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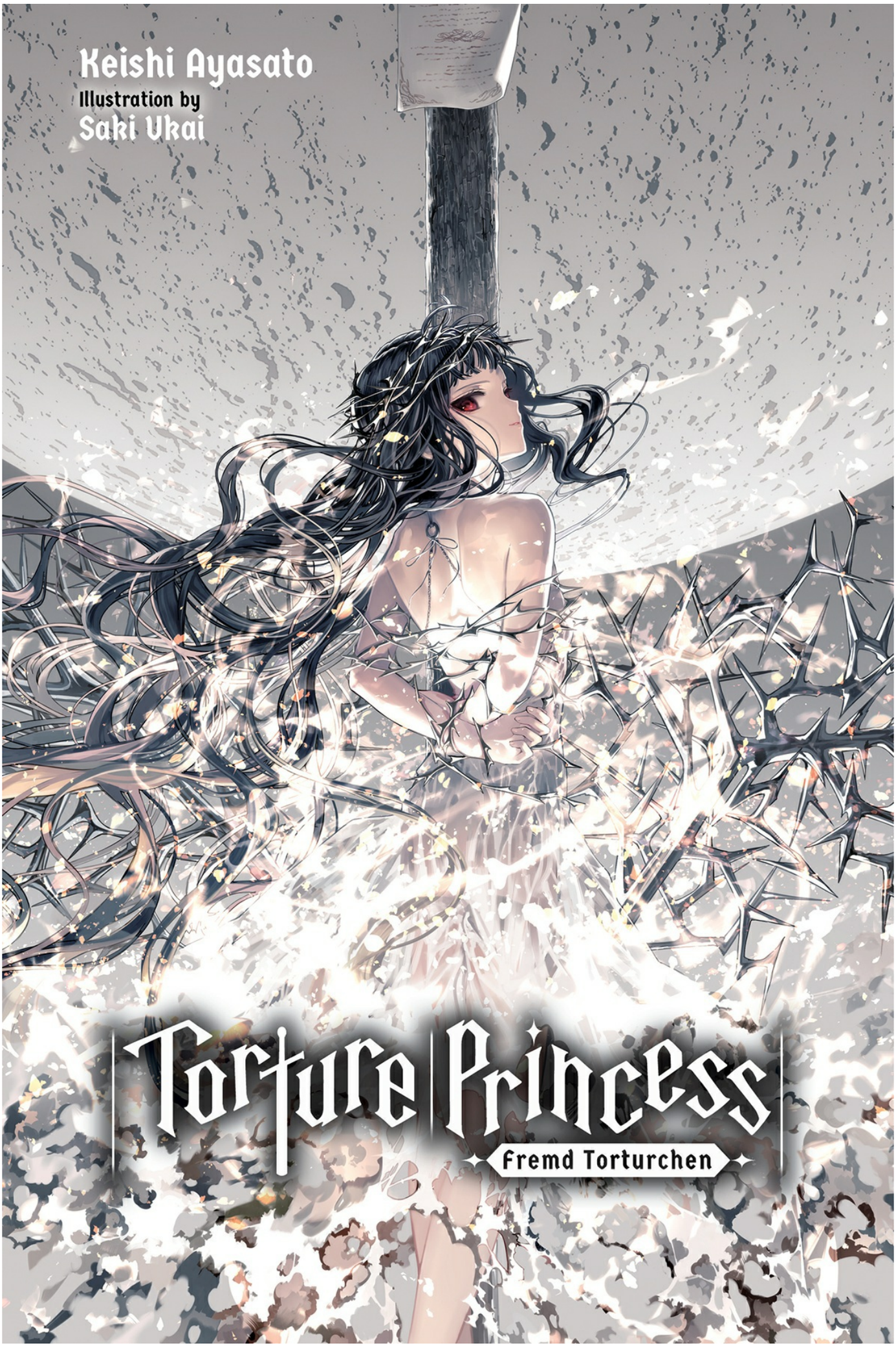
Keishi Ayasato
Illustration by
Saki Ukai
Torture Princess
Fremd Torturchen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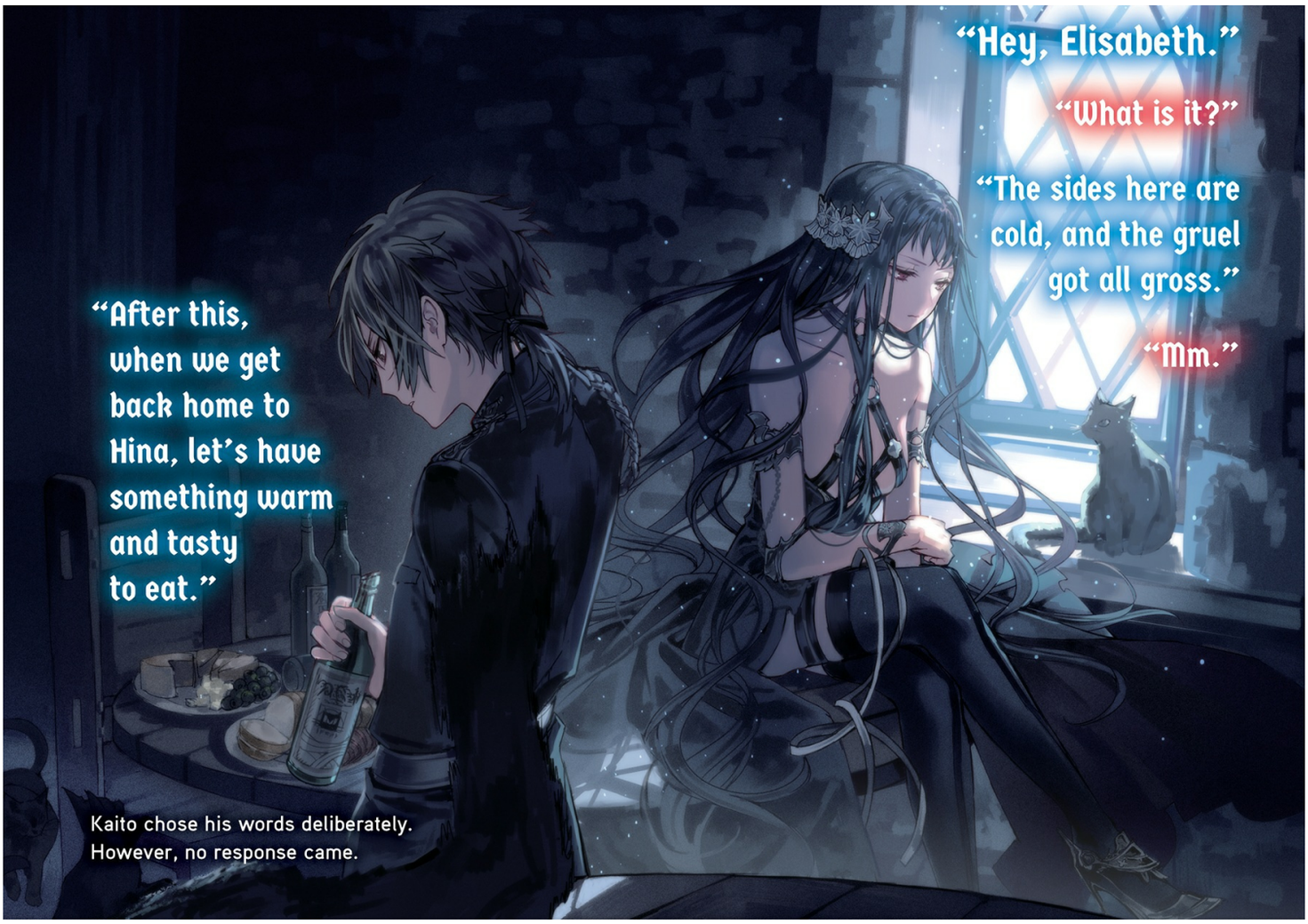
"So you're the Torture Princess.
First, I wish to express my gratitude.
You did well to respond to our summons."
Izabella


"Hey, Elisabeth."
"What is it?"
"The sides here are cold, and the gruel got all gross."
"Mm."
"After this, when we get back home to Hina, let's have something warm and tasty to eat."
Kaito chose his words deliberately. However, no response came.

"Look at me."
Responding to her call, Kaito turned toward her like his head had been yanked.
"You've killed none but your enemies, not a single innocent. You shoulder no sin. And for the innocent to be punished for their existence alone is absurdity. Once this battle is over, return to the castle. Then take Hina and flee. As you are now, you should have power enough to be able to evade capture."

✦✦✦✦ Elisabeth's Diary

Clear weather, rather chilly, many battles against demons.

While Hina sleeps, I shall take it upon myself to fill out this diary in her stead.

As the mass of flesh continues its invasion of the capital, the fighting today was just as hectic as the day prior.

No matter their numbers, underlings pose little threat, but the bastard does make quite a lot of them.

Kaito, dunce that he is, formed a contract with the Kaiser. While it has made him an asset in battle, it causes me no shortage of displeasure.

Men were not made to handle the power of demons.

Ah, but I mustn't worry Hina.

Today, as always, Kaito and I magnificently took down demons left and right, beating them black and blue!

There is naught for you to worry about. Be at ease!

On that note, Hina, I hope that you awaken soon.
I shall return Kaito to you in good spirits.

Today's menu..... Hors d'oeuvres I pinched from the bar, along with some sort of gruel-like concoction.

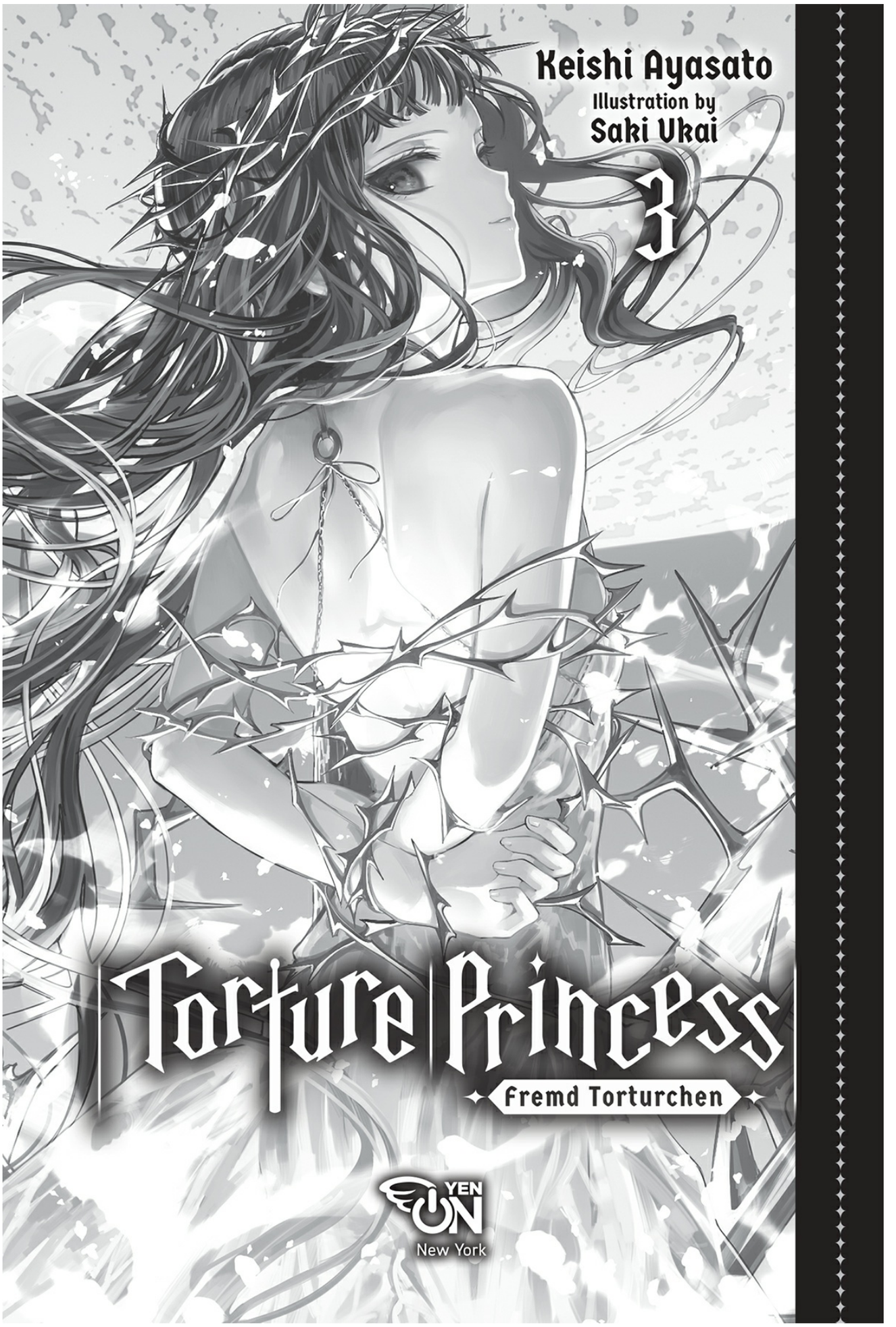
My opinion..... Your cooking is far superior, Hina!

Today's Kaito..... Distrusted by the people. Distrusted by the paladins. He brought this on himself.
(Wait, this is an actual heading?)

Today's Kaito 2 ..... As good-natured and as foolish as ever.
(You're serious? This is an actual heading?)

Both Kaito and I are wishing for you to awaken soon.

Fremd Torturchen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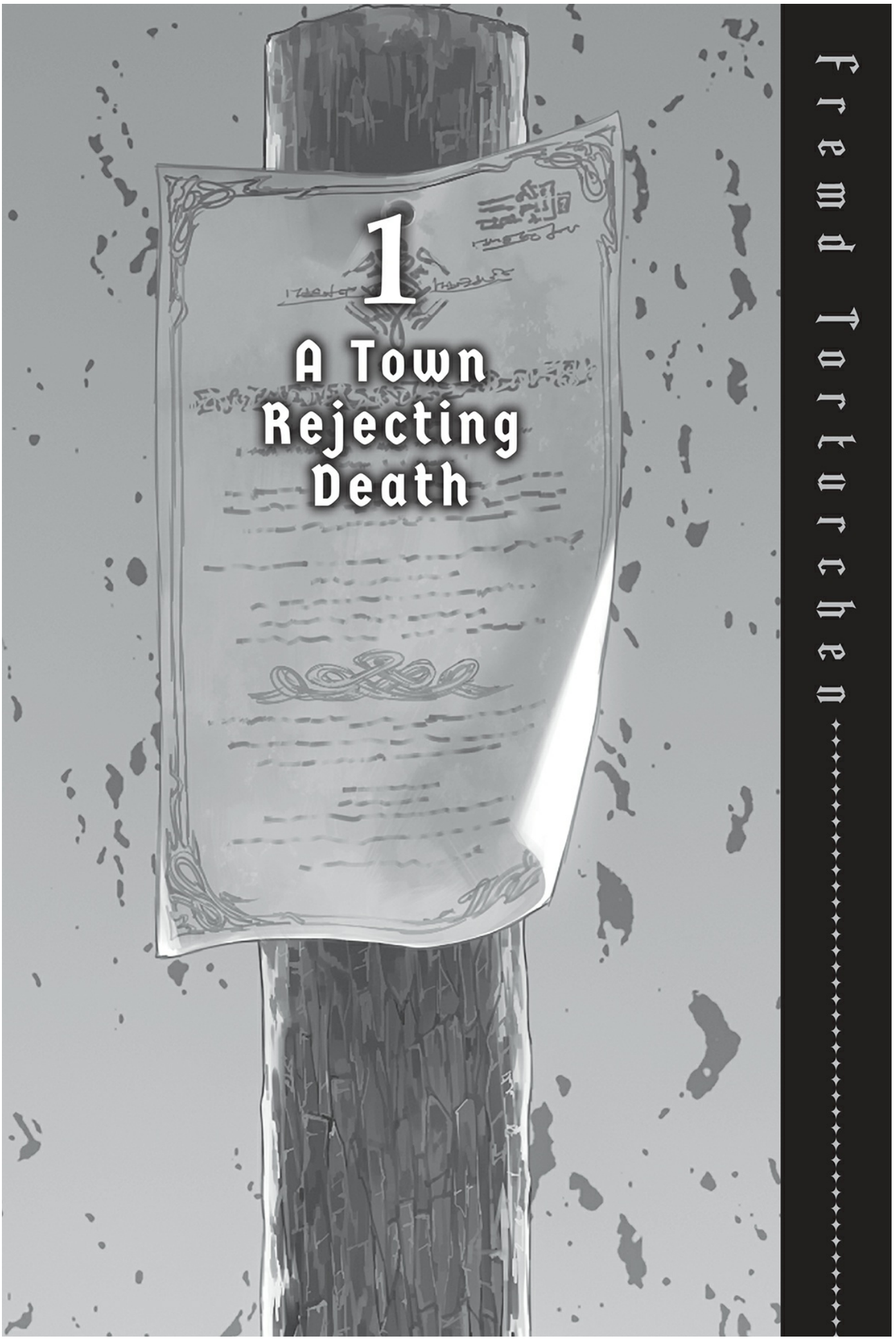

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A Town Rejecting Death

1

A Town Rejecting Death

People were being devoured, livestock was gnawed to pieces, and buildings were getting chewed away.

The capital was being eaten alive.

There was no other way to describe the cruel simplicity of the events that were unfolding.

One clear afternoon, a mass of flesh had suddenly exploded forth from the town's quiet, gloomy mercantile district. It had expanded rapidly, crushing countless buildings and swallowing up whole crowds of bystanders. Although the rotting meat's expansion eventually slowed, it was continuing to overrun the capital, which until the start of this catastrophe had boasted three-tenths of mankind's population and had been a center of commerce and politics.

Those who had just barely avoided the first wave of expansion had frantically sought shelter. However, any who fell behind were soon swallowed up by the subsequent waves of undulating tissue.

The elderly had desperately struck the mass with their canes, but their efforts were fruitless, and they were swallowed from their trembling ankles up. A dog tied to the eaves of a building barked as it was crushed beneath the advancing pulpy folds. Those too sick to move were engulfed, beds and all.

And to add to their misfortune, the mass of flesh was alive.

In other words, anyone consumed by it was either assimilated or transformed.

The majority of its victims were still alive as they became fused with the writhing mass.

The surface of its flesh was decorated with the faces of humans, beasts, fish,

and bugs—any and all living creatures that had been captured—like some sort of grotesque sculpture. The screams trickling from the victims' faces were bloodcurdling.

Ooooooooooohhh… Ooooooooooohhh… Ooooooooooohhh…

Their voices rang out with intense bitterness toward those who had survived.

Those who avoided being assimilated soon found an equally harsh fate awaiting them. Their bodies were forcibly warped, ending only when they were ejected as underlings, emerging from the main body to capture prey, be consumed, and then sent forth again, each time being fused together and broken back down.

Those who had once been human were hunting those who still were.

All the city's inhabitants were forced to acknowledge the sheer hopelessness of the situation.

That, after all, was what demons did. Powerless humans had no means with which to fight back.

Even so, in order to survive, everyone tried their hardest to flee.

A desperate fight raged in one corner of the capital. Several residents had escaped to a wide street, but underlings had caught up to the group containing most of the children. One bug-like underling swung its sickle-shaped arm and severed a number of their legs. The wounded, no longer able to flee, were dragged mercilessly toward the awaiting mass. Their desperate cries rang out. However, a strangely calm murmur cut through the noise of the street.

"Reenactment of the Plain of Skewers: Impaled Victim."

The voice was strong and elegant.

Stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab!

Accompanying the voice was a cloud of dust and a noise loud enough to drown out the caustic howling. Hundreds of iron stakes impaled the underlings, raining a gruesome shower of blood onto the road.

Trembling from the unexpected development, the people timidly looked up.

“…Is she…the Saint?” someone muttered in amazement.

A single young woman stood before them.

She was beautiful and wore a provocative bondage outfit. Her appearance was like the coming of a messiah or perhaps a tyrant, and her lustrous black hair and dress with scarlet-dyed interior fluttered in the wind.

Her chest was concealed by thin leather straps but was otherwise practically bare. Her erotic attire was a far cry from that of the Suffering Saint from the people’s faith. However, the beauty and solemnity of the person who had arrived in that hell made it impossible to imagine her as anything but a hallowed figure.

Hearing the people’s supplicating voices, though, the woman scowled.

“And just who do you think you’re calling a saint? Hold your tongue if you’re going to refer to me in such a repugnant manner!”

The woman waved her hand as though shooing away a dog.

Then she casually shifted her gaze from the group. As she turned to face the band of onrushing underlings, she clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“Tch, more of them? To have your bodies twisted and warped against your will… How pitiful you creatures are. I shall grant you swift deaths, if naught else.”

She lifted her face to the sky and extended a pale hand. Swirling darkness and crimson flower petals materialized at her fingertips. Without hesitation, she thrust her hand into the center of the vortex.

And from there, she drew a long sword.

“Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal!”

With a ringing voice, she called out the sword’s name. As she did, the runes etched on its bloodred blade glinted.

Their meaning was forcibly drummed into the minds of all who looked upon them.

You are free to act as you will. But pray that God shall be your salvation. For

the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand.

“Nail Gun!”

Shunk, shunk, shunk, shunk, shunk!

As the woman swung her sword down, the darkness and crimson petals spiraled outward, and rusty nails appeared in their wake, burying themselves in the underlings’ flesh. Chains wove like serpents, snaking their way through gaps in the spiral to mow down any who escaped.

The people raised cheers of joy. However, the woman turned to shout at them in an icy voice.

“Why have you stopped, you fools? It is the duty of the weak to flee. So flee. Do not turn to me. Do not rely on me. Do not look up to me—who do you think I am?”

With one hand on her hip and her crimson eyes shining, the woman gave her haughty introduction.

“I am the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu. I am the proud wolf and the lowly sow.”

The capital was a place where information gathered, and there was no shortage of educated people among its citizens. The tale of the Torture Princess was well-known, and the people gasped at her declaration. A heavy silence fell over the crowd.

Someone timidly opened their mouth to speak but was interrupted.

Gya-gya-gya-gya-gya-gya-gyaa!

A strange, grating scream split the sky. New underlings began swooping down from the heavens.

The massive, grotesque crows—whose bodies were riddled with eyeballs—snatched people up from behind with their warped talons. Atrocious screams rang out before falling silent an instant later.

“—*La* (dance).”

A calm voice rang out, and a blade danced through the air. The underlings

were all split in two, and their viscera pelted the earth. The people who'd narrowly avoided a grisly fate raised their voices in bewilderment.

"…Wh-what just, who…? Wh—?"

A woman who'd just been saved from the crows looked down at her bloodstained hands and lost her breath.

The only person present who could truly understand what had happened was the Torture Princess. Assailed by confusion, the people began fleeing on their hands and feet.

Then the sound of combat boots clicking against the ground echoed. The group froze.

A young man had appeared before them. The hem of his black outfit, which was adorned with red thread, fluttered as he walked.

The man was thin, and his left arm had been transformed into that of a beast. His faded brown hair had been tied back into a knot, and it matched the color of his eyes. He looked unnaturally composed.

He turned toward the group, all of whom bore terrified expressions. However, he paid their reactions no heed, instead focusing on confirming with his stern gaze that no more attacks were forthcoming.

As soon as he finished, he exhaled lightly and scratched his head, visibly relaxing.

"Phew, looks like that worked… But damn, it still doesn't feel completely stable. How am I supposed to get better at this?"

As he grumbled, he waved his right arm around like a conductor's baton. The blade that had just sliced apart the underlings drifted along and followed the path his hand had taken. The Torture Princess gave the hem of his outfit a quick yank.

"You know, you're inspiring no small amount of terror at the moment."

The young man's eyes went wide, and he turned on his heel, flustered. Surveying the group's expressions, he raised a perplexed voice.

"Wait, for real? Did I do something suspicious?"

“‘Suspicious’ hardly begins to describe it. You struck the perfect image of a villain making his entrance back there.”

“Whaaat…? I mean, I guess I can’t totally deny being a villain, but still, I’m not your enemy, you guys…”

Hearing that, the group finally let down their guard a bit. They turned inquisitive gazes toward Elisabeth, as though to ask if she knew him. She nodded, then answered.

“Be at ease. Suspicious as his left arm is, this one is a servant of mine. His name is Kaito, or Sena, or perhaps Kaito Sena.”

“Thanks a lot for that half-assed introduction. But it doesn’t matter; don’t worry about us.”

As he waved with his beastly left arm, the man—Kaito Sena—lined up beside Elisabeth, the Torture Princess. The two of them looked to where the mass of flesh was resting.

A fresh wave of underlings was heading straight toward them.

Kaito raised his right arm, and Elisabeth clicked her heels.

“I need you guys to run.”

Kaito snapped his fingers before murmuring softly.

“The Torture Princess and the Kaiser’s contractor can take it from here.”

Then the two of them began slaughtering the underlings.

*

Once, at the hands of his cruel father, Kaito Sena's seventeen years and three months of life had come to an end.

His death had been as meaningless as a worm's, one most pitiful, most unseemly, most cruel, and most gruesome. However, after his death, Kaito had been summoned to another world and obtained a second life.

His summoner had been Elisabeth Le Fanu, the Torture Princess, a terrible sinner who was destined to be executed after killing fourteen demons and their contractors on the Church's orders.

During their battles against the demons, Elisabeth had fallen into a trap of the Grand King's. In order to save her, Kaito had formed a contract with the Kaiser, the highest ranked among the demons and, as a result, had gained the ability to use magic. After fighting alongside an automaton named Hina, who was both his own servant and his bride, he'd successfully restored Elisabeth's health. However, after they'd successfully taken out the Grand King, the Church informed them of a new crisis.

The capital was under attack, and around a third of its citizens had been killed, including Godot Deus, one of the Church's high priests. The city, which was pivotal to the continued survival of humanity, had nearly been destroyed, and at this rate, it would likely fall, along with all its paladins.

When they'd received that message, Kaito immediately got to work making *purin*.

After dissolving sugar in milk, he added egg before mixing and straining it carefully to avoid creating bubbles. Then he poured everything into an earthenware pot and applied heat, cooking it until it reached the appropriate temperature.

At that point, all he needed to do to complete it was chill it in the ice-spirit fridge.

"Yup, as always, having the ingredients around is a lifesaver."

As he waited for the *purin* to chill, Kaito murmured to himself.

In this world, sugar, fresh eggs, and milk were all difficult to obtain without going through major guilds, as they were both the ones who maintained the supply chain and those in possession of ice-spirits. But with the Butcher's help, reluctant as he may have been, they were able to keep Elisabeth's castle sufficiently stocked. If not for that, it would have been difficult indeed for Kaito to reproduce *purin* in this world.

Huh? Wait, if I hadn't been able to make purin, wouldn't that have meant that all my knowledge and experience from my old world was useless? Well, I guess being used to pain came in handy, too.

Tilting his head to the side, Kaito grabbed the earthenware pot's chilly handles. Taking extreme care not to put too much strength into his beastly arm, he hurried through the corridor.

He dashed up the spiral staircase, then opened up the door to the dining room. Within, a chair with ball-and-claw feet was lined up next to the table, which boasted a stately tablecloth.

Seated at the table was Elisabeth, crossing her elegant legs. Likely having sensed Kaito, she lifted her face and displayed her bored expression. Then her gaze landed on the earthenware pot.

The next moment, her eyes sparkled with such intensity that cat ears practically sprouted from her head.

"Oh-ho, it's complete!"

"Yeah, I'm all done."

With that, Kaito hoisted the pot. In a flash, Elisabeth grabbed a spoon and held it on standby. Her reaction was as innocent as always. However, not long ago, that was a scene Kaito had feared he might never see again. Breathing an internal sigh of relief, Kaito placed the pot in front of Elisabeth and lifted its lid.

With a "ta-daa," a massive, jiggling yellow form appeared.

Elisabeth breathed in its aroma, pleased.

"Heh-heh, there you are. How pleasantly sticky you seem."

"Here, *purin*, just like I promised. Go on, dig in."

“Mm, the wait was killing me… Wait, did we ever make such a promise?”

“Oh, right. Uh, don’t worry about that.”

Kaito averted his eyes from Elisabeth. She tilted her head to the side, wondering what in the world he was going on about.

It had happened right before Kaito made his contract with the Kaiser. When she’d been in a coma due to having the flow of her mana dammed up by Sacrifice, he’d faced her and whispered: *“You’re probably going to be livid. But I’ve made up my mind, Elisabeth. See you later. When you wake up, I’ll make you some* purin*.”*

She hadn’t responded. He had almost stroked her cheek, but he’d stopped short, clenched his fists, and left the bedroom.

Then he had made a contract with the Kaiser.

Elisabeth didn’t know about that private moment. And Kaito saw no reason to tell her.

Watching Kaito speak noncommittally, Elisabeth made a strange face before turning back toward the *purin*. She scooped out a jiggling, sticky spoonful, then stuck it in her mouth.

“Ah…the texture is excellent… It’s sticky yet smooth…and jiggly… What a fine dish this is. Ah-ha-ha.”

An earthenware pot can hold a great deal of *purin*. However, Elisabeth polished it off in mere moments. After cleaning out the pot, she heaved a satisfied sigh.

“Ah! That was rather splendid. Between this and having activated Hina, your praiseworthy achievements total two.”

“I see that once again you’re blatantly ignoring all the other work I’ve put in up till now.”

Elisabeth practically purred in pleasure, radiating the same energy as a cat basking in a sunbeam. Kaito felt like he could almost see cat ears twitching back and forth atop her head.

For a short while, Elisabeth scraped at the bottom of the pot with her spoon.

However, she eventually relented.

Then, with a hard clank, she returned the silver spoon to the table.

She crossed her arms, and her expression abruptly stiffened.

“Now then, our respite ends here. Not only is the situation dreadful, it’s grave.”

Looking at her from the side, Kaito could see that the innocent light flickering in her eyes had vanished. Her cold expression was that of a resolute soldier. She clenched her fists.

A magical chessboard appeared before her, accompanied by white and black pieces.

Elisabeth removed a white piece shaped like a bishop.

Godot Deus, one of the high priests of the Church, had been killed by the demons. Furthermore, the wicked lot responsible for the murder were still running free and wreaking havoc.

Kaito clenched his fists and spoke in a low voice.

“So you’re seriously gonna go…? You’re planning to fight an enemy who took out a third of the capital?”

“Of course. The Church has ordered me to slay all fourteen demons. Above all, I myself decided to do so. Having lived the cruel and haughty life of a wolf, I shall die like a lowly sow. A sow forsaken by all of creation… And I have no intention of overturning that fate of mine.”

Elisabeth gave a sharp response to Kaito’s question. Her voice was frosty, making it clear that others had no say in her decision. Upon hearing that, Kaito lost his grip on the words he had planned to deliver next. He watched on as she continued removing pieces.

“The remaining demons number three: the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, and the King. Normally, the three of them would not possess the power to storm the capital. What in the world could have happened…? Well, I have my suspicions. But regardless of the accuracy of my hunches, naught but Hell awaits.”

“Just to be clear, I’m coming with you.”

“Do as you please. Or rather, I’d like to say that, but this time, I’d included you in the head count from the onset. Fool. Even if you mean no harm, I cannot simply leave the Kaiser’s contractor unattended… Listen now, Kaito. While I may owe you a debt for it, the sin you have committed would normally merit execution.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You know nothing. And even supposing you did, you fail to truly understand. Those who embrace the darkness can no longer return to being human…and you have crossed that final line.”

Then Elisabeth heaved a heavy sigh. After looking Kaito over—his left arm in particular, which had transformed into that of a beast—she shook her head.

“You utter fool.”

Kaito gave no response. For a moment, a heavy silence fell between them. After another sigh, though, Elisabeth stood with enough force to send her chair flying.

Stretching her back like a cat, she made a declaration.

“In any case, the time to depart is upon us! No matter what idle words we string together, the fact remains that we have no choice but to fight… However, one worry yet remains.”

“Yeah, we have to figure out what we’re gonna do about Hina.”

They looked at each other and nodded.

Elisabeth’s black hair fluttered as she set off. Kaito followed after her.

The two silently advanced down the corridor as light streamed through the ominous patterns adorning the clerestory windows. Elisabeth opened up the bedchambers, a room she herself had been comatose in just a few hours earlier.

At the moment, Hina was sleeping there.

She was lying on the bed, surrounded by azure roses.

Kaito had created the flowers at Elisabeth's suggestion in order to aid in the reorganization of Hina's gears. Hina slept deeply, swathed in the gentle magic the azure petals were releasing.

"Hina…"

Kaito unhesitatingly rushed to her bedside and knelt, then gently stroked her forehead. There was no response. Until her scrambled gears were realigned, she would be unable to rise.

Elisabeth clasped Hina's pale hand, then nodded after quickly confirming the flow of mana and mechanical noises were all in order.

"Her gears are realigning properly. However, there is some time yet before the process will be finished."

"So, the problem is what we're gonna do with her until then."

"Mm, that it is. While the realignment is in progress, she shall not wake. In short, she is wholly defenseless. We could leave golems to defend her, but their usefulness is limited, so that option leaves me with some unease… So when we consider who I could contact and ask to take Hina and flee should anything happen—"

"Ah, well, that would be me."

"Dude, your timing is crazy good."

With that, Kaito turned to look at the bedchamber's entrance.

There stood the Butcher, posing coolly with his finger pressed against his forehead.

Although his eyes were hidden by his hood, they were no doubt sparkling.

"While the two of you are absent, I shall remain by Ms. Lovely Maid's side. And should anything happen, I'll hoist her upon my back and scurry away with utmost haste. What say you?"

"While I'm most grateful for your proposal, are you quite all right with this? If I'm not mistaken, you have little to gain from aiding us."

"Oh, there's no need to be so reserved. A dear customer of mine is in a pinch!

Such a task is but a trifle… Incidentally, I couldn't help but notice that your ice-spirit storage unit and your carrier golems are getting a bit old, you know. Cha-ching, cha-ching."

"…Did he seriously just say 'cha-ching'?"

"Understood. Replace as many as you wish and send me the bill. Will that suffice?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha, leave everything to me, your friendly neighborhood Butcher!"

The Butcher hopped up and down. Shrewd as he was, the fact remained that his assistance took a great load off their backs. After all, the castle had been attacked by demons a number of times before. No ordinary man would dare come near the place, let alone house-sit for them.

The Butcher truly did have nerves of steel.

Kaito turned and bowed to the Butcher, who was still dancing with joy.

"…Thanks a lot, Butcher. That's a huge help."

"Mm-hmm, Dim-Witted Servant, showing me proper gratitude?! Away with you, impostor! Show me your true form!"

"Wait, have I really never thanked you for anything before?"

Kaito narrowed his eyes doubtfully. The Butcher had assumed some sort of strange fighting stance, one that called to mind a bizarre bird. Ignoring him, Elisabeth crossed her arms and spoke decisively.

"With that, then, everything is in order! Now, Kaito and I shall make our way to the capital in accordance with the Church's demand! Butcher, I leave the rest to you."

"Ha-ha, at your service."

"A proper response—Kaito, quell any regrets you may have."

"…Got it."

Nodding at Elisabeth's advice, Kaito silently gazed at Hina's face. He placed his hands on the bed, then gently kissed her.

Their lips joined, then parted.

However, Sleeping Beauty didn't wake.

Then Kaito whispered gently to the woman who'd asked to become part of his family.

"I'm heading out, Hina. Please wait for me. I promise we'll go back to living under the same roof."

He stood up. He stroked Hina's forehead one last time, as one would an infant's, then turned on his heel.

The hem of his black outfit that resembled a military uniform waved in the air as he determinedly strode forth. Elisabeth followed after him, her heels clicking loudly.

"I await your triumphant return! May fortune favor you!"

The Butcher watched them go, waving his hand as he called out from behind them.

As her beloved groom departed, the bride remained in slumber.

Leaving Hina behind at the castle, Elisabeth and Kaito descended into the maw of peril.

*

Using his blade, Kaito lopped the flying underling to pieces.

The ones rushing across the ground toward them found themselves on the receiving end of Elisabeth's stakes.

Each of them trusting the other, the way they devoted their full attention to their roles was reminiscent of a dance performance. In the blink of an eye, they completed their slaughter. A colossal mound of corpses was all that remained.

After gazing toward the end of the road where the swelling mass of flesh was sitting, Kaito and Elisabeth turned to each other and nodded.

"Good, looks like we drove them off for now."

"Aye, we can finally take a breather. And those people should have been able to make it to shelter by now—or not! Go on, you lot, get out of here!"

"Hey, Elisabeth, don't be so hard on them. That thing appeared out of

nowhere, right in the middle of the capital. If anything, it's impressive they were able to even make it this far."

Kaito placed a hand on Elisabeth's shoulder, then made his way toward the group, most of whom had frozen in their tracks. After coming to a stop front of the fleeing residents, he spoke in a calm voice, doing his utmost not to frighten them.

"Is everyone okay? If you all go straight that way, the paladins have a shelter set up. There should be guides along the way, too, so you don't even have to go very far."

Kaito urged on a parent and child, who up until a few moments ago were being pursued by an underling with a pig's head. However, they offered no response. Upon closer inspection, it appeared that all the adults were paralyzed with fear.

Kaito looked around, at a loss for what to do.

As he did, a young girl clutching onto her mother's arm called out to him.

"Mister…what's wrong with your arm?"

Kaito looked at the girl, flustered. Her innocent eyes were transfixed on his ghastly arm.

Now even more uncertain of what to do, Kaito frowned. After puzzling over his response for a moment, he sidestepped the question.

"Uh…it's…kinda cool, don'tcha think? And it's real strong."

"Yeah, it looks really strong! It's scary, but it's cool, too!"

"Wow, thanks. That's really nice of you to say. Now, c'mon, you gotta hurry!"

Kaito gave the girl's parents a soft push on the arms. The moment the mother felt the beastly arm touch her skin, she shuddered and stepped backward to shield her child. But after seeing the lonely look in Kaito's eyes, her expression quickly shifted.

She and her husband quickly bowed to Kaito, then broke off at a run. The rest of the people who'd been frozen still quickly followed after them. However, one old woman struggled backward against the sudden rush of the throng.

Casting a sharp glance at the Torture Princess, she fought her way through the waves of people.

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes, trying to discern the woman's intentions.

"Someone with a grudge against the Torture Princess, perhaps?"

That guess was about as far off the mark as one could be. After stopping in front of Elisabeth, the old woman tossed aside her cane and knelt atop the stone street with faltering knees. As Kaito and Elisabeth watched on in confusion, she bowed deeply.

In his surprise, Kaito let out an exclamation that bordered on shrill.

"Wh-what's the matter, ma'am?"

"Hmm? What is the meaning of this?!"

"Thank you… Thank you… Thank you…"

The old woman thanked them over and over. Looking at her tiny, rounded back, Elisabeth scratched her cheek.

"What? Ah yes, well…aren't you a courteous one…? Something about this feels wrong, you know."

"Thank you… Thank—"

"Good lord, woman, how long do you intend to go on for?! Enough already; up with you! Your thanks are unnecessary."

"Ma'am, she's saying that she appreciates the sentiment. C'mon now; it's dangerous here."

Kaito extended a hand to the old woman. With his help, she struggled to her feet.

Watching her pick up her cane and walk away, Elisabeth coldly shooed her off.

"Begone with you already! Heavens, what an odd bat she was… Oi! Look where you're going; don't bow while you walk! There are stones in your path! Listen, woman, don't go toppling over now!"

In spite of her attitude, her words were kind. Kaito surreptitiously softened his expression.

The next moment, Elisabeth whirled around to face him.

“Ah, I knew I sensed something unpleasant! Kaito! Wipe that expression off your face! Remember your place, servant!”

“Ow, don’t kick me!”

Finding himself on the receiving end of a precise roundhouse kick, Kaito clutched his chest as he leveled his complaint. All he accomplished, though, was infuriating Elisabeth even further.

“Then explain to me what that expression was just now: as though you were gazing upon a child! I shall not tolerate such insolence!”

“I did nothing of the sort! My face just loosened up a little!”

“And what is that if not insolence?!”

Kaito’s complaints of unfair treatment were wholly rejected. Displeased, Elisabeth shook her head from side to side.

“Behold, while you were preoccupied with your idle nonsense, that thing returned!”

As she spoke, a black shadow spread across the pavement. The sound of two bat-like wings flapping split the air. However, their owner was no bird.

They extended from the back of a dog.

The top-class hound—the Kaiser—flapped his wings as he descended.

His sinewy legs hit the ground, and he shook his body. His wings made a sticky sound as they folded into his back.

Once they’d been fully stored, he turned his eyes, which burned with hellfire, toward Kaito.

“I have returned, O Accumulation of Seventeen Years’ Pain, unworthy master of mine.”

“Good work out there. How’d it look?”

“Before that, I have something I must announce.”

“Wh-what is it? Why’re you acting all scary?”

The Kaiser drew up directly in front of Kaito, causing him to jump back a few steps. The Kaiser gnashed his teeth threateningly.

"Forcing me to do something as base as run reconnaissance for you is a deed punishable by being ripped to shreds between my jaws. You may be my master, but you are naught more than a worthless scrap of meat. Know your place!"

"Geez, man, that's harsh… You don't have to get all mad at me."

"Ha, I shall forgive you this once. The view from on high was as pleasant as expected, after all. Much to my amusement, the capital is being rapidly consumed by that mountain of flesh. Rejoice, whelp. Your predictions were on the mark."

Shaking his head, the Kaiser pointed with his jaw toward the mass at the end of the road. Laughing scornfully at his degraded brethren, the Kaiser continued: *"That thing is comprised of three demons fused together. I was able to identify the three needles that were thrust into their necks."*

"…Yeah, I figured. This is the Grand King's fault."

Kaito nodded. The needles that had been thrust into the demons' necks were magical devices designed to control minds—the kind that the Grand King had specialized in using before Elisabeth had killed her. The fact that there were three of them meant the demonic colossus currently invading the capital was not one demon but the remaining three—the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, and the King.

"That Grand King is an obnoxious one. Although their ranks were lower than hers, controlling those three would have been no small feat. She must have stabbed them with her needles, destroyed their egos, then carried them into the capital half dead. Three humans take up little space, after all."

"Then when she died, the needles stopped working."

"Indeed. And with their shattered egos returned to them, their powers ran wild…and once the three of them fused, they began expanding, and the capital got entangled as a result. Would you concur, Vlad?"

In response to the Kaiser's question, Kaito gently ran mana through the stone in his pocket. As though it had been waiting for just that moment, a velvety

voice rang out.

“Your conjectures are as impressive as ever, Kaiser.”

Vlad Le Fanu’s phantom knitted together in front of them and put on airs.

He was adorned with a silken shirt with a cravat and a black coat decorated with silver thread, the same noble attire he’d worn when he was alive. He surveyed the scene, his crimson eyes setting off his shoulder-length black hair and giving him a beauty remarkably similar to Elisabeth’s.

Crossing his legs in empty space, he spoke elegantly.

“I would wager that your guess is right on the mark and that this is the Grand King’s final trap. A rather straightforward timed explosive, as it were. With their egos obliterated and nothing but their desires remaining, the demons finally began taking in humans and using them, becoming little more than machines designed to gather pain. Quite the intriguing result, I’d say.”

Vlad laughed in amusement.

He pointed at the mass of flesh, as though showing off some sort of entertaining spectacle.

“While they used to be my comrades, I do find it interesting that they’re more powerful now while they run wild than when they had their wits about them. Perhaps, unbound by human consciousness and rationality, demons become able to wield their power solely for the purpose of destroying the world… Incidentally, Elisabeth, would you be so kind as to restrain yourself?”

Vlad shook his head in exasperation. Pierced by an iron stake, his head vanished for a moment.

After Kaito turned his gaze toward her, Elisabeth finally stopped the campaign of harassment she’d begun from the moment Vlad had first materialized. With a grim expression on her face, she crossed her arms and spoke in a voice dripping with hatred.

“Silence yourself, Vlad. Your voice grates on my ears. Take care you do not forget that, were it up to me, I would shatter the rock your soul dwells in this instant.”

“That’s a bit cold, don’t you think? Given your servant Kaito Sena’s contract with the Kaiser, I should think it quite prudent to keep me alive to give him advice, as his predecessor. And you understand that, don’t you? You really shouldn’t be so hard on yourself—oh, careful there!”

Assailed by numerous stakes, Vlad bent his body at a strange angle.

Unsurprisingly, his expression soured. Seeing that, Elisabeth scoffed.

“Ha. You’d best brace yourself. The moment your task is through, I shall kill you once more. I shan’t spare you a shred of sympathy.”

“Quite right. I’ll brace myself, then. Alas, this body of mine is somewhat short on methods I can use to flee.”

Vlad shrugged, the apparent sorrow in his words wholly at odds with his general demeanor. However, seemingly reluctant to get stabbed again, he lightly snapped his fingers and vanished. All that remained of him were a few azure flower petals.

After stomping on them, Elisabeth clicked her tongue.

“Tch, what a revolting man.”

“I mean, that’s just how it is. Vlad will be Vlad, after all.”

“And you. Speaking as if this is someone else’s problem!”

Elisabeth grabbed onto the knot of Kaito’s hair, then yanked. Screaming, Kaito frantically tried to resist.

“Owwww! Cut it out, Elisabeth; you’re gonna pull it out! The pain is one thing, but I don’t wanna go bald!”

“Just shut up and go bald! Bald, I say! All this came about because you had to go and act on your own! Forming a contract with the Kaiser… Surely you are this world’s greatest imbecile!”

“No, seriously, you’re gonna pull it out! Stop, stop, stop!”

“Worry not! Even if I pull it out, it shall grow back!”

“Wait, is there even a spell that can regrow hair? Owwwwwww!”

“Aye, there is! You can’t set the color, however!”

“Wait a minute; I don’t want blond highlights!”

“Better that than torture, I’d wager! I shall say it again. The acts you have committed are folly, crimes worthy of an inquisition. Rough treatment is the least you should prepare yourself for! Hmph…that said, perhaps it is best to leave it at that. After all, now is hardly the time for me to be tormenting you.”

Perhaps her mood had finally lifted, because she released him. With teary eyes, Kaito inspected the state of his hair. As he did, Elisabeth turned her crimson gaze toward the mass of flesh invading the capital. Kaito followed her lead.

“…Man, that’s messed up.”

“Mm, that it is.”

Even then, the three fused demons were still carving deep scars in the town and its people.

In a complete reversal from her demeanor a moment ago, Elisabeth spoke in a strained voice.

“Demons draw their power from the pain of others. Let us make haste, Kaito. The longer we leave that annoying thing be, the more pain it shall accumulate and the more power it shall gain. Bothersome as it is, we need to join forces with the paladins.”

“Yeah, I’m with you. No time to waste.”

Kaito gave a brief nod. However, he bit down on his lip, as though hesitating over something.

After a beat, he spoke in a hoarse voice and reaffirmed their situation.

“This’ll be…our final demon subjugation.”

The mass of flesh sitting before them was the last three of the fourteen demons.

Thinking ahead to what awaited them afterward, Kaito clenched his fists.

After executing all the demons, the Torture Princess, too, would be going to the stake.

Elisabeth Le Fanu had finally begun making her way up the steps to the gallows.

*

The main road branched off in a complex pattern, but most of its paths led to the main square, named for an apostle who was said to have faithfully served the Saint to the end. At the moment, the square was being used as a temporary shelter.

From behind Elisabeth, Kaito looked out over the plaza.

The place was likely loved by the people, and on holidays, it would probably have been no surprise to see the place bustling with food carts and street performers. At present, though, no vestiges remained of its usual, tranquil self.

The square was surrounded by an elegant iron fence modeled after vines, with paladins lined up within. In addition to the gate being firmly shut, they were serving as a thick human wall. Their silver armor sparkled, emblazoned with white-lily coats of arms, as they worked to maintain the magical barrier covering the square.

Looking over their stiff faces, Kaito spoke in a tense voice.

"…Hey, are we really going to be able to just stroll on in?"

"Mm, I see your point. We are the Torture Princess and the Kaiser's contractor, after all. While I have my doubts as to how well we'll be received, I see no better options."

With that, Elisabeth shrugged. Their minds made up, the two of them headed for the plaza.

The gate rattled open before them. Several corps members rushed out from within. Facing the mass of flesh, the resolute paladins ran down the main road where no small number of underlings lay in wait for them.

The square was likely being used as a base from which the corps engaging in rescue operations for the residents who'd been unable to escape would enter the danger zone. Even so, Kaito thought back to the scene that had just unfolded before them.

If we hadn't been there, even more people would have been swallowed up… Given the situation, it's hard to say if their rescue operations will even make it in time.

It was clear that the paladins needed help. Newly motivated, Kaito turned back toward the square. As he did, Elisabeth called out to one of the paladins guarding the entrance.

"I'm Elisabeth Le Fanu. The Church requested my aid, and here I am."

"And I'm her servant, Kaito Sena. Nice to meet you." Shaking off his tension, Kaito introduced himself.

However, the only response they received was a cold stare.

Several seconds passed. One of the paladins dashed back toward the rear of the square, possibly having received a message. The rest, though, remained as silent and unmoving as bronze statues, the tips of their swords pressed against the cobbled street.

"Um, we, uh, we came to help."

Kaito spoke once more. Still, no answer. There were several people inside, but all they displayed was open malice. Kaito couldn't think of a good reason for them to be receiving the cold shoulder.

Kaito frowned, then quietly whispered to Elisabeth.

"You know, I wasn't exactly expecting the red-carpet treatment, but still, this is brutal."

"Don't be unreasonable. This, too, is within expectations."

"Wait, seriously? Damn, I never took you for the understanding type."

"This is my just deserts. At the Plain of Skewers, I faced five hundred members of the Knight Corps and slew them, annihilated them, and exterminated them. While these paladins here are from higher in the organization, no doubt many of them had acquaintances among the victims. Their rigorous training and discipline are likely the sole reason I'm not at sword's point at the moment."

Elisabeth replied at the same volume. Kaito nodded with newfound

understanding.

Given the facts, the paladins' reactions were only natural.

"That makes sense, then."

"Mm, that it does."

No tyrant was in a position to complain when those they oppressed wound up expressing malice toward them.

Normally, people who get crushed like worms don't get the chance to come back, after all.

Elisabeth Le Fanu had once stood atop a mountain of corpses.

And those corpses were the allies of these paladins.

Suddenly, a clear voice rang out and obstructed Kaito's train of thought.

"So you're the Torture Princess. First, I wish to express my gratitude. You did well to respond to our summons."

The gate opened, and a woman, accompanied on each side by a paladin, strode out from within.

She herself was likely a paladin as well. Her body was as lithe as a rapier, and she wore the same silver armor as the others. However, atop her shoulders was a magnificent, deep-blue mantle of fine make embroidered with silver. Her silver hair dashed against it and further improved the flashy impression she gave off.

That and her pair of mismatched blue and purple eyes caused her to boast otherworldly beauty. However, the light within her eyes was cold.

She looked a good deal younger than her fellow paladins, and the fact that she was a woman was unusual as well. Despite all that, Kaito was surprised by something else entirely.

Damn, that's impressive. For an ordinary human, she's got crazy stores of mana.

Ever since his contract with the Kaiser, Kaito's ability to gauge the flow of mana had been refined. While the woman's stores of mana couldn't compare to

the Torture Princess's or to Kaito's, given that he'd made a contract with a demon, it was well above what an average person could hope to possess.

In stark contrast to Elisabeth's sinister, thorny mana, this woman's seemed as deep and as placid as the sea. Kaito could tell, not from knowledge, but from intuition, that she would be well-suited toward healing, protective, and summoning magic.

It looks like she's doing pretty well for herself among the Holy Knights, but I bet she could've become a pretty strong mage, too… Wait, huh? Did I just call her an ordinary human?

It was almost as though he thought of himself as some kind of monster. But he could hardly blame himself. For someone who had been reincarnated from another world, not to mention one whose left arm was that of a beast, continuing to perceive oneself as an ordinary human was no easy task.

Even so, I seem to be getting worse about it.

In spite of himself, Kaito looked off into the distance and grinned self-derisively. However, the woman interpreted his smile a different way.

Narrowing her cold eyes, she spoke.

"How rude. What, is there something on my face?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, I was just laughing at myself. Don't worry about it."

"…At yourself? At a time like this?"

"Mm, well, my servant is a man of many peculiarities. Paying him heed is little more than a waste of time. You'd do best to simply ignore him… And as I said, I am Elisabeth Le Fanu, the Torture Princess."

"Allow me to welcome you once more. Thank you for coming all this way."

"Enough with the empty formalities. I received word of Godot Deus's death. Are you in charge here?"

"I am not. Rather than explaining the situation, it would be quicker to simply take you to meet the man who is. Follow me. I expect you'll be quite surprised."

With that enigmatic declaration, she turned on her heel, her magnificent

mantle whirling behind her. Her two attendants went after her.

After exchanging a glance, Kaito and Elisabeth obediently followed behind.

A row of simple tents was lined up on top of the stone ground.

As he passed by them, Kaito peered within one.

Within, a healer was desperately pinning a convulsing man to his bed while using medicinal herbs to alleviate the man's pain. Kaito could make out a number of other healers applying magic and medicine left and right to care for the wounded. Given that they each boasted considerable reserves of magic, their original place of employment was probably the royal palace.

A long queue extended past the tents. It looked like those who were deemed too young or too ill to flee on their own were being teleported out of the city. Regardless of the fact that the line was guarded on both sides by Royal Knights, everyone on it was so nervous they would have broken down at the drop of a hat.

Elsewhere, the paladins were calling out and gathering the uninjured and those with only minor illnesses. However, between the people who were screaming in derangement and those who were glued to the ground with dead eyes, there was no shortage of people ignoring their orders.

Every single person who'd escaped bore a heavy, desperate burden.

"…This place is on edge, all right."

"And for good reason. It would be rather aberrant for a man who could relax after only so barely fleeing danger."

Hearing Kaito's whisper, Elisabeth nodded.

Eventually, the two of them made it to the middle of the square. Seeing something strange there, Kaito narrowed his eyes.

"…What's up with that?"

"That's a statue of the Saint. Hardly an oddity."

"No, but, like, what's it doing here?"

A bronze statue of an upside-down saint shedding tears of blood stood before them. In front of her was another statue, a kneeling apostle wrapped from the head down in tattered rags. Surprisingly, the apostle was a demi-human. Legs with scales engraved in them and sharp claws peeked out from the bottom edge of the rags.

He looked as though he was both rejoicing and lamenting at the Saint's suffering.

The scene called to mind torture, making it a strange choice to decorate a beloved plaza.

"It's a little grim for a plaza decoration, don't you think?"

"Perhaps, but according to the Church's legends, humanity's current society is built on the foundation of the Suffering Saint's sacrifice. In short, the scene signifies the sins man forced the Saint to bear. People must live proper lives, constantly recalling their sins as they sing prayers of gratitude. The statue is situated in an everyday place to remind them of that. It serves as something akin to a warning."

"…I see."

Her explanation was blunt, nearly to the point of heresy, but it inspired a vague sort of understanding in Kaito. He shifted his gaze from the bronze statue and the tent beside it. It was placed just off the statue and was a good deal narrower and longer than the ones holding the injured.

The female paladin stopped directly in front of it. Raising her left arm, she gestured for the two of them to enter.

"This way."

Feeling the hostile gazes of the Royal Knights standing guard bearing down on them, Kaito and Elisabeth went inside. As they did, they were assailed by bright lights, forcing Kaito to squint.

"…Wh—?"

"Not bad. Impressive even, being able to assemble so many."

Elisabeth's voice was full of admiration. Kaito looked and discovered that an

entire wall was covered in active magical communication devices. Civil officials were frantically setting them into motion, trading messages with partners that were removed from there by great distances.

Tense, angry voices filled through the air, and the female paladin called out to the two of them again.

“Please keep walking. Our destination lies farther in.”

Prompted on by her words, Kaito and Elisabeth continued on.

The air was hot and muddy, but the farther in they went, the cooler it got. Upon reaching the inner depths of the tent, they could hear new voices going back and forth, voices possessing a different kind of gravity than the ones from before. There was a desk placed directly on the stone ground, and a map of the capital was spread atop it. Paladins were pointing at it and exchanging arguments with stern expressions.

“For La Mules’s bombardment, we should…”

“We’ve received authorization for tomorrow afternoon…”

“Considering the angle and the effective range, the hill in the graveyard is…”

“The people we’ll need to secure it are…”

Whatever they were discussing, it was going completely over Kaito’s head. A man was floating in front of them. Upon seeing the man’s strangely blurry back, Kaito began doubting his own eyes.

Wait, why is that guy’s back blurry?

The man was dressed in a simple yet high-quality vestment. He was probably affiliated with the Church.

Wondering who it was, Kaito frowned. Beside him, Elisabeth muttered in a strained voice.

“…Godot Deus?”

“Godot Deus?!”

Kaito reflexively let out a hysterical cry. That shouldn’t have been possible.

Didn’t Godot Deus die?

Godot Deus was supposed to have lost his life in the initial attack, when the three demons had explosively begun their expansion. However, upon being called a dead man's name, the man turned to face them.

"Elisabeth, I see. You did well to make it here."

Aside from through communication devices, this was the first time Kaito had ever seen Godot Deus. In contrast to his expectations, Godot Deus's appearance was nothing more than that of a thin, wrinkled old man—the kind you could find just about anywhere. But given the fact that his supposed death hadn't stopped him from appearing before them, he was clearly no ordinary man.

Kaito narrowed his eyes and looked over Godot Deus again. Upon closer inspection, he was partially transparent. A silver bowl sat at his feet, a jewel resting in a sparkling pool of water.

As Kaito stared at it, the stone in his pocket squirmed. At the same time, Kaito realized something.

I see. Godot Deus really did die.

The Godot Deus floating in front of him was nothing more than a reproduction of his soul, the same as Vlad was. Supplied with mana from the holy water the Church had prepared, he was commanding the troops from beyond the grave.

The stone squirmed again. It seemed that Vlad wanted to talk to the man, perhaps due to them both being reproductions. But if Kaito did as Vlad wanted and materialized him, there was a solid chance the paladins would strike him down on the spot.

As Kaito ignored the stone, to his surprise, Godot Deus spoke up.

"Do you have Vlad in there?"

"Wait, you could tell?"

Completely exposed, Kaito responded in surprise.

At the sudden mention of the Kaiser's former contractor's name, tension filled the room. Elisabeth stared off into space. Godot Deus calmly shook his

head.

“Your left arm is that of the Kaiser’s and proof that one lacking knowledge of summoning was encouraged by a third party to form a contract. When you told me not to have any regrets, you were warning me that this was the choice you had made. Servant of Elisabeth’s…what a fool you are, forming a contract with a demon.”

“Yeah, I agree with you there. But I haven’t hurt anyone, and I plan to keep it that way. The minute I tried to harm an innocent, my master Elisabeth will probably immediately behead me anyway. I haven’t given you guys any reason to criticize me or give me orders…and you don’t have any grounds to punish me.”

“Strong words. However, it is true that we lack pieces to play. If you intend to fight alongside Elisabeth, I shall allow it. However, there is one thing I wish to confirm.”

Godot Deus extended a bony hand.

Then he spoke in a low, husky voice.

“Would you mind letting Vlad out?”

In response to his request, Kaito gently ran mana through the stone in his pocket.

Suddenly, azure rose petals and darkness whirled up within the tent. The paladins let out frantic cries. As he basked in their reactions, Vlad’s phantasmal body knit itself together in the air.

Overflowing with androgynous beauty, he crossed his legs and lorded over his surroundings.

“Hey there, Godot Deus. Long time no see.”

“What are you putting on airs for, you buffoon?”

“You’re trying to make it sound like you showed up after being called for, but you were literally just begging to be let out.”

Elisabeth and Kaito interjected at the same time. The paladins gripped the handles of their swords in unison. However, after realizing that it was just a

phantom, they lowered their guards.

Vlad's black hair fluttered as he smiled at Godot Deus.

"The last time was the inquisition—no, it was the time when you spared no pains in tormenting me? To see one of the Church's high priests reduced to the same state as me… I never realized the Church was so fond of twisting the natural order. For the first time, I find myself intrigued in you fellows."

"I suspected that the dregs of your soul were still present in the world. How deplorable. After the Torture Princess's execution, we'll have to destroy you posthaste."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that. I hear Elisabeth intends to do me in herself before then."

"Even so, Elisabeth's servant's arm aside, things exceeding our expectations seem to be appearing left and right… This, too, must be one of God's trials."

Half ignoring what Vlad had to say, Godot Deus shook his head again. After listening to their exchange, Elisabeth suddenly piped up.

"Aye, I was surprised as well. Does the Church not oppose defying death in such a manner?"

"It is as you say. With my soul currently residing with God, by all rights, Godot Deus should cease existing in this world as quickly as possible. However, the people are in a panic. After all, I am the one among the high priests with the authority to command both the Torture Princess and the paladins. A man entrusted with a blade must not be put to his rest alone."

Godot Deus spoke as though it were a matter that didn't concern him.

Kaito knew next to nothing about the power structure governing this society. But he'd been able to piece together that command of the Holy Knights, an organization ranked higher than the Royal Knights, rested not with the king but with the Church and that they were an organization specializing in fighting demons.

I guess I'll have to ask Elisabeth about the specifics later.

As Kaito pondered that, Godot Deus made yet another astonishing

proclamation.

“I am not the only Godot Deus who currently exists. Others are stationed all over the capital. All in all, from the shelters scattered about to the escape routes to the places connecting them, the sum total count of me’s *in operation comes to twenty.”*

“…What?”

Kaito let out a dumbfounded exclamation. He couldn’t help but picture twenty Godot Deuses all gathered in the same room. Filled with instinctive revulsion, he furrowed his brows.

The prospect of having multiple reproductions of the same soul at once was twisted beyond belief.

From beside him, Elisabeth loudly laughed.

“Ha-ha, what a lark! To think of the Church’s head priest sullying providence in such a manner! You lot truly do have your backs against the wall!”

“Watch your mouth, woman!”

One of the paladins launched a sharp rebuke. However, the woman who’d guided Kaito and Elisabeth there lifted a hand to admonish him. After nodding to the woman, Godot Deus turned back toward Elisabeth.

“Once more, the Church calls upon the Torture Princess. Fight alongside the paladins and defeat the demon that invades the capital. Your foe is the final three of the fourteen demons. This shall be your final order.”

With that, Godot Deus paused for a beat.

His gaze pierced Elisabeth with the intensity of a hawk’s.

“Until the day of your death, try to do some good, at least.”

“I’d have done all that had you told me to or not, you senile old man!”

The Torture Princess replied loudly to the Church’s command.

Her answer was accompanied by a truly fiendish smile. Godot Deus nodded, satisfied. Elisabeth scoffed, then tapped the map of the capital with her black-polished index fingernail.

“Now, this battle shall take place in an urban environment, so on the matter of how much I’m allowed to destroy…”

“If I may, we don’t need the Torture Princess’s assistance.”

A clear voice rang out and interrupted Elisabeth’s question. Elisabeth narrowed her eyes in annoyance.

Kaito turned to look at the speaker. It was the female paladin, the one who’d just stopped her underling from chewing out the Torture Princess. He tilted his head to the side at the unforeseen opposition.

On the other side, Elisabeth sneered provocatively.

“That reminds me, we’ve yet to hear your name. Who are you? What gives you the right?”

“My name is Izabella Vicker, commander of the Holy Knights. Godot Deus, please know that I speak with utmost respect. We mustn’t borrow the Torture Princess’s strength. We mustn’t rely on a sinner.”

“Skip the sentimentality. State why you feel she is unnecessary.”

“Yes, forgive me. As per the previous meeting, once we finish evacuating the residents, we plan to launch an all-out attack on the demon with the support of the priests. And La Mules, the Shepherd, will be joining us as well.”

“Hey, Elisabeth?”

“Now, of all times? What is it? If it’s some idle nonsense, I shall strike you dead.”

“What’s the Shepherd?”

“A high priest who bears the authority to summon first-class mythical beasts and spirits. It would seem that quite the big shot has been slated to make an appearance.”

Elisabeth answered Kaito’s question. From beside her, he saw her face stiffen a hair. Seeing that, he could tell that this person was the real deal.

The paladin—Izabella—continued talking.

“In particular, the priests possess God’s blessing, a boon that renders them

inviolable by the hands of demons. The expanding demon body itself is unguarded, and the effectiveness of a magical beast attack should be obvious. Given those conditions, the Royal Knights and the paladins together should prove to be sufficient to subjugate the demon. We can settle this matter with mankind's hands alone; to rely on the Torture Princess now would sully the Church's pride."

With that, she completed her dignified statement. The paladins around her nodded in assent.

Upon hearing the paladins' true thoughts, Kaito's face twitched. The first one to respond, though, was Vlad. Tracing his own lips with his white, gloved hand, he laughed low.

"Strong words from a young maiden who knows nothing of demons nor, I wager, the touch of a man. Go on then, my dear successor, give them a piece of your mind!"

"What are you guys, dumb-asses?"

Not waiting for Vlad to finish speaking, Kaito spoke of his own volition. Vlad's lips curled. Raising her elegant eyebrows, Izabella turned to face Kaito.

"What did you just say?"

"That demon is swallowing people up one by one and tormenting them. Even if you guys could defeat it on your own, you should be looking for any help you can get, even if it comes from a monster. That pride of yours can eat shit. If you think you've got time to be spewing garbage like that, why don't you go march outside and take a good, long look at all those faces covering the demon's surface?"

Despite his rage, Kaito was utterly calm. His mind was cold and clear.

His words themselves were coarse, but he layered them on in a level, icy voice. Then suddenly, he went silent. The gaze he focused on Izabella had no malice in it, simply pure questioning.

"Don't you want to save them as soon as possible?"

Surprisingly, no counterargument came. Disappointed, Kaito blinked.

Izabella simply stared at him, eyes wide in puzzlement. Her face seemed ever so young and looked like she'd just been struck or like she'd just heard something she hadn't expected. She opened her mouth to speak.

Before she could, one of the other paladins spoke up.

"Who are you to talk? You've got a monster's arm, and you made a contract with the Kai—"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh, precisely. How very right you are!"

All of a sudden, a lively voice rang though the air.

Elisabeth clapped her hands together and grinned. As if inviting him to dance, she extended a hand toward the paladin about to make his rebuttal.

"And on that note, I shall return home! Good work, everyone!"

"No, wait, that… Godot Deus has to…"

"…And if I were to say that, 'twould be you lot who would regret it. To think that you failed to understand even that much. I'd thought the paladins would be able to at least gauge how outclassed they were. You lot are like children, ignorant of your own limits."

Elisabeth delivered scathing criticism.

The atmosphere in the room froze over with a loud snap. At least, Kaito felt as though it had. Upon being verbally abused by the Torture Princess, the same woman who'd once slaughtered their comrades, a number of hands reached for swords. As they did, Kaito raised his beastly arm.

Then he openly displayed a terrible bloodlust he'd accumulated from tasting death hundreds of times over.

"Don't move. If you draw those, I'll make the first move. And I'm faster than you guys."

The situation tottered on the precipice. Neither Godot Deus nor Vlad spoke, each surveying the other's movements.

The paladins' eyes were filled with rage, and Kaito looked directly into them.

"Please don't make me use the Kaiser's power for something as stupid as

this.”

Suddenly, Elisabeth moved. Paying no heed to the tension filling the room, she majestically spread her arms wide and stomped the ground.

For some reason, she began twirling, and her dress fluttered behind her.

“God’s blessing, eh? I see, I see. True, the Church’s divine protection is effective against demons. However, demons exist to destroy God’s creations. And that is what you all are. God’s creations doomed to have your prayers dashed by the powers of darkness.”

The black cloth of her dress, the inside of which was dyed scarlet, spun like a pinwheel.

Elisabeth continued in a lilting tone.

“The demons invading the capital are running rampant, drawing their power from the bottomless well that is the suffering of your people. As the mass grows, its collection of pawns continues to multiply.”

She loudly slammed the tip of her heels onto the stone floor. Having gathered the full attention of everyone present, she stopped in her tracks and smoothly extended her arm toward the ceiling.

“Numbers beget force. And one can accomplish much through the use of force.”

Darkness and crimson flower petals swirled at her fingertips, and she drew the Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal from within the vortex.

Unsure of her intentions, the paladins tightened their grips on the hilts of their swords.

Not sparing a glance in their direction, Elisabeth clutched her sword and glared at the ceiling as if looking for something.

“As I thought. They’re coming!”

As she spoke, the ceiling of the tent warped like a pool of water struck by a school of fish. A moment later, it teared open.

Kaito’s eyes widened. Cacophonous laughter rang out, and some sort of

ominous white mass descended upon them.

Elisabeth swung her sword and reaped several of whatever it was that assailed them in a single swing. She brought her sword around with a backswing, slaying just as many. Even so, the mass had a sizable number of survivors swooping down on Kaito and the rest.

A huge number of feathers filled the air, obscuring their vision.

“—!”

Reflexively, Kaito used his beastly arm to shred something flying in front of him.

Still unclear as to his attacker’s true nature, he frantically fought back against the waves of animosity and bloodlust bearing down on him. The paladins, on the other hand, tried to avoid the initial attack and calmly assess the situation.

The difference in their judgments caused their fates to diverge.

Several of the paladins had their heads torn off with force that would have been unthinkable had their foes been human. Blood gushed and sprayed as their armored bodies spun.

With comically heavy noises, they toppled to the ground.

Scraw, scraw, scraw, scraw, scraw!

Round objects flew through the air to accompany the shrill laughter. The paladins reflexively caught them, then screamed when they realized that the objects were their comrades’ heads.

Amid the chaos, Izabella was the first to react. She quickly drew her sword, then swung it in a semicircle. Its blade glowed white, as the priests had apparently consecrated it, and she sliced open the stomach of one of their assailants.

Kaito turned his gaze toward the collapsed corpse. It was an underling with the body of a dove and the head of a fish. Like some sort of cruel joke, its feathers were white.

Splattered by the underling’s blood and trampling on its guts, Izabella shouted.

“Move! You’ll make yourselves targets if you freeze up!”

“Draw your swords, fools!”

Godot Deus gave a rebuke, as well. The paladins, who’d been caught unawares by the atrocious attack, returned to their senses and drew their blades in succession.

While that was going on, Elisabeth was slaying underlings with gorgeous, dance-like movements. She wasn’t summoning torture devices, likely realizing that the confined space would result in friendly fire.

She was prioritizing the underlings attacking the civil officials. Kaito followed her lead.

Their enemy’s ranks waned quickly. Their grotesque corpses littered the ground.

Other than in the initial attack, none of the paladins had fallen. Making sure they had reclaimed their original presence of mind, Kaito called out.

“Everyone, get down!”

“Get down!”

Izabella echoed his shout. Immediately afterward, Kaito snapped his fingers.

“—*La* (dance)!”

A massive blade flew through the air, just barely passing over the paladins’ heads. Cleaved in half, the underlings toppled to the ground.

Despite the torrential rain of blood pouring down on them, none of the paladins flinched. They quickly mopped up the underlings who’d evaded the blade.

Eventually, the inside of the tent became quiet again.

As though they’d traded places, screams rang out from outside.

As she aggressively wiped blood off her face, Izabella spoke in astonishment.

“Impossible… The barrier!”

“Your paladins formed a perimeter around the square and maintained the

barrier from there. The barrier is hemispherical, and your men form its center. In short, the barrier's thinnest point is overhead… The underlings must have gathered there, then broken through with sheer numbers. 'Tis no hard task, should they be willing to sacrifice a dozen or so of their forces."

As she gave her dispassionate analysis, Elisabeth strode forward. Her lustrous black hair fluttered as she turned to briefly look over her shoulder.

"Why are you all standing there so addled? If you wish to protect your allies and kill your foes, you'd best follow me."

Her dress fluttered as she left the caved-in tent behind her. With Izabella at their head, the paladins snapped into action and went after her.

Kaito was about to be reeled in as well, but he stopped himself. He quickly surveyed his surroundings. The civil officials were trembling, but none of them seemed to be badly injured. At some point, Vlad had vanished.

He probably just got bored… What a carefree— Huh?

Then Kaito realized that Godot Deus was staring at him. After making sure his jewel was undamaged, Kaito nodded. After exchanging a meaningful glance with Godot Deus, Kaito ran outside.

The moment he did, he sucked in his breath.

"—!"

There, he found yet another hellscape spreading out before him.

Just like before, the dove-bodied underlings were lopping people's heads off one after another. Blood shot out of their dismembered torsos before they spun and toppled over. Their severed heads crashed against the stone ground, popping like overripe fruits.

At the same time, other underlings were grabbing a dozen or so people by the arms and forcibly dragging them toward the mass of flesh.

"Ahhh! Ahhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

Desperate screams filled the air as the people's legs flopped atop the tragic corpses. They looked almost like marionettes, playing out an act in a cruel comedy. However, their crazed screams were no doubt the real deal.

“Heavens above!”

Unable to bear the terrible spectacle, even one of the paladins maintaining the barrier was on the verge of fleeing. Frantically, Kaito went to try and stop him. However, before he could, Izabella admonished the man.

“Stand your ground! Focus your mana on mending the damaged sections! We will deal with the intruders!”

Right as she shouted, a new black shape rushed in through the cracks in the barrier.

Izabella looked up pointedly.

“…A second…wave?”

The final word of her sentence was tinged with bewilderment.

As he looked at the reinforcements, Kaito’s eyes went wide. He muttered in astonishment.

“No way… That’s too cruel.”

The new underlings still had most of their human forms intact.

Strange pink wings protruded from their naked backs. Each time they flapped, the human parts of their bodies were forced forward. Losing their balance, the underlings toppled to the ground.

Seeing the underlings fall, the fleeing townsfolk stopped in confusion.

From within them, one woman called out.

“Oh… You’re Rohan, aren’t you? Rohan! Dear!”

Forgetting the danger and dread consuming her, she rushed over to the bald underling. Based on the way she’d called his name, they were likely lovers or a couple of some sort. With seemingly rusty movements, the man called Rohan turned to look at her.

The moment she extended her arm toward him, the underling’s cheek swelled to the point of nearly popping.

Coming to his senses, Kaito called out to her.

“Don’t!”

With a pulpy noise, the man’s tongue extended out from his mouth, and its soggy, bruised flesh wrapped around the woman’s torso. Once he’d captured the woman, his pink wings began flapping, almost as though they had a will of their own.

“No, nooooooooooooooooooo!”

The woman was carried off toward the mass of flesh, leaving nothing but her screams.

Seeing the act of violence carried out before their eyes, the townspeople scattered. The bald underlings’ tongues and the dovelike underlings’ talons swooped down on them one after another.

Furious and repulsed at having been deceived, the paladins raised their swords high.

“Damn you!”

“Eek!”

As they did, one of the bald underlings let out a frail cry. The human parts of their bodies were trembling. Their distended tongues seemed incapable of forming words, but if that weren’t the case, they’d probably have been begging for their lives. Large tears were even welling up in their eyes.

Demons didn’t cry.

Like it or not, the paladins were forced to realize that these underlings were still mostly human.

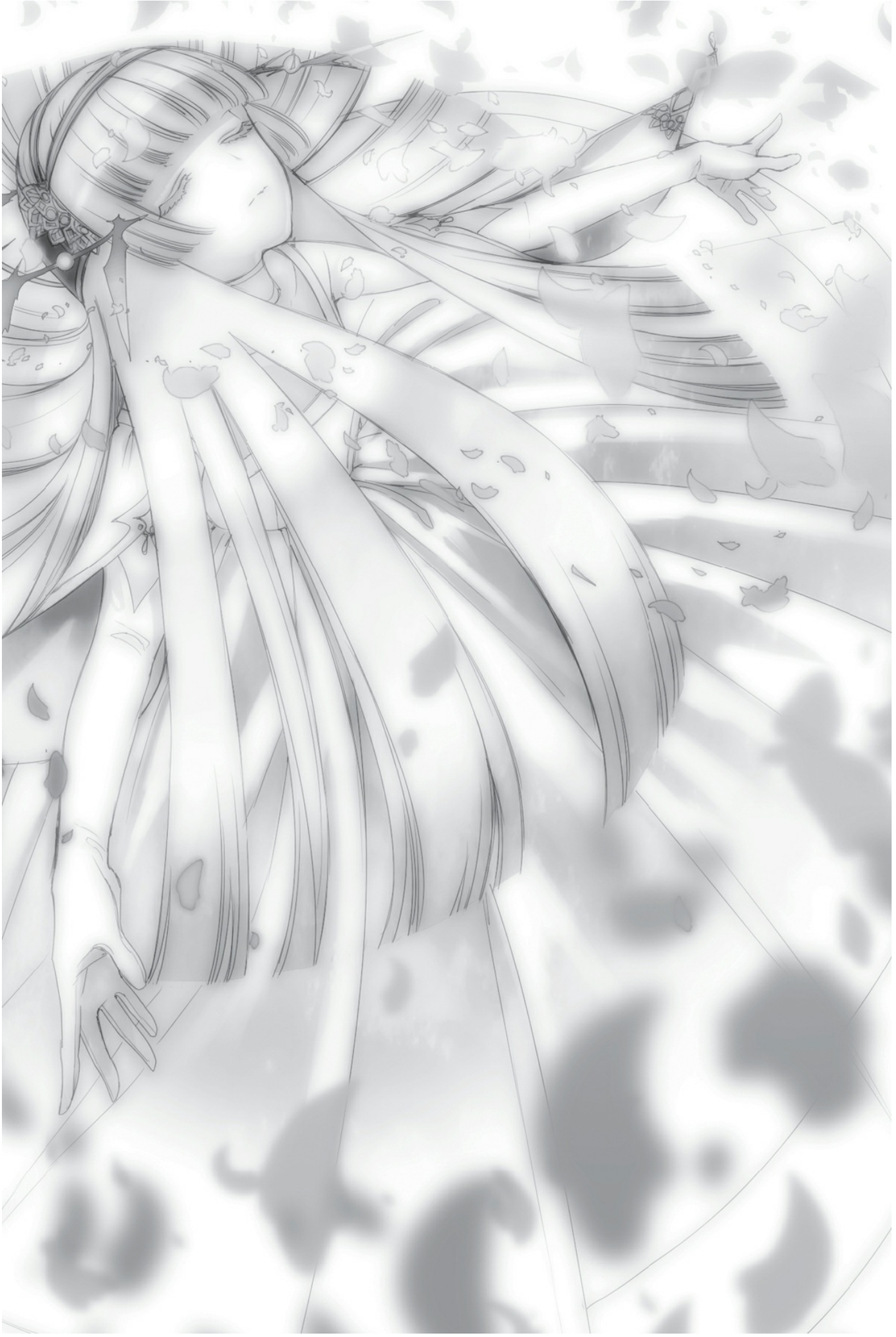
All they had to do was lop off the pink wings, and they might yet be saved. Although nobody put that thought into words, hope flooded the square.

As it did, a low, cold voice rang out.

“La Guillotine, Saint of Beheadings.”

Five vortexes of darkness and crimson flower petals appeared around Elisabeth, and five white figures emerged from within them, landing on the ground. The five beautiful saints raised their heads, their eyes shut tight.

Their thick, straight, evenly cut silver hair swayed.



While that was happening, Elisabeth clicked her heels.

The saints tilted their bodies and their plain white dresses moved with them. Peering up at the sky, they crossed their pale arms over their chests before stretching back out. With a sharp noise, rectangular blades slid out from their elbows.

The blades carved through both types of underling in succession, arcing in ways that defied the laws of centrifugal force. Unlike the time they'd been used at the Governor's manor, the blades returned to the saints' arms after reaching the end of their paths.

Blood rained down in every direction. Perplexed screams filled the air.

Among all the people present, Kaito was the only one with calm eyes. He nodded.

Izabella said nothing. However, one of the other paladins called out in a quivering voice: "We might have been able to save them!"

"Idiot. Get the notion out of your head that any man turned into an underling can be saved. Discard your naive dreams. Killing them is the only option."

"You can't know—"

"I can. I am more familiar with the work of demons than any other."

After speaking firmly, Elisabeth clicked her heels again.

The La Guillotines bisected the underlings one by one. Their pitiful corpses began piling up.

Amid them, the Torture Princess—beloved daughter of the Kaiser's previous contractor, Vlad Le Fanu, and a woman who'd surpassed perfection—made a merciless proclamation.

"Harboring hope is worthless. Trust only in despair—and fight back against it, so that you may find a chance to destroy it."

Her eyes were fierce as she spoke. Kaito bit down on his lip when he heard her, as though he was listening to a tragic drama.

Then a single paladin sprang into action.

“Ha!”

Izabella’s silver hair fluttered as she gave a sharp fighting cry. She brandished her sword, severing an underling’s neck.

Its head, still that of a human, went flying into the air.

Blood dripping down her porcelain skin, Izabella gave a resounding order to her troops.

“Kill them. That’s my order, so I shall bear both the responsibility and the sin. Grieve not; just put an end to this.”

Looking at Izabella’s bloodstained visage, Elisabeth narrowed her crimson eyes. However, she said nothing.

Perhaps in order to encourage themselves, the paladins let out a sudden battle cry. As they shouted from deep in their abdomens, they raised their swords overhead. The Royal Knights followed in their wake.

After that, the knights calmly carried out their work.

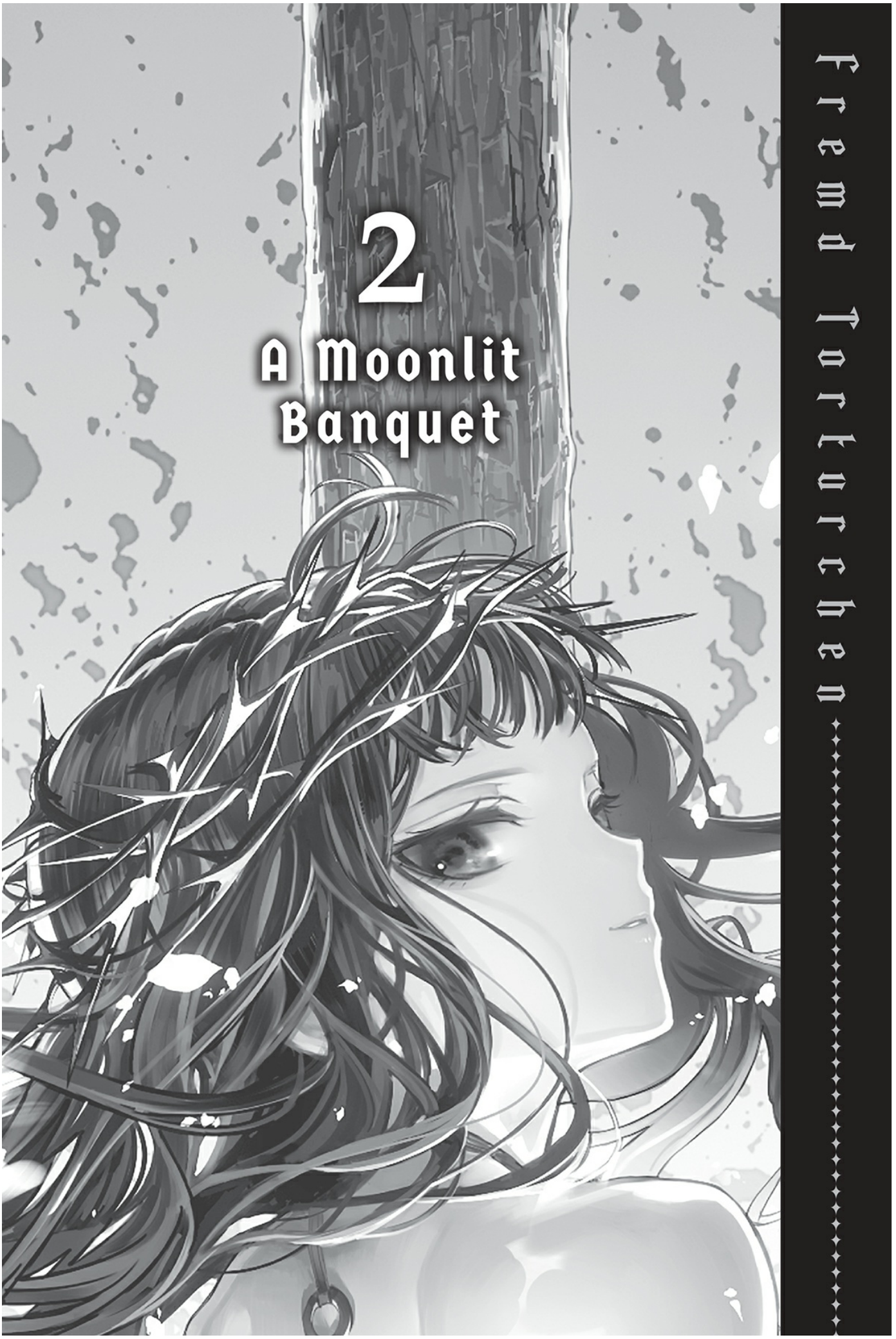
Aside from their wings, the corpses that lined the streets were completely human.

Eventually, the underlings were successfully exterminated.

The paladins repaired the barrier. With the aid of the priests, they were also able to reinforce it past the point it had been at before. Transportation of the young and infirm began again as well, and the paladins formed an escort to hasten the escape of the able-bodied. After watching this series of events and gazing at the corpses piled up in a corner, the reality of the situation hit Kaito once more.

These people are trying desperately to survive.

That, and the fact that battles against demons were cruel and tragic beyond words.



2
A Moonlit Banquet

2

A Moonlit Banquet

No matter how stagnant it may seem, time always marches on at the same fixed pace.

At the end of the battle, the sun had set, and night had finally arrived. The capital, cruelly transformed as it had been, was concealed behind a thin curtain of darkness. While it was likely only temporary, the mass of flesh had stopped expanding as well. Perhaps having sensed the decrease in available citizens to use as fresh materials, it had also stopped indiscriminately attacking.

"…That felt like it took a lifetime."

Off in one of the square's nooks, Kaito muttered to himself. However, all the events that had occurred up until then had taken place in an almost bizarrely short period of time. There had simply been too many bloodstained tragedies, causing his sense of time to be completely distorted. And he likely wasn't the only one.

At long last, the defenders had finally gotten some time they could use to take stock.

However, the battle was far from over.

Countless drops rained down upon the pavement. Drawn in by the noise, Kaito lifted his head.

When he did, he saw a cylinder of white light appear around a handful of people, then transform into droplets and fall to the ground.

When the light faded, the people who had been standing there were nowhere to be seen. The Church's teleportation circle was operating without rest. However, someone must have determined that transporting everyone present within the day was impossible, as one of the circles was being used to bring in troops and supplies from outside the capital.

Using the newly delivered grain, the Church's nuns immediately got to work cooking gruel. The people waiting in line for the teleportation circle, having temporarily overcome their panic that had arisen out of nearly being slaughtered, voluntarily offered up their assistance.

Sending them off with thankful gazes, the priests in charge of the teleportation circle took turns expending their mana. Beads of sweat welled up on their foreheads. And the people in charge of the barrier were even more exhausted still.

I guess battles aren't only fought on the battlefield.

However, Kaito was unable to assist them.

The mana he currently possessed didn't solely originate from Elisabeth's blood; he himself had generated a large supply as well. But he'd obtained it from pain as a result of his contract with the Kaiser. It was incompatible with priests' mana, which the talented among them could obtain by collecting energy within themselves that they'd accumulated from prayer and that was apparently also called spiritual energy. And although he'd wrapped his beastly arm in cloth so as to avoid scaring anyone, there was a chance it would unravel if he lent a hand distributing the rations.

…Man, it hurts to admit it, but I really am part evil now, huh?

As Kaito thought earnestly, he suddenly found warm steam gently caressing his cheek.

Frantically, he looked up. Upon inspection, he discovered a chipped bowl of vegetable gruel floating in front of his face, and there was even a wooden spoon. One of the Church's nuns was holding it out to him with an affectionate smile.

"A blessing from God. Please have some."

"Wh…? U-um, I really shouldn't—"

"Don't be silly. If you don't eat, your body won't hold out."

The young nun firmly pushed the bowl into his hands.

Kaito frantically shook his head to stop her. The word *inquisition* flashed

through his head, as well as the various fanatical, exhaustive, scornful things Clueless had said about heretics. Godot Deus's attitude toward Kaito and Elisabeth hadn't exactly been friendly, either. That was simply the way the Church's representatives were.

If that was the case, then what was this nun's angle?

Bewildered by the unexpected turn of events, Kaito avoided meeting the nun's gaze.

Why would someone from the Church come give me gruel? Is it poisoned? Could there be poison in it? Could there?

Then Kaito noticed something.

Magical flames lit up the plaza from within a number of containers. The flames posed no risk of accidentally causing a fire, and their golden light served to warm those present. Amid the firelight, the nuns were walking about and distributing the gruel.

It seemed they were handing it out not just to Kaito but to everyone who lacked the energy to go get it themselves.

Kaito gazed dumbfoundedly at the proceedings. The nuns' faces as they recited words of prayer and concern for those present were filled with genuine kindness, the type Kaito had never experienced back when he was alive. Even though they were dealing with the Kaiser's contractor, it was difficult to see their actions as malicious.

But if that was the case, then Kaito found himself with all the more reason not to meet her gaze.

Won't it cause trouble for her if anyone finds out she was nice to a demon's contractor? Wait…could it be that she doesn't know who I am?

With that thought, Kaito was finally satisfied. After all, his left arm was currently concealed by a bundle of cloth. While his military uniform would make it difficult for him to be mistaken for one of the townsfolk, he could easily have been confused for one of the mages simply taking a breather.

It that case, what should I do?

The nun's feelings would probably be hurt if she found out later that he'd been the Kaiser's contractor. He was at a loss. However, he didn't want to frighten her. And he didn't want to refuse the rare kindness.

Ultimately, he ended up taking the bowl with his right hand.

"I'll take you up on that. Thanks for the food."

"No, thank you for this afternoon. May God's protection be with you."

After closing her eyes and praying for him, the nun smiled again. Then she left, her thick black veil fluttering as she went. Taken aback, Kaito watched her go.

Apparently, she had known who he was. And even so, she'd brought the food just for him.

"…Well, that was nice."

After nodding a few times, Kaito began scooping the gruel into his mouth. A weak, salty flavor spread across his tongue. However, after a moment, the sweetness of the grain and the vegetables began to sink in.

Due to the abuse he'd suffered in life, Kaito's sense of taste was weak. As long as it didn't have detergent or poison in it, he could eat just about anything. Despite that, although it didn't compare to the home-cooked meals his beloved Hina prepared for him, he felt that the gruel's flavor was more than decent. Warmth began to spread throughout his empty stomach.

Then he finally realized how hungry he'd been.

"Even after forming a contract with a demon, I still get hungry, huh?"

After muttering to himself, Kaito tilted the bowl up and downed the rest of the gruel. Well aware of how poor his table manners were, he stubbornly scraped at the last few beads of grain with his spoon.

Then he thought back to a similar scene he'd witnessed just a few days prior.

A catlike figure scraping persistently at the bottom of an earthenware pot floated across his mind.

Hmm… Now that I think about it, where'd she go?

Standing up, he quickly looked around. However, the person he was looking for was nowhere to be seen. Given the fact that he'd have immediately been able to pick her out had she crossed his field of vision, it seemed unlikely she was picking up gruel.

After pondering for a moment, Kaito set off and rejoined the end of the ration line.

When he reached the front of the line, he handed his bowl back to the old witchy nun and made his request.

"Um, the woman I'm with hasn't eaten yet. Would it be possible for me to get another bowlful?"

Snorting out of her hook nose, the nun cast a sharp glance at Kaito's left arm.

Pierced by her gray, knifelike gaze, he unconsciously straightened his posture. However, after a heavy silence, the nun shook her head slightly and refilled the bowl.

Apparently, she intended to feign not having noticed anything.

"…Thanks a bunch."

There were two meanings behind the way he thanked her, and after he had, he walked away. With the warm, steaming bowl in hand, he surveyed the plaza. However, as he'd expected, the woman he was looking for was still nowhere to be seen.

"Dammit, Elisabeth, where'd you get off to?"

In search of the Torture Princess's bewitching figure, Kaito set off once more.

*

"Ow, hey!"

About half an hour later, Kaito found himself being practically kicked out of the entrance of the plaza by the paladins.

Behind him, he could hear the gate loudly closing. He had been well and truly locked out.

After somehow avoiding toppling over, Kaito guarded the bowl in his right

hand to avoid letting any of the gruel within fall out. Brushing his bangs to the side and wiping away his sweat, he turned back to look over his shoulder.

“I get that you’re impatient and all, but would it kill you to be a little gentler?!”

Nobody replied to his angry outburst. The only response the row of paladins offered was their silence.

Livid, Kaito ground his teeth. However, at the same time, he understood why they’d driven him so roughly from the plaza.

After noticing Elisabeth’s absence, Kaito had walked around the square in search of her.

Drawing no small share of dirty looks, Kaito looked in every last tent, eventually going so far as to check under desks. Even so, he couldn’t find her.

As a last resort, he asked the paladins manning the perimeter if they’d spotted her. As a result, he discovered that she’d taken off on her own and was kicked out and tasked with bringing her back.

“As much as you hate us, you still want me to bring her back. If you understand how badly you need our help, you could at least try to treat us like we’re on your side, don’cha think? Although…I can understand why you’re so pissed off.”

Kaito mumbled to himself, then stole one last fleeting look at the paladins.

Seeing their tense figures clad in their silver armor, he swallowed.

At the moment, most of the barrier’s maintenance was being carried out by the priests, releasing the paladins from their heavy, unaccustomed responsibility. However, just like during the afternoon, they were still guarding the perimeter in a state of high alert.

While they were helping to supply the priests with mana, they were also serving as human shields. They were prepared for the fact that if the underlings pressed the attack, they would immediately lose their lives.

However, the Torture Princess had simply forced her way through them.

On top of all that, her servant had come nonchalantly strolling by with a bowl

of gruel in one hand.

…Man, I was lucky I didn't just get punched.

Realizing that the paladins could hardly be blamed for the way they'd treated him, Kaito heaved a sigh.

Then he made his way once more down the road.

With the plaza at his back and moans coming from the mass of flesh behind it, Kaito strode forth.

*

Earlier, Elisabeth had told Kaito that many of the capital's residents were wealthy, particularly those who lived not in the mercantile or industrial zones but in the dedicated residential district.

The proof of her words lay in the beautiful townscape stretching out before him. Each row of houses was ornamented with different-colored bricks, the hedges facing the main drag were beautifully maintained, and white stone staircases led up to the porches of the homes.

It reminded Kaito of the touristy European suburbs he'd once caught a glimpse of on TV. However, the colorful, flower-laden townscape was currently steeping in an ominous silence.

Not a single person was in sight. Fortunately, though, nor were any underlings.

Back at the square, the paladins had selected the able-bodied from among those who'd sought shelter and sent their best men along with them to escort them out of the capital. They'd probably done a sweep of the underlings along their path.

Thanks to that, I should be fine, even with the gruel tying up one of my hands.

No longer fearful of dropping the gruel, Kaito energetically picked up the pace. Each time he neared an alley, he stopped, then peeked around its corner. However, he didn't find so much as a single stray kitten.

It seemed that, for the time being, he was alone.

The moment he realized that, an overwhelming silence filled his ears.

“…Here should be fine. And it’s not like I’ll really be able to chat him up once I’ve found Elisabeth.”

Muttering to himself, Kaito temporarily paused his search.

After fretting for a moment, he let out a low voice from deep in his throat, one that sounded almost like a stranger’s.

“Kaiser.”

“You called, O unworthy master of mine?”

Darkness swirled in front of him. Thin strands of darkness spun together to form supple muscles and fine, velvety fur. Before long, a black dog as tall as the roofs of the nearby houses had materialized. While it was gigantic by nature, it could change its size at will.

The monstrous beast glared down at Kaito, his eyes glimmering with blazing hellfire.

Facing the magnificent hound that housed the Kaiser, Kaito posed a question to him without any trace of fear.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“What do you wish to know?”

The Kaiser’s response was the very image of servility. Kaito scowled at the snide canine.

“Why didn’t you pitch in when the underlings launched their surprise attack?”

Back then, the Kaiser could have woven his way through the obstructing humans and hunted down the underlings with ease. Despite that, he hadn’t shown his face.

For a moment, silence descended upon them. However, the Kaiser quickly snorted in derision.

“The answer is simple. I have no objections to destroying other demons to demonstrate my power. But why should I, the supreme Kaiser, be made to hunt mere underlings in the service of some humans? That is no task for a hound of my caliber. Are you such a fool that you would use a cannon to destroy an ant?

Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

The Kaiser laughed in a voice that resembled a human's. Kaito narrowed his eyes, as though challenging the Kaiser.

"I'm your contractor. Isn't it your job to lend me your help when I ask for it?"

"Don't put on airs, boy. You are my master, my catalyst, my tool, and my flesh. I am not the one being kept. Would you rather I consume you here and now?"

"…Oh, I see. So you're gonna eat your contractor up, lose your link to our world, and go running back home just as soon as you got here. You'd be the laughingstock of humanity. Nobody's ever gonna wanna summon you again. Go on, do it. That'd be funny as hell, wouldn't it?"

Anyone who knelt before a demon would quickly find their head crushed. Kaito instinctively knew that trembling and abasing himself before the Kaiser would be the height of folly.

That was precisely why Kaito was acting so haughty. As he spoke, a dull, heavy sound rang out.

Kaito's left arm had vanished from the elbow down.

"…Huh?"

Blood gushed forth onto the stone pavement. The sole reason he was able to avoid dropping the bowl of gruel was that the fingers on his right hand had stiffened out of shock, in what could only be described as a miracle.

In front of Kaito's bewildered eyes, the Kaiser spat something out. A lump of meat tumbled into the pool of blood with a heavy splash, and the black cloth wrapped around it came loose. Kaito stared at it, dumbfounded.

The human arm, which had been largely transformed into that of a beast, seemed almost completely foreign to him.

…Wait, that's my arm, isn't it?

The moment that delayed realization set in, an acute pain ran through his nerves.

“—Rrk!”

Kaito immediately choked back a scream. Before that point, he’d tasted the sharp pain of death hundreds of times over. However, even he was weak to surprise attacks.

Closing his eyes, Kaito repeated two words again and again in his mind.

Settle down, settle down, settle down, settle down, settle down! This is nothing.

By purposely tasting it and acclimating himself to it, Kaito tamed the pain.

A few seconds later, he’d completely regained his composure.

The Kaiser’s lip twisted slightly, as though in admiration.

“Oh-ho.”

Stooping down, Kaito set down his bowl on the surface of the road.

It was, in a sense, foolish how he immediately prioritized the gruel’s safety. He snapped his fingers. His spilled blood burst into crimson flower petals. They gathered at his wound, then returned to his body. Afterward, he picked up his left arm and pressed it against the cross section. His bare flesh and bones came into contact, and they made a splatting sound as he crushed them against each other.

“—*La* (return).”

Darkness and azure flower petals enclosed them as a crude adhesive surface. Bone, flesh, and the fibers of his clothes all stretched out as though hundreds of tiny, ghastly hands had sprouted from them. They became intertwined, fusing together.

In the end, it had all returned to its original state.

Kaito immediately fixed his gaze on the Kaiser.

“You good now, Kaiser? You really gotta do something about that temper of yours.”

“And you ought to do something about your habit of carelessly prodding your own beast… Hmm, it seems your spirit is unbroken. And I see your madman’s

guise is intact as well. Very well. Twisted as you are, I shall forgive your insolence. However, what do you intend to do about the contradiction you bear, O unworthy master of mine?"

The Kaiser flopped heavily onto his stomach. Resting his chin on his crossed forepaws and finally taking a proper pose to hold a conversation, he posed his question to Kaito.

Kaito tilted his head at the sudden inquiry. The Kaiser blew air that reeked of rust out through his nose, then gave a throaty laugh.

"What, fool, had you not realized it? You are contractor to a demon, the very embodiment of power designed to destroy the world. Yet, you save others, receive their gratitude, and feel serenity. Absurdities upon absurdities. Such absurd, unsalvageable contradictions. Shame on you, boy."

"…You were watching that?"

"And laughing all the while. You put on quite the unpleasant, unseemly show."

The Kaiser snorted mockingly again, blowing fumes in Kaito's face that smelled distinctly of blood. Kaito clenched his fists as he cast his gaze down. The Kaiser was right. Given his power and situation, his actions were contradictory beyond belief.

As Kaito mulled over that, the Kaiser went on.

"In time, that contradiction will become as a stake and pierce through your chest. Not unlike that woman destined for the stake."

"Elisabeth."

Kaito responded to that part alone. He turned his thoughts to her inescapable fate.

After they overcame their current predicament, Elisabeth would be burned at the stake. And given that he was her servant and contractor to the Kaiser, the fact that he hadn't hurt anyone wouldn't be enough to let Kaito escape being executed as well.

No matter how many good deeds she piled up, it was too late for the Torture Princess to be forgiven.

Kaito bit down on his lip a little. The Kaiser, watching him, laughed in a low voice.

“The power of demons is supreme, and it is first attained when one extends their hand past the limits of avarice and desire. Do not mistake that, boy. One who forgets their greatest wish is naught but a fool masquerading as a saint. Accumulation of Seventeen Years’ Pain, I— Hmm? It would be inconvenient were I seen, as I care little for the squeaking of mice.”

The Kaiser said no more as his silhouette collapsed and his steely muscles and fine fur gently dissolved. He then vanished into a spiral of darkness, the afterglow of his hellfire the last to go.

Wait, what just happened?

Furrowing his brow, Kaito looked up in surprise. He saw a crooked shadow approaching from the end of the road. Worried that it was an underling, Kaito put up his guard. However, the shadow turned out to belong to two paladins.

Due to the fact that one of them had been supporting the other’s shoulder, the pair collectively appeared to be a monster for a split second.

Their gait was unsteady.

Did somehow aiding in the evacuation efforts get them injured and force them to come back early?

With that as his hypothesis, Kaito began calling out to the two.

“Are you oka—?”

“Come on, walk… I get how you feel, but we can’t avoid headquarters forever. And unless you want someone to find us, you gotta stop that crying.”

“Dammit…dammit, dammit… Dammit all to hell!”

Hearing their conversation, Kaito frantically shut up. Apparently, the two of them had temporarily slipped away from the square. On top of that, the one being supported was wailing and striking himself in the head with the hand not wrapped around his partner’s shoulder. He was clearly in some sort of addled state.

Ah, shit, that’s not good.

Glancing around, Kaito slipped through a gate someone had left open during their escape. Squatting behind a hedge, he balled his body up as small as he could.

After all, there was no shortage of people who would bear animosity toward the Torture Princess's servant.

And I doubt that guy wants anyone to hear him crying.

Cautiously peeking through the hedge, Kaito looked out toward the road. Of all the places the two could have chosen, the two paladins ended up stopping almost directly in front of him. Kaito held his breath to avoid being discovered.

Not noticing him, one of the paladins whispered as he tried to stop his coworker from harming himself.

"Come on, we can get them to let you rest with the injured. At least head to the first aid station until you've settled—"

"Don't be an idiot! The new kids would be anxious even in the best of situations; I can't let them see me like this! …Goddammit, dammit… That was horrible… Dammit, I'm sorry, I'm sorry… Ahhhhhh, forgive me… I can't… I can't keep this up…"

After regaining his senses, the paladin's cries grew even fiercer.

As he sobbed, his legs got tangled up and he toppled over. However, his panic didn't abate. Crawling along the ground as he cried, he curled into a ball and began vomiting.

Kaito couldn't blame him. He really couldn't.

The reason he feels so guilty is probably because of what happened at the end of the search-and-rescue operation in the area around the fleshy mass.

That was Kaito's hypothesis.

The search-and-rescue operation for the people who hadn't been able to get out in time had finished around sundown.

Although that mission had concluded, their work was far from over. If they'd looked between the buildings a bit more, they probably would have been able to find many more of the residents.

In spite of that, though, the mission had been aborted.

The reasoning was the fact that too many of the rescuers had been exhausted.

Kaito, too, had participated in the mission, and he thought back to the events that had taken place midway through it.

Most people who fell victim to demons met fates that were beyond description. The Church's staffers were well aware of that, and the paladins had likely made peace with that fact beforehand. However, the way the victims in the capital had been transformed was ghastlier than anyone had imagined.

What had been particularly horrific was the state of the small theater designed for the children of wealthy merchants to hold singing recitals at. The Church had invested in the construction of the building—and as a result, had been able to place restrictions on what could be performed there—which boasted a grand design. Its delicate stained-glass windows cast vivid lights onto the stage. When the mass of flesh had burst through the wall behind the boys and girls lined up on the stage, it had devoured them from the waists down and merged all their brains and organs together.

They'd been transformed into blasphemous, repulsive objets d'art, completely unrecognizable as human. Heightening the horror of the scene was a statue of the bloody tear–shedding Saint hanging from the domed ceiling, symbolically watching over them.

Each time they were cut, the children cried out, occasionally lending their youthful voices to cherubic, haphazard songs.

That was more than enough to stay the hands of the warriors sent to dispatch them, especially the paladins, the Holy Knights. The experience shattered their resolve.

In the end, the duty of butchering the children fell to Elisabeth.

She was the only one who never averted her eyes from the children's tragic figures.

After that, no small number of young knights had fallen into critical states of psychological agitation.

There were probably still survivors out there, hiding and trembling after having witnessed scenes of comparable atrocity. However, given the fact that the fighting was slated to grow only more severe going forward, they couldn't risk using up any remaining personnel.

As a result, the search-and-rescue mission had been aborted.

Even Kaito agreed that decision had needed to be made.

However, there were still people like the paladins he had spotted who were weighed down with unbearable guilt.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Arghhhhhhhh!"

Even so, apologizing isn't going to make any difference. If I were one of the residents, nothing they said could make me forgive them.

No matter how much they asked for forgiveness, to the people who'd been abandoned, the decision to stop searching for survivors meant everything. There was no doubt that those people resented the world as much as Kaito had in his past life, if not many times more.

Kaito understood all that, so much so that it hurt. However, he could also appreciate the feelings of those who couldn't abide by not apologizing.

As if to comfort him, the other paladin rubbed his vomiting colleague's back.

"…Yeah, man. That was horrible, all right. I'd never seen a place as close to Hell as that."

"People…people looking like that… Ahhhhhhh! It's sacrilege. Sacrilege, all of it. Saint, God, why didn't you protect them? So cruel; it's too cruel… And on top of that, why did we have to be the ones to do it? With our own hands, our own swords! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Clutching his head, the paladin screamed. He banged his head against the stone pavement over and over.

"This isn't what our swords are meant for. It isn't, it isn't, it isn't. No, no, ahhhh. Don't look at me; don't look at me like that!"

"Come on, settle down. I understand how you feel, but you have to get a grip. Please, you have to stop."

The other paladin held him, though his shoulders were trembling as well.

Kaito found himself on the verge of leaping out from behind the hedge. Wanting to tell them that they'd done nothing wrong, he spontaneously gathered strength in his knees.

As he did, though, the paladin rubbing his screaming comrade's back—with questionable effect, as they were both wearing armor—spoke up again.

"I can't accept our commander's decision—why not just make the Torture Princess handle the underlings?"

Wait…what'd he just say?

Kaito could feel a chill spreading through his head. Because of the abuse he'd suffered in life, anytime his negative emotions crossed a certain threshold, their intensity would decline. In their place, he would regain his presence of mind and become calm.

Kaito pictured the expression on Elisabeth's face back at the theater.

"How pitiable you all are. Go now to your rest."

As she ruthlessly finished them off as gently as she could, Elisabeth had been the only one who never averted her eyes.

The Torture Princess was the only one who'd witnessed that tragedy in its entirety.

"This isn't what our swords are meant for! We should just leave stuff like that to the person already burdened with sin!"

Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

The Kaiser's laughter echoed inside Kaito's ears. His voice sounded both contemptuous and disturbingly human.

The fur on Kaito's left arm bristled, and the hem of his long black outfit rustled as he stood. He tore across the lawn with magically enhanced strides, reaching the gate in an instant.

As he did, a dull strike rang out.

“…Huh?”

Kaito reflexively stopped in his tracks. Hiding himself behind the gatepost, he peered out into the street.

There, he saw something wholly unexpected.

The paladin who’d suggested they should leave killing the underlings to the Torture Princess had collapsed onto the pavement, and blood was running from his nose. A beautiful woman with silver hair and red drops dripping from her gauntleted fist was standing in front of him.

Izabella Vicker resembled a sharp, refined sword as she spoke in a low voice.

“Is that all you had to say?”

“…C-commander!”

“We are the swords of the Church, the blades of the Saint, and the shields of the people. If we do not save the innocent who suffer, if we do not kill the underlings…then who exactly do we expect to bear that burden?”

“Like I said, the Torture Princess—”

“You would have us entrust those we ought save to another?!”

Izabella roared at the fallen paladin. Her cold, blazing rebuke echoed loudly. Timidly gulping, the paladin shook his head. However, he continued his complaint, his voice practically a shriek.

“But killing civilians…it’s horrible. This is—”

“What the hell did I tell you?!”

Izabella grabbed the man’s collar through a gap in his armor. He was taller and brawnier than her, yet she hoisted him into the air with ease. His internal turmoil must have bubbled over, as tears began trailing down his face alongside the blood from his nose.

Facing his emotional gaze head-on, Izabella shouted.

“You all should feel no guilt in slaying those warped people! If there is any blame to be had, then as the one who gave the order, I shall bear it, and I alone! When the time comes, the Saint’s forgiveness will guide you to God’s side. The

people you slew could surely have no objections to that!”

“Ma’am…Commander Izabella.”

“Throw out your chest with pride and shed tears no more! I won’t forgive any who hold your actions against you, even if it’s you yourselves. And as for you…”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am! My apologies, my deepest apologies! I just, I…”

The other paladin leaped to attention, blood dripping down his forehead. He then dropped again to grovel against the stone ground, his voice high and shrill. Peering down at the clearly agitated man, Izabella gave him a stern order.

“Go rest at the first aid station. And don’t you dare set foot on the battlefield without a healer’s permission. Or do you intend to endanger your comrades?”

“No, ma’am; understood, ma’am! I will do as you say, Commander!”

“Then go—and you have my apologies for not noticing your condition sooner.”

The prostrate paladin scrambled to his feet. Flustered, the pair apologized repeatedly. Then, realizing they had pressing tasks to attend to, they placed their left arms horizontally against their chests and bowed.

After returning their bows, Izabella gave an affirmative nod. The two paladins hastened down the road to return to base. Through his tears, even the paladin who’d needed supporting up until then frantically pulled himself together.

Soon, they were gone, leaving behind only a heavy silence.

Izabella exhaled briefly and stared up at the sky. After a moment passed, she spoke softly.

“Are you going to come out?”

“You noticed me?”

Surprised, Kaito stepped back onto the road.

Izabella turned to face him. Her silver hair fluttered gently in the pale moonlight. Her blue and purple eyes looked like a pair of gemstones as they focused on Kaito. A gentle, somewhat exasperated smile spread across her face.

“Hard not to with you so eager to draw blood… Intriguing. At first glance, you

seem accustomed to battle yet at times act like a complete amateur. First, let me offer you an apology. My subordinates were quite rude. It must have pained you, hearing your master slighted like that.”

“I prefer to think of her less as a master and more like a friend.”

“A friend?”

Yet again, Izabella responded to Kaito’s words with blank puzzlement. With a childish gesture that seemed to clash with her sagacity and beauty, she tilted her head to the side.

Noticing her confusion, Kaito unconsciously began babbling.

“She, you know, uh, there’s a lot of things people misunderstand about her… I mean, she is the Torture Princess, so some of that stuff isn’t really misunderstandings. But she’s got good qualities, too. People think she’s practically a demon, but she’s not. Even now, she’s fearlessly fighting on humanity’s behalf.”

Kaito finished by turning a hopeful gaze toward Izabella, one that asked if she understood what he was getting at.

For some reason, he felt like she would be sympathetic.

Eventually, Izabella gave a slow nod, as though her perception had changed.

“That’s a surprise. The relationship you two have is much better than I’d anticipated… I apologize for this afternoon as well. Although it’s just an excuse, I did have a reason for the counsel I gave.”

“Uh-huh?”

“My younger brother was killed by the Torture Princess. As a result, I harbored doubts about your reliability.”

Without so much as a pause, Izabella revealed an astonishing truth.

Kaito’s eyes widened. Brushing back her silver bangs, Izabella covered her pretty blue left eye. She then wove her next words together as though she were telling a tale of old.

“Even now, when I see my blue eye, I think of him… He wasn’t as skilled at

magic as I was. People told him that it would be too hard for him to become a paladin. But his will to live and his sense of justice were strong. I'd braced myself for the day, but I never expected him not to come home from the Plain of Skewers."

"…!"

As he listened to Izabella's story, Kaito's thoughts immediately zipped back to a particular demon.

They'd fought him almost immediately after Kaito was summoned by the Torture Princess. Down in a village full of slaughtered residents, the Knight had cried out like a madman, his arms and legs strung up in chains.

"ELISABEEEEEEETH! ELISABEEEEEEETH!"

His voice was filled not just with pain but with unadulterated fury.

The eyes beneath his armored helmet had been startlingly pure and blue and just as beautiful as Izabella's. And the Knight's contractor had been rather young and looked to originally have been quite virtuous.

Facing the man, Elisabeth had whispered gently to him.

"A survivor of the Plain of Skewers, hmm? It must have been painful. No doubt you detest me."

That guy… Could he have been…? No, there's no way.

"What's the matter? You bear a strange expression."

Izabella frowned as she looked at Kaito quizzically.

After internally debating for a few seconds, Kaito swallowed back the words that had been on the tip of his tongue.

"…No, it's nothing."

Even if my guess is right, telling her would accomplish nothing but bring her pain.

Nobody would want to hear there was a possibility their brother had made a contract with a demon.

Having made his decision, Kaito elected to stay silent. Wearing a puzzled

expression, Izabella went on.

“I hear you were summoned as her servant from another world. That being the case, you may not be aware, but ever since the Plain of Skewers, every battle the Royal Knights and we paladins fought has ended in ignoble defeat. We had a duty to protect the people, not just from the Torture Princess but from the army of demons Vlad Le Fanu commanded. But until the Torture Princess defected from the demons and we obtained a temporary reprieve, we were constantly overrun. In order to maintain our fragile line of defense, we had to make many sacrifices, the bulk of which consisted of our most talented and experienced men.”

“Wait…could that be why…?”

“Precisely. As a result, many of our current knights are green and weak to psychological attrition. On top of that, most of our surviving senior members are people who were tasked with guarding the border of the area where the pure-blooded demi-humans and beastfolk live. And ever since the third peace treaty, that region has been the epitome of tranquility. For those soldiers to see such tragedies play out in front of them has no doubt sent them into states of panic.”

She made her declaration with lonesome eyes. An image of the calamity they’d seen floated back through Kaito’s mind.

That place had been a hellscape crafted from flesh and blood, a carnival of the cruelest variety. If one wasn’t familiar with fighting against demons, it would have been a harsh spectacle to bear. However, not everything Izabella had to say was hopeless.

“However, with all our forces combined and with the help of the priests, I believe that we have the power to secure the capital’s defense against the encroaching demon. Even though we’re suffering attacks from within our lines, just as I advised Godot Deus, it should be possible.”

“So what you’re still saying is that you don’t need the Torture Princess’s help?”

“I withdraw that statement. In fact, telling you that was my main reason for this conversation. Even if we do possess sufficient power to deal with this

situation, just as you said, I wish to save the people as soon as possible."

This time, it was Kaito's turn to blink.

Izabella looked straight at him. Her gaze was so earnest it was almost scary.

"I will speak frankly. Even now, I find it difficult to fully trust you two. But between what you said and the fact that the Torture Princess remains on our side in the wake of Godot Deus's death, it's enough."

"…Ah!"

Oh, right… So that was another significance of Godot Deus's death!

Kaito was shocked at Izabella's words, almost as though he'd been slapped in the face.

The Torture Princess was bound by the Church's shackles. However, she could cast them off by forming a contract with a demon. If that happened, Godot Deus had agreed to stop her at the cost of his life and all the spiritual power he possessed. But now he was dead.

Even so, the Torture Princess hadn't betrayed mankind.

Kaito frantically racked his brain over the way Godot Deus's death had changed the situation.

As he did, Izabella's voice quickly brought him back to reality.

"Please lend us your strength."

Izabella's silver hair gently sparkled as though to blend in with the moonlight. As Kaito returned to his senses, he found Izabella bowing her head low. Before his flustered eyes, she made her calm, powerful proclamation.

"For the sake of the people."

Abasing oneself before a demon is the height of folly.

Kaito churned that thought through his mind. He knew that because he was a contractor to one, and the Church possessed enough documents and information on demons that they probably knew as well. The bloody annals of history should have taught them what happened to anyone foolish enough to bow before a demon.

In spite of that, Izabella was sincerely bowing to Kaito.

In other words, she thought of him as human.

When he realized that, Kaito spoke.

“I’m…I’m Kaito. Kaito Sena.”

“Kaito Sena…will you lend us your strength?”

“Of course. You were… Commander…uh…?”

“Izabella is fine. You may also call me Vicker, if you’d rather.”

“Izabella, then. That’s what I should be asking. Please lend us your strength.”

About to extend his right arm, Kaito changed his mind and went with his beastly left arm. As if testing her, he purposely extended it. Without a shred of hesitation, Izabella took her gauntleted hand and grasped his, the proof of his demonic contract.

Fur and metal came in contact. Looking directly at each other, the two of them spoke in unison.

““Let’s take out that demon together.””

As they did, a humanlike laugh echoed around in Kaito’s eardrums.

A low murmur grazed at his ear, one that both threatened and ridiculed him.

You are contractor to a demon, the very embodiment of power designed to destroy the world.

Yet you save others, receive their gratitude, and feel serenity. Absurdities upon absurdities.

Such absurd, unsalvageable contradictions.

*

Shame on you, boy.

Even so, Kaito continued grasping Izabella's palm.

As though saying that if he released it, he would lose something key to his humanity.

*

About ten minutes later, Kaito set back out along the main road with his bowl of gruel in hand.

Through some stroke of fortune, despite all the ordeals he'd been through, its contents still hadn't spilled.

The fact that it hadn't gotten kicked by the two paladins had been nothing short of a miracle. When he'd gone to retrieve it, Izabella had exasperatedly asked him why he'd put it there.

She'd returned to the square just a little bit ago. Apparently, after hearing that the Torture Princess, two paladins, and Kaito had all left the plaza, she'd come after them under the suspicion that a fight might break out.

In other words, the moment she found Kaito and the paladins, she'd completed her initial objective.

"Hmm, now where'd Elisabeth get off to?"

Kaito, now alone, wandered about the wide thoroughfare. Before he'd noticed, the buildings around him had stopped being residences, instead becoming restaurants, shops, inns, and the like. In the distance, he could make out the outer wall surrounding the city's southern gate. But even as the townscape shifted to one suited for travelers, Elisabeth was still nowhere to be seen.

Still not here, huh…? Don't tell me she went back already, did she?

Then Kaito stopped in his tracks.

He could hear a voice singing a beautiful song.

The voice responsible for the gentle tune was one he knew well.

Flustered, Kaito checked around to see where it was coming from. Then he noticed a bar-slash-eatery replete with shingled roof and copper signboard with its wooden door left wide open.

The song was coming from inside.

Kaito carefully ascended the stairs, which were made of brick and had been ground down by years of drunkards' footfalls. He cautiously peeked inside the store. Round tables were lined up atop the worn-out wooden floor within.

And Elisabeth was sitting at one of those tables.

She was crooning to herself as she bathed in the moonlight streaming in from the windows.

Occasionally, she would kick her elegant legs back and forth, like a child playing in water. For some reason, cats were gathered around her. She stroked their soft backs as they nestled up to her, gazing vacantly off into space as the song drifted unconsciously across her lips.

A smile played across her face, one that seemed somehow lonely yet also tranquil.

After watching her for a moment, Kaito timidly called out to her.

"So…you like cats?"

"Hwah!"

Giving a panicked cry, Elisabeth leaped to her feet. All at once, the cats relaxing at her side raised shrill meows and scattered.

Whirling to face Kaito, Elisabeth struck an odd pose.

"K-Kaito! What are you doing here?! Don't startle me like that!"

The way she was practically hissing with anger resembled a cat with its fur bristling. However, her strange combat stance also called to mind some sort of bizarre bird. Trying to think back to where he'd seen it before, Kaito nodded.

"Oh, hey, that's the same pose the Butcher made!"

"Do not go lumping me in with that man! 'Tis the height of disgrace!"

Elisabeth roared in indignation. Inside Kaito's head, his mental image of the

Butcher was leaping up and down in protest. If the man himself had been here, he would probably have been shouting something about discourtesy.

Plopping herself back down at the round table, Elisabeth crossed her arms. She scoffed in displeasure.

“Ha, it’s not as if I bear any strong fondness for cats! I merely sat, and they approached me of their own accord.”

“Oh, so you’re the kind of person who cats are attracted to.”

“Quit speaking of me with such peculiar warmth every chance you get!”

Elisabeth hissed with anger yet again. Kaito could practically see a bristling tail sticking out from behind her. Realizing that he’d be forced to sit on a ducking stool at this rate, Kaito shut up.

After remaining angry for a moment, Elisabeth quizzically tilted her head to the side a little.

“Hmm? I shall ask you again. What are you doing here, Kaito? Too much time on your hands?”

“Right back at you. Why’d you head out like that? Sounds like you’re the one with too much time on your hands.”

“Ha, fool. Should I rest for a moment in a place that ridden with knights, I should quite likely find myself challenged to a duel. And crushing all those fleas one by one seems like a hassle.”

Elisabeth shrugged. Kaito nodded in understanding.

Given Godot Deus’s orders, it was unlikely that anyone would try to kill her in her sleep. However, even in their current state of emergency, it wouldn’t have been strange for someone to challenge her to a duel. There were probably also people who wanted to verify her power and true intentions before the decisive battle against the demon.

As Kaito thought through that, Elisabeth’s interest turned elsewhere.

Turning her gaze to the bowl in his hand, she tilted her head to the side once more.

“Hmm? What might that be?”

“Oh, right, here.”

“Oh-ho?”

“It’s tasty.”

“Hmm.”

“Go on, eat it.”

“Mm.”

After their mysteriously short exchange, Elisabeth took the bowl from Kaito. As she scooped at the pale-yellow gruel, she gave Kaito a dirty look. Kaito nodded, urging her to believe him.

Still looking somewhat concerned, Elisabeth dutifully shoved the gruel into her mouth. A complex expression made its way across her face as she chewed. Eventually, she gulped down the mouthful, then murmured.

“Paddle.”

“Why?”

Having a torture device summoned on him without so much as a discussion hadn’t been what Kaito had expected to happen.

Darkness and crimson flower petals swirled. A wooden stick laden with nails swung down on where Kaito was standing. Avoiding the merciless attack with movements that could either be described as graceful or weird, Kaito raised his voice in protest.

“Heyyyyy! I went through hell bringing that to you! And you repay me with torture?!”

“Mm, it was dreadful.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘dreadful’? It was great!”

“It was absurdly viscous and dreadfully pasty! This is some form of harassment!”

“That can’t… Oh.”

Snatching the bowl from Elisabeth and peering into it, Kaito stared, dumbfounded. Due to the grain that had been used, the gruel had hardened into a sticky blob. Dropping his shoulders, crestfallen, Kaito heaved a heavy sigh.

As she watched him, Elisabeth snapped her fingers in acknowledgment and banished the Paddle.

“It seems harassing me was not your intention… Hmm? Hold on a moment, wait. Don’t tell me bringing me that was your sole reason for leaving the square?”

“It was, why?”

“You fool! You leaving for such an idiotic reason is certain to draw the paladins’ doubt! With master and servant having left at the same time, they’re sure to grow suspicious that we’re plotting something!”

“Ow! Don’t kick me! It’s fine; Izabella’s not like that!”

“What do you think you’re doing, acting so chummy all of a sudden?!”

“We met a little bit ago and chatted about stuff! And, uh…”

Blocking Elisabeth’s splendid roundhouse kicks, Kaito opened his mouth to speak. However, before he could finish, he felt a surge of embarrassment.

N-now that I think about it, I have to admit, it was kind of an idiotic reason.

But now that he was here, it wasn’t like he could just turn back.

Turning his head down a little, he gave his reason in a mumble.

“I figured you might be hungry… And it made me really happy when the nun gave me my food, so…”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

Kaito finally turned up his head, as if to ask what was wrong with that. He threw out his chest with pride.

About to cry out in anger, Elisabeth pressed down on her forehead. Her shoulders slumped.

With a “haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah,” she heaved a gigantic sigh.

“So you came all the way out here to bring gruel to the Torture Princess, eh…? Your foolhardiness truly knows no bounds.”

“I feel like you’re making fun of me.”

“That I am, fool.”

Elisabeth snorted. Sitting back down at the round table, she waved one hand aimlessly.

Sensing that the disturbance had settled down, the cats began gathering back around her. They mewled as they snuggled up to her.

As she carelessly stroked their knotted fur, Elisabeth gestured toward the edge of the round table.

Kaito looked and found bottles of wine, smoked meats, olives, cheese, and the like lined up on it. She’d probably gotten them from the kitchen. Flower petals flashed across the mouth of one of the still-sealed bottles.

A fragrance drifted out, and red wine spilled onto the table.

“Well, no matter. You’re here. We may as well make the best of it. Make merry, Kaito, and drink with me.”

“A party, huh? That’s a surprise. Won’t this be bad for the fight tomorrow?”

“As you are now, your magic will purge the impurities from your system no matter how intoxicated you get.”

“Damn, magic’s crazy convenient.”

“Go on, then. Drink.”

Elisabeth took the sliced bottle and tossed it to Kaito. As its contents came gushing out, he caught it. When he did, Elisabeth grabbed an already-opened bottle and took a swig.

A black cat came and sniffed at the spilled wine, then tried to lick it. Watching it, Elisabeth quickly leaped down from the table and gently grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck.

“No, no, none for you. Come, sit here now.”

The cat mewled after being placed on Elisabeth’s lap. Watching the scene play out, Kaito posed a question to Elisabeth.

“Hey, what are we gonna do about these cats? Based on their fur, it doesn’t look like they belong to anyone. Are they gonna be okay here?”

“Hmph. If all it needs to do is transport cats, I can draw any number of teleportation circles. I’ll toss them through later. If I stick them in some other town, they should be able to manage.”

As she spoke, Elisabeth scratched the cat’s chin.

The cat purred in delight.

“These little ones need not concern themselves with demon invasions and the like.”

Urging Kaito to try the hors d’oeuvres, Elisabeth gulped down her wine. As he watched her eat, Kaito was struck by an ominous premonition.

Will Elisabeth Le Fanu ever have another chance to eat a proper meal outside the capital?

He felt as though his wine had suddenly gone bitter.

This was her final battle. Once they’d defeated the last three demons, there was only one path left for her.

“Hey, Elisabeth.”

“What is it?”

“The sides here are cold, and the gruel got all gross.”

“Mm.”

“After this, when we get back home to Hina, let’s have something warm and tasty to eat.”

Kaito chose his words deliberately. However, no response came.

Elisabeth remained silent. Kaito seemed like he wanted to speak to her again. However, as though wanting to prevent him from doing so, she took a big gulp

of her wine.

After downing a sizable amount, she began talking about something else entirely.

“At forenoon tomorrow, we meet up with the Shepherd and begin our all-out attack. Keep your wits about you.”

Kaito, having not heard about that plan, gulped.

That was where their conversation ended. The Torture Princess had nothing else to say.

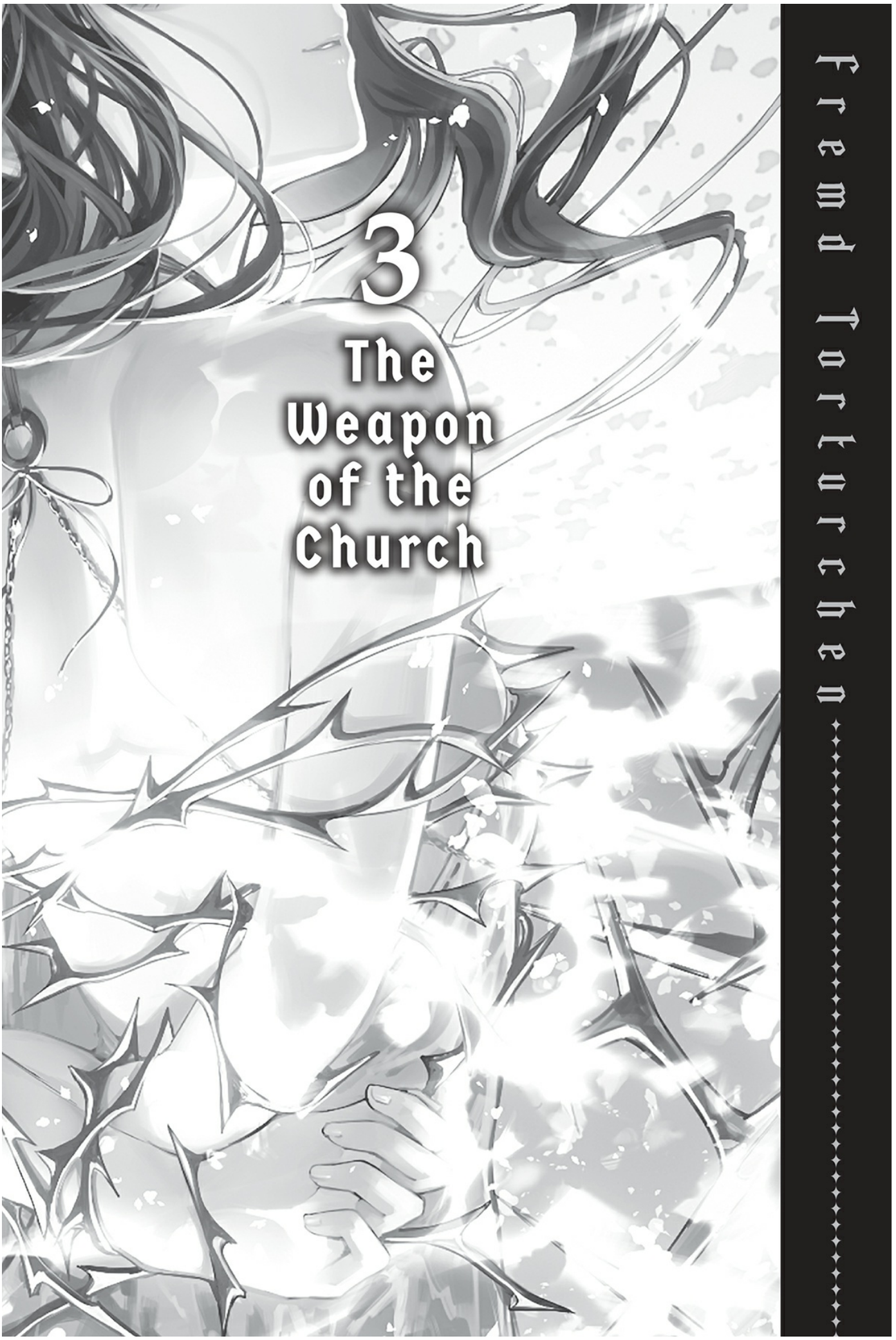
Kaito did nothing but gaze at her beautiful face in profile. Then he suddenly realized something.

That song just now…

In truth, Kaito had never heard one of those before. After all, his mother had passed before he was old enough to remember her. But he knew that gentle melody couldn’t have been anything else.

That was…

It was a lullaby. He was sure of it.



3 The Weapon of the Church

3

The Weapon of the Church

The sky over the capital the following morning was brisk and refreshing.

Its clear blue was highlighted by the floating white clouds.

The weather seems kinda misleading when you think about how awful the stuff going on down here is.

That was Kaito's reaction.

As he walked forward, he glanced around and surveyed the troops marching around him.

The paladins' silver armor was sparkling radiantly in the sunlight. The flag they were hoisting, which bore the image of a lily coat of arms and the suffering Saint, fluttered in the blue sky each time the wind blew. Its splendor seemed rather unfitting, given the stench of blood the wind also carried.

Then Kaito reconfirmed the current situation.

Many of the knights had been scattered across the capital, acting as escorts to the evacuation shelter, but they were now all marching as one. Besides the ones manning the perimeter and those in charge of maintaining the barrier, every last one of them was currently advancing toward the appointed location.

It truly was all-out war.

Kaito and Elisabeth were traveling in the company spearheaded by Izabella and Godot Deus.

From time to time, Kaito snapped his fingers to mow down approaching underlings with his blade. Trusting his judgment, Izabella and the paladins devoted all their energy into checking between buildings to head off surprise attacks. Leaving the others to act as her outriders, Elisabeth simply conserved her power.

Finally, Kaito and the others reached their destination: a hill.

A graveyard spread out behind the hill, but from atop it, Kaito could look down and see the entire townscape illuminated by sunlight.

Groups of knights and paladins from other refugee camps were supposed to be on standby after having encircled the mass of flesh that the King, Grand Monarch, and Monarch had transformed into. However, from this distance, it was impossible to confirm or deny their presence.

As if in their stead, what Kaito could make out was a rather bizarre spectacle.

"…What's up with that?"

The area around the mass was stained gray for several miles in every direction.

The buildings within the encroachment radius were weathered like old paper, and some of them had transformed into shapes and materials that defied the laws of physics—some glassy and vitreous, others foamy and granular.

The gray world was silent. Color, time, and shape had all been robbed from it. The very nature of space shifted once past a certain threshold, as though it had been cut away with a knife.

Kaito finally realized why the mass had stopped expanding. It was simply consuming its surroundings in a different manner rather than physically corroding them.

It's destroying the world.

Either instinctively or due to his contract with a demon, that was the conclusion Kaito arrived at.

The Kaiser whispered low in his ear.

"Behold. Demons are those who destroy God's creations. This is what happens when we are unchained from our contractors' egos and allowed to wield our true, unbridled power. Now then, the Church. While they crown themselves with God's name, in the end they are but mere humans. Let us see what their play is—this is sure to be a spectacle most comedic.

Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-

heh.

The Kaiser laughed in a voice that sounded almost human. It seemed he intended to enjoy himself here.

Not responding to him, Kaito surveyed the scene in front of himself a second time.

A road extended out from the hill, leading to what had originally been the royal castle. However, the splendid castle, which had apparently been hailed as resembling an ivory rose, was currently nowhere to be seen. Nor was its garden or the myriad vacation homes belonging to prominent aristocrats. They had all been consumed by the mass.

When the mass of flesh had first exploded out from a storehouse in the mercantile district, it had spread toward the capital's most important sector as though it had been aiming for it.

In spite of that, most of the important people made it out, including the king.

That had been thanks to Godot Deus, who had been attending a defense meeting in the capital after learning of the battle between the Grand King and the Torture Princess. He had single-handedly bought them enough time to evacuate.

And once he'd confirmed that they'd all made it out, he committed suicide right before the mass swallowed him up to avoid presenting the demon with an opportunity to make use of his power.

As a result, the Church had lost one of its head priests, one of the few people who could have stood against the three fused demons.

Having lost his essential strength, the paladins were waiting with bated breath for the arrival of a certain individual.

The Shepherd, La Mules.

What kind of person could they be?

She—according to Elisabeth, it was a woman—was a high priest who bore the authority to summon first-class mythical beasts and spirits. The paladins, Izabella included, seemed to place a great deal of faith in her. However, her

tardiness planted a seed of doubt in Kaito's mind.

The Church's headquarters should have a permanent teleportation circle installed. If that's the case, then why is she so late?

Given the current state of emergency, there was even less reason for them to be stingy in dispatching their high priests.

Staring at the mass of flesh, Kaito crossed his arms. Sensing his irritation, Godot Deus called out to pacify him.

"Be patient, servant of Elisabeth. You will understand once you see her."

"When I see her?"

Not when I meet her?

As Kaito wondered about that, a voice rang out.

"La Mules has arrived."

A raucous, rattling noise echoed out alongside the messenger's report. A woman appeared, riding atop a wheeled wooden chair. Kaito reflexively gulped.

The moment he saw her, his doubts had indeed vanished.

La Mules looked to be more of a *what* than a *who*.

Snow-white bands ran all the way down from her face to her feet, relentlessly binding her to the chair. Because of the way she was strapped to the chair's back and armrests, it looked almost as though she'd become one with it. It was impossible to even get a decent read on her build. Given that, it was almost uncanny how clearly her large eyes were visible from within the gaps in her restraints. A strangely innocent light burned within them.

She looked like a piece of equipment or perhaps an infantile monster.

Whichever it was, she certainly didn't appear human.

"It's been a while, La Mules. The fact you're still in good health must truly be due to God's grace."

La Mules didn't reply to Godot Deus's greeting. Instead, she gnashed her teeth at her creaking metal muzzle. Drops of saliva dripped through the spaces between her restraints onto the ground.

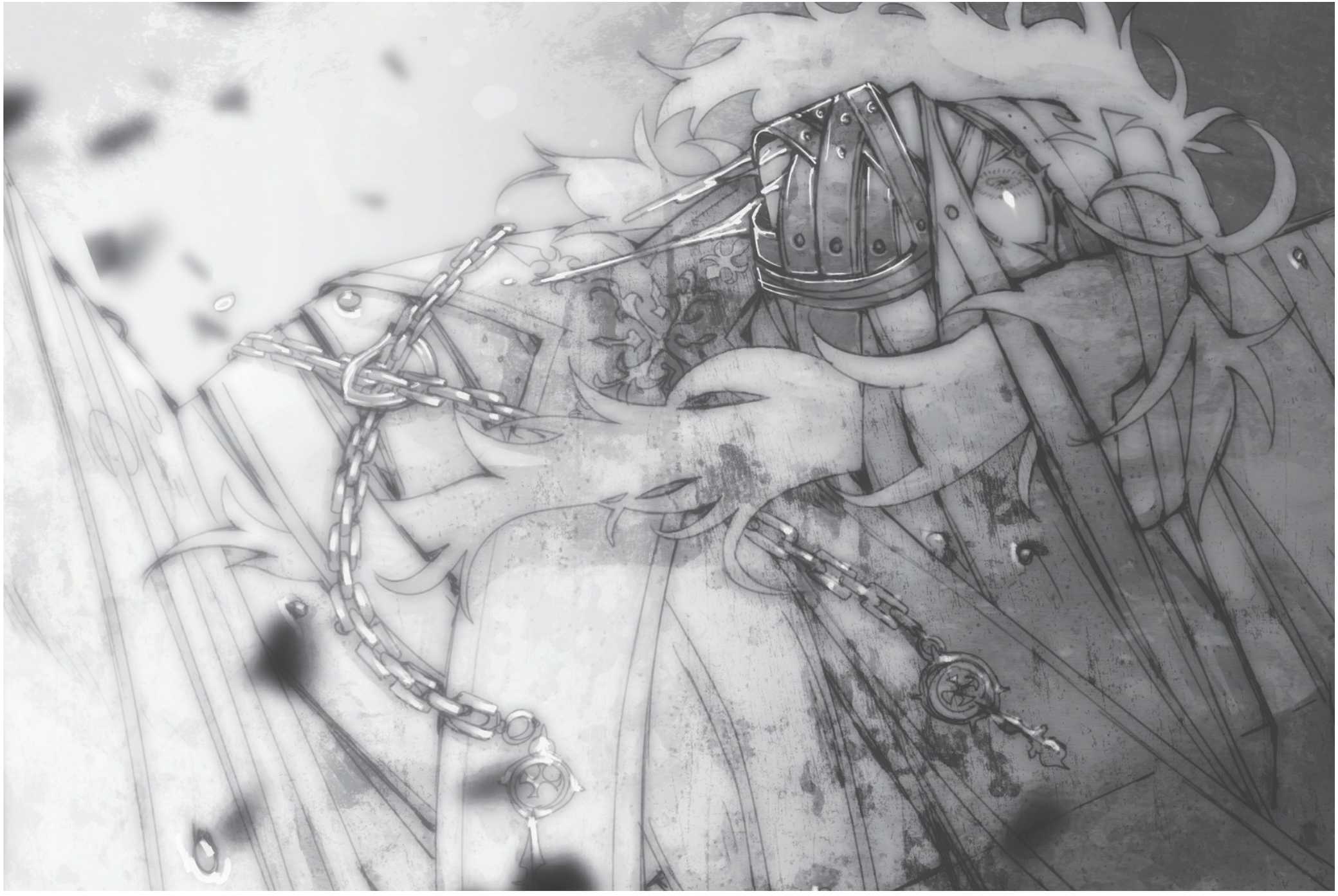
The paladins knelt in unison. Kaito reeled back a step in revulsion.

Elisabeth whispered in his ear.

“La Mules is a high priest and has also been canonized while still alive. However, she cannot move of her own volition and possesses no will of her own.”

“She doesn’t have a will? What does that even mean?”

“While their ranks are below his, first-class mythical beasts and spirits are similar in nature to God, and summoning them means dragging them down from a higher plane of existence. To do that, one must have a strong connection to God. However, aside from the Suffering Saint, none can hold that power within themselves for long and still retain their sanity.”



As he heard that gut-wrenching truth, Kaito's face stiffened. Looking back at La Mules, his mind raced in astonishment.

So wait, as far humans are concerned, doesn't that mean that God and the demons are both just as fundamentally dangerous?

Having guessed his train of thought, Elisabeth laughed quietly.

"It took you this long to realize, fool? God and Diablo both do naught but create the world and destroy it. Man was not meant to lay hands on their ilk."

As the two of them were having their secret conversation, La Mules's preparations were proceeding.

The paladins had turned her toward the mass of flesh, chair and all. They had also tilted the back of the chair to adjust her "angle." Once they'd finished fixing her wheels in the ground with nails, they all fled from her side.

Left behind, Kaito was at a loss for what to do. Then Izabella's directions cut through the air.

"You two should get back as well. It's dangerous there."

"Okay, got it."

Leaving La Mules alone at the hill's summit, the paladins lay flat on the ground beside the gravestones on its slope. Kaito and Elisabeth followed their lead. After making sure everyone had evacuated, a young man wearing a dark-red robe who appeared to be La Mules's attendant reverently approached her. His hands trembled as he removed her muzzle, then crawled away on his stomach, as terrified as though she was some sort of carnivorous beast.

For a moment, La Mules did nothing. However, she then gently opened her mouth, as though yawning. Saliva dripped down from between her uniform white herbivorous-looking teeth.

The entire scene seemed steeped in madness, and Elisabeth murmured as she looked upon it.

"La Mules was born with many stigmata within her, and she can use them as summoning circles. But activating her requires the signatures of not only all the high priests but those of the royals and titled nobility as well. That was the

reason for her delayed arrival.”

“‘Activating’… That’s hardly a way to describe a person.”

“Mm, not at all. She is a high priest who bears the authority to summon first-class mythical beasts and spirits in name alone.”

Before their very eyes, La Mules’s jaw was gradually stretching past the point jaws were designed to. Yet, she opened her mouth farther still. Little by little, the tips of her lips began to tear. Even the restraints binding her face tore off with audible groaning noises.

Then they were joined by a different sticky sound.

“…Wh—?”

Kaito’s eyes went wide. A dimly glowing blob had burst out of La Mules’s mouth. Its head was a dozen times larger than her face, and it was covered in a mucous membrane like a newborn animal.

It was a grotesque scene, one in gross defiance of the laws governing conservation of mass.

“In truth, she is the greatest weapon the Church possesses,” Elisabeth quietly continued.

Then Kaito realized something. The blob was made out of soggy feathers.

A gigantic bird was trying to make its way out from between her tiny lips.

Suddenly, as though it had been pushed from within, the bird shot out. It broke free in one fell swoop.

Kaito tried to take in its full hideous form. However, before he could, it gave off a short whooshing sound and vanished.

Light shot forward from La Mules, and a striking wind burst out in a circle. The back of the chair twisted outward. As it did, all the buildings on the side of the road leading from La Mules to the mass of flesh blew into the air like rag dolls.

Accompanied by a shock wave, something had gone rapidly flying toward the mass of flesh.

“She is little more than a living cannon.”

As Elisabeth spoke, something—most likely the bird that had come out of La Mules's mouth—impacted the mass of flesh. Jet-black smoke shot up. The faces of the mass's captured victims screamed in succession. Even the paladins trembled, their armor rattling, as the agonizingly sorrowful voices reached their ears.

Kaito strained his eyes, trying to make out the mass behind the smoke concealing it.

There was a deep, scorched hole bored into it. What on earth had happened?

Kaito thought back to the events that had taken place over the past few seconds to try to get them in order.

The bird La Mules made probably flew at it superfast, crashed into their target, then vanished.

Then another weird plopping noise rang out. A second blob peeked its head out of La Mules's mouth.

Holding his breath, Kaito watched over it. He tried with utmost composure to make out what was going on.

Just like Izabella said, it's obvious how effective these summoned beasts are.

Another bird was birthed from La Mules's mouth. The light blasted out with a short popping noise.

The surface of the mass burst and scattered. The second bombardment had gone through successfully. However, Kaito tightly balled his fists up.

…It's going well, so why?

A dark sense of unease was filling his chest, one that he couldn't suppress.

It happened as La Mules was spitting out the third bird.

"They're coming," Elisabeth muttered in a low voice.

At practically the same time as she spoke, a black shadow gushed out from the base of the mass. Countless black dots appeared overhead, as well. The two groups almost looked like armies of ants and flies. However, their forms were sinister enough to put bugs to shame.

The mass of flesh was releasing underlings.

The evil army marched through the gray space, traveling toward La Mules—both the cannoneer and the cannon—with fierce intensity. As he leaned over a gravestone, Kaito prepared himself for battle.

Then Godot Deus issued an order.

“Hold your positions.”

With a slump, La Mules drew in her chin at a bizarre angle. Her line of fire shifted.

The third bombardment shot forth. White flames exploded, gouging the mass’s foot. The band of incoming underlings perished in the fire. Struck by the shock wave, the bird-shaped underlings violently slammed into the ground. Bones and viscera tore out of their bodies as they bloomed into pitiful crimson flowers on the road.

Seeing La Mules’s overwhelming power, the paladins raised their voices in awe.

For a moment, even Kaito felt as though victory was at hand.

Suddenly, the surface of the mass trembled and a chunk fell off.

“…Huh?”

Kaito narrowed his eyes in confusion. It was a chunk of raw flesh, but its form was like that of dough cut out by a child with a crude cookie cutter.

Waving in the wind, the thin figure floated through the air. It was shaped like a warped human. It nimbly evaded La Mules’s oncoming attack. It was slammed by its shock wave, though, and the figure drifted even higher into the air. However, it didn’t look as though it had sustained any damage. Looking at it, Elisabeth furrowed her brow and crossed her arms.

“Hmm, ’twas originally quite different, but I remember that shape. Flesh in the shape of a man… I see. The Monarch has split off.”

“Split off?”

“They likely wanted to avoid all being targeted at once. Quite clever for a

mass of flesh. The fruit of its survival instinct, I'd wager."

Elisabeth nodded. Pursuing the figure, La Mules spun her neck with alarmingly smooth motions. However, her foe's movements were too quick, and she was never able to settle on an angle of fire.

She's like a fixed battery.

La Mules was unsuited for battle against a foe constantly on the move.

Suddenly, the figure found itself assailed by red arrows. The paladins had been on standby throughout the town, and it seemed they'd launched a magical attack. However, the figure drifted lazily and passed directly over them. It was unclear what it had done to them, but their attacks came to an abrupt stop. The whole scene seemed somewhat ridiculous, which made it all the more ominous.

Kaito felt a chill run down his spine. Shaking her head, Elisabeth spoke.

"The task is beyond them. I shall hunt him down."

Godot Deus nodded. Using communication devices, the priests attending to him contacted what was likely another unit and told them to hold their fire. All the while, the strange figure was growing in size.

Frowning in unease, Kaito finally came to a realization.

No, that's not it! It's not getting bigger! It's getting closer!

At the same time, Godot Deus cried out it a tense voice.

"Protect La Mules!"

The paladins moved in unison. As La Mules prepared her next shot, the holy warriors worked together to form a perimeter around her. A few priests took positions around them.

The next moment, a deep noise rang out, and the massive humanoid figure passed over the heads of Kaito and the rest.

The faces of a number of victims floated upon the surface of its flat stomach.

Looking up at them, Kaito shuddered in disgust.

He'd met the eyes of every single one of them.

And they were all laughing.

…!

On an impulse, Kaito dashed.

“Oh-ho, not a bad decision.”

As the Kaiser’s sarcastic compliment echoed in his ears, Kaito dashed up the footholds he’d unconsciously crafted out of darkness and azure flower petals. He reached out, grasping at a height that would have been impossible for a normal human to reach.

With his beastly arm, he slashed at the faces lined up overhead. He crushed a number of them, and blood came billowing out.

At the same time, all the intact faces opened their mouths.

Bloodred drool rained down over the paladins.

“Ah, ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Bloodcurdling screams rang out. Wherever the saliva touched them, the dribble melted the paladins’ armor. A horrid stench wafted through the air. After eating through armor, skin, and bone, the fluid even bored holes in the ground.

Kaito bit his lip in horror. However, he quickly turned his face away from the victims who were beyond saving and surveyed the extent of the damage.

La Mules was unharmed, as the priests surrounding her had thrown up a barrier to protect her. On top of that, they’d used their mana to strengthen and consecrate the paladins’ shields, and the paladins formed a seamless wall around her.

The figure whizzed past the top of the hill, its movements like those of a breaching whale. Then it did a loop and came back, racing once more toward La Mules and her guard.

As it did, the sound of a heel clicking rang out.

A radiant woman stood atop the hill, facing the figure.

“It’s been a while. I see you’ve taken on such a hideous form, Monarch.”

Her lustrous black hair fluttering in the wind, the Torture Princess squared off against her demonic prey.

Having noticed her, the victims' faces on the figure's stomach opened their eyes wide. As though acting as conduits for the Monarch's emotions, they launched into an agitated, hateful howl.

"Elisabe…be-be-be-be-be-be… ElisabeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEETH!"

There were men's voices, women's voices, old people's voices, children's voices, and beastly voices.

The cries of the victims were resounding.

"How miserable you lot are. How ugly and powerless. Wait but a hair longer. It shall take me little to snuff out your pitiful lives."

Basking in their cries as if it was applause, Elisabeth drew the Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal. Crimson flower petals scattered as she swung it before bringing it to a controlled stop. She pointed its sharp tip at the Monarch.

"Splendid Executioner: The Boondock Saints!"

Darkness and crimson flower petals swirled above the buildings of the capital, then launched something toward the ground. Metal glittered as it descended with a thunderous roar. Lumps of various shapes and sizes heaped up by the hundreds.

Each one of those lumps was a blade.

Carving knives, shears, pocketknives, and spears all piled up in a purposeful pattern. One by one, the various blades interwove with an artistic sense of balance.

Eventually, the giant made of blades was complete.

Its torso was composed of every kind of bladed object imaginable. Its right arm, though, was adorned with an executioner's ax, and its left arm boasted a sword designed for decapitations.

The blade giant rose to its feet with surprisingly delicate movements, then swung its executioner's ax. Like a slab of meat in a butcher's shop, the humanoid figure was cleaved clean in two from top to bottom. Despite that,

though, each of its halves tried to scurry away.

The next moment, it had been chopped into fourths.

The giant had moved faster than the eye could see, catching both halves with its decapitating sword and slicing them horizontally.

The figure had no chance to escape, and its flesh was shorn into pieces. Losing their strength, the tiny chunks collapsed to the paved ground. Without a moment's delay, the giant crushed them underfoot.

As he watched the one-sided beatdown, Kaito suddenly realized something.

The Boondock Saints and La Guillotine aren't torture devices, they're executioner's tools.

Each time the blades flashed, the screams of the figure's victims grew quieter. Each blow sliced through every face in its path, so the sum amount of pain the giant was doling out couldn't have been that high.

Those were probably the two that Elisabeth called on when she needed to end lives quickly.

Eventually, and in stark contrast to its original form, the Monarch had been cut down to the size of a dinner steak.

Suddenly, one of the faces on the remaining chunk of meat violently swelled up. It was unclear how it had fit inside, but a body dropped out of it onto the ground as though it were losing a tooth.

That body was the Monarch's concealed true form.

Unlike that of the Grand Earl, whom Kaito had once seen, the Monarch's skin was melted, and he looked barely human. The Monarch sat still, hanging his head as though waiting for the end to come. The blade giant raised its foot, looking to deal him the final blow.

Wait a minute, that's…!

As it did, Kaito stumbled upon an idea. He snapped his fingers.

"You're plotting something twisted again, aren't you, boy? Very well. I shall act as you desire."

Answering his summons, the Kaiser appeared in midair. Kicking off against the ground with his steely feet, he dashed to the Monarch's side. Narrowly slipping between the giant and the road, the Kaiser grabbed the Monarch's neck in his mouth and withdrew.

A loud noise rang out as the giant slammed its foot down onto the empty ground.

The first-class hound had captured the Monarch alive.

Having had her prey snatched from her grasp, Elisabeth whirled around to face Kaito.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Kaito?"

"I had an idea. Would you mind letting me deal with him?"

Kaito responded with a request. Murder flashed across Elisabeth's eyes as she glared at him, and the knights around them cast distrustful gazes his way as well. However, Kaito pressed on without hesitation.

"It's not like he's strong enough to run. I can't tell you what I'm planning on doing with him yet, but…if worse comes to worst, and we don't succeed in taking down the mass today, then I think we're gonna need him."

"Even so, you intend to retain two demons in your custody?"

"I'm not gonna make a contract with him. What if we left managing him up to the paladins?"

"…And this is truly necessary?"

"It is."

Hearing Elisabeth's question, Kaito nodded with a serious expression on his face. The two of them glared at each other. Eventually, Elisabeth realized that Kaito didn't plan on backing down. Clicking her tongue, she heaved a sigh as she continued.

"While I know not what you plan for him, I'll admit there is merit to capturing him. I grant you my permission. However, don't you dare let him get away. Godot Deus, take heed. We're bringing the Monarch back alive."

“As Elisabeth says, there is value in capturing a demon. As long as he remains under Church supervision, I shall allow it.”

Hearing them agree, Kaito nodded. Not being overly fond of their annoying chirping, the Kaiser waited for the humans to reach their conclusion before dragging the Monarch over. Still hanging in the Kaiser’s mouth, the half-melted man showed no signs of movement. After checking to make sure he’d been dealt with, the paladins separated from La Mules’s side.

Elisabeth did the same, turning the blade giant back into crimson flower petals. It was too small to be of much use dealing with the full mass of flesh.

La Mules went to start her barrage back up. A fresh bird was on its way out of her mouth.

At that moment, Kaito narrowed his eyes.

He felt as though the mass of flesh, having lost the Monarch, was wriggling.

The next moment, its wound frothed as though the spot had begun boiling. With smooth motions, eyes, a nose, and a mouth protruded from its surface. Above them, spiderweb-like fibers stretched out and began stitching skin together.

Eventually, a man’s face was displayed. Although its muscles looked flaccid, its chiseled features and virile masculinity could be clearly made out.

It opened its thick lips.

“—Graaah!”

A gray roar emanated from its dark throat.

The paladins immediately threw up their shields. Working in unison, they protected La Mules from the discolored air. The priests also acted quickly and threw up their barrier. All of their responses were precise. However, the moment the roar passed over them, they dropped to the ground like puppets who’d had their strings cut.

Even so, the rest of the paladins tried their best not to seem fazed and instead calmly tried to deal with the situation.

“Squad Two, advance!”

Following Izabella's orders, a different group of paladins raised their shields and, accompanied by a handful of priests, took their places defending La Mules. As they did, a convoy of healers retrieved the fallen. However, once they were safely on the back slope of the hill, Izabella checked their conditions and frowned.

Peering at them alongside her, Kaito tilted his head.

"They're…just asleep?"

"Yes, that's what it looks like. What in the world happened up there?"

The fallen paladins and priests were simply deep in slumber. While their lives didn't seem to be in any danger, they also didn't show any signs of waking up.

Dropping to one knee, Elisabeth checked their pulse and breathing.

"Hmm, a spell designed to make them sleep, perhaps… She was caught in the roar; is La Mules—"

Then something peculiar happened.

Warped laughter echoed across the hill.

"Hee-hee… Hee-hee-hee… Hee-hee-hee… Ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

It was a voice one certainly didn't expect to hear on a battlefield. What was strangest, though, was where it came from.

The paladins holding their shields turned nervously to look at its source.

La Mules…

…was laughing like a child.

La Mules laughed innocently, in a voice with a definite will behind it.

That was when Kaito realized for the first time how young she was. Her voice was clear and beautiful, and she sounded amused, as though something pleasant had happened.

After laughing for a while, she abruptly tilted her head to the side.

"…Hoo, wah?"

After saying some words that didn't seem like they bore any particular

meaning, La Mules opened her mouth up wide.

Then, after sticking her tongue out, she bit down hard. The muscles in her jaw were unnaturally developed, and she mercilessly put all strength behind the bite.

She neatly cut off her tongue, and it flopped down comically onto the ground.

It took everyone a moment to comprehend what had just happened.

“La Mules!”

A healer rushed up beside her. However, La Mules stubbornly refused to open her mouth.

Several people grabbed her jaws, desperately trying to pry them open. However, their efforts were in vain.

Blood dribbled from the gaps between her clenched teeth, soiling her snow-white restraints.

Gazing at the ghastly spectacle, Godot Deus spoke in a subdued voice.

“They got us… But…how?”

Nobody raised their voice to answer his question.

La Mules forcefully gulped down mouthfuls of her own blood again and again. Eventually, she convulsed, then stopped moving.

A heavy silence spread across the top of the hill.

Kaito reviewed the situation. After having fired off a single attack, the man’s face had vanished from the surface of the mass. They’d been able to capture the Monarch. And they’d successfully dealt a good deal of damage to the Grand Monarch and the King.

And the Church’s ultimate weapon, La Mules, committed suicide.

Those were the cold, hard facts of the scene laid out before him.

4
A Secret Date

4

A Secret Date

"So what the hell happened to La Mules?"

"The most likely possibility is some manner of mental attack."

Atop her bed, Elisabeth crossed her legs as she answered Kaito's question.

At present, the two of them were trespassing in an unoccupied inn.

It had already grown dark outside.

A few hours had passed since La Mules had abruptly committed suicide. Not knowing what the nature of the demon's attack had been, the Knight Corps had elected to stage a temporary withdrawal.

Once they'd gotten back to the plaza, Kaito created a cage to hold the Monarch, imprisoned him, and turned him over to the paladins as promised. Afterward, he'd made the rounds and checked in with the guards and patrols to make sure the underlings raid they'd been concerned about hadn't taken place. The demon had sustained a great deal of damage as well, after all.

Elsewhere, Elisabeth and Godot Deus had been conducting an emergency meeting. Once Kaito and Elisabeth had both finished their tasks, they joined up and, at Elisabeth's suggestion, took their leave from the still-chaotic plaza.

Kaito ran the hypothesized cause of La Mules's suicide over his tongue again.

"…A mental attack, huh?"

"Mm. As Izabella said, under normal circumstances, powerful priests obtain God's grace through prayer. Their very bodies brim with power, much like consecrated relics. But with the King as their foe and against a mental attack with no physical form…they naturally find themselves helpless to resist."

Elisabeth bore a displeased expression as she put her weight on the mattress, which was piled high with blankets and stuffed with waterfowl feathers. The

room was a private one and expensive even for the capital. It was nice and roomy, and all the furniture was of quality make. The corners on all the furniture had been filed down, so the shadows cast by the lamplight all drew smooth curves on the ground and walls.

Idly rubbing the edge of the writing desk, Kaito frowned doubtfully.

“Elisabeth, you said that you’d met all the demons but the Grand King, right? Shouldn’t you know something useful?”

“Your point is painfully valid, but I know naught. Had I known anything of the sort, I’d have taken measures before the battle.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Neither the King nor the Grand Monarch possesses any talents of particular note… No, wait. Upon further consideration, that might not be true of the King.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

On hearing Kaito’s question, Elisabeth pressed down on her forehead. She frowned, as though rummaging through her memories of the days she’d spent as Vlad’s beloved daughter.

“The King’s prowess with arms was considerable, and he boasted that the talent itself was his natural ability. However, at this point, the odds of that having been a lie seem considerable.”

“A lie? You mean he was lying to his own comrades?”

“Mm, precisely.”

“And he even fooled Vlad, huh…? Did the King really distrust his allies that much?”

“Nay, his reason likely lay elsewhere. I just told you, did I not? He was fond of boasting about his prowess in combat.”

Elisabeth shook her head.

Illuminated by the lamplight, she interlaced her fingers.

“The King seemed to hold Vlad, the Kaiser, in high esteem. But he was always

the first to mock the Governor, who possessed an ability suited for naught but assassination. And even though his rank was lower than hers, he held the Grand King's powers of mind control in contempt as well. Although, in the end, that resulted in her getting the drop on him and stabbing him with her needles."

"Given her personality, it's no wonder she took advantage of that opportunity."

"What a pitiful fellow… It goes to show just how much credence the King held in martial prowess. In following, he likely just felt ashamed of his ability and concealed it from the rest. At this point, that much is clear."

Kaito recalled the colossal face that had appeared on the mass's surface. That had probably been the King.

The muscles in his face had been slack, and the impression he'd given off had been squalid. However, his physique had still possessed remnants of the chiseled, stubborn features of a warrior.

Then Kaito stumbled upon a question.

"Okay, let's say that hypothetically, the King's ability is a mental attack. Of all the people who got hit, why was La Mules the only one to commit suicide, then? We don't know when everyone else is gonna wake up, but their pulses and breathing are all stable."

"Mm, and the curiosities don't end there. La Mules was a high priest, and God's blessing was strong with her. Furthermore, she didn't possess consciousness. In following, she should have been incredibly resilient against mental attacks. With all that taken into account, then, what in the world happened?"

Crossing their arms, the two of them sank deep into thought. However, they couldn't come up with answers. And there was nobody they could get information out of. Kaito had already asked Vlad if he remembered anything related to the demon's attack.

Vlad had responded with a laugh.

"Oh, I haven't the foggiest. Hmm… Don't you think it's interesting, though, coming all this way just to find yourself facing a foe who holds fresh secrets?"

Given how excited he seemed, it didn't appear as though he was lying.

Kaito furred his brow. He silently cursed at Vlad, lambasting him for his uselessness. As if sensing his thoughts, the stone in his pocket squirmed. Ignoring it, Kaito kept thinking.

Eventually, Elisabeth uncrossed her arms and let out a heavy sigh.

"Given the information we have, giving the matter more thought is naught but a waste of time. Godot Deus had his theories as well, but getting wrapped up in conjecture is folly. One way or another, one thing's for certain—the demon's been carved down a notch."

"Yeah, thanks to La Mules."

"Given the opportunity we've received, it's been decided that I'm to attack the demon directly tomorrow morning. Without firepower on par with La Mules's, any damage we deal the demon from outside will fail to keep up with its ability to recover. And long-range attacks could leave us vulnerable to meeting the same fate as La Mules. In following, I shall make for the weakened King and Grand Monarch and attack their true bodies directly."

"What?!"

Hearing Elisabeth's sudden declaration, Kaito unintentionally raised his voice. She frowned, as though telling him to quiet down. His thoughts racing, he immediately reprimanded her.

"Are you insane? What the hell are you thinking? We don't even know what the enemy did to us yet! A-and one other thing. Give me a second."

Kaito hurriedly pressed down on his forehead. The words *attack their true bodies directly* repeated frantically in his mind.

A twisted scene floated through his head.

The area around the mass is stained gray for miles around.

The buildings within the encroaching radius had been weathered like old paper, and some of them had transformed into shapes and materials that defied the laws of physics—some glassy and vitreous, others foamy and granular. The very nature of space had shifted once past a certain threshold, as

though it had been cut away with a knife.

It was simply consuming its surroundings in a different manner rather than physically corroding them.

The world was being destroyed… And who knows what the hell is going on in there?

The Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu, boasted absolute power.

Up until then, she'd been handily slaughtering the fourteen demons. Even so, she'd never gone inside a space as bizarre as that one.

"This should mark the first time you've ever seen a demon literally destroy the world. Going in there would be suicide, even for you, wouldn't it?"

"True, we know little of what's transpiring within the area of acute encroachment. However, our foe has already begun healing. Once it's finished, it shall resume accumulating pain, as well. The longer we leave it be, the more victims it will claim, and the worse our position shall grow."

"Still!"

"It's not as though I yet lay in Sacrifice's clutches. As far as sheer power goes, I hold the upper hand. If you would not have me face them now, then when? And one other thing. Think back, Kaito."

Then Elisabeth stopped talking. She cast a sharp gaze Kaito's way.

He reflexively gulped. Elisabeth began speaking again, her tone deadly serious.

"When the battle is over, I shall be burned at the stake. In following, the Church is within their rights to order a sow such as myself to put my life on the scales. However, they're no doubt loath to send anyone else into the encroachment area. So the command they've given is appropriate. I have no objections nor any complaints. I simply intend to win. That is all."

Hearing her say that as dispassionately as she did, Kaito clenched his fists.

And the truths the Kaiser had dropped on him weighed heavy on his mind as well.

Suddenly, he found himself at a loss as to how to express the turmoil swirling within his heart.

I can't just tell her to flee. And the way things are, I can't forsake the capital.

Furthermore, he was well aware of the grisly deeds the Torture Princess had committed. He'd witnessed the scars her slaughter had left on her hometown with his own eyes. Crimes ought to carry commensurate punishments.

Kaito himself had once screamed that Elisabeth should just clean up her mess and then descend to Hell like she swore she would.

However, the conclusions he'd arrived at were no longer quite the same.

Godot Deus is gone. And the paladins have taken a serious hit. Maybe once everything's over…

A thought crossed his mind. Would she still submit, once this was all over? However, in his heart, he knew.

"Having lived the cruel and haughty life of a wolf, I shall die like a sow.

"…For that is the choice I made."

He knew Elisabeth Le Fanu wouldn't run.

No matter how much pain and despair awaited her, she would accept the consequences of the life she'd led.

Elisabeth Le Fanu would take responsibility for the horrible life she'd led.

She would pay for her sins as the Torture Princess.

As he racked his brain about that fact again and again, Kaito found himself at his wit's end.

It's no good… What can I do?

Closing his eyes, he desperately turned over his thoughts again. After thinking, thinking, and thinking even harder, he opened his eyes wide.

Then, led by his heated thought processes, he made a truly odd proposal.

"Hey, Elisabeth."

"What?"

“Go on a date with me.”

For the rest of his life, Kaito would never forget the face Elisabeth made in that moment.

Thanks to her expression, the experience of being asked, “Are you an idiot?” became precious to Kaito for the first time in his life.

*

“Are you an idiot?”

“Ah, there it is.”

He’d expected her to turn him down. However, the fact that he expected it didn’t make her verbal arrow sting any less.

He suffered a fair deal of emotional damage. He unconsciously staggered back a step. Before him, Elisabeth fiddled idly with the tips of her black hair. Surprisingly, she too seemed flustered.

A moment passed, and Elisabeth went, practically grumbling. “Or rather, how to put it? I fail to grasp your meaning, and I think it somewhat problematic for a married man to be asking someone out.”

“I agree.”

“And for that someone to be myself, well, then problematic all the more.”

“Still agree.”

“Hmm, might you be coming down with something? Did the King’s attack hit you as well? You’d best turn in early. Don’t go pushing yourself, okay?”

“Man, what am I gonna do? This is the first time Elisabeth’s ever been nice to me.”

The fact that she was so concerned for him was kind of sad in and of itself.

Kaito reflexively looked off in another direction. However, he couldn’t afford to give in that easily. After somehow scraping together his composure, he asked again.

“C’mon, let’s go. We don’t have to call it a date. I’m fine with whatever, I just want to take a walk around the town.”

“I-is that really the sort of thing one ought to propose in the hours leading into a decisive battle? It feels as though you’ve lost your wits… Are you quite certain you’re all right?”

Elisabeth stood up from the bed with great vigor, then pressed her pale palm against Kaito’s forehead. It seemed she was checking to make sure he didn’t have a fever. Kaito doubted that golems could catch colds, but apparently what he’d said had been enough to elicit concern out of her.

Now then, what’s to be done?

I mean, sure…maybe I have lost my wits.

At present, the capital was being overrun by a demon. There was no way of knowing where its underlings might be lurking.

And Elisabeth was planning on heading to near-certain death the following morning.

No matter how you looked at it, now was no time for a proposal such as Kaito’s.

However, he also knew that it was now or never.

“After you die, my inquisition is probably gonna end with me getting the death sentence.”

Kaito spoke. As he suspected, Elisabeth said nothing.

The fact that the Torture Princess was going to be burned at the stake tied in closely with the cruel fate awaiting Kaito. As both her servant and the Kaiser’s contractor, the Church was unlikely to forgive him.

“So I wanna check out the capital while I have the chance.”

Kaito went on. In truth, thoughts of his future weren’t the main reason he was making this request. At the same time, though, it wasn’t as though he was lying.

After all, in his past life, he’d died surrounded by flies in the corner of a cramped little room.

He did, in fact, wish to see the big wide world around him.

Elisabeth thought on it for a few seconds. But after opening and closing her mouth, she heaved a deep sigh.

“Fine. I shall accompany you.”

“Hey, thanks.”

Nodding at Elisabeth’s response, Kaito extended his hand. He turned his palm up, as though inviting her to a dance.

Then she reluctantly placed her hand atop his.

With his still-human right hand, Kaito clasped her pale palm.

And with that, the two of them strolled into the night.

*

“Hyah!”

“Yikes.”

Before Kaito’s eyes, Elisabeth kicked open the pawnshop’s door.

Her crimson skirt fluttered as she dashed down the short staircase. Bathed in the pale moonlight, she took a short leap before landing with both feet pressed together.

Landing magnificently on the stone pavement, Elisabeth looked over her shoulder toward Kaito.

“How do you like that, Kaito?! I’ve done it once more! Tremble in reverence as you praise me!”

“Yes, yes. Full points.”

Kaito’s response came practically in a monotone.

Elisabeth planted her hands on her hips in dissatisfaction.

She was swathed in a crimson dress, a far more respectable one than her usual bondage outfit, with a high collar reaching up to her throat. It was an elegant, high-class article. However, when she did another spin, her immaculate shoulder blades peeked out from behind the dress’s audaciously bare back.

The inside of her skirt was all frills, and they spread out like the petals of a

rose. She stopped in place, and they returned to their original position.

Pressing her palm against her bosom, Elisabeth pouted.

“Now listen here, you! Show more enthusiasm when you praise me! You’re the one who told me to change!”

“I mean, I can’t deny that, but…”

“Heh-heh, ’tis quite the splendid find, for a pawnshop we selected at random! Unlike you, who appears seedy regardless of what you garb yourself in, ’tis showy and extravagant! Wouldn’t you say so?”

Elisabeth’s fashionable plumed hat began to droop. As she fixed it, she puffed her chest out with pride.

Looking her over from head to toe, Kaito crossed his arms with an audible “hmm.”

“It does look kinda nice.”

“Doesn’t it? Then you ought to be more verbose in your praises. You’re an impertinent one, for a servant!”

“I mean… There is a reason I told you to change, you know. If you were wearing your Torture Princess outfit while we were walking around, running into someone could end poorly.”

“Mm, we find ourselves in agreement on that point. ’Tis why I agreed to change.”

“But when you think about it, what we’re doing is really just looting. Are we gonna be all right with you picking out something so conspicuous?”

“Don’t go calling people looters! What a self-centered man you are!”

Elisabeth hissed in anger. Regardless of what she said, though, Kaito had been completely blindsided by how flashy the outfit she’d chosen was. He hadn’t known that her tastes ran that way.

Man, how’re we gonna explain this if we run into any paladins? Kaito wondered, concerned. Elisabeth, on the other hand, hesitated for a moment—no doubt deciding whether or not to call forth a torture device—before

snorting. She tapped her heel against the ground to urge him on.

“Well? What did you intend to do from here?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me. I’ll have your head.”

Pressing down on her forehead, Elisabeth took in a deep breath, then exhaled.

Adjusting the angle of her hat once more, she raised her lips in a pout.

“This situation as a whole is foolish beyond belief, but having said I’d accompany you, I’ve accepted my fate. Rejoice. I know not what this is, be it a date or what have you, but I intend to accompany you to the location of your choosing! Be honored by my charity. Now, where did you want to go?”

“Well, when you put it that way, I guess there wasn’t really anywhere in particular.”

“Just who do you think you are? I’ll have your head!”

Elisabeth shouted at him, livid. Whatever she had to say, though, the fact remained that Kaito knew next to nothing about the capital. And even in his past life, he’d never had a chance to just go for a walk around a town.

Telling a person like that to imagine somewhere they wanted to go was asking a bit much.

“See, the thing is…”

Kaito conveyed those facts frankly to Elisabeth. Murmuring her assent, she knit her brows as she nodded.

Eventually, her shoulders slumped in dejection.

“Well, your past life being what it was, I suppose I can take your extenuating circumstances into account. But listen here, you…”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Inviting someone on a date like that… Even I, the Torture Princess, find that a tad questionable.”

“I agree with you completely. I have nothing to say in my defense.”

“Given your sorry state, that wife of yours is liable to leave you.”

“Hina wouldn’t do that.”

“In truth, I must agree.”

“I’ve got an awesome wife, don’t I?”

“Mm, and one wholly wasted on you at that.”

“Man, that hurts. Anyway…what about you? Do you have anywhere you want to go visit?”

“A place I wish to visit, hmm?”

Elisabeth crossed her arms as she pondered this.

As she did, the plume drooping from her hat rustled and fell directly in front of her face. With feigned composure, she brushed it back up. But it simply rustled back in her way once more.

Rustle, rustle, rustle. After wrestling with the plume, Elisabeth eventually grabbed the brim of her hat with all her strength.

“Begone, you vexing thing!”

“Now you’ve done it!”

Elisabeth hurled the hat high into the air like a Frisbee. It spun and spun as it fell. Then it landed precisely atop Kaito’s head. Perhaps that was what she’d been aiming for.

Flustered, Kaito lifted the hat up. Its sagging plume rustled as it fell in front of him.

On the feather’s opposite side, Elisabeth was grinning.

Her white teeth glittered as she made her innocent declaration.

“Very well! Then let us wander about the marketplace!”

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However, the mercantile district had long since been consumed by the mass of flesh.

They had no way of wandering about the main market. And if they weren't careful and got too close to the mass, they could unwittingly end up initiating the final battle. Doing that would be idiotic beyond belief. However, according to Elisabeth, the heart of the capital lay elsewhere, which meant they didn't have a problem.

"While it's superior in scale, the market that the masses use here is fundamentally quite similar to the one we visited while in the Earl's territory. There's little novelty to be had there. As a special courtesy, I shall guide you and allow you to taste all the wonders this city and this world have to offer."

Her narration brimming with confidence, Elisabeth strode rapidly through the residential districts, moving in the direction opposite from the location of what used to be the market. Kaito obediently followed after her.

Eventually, the two of them made it to a particularly deteriorated section of town, near the castle gates.

As he walked alongside Elisabeth, Kaito surveyed their surroundings.

The road around them was surprisingly narrow. Even the main road looked like some sort of back alley. Unadorned, artificial-looking, boxy buildings were packed tightly along both sides of the street. Even then, at night, Kaito could tell how colorless the sector was. And it looked as though the rows of buildings had been intentionally built to look shady. It was a far cry from the townscape he'd seen in the rest of the city.

Cocking his head in confusion at the strange ambience, Kaito realized something else seemed out of place.

"Hey, Elisabeth, why don't those buildings have entrances? How are people supposed to get in and out?"

"Hmm, as I thought, you still can't find it on your own. Well, as far as magecraft goes, you're an amateur among amateurs. You're but a hair better than a layman. It's only natural."

As she casually ridiculed Kaito, Elisabeth came to a stop in front of a building.

Pressing her finger against a particular section of its wall, she released some mana. Pushed back by a spiral of darkness and crimson, certain rocks rumbled

and sank back into the wall. In the distance, the sound of various mechanisms moving and meshing together rang out.

With a heavy scraping noise, the wall opened up. Elisabeth laughed proudly as she strode inside. Murmuring that he'd underestimated the sector, Kaito followed after her.

"Wh-whoa!"

The moment he stepped inside the building, Kaito let out a cry of amazement.

The room before him made it fully clear what Elisabeth had meant by "all the wonders this city and this world have to offer."

"Wow, that's a surprise. It's quite the sight."

"Isn't it? Be grateful that I brought you here!"

Elisabeth puffed out her chest. Kaito earnestly bobbed his head up and down.

The room's walls were radiating rainbow-colored light. It felt as though they'd gone inside a massive conch shell. The material it was made of was strangely supple, billowing in ways that ordinary human manufacturing couldn't possibly have produced. The parts that naturally stuck out were being used as ledges, and they were adorned with an assortment of bones.

Casting her gaze over each of them in turn, Elisabeth took notice of one in particular.

"The shopkeepers took most of them with them when they fled. But some items yet remain. Look here, Kaito."

"Hmm, what is it?"

Elisabeth picked up a chain dangling from a lizard's rib cage. It seemed that the bones were being used to display the goods.

Hanging from the delicate silver loop was a small stoppered bottle with flower petals suspended inside it.

"It'll only last for but a moment. Take care not to miss it."

With that, Elisabeth held the bottle beneath Kaito's nose and uncorked it. Flower petals mingled with the wind that blew up at his face. For a second, he

smelled a gentle aroma and felt the heat of sunlit air.

“Man, there’s no way someone made this… Was that a spring breeze?”

“Indeed, that it was! Good nose! Just as you said, sealed within this bottle is air from the prime of spring.”

“Wow, that’s kinda cool.”

The natural warmth quickly faded. However, the petals remained, dancing through the air in a gentle swirl.

Kaito poked at it. The swirl banked left and right as though trying to avoid his finger before popping back in the bottle on its own. Elisabeth tightly refastened the stopper.

“’Tis intended as a souvenir for noblemen who come accompanied by their magician attendants. While they’re more expensive than your everyday trinket, they aren’t particularly useful, so they’re cheaper than most other magical objects. ’Tis likely the reason the shopkeepers left it behind. Also, there’s… Oh? I’d forgotten about this one.”

“What?”

“Try holding it.”

Elisabeth pulled a blue bowl out from the mouth of a wolf skull.

Kaito took it from her. The bowl hadn’t been glazed to attain its color; it had been crafted from some sort of naturally blue material. But although it looked like a hollowed-out jewel, it was strangely light.

As he held it in his palms, Kaito gradually began feeling a familiar sensation.

He hadn’t known it back then, but magical devices carried hollowness and hunger within them.

With his beastly left hand, he filled the bowl with the mana it so craved.

“—*La* (overflow).”

As he whispered, water began gushing out of the bowl. As though in exchange, one loop around its interior crumbled away. Apparently, there was a limit to how many times it could be used. However, it would be more than

enough for a short journey.

Kaito let out a deeply impressed sigh.

“Damn, that’s handy. Lugging around water is a pain.”

“Unlike Vlad’s castle, there are no full-fledged magical tools to be found here. In particular, combat-oriented goods are hard to produce without knowledge of dark magic. However, you can still obtain trinkets of this caliber in the capital. And that isn’t all.”

Elisabeth took the bowl from Kaito and gulped down the water. Then, once it was empty, she placed it back in the wolf’s jaw.

Her crimson dress fluttered as she turned on her heel.

Transfixed, Kaito stared at the curves of her bare white back.

Looking back over her shoulder, Elisabeth smiled mischievously.

“Hold onto your hat. You’ve not seen the last Mage’s Row has to offer.”

Elisabeth certainly wasn’t lying.

With each building she led him to, he found himself amazed all over again.

*

After the magical curio shop, they visited several other spots.

Mechanical birds crafted from springs and nails, screws and gears, and amber and iron.

Medicines, antidotes, and poisons stored in multicolored ceramics.

Jewels processed into unfathomable shapes.

They spent a particularly long time engaged in a challenge at the herb shop.

“How is it, Kaito? Delicious?”

“I…I feel like it’s super-tasty, but at the same time, it’s somehow super-nasty.”

Kaito gave his answer as he munched on his sandwich. It was smoked chicken on wheat germ bread, and it had some manner of unidentifiable bluish-green paste spread on it.

There had been a recipe affixed to the shop’s wall, with the title Medicinal Herbs You Can Start Using Today! Elisabeth had said she wanted to try it out, and they’d raided the kitchen to recreate it. Despite it being her idea, though, she’d refused to taste-test it, so that role had fallen to Kaito.

The result of that had been the wishy-washy response he'd just given.

Unsatisfied, Elisabeth furrowed her brows.

"What in heaven's name does it mean to be both tasty and nasty? That makes little sense."

"I don't have much of a sense of taste, so it's hard for me to explain. You could just try a bite, you know."

"Very well. Ahhh."

"Here it comes."

Kaito stuck out the sandwich, and Elisabeth, having lost to her curiosity, ate out of his hand. Kaito was impressed at how vigorously she'd gone at it.

After chewing for a bit, Elisabeth swallowed with utter dejection.

"…The acidity is rather invigorating. And the flavor is mellow and rich. Judged alone, its individual attributes are quite decent, but taken as a whole, they're altogether disastrous. In conjunction with the dryness of the bread and the chicken, the experience is rather disappointing."

"Damn, your food critiques are on point."

"Hmm, did I make a mistake with the recipe? It tasted like something you might cook."

"You make fun of me so nonchalantly."

"In any case, this stuff is beyond my comprehension. But if used properly, I feel as though it might bring new culinary horizons upon us."

Elisabeth sat down on the old wooden counter. Gracefully crossing her legs, she snatched the open bottle.

Hearing her words, Kaito nodded.

"If we bring that bottle back to Hina, I bet she'd be able to make something interesting with it."

"Mm, let's add it to the other souvenirs."

"Roger that."

Sealing the bottle up tight, Elisabeth stuck it into the leather bag they'd pilfered from a general store along the way. In it already was a bottle with spring wind sealed inside, a clockwork toy butterfly, and a set of fruity tea leaves that crackled when you poured hot water on them.

Snapping her fingers, Elisabeth pulled a coin out of thin air. She placed the designated amount of money on the shop's counter.

"That's coming out of your wages, you know."

"Sure. I mean, even if I saved up, it's not like there's much for me to spend it on."

Ever since the pawnshop, the two of them had been leaving behind payment for the things they'd pilfered. Most of it had come out of Kaito's wages. However, Elisabeth had paid for some of the stuff out of her own pocket. Now, too, she was straightening her back and plucking a new jar out of the shop's hanging cupboard.

After reading its label, she placed a coin of her own beside Kaito's.

"Hmm, then I shall bring her these dried mushrooms. It says their unique spiciness goes well in fried dishes and that they boast considerable benefits to one's health."

"Hey, wait, that sounds good. I wanna go with that one, too."

"Fool! For a man who's already maxed out Hina's affection levels, you ask too much! I'm entrusting you with all the goods whose quality is uncertain. I intend to be the one to bring her all the items sure to be well received."

"I want to make Hina happy, too, you know."

"Ha, 'tis Hina we speak of! She's certain to be delighted no matter what we bring her!"

"I mean, you're not wrong, but still."

Kaito's expression unconsciously softened as he imagined Hina's delighted face. Elisabeth nodded gently, too.

Once they were done picking out souvenirs, they split the rest of the sandwich in half and finished it off.

Kaito bowed toward the unmanned counter in thanks for the food. Elisabeth, complaining once more about the flavor, gulped down water.

“Ugh, I feel sick. Hmm? Hold on a minute. If dreadful food doesn’t faze you, why did I not simply make you eat the remainder?”

“C’mon, that woulda been cruel.”

Kaito nodded. Fair was fair.

After kicking him lightly in the back, Elisabeth headed outside.

As he gave his usual complaints, Kaito followed after her.

*

By the time they made it out of the herb shop, the night had deepened, and the full moon had shifted its position. However, its movements weren’t obvious enough for Kaito to tell whether or not it was the same as the moon from the world he’d come from.

Besides, even if it looks like my world’s moon, there’s a chance that it’s something completely different.

All he knew was that the moonlight was distinctly brighter than it had been earlier.

Bathed in its silver radiance, Elisabeth murmured.

“Let’s go for a bit of a stroll.”

They walked in silence. After leaving Mage’s Row, they returned to the residential district.

Kaito then followed Elisabeth up a gently sloping road that led toward the higher parts of the city. He had no idea where she was going. However, their surroundings gradually began to look familiar.

Wait, this is…

Eventually, they reached the hill where La Mules had killed herself.

The gravestones stood silently lined up in the dim light. Their cold stone faces were feigning ignorance as to the tragedy that had taken place that afternoon. In fact, they looked almost as though they’d forgotten they were hiding corpses

beneath themselves.

After taking wide strides past them, Elisabeth sat down on a clear bit of meadow.

Without hesitation, she stuck her pale legs out from beneath her sprawling dress and clutched her knees. Kaito knelt down on one knee beside her.

The two of them stared out over the town.

Even then, in the dead of night, they could make out the black mountain of writhing flesh.

Eventually, Elisabeth spoke.

"…Satisfied?"

"Yeah, that was plenty," Kaito responded in kind to her blunt question.

She nodded silently.

A gentle wind brushed at their cheeks. Kaito smelled something rusty and rotting in it. However, he purposely avoided bringing that up.

Time passed quietly.

Gazing down at the malicious mass of flesh, Elisabeth muttered in exasperation.

"…So given our abnormal situation, what's your true objective here?"

"I accomplished my goal. We were able to pick out presents for Hina."

"Ha, you just wanted to get gifts from the capital for your bride? What a faithful fellow you are."

"Now we just have to go back together so we can give them to her."

Elisabeth shut her mouth tight. From beside her, Kaito examined her face. Her expression was pained, as though clearly stating that she understood what he meant. Still, he didn't falter.

"Now that you've bought souvenirs, you gotta go back."

Elisabeth still said nothing. Kaito was about to say more.

Then Elisabeth let out a light sigh and relaxed her whole body. Spreading her

arms wide, she fell over backward. Eventually, she whispered about something wholly unrelated to Kaito's emotional appeal.

"Behold, Kaito."

"Behold what?"

"Look at how bright the stars are. It's as though all the tragedies of the world are nothing more than illusions."

Elisabeth spoke in a voice very unlike her; one that sounded almost as though she were dreaming. She didn't say anything more. After spending a moment puzzling at the meaning of her silence, Kaito broke the ice again.

"You know, I called it a date… I'll grant you that the phrasing was weird, but I didn't want to go alone. I wanted to walk around the capital with you."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see what you'd do."

"In what sense?"

"I wanted to see how you'd spend the time, knowing that the battle tomorrow could go either way and that certain death awaited you. And you chose to pick out souvenirs for Hina. 'Ones that would definitely make her happy,' you said."

Elisabeth's response was delayed.

This time, Kaito didn't look at her face. Glaring at the distant mass of flesh, he went on.

"Someone who was totally satisfied with dying, who'd given up on life, wouldn't do that, would they? Don't you actually want to go home?"

"…Listen, Kaito."

Just as Kaito had guessed, she didn't deny it. Her voice rang out softly, along with the rustling of clothes.

Elisabeth had raised herself up and appeared to be once more clutching her knees.

"Look at me."

Responding to her call, Kaito turned toward her like his head had been yanked.

Then he gulped.

Lowering her face to her knees, Elisabeth wore a gentle smile.

It was the kind of smile one would direct toward a child who was asking for something unreasonable.

“You’ve killed none but your enemies, not a single innocent. You shoulder no sin. And for the innocent to be punished for their existence alone is absurdity. Once this battle is over, return to the castle. Then take Hina and flee. As you are now, you should have power enough to be able to evade capture.”

For a second, Kaito wasn’t sure what she’d just said.

Before he’d fully understood it, he instinctively opened his mouth to speak.

“What the fuck are you talking about?!”

“However, you mustn’t kill people. I forbid you from hurting them, as well.”

Suddenly, Elisabeth’s voice became sharp. Her expression, too, transformed into that of a proud warrior. She gave Kaito a stern command as the Torture Princess.

“This is the final order from your master, the Torture Princess.”

“Elisabeth…”

“Don’t give in to the demons’ temptations. If you think you are likely to, then end your life yourself. ’Tis a heavy thing, to harm others, to be loathed by the world, and to constantly shoulder sins.”

The further she got in her sentence, the softer and more disorganized her words became.

She closed her eyes, as though in prayer. When she continued, it was in a small voice.

“… ’Tis too heavy a burden for you to bear.”

Her hair gently rustled as she turned her head up. Her eyes still closed, she gazed up at the sky.

“The stars are bright. Yet, down here the screams well up.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“’Tis simply the way of things. The pleasant time we spent together just now does naught to change what has come before or the things that shall come after.”

“Why does it have to—?”

“I drew enjoyment from people’s pain, pleasure from their screams. Such was the life I chose. One must square their accounts for the tab they’ve driven up. Should the deeds I’ve done be forgiven, it would warp the world of mankind. I myself cannot allow that.”

Abruptly, Elisabeth opened her eyes. Kaito found himself speechless.

Her perfect, jewel-like crimson eyes held no fear or hesitation. They were so tranquil it bordered on madness.

“The demise of torturers should be garnished with their own screams as they sink to Hell with no chance for salvation. Only at such a time is a torturer’s life truly complete. And in this capital, a fitting stage has been set for that finale.”

“A fitting…stage?”

Swallowed up by the beauty of her eyes, Kaito parroted her words back to her.

Elisabeth nodded deeply. Turning back toward the mass of flesh, she resumed speaking.

“The Royal Knights belong to the king and the paladins to the Church. The Church may specialize in fighting demons, but they’re also permitted quite powerful arms. That comes as a result of the fact that in this world, the Church’s status is higher than that of the king’s.”

“…I…see.”

“Whenever a king wishes to assume the throne, permission from the Church is needed. But the Church isn’t a fully autonomous organization. While the Church has historically held a strong say in the way the kings have ruled, their decisions are also influenced by the times the country is facing. Given the

unstable state the country is in, it will take countless years for people to return to the capital and for trade and commerce to recover, even once the demons are eradicated.”

Kaito nodded. He now understood a part of this world’s power structure, as well as the trials awaiting its people.

Elisabeth went on, even more dispassionately.

“Moreover, at this rate, the curtain will be drawn on the war against the demons far from the eyes of the people. They will find themselves unable to shake their fears, unable to purge their unease. Society requires a rite of passage.”

A moment later, Kaito’s eyes went wide.

Thus far, he hadn’t been able to figure out the point of her story, but it had finally clicked. He’d realized what she’d meant by a “fitting stage.”

“You don’t mean…”

“The most effective method by which to unite people is to give them a common enemy. The Torture Princess has slain far too many. Burning her at the stake should prove a fitting symbol.”

Elisabeth looked at the mass of flesh, as though gazing toward her own demise.

A self-deriding smile spread across her lovely lips.

“Despots are killed, tyrants are hung, and slaughterers are slaughtered. All for the sake of the people.”

Elisabeth’s whisper was gentle, as though saying that that was simply how things were.

That that was how things ought to be.

Kaito clenched his fists. He tried to shout at her, but the words wouldn’t come out.

As he closed his eyes tight, a thought he’d once had crossed back through his mind.

Something's wrong.

He didn't know what it was, but he knew that there was some detail that was off about the whole situation. He bit down on his lip. The words he'd once spat at Godot Deus went off in his ears like firecrackers.

"If you guys had just been stronger, the Torture Princess wouldn't have even been born, would she?

"If someone were to ask if the Torture Princess was good or evil, then obviously the answer would be evil. It was crazy to ask the allies of her victims to come and save her. If I were on the side of her victims, then I'd be cheering from the rooftops to work her to the bone then put her to the stake. Which means that this doesn't have anything to do with you guys. I'm the one she summoned, and this is really all just me being selfish, so it's really my problem.

"What I'm trying to say is that person who saved me wasn't God or a hero. It wasn't faith, and it wasn't you guys."

"It was the Torture Princess—the most evil woman in all the world."

Why, why, why, why, why? Why?

Why?

Then Kaito realized something.

Deep in his heart, a young version of himself was crying out. The young boy hadn't shed a single tear, even when he was kicked, and burned, and beaten, and had his teeth ripped out. Yet he was crying at the top of his lungs.

As though to say that this, if nothing else, was unforgivable.

"I finally found a hero," he cried out.

"Why are you taking her away from me?" he cried out.

"She saved me," he cried out.

"From a life that was fated to end in despair."

"She lifted me out of that hell!" he cried.

Kaito opened his mouth, then closed it. He tried to say something.

He tried to make his younger self see reason, to respect Elisabeth's wishes. Yet, he didn't give voice to a single one of the objections and logical arguments that sprang to his mind.

Eventually, he just gently grasped his crying self by the hand.

Yeah, I know. I know.

In this world, Kaito Sena had found someone to believe in for the first time. He'd found a family for the first time.

He'd finally been able to take his life in his own hands.

Who had been the one who'd given him all that? Out of the two worlds he'd lived in, who'd been the sole person to save him?

Trust me, I feel the same way.

At that moment, a quiet, firm resolution welled up within him.

A resolution for his hero's sake.

Kaito gently withdrew his teeth from his now-bloody lip.

The confusion and anger he'd felt earlier had been completely wiped from his face.

Elisabeth hadn't noticed anything. Turning toward her, he began speaking, his words as much for himself as they were for her.

"You know, you're the only one who ever saved me."

"…What are you talking about?"

"The person who saved me after I was tortured and killed like a worm wasn't God or some noble hero. Those guys can all eat shit."

Belief in God ran deep in this world, and Kaito's words were incredibly blasphemous.

Without hesitating, he went on.

"The only one who saved from that hell was the Torture Princess. Just you, Elisabeth Le Fanu."

Elisabeth's eyes widened. That probably wasn't anything close to what she'd

been expecting to hear. It was rare to see her so genuinely astonished. She blinked a few times. However, she eventually shook her head, a thin smile creeping its way across her face.

"…And here I was, wondering what you'd have to say. Are you an idiot? Don't go getting all grandiose on me. 'Twas on a whim, nothing but coincidence. Feeling indebted for such a thing would be creepy."

"Coincidence, a whim, it's all fine by me. Hey, Elisabeth. I told you, right? That until you start walking the road to Hell, I'll try and stick by your side for as long as I can, even if I'm the only one."

"Mm, so you did. And what of it? That time is upon us, that's all."

"It's not here yet."

Kaito spoke definitively. Elisabeth frowned at his strangely forceful statement. Looking into her crimson eyes, Kaito spoke with the sincerity of a man giving his wedding vows.

"I'm not going to let you die."

Elisabeth's face froze. She looked like she was about to say something, but Kaito ignored her and stood up. He forced the bag carrying Hina's souvenirs onto Elisabeth.

Then he ran down the hill at full speed.

"Hey, Kaito, wait! Just what do you intend to do?!"

Elisabeth shouted after him. But he paid no heed to her words and kept running.

He had a single destination in mind.

The square where the Monarch was imprisoned.

*

When Kaito reached the square, he found himself once more enduring the glares of the paladins manning the perimeter.

He began carefully observing the priests' barrier. Staring at it, he gauged its strength. Then, once he was satisfied, he asked to be let in. He received a dirty

look but was able to enter successfully.

Once he was in, he headed for the section of the plaza that had been curtained off to conceal it from people's eyes.

The Monarch was sitting inside a thorny cage that Kaito had crafted with magic. A group of paladins was standing guard over it and directing uneasy, hateful glances at the Monarch's melted body.

Before they could call out to stop him, Kaito snapped his fingers.

When he did, a swirl of darkness appeared above the cage, and supple muscles and sleek fur began knitting together. The horrific black dog Kaito had secretly tasked with watching over the Monarch made its appearance.

Lying sluggishly on its belly, the Kaiser swung its tail back and forth.

"You're late, O unworthy master of mine."

"Yeah, I just got back."

Shocked by the Kaiser's sudden appearance, the paladins all let out distressed shouts.

Ignoring them, Kaito called out to his beast.

"Looks like I'm gonna have to do it after all, Kaiser. Let's go."

"What a self-centered man you are, and what a colossal fool. But you amuse me. I have no objections. But get permission from the mice first. I don't care for their shrill squeaking. The fuss they make is disagreeable."

With that, the Kaiser snorted. Kaito nodded, then turned around. As he'd expected, Izabella had been informed of the Kaiser's manifestation and made her way inside the curtain.

"Kaito Sena! Even if you're just using it as a guard, you need permission before you—"

"Izabella, there's something I need!"

Beating her to the punch, Kaito nimbly intercepted her reprimand. Faced with a request, Izabella politely stopped speaking. Not missing his opportunity, Kaito spoke quickly.

“Seal the curtain and cast a silencing spell on it. And I need you to make sure Elisabeth doesn’t get anywhere near the spot.”

“What’s this all of a sudden? What in the world are you intending to do?”

“At the end of the day, my power’s just a stopgap. So before we fight the King and the Grand Monarch, I want to build up as much mana as possible. But because of how much pain’s involved, there’s a good chance Elisabeth will try to stop me. Please.”

“I can’t in good faith give you permission to do something your master would prohibit.”

“That’s just a pretense, though, right? What reason do you have to doubt me? You got a report from the familiars they had observing my fight against the Grand King, didn’t you? If I was planning on making a run for it and abandoning mankind, I’d have done it back then. You should already know that I wounded my own body in order to use the magic I saved Elisabeth with.”

“That’s—”

“Dark magic requires pain. This is necessary for me. If you don’t trust me, you can put as many guards on me as you want. And if I do anything suspicious, feel free to stop me.”

“Kaito, still—”

“La Mules is dead. If the Torture Princess screws up, who do you think’s next in line to fight?”

For the people affiliated with the Church, the wound from having their ultimate weapon, the Shepherd, commit suicide was still fresh and raw. Kaito didn’t hesitate in stabbing at it. He also purposely gouged at Izabella’s conscience.

“Who the hell do you think is gonna end up getting sacrificed for the sake of all the heretics and people who call him a monster?”

“…And you’re saying that this is truly necessary for you to fight against the demons?”

“Yes. I promise I’m telling the truth.”

“I understand… While I will personally be one of your watchkeepers, you have my permission. However, Godot Deus has the final say in—”

“Permission granted. Do as you wish.”

Suddenly, a calm, deep voice rang out. Izabella spun around.

Kaito confidently locked eyes with the voice’s owner.

A priest whose face was concealed by a deep crimson robe was reverently carrying a jewel. A phantasm of Godot Deus floated above it. Narrowing his eyes as though trying to gauge something, he spoke.

“Servant, I can more or less guess what your objective is. However, there are bound to be benefits as far as our current battle against the demon goes. You have my permission.”

“Thanks a bunch. This is gonna be good for you guys, too.”

“I wonder about that… However…ah, yes. There is one thing I’d best tell you.”

“What’s that?”

“Under normal circumstances, the Church does not permit replicating souls.”

Kaito frowned, confused by the expected statement. Unable to make out the true meaning of Godot Deus’s words, he urged Godot Deus on.

“…So?”

“Once this matter is resolved, all the reproductions of Godot Deus’s soul, myself included, are slated to be destroyed.”

Kaito was shocked. The stone in his pocket holding Vlad’s soul rattled around, as though Vlad found this topic to be of great interest. Kaito sorted through the pieces of information that he knew.

Reproduced souls are nothing more than degraded versions of the person from when they were alive. Still, though, they have wills of their own.

Destroying a stone with a copy of someone’s soul inside was practically the same as executing a person.

The way Godot Deus had died—committing suicide so he wouldn’t be of use to the demon—was enough to let Kaito understand the resolve that members

of the Church held. Once again, Godot Deus was marching toward his own death.

At the same time, Kaito thought about why Godot Deus had told him that.

Godot Deus worries for the people and trusts in God from the bottom of his heart. But he has a self-serving side, too.

That helped Kaito realize that the resolve the Church possessed and the sacrifices they were making couldn't possibly have been his sole objective.

Wait, could you be…?

Kaito stared at Godot Deus, trying to figure out what he was thinking. However, it was clear to see that he didn't intend to say anything more. Eventually, Kaito stifled his conjecture and spoke.

"Sorry. I know that we're not the only ones being sacrificed."

"You have nothing to apologize for, servant. However, I wish to witness it. Though it may be for the sake of fighting demons, I wish to witness what it is that you intend to hide yourself from Elisabeth's gaze in order to do."

"Yeah, go for it. Watch to your heart's content."

With that, Kaito nodded. After checking to make sure that the paladins keeping watch over him were in place, he turned back toward the Monarch's cage. The drooping man was hanging his head from atop the cage's metal floor.

Snapping his fingers, Kaito whispered.

"—*La* (rend)."

The next moment, blood spouted from Kaito's own arm. He started carving at his body with azure flower petals.

Seeing his sudden, brazen self-mutilation, some of the paladins let out cries.

Ignoring them, Kaito's fingers danced as he manipulated his blood. He used the spilled streaks of crimson to paint a magical formula at his feet and on the floor of the Monarch's cage.

Interpreting its meaning, Izabella called out in a strained voice.

"Are you mad?!"

It was Kaito's second time drawing it, but anyone knowledgeable about magic would be able to easily tell how repulsive it was.

This was a procedure that converted another's pain over to himself.

His eyes filled with compassion and dry composure, Kaito whispered.

"I'm going to torture you now. It won't be much help, but here's something to set your mind at ease."

He raised his arm overhead.

The corners of his mouth curling up unpleasantly, the Kaiser smiled. The Monarch slowly turned his dissolved head to the side.

Swinging his arm down like a conductor, Kaito made his declaration.

"This is gonna hurt me just as bad."

The Monarch's torso tore open.

And at the same time, Kaito's chest ripped apart.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!

The Monarch let out a scream of pain.

Blocked by the silencing magic, his bloodcurdling voice vanished before it could make it through the curtain. However, it forcibly burrowed its way into the ears of the paladins within. Their faces contorted in unison.

Kaito delicately carved into the Monarch's body. He lopped off his arms, gouged out his eyes, and pulled out his innards. But because he was fused with a demon, the transformed Monarch didn't die.

In addition, the magical formula was regenerating his body.

AHHHHHHHHHHHH! AHHHHHHHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHH!

As he screamed, the Monarch rocked his cage like a madman.

Kaito ignored his wordless pleas. He waved his arm without pause.

The Monarch's organs danced through the air, his cheeks were gouged out, and his legs snapped into fourths.

As the Monarch's torture continued, just as Kaito had promised, he himself

experienced the same pain. Occasionally, the pain would cause Kaito to die of shock. When it did, he would revive himself, satisfied with his results.

Man, this really is more efficient than just hurting myself, isn't it?

While he was dying and reviving, the magic he'd fired off ate away at the Monarch. It was a much more efficient way of gathering pain than simply tormenting his own brittle body. As Kaito and the Kaiser suffered more and more pain, the amount of mana at their disposal gradually grew.

As they watched the ghastly spectacle unfold in front of them, one of the paladins muttered: "…This is madness."

When he heard them, Kaito elected to remain silent.

He had no words to refute them with. He was well aware of how insane it was.

His resolve and determination firm, Kaito continued the torture. A vision of the young boy who'd died for his sake, Neue, cast a questioning look toward him for the umpteenth time. But Kaito didn't turn to return his gaze. Just a little more, and he would reach the amount of mana he'd determined was necessary.

Just a bit more, just a little more…

Fighting to pour crimson water into his cup, Kaito desperately struggled to make it overflow.

Eventually, morning broke.

As the sun rose, Kaito lopped off the Monarch's head.

The demon, who'd chosen a life of devouring people and in the end was granted acute pain, was finally released. He toppled over onto the stone floor. Blood dripped out of his pitifully convulsing body.

Several times more blood was spread around the cage.

The paladins were silent. Either fear or disgust had robbed them of their voices.

Amid the overwhelming silence, Kaito quietly murmured.

"Good work, Monarch."

With a bloody hand, he swept back his bangs.

Clotted blood stuck to his cheeks.

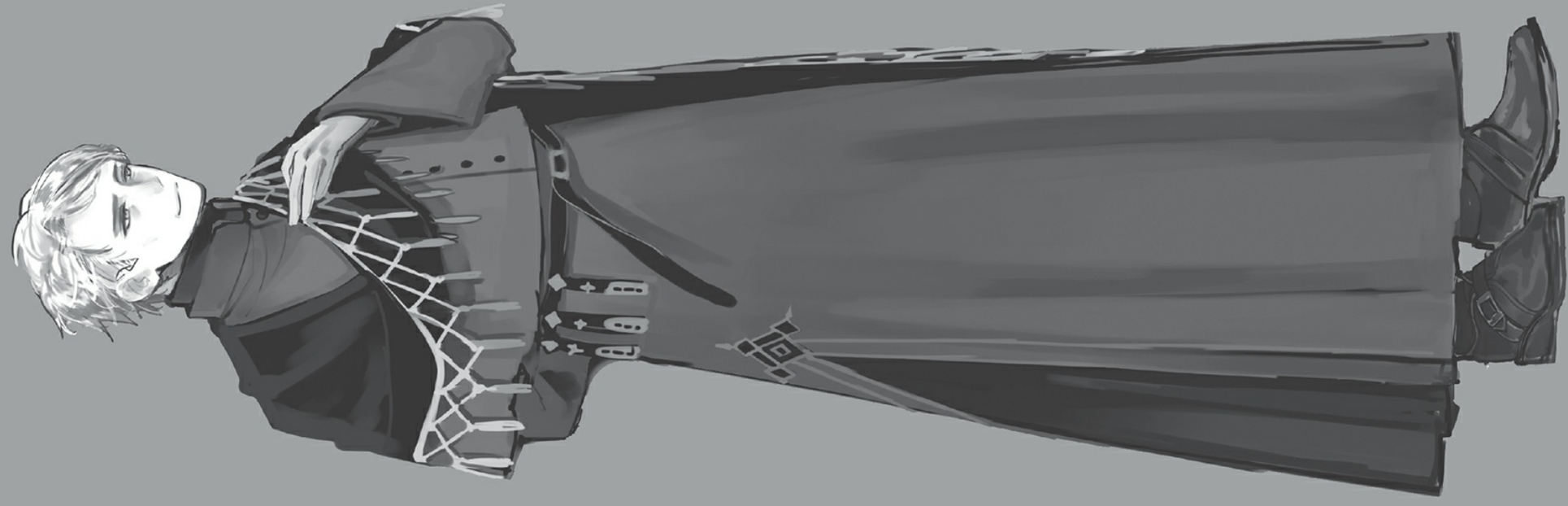
Even assailed by unimaginable pain, he hadn’t screamed once. His face stained with blood, he smiled.

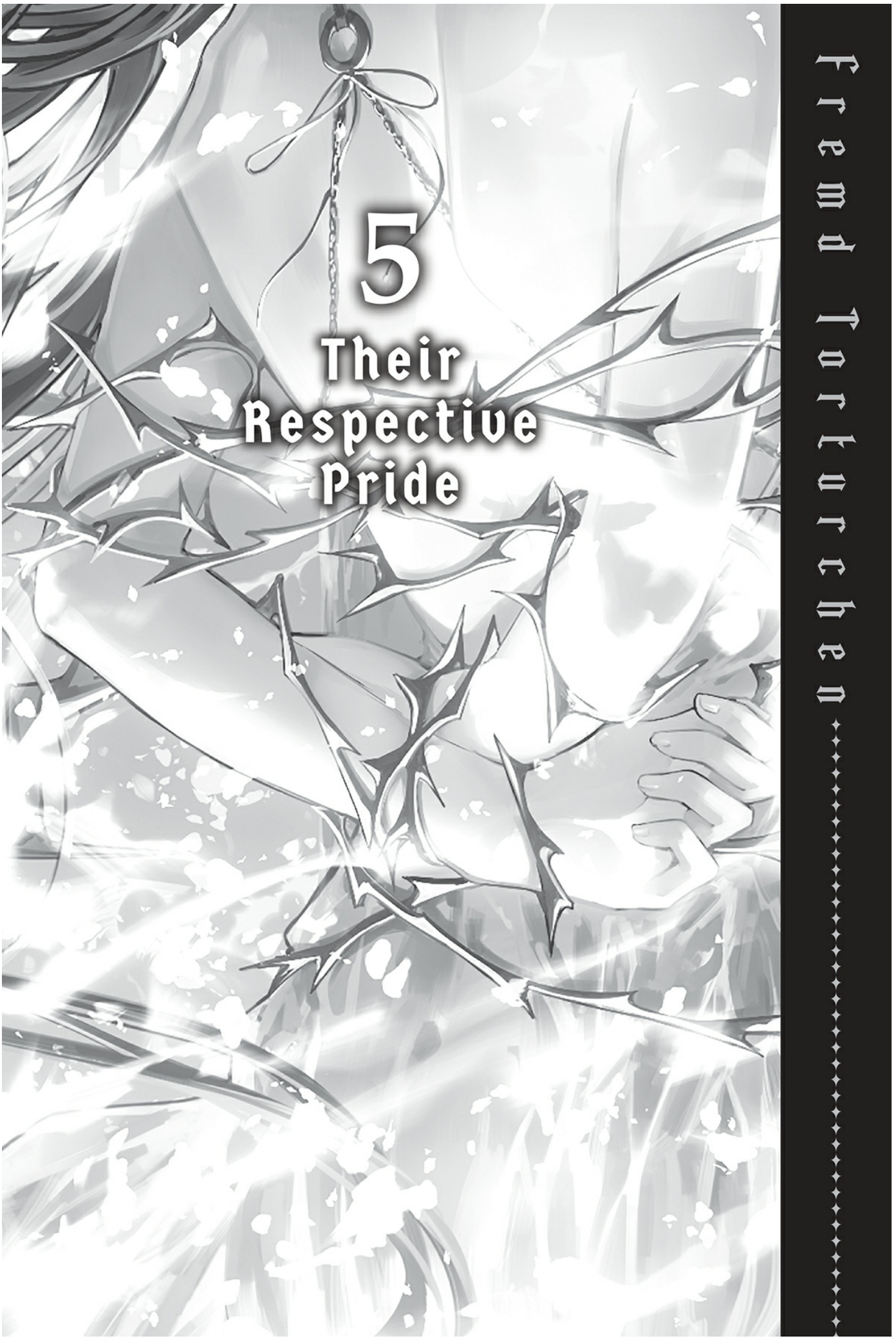
“Now then, onto the King and Grand Monarch.”

Clueless Ray Faund

A member of the Church and a fanatic who abhors heresy. Under the unique belief that "for God's ends, we should use even demons," he came into contact with the Kaiser.

Clueless Ray Faund





5
Their Respective Pride

5

Their Respective Pride

Thinking back, it had been a while since Kaito had been reincarnated into this world, yet it felt like it had passed in a moment. He ruminated about the days they'd spent fighting the fourteen demons. The twisted, joyful life they'd shared sandwiched between them was finally coming to an end.

"…The final battle, huh?"

As he murmured, Kaito opened his closed eyes.

This place was the final step on the stairway leading up to the gallows.

The Torture Princess and her servant had reached their ultimate destination.

The stone road leading to the mass of flesh extended out before him.

Without warning, the ordinary, commonplace road became steeped in gray halfway down its length. The boundary line was directly in front of Kaito's face, as clear and obvious as though it had been drawn with a knife.

Beyond it was a sight that would cause anyone looking to doubt their sanity.

Everything there was stained gray. The surfaces of the buildings and trees were weathered, as though hundreds of years had gone by. There was no sign of life in sight, of course. Even the air itself was cold and firm.

The dim rays of morning sunlight faded and vanished into the gray as well, much like how they would in the depths of a swamp.

Kaito utilized all his senses to try to impress a comprehensible form onto the world beyond the boundary line.

The space beyond here is practically a corpse in its own right.

He felt as though he was standing before the carcass of some colossal creature with none of its presence or warmth remaining. The entire zone, which

should have been teeming with energy, had transformed into a hollow cadaver.

The space was death itself, and it was close enough for him to touch.

“I’d thought you’d vanished, yet here you are.”

The voice that called out from beside Kaito was accompanied by the hard sound of heels clicking. He cast a sidelong glance toward it. Elisabeth was standing there.

Her arms were crossed, and her expression was sour. It made sense that she hadn’t run into him until just then. When morning had come, he’d immediately left the plaza after getting dressed. He’d known there was a chance Elisabeth would try to stop him from coming.

Kaito didn’t give her much of a response. Elisabeth continued her cross-examination.

“Now, then. Exactly what were you doing that required sneaking about all night long? You were even crafty enough to get the paladins on your side.”

Kaito averted his gaze from hers.

Looking back toward the section of the world the demon had destroyed, he quietly answered her.

“…Something stupid.”

As he spoke, he suddenly felt his earlobe get yanked.

Elisabeth mercilessly pulled on his ear.

“’Tis entirely obvious you were up to something stupid, you fool! Don’t go trying to play this off! Who do you think you are, Vlad?!”

“Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! I don’t mind the pain, Elisabeth, but it’s gonna be a hassle sticking it back on if you tear it off! Also, I’m nothing like him!”

Kaito struggled, waving his arms in resistance. The threads of madness holding his face taut had abruptly snapped. Deep in his pocket, his stone rattled around to express its exasperation.

Having sensed a change in his expression, Elisabeth snorted and let go of his ear.

“Well, I have something of an idea. Your stores of mana have risen, after all. You were up to something rather stupid, indeed.”

“…Yeah, I figured you’d have me pegged.”

“Ha, I still haven’t the foggiest as to your true objective. No matter what drivel you spout now, nothing shall change, nor do I intend to let it… But at the moment, that power of yours is liable to be of use.”

“You know, Godot Deus told me something similar.”

“His judgment was the same as mine, eh? Very well. Do try to keep yourself alive.”

Elisabeth spoke, and Kaito nodded.

At least she didn’t tell me to stay out of it.

Secretly pleased by that, Kaito surveyed his surroundings.

The only person standing by his side was Elisabeth. The Royal Knights and paladins hadn’t followed. If the unthinkable happened and the Torture Princess fell, they needed to be ready to take steps to abandon the capital and seal the demon within. Because of that, they needed to preserve as many personnel as possible.

Godot Deus’s decision had been *correct*. The Torture Princess and her servant would face death alone.

Just like they had back in their first battle.

Like always, and just like it was back at the very beginning, huh?

With that thought, Kaito nodded. However, there was one thing he found disappointing.

Not having the ax-wielding automaton, Kaito’s beloved, by their side made him feel a little discouraged and lonely. But he took pride in the fact that he hadn’t left the Torture Princess alone.

“Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu’s bloody life, she was accompanied by a single foolish servant.”

Kaito thought that sounded just fine.

"…Let's go."

"…Mm-hmm."

Unlike once before, Elisabeth didn't accuse him of giving a response unbecoming of a servant. Side by side, the two of them stepped into the gray space.

As they did, they crossed the boundary. The moment they did, Kaito was swallowed up by the space in which anything and everything was wrong.

The Kaiser gently whispered in his ear, as though teasing him.

"Welcome to the world of demons. Welcome to the nightmare."

I see. This is…

What did it really mean for the world to be destroyed?

What was the true nature of the deeds the demons committed?

In that moment, Kaito truly understood.

*

It was quiet there.

And it was engulfed in an absolute, overwhelming sense of peace.

Kaito's senses of touch, hearing, and sight collectively made that abundantly clear.

In that gray space, everything was uniformly dying, being killed, and silent.

Demons were beings who fed on the pain of God's creations. Normally, they would be surrounded by incessant screams. However, once they'd taken everything they could, the ruins they left behind were enveloped in a surprising degree of tranquility.

In a way, this made sense.

Once something had been destroyed all the way to its very core, nothing possessed the means to destroy it further.

Diablo destroys the world, and God creates it.

At the moment, that place was waiting for God to come reassemble it.

In this achromatic world, the living were clearly the foreign ones. Perplexed by the fact that they were the ones disturbing the tranquility, Kaito suddenly realized something.

Demons are fundamentally evil. But at the same time, human morals don't apply to them.

The words Vlad had once spoken to him crossed back through his ears.

"Before they're summoned, they exist in a higher dimension. They don't possess human thoughts, they cannot use speech, and they aren't equipped with senses. When the higher-ranked demons materialize, they reflect their summoner and lower themselves such that they can understand each other as simple, evil souls.

"If they didn't, we humans wouldn't even be able to comprehend their existence."

"…An evil that humans can't even comprehend."

As he repeated those words to himself, Kaito came to realize something.

The demons fundamentally differed from the way human society defined evil.

In the past, Kaito had faced off against the fourteen demons and witnessed firsthand the acts of cruelty they'd committed. But here in this quiet world marked the first time that his body stiffened not with rage but with sheer terror.

Once demons wielded their true power, they didn't have anything humans might regard as an objective. There was only pure, absolute destruction.

Kaito now viscerally understood that.

God and Diablo weren't entities man was supposed to interact with.

"What the hell was Vlad thinking, summoning something like that?"

"A perfectly reasonable question, my dear successor. But it's only human to take that which we cannot comprehend and, while still ignorant of its true nature, use it for our own ends."

Suddenly, Vlad's voice echoed throughout the gray world.

Kaito raised his head in surprise and looked in the opposite direction from where Elisabeth was standing.

“By summoning demons and dragging them down to our level, we obtained power. Perhaps it wasn’t respectable, but I’d rather not be unjustly accused of folly.”

At some point, his slender figure had floated up. His long legs were crossed, as though he were sitting in a chair. As he spoke, he wore a smile that could best be described as beguiling.

“We were carnivorous by nature—it’s only human to want to consume everything one can.”

Vlad theatrically extended one hand in front of himself as he spoke. As he looked up at Vlad’s androgynous features, Kaito ignored most of what he was saying and dejectedly asked him a question.

“Hey, Vlad. I didn’t run any magic through your stone, so how did you materialize?”

“The rules from outside don’t apply in this hollow space, you see. In the face of ‘zero,’ both the living and reproduction of souls in stones amount to ‘ones’ equally. While I don’t possess flesh, my soul is given form in the truest sense in here. Or rather, though I say all that, I couldn’t really tell you what the underlying principles are or how they work. My research is lacking. I must admit, though, being able to take form on my own is quite pleasant… Oh, careful there.”

Vlad’s face forcefully blurred out. A sharp fang was piercing through his phantasmal body.

Kaito assumed it was Elisabeth harassing him, but in truth, it was the Kaiser. The first-rate hound had also materialized in this space, likely irrespective of his own will.

As the Kaiser bit down hard into him, Vlad shrugged in annoyance.

“What might be the matter, Kaiser? I’d thought your anger had somewhat abated.”

“Fool! Just now, you were mocking us demons! ‘Wanting to consume everything in sight’… Cease your chittering, you weak meager half-wit who went and died beyond my reach! You run your grating mouth too much, O He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind!”

“Good heavens, aren’t you on a short fuse. Just whose influence could that have been caused by…? Oh, easy now.”

Once again, his face blurred in an amusing fashion. This time, it was due to Elisabeth’s stakes. At that, even Vlad’s expression soured. Given his temperament, he probably didn’t much care for situations where he was unable to show off.

Turning toward Elisabeth, Vlad made his protest.

“While I’d love to let you play your adorable little pranks, would you mind giving it a rest, Elisabeth? Surely now is no time to be wasting your mana like that.”

“Ha, worry not. It takes nearly no mana at all to pierce your unsightly visage.”

“You say that, but you mustn’t let your guard down… As my dear successor just heard from the Kaiser, this here is the world of demons.”

Suddenly, Vlad’s lips curled up. He opened his arms wide.

Regaining his normal demeanor, he spoke in an unpleasant tone.

“Truly, the depths of man’s nightmare. And don’t think you’re safe just because it’s silent. Even this space, engulfed as it is in endless tranquility, will spit out fresh pain in order to expel foreign contaminants.”

His movements theatrical, Vlad nimbly extended his arm and pointed deep into the hazy, gray world. Kaito followed to where Vlad was pointing.

As he did, his hazy, muddied vision instantly cleared up.

A shade of raw crimson peered out in the distance. Upon further inspection, it was writhing. The wall of flesh towered high above their heads, pulsating as though it were the very heart of the world.

“See, they’re coming.”

Vlad spoke in an amused, half-mocking voice. His words were like a cue.

The silence and tranquility crumbled.

Kaito gulped. A wave of pain was billowing forth from the base of the mass of flesh.

More underlings than he'd ever seen before were advancing on him and Elisabeth.

*

Death howled. Pain clamored.

The grotesque horde approached.

They were all lined up, like a parade or an orchestra, appearing loudly and boisterously.

The tumult they caused made it seem as though all the pain in the world had gathered in one place.

Because of the emergency missive Elisabeth had received from the Church, Kaito had been aware of the fact that when the mass of flesh had first explosively expanded, it had slaughtered as many as a third of the capital's inhabitants. To be more precise, it had either forcibly transformed them into underlings or left them as humans just to gruesomely kill them. However, it was only when he was faced with the host before him that he realized just how insufficient his imagination was in comprehending the scope of the casualties.

The crimson-, peach-, black-, and rust-colored underlings filled the horizon to the limit.

The underlings who had assaulted the square and the ones who'd been killed by La Mules must have been nothing more than a fraction of their ranks. Even just counting the ones in Kaito's field of view, they numbered well into the thousands.

Having sensed enemies approaching the mass of flesh that was their master, the underlings' ranks swelled by the minute.

One by one, they raised resentful cries against those who had survived. Then they advanced forward in a wave.

Normal humans would have had no means of going up against that army. But Kaito knew that the woman standing before them was in a league of her own.

The Torture Princess was a peerless sinner, one who'd slaughtered the entire population of her fiefdom.

"Reenactment of the Plain of Skewers: Impaled Victim."

Shunk, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab, stab!

Hundreds of iron stakes sprouted from the ground, destroying the weathered buildings as they went. One after another, they pierced through underlings and hoisted their tragic corpses into the air. It looked almost like they were being offered up to some dark being.

Elisabeth piled on the attacks even more.

"La Guillotine, the Decapitating Saint! Splendid Executioner: The Boondock Saints!"

Countless blades appeared and formed a fantastical giant, around which stood a group of white saints. As the saints looked up to the heavens, Kaito snapped his fingers.

"—*La* (dance)."

A rectangular blade cleaved the sky as it came flying in.

Kaito, the giant, and the saints all began their attacks simultaneously. Their sharp blades carved through the group of underlings.

An almost excessive spray of blood gushed forth, and bodies began piling up a rapid clip. But although the odds looked favorable at first glance, Kaito and Elisabeth frowned.

"… 'Tis problematic."

"Yeah…"

The underlings had begun grabbing the blades that made up the giant, tearing up their own arms in the process. Though at the cost of shedding immense amounts of blood, they still managed to tear the blades off the giant's body. Dozens of underlings died due to blood loss. But like ants disassembling a

spider, they eventually finished dismantling the giant.

Grabbed by countless hands, the La Guillotines also sank into the wretched sea of underlings.

Elisabeth snapped her fingers again.

“Gluttonous Hellhole!”

A hole opened in the ground, one much larger than the Hellhole she usually summoned.

As the earth caved in, it swallowed up underlings, and the underworldly beetles and grubs within ripped them to shreds with their powerful jaws. However, the underlings didn’t hesitate. They leaped into the hole, one after another. Unable to withstand it, the bugs were squished. Green juices oozed out of their crushed bodies.

The hole was eventually filled in with corpses, and the underlings advanced over it.

They marched forward with aggressive simplicity, removing any obstacles that stood in their way.

Then a ferocious darkness covered the sky, as though a typhoon was arriving. A dense black cloud violently appeared before Kaito and Elisabeth’s eyes. It was yet more underlings.

The grotesque, winged creatures were soaring through the sky in unison.

Kaito maneuvered his blade, and Elisabeth summoned even more torture devices. But against the numbers they were facing, the ones they slew would amount to nothing more than a drop in the bucket.

Overwhelmed by the waves approaching from land and sky, Kaito recalled the words Elisabeth had once said.

“Numbers beget force. And one can accomplish much through the use of force.”

…So this is what she was talking about.

The black wave and cloud drew near.

Their footsteps shook the earth, and their howls split the sky.

They were like the end of the world given flesh.

“Hmm, now this is a situation where shooting a cannon at a group of ants seems reasonable. But know this, boy. Even if I were to enter the fray, the number I can devour in one go is limited. What would you have me do? It would sully my good name if I were to allow my master to be consumed by cannon fodder. I wouldn’t mind taking you both on my back and leaping over that throng, you know.”

The Kaiser posed an uncharacteristically benevolent question to Kaito. However, Kaito shook his head.

“No… If we let those guys get outside, the knights and nuns will be in danger, never mind the people who haven’t been able to evacuate the city yet.”

“Ha, a splendid jest. The daughter of Vlad and I could keep them in check, but annihilating them is another matter altogether. I told you once before, boy. One who forgets their greatest wish is naught but a fool masquerading as a saint.”

Kaito bit down on his lip at the Kaiser’s words. He knew the Kaiser was right. There was no point to holding back the deadly stream’s flow if it left them unable to advance.

There was still the Grand Monarch and the King to contend with beyond this horde.

Kaito knew that, but he still couldn’t bring himself to agree. He looked toward the Torture Princess, as though imploring her.

“Elisabeth…”

“Enough of that gloomy voice already! While I’d normally advise you that naive thoughts have no place on the battlefield, even I understand. If naught else, we’d best thin out their ranks. If we simply let them roam free like this, the capital’s likely to be annihilated. ’Twould be no laughing matter if we two ended up the sole survivors.”

“See, I knew you’d see it that way.”

“Quit speaking of me in that warm tone!”

Kaito nodded toward Elisabeth, who was infuriated. However, this too was a dangerous gamble.

For the first time, he lamented the fact that the two of them were alone there. Here in that gray world, there was nobody for them to entrust their backs to. Eventually, though, Elisabeth shook her head.

“I suppose we’d best get to it, then. ’Tis no point in expecting things to turn for the better. And regret accomplishes naught.”

“Yeah, you’re right—we’re the only ones here, after all.”

The Torture Princess and the Kaiser’s contractor nodded to each other. The unseemly black dog snorted and pawed at the ground. Vlad shrugged in exasperation.

But as the two of them mustered up their tragic resolution before their oncoming foes, they heard something.

“Get back, you two!”

An unexpected voice rang out.

Kaito looked up as though he’d been slapped. As he confirmed the voice’s owner, his eyes went wide.

A winged, white orb was floating amid the gray sky. It was one of the Church’s communication devices, and Izabella’s voice was coming from within it.

“How—?”

“Don’t just idly stand there, Kaito! Get back!”

The moment Kaito tried to question what was going on, Elisabeth grabbed him by the collar. As she did, she dragged him violently backward at a rapid clip. Then she released him, practically tossing him aside. He turned to look at the place where they’d just been standing.

When he did, his retinas were seared white.

An intense light had burst right in front of him. A group of underlings had been vaporized.

“Oh-ho.”

Vlad raised his voice in interest.

Turning away from the scene for a moment, Kaito frantically recovered his temporarily shattered vision. Then he rechecked the terrible spectacle before him. The underlings had burst into flames and were burning. Among them, a massive bird was turning to ash as well. Kaito identified it.

It's a summoned beast, the same kind La Mules was summoning!

It was then that the reality of the situation hit Kaito.

The holy bird was what had made the underlings disintegrate.

La Mules should be dead, though…

"Izabella, you fool! You'll kill yourself!"

The moment that bit of confusion crossed Kaito's mind, Elisabeth let out a shout.

Beside him, she was staring out beyond the boundary between the worlds of demon and man. As he followed her gaze, Kaito's eyes widened.

Off in the distance, the apex of the hill was shining silver.

Paladins were gathered there, standing with a group of priests in a strange square formation. At their feet were magical runes so large that Kaito could make them out from where he stood.

He couldn't tell what they said, but he knew what they meant.

It's gathering up mana from the priests and the paladins!

With La Mules having passed, the group was now working together as one and forming a single cannon. And Izabella was most likely acting as its launchpad.

Kaito then recalled a certain fact. Izabella's store of mana was as deep and as placid as the sea and well suited toward healing, protective, and summoning magic.

At the same time, an old scene flashed back through his mind.

That night, Izabella hadn't hesitated in taking his beastly hand, the proof of his demonic contract, and shaking it with her gauntlet. They'd looked each

other in the eyes and sworn an oath.

""Let's take out that demon together.""

But in the end, the Torture Princess had ended up shouldering the decisive battle alone. After talking with Elisabeth, Kaito had attacked Izabella's conscience, both for the sake of his ulterior motive and out of indignation.

"La Mules is dead. If the Torture Princess screws up, who do you think's next in line to fight?"

"Who the hell do you think is gonna end up getting sacrificed for the sake of all the heretics and people who call him a monster?"

At the time, Izabella hadn't responded. But at present, she was trying to fulfill her promise to Kaito with her own hands. She'd chosen to fight alongside him and the Torture Princess.

But she's taking too big of a risk.

Izabella's method of attack differed from the way La Mules used the summoning circles inside her own body. Additionally, because she was splitting the burden with the paladins, there was little chance she'd lose her sanity. But the amount of mana they'd amassed was too much for a mere human's body to handle.

Furthermore, the other paladins were in danger as well. Even though they weren't going to enter the demon's world themselves, they would have nowhere to run if the King launched his long-range attack on them. And above all, the strain on their bodies and their mana would be intense no matter what else happened.

They clearly had no intention of preserving their strength.

But Godot Deus's decision was correct*!*

"What in the world do you think you're doing?! Don't be rash!"

"I should be the one telling you not to say such foolish things! We are the swords of the Church, the blades of the Saint, and the shields of the people. If we do not save the innocent who suffer, then who exactly are we expecting to bear that burden?"

“We’re handling it just fine! What, are you worried about that stuff I said to you? My bad. That was just me running my mouth! Please just forget about it! Think about your responsibilities!”

“This is our city! We will aid you, and we will protect it! I have no intention of foisting those I am duty bound to protect onto you two!”

“But…!”

“Just how long do you think it took me to convince the priests?! Leave this to us and advance!”

Loud, fierce shouts came from within the white orb. For a moment, they were overlaid with the sound of someone coughing up blood. As he heard Izabella let out a clear groan of pain, Kaito clenched his fists.

As he did, another summoned beast came soaring in. Exploding underlings filled the horizon.

Kaito inhaled sharply. He knew he needed to stop her.

Before he could speak, though, Izabella stole a lead on him.

“Don’t give me that nonsense, Kaito Sena! Enough is enough! You should be looking for any help you can get, even if it comes from a monster! Don’t you want to save the suffering people as soon as possible?”

Her voice was like a slap in the face.

In that moment, Izabella had completely and utterly defeated Kaito.

He found himself at a loss for words. Still speechless, he practically spasmed as he bowed deeply to the white orb. After biting down hard on his lip, he turned to Elisabeth.

“Elisabeth…”

Her crimson eyes were fixated on the orb.

For a second, Kaito felt as though the gazes of those two women, who stood at opposite ends of evil and holiness, had met.

Eventually, Elisabeth said a few words.

“You could have merely cracked your whip at me and amused yourself as a

spectator… I'm surrounded by fools, the lot of you."

"Elisabeth…"

"We're leaving, Kaito! Don't fall behind now! Chop-chop!"

The next moment, Elisabeth kicked off the ground hard. She took off like an arrow, leaving deep footprints in the gray earth as she ran. Flustered, Kaito took after her. Vlad and the Kaiser followed along as well.

The orb remained behind, perhaps in order to survey the underlings' positions.

Then Izabella's pained shouts chased after them.

"Go, Torture Princess, O reviled sinner who slaughtered countless innocents, knights, and my brother!"

For a second, intense hatred leaked through into her voice. Izabella was aiming her vivid resentment at Elisabeth like an arrow. But with power strong enough even to crush her negative emotions, Izabella continued on.

"Please save the capital!"

Her tone sounded almost like a prayer.

White light surged forward. It drowned out Elisabeth's expression, so Kaito couldn't see it. He just single-mindedly advanced, surrounded by flying underling corpses.

Burdened with Izabella's sincere plea, Kaito and Elisabeth dashed across the plain. It was practically like a battlefield that was under bombardment. The light burst forth several more times. Though their vision was blasted away time and time again, they unceasingly made their way through the stream of death.

Leaving the sound of bombardment behind them, they pressed deeper into the gray world.

Eventually, all the noise faded into the distance.

Once again, they were engulfed in a heavy silence.

The air was thick with the presence of death as the mass of flesh towered in front of them.

*

The looming mass was adorned with innumerable holes. Its damp red surface was covered in cavities, like a leaf that had been chewed through by a caterpillar. It was almost impressive how viscerally repugnant it was.

Kaito felt goose bumps run all the way down his body. He looked up fixedly at the mass's unseemly surface.

Those holes are probably from when its victims' faces came out.

They'd been uniformly transformed into underlings, then expelled.

Kaito racked his brain as to how they were supposed to deal with that thing. But without laying a finger on the writhing mass in front of her, let alone attacking it, Elisabeth quickened her pace. Tilting his head to the side, Kaito followed her. Although he hadn't said anything, she must have sensed his confusion as she spoke.

"'Tis too great a task to cut it down from the outside. I said I'd be striking their true bodies directly, did I not? It just released that great mass of underlings. There should be a hole somewhere that leads to its core. I aim to find it."

"A hole that leads to its core?"

"Indeed, I would say that her prediction is right on the mark."

Vlad gently floated up to walk beside Elisabeth. As Kaito turned to look at him, he exaggeratedly propped up his chin with his finger.

"All-out war has a nice ring to it, but putting all their cards on the table like that was base foolishness. The King and the Grand Monarch expelled everything they had. Because of that, you should be able to make it past where they were storing the underlings inside themselves. Making such a choice causes me to wonder if their very brains had turned to mere lumps of flesh… Hmm, even though it may give rise to abnormal power, it seems that having demons run rampant carries few benefits with it."

"You just be quiet, Vlad, and cease your twittering. Nobody asked you."

Elisabeth clicked her tongue. Vlad shrugged and obediently shut up.

After nodding at her explanation, Kaito began circling the mass's perimeter.

The footing was poor, and the area was covered in blood and tallow. The two of them noisily trudged through the muck as they looked for a suitable opening.

Before long, Kaito stopped in front of an unsettling fold of flesh that hung conspicuously over the ground.

“Elisabeth.”

“…I see; this must be it.”

Behind the soft, womanly flesh was a massive, tunnel-like hole. Its insides had been trampled flat by underlings. It was the remnants of the path that deadly procession had taken.

Elisabeth cast a sharp gaze inside.

“There.”

“Wait, there’s still more of them?”

Three underlings sat at the edge of her crimson glare. They were lined up horizontally, guarding the hole like overly diligent gatekeepers.

Kaito looked their new foes over from head to toe. From the left on, he cast his gaze at each of their peculiar figures in turn.

There was a woman wearing a tattered dress.

There was a man wearing a gray wolf headdress.

And there was a man dressed in stern, full-body armor.

Out of the three of them, it was the woman’s strangeness that gave Kaito pause. She had proper eyes, lips, and a nose, yet her face was decidedly inhuman. Her skin was made out of some smooth material, like glass or porcelain. Her clothes, too, gave her the appearance of some sort of half-finished cloth puppet.

Their faces are covered up by the helmet and the headdress, but the two guys probably look the same way.

Even so, they looked more human than the underlings who’d been forcibly transformed. And above all else, the amount of power emanating from them was far greater than that of the small fry they had seen so far.

Remaining wary of the three, Kaito spoke.

“Hey, Elisabeth… Is it just me, or are those guys way stronger than the other underlings?”

“Indeed, they are. ’Tis the Grand Monarch’s ability—birthing unique underlings through Duplication. Those three are copies of the King, the Grand Monarch, and the late Monarch. While they are far weaker than their demonic counterparts, ’tis true that they far surpass ordinary—huh?”

As she spoke, the armor-clad man strode directly toward Elisabeth.

He grabbed the handle of the long sword strapped to his back, then drew it from its sheath with one hand. He swung its blade downward, parting the muddy gray air with great force. Kaito felt a powerful gust of wind blow across his entire body.

The armored figure then pointed the tip of his fiendish blade at Elisabeth, as though provoking her.

Her eyes widened a hair, and the corners of her ruby lips curled up.

“I see; he truly is a copy of the King. So you wish to trade blows with me? Very well.”

In response, Elisabeth raised a pale hand overhand and drew the Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal from a swirl of darkness and crimson flower petals. After spinning its handle once around in her palm, she turned it toward her armored foe. Its tip came to a sudden stop in the air.

“Come. I shall face you.”

Their blades in hand, the two squared off.

A stillness rife with bloodlust filled the space.

The next moment, the armored man roared. The air around him froze over, then shattered like glass. He charged with a glorious scream.

As the ferocious mass of bloodlust approached her, Elisabeth shouted as well.

“Wicker Man!”

Darkness and petals exploded from the Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal.

Defenseless, the armored man rushed directly into them. The dancing black and crimson swallowed up the other two replicants as well.

A dry popping noise rang out, and the darkness split to become countless boughs. Before Kaito's eyes, a massive, birdcage-like figure knit itself together. The replicants found themselves sealed within its hollow torso.

They raged, demanding to be let out. As they did, the figure's twisted limbs caught fire. The blaze grew to a tempest.

As he faced the radiant scarlet mass, Kaito spoke up in confusion.

"W-weren't you going to face off against him?"

"Your honesty is going to get you killed one of these days, boy."

"I really must agree, my dear successor. Take this as a lesson. At times, victory demands one to abandon their scruples."

"Exactly! Why should I feel obliged to go out of my way to fight those things? Splendid, splendid! Burn for me! Ha-ha-ha!"

Elisabeth crossed her arms and let out a loud, villainous laugh. But the next moment, the flaming mass tore open from within, and the figure's torso burst. Sparks flew violently through the air.

The three replicants practically danced as they leaped out from within it.

"Tch, it seems a single blow was insufficient."

Elisabeth clicked her tongue. The female replicant leaped at her as her tattered dress violently flared up. Suddenly, the replicant's throat squirmed strangely, and her egg-like face split open.

Something soft came flying out from between her glassy lips.

"—!"

It looked like a blob wrapped in ordinary red cloth. But Kaito could sense a bizarre liveliness coming from it.

The blob of cloth was giving off the same kind of vitality that flesh did.

Having been tormented by something similar once before, Kaito reflexively knew what it was.

That blob is a copy of a heart.

Mediocre as it may have been, the female replicant was preparing a version of Sacrifice.

“It can’t be!”

He hadn’t thought it to be a technique usable by a mere copy.

Kaito was shaken. At the same time, his battle experience caused a dreadful hypothesis to flash through his head.

Even with the amount I’m keeping in reserve for the fight against the King and the Grand Monarch, I’m burning through a crap ton of mana.

Given the situation, having their power sealed away, even a little bit, would be dangerous. And even if Kaito wasn’t the target, Elisabeth getting hit would lead to the same ending. Dispelling Sacrifice would use up a huge amount of his blood and mana.

In other words, no matter who took the blow, it would severely restrict Kaito’s ability to keep fighting.

If that happened, he wouldn’t be able to keep his promise to Izabella, the oath he’d sworn with her to take out the demon together. And he’d end up leaving Elisabeth alone right before the decisive battle.

I can’t allow that.

He had to destroy the heart before it could activate. Panicking, Kaito completely froze in his tracks.

Standing still on the battlefield was clearly an act of utter folly.

Elisabeth shouted out in rage. The King turned his blade on Kaito. Sacrifice was on the verge of erupting from the heart.

And looking overhead, the Kaiser was laughing.

“Oh-ho. An intruder here, of all places.”

All of that happened in a single moment.

A powerful flapping noise rang out, and a massive shadow passed over Kaito’s and Elisabeth’s heads.

And at the same time, someone shouted.

“MASTER KAITOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

A classically designed maid uniform and skirt soared through the air. The silver-haired girl’s frills fluttered as she fell.

The way she’d appeared before Kaito was practically like destiny.

“…Hi…na!”

As she landed, the beautiful maid brandished her halberd.

With it, Hina, Kaito’s bride, brilliantly cut down the heart right before it could invoke Sacrifice.

*

The rent heart fell to the ground with a *plop*. As it gently unraveled, it reverted back to being ordinary cloth.

The female replicant toppled to the ground. Hina turned to Kaito, who was still astonished.

Her emerald-green, gemstone-like eyes shone as she looked at him.

“Master Kaito! I’ve returned home!”

A beautiful smile spread across Hina’s face, one brimming with heartfelt love. But her choice of words was a little strange. They were rather far away from the place where they lived.

This wouldn’t normally be a situation that called for the phrase *I’m home*. But for the two of them, it was wholly fitting.

Gazing solely at Kaito, the silver-haired bride went on.

“At long last, I’ve returned to my rightful place by your side.”

Kaito snapped his fingers, saying nothing.

His blade flew in from the sky and cleaved at the torso of the King, who had drawn near. After swinging his sword and repelling the blow, the King fell back.

Not sparing the interloper a single glance, Kaito spread his arms as wide as they would go.

Mustering all his power, the bridegroom smiled wide and responded to his wife with words yet unbefitting the battlefield.

“Welcome home, Hina! Come to me!”

“Master Kaitoooooooooooooooooooo!”

Instantly tossing aside her halberd, Hina took off at a sprint.

And so at the center of the battlefield, the two lovers locked themselves in a passionate embrace.

Hina was notably taller than Kaito. Leaning in toward his face, she drew him into her bosom. Kaito buried his face in her chest. In the past, he would likely

have gone beet red, but now he calmly returned Hina's embrace.

Nuzzling Kaito's head over and over again, Hina inhaled deeply.

"Ah… Master Kaito's scent… Master Kaito's warmth… Master Kaito, Master Kaito, Master Kaito. My master, my husband, my eternal lover, my heart…my everything. Please let your heart sing, for I have finally returned to you. I'm finally back where I belong."

"Hina, I can't tell you how happy I am to see you again. I'm so, so glad. You'll always be there to protect me, won't you?"

"Without a doubt. I am your blade and yours alone!"

"W-wait. But what are you doing here?"

"Madam Elisabeeeeeeeeeeeeth! Mr. Dim-Witted Servaaaaaant! Are you two saaaaaaaaafe?"

As if to answer his question, a voice came down from the skies.

After hurriedly looking up, Kaito goggled. A steel-blue dragon was hovering in the gray sky. Bearing a fiendish face, it leisurely flapped its gigantic wings.

As the Kaiser gazed up at its majestic form, he spoke in a low voice that was somewhere between admiration and exasperation.

"A steel dragon? The dragons were supposed to have all fled from the lands humans, demi-humans, and beastfolk inhabit. Where in the world did he find it?"

"Oh my, oh my. And it even bears a saddle. How ingenious."

Vlad chimed in as well, seemingly amused. Just as he'd said, the steel dragon had a saddle fastened to its back.

And of all things, the Butcher was mounted atop it. Furthermore, the hard, metallic scales covering the dragon's back even had a hunk of meat on the bone—perhaps intended to be a standin for a shop's insignia—drawn on them.

The Butcher called out as he deftly manipulated the reins.

"Ms. Lovely Maid completed her recovery, so I brought her here atop my beloved third dragon!"

“Noooooot that I’m not thankful, Butcher, but just who the hell are youuuuuuuuuu?”

“Mm, the mysteries just deepen and deepen.”

As Kaito shouted back, Elisabeth stroked her chin.

It was unclear if he was able to hear them or not, but the Butcher flashed them a thumbs-up. It hardly made for much of an answer. Then he gave them a big wave.

“And with that, I take my leeeeeeeeeave! I look forward to your continued patronaaaaaaage!”

“You’re just gonna leave after all that? Maaaaaan, you’re something else!”

“…Now then, you two. I understand your burning desire to flirt and make eyes at each other, but do try to save it for later.”

“Ah, sorry. My bad. I couldn’t help myself!”

“Ah, oh yes, you’re quite right; my deepest apologies! Oh my, how could I?! I will return to the fight at once!”

Kaito and Hina had been hugging for the entirety of the previous exchange. With an exasperated look on her face, Elisabeth used a torture device to pry the two away from each other.

Hearing her request, Hina hurriedly tried to separate from Kaito.

“And at that, Master Kaito, pardon me… *Squeeze!*”

Before she did, she hugged Kaito tight one more time. After deeply breathing in his scent, she released him from her arms and balled up her fists.

“All right, I’ve sufficiently replenished my Master Kaito energy! Here I go!”

As she spoke, Hina’s skirt flapped mightily as she kicked her halberd off the ground. The hefty weapon spun through the air like it weighed nothing at all. Hina grabbed its handle out of the air, then turned to face her foes.

She gave her halberd a decisive swing, and its tip came to a sharp stop.

It seemed that one swing was enough for the King’s replicant to sense her prowess. He waved his arm, gesturing for the replicant with the wolf headdress

to fall back. Then the King's replicant lowered his posture.

Facing the fully armored combatant, Hina whispered to Kaito and Elisabeth.

"Back when we landed in the town, we were fortunate enough to receive information from the kind paladins and discern that the situation has developed into a state of emergency. While it worries me to leave you alone, Master Kaito, I believe in my dear Lady Elisabeth! Please, you two, go on ahead! I can handle things here."

"Hina, what are you talking about? Elisabeth and I can stay with you and—"

"As always, how kind you are! But fighting those two will be a breeze. My power stems from the mechanisms within me. Because it has nothing to do with demons, Sacrifice will have no effect on me. I may not be a match for true demons, but no underling will be able to best me! Please leave this to me and press on!"

Elisabeth and Kaito looked at each other. It was true that Hina was under no risk of losing her powers. And it might even be better for her to fight the underlings alone, rather than alongside someone who she'd have to worry about protecting from Sacrifice. But Hina had only just woken up.

"You need not worry! I urge you, conserve your mana!"

Seeing their hesitation, Hina doubled down.

As she did, the armored man, the King's replicant, took off at a dash. He loudly swung his sword. Hina easily blocked his heavy attack with the back of her halberd. Then she shifted to go on the offensive.

Twice, three times they clashed, and each time, Hina would do a somersault off the ground and kick the armored man in the helmet. He staggered. Pressing the assault, Hina made use of her weapon's reach by putting some space between herself and the King's replicant.

Adjusting her grip on the halberd, Hina spoke passionately.

"I can't make children the way a human woman can! But even so, I swore to become part of your family, Master Kaito! Even if it kills me, I refuse to do anything that would renege on—"

“Mm, well… To avoid misunderstanding, I should make one thing clear.”

“What might that be, Lady Elisabeth?”

“You two can have children.”

Hina abruptly ground to a halt.

An unbelievably eerie, heavy silence filled the air.

“…Hi-Hina?”

“Hina, are…are you okay?”

Even with Elisabeth and Kaito calling out to her, Hina remained motionless, as though she was frozen. Thinking he’d found an opening, the King’s replicant charged. But Hina, moving only her arm, leveled a precise slash at him. The wolf-headed copy, now defying the King’s replicant’s orders, rushed at her from the left, but Hina silently slipped a knife out of her sleeve and hurled it at him as well.

He let out a scream.

Still staring straight ahead, Hina spoke in a terrifyingly quiet voice.

“……Lady Elisabeth, what did you just say?”

“Erm, well, you know. You two can…have children. Mm… ’Tis the truth, I swear!”

“If—if—if—if—if I might be bold enough to ask, h-h-h-h-how, precisely, would we go about that?”

“Hina, you’re way too wound up. I’m interested, too, but I’m begging you, you gotta settle down a bit.”

Hina had begun forcefully trembling. Worried, Kaito frantically tried to pacify her.

The whole situation had been thrown into complete chaos. Even so, Hina’s halberd movements were precise and accurate. The way she was near automatically managing her offense and defense to keep the replicants from drawing even a step closer was amazing in a way.

Swinging her halberd wide to keep her two foes at a distance, Hina’s eyes

opened wide.

“Quickly! Lady Elisabeth! How?! Promptly! Without delay! Please tell me!”

“I—I get it! I shall tell you! I’ll tell you!”

Faced with Hina’s bloodcurdling intensity, Elisabeth leaped up.

Breaking out into a cold sweat, she spoke in an oddly bashful manner.

“You know if we’re speaking accurately, it isn’t *quite* the same as a child… ’Tis more like a humanoid homunculus formed from a mixture of each of your physical data, then cultivated in a device within Hina’s abdomen. Then, um, well…”

“What then, Lady Elisabeth? What theeeeeeeeeeeeeennnnnnnn?”

“M-mm! Then…well, um…don’t make me say it! ’Tis embarrassing! You do the deed! Then you insert Kaito’s fluids into… Wait, why must I be the one to explain such a thiiiiing?!”

“Elisabeth, Miss Elisabeth, settle down! And quit hitting me!”

“Lady Elisabeth! Keep going! Quickly, quickly! You can do anything you set your mind to, Lady Elisabeth!”

Rapidly spinning her halberd, Hina loudly urged Elisabeth on.

Punching Kaito all the while, Elisabeth continued in a desperate tone.

“Hyah! Then! With you-know-what as a base, you nurture the homunculus within Hina’s womb! Kaito uses his mana to aid it along, and once it emerges, erm, your ‘child’ will be complete!”

Elisabeth puffed up her chest with pride, having gotten through her explanation all in one go. However, she received no response. Hina simply stood silently, continuing to spin her halberd. A despondent look crossed Elisabeth’s face.

“…Was there something wrong with my explanation?”

“Man, I’m surprised by how quickly you got dejected.”

In front of them, Hina’s white shoulders began violently trembling.

“Hee-hee-hee……hee-hee-hee-hee…”

“H-Hina?”

“Dear Hina?”

“I CAN HAVE A CHILD WITH MASTER KAITOOO

“……My wife is incredible.”

Eventually, the two of them let out those feeble murmurs.

At times, resolution, urges, and strong emotions—whether they were positive or negative—could grant people abnormal bursts of power. But upon witnessing that effect to such a degree, Kaito and Elisabeth found themselves at something of a loss for words.

One of Hina’s heavy blows sent the King’s replicant flying. He staggered uneasily but was still able to move. As she faced him, Hina looked over her shoulder and smiled.

“Ah, my dear friends. To that end, please leave this to me! This brute seems rather firm, so it may take just a little bit of time to whittle him down.”

“Got…got it.”

“W-we leave it in your capable hands.”

“Oh, and Master Kaito, is twelve children all right with you? Would you prefer more?”

“L-let’s leave it at twelve for now! W-we can iron out the details later!”

“Aye-aye! This is an important matter for us! Oh, you’re coming at me again? Very well! Die!”

No matter how one looked at it, in her current state, Hina seemed unlikely to lose.

Having decided to leave her to it, Kaito and Elisabeth broke into a run. As they quickened their pace, the sound of Hina pounding on armor receded behind them.

And with that, the two of them finally infiltrated the mass of flesh and headed inside the demon.

⁕

The tunnels inside the mass resembled the inside of a human uterus.

Kaito and Elisabeth dashed down paths that resembled birth canals and esophagi. It was like they’d been swallowed up by a monster or were traveling

back up through a mother's birth canal.

Their surroundings were so permeated with the stench of blood it was stifling. And unsurprisingly, they could sense a powerful source of vitality farther down the path. Strangely, though, the mass's insides had an ephemeral frailty to them as well.

Perhaps due to the damage it had sustained from La Mules's attack, the mass was clearly hemorrhaging mana.

The weakened King and Grand Monarch should be somewhere down this way.

That thought propelling him, Kaito kept a watchful eye as he strode inward. As the two of them ran, the slapping sound of meat on the soles of their shoes rang out. They went deeper and deeper down the path, as though they were descending into the bowels of Hades.

"Did you notice?"

"Yeah…"

Eventually, the two of them perceived a change. The pulsating sound that quivered through the entire mass was gradually getting louder. Thump, thump, thump, thump. The rhythm of some malevolent being's exertions of breath rocked their bodies.

We're probably getting close to the center.

They ran down a passage that had started to call to mind thick blood vessels. A wide, open space lay at its end.

The scent of blood and flesh grew stronger. As he stopped to look around, Kaito found himself assailed with nausea.

"This is…"

"How very strange and how utterly twisted."

The fleshy walls surrounding them were hollowed out in a circle. They were propped up by crowded ribs and looked to be on the verge of collapse. Alongside them, two people's worth of massive organs were lined up. However, the way the organs were arranged was haphazard.

The two hearts pulsed side by side as blood vessels wound their way around them. Their fused lungs lay scattered on the ground, and half-dissolved heaps of brain lay piled up around them.

The spectacle surpassed grotesqueness and ventured into the realm of being downright bizarre. In fact, it was almost humorous.

It was as if human organs had been enlarged and then put on display.

After glancing over them all, Kaito's gaze returned to the hearts. Upon closer inspection, one right atrium and one left atrium each had a single person-shaped figure squirming within them. It was probably the King and Grand Monarch's true bodies, submerged in blood.

Elisabeth wordlessly raised her right arm to call forth a torture device. But in a rare display, the Kaiser growled with his fur bristling.

"Look at that, boy."

"Huh? …Wait, what is that?"

Prompted by the Kaiser, Kaito looked toward the wall of flesh to his left.

Two types of organs had sunken into it. However, Kaito couldn't make out what they were from their roundish shapes. But the moment he thought back to the three underlings, he instinctively guessed their identities.

Between the King's, Grand Monarch's, and Monarch's replicants, two had been male, and one had been female.

The Monarch and the King were men. That meant that the Grand Monarch had to be a woman.

The organs were a uterus and a pair of testicles. But what the Kaiser was pointing at was something else entirely.

"I know not. It is something that not even I know the identity of. And for me to not know of it, it must be abnormal in the extreme."

The female organ was fused to the male organ.

And at the point where they met sat a strange, fleshy, tumorlike cocoon.

It was wrapped in soft, hypha-like fibers and filled with fluid. A small figure,

one that belonged to neither the King nor the Grand Monarch, wriggled energetically within it.

There was something living there that did not belong.

Faced with that reality, Kaito froze, and Elisabeth scowled.

“That thing…could it be…?”

After thinking for a moment, she breathed in a small breath. With widened eyes, she gave voice to her terrifying hypothesis.

“Are the demons trying to birth a child?”

“…! Is that even possible?”

“Mm, two contractors can theoretically bear a child. Of course, it would give rise to naught but a normal human… But two contractors merging with their demons, going beyond ordinary transformations and warping into a mass of flesh, and then having a child is unheard of.”

“Indeed, the girl speaks truth. Demons exist solely to destroy—this is blasphemy! Blasphemy against our very existence!”

“In my opinion, such a creature would be fascinating… It would go against not just the laws of our world but the very providence of God and Diablo. And it offends the Kaiser, as well. It would certainly be safer to return it to nothingness before it is born.”

The Kaiser howled, and Vlad spoke in an unusually serious tone.

Kaito felt a cold sweat bead up on his forehead.

Looks like we were right to rush over here.

There was no way anyone could have known that such a thing was being cultivated here. The fact that Elisabeth had marched here concerned that the demon would grow in power had ended up being important in an unexpected way.

Kaito and Elisabeth nodded at each other. Then they changed their target.

Aiming at the fetus, the two of them launched their attacks.

When they did, the entire room squirmed, and the walls pulsed. Elisabeth and

Kaito braced themselves for whatever was about to appear. But their vigilance ended up backfiring.

The next moment, countless King faces appeared from all directions.

“—!”

The only things sharp about the sunken, squalid, muscled faces were the eyes. Countless eyeballs bore down on the two of them. Then strands of drool dripped from countless pairs of flaccid lips as they opened.

All at once, they released multihued roars.

Because they hadn’t dashed away before the faces had finished appearing, there was no way for them to avoid the attack.

“Elisabeth!”

Kaito’s scream was blotted out.

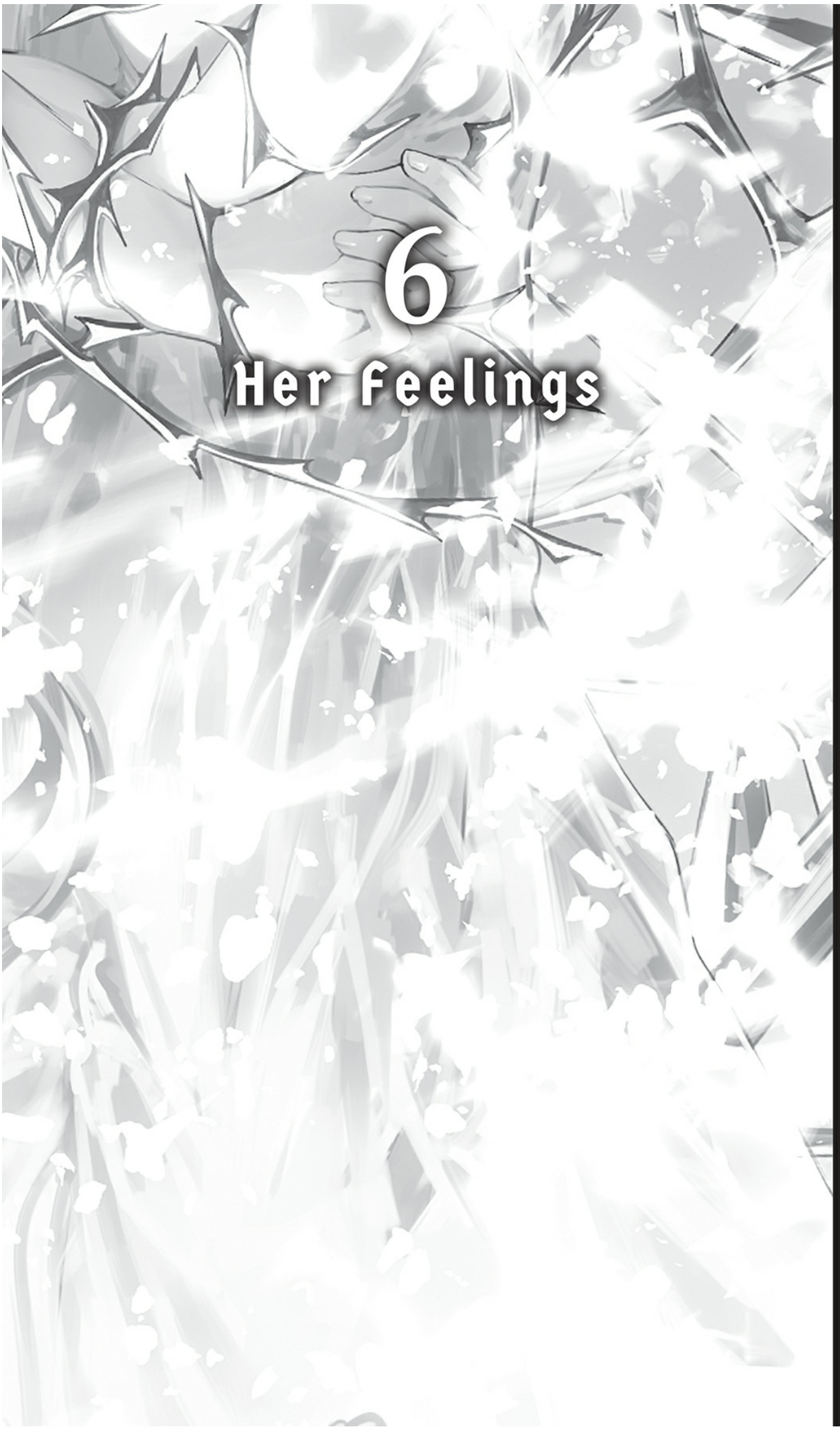
He and Elisabeth were swallowed up by the vortex of gray noise.

The ceiling crumbled; the floor crumbled; someone cried; someone laughed

And then Kaito’s vision went dark.

Fiore

An old friend of Vlad's and contractor to the Grand King.
She'd known Vlad since before they made their demonic contracts.
Long ago, the two of them would liven up balls together.



6
Her Feelings

6

Her Feelings

Pain.

Pain was all that existed.

Most of Kaito's memories from his previous life started and ended with pain.

Assailed all over by that nostalgic agony, Kaito opened his eyes.

When he came to his senses, he found himself lying atop a damp tatami mat.

…H-huh?

Flies buzzed noisily over his eyes.

He surveyed his surroundings. A dirty fluorescent bulb was swaying from the ceiling. The window was covered in packing tape, and his ripped-out teeth rolled about beneath the tea table.

Then Kaito looked at his body. The shirt stuck to his scrawny torso was hardened from all the sweat and vomit staining it. His right arm was covered in shallow lacerations, and his left arm hung unmoving and was slathered in dark-red stains.

His ankle was twisted at an odd angle, and his stomach was assailed by a heavy pain, as though one of his organs had ruptured.

Kaito took a good, long look at the situation he was in. He was lying on his side in the room where he'd been killed in his previous life. It was almost as though everything that had happened after his resurrection had been nothing more than something he'd dreamed while on the verge of death.

Faced with that desperate situation, a single thought crossed his mind.

What, this *again?*

Kaito remembered *this*.

During his ceremonial trial with the Kaiser, he'd gone through the exact same experience.

At the same time, he now understood why La Mules had died, as well as the nature of the King's mental attack.

While their ranks were below his, first-class mythical beasts and spirits were similar in nature to God, and summoning them required dragging them down from a higher plane of existence. To do that, one needed to have a strong connection to God, but aside from the Suffering Saint, nobody could hold that power within themselves for long and still retain their sanity.

That was what Elisabeth had said.

Before she lost her senses, La Mules must have had her memories and will returned to her.

Then, in her confusion, she'd ended up going insane and killing herself.

Man, this is cruel, all right… It probably didn't do much to most of the paladins. But it'd be brutal on anyone with a traumatic past. If this had been my first time, I'd have been in trouble, too.

Just like the last time, Kaito forcibly moved his body as he mused. His body was little more than skin and bones; even the act of breathing caused him to spasm with convulsions. But he staggered across the room anyhow, regurgitating gastric juices as he walked.

I wonder how I'm supposed to wake up from this dream… Given what happened to La Mules, if I kill myself in the dream, I feel like my real body will probably die, too.

As he thought through his problem in an almost insanely calm manner, he limped forward on his mangled ankle.

As he did, he heard the sound of the front door opening and then the noise of stomping coming from the front hallway. His father was probably home. Looking up as though he'd been slapped, Kaito paused in his tracks.

The screen door to the room slid open. Kaito's father was angrily shouting something.

“Kaito, ya little shi— Bluh?”

As he did, Kaito matched the timing as his father stormed into the room and used it to bury his fist in his father’s face. Kaito’s own bones snapped, but the blow was clean.

Blood gushed from his father’s face. His nose had been crushed. Perhaps he’d even suffered a concussion as he toppled over onto the floor. Covered in blood from his own nose, his eyes rolled back in his head as he pathetically slipped into unconsciousness.

“Outta my way.”

Kaito’s voice was cold as he spoke over his shoulder. He then completely ignored the man who’d abused him for countless years and eventually even murdered him. Not sparing so much as a passing glance in his father’s direction, Kaito exited through the screen door.

Dragging his mangled body, he made his way down the damp hallway and opened the front door.

On the other side of it, there was nothing but darkness.

“…Huh, so that’s how it is.”

Faced with a darkness that would have caused any human to instinctively succumb to terror, Kaito muttered those few words.

Once, he’d spent hundreds of subjective years in a similar space. At this point, it would take more than that to scare him. Without an ounce of fear, Kaito strode into the darkness.

He knew full well there was nothing he could gain if he didn’t walk forward.

This place really is like where the Kaiser tested me, Kaito thought.

He’d gradually come to realize that, just where he’d been tested, his bodily sensations were fading away. He had become a being of consciousness alone. There was nobody there to observe him, to interact with him, or to define him. And he had no methods at his disposal to confirm his own sensations.

It was hard to prove the existence of the self with nothing but consciousness in this space devoid of touch, sight, hearing, and meaning. But even in this cruel

world, Kaito didn't hesitate.

He just kept walking in search of an exit without a word.

He went farther and farther and deeper and deeper into the darkness.

Then Kaito stopped in his tracks.

He could hear a voice singing a beautiful song.

The voice responsible for the gentle tune was one he knew well.

That song…

In truth, Kaito had never heard one of those before. After all, his mother had passed before he was old enough to remember her. But he knew that gentle melody couldn't have been anything else.

That's…

It was a lullaby. He was sure of it.

*

Kaito followed the source of the song. As he drew closer to the soft voice, the space around him shifted and changed. White light began mingling with the black of the darkness, and the space's empty gloom began taking on definite forms.

Eventually, his field of vision had cleared up completely.

Before he'd noticed, he'd arrived in a child's bedroom.

…I recognize this room.

That was the first thought that crossed his mind as he looked around the room.

The rectangular walls were covered with wallpaper adorned with a dull yellow floral design, and beside the window were cute confectionary-like plaster sculptures. The furniture was all white, and atop a beautiful chest of drawers with metal handles sat a group of dolls and stuffed animals. There was a four-poster bed, too, with pearl-gray sheets and a heavy mattress no doubt stuffed with down.

And sitting on the bed was a young girl atop a pile of blankets.

She was beautiful, but her complexion was marred by the effects of an aggressive illness.

The way her long black hair was knotted and robbed of its luster was painful to look at. Her features were so fine they looked almost inhuman, but her skin was pale and her lips were cracked and caked with blood. In spite of all that, though, her expression was strangely calm.

Although it was tinged with death's black shadow, she wore a lonely yet serene smile on her face.

Her chest damp and reddened with blood, she wove her song.

"…Elisabeth."

"Marianne taught me this song, see?"

A young voice rang out.

Kaito, not having expected a response, swallowed sharply.

At some point, she'd turned to look at him. He could make out his reflection in her large eyes. He was about to call out to her, to the young Elisabeth, but he stopped himself.

When she said Marianne's name, there was genuine affection in her voice.

Marianne had gone mad because of Elisabeth, and Kaito himself had killed her. If it had been the normal Elisabeth saying her name, her voice would have been filled with nostalgia as well as deep regret and a tinge of disgust.

The Elisabeth in front of him probably didn't know anything about what had happened.

Having realized that, Kaito decided to give a gentle, quiet nod.

"Yeah, it's a nice song and a gentle one… A lullaby."

"Isn't it? You know, Marianne will sing it for me whenever I ask!"

The young Elisabeth puffed up her chest with pride. But the next moment, she violently balled herself up like she'd been struck by an arrow.

Clutching her chest with her small hands, Elisabeth began coughing with such intensity it seemed she would vomit up her intestines.

“Hic… Hic… Cough, cough… Hack, hack, hack—”

“Elisabeth, are you okay?!”

Panicking, Kaito rushed over to her side. As she trembled in pain, he gently stroked her frail back. The anguish she was in was heart-wrenching. Kaito bitterly lamented that he couldn’t do more for her.

Eventually, Elisabeth settled down. She wiped the blood off her lips, then peered up. With tears welling in her innocent eyes, she looked at Kaito.

“Thank you, I’m okay now… But, huh? Who are you, mister?”

“I’m…”

“I should be the only one in this room… Where in the world did you come from?”

Kaito was at a loss for how to respond. He had no idea what kind of answer he should give.

As the servant of the Torture Princess, he could give no true answer that wouldn’t hurt her. No matter what he told her, it would indubitably cause her pain.

I don’t know if her young heart can handle how cruel the truth is.

The explanation Kaito eventually settled on was vague but true nonetheless.

“I’m on your side.”

“My side?”

“Yeah. No matter what happens, I’ll always be on your side.”

Kaito made his firm declaration. The young Elisabeth blinked repeatedly and tilted her head to the side in confusion. But it looked like he’d been able to convey his friendliness, if nothing else.

After a moment, Elisabeth gave him a meek smile.

“Oh. I guess you are.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Say, mister. Do you want to hear me sing some more?”

“…Yeah, that’d be nice.”

“Then how about I sing for you!”

Her voice full of vitality, Elisabeth resumed her song. Kaito listened silently to the gentle melody.

The time passed by calmly. It was like they were playing house. But suddenly, the low roar of a beast rang out and shattered that peace. Kaito looked up with a start.

Somewhere far beyond the window, a hound was baying, as though it were calling for someone.

Upon hearing the rumbling voice, Elisabeth trembled. Terrified, she clung tightly to Kaito.

“Make it stop… I’m scared…”

“Elisabeth.”

“Everything out there is so scary. No, no more… I’m not going out there anymore.”

Her words had a sincere ring to them.

The moment he heard them, Kaito realized something.

Elisabeth was sick when she was young, so she shouldn’t have had many opportunities to leave the castle.

If that was the case, then which Elisabeth did those words belong to?

There was a certain fact that Kaito had long since been aware of.

Elisabeth had been swallowed up by the mental attack at the same time Kaito had been. This was her world. After walking through the space that the demon had created, he’d arrived at a place formed from her childhood memories. The words coming out of her mouth belonged not just to the young Elisabeth but her present-day self, as well.

The young Elisabeth shook her head over and over, and tears welled up in her large eyes as she spoke.

“I’m done with it… Everything out there is painful and scary… And nobody out there likes me. They all hate me so, so much.”

“…Do they?”

“They do! Everyone would have been better off… Marianne would have been better off…if I’d just stayed in here and died. If I’d just done that, then the Torture Princess would never have been born.”

As she went on, the tone of her voice lost its youthfulness.

When she murmured next, her tone was steeped in despair.

“None of those innocent people would have died.”

The present-day Elisabeth was stubborn. She would probably never have given voice to those words.

The young Elisabeth reached out a trembling hand. With it, she grabbed tight onto the hem of Kaito’s shirt.

“Mister, you’re on my side, right?”

“…Yeah, I am.”

“Can you stay here with me forever, then?”

Kaito hadn’t expected that. His eyes went wide, and he stared directly at her. Elisabeth slowly closed her eyes.

Then the girl who’d lost both her parents, driven her tutor mad, killed her people, and been abandoned by all of creation whispered.

*

“It’s lonely, being alone.”

In the next moment, Kaito hugged her tight.

The young Elisabeth gave a small gasp. Kaito squeezed her body with all his strength. It was probably hurting her, but she just wordlessly went limp.

As he held her warm, frail body tightly enough to shield her from all the world’s hardships, Kaito whispered back.

“You know, I have someone I admire.”

“Someone…you admire?”

“Yeah. She’s really strong and really scary and a terrible sinner. The people hate her, they loathe her, and they tell her to die.”

“…I think the world would be better off without people like her.”

“But you see, she saved me.”

There was great conviction behind his words. The young Elisabeth probably didn’t remember summoning him. Even so, her body quivered. Obediently remaining in Kaito’s embrace, she whispered in a timid voice.

“…Mister?”

“People say that she’s like a demon, but I’ve seen her smile, I’ve seen the way she lives more nobly than anyone else, and I’ve seen the way she continues fighting her harsh battles. To me, she’s a hero.”

The young Elisabeth stirred slightly. Relaxing the strength in his arms, Kaito gazed at her face.

The young Elisabeth and the present-day Elisabeth were the same yet different. The girl didn’t seem to know who he was talking about, as she wore a quizzical expression on her face.

In spite of that, Kaito smiled at her and continued gently speaking.

“I like her a whole lot. I would do anything for her sake.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I promised my lover that we’d live together. But she understands that if I didn’t cherish this person, then I wouldn’t be myself… For that person’s sake, I could do or become anything. I’ve never told her in person, but she’s really, really important to me.”

Abruptly, he placed his hands on the young Elisabeth’s shoulders. Then he gently pried her away from himself.

After that, he quietly closed his eyes. He could hear a dog’s howling from far in the distance. The first-class hound was calling for its master.

When he opened his eyes, they were filled with determination. With no hesitation, he told the young Elisabeth what he needed to tell her.

“That’s why I can’t stay by your side. I’ve gotta go.”

“Why? Why are you leaving me?!”

The young Elisabeth screamed, unable to understand.

She clung to his arm, as though begging him not to go. But Kaito just gently shook off her small hands and silently turned his back to the young girl. Then he made to stand up from the bed.

As he did, an adult-sized hand grabbed the hem of his shirt.

“Why, Kaito?!”

“Because I love you. That’s why I can’t stay here.”

Without a shred of indecision, hesitation, or bashfulness, he made his declaration.

At some point, his clothes had transformed from the shirt caked in blood and sweat to his military uniform–like outfit.

Obstinately refusing to turn around, Kaito continued his declaration to Elisabeth.

“If you want to stay here, so be it. I’m not gonna stop you. And I won’t let anyone else complain about your choice, either. If you don’t want to fight anymore, then that’s fine, too. You’ve done more than enough. I can just go in your place.”

“What…are…?”

“I’ll kill the King and Grand Monarch and save the capital. Until I kill the King and the dream ends—actually, y’know, if you don’t break out of it, it might just keep on going. If you think that’ll make you happier, then go for it. Good-bye, Elisabeth.”

And with that tender murmur, Kaito walked forward. As he went, the strength in the fingers clutching his clothes gradually weakened.

Then Elisabeth let go of him. As he strode along into the darkness, he continued.

“Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu, noble wolf and lowly sow—even if every single other person scorns you, I will hold you in higher esteem than anyone else in the world.”

With that profession as his parting note, Kaito made to leave the room.

However, just as he was about to open the door, a sound rang out.

The hard, resolute sound of heels clicking sounded out from beside him.

Kaito’s eyes went wide.

Silky black hair was fluttering right next to him, as was a dress with its inside dyed scarlet. A woman wearing a provocative bondage dress passed from his side and began walking in front of him. Kaito tried to call out to her pale back.

But before he could, her usual chilly voice rang out and interrupted him.

“Do not make light of me, Kaito. Just who do you think I am?”

She looked over her shoulder, straight at him. Her crimson eyes blazed with pride.

Then the woman who had been forsaken by all of creation made her firm declaration.

“I am the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu. I am the proud wolf and the lowly sow.”

Upon hearing those words, Kaito closed his eyes. Then he nodded with a faint, defeated smile on his face.

After slowly opening his eyes, he found himself involuntarily blinking repeatedly.

Elisabeth was standing before him and giving him a gentle smile.

Kaito released the tension from his shoulders and, without hesitation, extended his hand toward Elisabeth as though inviting her to dance. And just like before, she laid her hand on top of his.

Kaito enveloped her pale palm in his beastly left hand.

Then the two of them began walking in the howling dog's direction.

*

"…H-hwah!"

"I see you've finally risen, O unworthy master of mine. Had you taken but a moment longer, I was thinking of devouring you whole."

"You really must do something about that temper of yours, Kaiser. But the fact remains that you successfully woke up my dear successor and my precious daughter, and for that I am grateful. It would be rather dull for them to die here, not to mention the fact that I'd be taken along as well."

As he awoke, Kaito turned toward the obnoxious voices.

Ignoring the man and the beast, he looked over his surroundings. The King's faces had vanished, and the fleshy walls had returned to their original state. But he and Elisabeth had toppled over and were being sucked into the floor. Creepy red fibers had already started crawling their way across their bodies. If he'd been out any longer, he would have been in trouble.

As he ripped apart the muscle fibers, which had even begun burrowing under his skin, Kaito spoke in an annoyed tone.

"…Hey, Kaiser. I'm glad you called for me; that was helpful. But would it have killed you to drag me out before I got like this?"

"I said that I planned to consume you if you failed to wake, did I not? That was the point at which I intended to retrieve you."

"Are you kidding me? I'm begging you, man, do something about that temper of yours. I can't shake the feeling that you're really gonna eat me one of these

days.”

Kaito plucked out the roots of the flesh that had been ensnaring him. Blood gushed out from the little holes they’d bored in his skin. However, Kaito didn’t particularly care. He looked to his side, then called out to his partner in root plucking.

“…Elisabeth.”

She didn’t respond, simply rising to her feet without a word. As she wiped away the filth from her dress, Elisabeth turned toward the demonic fetus. After staring intently at it for a moment, she gave Kaito his orders.

“I will deal with this thing. Your task is to kill the King and Grand Monarch before they can attack.”

“All right, got it.”

Her voice was as cold as always, as though nothing had happened. Kaito nodded. The two of them stood back to back. They both raised their arms, as though carrying out executions.

Then they spoke in unison.

“Behead.”

“—*La* (rend).”

Kaito and Elisabeth swung their blades. The loud, splattering noise of meat being cut echoed across the room.

The hearts in front of Kaito tore, and blood began gushing out of them. As their chunks scattered around the room, two corpses rolled pitifully atop the mess. Their bodies were dissolved, but they could just barely be identified as a man and a woman.

The King and Grand Monarch were dead. Realizing that marked the end of their long battle, Kaito breathed a sigh.

As he did, a tense voice called out from behind him.

“…I cannot kill it.”

“Huh?”

“My blade cannot pierce this baby!”

After hearing Elisabeth’s words, Kaito whirled around.

The fleshy cocoon pulsated. It should have been cut clean through, but it didn’t have so much as a scratch on it. Then it swelled from within, and red cracks started appearing on its suspiciously shining surface.

Then its membrane tore, and a gray hand extended out from within.

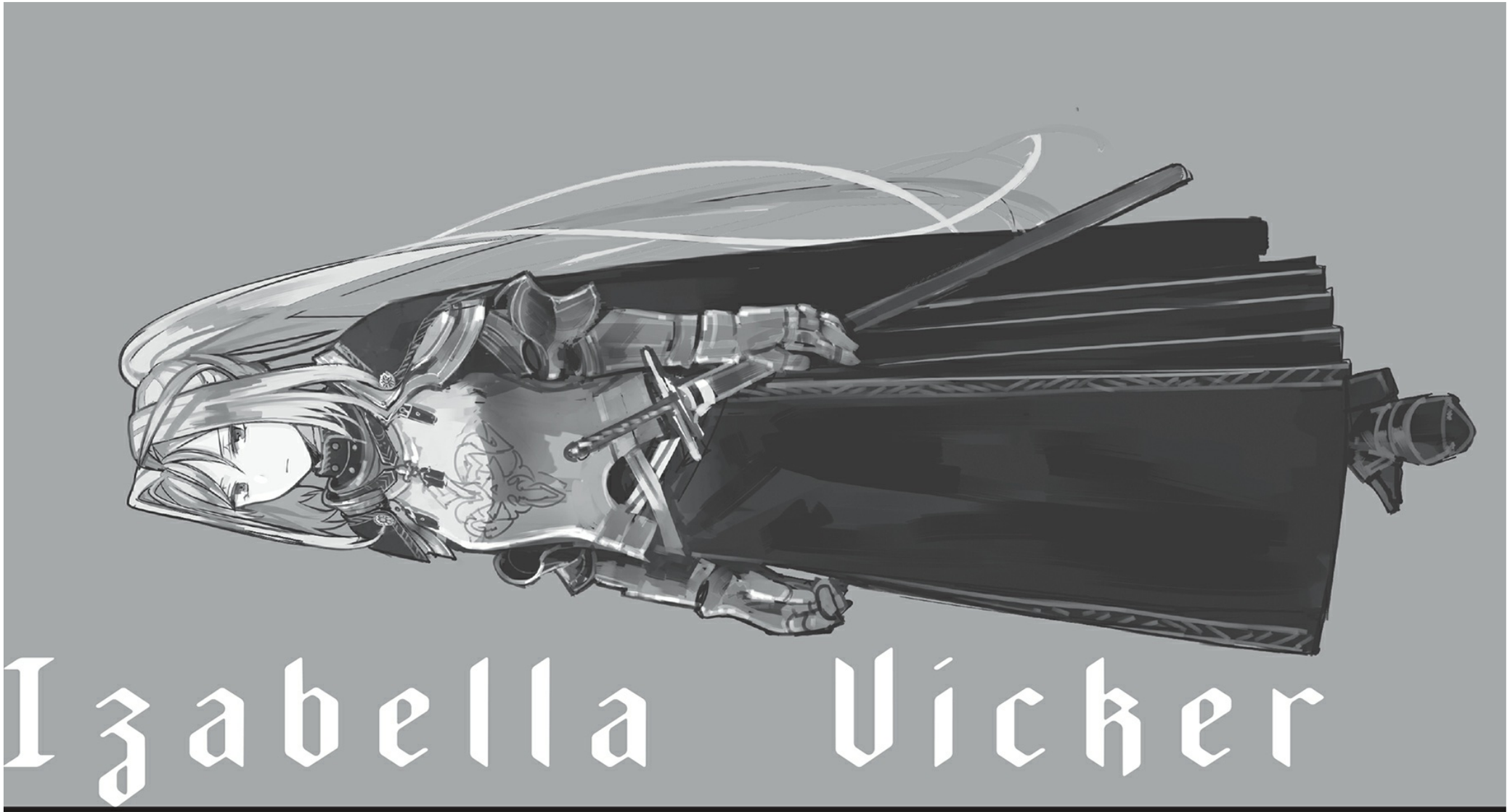
All at once, the amniotic fluid rushed out and soaked Kaito and Elisabeth’s feet. Kaito stared in mute horror at the scene that unfolded before him.

Something had flopped out onto the floor.

An innocent laugh, one that fit neither the time nor the place, rang out.

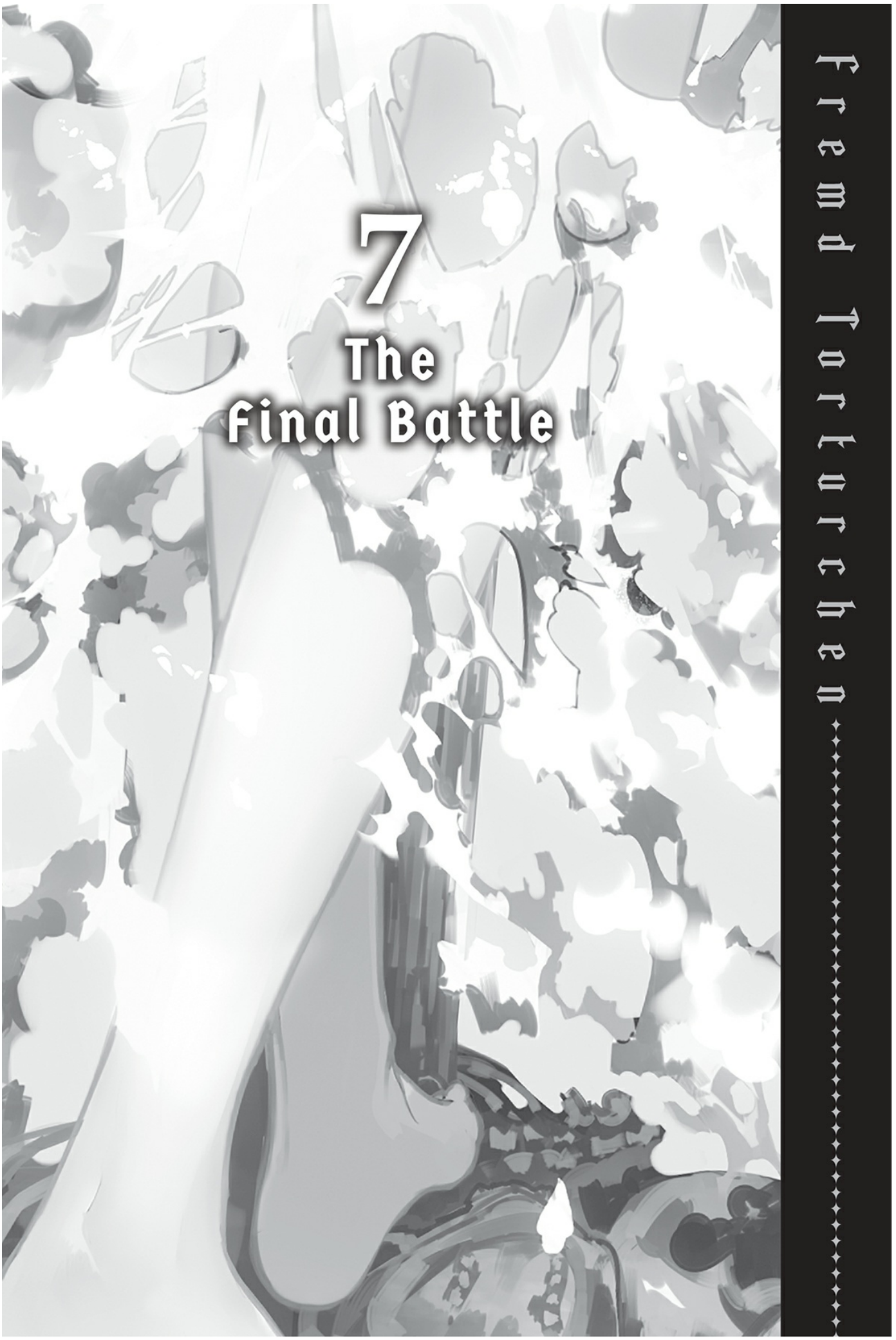
“…Ha-ha!”

Before their very eyes, a demonic baby had been born into the world.



Izabella Vicker

Current commander of the Holy Knights. Possesses powerful mana, a gallant spirit, and a deft sword arm. She lost her brother at the Plain of Skewers.



7
The Final Battle

7

The Final Battle

The baby's body was warped. Its head was far too large, and its abdomen was swollen like a pregnant woman's. Furthermore, its shoulder blades were overgrown, making it look almost as though it had wings.

It began trying to crawl. However, it was largely unsuccessful. Its efforts only produced more sickening sounds of flesh slapping against flesh. Eventually, it looked up and weakly stuck its hands out in front of itself.

"Ma-ma, hya-hee…hee-hee."

Even though it had just been born, it was already calling for its mother. But there was no way of knowing what mother it was referring to nor how it was even forming words in the first place.

"Pendulum."

Without a shred of hesitation, Elisabeth snapped her fingers. A blade hanging from a chain swung down from the fleshy ceiling, then stopped in midair. It changed directions, then went flying toward the baby.

Then its blade collided with the baby's massive head.

There was a distorted *splorch*. But the baby was still alive.

"Ahh-haa!"

The blade had definitely sunken into the baby's head. But it hadn't broken the skin.

"…!"

"Hee-hee-hee-hee!"

The baby laughed, having mistaken being attacked for some kind of game.

After grabbing the blade with its fat fingers, the baby pulled it from its head.

Then it yanked down, hard.

Its silver chain loudly snapped. Elisabeth's eyes went wide.

The blade and chain fell quickly, slicing through the organs directly under them and crushing them. A massive avalanche of brain tissue rushed forth. It seemed that the baby had taken an interest in it.

Grabbing a handful of the gray matter, the baby shoved it in its mouth and stuffed its cheeks full.

Munch, munch.

"Is it…eating that stuff?"

Kaito's murmur was full of disgust. But the baby didn't swallow the brains.

After coming into contact with the baby's saliva, everything it had chewed on had turned gray. The dust, which looked like ashes of the deceased, gently piled up. Apparently, the baby wasn't "eating" so much as "destroying" its target. It was impossible to guess which of its other actions were connected to destruction as well.

As it meaninglessly transformed the brain tissue in its mouth to ash, the infant giggled with pleasure.

As he watched it, a thought crossed Kaito's mind.

That thing isn't good or evil.

It lay far outside any framework of human morality.

The problem was that they weren't able to kill it.

The baby bit and tore at all the organs around it. It then began chewing on the blade and turning it to ash as well. Elisabeth hurriedly snapped her fingers and made the torture device vanish.

Having had its toy confiscated, the baby nearly threw a tantrum. However, it quickly grabbed onto another chunk of meat. Kaito carefully observed it. At the moment, the baby didn't have a complete ego. But living things have a tendency to grow. What in the world would it become by the time it reached maturity?

Or I guess what I should worry about is…what happens when it gets interested in us?

Right as that fear crossed Kaito's mind, the baby lost interest in the lifeless meat. It turned its large head and looked directly at Kaito and Elisabeth. As it did, Elisabeth and the Kaiser exchanged a fleeting glance.

Ash tumbled out of the baby's bloodstained mouth.

Even though it had only just been born, its entire body released an aura of death as it laughed.

"Ahyah?"

"We must abscond at once, daughter of Vlad!"

"Obviously!"

The Kaiser shouted, and Elisabeth responded. Immediately afterward, the Kaiser grabbed Kaito's collar in his teeth and tossed him into the air. Elisabeth jumped on the Kaiser's back. As he'd aimed, Kaito fell directly behind her.

Then the Kaiser took off at a terrific speed.

"Hwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Urk—"

Kaito almost bit his tongue at the sudden acceleration. As the Kaiser sprinted along on his sturdy, muscular legs, a revolting noise came from behind him. Kaito turned to look.

The baby was chasing them. When Kaito saw the way it moved, he felt goose bumps appear over his entire body.

The baby didn't even know how living things were supposed to move their bodies.

The way the baby completely ignored the natural bends of its joints made its movement akin to that of a mollusk. It spilled blood and shaved away at the ground as it went. But for whatever reason, the Kaiser made his way not toward the entrance to the mass of flesh as he fled from the baby but deeper within.

Kaito shouted out in panic as he clung to the Kaiser's thick neck.

"Weren't we supposed to be running away?!"

“Not on your life, boy! I cannot abide that shameless fool surviving—it’s a blight on the pride of demons! For the sake of our pride, I will have you end that thing!”

“But how?!”

“Worry not. The daughter of Vlad has an idea. I shall tell you this while I have the chance, boy!”

“What?”

“Try not to die, O unworthy master of mine!”

On that ominous note, the Kaiser came to an abrupt stop.

Kaito and Elisabeth went flying into the air. Elisabeth landed atop the meaty floor gracefully, and Kaito somehow managed to land as well. The pathway in front of them was blocked off by a wall. They had reached a dead end.

It would appear they were in the deepest part of the fleshy mass.

When Kaito turned around, he found that the baby was already coming into view. Assailed by primal fear, he snapped his fingers. But between its fat, pudgy fingers, the baby caught the blade that Kaito had materialized.

“Ooh?”

With a confused expression on its face, the baby gnawed on the tip of the blade. Ashes spilled out of its mouth.

Kaito choked back his spit out of tension and hopelessness.

We can’t let that thing get outside. But we can’t just let it eat us, either. What is Elisabeth planning on doing?

“Pillory!”

Elisabeth shouted as he was thinking. Darkness and crimson flower petals swirled around the baby.

Two long horizontal planks with two holes in each appeared. They snapped open, then clamped shut around the baby’s wrists and ankles. The planks caused its limbs to stick out.

Having had its hands and feet sealed, the baby tilted its head to the side. But

the planks' power would only be enough to hold the baby for a moment. As that misgiving crossed Kaito's mind, Elisabeth spoke.

"'Tis enough."

It was as though she'd read his mind.

At the same time, the fleshy walls surrounding Kaito began to tremble. He looked around in a panic. They'd held their rigidity up until then, but the flesh was beginning to go limp and wriggly.

Unable to maintain its posture, the bound baby tumbled from side to side. The walls began restlessly undulating. The Kaiser howled, as though signaling that something was starting. Vlad spoke in a smooth whisper.

"The flesh of demons transforms into black feathers when they die. But first, it collapses."

Kaito's eyes went wide.

Of all the places they could have gone, they'd arrived at the deepest part of a collapsing demon.

It was then that Kaito intuited what Elisabeth's plan was. Words played back through his mind once more, words that this battle had taught him the veracity of time and time again.

"Numbers beget force. And one can accomplish much through the use of force."

I guess this is another one of those times.

"Ooh?"

The fleshy ceiling undulated. Its limbs still bound, the baby looked up with naked curiosity.

Blades couldn't pierce that evil being. But any sort of shallow impact would probably serve no purpose, either.

In that case, there was only one choice.

They had to crush it in an instant, before it could turn the meat to ash.

At that moment, a massive avalanche of flesh came crashing down on the

baby.

*

It was like the weight of the world had come tumbling down.

An entire section of the flesh that had swallowed up a third of the capital's population and completely filled up the mercantile district and the royal castle had caved in. With no options available to it, the baby was engulfed by the onslaught. But Kaito and Elisabeth's situation was no different.

The incoming blow was like an unmitigated natural disaster. Because of that, it would be virtually impossible for humans to stand against it.

The massive crimson wave came bearing down on them. As it did, Elisabeth shouted: *"Death Row Cell!"*

Stone walls deployed around them, sealing them in a tiny room with no windows or doors.

It was a torture device designed to confine prisoners and starve them to death.

The stone walls saved Kaito and Elisabeth from being engulfed by the meat for a moment. But the resistance the barrier offered proved to be fleeting. There was no way it could withstand a direct hit from a landslide.

The stone walls crumbled in an instant. But Elisabeth summoned an identical set so quickly that Kaito could barely see her do it. As he stood stupefied, Kaito realized a certain fact.

Magical techniques are the one thing we have that the baby doesn't.

Wielding her magic freely, Elisabeth continued to ward off the deadly external pressure.

She summoned those stone walls over and over again. It felt like an eternity had passed. Eventually, the flow around them lightened by just a smidge. Picking up on even that tiny change, Elisabeth shouted out.

"The Boondock Saints! Wicker Man!"

"Simultaneous summoning? There's no way."

Kaito mumbled quietly. A thunderous noise echoed from outside the walls. Kaito could guess what had happened. The Wicker Man had taken in as much meat as it could, then burned it up. Then the Boondock Saints had carved away at the resulting ash and shoved the room into the opening.

Each time the giants and the flesh faltered, Elisabeth continued simultaneously summoning them.

“Elisabeth…”

“Rgh…”

Beads of sweat rose up on her forehead. One by one they ran down to her chin.

Her foe in this desperate battle was nothing more than a colossal mountain of flesh. That was what made it so terrifying.

Vlad and the Kaiser watched her with interest. Kaito clenched his fists. At the moment, he was powerless. There was nothing he could do but stand amid the thunderous noise and believe in Elisabeth.

A long, long time passed.

Then the giant pushed conspicuously hard against the stone wall.

At that moment, the violent noise and vibration stopped. Elisabeth lowered her outstretched hand and dropped to her knees. As she did, the walls around them began melting like heated toffee.

The room’s stone floor vanished, and they all tumbled outside.

The first thing they saw was the gray sky.

A vast sea of ash and flesh surrounded them.

If Elisabeth had erred just once, they would have found themselves buried beneath it. They stood still in shock, their vision filled with the bizarre spectacle of raw, piled-up meat as far as the eye could see.

Eventually, Kaito’s whisper broke the overwhelming silence.

“Is it…over?”

In that moment, one chunk of ash-covered flesh violently stirred. Something

red came flying out from within.

Although it had been crushed all over and on the verge of grossly collapsing in on itself, it nevertheless gave a shrill laugh.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee, ah-ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Vomiting blood as it moved, the baby leaped at Elisabeth.

“Elisabeth!”

Kaito shouted. Still kneeling on the ground, she extended her hand. Then she drew the Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal from within a vortex of darkness and crimson flower petals.

Then she sped off like an arrow.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee, hee-hee-hee-hee, ah-ha-ha-ha!”

“Just die already.”

The mad, cackling baby and the Torture Princess clashed.

Then, for a second, time stood still.

Kaito swallowed his breath. After a few seconds of silence, the baby’s massive head came tumbling off.

The baby had consumed the utmost limits of what it could, and the blade had finally pierced it.

The next moment, as though they’d received some sort of signal, the baby and the mass of flesh vanished.

Having lost their footing, Kaito and the others were all hurled unceremoniously to the ground. Countless black feathers fluttered into the air before them.

The feathers filled the sky, as if to convey some sort of blessing.

Faced with that sublime, beautiful spectacle, Kaito realized something. Something had begun to change within the demon’s world. The rays of sunlight that had been blocked off until then were finally starting to make their way down to the earth.

Bathed in sunlight, the baby's corpse transformed into particularly large feathers, which blew away gently in the wind.

Eventually, the feathers all burst into azure flames and burned away into nothing. Closing his eyes, Kaito whispered as he took it all in.

"…I guess it's really over."

And with that, the curtain fell on the final battle.

*

Kaito looked at his surroundings.

The demon's world was collapsing, and Vlad and the Kaiser had vanished.

Elisabeth collapsed, crashing to her knees atop the ground. Other than the amount of mana she needed to maintain the demonic roots within her body, she was practically running on empty. It would take a good while before she was back to full strength.

As he gazed at her alarmingly defenseless back, Kaito shifted his expression. With a grim face, he rushed to her side. Kneeling in front of her himself, he called out to her.

"Elisabeth, let's make a run for it while we can."

"…"

She didn't reply. Her face was firmly cast downward, and she didn't move a muscle. Frantically, Kaito grabbed her hand. Like he had once before, he pleaded with her with the intensity of one taking a vow.

"When the King hit us with his mental attack, you told me how you really felt. Let's go together. The three of us can live together again. You finished your job. I'm not gonna leave you on your own!"

Upon hearing his plea, Elisabeth looked up.

For a second, she smiled through her tangled black hair. Her crimson eyes were moist, and she was on the verge of saying something. But as though she were waking from a dream, her expression abruptly changed.

She pursed her lips tightly. Then she roughly brushed Kaito's hand away.

Kaito was at a loss for words. She looked at him, then shook her head.

“I told you once before, Kaito. Return to the castle alone. Then take Hina and flee.”

“Being alone is lonely! That’s what you told me!”

“Silence! I swore an oath!”

Elisabeth practically screamed the words out.

Her tone was violent, yet the emotions in her voice were completely suppressed.

“I swore an oath to my people, to the people I tyrannized!”

At that moment, images of the people the Torture Princess had subjugated flashed through Kaito’s mind. The men, the women, the children, the elderly. Their myriad corpses hadn’t possessed a shred of dignity, and their resentful cries sounded out one by one.

Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth, cruel, hideous Elisabeth!

A curse upon you, a curse upon you, a curse, a curse, an eternal curse upon you, Elisabeth!

Faced with those screams, she’d sworn an oath. That was what she’d continued living for, shameless as it may have been.

Kaito knew there was something he ought to say, but he couldn’t for the life of him come up with it. And Elisabeth just kept shaking her head.

Then she looked at him again.

The smile that adorned her face was gentle, sincere, and exhausted.

“Go… Go now… Please go. Flee. Have a family. Cause none to cry on your behalf. And don’t you cry, either. Live a life full of happiness and joy.”

“Elisabeth…”

“You need bear no burden. Harming the masses, being hated by the world, and spending your life burdened by sins is a heavy thing.”

As she spoke practically in prayer, Elisabeth extended her hands. In a wholly

uncharacteristic gesture, she clasped Kaito's cheeks in her hands, as though she were trying to burn the image of his face into her memory so that she would remember him even if her eyes were gouged out.

Given that she was about to face an inquisition, there was a chance of that actually happening.

Then through her gentle gaze, she spoke.

"'Tis too heavy a burden for you to bear."

Her expression was that of someone instructing a child. Seeing this, Kaito understood.

He had no choice but to understand.

No matter how much I call out to her here, Elisabeth will never take my hand.

That was the oath she'd made. That was what she'd promised.

Even if he brought her by force, she would no doubt return in order to take responsibility for her sins.

In order to die as the Torture Princess.

"My beloved Master Kaito, my dear Lady Elisabeth! Where are you?! Are you all riiiight?!"

Then they heard a voice.

Somebody was restlessly, desperately running around atop the parched earth. It would appear that Hina had made it out safely. She was sprinting all around but then stopped on a dime once she noticed the two of them.

Tossing her halberd aside, she rushed up to them like an excited puppy.

"Oh, oh! Thank goodness! Thank goodness you two are all right! Nothing could bring me greater—"

"…Hina, let's go."

Kaito cut off her joyful shouts in a low voice.

Sensing that something was amiss, Hina stopped in her tracks, her smile stiff. She looked back and forth between Kaito and Elisabeth. Leaving the sitting

Elisabeth behind, Kaito stood.

Hina shouted, as though she'd realized what was going on.

"But Master Kaito, Lady Elisabeth is… Lady Elisabeth? Whatever might be the matter? Shall we depart? I can cook us up a banquet to celebrate the battle's end! Delicious cooked organs, all the desserts you can eat… So please, Lady Elisabeth, stand up! Lady Elisabeth, I insist!"

"C'mon. Let's go."

"But we can't… We mustn't… I won't stand for this! I simply won't! If Lady Elisabeth doesn't return with us, I—"

"Let's go!"

Embracing Hina's shoulder, Kaito forced her to start walking. Her emerald eyes warped, as though she were on the verge of tears. Although she was about to continue her plea, Hina suddenly went silent.

Kaito's hands were trembling. Realizing that, Hina shook her head and swallowed her impassioned cries.

With that, Kaito began walking off into the distance. But his footsteps gradually grew slower and slower. Unable to bear it anymore, he stopped in his tracks and turned back toward Elisabeth.

Her gaze was fixed directly on him. When she murmured, it was with a weak smile on her face.

"Why is your face contorted so, Kaito? Be glad. You were forcibly resurrected by the Torture Princess, then coerced into fighting demons. But now, your nightmare is finally over."

"Lady Elisabeth…"

"You too, Hina. Shed no tears for me. A smile suits your face far better."

"Lady Elisabeth, I… I…"

"Live strong. And for the rest of your days, may you spend them in happiness."

Elisabeth gazed at Hina as though she were a beloved younger sister. Then

she looked back toward Kaito. They silently locked eyes with each other.

Faltering for a moment, Elisabeth shook her head. But then she spoke quietly, the words seeming to fall out of her mouth on their own.

“I quite enjoyed our date.”

“Yeah…me too.”

Those weren’t the words of the Torture Princess nor of his master.

They were the honest words of Elisabeth Le Fanu.

On that final note, Kaito snapped his fingers. Azure flower petals and black feathers danced down through the air.

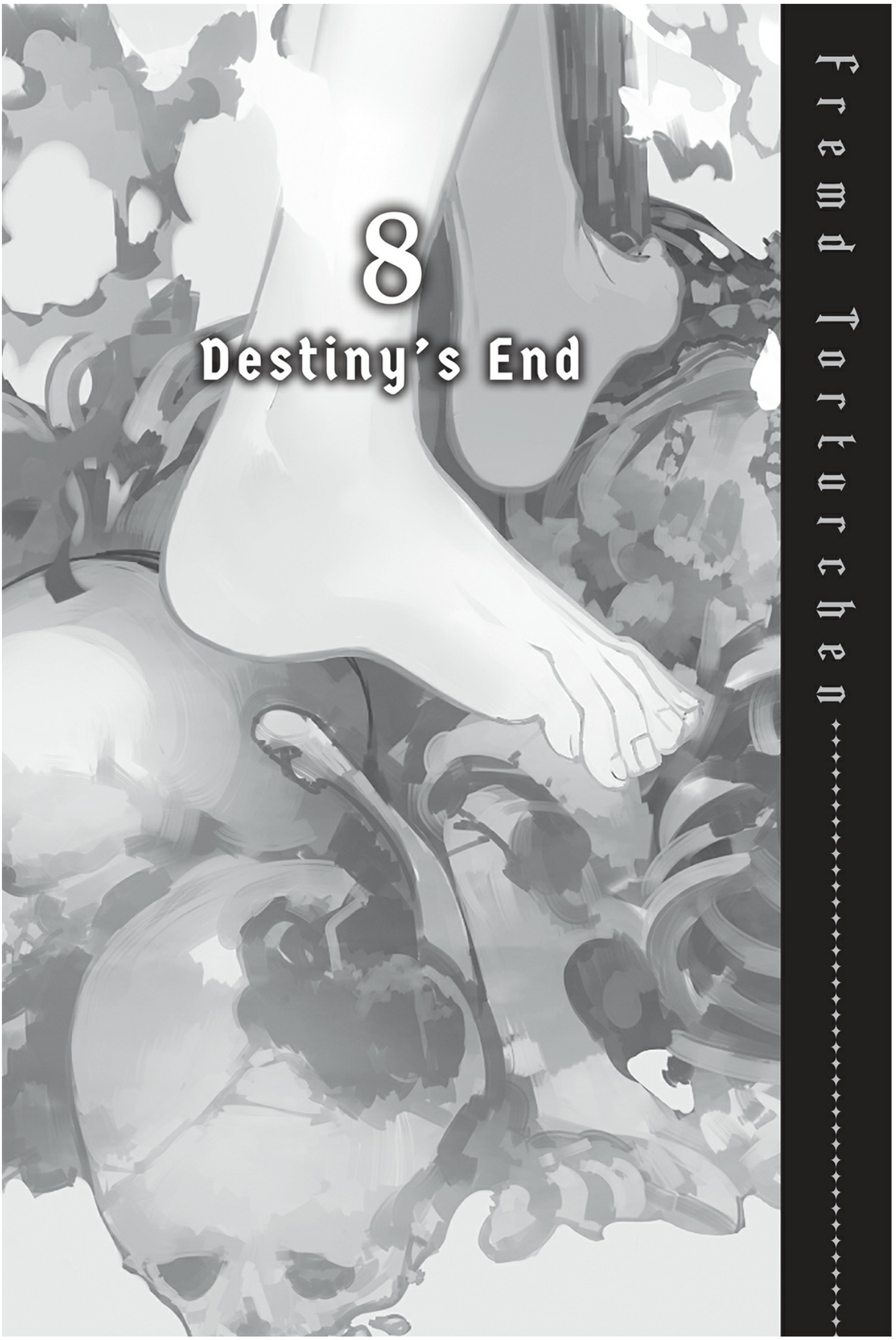
He and Hina disappeared. Elisabeth was the only one remaining.

Eventually, she let out a short, deep breath.

She looked up at the sky with serene eyes. Dazzling sunlight was streaming down from the cracks between the thick gray clouds. She could hear the footsteps of paladins off in the distance. With the noise at her back, she scrunched her face up as though she were about to cry. But then she broke out into a calm smile as she whispered: “And my nightmare is finally over as well.”

And then, with the time she had left to her,

the Torture Princess wove a gentle lullaby.



8
Destiny's End

8

Destiny's End

The cell had no windows, causing it to be steeped in constant gloom. Its chilly air called to mind a seabed and carried the scent of mold. If anyone spent too long confined there, the damp and the cold were liable to cause their body to ache and then to vomit up blood.

Centipedes crawled along the ceiling. Rats scurried in and out of holes in the walls.

And within that nasty, isolated cell, a single woman lay horizontal on the floor.

Her face in profile was so beautiful she barely seemed human. Her hair spread on the floor was lustrous and black, her skin was as white as snow, and her lips were so red they seemed to be practically oozing with blood. But due to whatever horrendous crime it was she'd committed, her ravishing limbs were bound in a straitjacket.

Lying down on the chilly stone floor, she sat motionless.

She was silent, and her eyes were closed.

Due to the silence of its sole inhabitant, a deep stillness permeated the cell. But the quiet, which seemed as though it would be endless, was suddenly shattered.

The door opened.

In an instant, the room was flooded with light. But a creaking noise rang out, and the room fell into darkness once more.

The paladin had closed the door behind her.

The woman's silver armor paired well with her fine silvery hair and mismatched blue and purple eyes. However, a number of unseemly scars

decorated her face, as though it had split from within. In spite of that, though, her gallant, beautiful nature was as refined as could be.

The paladin looked down at the bound woman. Although she'd no doubt taken notice of her visitor, she remained motionless.

After waiting a moment, the paladin, Izabella, suddenly spoke.

"Elisabeth Le Fanu."

"Izabella, eh…? I see you survived."

"Somehow, yes. Unable to withstand the force of the mana, my whole body tore from within, yet here I stand."

"Hmph, so you bear scars… What a fool you are."

"I'm much obliged for your concern. But I wear these scars proudly. I have no regrets."

"Concern? Hardly… Now, what business do you have?"

"I came here to meet with you." Izabella gave her answer.

When she did, Elisabeth's mouth snapped shut. It was as though Elisabeth didn't take a shred of interest in matters regarding herself.

After wavering for a moment upon seeing Elisabeth's reaction, Izabella continued in a calm tone.

"I have something I wish to inform you of."

"…What might that be?"

"Your servant, Kaito Sena, has yet to be located. Your castle was empty before the Church even began their search. He seems to have absconded with a number of your riches and automatons and gone into hiding."

"…Have you set pursuers on him?"

"We have. However, he is contracted to the Kaiser. If he focuses his power solely on escaping, finding him is likely to be difficult."

"Mm, I don't doubt it."

Elisabeth's response was concise. Izabella dutifully responded with a nod.

Having finished saying what she'd come to say, Izabella peered around the room restlessly. As soon as she did, though, she suddenly launched into some meaningless small talk.

"This room is frigid, not to mention dark. Hardly what I'd call pleasant conditions."

"Given my sins, the fact I was exempted from interrogation and torture alone would easily qualify as special treatment."

"Perhaps… Oh, are your restraints getting loose over there?"

Izabella leaned in. Her tone was clearly forced, almost as though she was trying to get whoever was standing on the other side of the door to hear her. She ran her fingers over the leather belts, none of which were loose in the slightest.

Then she drew her face close to Elisabeth's ear.

"Please stay quiet and listen to me, Elisabeth."

"…"

"Only a handful of people within the Church are responsible for this decision. But I was fortunate enough to be granted an audience with Godot Deus before his disposal, and both of us wish for your continued survival. The fourteen demons may be dead, but mankind's avarice has no limits. We have no guarantee that another contractor won't arise. I won't deny that you have a duty to pay for your sins and that mankind needs a common enemy. But we can't afford to lose your strength."

"…Hmm."

"The state is unlikely to overturn their decision saying the Torture Princess being burned at the stake is a necessary symbol. Treason though it may be, if you have any will to commit a jailbreak, I have trusted men who I can set into motion. Elisabeth, have you no desire to escape? You fought so hard."

Then Izabella paused.

After running her fingers across the Torture Princess's leather restraints one more time, she went on. Her voice was tinged with sadness.

“You killed many, but you saved many, as well. You are the Torture Princess, but you are also a hero.”

“…”

“I feel that it is wrong to disregard that fact. If you have the will to break out of here, simply nod.”

The paladin whose brother was killed by the Torture Princess urged her on. However, Elisabeth refused to nod. Izabella waited. But after a prolonged silence, she shook her head and stood up.

“Hmm… It seems it was only my imagination.”

As she made her announcement for the person beyond the door, Izabella separated from Elisabeth.

Then, with the blue and purple eyes resting between her tragic scars, she looked at the sinner who was merely awaiting death.

Izabella silently gazed at the capital’s savior and at the murderer who’d killed her brother along with countless innocents. But with another shake of her head, she changed her expression. Then, wearing the stern face of a soldier, she spoke again.

“Now, as an envoy of the Church, I have one more announcement for you.”

As commander of the Holy Knights, Izabella made her proclamation to the Torture Princess.

“Elisabeth Le Fanu. Your execution is scheduled for dawn on the morrow.”

No reply came.

Elisabeth just gave a slight nod, as though to affirm her destiny.

*

Official notice of the Torture Princess’s execution had been posted about two weeks prior to Izabella coming to inform Elisabeth.

And as soon as the notice was posted, the news spread throughout the capital like wildfire.

After having been trampled over and oppressed by the demons, the people

had been filled with a relentless sense of fear, rage, despair, and indignation, and it took little convincing for them to change the target of those emotions. No sooner did information get out about the location where the execution was slated to take place than people begin gathering there. They were so fervent in their desire to stake out spots in the plaza that disputes rose up day after day.

And then the morning of the execution arrived.

The sun rose, and with it, a black carriage came like a sinister specter.

All at once, the people raised vitriolic jeers and threw rocks. As they did, the door of the carriage opened.

The Torture Princess made her appearance and basked in the single-minded malice of those present. The scene must have made for a strong example. She'd been made to wear a white dress and had been symbolically bound with thorny briars.

As blood dripped down her body, the beautiful woman made her way down the road toward the platform where the stake had been erected.

The people lining the street let out hateful shouts. They clenched their fists as they yelled.

"Kill her, kill her, kill her, kill her, kill her, kill her!

"Loathsome Torture Princess; repulsive Torture Princess; cruel, hideous Elisabeth!"

Even upon hearing their voices, her expression didn't waver. A faint smile adorned her lips as Elisabeth looked out into the furious, shouting crowd. But then, all of a sudden, she furrowed her brow in puzzlement.

Among the people filled with fear and loathing, there was another group who was focusing another emotion on her altogether.

The young girl who'd innocently praised Kaito's arm as "cool" was on the verge of tears. Her mother, too, was casting a heartbroken gaze at Elisabeth.

The old woman who'd once knelt and thanked Elisabeth was there, too, clutching at the sleeves of those around her with trembling hands. Unnoticed by the people beside her or perhaps being intentionally ignored, she was

frantically trying to convey something.

The group was small in comparison to the mob, but they continued to shout, undeterred by the fact that their voices were being drowned out. For an instant, one of their sorrowful calls reached Elisabeth's ear. "Don't kill her."

"She's the one who saved my family," it said.

"Even though she's a murderer and sinner without peer," it said.

"…I truly am surrounded by fools."

And with that small whisper, Elisabeth kept walking.

Before long, she arrived at the platform. Rejecting the executioner's roughly extended hand, she walked up the wooden steps to the stake herself. A group of men fastened her to the post.

A priest approached her. As he made to begin praying, Elisabeth interjected.

"'Tis far too late for prayers. Get on with it."

"But it is for your—"

"Enough. There shall be no salvation for me. This is my end."

"If you are resigned to your fate, then I will respect your wishes. Do you have any last words?"

"……None."

After hesitating for a few moments, Elisabeth gave her answer.

She closed her eyes, opened them back up, and slowly shook her head.

"I have nothing to say, nor any to say it to."

The priest nodded, then stepped off the platform. An executioner wearing a leather bag over his face approached her in his place. He took the torch he was holding and used it to light the kindling at Elisabeth's feet.

Cheers rose up from all around. Just like Vlad once had, she began burning in the flames of man. Elisabeth looked through the billowing gray smoke at the elated masses.

As the heat lapped at her toes, she gave a reflexive comment.

“It…hurts.”

In contrast with her words, her expression was serene and tranquil.

Gazing up at the sky, she thought back on the words she’d just said.

I have nothing to say, nor any to say it to.

That was what she’d declared. And it was true. There was no other answer she could have given.

Everyone she’d held dear had died. Her parents, her people, and Marianne.

However, a single name slipped through her lips.

“Kai…to…”

The words he’d once told her flashed through her mind.

She recalled his stupid, nonsensical promise.

“And hey, you bringing me back to life and summoning me here must have been some kind of fate… So until you start walking the road to Hell, I’ll try and stick by your side for as long as I can, even if I’m the only one.”

“You have my thanks.”

The crackling of the flames grew louder. Elisabeth’s whisper vanished among them.

Then she spoke a few heartfelt words, words that would reach no one.

“Just as you promised, I was never alone, right to the end.”

“Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu’s bloody life, she was accompanied by a single foolish servant.”

She thought that had been altogether quite fine.

Then she closed her eyes.

The family she had saved broke down into tears, and the old woman covered her face and wailed.

The Torture Princess was to die alone, forsaken by heaven, earth, and all of creation, then descend into Hell.

…However, at the eleventh hour, something happened.

Kssssssssssssssssh!

Suddenly, a blade came whirling through the sky. It blew away the fire, kindling and all.

As the loud noise rang out, the platform collapsed. Elisabeth went flying and crashed into the side platform the executioners were standing on, almost as though the angle of her flight had been planned. The people in the crowd let out confused cries. Above their heads, a magnificent storm of azure flower petals and jet-black feathers spiraled down.

The spectacle that was unfolding was beautiful, yet for some reason, it struck fear into the hearts of all in attendance.

Amid the uproar, a young man appeared in the air.

He wore a black military uniform, and it fluttered as he glared down over the crowd.

In his left arm, he was carrying an attractive, silver-haired automaton in a maid outfit. And of all things, the Kaiser accompanied him on his right.

None of the people in the crowd could truly tell that the grotesque black hound was in fact the Kaiser. But driven by their instinctive repugnance and terror, they cried out all the same.

Watching them, the young man's face curled into a malicious smile.

Flanked by an oddity on each side, he gave a loud, booming laugh.

"What a carefree bunch you all are, killing off your own pawns while humanity still has enemies!"

"It can't be…"

Elisabeth muttered in shock. The young man snapped his fingers before her astonished eyes.

Snap!

In response to the dry noise, twenty jewels appeared in the air around him.

As he channeled mana into them, the people's screams grew even louder.

Images of Godot Deus floated up above the jewels. As a high priest of the Church, the faith the people held in him was considerable. He raised his wrinkled head, then began making some manner of pitiful plea.

As he did, the young man gave a sinister laugh and snapped his fingers once more.

Snap!

Kssssssssssssssssh!

A screeching noise rang out, and the stones holding the high priest's soul shattered in unison. The fragments sparkled as they fell through the air.

Shocked by the abruptness and the atrocity of the deed, the people screamed. Their deep scars left from being attacked by demons had been pried open. They trembled, then succumbed to their rage and hatred. In an instant, their gazes shifted to one of stark animosity.

The young man nodded, satisfied.

The people didn't know.

They didn't know Godot Deus had told the young man that the reproductions of his soul were slated to be destroyed or why he'd told him.

After all, they had no way of knowing.

They had no way of knowing that Godot Deus, who'd understood the importance of Elisabeth's execution better than anyone, had keenly known the vulnerability his death would create in mankind.

There was no way they could have heard.

There was no way they could have heard what he and the young man had discussed right before this, when all his crystals had been gathered in one place.

There was no way they could have known what mutual objective the two of them aimed to fulfill with this display.

And just what was that objective?

The most effective method by which to unite people was to give them a common enemy. And as long as such an enemy existed, mankind would find themselves in need of a dangerous, powerful blade.

To that end, the young man—Kaito Sena—shouted.

"Letting your guard down just 'cause you killed all fourteen demons? Ha! What a joke! You guys are a bunch of dumb-a—no, fools. From here on out, I shall lead the Kaiser and become the stuff of nightmares! And I'll start with that woman over there, the tyrannical foe of us demons! She will be a hindrance to us no more. With my own two hands, I shall slay the Torture Princess!"

"Why are you doing this, Kaito Sena? I thought you were a man of integrity! What are you thinking?!"

Flustered, Izabella shouted at him. Perhaps due to her honest nature, it seemed that she was panicking in earnest. Kaito watched her with relief, glad that his acting seemed to have passed muster.

The Kaiser stepped on his foot, and the maid gently poked him in the side.

Hurriedly, Kaito snapped his fingers.

"—*La* (dance)!"

Countless blades dived at the Torture Princess. But the executioners made a split-second decision, pushing Elisabeth aside and covering for her. The brawny men formed a wall with their bodies and guarded the Torture Princess from the would-be assassination.

Then, at Izabella's orders, the paladins got to work. Unwilling to let any who bore ill will toward the innocent escape, they activated the barrier they'd been intending to use in the unlikely event the Torture Princess tried to escape.

After looking at the sacred white light they were weaving together, Kaito nodded.

"…Yup, I can break through. Looks like I was right."

He'd wanted to be able to make his escape even if the paladins threw up a barrier, so after he'd left Elisabeth alone on the hill and made his way back to the plaza, he'd tried to figure out how strong it was. Then, by torturing the Monarch, he'd gathered the mana he'd needed to destroy it.

Again, he snapped his fingers. An explosion of azure petals and black feathers danced through the air.

Then, with a noise like glass shattering, the barrier vanished.

"Oh-ho, it seems I am at a disadvantage here. Very well. I take my leave now, gentlemen! We shall meet again!"

After promising another encounter, Kaito gave a twisted laugh. The Kaiser, too, laughed mockingly at the crowd in its humanlike voice. Still embracing the back of Kaito's neck, the automaton smiled sweetly.

Then their master snapped his fingers once more.

As if by magic, the Kaiser's contractor vanished.

Finally, the finishing blow was dealt in the form of a delighted voice, which rained down on the terrified, furious, panicking crowd.

"Next time, I shall deliver upon mankind a truly demonic calamity!"

“That…utter…imbecile!”

As the crowd was whipped up into a frenzy, Elisabeth quietly cursed. She clenched her fist, then punched the platform. However, no one was looking her way. She’d been neglected so thoroughly it was hard to believe that she’d just been on the verge of being burned at the stake. Now alone, she bit down hard on her lip.

As she looked down toward the ground, she thought back to something he’d said.

The words had been heartfelt and directed straight at her.

“I like her a whole lot.

“For that person’s sake, I could do or become anything.”

“…I told you, Kaito, ’tis too much for you to bear.”

Elisabeth muttered the words quietly. But there was nobody there to respond to her.

As though to console her, the azure petals and black feathers gently brushed against her slender shoulders as they fell.

*

Due to the unforeseen turn of events, the Torture Princess’s execution was suspended.

The paladins hastily mobilized a search party to pursue the Kaiser’s contractor. But despite devoting their full efforts to the chase, they were unable to locate him. Given the appearance of a new demon and one that had publicly proclaimed hostility toward mankind, to boot, the Church held a discussion, then handed down their official decision.

The Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu, was informed of her new orders.

Her mission was simple.

It was to kill Kaito Sena, the fifteenth contractor.

Afterword

Hello, Keishi Ayasato here.

You hold in your hands the newly released third volume.

Thank you all so much for buying the third volume of Torture Princess. My editor and I decided to cram as much content in each volume of this series as possible, so I guess the action's been pretty nonstop for these past three volumes.

I'm sure those of you who have read it can tell, but the third volume marks the end of the first story arc. That said, I've already planned out where the plot will go from here. Of course, only God knows whether or not we'll get to that point, but nothing would make me happier than to complete the story of the Torture Princess and the boy she summoned.

It is my humble wish for us to meet again in the next volume.

As an aside, I wrote another limited-edition booklet for Animate to go with the third volume! As I mentioned in the second volume, skipping it won't affect your enjoyment of the main story, but the story is once more fun and prattling, so if you're interested in taking a peek at the day-to-day routines of Kaito and the rest, I would love it if you checked it out (I'm the type to toss in advertisements each and every time). Please take a look, even if all you do is admire the fascinating, adorable cover Saki Ukai drew for it. The two heroines trade outfits!

I'm almost out of room in the afterword here, so as is custom, I have some people I'd like to thank. As always, Saki Ukai, thank you so much for all your beautiful illustrations. To my designer and my publisher, your suggestions were invaluable, and to my editor O, I wish to extend my sincere gratitude. And a big thank-you to my beloved family, in particular my older sister, who helped me with corrections on the first draft!

And last but not least, to all my readers, I wish to thank you with all my heart. The fact that you all read my books brings me endless joy. I'll put everything I have into the next volume, so I hope you all look forward to it.

And on that note, I pray we will meet once more.

The resurrected young man's battles aren't over just yet.

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