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## **Chapter 1**

## Act 1

The wind brushing against my cheeks was gradually warming. Awakened by the feeling, I looked up at the sky. The days had grown longer before I knew it. My second winter at the academy was about to end. Our semester exams were over, and the academy would soon go on spring break.

"Think you're gonna pass, Mabel?" Amyu asked.

"Somehow."

"We all did our best," said Yifa.

The three girls were walking in front of me and talking cheerfully. Once spring break was over, we'd be third-years. We could advance to the high school section of the academy and choose a field of research, or graduate and pave our own way in the world. It was probably a big decision for most students, but I'd already decided on becoming an adventurer.

I had also considered becoming a teacher. Passing knowledge on to children like I had in my past life wouldn't be a bad way to live. However, if I wanted to be highly paid, I'd have to work at an imperial institution like the academy or get hired by a wealthy noble. I knew I wasn't cut out for that, and above all, I wanted to avoid being around people in positions of power. I didn't want to end up attracting attention if I had to use my abilities.

The world was run by cunning people who couldn't be confronted with even the most forceful violence or all the truths of the universe. Dealing with those sorts of people was too much for me. I was far better suited for head-on battles.

In addition, there was the promise I'd made to Amyu. Having decided on a career path, I should have been free of worries about my future—yet at the moment, I was feeling hesitant for an entirely different reason. *Oh well.* Sighing,

I readied myself to speak.

"Amyu, do you have a second?"

Amyu stopped and looked behind her. "What?"

"I have a favor I'd like to ask of you."

"And that is?"

"Would you mind coming home with me?"

"Huh?"

"I'd like you to meet my family."

"Huh?! Wh-Wha—" Wide-eyed, Amyu stammered in confusion. "Wh-What do you mean by that?! W-We don't have that kind of relationship."

"Is that a no?"

"Forget yes or no—this is way too sudden! A-At least give me some time to think..."

"That's understandable. I can wait, but try to give an answer as soon as possible."

Next to the red-faced Amyu, Yifa had tears in her eyes. "I wish I was you, Amyu. Congratulations..."

"Wh-What are you talking about?!"



Looking around at everyone's faces, Mabel tilted her head. "Was that a marriage proposal?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, no, that's not it." I smiled awkwardly. "I got a letter from home. My father...and others want to meet Amyu. Apparently, he heard rumors that the top student was a magic swordsman who could use every element." Although there was probably a gag order in place regarding the Hero, they couldn't stop students from sending letters home or sharing stories when they returned. It seemed like talk about Amyu had been spreading at least to some degree. "He's probably curious about you as someone who researches magic. He's paying my tuition, so I'd feel bad just saying I can't bring you along. I'd appreciate it if you'd visit with me."

As Amyu stared at me with her mouth hanging open, I finally realized something. "Wait, did I give you the wrong idea?"

"Of course not, stupid! Do you want me to send you flying?!"

That seems a little uncalled for. Amyu gave an exasperated sigh. "So, how about it?" I asked again.

"Sure, why not? I wasn't planning on going home for spring break, so I'm free. Though I don't really know anything about noble etiquette."

"That's fine. Our territory is out in the country, so we don't really care about that stuff. Having said that, maybe I should teach you a little bit." If she came off as too rude, a certain someone would surely make a scene of it. "Why don't you come too, Mabel?"

"Me?" Mabel asked.

"Baron Crane is quite involved with academic society. I'm sure my father would be happy to see you as well."

"Then I guess I'll go."

"Good. I'll have a courier deliver a letter right away." Excellent. The more people the better. Maybe I'll be able to avoid her.

"Hey, Seika," Mabel said.

"Hmm?"

"You said your father and others a second ago. Is someone else gonna be there?"

"Uh..." I looked away from Mabel as I answered. "My older brother's fiancée might be coming. Then there are other relatives and guests who could be there. We'll just have to greet them if they show up. You're a noble too, so you get it, right?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, that's just how it goes."

"Hmm. So that's why you brought up teaching us etiquette. This is starting to feel like a pain. Yifa, do you get this stuff?" Mabel asked.

"I'm just a slave, so I've never sat at the same table or spoken with those people," said Yifa.

"Can I sit somewhere else with Yifa?"

"Of course not," I replied. "Anyway, that's how it is! The carriage leaves in three days, so get ready. See you all later." Leaving them with that, I escaped back to the boys' dorm.



"You seem down, Master Seika," Yuki piped up from atop my head.

I sighed, continuing on my way back to the boys' dorm.

"Are you that against returning to the mansion?"

"You could say that." There was a certain pair of people that I wasn't keen on running into.

"In that case, why don't you just say no like you usually do?"

"I can't do that."

"What makes this time different?"

"There's a pretty important person coming to the manor. She's the one who said she wanted to meet me and Amyu."

"I did think it was weird that that man would suddenly send a letter asking to

meet the Hero girl two years after you enrolled. That explains it."

"Human society is all about status and authority. It's a real pain."

Yuki fell silent for a bit, then finally grumbled, her voice tinged with dissatisfaction. "I don't get it."

"Don't get what?"

At my encouragement, Yuki slowly began to speak. "At the end of the day, aren't status and authority things that can be taken by force?"

I remained silent.

"You could do it anytime if you wanted. Why do you go so far to ingratiate yourself to those in power? Even the emperor in your past world respected you and treated you as an equal," Yuki said, sounding somewhat frustrated.

"It's not that simple," I quietly replied. "Even if I were to become emperor or a powerful noble by force, then what? I'm no good at governing or strategy, so I'd just be manipulated by those around me. They have their own battles to fight."

"But with your strength, you could handle that however you want."

"Am I to eliminate my political opponents by force as well? What sort of world would lay at the end of that reign of terror? The assembly will be unable to have discussions for fear of being purged, and nobles and merchants will plot against each other to bring their rivals down. With the expulsion of all the virtuous people and rise in paranoia, the government will collapse. Eventually, the country will either be invaded or face a rebellion by its own people. At the very least, this prosperous country will be lost and all that'll await me is ruin."

Yuki didn't respond.

"There are limits to what force can achieve, Yuki. Not even I can do everything. Though I learned many things in that world, I was by no means a politician. The intentions and actions of others are beyond my ability to understand." Because I had lived such a long life back then, I had forgotten something so obvious. "I lacked foresight. I didn't anticipate that befriending the young emperor would involve me in the battle for the throne decades later,

and I didn't anticipate that my enemies would send that girl against me, knowing I wouldn't lay a hand on my disciple."

""

"It was a mistake to take even the smallest step into the world of politics. To politicians, an extraordinarily strong individual is no more than a singular pawn. Even the most powerful exorcist in history was defeated and forced to reincarnate in another world. If I carelessly reveal my power and draw attention to myself, I may well meet the same fate in this world."

"Then what should you do?"

"Live an inconspicuous life," I answered simply. "Bow before those in power, and make myself just another member of the masses. If I can't beat them with strategy, then I'll just stay out of their way. I'll conceal my strength as best I can and remain hidden."

"..."

"I need to have at least that level of cunning. Otherwise, I'll die without ever finding happiness. That said, I've been pretty relaxed these days."

"But doesn't that mean..." Yuki uncharacteristically cut me off. "Doesn't that mean you'll have to give up sometimes?"

"Give up on what?" I asked, returning her question with a puzzled look.

"Well... I can't really put it into words. Never mind." That was all Yuki said before falling silent.

"Sorry for the dull conversation," I said to the ayakashi atop my head with a smile. "Is there anything you'd like to eat? Exams are done now, so let's head to town and buy something."

"Then I want honeyed peaches."

"You've got a real sweet tooth, don't you?" Not very fox-like.



Three days later, we boarded a carriage and departed from Lodonea. Our seven-day trip took us down the same road I had traveled to arrive at the

academy. For the first time in two years, I returned to the Lamprogue family's territory.

"Hup." Jumping out of the carriage in front of the manor, I was greeted by a familiar face.

"Welcome home, Seika."

"It's good to see you, Luft. Something seems different about you."

Luft returned my smile with a bashful smile of his own. He would be turning nineteen this year. "You think so? Maybe I'm starting to behave like a proper lord."

"Just a little."

"You, on the other hand, have barely changed at all. You're just taller."

Well, yeah. When you've lived as long as I have, what's inside is pretty much set in stone. "Will we be meeting your fiancée?" I asked casually.

"Unfortunately, I don't think she'll be coming," Luft answered with an awkward smile. "Given our current company."

"That's too bad. I was looking forward to meeting my future sister-in-law."

"Another time."

I shifted my attention to the tall, middle-aged man standing next to Luft. "Hey, Eddis. I appreciate you coming out here to greet us. I'm sure you're busy."

"Think nothing of it. Welcome home, Master Seika. You've grown up since I last saw you." The tall man gave a polite bow. Eddis was a freed slave who served the Lamprogue family. He was a man of few expressions, with chestnut hair and a mustache, yet he was exceptionally competent and managed the Lamprogue territory's affairs almost entirely by himself. Blaise was only able to devote himself to his research because he had Eddis assisting him. All that had to keep him busy.

"Is your work going to be okay?"

"I left it to my subordinates. It's a bit much for them, but I was determined to greet you personally," Eddis replied with a stiff tone. He had always been like

that. Because he treated everyone with the same attitude, he was well-liked within the manor. Granted, I was pretty confident I wasn't the reason he had come today. "At any rate, did you return alone?"

"Huh? You guys can get out of the carriage," I said, turning my head and calling out to the others. Taking that as their cue, they streamed out.

"I-It's been a while, Master Luft," Yifa said.

"Oh, Yifa," Luft replied. "Yeah, it's been a while. I can't believe how pretty you've become."

"Th-Thank you."

"Go on, Yifa," I encouraged her.

"O-Okay." Yifa looked up at Eddis and gave a shy smile. "Um... I'm home, dad."

"Indeed." Eddis, a man of few words, nodded. "Are you well?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You haven't been causing trouble for Master Seika?"

"I don't think so." Yifa looked over to me for reassurance, so I answered for her.

"Yifa's been doing a good job. She gets good grades at the academy too. I'm proud to be her master."

"My daughter is unworthy of your praise. In that case, sending her with you has been worthwhile." That was all Eddis had to say. Though he excelled at his job, as a father, he was a little lackluster. He was kind of like Blaise in that sense.

Anyway, putting them aside... I turned to face Luft and motioned to the redheaded girl standing motionlessly nearby. "Luft, this is Amyu. She's the one."

"Ah, I see." Luft looked at Amyu and extended his hand with a gentle smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm the heir to the Lamprogue family, Luft Lamprogue. Welcome to our territory. You've come a long way."

"Th-Thank you for having me." Amyu awkwardly shook his hand. She was

nothing like her normal self.

Luft gave her a charming smile and continued. "So, how does it compare to Lodonea? Pretty rural, right?"

"Uh, a little... No, a lot, I guess."

Luft chuckled. "No wonder Seika never wants to come home. I've been to the capital several times myself, but never Lodonea. I'd love to hear about the city and the academy over dinner. Seika only writes about his grades and achievements—never about his life there."

"There's just not much to say about it," I replied. Then I pointed to Mabel, who was standing just as stiffly next to Amyu. "This is Baron Crane's daughter, Mabel. Did you read my letter?"

"Of course I did. It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Miss Mabel," said Luft, giving Mabel a classy bow. "Actually, I met your uncle at an academic conference once. Give him my regards if you have the chance."

Mabel silently nodded, then looked around in a panic before returning his bow.

She said her etiquette was okay, but she's not used to this at all. I figured as much. Poking me on the arm, Amyu whispered into my ear.

"Hey, is that handsome guy your oldest brother?"

"Yeah."

"He's pretty different from you, huh?"

"Is that supposed to be a roundabout way of insulting me?"

"I just mean he actually feels like a noble. I'm not trying to offend you," she said, seemingly not meaning any harm.

That wasn't what she said two years ago. Young people change so fast. Sighing, I called out to Luft. "I'd like to put our bags away. Could you show everyone to their rooms, Luft?"

"Sure, this way." Leaving the luggage on the carriage to the servants, Luft guided us through the manor.

"Are they going to stay in the other building?" I asked, walking next to him.

"No, there are rooms available in the manor. Our other guest is staying in the detached building. You know the one."

"Ah..."

At that moment, a voice I really didn't want to hear reached my ears. "Seikaaa!"

"Ugh." I unintentionally came to a stop and turned to the voice. Just as I feared, it was my other brother.

"You finally came home, huh? Ha ha! You have no idea how long I've waited for this day!" Standing imposingly in the middle of the courtyard, grinning boldly, Gly shouted.

"H-Hey, Gly," I said, my face stiffening up. "I didn't expect such a warm welcome. You've, uh...gotten bigger since I last saw you." Two years ago he had been around the same height as Luft, but now he completely dwarfed him. On top of that, he looked much tougher now, probably due to his training in the military. Gly had probably been training at this very moment—he had a mock sword in his hand and seemed a little sweaty. *Guess he's changed too.* "G-Glad to see you're doing well. Are you enjoying your time in the military?"

"Yeah, it's not bad." For something he had been so opposed to, he was surprisingly nonchalant in his answer. "I didn't expect it to suit me so well. Swinging a sword until I puke and throwing off magic without worrying about theory is way more fun than sitting at a desk all day. It definitely beats going to the academy. I'm almost grateful to you. But I haven't forgotten what you did to me!" Gly pointed the mock sword in his hands at me. "Duel me, Seika!"

"Huh?"

"I've been waiting for this! Today's the day I make up for my humiliation!"

As I stood there dumbfounded, an elderly man standing next to Gly admonished him. "Young Master, you mustn't! He's a child with no military training!"

"Shut up! Don't call me 'Young Master'! I've gone through hell for this day!

Stay outta my way!" Gly shot back, undeterred.

I didn't know who the man was. Maybe he was a subordinate of Gly's from the military. Gly hadn't simply come home—he was here leading a unit on military business. Luft had told me in a letter that Gly had been put in command of a platoon. He had originally been assigned to a relative's unit, so he'd probably been treated well, but for him to rise through the ranks so quickly, he must have been skilled. Leading a unit required more than just swordsmanship and magic—you had to understand military strategy, win over rowdy soldiers, and inspire them. Come to think of it, he hung out with some unsavory characters when he was still living at the manor. Maybe he actually was cut out for the military.

As I thought to myself, Amyu poked me in the arm again. "Hey, is that guy your middle brother?"

"Yeah."

"The one who bullied you and Yifa? That you beat up before leaving for the academy?"

"That's the one. Now he's the platoon commander of a local unit in the imperial military."

"A soldier is challenging a student to a sword fight?" she asked. "What's he thinking?"

"It's a little silly when you look at it rationally, but that's just how he is."

"Hmph." Snorting, Amyu took a step forward. "Hey, you! Duel me in Seika's place!"

"Huh? A-Amyu?" I was shocked at what I'd just heard.

Gly gave Amyu a curious look, then returned his gaze to me. "Who's this, Seika?"

"A classmate," I answered.

"Aren't you ashamed to be challenging an amateur swordsman?" Amyu continued, undaunted. "I'll take you on! Representatives are a normal thing in duels, aren't they?"

With an annoyed look on his face, Gly waved her off like he was shooing away a dog. "You think I'm gonna fight a student? Nobody asked for you. Get outta here."

"Seika's a student too! I didn't do all this training to get looked down on by some stuck-up noble!" Amyu shouted.

"Look, I'm not—"

"Uh, why don't you just duel her, Gly?" I said hesitantly. He'd probably settle down once he lost. "Amyu can be my representative. She's better with a sword than I am, at least."

"You've barely ever touched a sword. That doesn't say much."

"If you beat Amyu, then I'll take you on myself."

"You should've started with that." Gly looked at Amyu. "All right, brat. I'll take you on. Draw your sword."

"Draw what? Gimme a mock sword."

"Quit being such a pain. You've got a perfectly good sword at your hip there." Gly pointed at Amyu's mithril spellblade with his mock sword. "I'm sure you're better at using that one too."

"You're telling me to fight you with a real sword?"

"If we stop just before hitting each other, it doesn't make a difference. That said, you can come at me for real if you want. Even with mock swords, people sometimes die during military training."

"All right, then." Amyu slowly drew her spellblade. "That goes for adventurers too."

"Adventurers? Whatever. Lauren! Serve as our witness! That's an order!"

"Young Master... Very well. Do take care not to harm the young lady. And although the young lady has a spellblade, magic will be forbidden in this duel. Is that acceptable to the both of you?" The elderly man stood between them as the two duelists faced off.

I couldn't help but frown. It was only Amyu, but it had become a duel with

real swords. Still, it'll probably be fine. Amyu should be able to win easily, even if she has to keep that in mind. There's no way Gly's a match for the Hero. And if he does get seriously injured, I guess I could heal him if I have to.

"Now, begin!" The man named Lauren began the match, his voice surprisingly fierce.

Amyu kicked off the ground, closing the distance between them in an instant and swinging her mithril sword downward. A heavy metallic clang echoed through the area. Gly had used the part of his blade near the handle to catch her blow, as was standard practice in swordplay. His eyes slightly wide with shock, his left hand was supporting his mock sword from behind. Were it not for that, he likely wouldn't have been able to block it.

Nonetheless, block it he had. Amyu had the strength to overpower even a lesser demon, so I had assumed he would be brought to his knees and that would be the end of the duel. Although Mabel had also been able to stop Amyu's downward swing, that was only because she'd been using a gravity spell. I didn't sense any flow of energy coming from Gly—he was resisting her superhuman strength through pure skill and magical reinforcement.

Locked in their clash, Amyu pushed forward, but Gly skillfully deflected her effort, enduring the change in pace of her attack without exposing any openings. In fact, his expression was calm. It looked like he wasn't even feeling pressured.

"Forget this!" Growing impatient, Amyu broke off their clash and put some distance between herself and Gly before shifting to a fierce offensive. She was being reckless and hadn't fully grasped the flow of the fight. Though her strikes were both fast and heavy, Gly calmly caught every single one.

Then, he abruptly lost his balance. Maybe he had tripped over a small rock. While he didn't fall over, it created an opening that Amyu wasn't about to let slip away. From that position, Gly would only be able to defend himself once or twice. The duel was over.

It's kind of a letdown, but at least he should lay off now.

"Blazing red! Spirits who birth heat and sulfur—" Gly suddenly began chanting a spell incantation.

Amyu immediately stopped her charge, pulled back her sword, and was forced on the defensive. Stopping her attack so hastily had left her hopelessly exposed, and that was all it took for Gly to end the duel. He recovered his posture unbelievably quickly and swung his sword, sending Amyu's mithril spellblade flying out of her hand. Amyu fell onto her butt, and he pointed the tip of his mock sword at her.

"I win," he said, sounding almost bored as he looked down at Amyu.

The area fell silent before Amyu returned to her senses and shouted. "Huh?! Y-You coward! You said we weren't using magic!"

"When did I use any magic?"

Amyu's eyes went wide at the realization.

Well, now.

"You tricked me?! Y-You call yourself a swordsman?!"

"The battlefield isn't a place for etiquette. You seem like you have some practice, so I assume you're an adventurer or something. Would you say that to a monster?"

Gly lowered his sword, and Amyu angrily ground her teeth as she stood up. "O-One more time!"

"Not happening."

"Excuse me?!" Amyu demanded.

"I'd probably lose next time."

"Wh-Wh-Wha—"

"Young lady," said Lauren, extending his hand to Amyu. "The young master tripped on purpose."

"Huh?"

"You're quite strong, young lady. I was surprised as well. That's probably why the young master struggled to come up with a way to win. After all, he couldn't possibly get too rough with a guest in a place like this. Despite how it may seem, the young master is the finest soldier under General Petrus's command,

both with magic and the blade. He's grown a lot in these two years, though he still has a way to go when it comes to tactics."

"That's enough outta you, Lauren!"

"Pardon me. That's a secret between us in the military."

It looks like Gly really has changed, I thought to myself as I watched his and Lauren's exchange. Both inside and outside.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Seika! Time for that duel you promised me," Gly proclaimed with his hands on his hips. He didn't even look out of breath. He hadn't been stressed at all.

"Give me a break, Gly," I responded with a sigh. "I wouldn't stand a chance against you with a sword now."

"Who said anything about swords? Anything goes. Use those weird talismans of yours if you want. I'm gonna be using this myself," Gly said, tossing aside his mock sword and drawing the blade at his hip. It seemed to be a spellblade. Despite its rugged design, its quality was apparent from the careful craftsmanship.

"Young Master! You mustn't!"

"Shut up, Lauren! You're not getting in the way of this duel!"

"Young Master..."

"You better accept, Seika! I heard you won a tournament in the capital. I bet none of them were even a challenge for you. But I'm different now! I've used the humiliation you gave me as motivation to get stronger! Duel me! It's time for our rematch!"

"You just don't give up. Fine," I sighed. *Give me a break.* I stepped forward. *He should settle down if I beat him.* "I'll keep my word. What are the rules?"

"Same as the tournament. That should work for you, yeah?"

"I'm fine with whatever. Since we don't have any defensive amulets, let's just say you lose if you get hit by a spell. But no limits—mid-level spells and higher are allowed. We can't show our true strength otherwise, right?"

"Ha! You've got some nerve." With a bold smile, Gly hefted his spellblade over his shoulder. "Lauren! You determine who wins! Commander's orders!"

"Very well, Young Master. He doesn't look it, but Seika must be quite powerful to be worthy of your determination. As an outsider, it isn't my place to intervene. I, Lauren, vow to bear witness to your duel!"

"S-Seika, are you really doing this?"

"Hmm?" I turned my head to see Amyu looking at me anxiously.

"I don't know how he was in the past, but he's seriously strong now. Probably stronger than anyone in that tournament."

I chuckled. "It's unusual for you to be worried about me."

"This isn't funny! If by some chance, you—"

"I won't."

"Huh?"

"There is no chance." Leaving her with that, I turned back to Gly. Even ten thousand attempts wouldn't be enough for him to ever beat me. Let me teach you a quick lesson, brother.

"This duel is not for honor or revenge, but simply to determine who is stronger," Lauren said, raising his voice. "Endeavor to avoid drawing blood with your blade or using any fatal magic. I will determine the victor. If these terms are acceptable, then you may—"

"Oh my, a duel." A clear, out-of-place voice prompted everyone present to look toward the source. A young lady had entered the courtyard at some point without anybody noticing. "What in the world is going on here? My holy knight is in a duel? It must be my fate to witness such a thing," the girl murmured whimsically.

She was inhumanly beautiful, as though she were a sculpture modeled on the gods. Her eyes were a dark gray like steel, and her hair was a pale blue. I'd never seen anyone like her in my past life. She almost seemed like a type of spirit, but I could tell from her luxurious dress and classy way of speaking that she was a human of high standing.

Lauren, Luft, and Eddis and the other servants all straightened up respectfully in her presence. Facing off against me, Gly's expression turned grim.

"Wh-Why are you here, Your Highness? Didn't I tell you not to walk around alone?" he asked.

The girl giggled. "What choice did I have? Everyone wandered off somewhere. Or perhaps it was I who wandered off?" She giggled again.

"Don't give my men a hard time."

"What does it matter? Go on and begin your duel, Gly." The corners of her lips curled up into a smile, her expression still unreadable. "Though it's a fight you stand to gain nothing from, it holds great meaning to you, no? I must say, it's a little incomprehensible to me."

Gly frowned. "Are you saying I'm gonna lose?"

"Now, I could never be so cruel as to spell out your coming future," she giggled. "There's meaning in defeat as well, is there not? Not that I'm talking about anything in particular. Even a defeat so crushing that you fail to make your opponent use their full strength would at least help one come to terms with their feelings. Generally speaking, of course."

"Is that right?" Gly slumped his shoulders and sheathed his spellblade. "Forget it, Seika."

I blinked my eyes in confusion. What just happened? She's of higher status than him, sure, but why's he being so obedient?

"Also, if you're mad, you can just say so," Gly added.

"In that case, I'm rather upset."

"Why's that?"

"I can't have my holy knight getting into duels without permission."

"I'm not your holy knight yet."

"It's your fate, so you might as well be. That aside, hurry up and introduce me to your guests. I've grown tired of waiting. I'd like to wrap up all that's fated to happen here sooner rather than later."

"I haven't even introduced myself yet, but whatever." Gly walked up to the girl, then turned to face us and motioned to her. "This is Her Highness, Fiona Urd Alegreif."



Truth be told, I already knew who she was. The noble girl standing before me had to be the person Luft had mentioned in his letter.

"The imperial princess."



The current imperial family was nearly all princes—there was only one person ever referred to as the imperial princess.

"You mean...th-the Holy Princess?!" Amyu cried out in shock.

Holy Princess Fiona—the emperor's only daughter, born to a priestess who worked at the central church. Her unusual situation was extolled in song by bards, and her beauty had been captured in several portraits and statues. She was well-known among the populace. And for some reason, she was standing in the courtyard of a rural nobleman's manor.

"Hey! Show some respect!" Gly shouted at Amyu.

"You're one to talk, Gly. Your own behavior has been quite crude as of late."

As I watched their back-and-forth, Amyu shook my shoulders. "H-Hey! What's the Holy Princess doing at your place?!"

"Uh... She's staying here at the moment."

"Why didn't you say anything?!"

Because you would have refused if I did.

"I wanted to meet you, Amyu."

"Eek!"

Fiona scared Amyu, who hadn't realized Fiona had walked over to her. "I apologize for startling you," the imperial princess said with an unreadable smile, her words hanging in the air. "I'm in the middle of inspecting the countryside and Count Lamprogue has graciously allowed me to stay at his residence. I very much wanted to meet you, so I asked if he could have his son bring you while the academy is on break."

"O-Oh... Is that right?" Amyu gave me a sidelong glare.

Sorry.

"It doesn't seem like he told you. Please, don't blame your friend. I'm the one who was being unreasonable."

"I-It's fine. But what exactly do you want with me?"

Fiona giggled. "I've heard all sorts of talk about you. You got the highest score on the academy's entrance exam two years ago, no? A score never before seen in the academy's history."

"Huh? You're the one Her Highness was talking about?" Gly asked. "No wonder you hit so hard."

"Gly, be quiet for a moment." Silencing Gly without so much as even looking at him, Fiona continued speaking to Amyu. "Not only do you have an aptitude for magic of every element, but you've even got extraordinary talent with the sword. You're like the Hero from the fairy tales."

"Th-Thanks," Amyu replied nervously. "I've been hearing that a lot lately."

Fiona giggled again, her gray eyes locked on Amyu. "Red hair and bright green eyes. Just as I saw. I'm sure it's what mother saw in her final moments as well."

Amyu shot Fiona a confused look.

"Seika Lamprogue," Fiona said, abruptly turning to me, the smile still on her face. "Thank you for listening to my sudden request."

I was taken aback for a moment, but I quickly remembered how to speak with nobility and returned her smile. "Think nothing of it. Make whatever request of me that you wish, Your Highness."

Fiona looked at me in silence for a moment.

"Um, is something wrong?" I finally asked.

"It's nothing," Fiona replied, shaking her head. "I've heard you possess considerable strength yourself. You even won a tournament in the capital. I wasn't able to watch as I'm afraid of blood, but I'm finding that rather regrettable now."

"I appreciate the kind words. Everyone there was quite strong—I simply got

lucky."

Fiona silently stared at me once again.

"Are you sure there's nothing wrong?"

"No, nothing at all," Fiona giggled. "I would love to have the two of you as my holy knights if possible, but I suppose that isn't an option." Her voice was still whimsical, but she seemed to have returned to her senses. "I'm planning on staying here a little while longer. Would you care to depart with me when the new semester begins? I'll be heading to Lodonea as well. Though we'll have to stop by the capital, we'll have a guard squad with us, and you'll be able to enjoy the finest lodgings along the way."

"C-Certainly. I couldn't ask for anything more."

"Then I'll make the arrangements." For the first time, Fiona's smile took on a hint of humanity. "I hope we can get along during my stay here. I'll see you again at dinner," Fiona said before walking off.

She's headed away from the manor. Where's she going? To talk a walk through the courtyard or something? Gly ordered Lauren to accompany her, and I doubt they'll run into any danger on our property, but still. What an odd girl.

"That's not what I expected the Holy Princess to be like," Amyu mumbled. I wholeheartedly agreed.

"S-S-Seika?! Was that really the Holy Princess?!" Yifa asked.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Mabel followed up.

"Uh, well... Luft! Why don't you show us to our rooms?"

Luft chuckled. "Sure. We'll formally introduce you all to Her Highness at dinner. I'm sure you're tired from your long trip, so feel free to relax in your rooms until then."

Fleeing Yifa and Mabel's questioning, I walked alongside Luft. "Give me a break," I sighed.

"Did you bring them along without telling them about Her Highness?" Luft asked. "You shouldn't do that."

"It would've been problematic for you if they'd refused, wouldn't it? Just be glad I brought them at all. More importantly, why didn't you stop him?"

"Hmm? Stop who?"

"Gly."

"Ah. Gly's rivalry with you has been burning all this time. I'd feel awkward getting in the way of that," Luft said with a forced smile. "Besides, I didn't think you two would do anything reckless."

"Why not?"

"You two are both far stronger than I am now. They say sparring between skilled fighters results in fewer injuries, don't they?"

"I wouldn't call that sparring." Still, I get what he's saying.

"Hey! Seika!" At some point, Gly had come walking over. To make matters worse, he was so tall he was looking down on me. "Remember this! One day I'm gonna beat the crap outta you."

"Yeah? Why not try it now?" I taunted.

"I'm not starting a fight I won't win," he grumbled, looking away.

I couldn't help but frown. What happened to all that fight he had in him? He suddenly lost it all after he spoke with the princess.

"Anyway, what are you doing bringing home a bunch of girls? What did you go to the academy for?" Gly demanded, oblivious to my misgivings.

"Yifa lived here to begin with, and Her Highness is the one who told me to bring Amyu."

"What about the gray-haired one?"

"That's Mabel." Now that she didn't need to dye her hair anymore, it had returned to its original gray color—the same as her older brother Kyle. "She's Baron Crane's daughter. Take care not to be rude to her unless you wanna cause problems for Luft and father."

"Why'd you bring her?"

"The more the merrier, right? I was hoping I'd be able to get out of having to

entertain the princess."

"Hmph! You coward." Then Gly added one more thing in a whisper. "That's not a bad plan. Nice going."

It seemed like Gly wasn't good at handling Fiona either.

## Act 2

Holy Princess wasn't an official title—it was just something the people had called Fiona ever since her birth. The Urdwight Empire had practiced polytheism since ancient times. Its religion was something akin to Japan's Shinto or ancient Greek mythology.

Although it wasn't particularly relevant in daily life, the religion's headquarters was the large central church in the imperial capital, where a grand festival was held once a year. Priestesses worked at the church, living separately from the mundane world and only appearing in public on special occasions. These priestesses were revered by the common people, and as I had often seen in the religions of my past life, were expected to maintain their purity. The punishment for breaking chastity was death.

There were few records of priestesses ever being found guilty, but among them, there were no exceptions. Around fifteen years ago, one of the priestesses had gotten pregnant. While she would have ordinarily been given the death penalty, it was imperial custom to exempt pregnant women from capital punishment. As a result, she had only been subject to excommunication from the church.

The man, however, had not been exempt from execution. At the end of their relentless interrogation, the investigators finally got a name—one that had surprised everyone. The emperor of the Urdwight Empire, Gilzerius Urd Alegreif.

To put it kindly, the priestesses were protected—to put it harshly, they had no freedom. Yet the emperor also served as the leader of the clergy. Although difficult, it was possible for him to lay his hands on a priestess. The only issue was that there was no one who could judge the emperor for his crimes. As the commander of the capitals' imperial guards and the entire military, and with his own intelligence agency at his disposal, there were none who could restrain him.

Naturally, the assembly had been in turmoil, those who had condemned the emperor's refusal to stand trial had died under suspicious circumstances. Furthermore, because there had been no suitable heir to take the emperor's place, his crimes had been swept under the rug and had eventually faded away.

Then, just as the uproar died down, Fiona had been born. Unfortunately, her mother had been unable to recover after giving birth and had passed away not long after. Nonetheless, something unthinkable had happened. An imperial princess with the blood of a priestess had been born—Holy Princess Fiona.

Due to the circumstances of her birth, she had lived a very restricted life, but in recent years she'd become well-known among the people and more prominent within the imperial family. The common people saw her as a princess born of forbidden love, and yet...

"If I could be born again, I'd love to be able to fly in the sky," she suddenly said. Everyone at the dining table froze. Not a word was spoken.

My father, my mother, Luft, Gly, myself, and Amyu and the other girls all sat around a table adorned with candles and flowers. An awkward atmosphere filled the room, and no one seemed to know how to respond.

Seeing that, I took it upon myself and spoke up. "In that case, I'd recommend the birds that live in the southern forest. They have plenty of food, few predators, good eyesight, and their feathers are bright and beautiful."

"I saw a merchant selling those birds once. But truth be told, I'd like to be something stronger in my next life. Something like a dragon."

"Dragons don't have easy lives either, you know. At least from what I saw in Astilia."

"My, you mean that famous dragon? I'd love to hear more about it."

"Over the summer, I..." I looked over the table as I recounted the story, and I saw a look that said, "Is this guy serious?" on Gly's face. I get where he's coming from. Fiona is...a little odd, to put it lightly. He probably thinks it's weird that I'm voluntarily speaking to her after going through so much trouble to avoid it. Gly seemed to be in her good graces, and he also seemed fed up with having to constantly be her conversational partner. That was probably why he was so

casual with her. For someone so peculiar, she certainly did talk a lot.

"You were there as well, weren't you, Yifa? I'm curious—what sort of relationship do the two of you have?"

The sudden question almost caused Yifa to choke on her food. She had joined us for dinner only after numerous refusals, insisting she was only a slave, but Luft had forced her to join as both my classmate and a guest. Though given the current atmosphere, I wasn't sure it had been in her best interest. Maybe Luft had just wanted another victim.

"I-I'm Seika's servant and slave... That's all."

Fiona gave an amused smile at her nervous response. "You refer to your master by his name?"

"W-Well, we've always..."

"How adorable," Fiona giggled. "Take good care of her, Seika."

"Please don't tease her," I replied.

"At any rate, it would seem that the academy truly is merit-based," Fiona said, changing the subject. "I'd heard they accepted slaves as well. Despite being of common birth, I'm told Amyu and Mabel are receiving excellent grades as well."

Mabel and Amyu both looked puzzled.

"Yeah, I guess..." Mabel grumbled.

"I get why you'd think I was, but what makes you say that Mabel was born a commoner?" Amyu asked.

"Oh? I heard she was adopted by Baron Crane. Was I mistaken? I apologize if I've offended you."

"Don't worry about it. It's true that I was adopted," Mabel replied.

"Also, she doesn't get particularly good grades," Amyu added.

"I don't wanna hear that from you. You just cheat by taking a bunch of practical classes."

"How is that cheating?!"

"What sort of things do you do in a practical class at the academy?" Fiona asked.

Seeing that the girls had managed to make conversation among themselves, I returned to my meal. *Good grief*.

"Seika." I looked back up. This time it was Blaise who had called out to me. "Are you doing well?" We hadn't had the time to speak much yet.

"Yes, I'm doing just fine, father," I answered, forcing a smile on my face.

"Good work in Astilia. Your report was well written. It was all monster scholars would talk about for a while."

"Thank you. Studying at the academy paid off."

"Is the academy still a good place?"

"Huh? Yes, it is."

"I see. Good." With that, Blaise fell silent. He was a man of few words.

"Write home a little more often. We don't get much news about Lodonea all the way out here." I was so shocked I nearly dropped my spoon. I was looking down at my plate, but that voice clearly belonged to my mother. The one who had completely ignored me ever since I'd reincarnated.

"Y-Yes, mother."



That night, I returned to my room after dinner and let out a sigh. It was the first time I'd been back in my room in ages, yet there wasn't a speck of dust to be found. The servants must have cleaned it before I'd come home.

"This country's princess is pretty weird, huh?" Yuki yawned as she popped her head out of my hair. She seemed tired for some reason. Fiona had continued to display her peculiarity here and there during dinner, creating an indescribable atmosphere at the dining table. "I hate women like her," Yuki grumbled unhappily.

"I'm not surprised."

"I'm amazed you could understand all her nonsense. She sounded like she

was intoxicated."

"It would've been awkward if nobody responded."

"That's true, but you sounded pretty used to it."

"Hmm, I guess I am." I debated whether I should continue for a moment, but I decided to tell her. "My wife was the same way."

"H-Huuuh?! Your wife was like her?!"

"Not in terms of looks. Just personality."

"Y-Yeah, I get that. How do I put this... You had it rough, huh?" Yuki said sympathetically.

"We were a surprisingly good match, actually." To an extent, that personality of hers had saved me back then. "Besides, I wasn't in the position to criticize anyone else's personality in my youth. If anything, I was worse."

"Tell me more!"

"I think it's time for bed. We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Come on!"

That moment, the door suddenly clicked open. "Seika?"

I jumped in surprise. Yuki dove back into my hair in a panic just before the door fully opened. "A-Amyu. You could at least knock," I said to the girl who had opened the door.

"Why are you freaking out? What were you doing in here?" Amyu asked as she entered the room and promptly flopped onto my bed. Letting out a long sigh, she buried her head in a pillow. The bottom of her long, oversized shirt fluttered for a moment before settling down. I usually only saw her in her uniform, so it was kind of refreshing.

Nonetheless, I felt the need to admonish her. "You know, you really shouldn't come to a man's room alone late at night."

"What? Are you telling me to have some modesty?" Amyu shot me a sidelong glance from within the pillow. "Who cares at this point? You've already seen me naked once."

"Th-That was unavoidable. Actually, I've gone out of my way to never bring that up again. Don't go throwing out all the thoughtfulness I've shown you."

"Aha ha ha, I'm just kidding." With a cheerful smile, Amyu lay sideways on the bed and faced me.

"Anyway, why are you here?" I asked.

"No reason. I was just bored, so I figured I'd come hang out."

"Sorry for not telling you about the princess."

"Don't worry about it. I probably would've still come even if I'd known." Her voice then took on a more serious tone. "I guess nobles have their own problems."

"You finally realized that, huh?"

"Not like you would know anything about it."

"Fair enough."

"I'm glad I came. There's a bunch of noble kids at the academy, but just listening to their stories never really clicked with me."

"I'm glad you won't have to graduate in ignorance now."

"What are you sounding all self-important for?" Amyu threw the pillow at me, which I barely managed to catch.

Be careful. We'd be in trouble if that hit a lantern.

"Hey," Amyu said, her tone a little lower. "Have you decided what you're gonna do when you graduate? You said you didn't wanna be a government official, right? You seem to like studying, so are you gonna continue into the upper grades? Or are you gonna come back here and help manage your family's territory? After what you did in Astilia, you could probably become some famous scholar's apprentice and study somewhere else too."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Me? I think I'm gonna go home and keep being an adventurer," Amyu said with a smile. "My friends at the academy are always talking about becoming officials or scholars, or getting married to a nobleman and living the easy life,

but I just can't imagine that kind of future for myself, y'know? My mom and dad would probably call it a shame, but oh well. Just learning that I'm not cut out for that stuff means coming to the academy was worthwhile as far as I'm concerned. Plus, I've gotten a lot better at magic. So now I can confidently say I'm gonna become an adventurer!"

"That makes sense," I mumbled. She had grown a lot too. With how harsh she'd been when we'd met at the entrance exam two years ago, I never would have imagined she'd be able to speak about her future so confidently. It reminded me of my time with my disciples in my previous life.

"So, what about you?" she asked timidly.

"Well, back when you suddenly started stripping in that dungeon—"

"Enough about that."

"We made a promise, didn't we? That we'd go on another adventure together. So I'm planning on becoming an adventurer too."

"Th-That's not..." Amyu averted her eyes. "I didn't take that promise seriously. You have your own life to live."

"Well, I was serious. Besides, I can't imagine myself as a scholar or administrator either. I'm more suited to fighting. I mean that."

"That sure isn't the impression you give."

"I wonder why that is? It's a mystery to me too. Still, just like you didn't know anything about nobles, I don't know a thing about adventurers. How about you teach me once we graduate?"

"I-I guess I have to!" Amyu stood up on my bed, a wide grin on her face. "Let's promise one more time," she said boldly with her hand on her hip. "We'll go on another adventure together."



"I promise," I said, returning her smile.

With a giggle, Amyu jumped off the bed and put her shoes back on before reaching for the doorknob. "See ya, Seika. Good night."

"Are you going to bed?"

"Nah, I'm gonna go find Mabel or Yifa."

"All right." She seems cheerful.

Once Amyu left and her presence disappeared down the hallway, Yuki poked her head back out. "Master Seika, do you still remember?" she asked quietly. "You were only going to stay by that girl's side because she's the Hero. You were going to use her to hide your power."

"Yeah," I answered, my tone unchanged. "How could I forget?"

## **Interlude: Count Blaise Lamprogue in His Study**

As the day came to a close, Blaise Lamprogue was in his study at his estate. Under the light of a lantern, he scanned over the documents piled up before him. He left most aspects of managing his territory to people he could trust, but occasionally there were matters the lord himself had to address.

His eyes tired from the tedious task, Blaise called out to the man next to him. "Eddis."

"What?" the freed slave, who was waiting for Blaise to finish his work, replied curtly. It was an impolite attitude he would never take in public, but it was their true relationship.

"You're not still mad, are you?" Blaise asked, not meeting Eddis's eyes. Eddis didn't respond, leaving Blaise to sigh in exasperation. "Yifa seems happy."

Eddis maintained a stoic silence.

"And she's doing well at the academy. Sending her was the correct decision, would you not agree?"

"…"

"I'd feel bad making her spend her entire life in a remote area like this. She's your daughter, after all."

"Don't say that," Eddis finally responded. "I'm fond of this land."

"Yifa isn't like you. I'm sure she wants to see the world."

"That isn't what I take issue with. My problem is that you gave her up so readily." Eddis wasn't demanding that Blaise free Yifa. It was common for the child of a freed slave to be kept a slave by the master. In many cases, it served as a means to ensure that the freed slave remained obedient—a hostage, so to speak. However, for Blaise and Eddis, it held a different meaning. "And you made her serve that detestable child."

"Eddis," Blaise said with a tone of admonishment. "Yifa is neither a memento

of that woman nor a token to prove your loyalty. The sentiments you and I hold will fade with age. Enough of this. Let the girl walk her own path."

"Hmph."

"Also, stop speaking about Seika that way. He's a normal child now. He's an excellent student at the academy and he hasn't caused any problems. In the end, he wasn't a demon at all. Even Berta has come to agree with my point of view." Blaise himself had been surprised at how his wife had interacted with Seika at dinner. Berta had always been afraid of him, fearing that his strange magic would harm Luft or Gly. However, her two sons had grown up and formed relationships with all sorts of people in distant lands. Perhaps she was starting to feel more forgiving.

"Hmph. I still find him disturbing," Eddis spat. "He always felt strangely adult as a child, and that hasn't changed."

"I disagree. The side of himself he shows Yifa and his friends from the academy is different from the side he shows us."

"You're free to think what you want, but what reason do you have for making Yifa serve him?"

"Eddis," Blaise sighed. "Why don't you just admit it already? Surely you can tell how fond she is of Seika. Don't you remember how happy she was when she told you she was going to the academy with him?"

"Tch!" Eddis clicked his tongue.

"I'm a father as well. I understand how you feel."

"You don't understand anything. You don't have a daughter."

"I suppose you've got me there," Blaise chuckled. "Seika is a good person. Do you not trust me, Eddis?"

"No, I trust you," Eddis answered with a sigh. "You're an odd man. You seem to have no interest in others, yet you have an excellent eye for people."

"A researcher needs a keen eye. And social skills, surprisingly enough."

"From what I've seen of you, I'm not convinced. If your social skills are so great, why don't you chat up the Holy Princess?"

An expression of bitterness crossed Blaise's features. Truth be told, he wasn't good at handling Fiona either. He didn't understand what young girls were thinking very well to begin with, and the constantly daydreaming Holy Princess was even more of an enigma to him. Fortunately, her maids and Gly, who was to become her holy knight, were often with her, so he didn't have to interact with her very much.

On the other hand, Blaise felt there had to be some sort of significance to her staying at his estate. It was clear from her looks and manner of speaking that the Holy Princess was no ordinary girl. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to assert herself so dominantly despite having no backing and being furthest from the throne. It was probably true that she wanted to meet Amyu, the academy's most outstanding student, but there was more to it than that.

She had an ulterior motive, be it intelligence, an opportunity, something, or perhaps someone. Blaise wasn't sure what it was, but it was there, in some shape or form. And he was quite certain he would never find out. He had a feeling she would simply accomplish her goal unbeknownst to him, then depart. There was no need to pry into it any further. He just needed the coming days to pass by uneventfully.

After a long silence, Blaise finally spoke. "Why don't you join us for dinner tomorrow? You don't have many opportunities to eat with your daughter."

"I believe I informed you that I have a dinner meeting with an executive from a distant merchant association tomorrow. Don't drag me into this. If you're not going to fulfill your duties as lord, at least fulfill your duties as head of your family."

Blaise let out a deep sigh. Eddis's argument was unexpectedly sound.

## Act 3

Two days after I returned home, on a beautiful sunny day, I found myself visiting a town in Lamprogue territory due to certain unavoidable circumstances.

"Seika, what's that over there?"

"This region's church."

"My, it's quite small. And what's that there?"

"A place where you can hire carriages."

I was with Fiona, and Amyu and Gly were trailing behind us. Yesterday, Fiona had suddenly said she wanted to visit a town within our territory. That in itself wasn't an issue, but then she said it wouldn't be any fun with soldiers around and insisted on leaving all her guards behind. Her maids had been horrified and tried to stop her, but in the end, Fiona's stubbornness had won out. Gly, Amyu, and myself were then designated as her guides and bodyguards.

There was an awkward atmosphere between Gly and Amyu. Naturally, Amyu, who had picked a fight and then lost, and Gly, who viewed their fight as someone he barely knew just butting in, didn't have much to talk about, so they continued on in silence.

Fiona was happily chatting with me the entire time, making the difference all the more apparent. I let out a sigh small enough that it wouldn't be noticed. I'd only come to this town a few times before leaving for the academy, but compared to then, it felt like there were more buildings and the town was livelier. "Gly, was the town always like this?"

"Huh? No. It's been two years. Things are gonna change," Gly answered curtly, looking around at our surroundings. Perhaps it was due to Eddis's skillful management. As we approached the town center, pedestrian traffic increased as well. "Oh, lucky us. The market's open," Gly said as we stepped out onto a wide street.

Both sides of the street were lined with stalls crowded with people. Cloth and miscellaneous goods, dried and salted preserved foods, materials from domesticated animals and monsters—everything one could imagine was lined up. Delicious smells filled the air from every direction. It wasn't always like this, so as Gly had said, we'd gotten lucky.

"My," Fiona said, her tone surprised yet also not. "There are so many people. We're bound to get split up."

"I don't think it's that bad," I replied.

"Let's hold hands." Completely ignoring what I'd said, Fiona grabbed my hand. Taking us into the heart of the market, Fiona giggled. "This feels like a secret rendezvous between lovers."

"Wha— Please don't say things like that, Your Highness. You have your status to uphold."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that. There's no one here to find fault with me at the moment," the princess whispered with a grin.

Why's she so excited? Her behavior was odd to begin with, so it was hard to tell, but her enthusiasm seemed a little unnatural. The princess's eyes were darting around, looking at all the shops around us. Maybe she found the market of a rural town like this interesting. There was some part of her gaze that felt almost businesslike.

"Are you having fun, Your Highness?"

"Of course. I don't have too many opportunities to see how the common people live. I may have status, but I lack freedom."

"Really? I've heard that you often walk the streets of the capital and exchange words with the townspeople. And you've started doing these regional inspections. I'm sure you've seen several markets larger than this one."

The princess remained silent.

"Uh, Your Highness?"

The princess giggled and gave a smile that seemed to lack any true substance. "Ah!" Her eyes suddenly shifted to one of the food stalls. "I want to try that,

Gly. Buy it for me," she said as though making an excuse.

A pleasant smell was wafting over from the grilled skewer stall. Gly reluctantly went to go buy some as he'd been ordered. He returned a short while later with four skewers in hand and gave one to Fiona. Then he held one out to me.

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me. Take it," Gly said bluntly.

As I accepted the skewer, I felt a little moved. "I had no idea you were capable of being considerate. You've grown."

"Are you trying to start a fight? Here, I got one for you too," Gly said as he held a skewer out to Amyu as well.

Amyu nervously took it. "Th-Thanks."

"That was decent." Fiona seemed to have already finished and handed her now-bare skewer back to Gly.

"You're gonna pay me back when we return," Gly said with an annoyed look.

"My, what a petty man."

Watching Fiona instigate my brother, I chewed on my skewer. It wasn't bad, though the salty taste was a little strong.

"Delicious, isn't it, Seika?" Fiona suddenly approached me with a smile.

"Huh? Didn't you just say it was only decent?" I asked in confusion.

"Delicious, isn't it?"

"S-Sure."

Fiona giggled and took my hand, leading us through town. I looked around at the throngs of people surrounding us. While there weren't any immediate issues, Fiona's appearance was attracting a lot of attention.

"I certainly stand out, don't I?" she said as though she was used to it. The problem wasn't that she was famous—there weren't many people out here in the countryside who would recognize the imperial princess. It was simply that girls with hair as long and beautiful as hers weren't very common. While Fiona was wearing clothes appropriate for a commoner, it appeared that she'd

escaped her maids partway through, as she was unchanged from the neck up. Combined with her unusual hair color, there was no way for her to avoid drawing attention. "Perhaps I should have done my hair up like that," Fiona mumbled, looking at a girl with tied-up hair. "But I suppose it's too late now."

Hmm, I should probably do something. I looked around the market, but the princess continued on, unconcerned. Then she came to a stop as we reached the end of the street.

"How do men and women grow closer? I can't come up with anything." Yet another sudden question.

"Uh, are you worried about a fiancé or something?" I asked, seeing that everyone else was equally unsure how to respond.

"No, I have nothing of the sort. Not yet, anyway," she giggled.

"Then why?"

"I mean in general," she mumbled whimsically. "How do people grow closer to others?"

"Usually you just meet them over and over and talk about stuff."

"Is there no way to close the distance faster?"

For a moment I thought she was being unreasonable, but given her position, she probably found herself frequently having to interact with important figures. This topic might actually have been a serious concern for her. "In stories, people often grow closer by saving each other from life-threatening situations."

"Isn't that a bit extreme?"

"I think it's a real thing," Amyu suddenly chimed in. "You hear it a lot among adventurers. Someone beating up a bandit or saving another person from a monster and it turns into a romance," she explained enthusiastically.

"My, but isn't that a rare occurrence?"

"It probably happens all the time. There are tons of stories where fellow adventurers become lovers. I think it's natural when people face danger together. On the other hand, if you get into a disagreement, it can turn bloody."

"How very intriguing."

Watching their excitement with a conflicted expression, I felt the need to interject. "I don't think—"

"That's a load of—" Gly tried to speak out at the same time, and we both ended up holding our tongues.

"You two got something to say?" Amyu asked with a suspicious glare.

"No..." I mumbled. In truth, there was no guarantee that saving someone from danger would make them fall in love with you. It might provide the spark, but if that person already had a partner, or wasn't your type, or wasn't even interested in the first place, it would simply end with a thank you. It was a lesson I'd learned in my past life, but it was hard to explain, so I fell silent. Gly kept his mouth shut as well.

"What's wrong with you two? I don't think I said anything weird. Isn't that how it was for us?"

"Huh?!" I couldn't stop myself from raising my voice.

Realizing that everyone was staring at her, Amyu's face turned red. "I-I don't mean it that way! I just mean the dungeon is what made us start talking!" she explained in a panic.

"O-Oh, that's what you meant." That surprised me for a second.

"I've had to overcome all my obstacles on my own," Fiona said, her tone a little more genuine than usual. "I've thought about what it must be like to be rescued before. It does sound rather appealing."

"Right?! You get it!" Amyu said excitedly.

"I think you're more likely to be the one doing the saving, Amyu," I added.

"Shut up! What's wrong with dreaming?! You've been a total killjoy this whole time."

Sorry. I guess Amyu has a side to her that's kinda like Yifa. That's surprising.

With a whimsical giggle, Fiona turned her gaze toward the center of town. "I'd like to go over there," she said, immediately pulling my hand. With that, the

strange topic came to an abrupt end.



The central part of town was home to larger buildings such as government offices, the churches, and branches of large merchant firms. In between those buildings, small restaurants and general stores dotted the streets while houses filled the remaining gaps. At least, that was how it had been in the past. Now it seemed things had changed, if only a little.

"There are more buildings than there used to be," I said. I could see three and four-story residential buildings that hadn't been there just a few years ago. It wasn't nearly on the level of Lodonea or the imperial capital, but the town seemed to have developed and increased its population. "Your Highness, where are we going?"

"Um..." Fiona looked around and mumbled to herself. "The church is that way, and the sun is that way, so... I'd like to head this way."

"Do you have a destination in mind?"

"Not at all. We're just taking a walk," Fiona said with a smile. It certainly didn't seem that way, but perhaps that was just how the princess was.

"How long are you two gonna hold hands? We're not in a crowd anymore," Amyu said with an annoyed look.

I pulled my hand away from Fiona in a hurry. "Pardon me, Your Highness."

Fiona didn't say anything.

"Uh, Your Highness?"

Fiona silently stared at me for a while, her smile still on her face, before finally speaking. "It's nothing, Seika. But you never know what might happen, so please stay next to me."

"Sure..." As I grumbled a half-hearted reply, Amyu elbowed me in the side.

"What are you being all flirty for?"

At what point have I done anything flirty?

Our group reached the town square before long. I thought it was where she

had wanted to go, but contrary to my expectations, she showed no interest in the square itself and we walked along the outskirts.

"Whoa, they're building something crazy," Amyu said in surprise. Looking up, I saw what seemed to be a rental building under construction. It was indeed quite tall—it was already seven stories high. Had it been built in Lodonea or the capital, it probably would have been regulated.

"My goodness. It's even bigger than the church," said Fiona.

"Gimme a break. The price of land increases so they go and build this. Hey, don't get too close."

Fiona responded with a smile as Gly tried to stop her. "I'll be fine. Come on, Seika, let's get a closer—"

I approached Fiona as instructed, then a sudden gust of wind blew through. The construction workers high up grabbed onto pillars and beams in a panic as an unpleasant noise rang out. It was the sound of one of the pillars supporting the four-story building breaking. Lurching from the wind, the building's balance had been destroyed. To make matters worse, it was leaning right toward us.

"Wind Lance!" Gly unsheathed his spellblade and cast a mid-level wind spell. It blew away the falling debris with force and accuracy unrecognizable from the spells he'd used two years ago—but he didn't get all of it. The remnants of the earthen wall and pillars rained down on us.

Just then, a shadow appeared overhead. The falling debris was intercepted and dull sounds filled the air. "Are you two okay?!" Her mithril spellblade in hand, Amyu came running over.

I looked up once again and saw that a giant hand had emerged from the ground and covered us like an umbrella. "Is this part of a golem? You've gotten better, Amyu."

"Why do you sound so relaxed?" Amyu sighed. "Anyway, it's no big deal."

"Was that completely incantationless?" Gly asked. "Ha, you're not half bad, honor student."

"You were all right yourself, soldier. You fell short at the end, though."

"Thanks for saving us," I said. The two of them shot me annoyed looks.

"What were you spacing out for? You almost died. That's not like you," said Amyu.

"Were you asleep or something?" Gly asked.

It wasn't as though I hadn't noticed. They had just seemed capable of handling it, so I'd left it to them. I could have teleported us away if it had been necessary.

"Sheesh. Hey, was anyone injured?! If anyone's hurt, bring them to the lord's estate and we'll have a military doctor treat them. And have the one in charge of this construction see the lord's representative. The architect too."

Leaving Gly to talk to the construction workers, I turned to Fiona. "Were you injured, Your Highness?"

She didn't respond.

"U-Umm, Your Highness?"

Fiona puffed out her cheeks and had an unsatisfied look on her face. With a "hmph," she turned toward Amyu and approached her with a smile. "Thank you, Amyu. You as well, Gly."

Watching her from behind, I thought to myself. Did I disappoint her?



At that point we decided it was time to head back, so we retread the path we'd come. Fiona was ahead of me, chatting with Amyu. It was like the way she'd been so attached to me earlier had all been a lie—she no longer spoke to me at all.

I think she was hoping I'd be her knight in shining armor. We had just spoken about what happened when men and women braved crises together, and I was the victor of a combat tournament, so she knew I was capable. She probably felt let down after seeing how useless I had been. I let out a small sigh. Maybe this will teach her not to get her expectations up for no reason.

As we approached the market street once again, traffic increased, and naturally, so did the amount of eyes looking Fiona's way. A lone stall at the edge

of the market caught my attention. It had colorful fabrics and accessories for sale.

"Your Highness, wait just a moment, please."

"Pardon?"

Without waiting for Fiona's response, I ran over to the stall. Returning with what I'd bought, I spoke to Fiona again. "Sorry about that. Could you hold still for a second?"

"Sure..." I walked behind Fiona and tied her long hair up over her head with a braided string I had bought from the stall. Finally, I wrapped a vine-patterned scarf around her head to hide her hair. "Now you look a little more like a local. You shouldn't draw as much attention now. At least not until we get back to the manor," I said with a slight smile.

"It doesn't look strange?" Fiona asked uneasily as she patted her head.

"Not at all. It matches your clothes too," said Amyu.

"It's not bad. And it makes our lives easier when you don't stand out so much," Gly added.

"Is that so?" Fiona giggled, this time patting her head happily. "I wish I'd brought a hand mirror."

"I can prepare a mirror for you." *Phase of earth and metal: Glass Mirror*. A large, oval mirror emerged from the earth. Fiona stared in wonder for a moment, then looked at her reflection from several angles before giggling happily.

"I'm glad you seem to like it. I can prepare something a little more highquality next time," I said.

"No, this is fine. Thank you, Seika. This is my first time ever receiving such a gift. I'll treasure it," Fiona said with a grin. I had been a little hesitant about getting her something so cheap, but if she liked it, then there was no problem.

"This mirror is incredible," Amyu said, peering at the mirror I'd created. "I've never seen one so clear. I can barely tell where the real ground ends and the reflection begins."

"Aha ha ha, well..." I awkwardly laughed her off. It was a technique I'd gotten from a Venetian alchemist where glass was coated in a thin layer of silver. It had taken a lot of work to recreate it with a spell.

"I bet it'd be worth a lot if we sold it."

"Knock it off."

"Your magic never makes any sense," said Gly.

Truth be told, I wasn't sure why I had expended so much effort on a spell like that either, even if it did come in handy in surprising places.

"You seem pretty experienced at tying up hair, Master Seika. Yet I don't remember you ever doing it for your disciples," Yuki whispered into my ear.

I looked after a young girl while I was in the West. Stop talking to me. Now's not a good time.

"Just what sort of life did you lead while you were in the West? I'm quite curious."

Don't be.



That night, after dinner had come to a close and the lights around the manor were starting to go out, I got thirsty and headed to the well. On my way there, I caught sight of Gly in the courtyard, swinging his sword under the moonlight. He seemed to be training and hadn't noticed me.

"Well, aren't you diligent?"

"Huh? What do you want, Seika?" Wiping off his sweat, Gly shot me an annoyed look.

I wasn't really sure what to say. Truth be told, I wasn't certain why I had called out to him. "Nothing in particular. How about I take you on? I still remember a little swordplay."

"Don't be stupid. You won't even serve as practice."

Yeah, probably not. In my past life, there had been a period of time when I'd learned how to use a tachi alongside a disciple with little talent for sorcery,

under the tutelage of a renowned warrior. I had learned a few techniques, but I had been no match for our teacher and my disciple had quickly surpassed me. I had no talent for the blade. Now that I was rusty—no, even in my prime, I wouldn't have been a worthwhile opponent for Gly.

"Turns out you actually had a knack for swordplay," I said.

"What's wrong with you? You're grossing me out."

"It was just a compliment. You were good enough to be chosen as the princess's holy knight, after all."

"Ha." Gly sat next to me and took a drink of water from a canteen.

Holy knights were magic swordsmen who served at Fiona's side. Essentially, they were just bodyguards, but there were fewer than ten of them and their strength was unmatched. They had defeated countless assassins and monsters—at least, according to the bards' songs.

In one of his letters, Luft had said that during her inspections, Fiona had visited a military base in the east and selected Gly to become her holy knight at first sight. However, the official appointment had to take place at the palace, so they needed to return to the capital. It was a great honor for General Petrus that one of his men had been chosen as a holy knight, so he tasked Gly with leading a platoon to escort the princess back to the capital. They were on their way back now, stopping at the Lamprogue estate so Fiona and the soldiers could rest.

After a brief silence, Gly opened his mouth. "Do you know why her bodyguards are called holy knights?"

"Can't say I do."

"She spread the name herself. It sounds good to the people, and it's easy for poets to write about. In short, it's a public relations move."

"You mean it's all for show and has no substance?"

"Hardly," Gly said, taking another swig of water. "They're the real deal. I'm probably the weakest of the lot. Her two maids are crazy—the ones who stopped Fiona this morning. They beat the crap outta me during our trip and

called it training. And they're supposed to be low-ranking members, so I can't imagine how scary the others are."

"I thought she left them all at the capital. I guess not. Maids, huh?" Come to think of it, I had gotten that vibe from them. "So, what are you trying to say?"

"I don't think I was chosen for my strength. She's got some kind of ulterior motive. She's a politician, y'know."

"A politician..." I pondered Gly's words. "She doesn't seem like one to me."

"Appearances can be deceiving. She escaped her confinement, built a reputation, and now she's even being mentioned in succession discussions. Do you really think that's all a coincidence?"

"Are you saying she planned it all?"

"Yeah. The name 'Holy Princess,' and her reputation among the people too. She told me herself."

"Accomplishing all that at her age certainly isn't normal," I said quietly. "Maybe if she has a natural gift for politics..."

"That's not all there is to it. It goes beyond any kind of talent. You don't gather that many absurd people to be your holy knights through talent alone."

"If it's not talent, then what is it?"

Gly took a deep breath. "Have you heard of the oracle priestesses, Seika?"

"No. Is that someone in the central church?"

"They were a family who existed in the past, unrelated to the church. Once every few hundred years, they would prophesy the birth of the Hero and the Demon Lord. Her mother was one of their descendants. The Holy Princess has the blood of the oracle priestesses running through her. She can see the future."

"The future?" I repeated it back at him.

"It just pops up in her head. A certain time, a certain place—a scene or memory that she witnesses. Remember when that building collapsed earlier today? She probably saw that too. I'm not sure what it meant, but that's why she went out of her way to go there. And I bet she saw me losing to you the day you got here too."

"But that didn't actually happen. You suddenly called it off."

"She says that the future can change. Which I guess is pretty obvious if you think about it."

I pondered for a moment before speaking. "You mentioned a family that predicted the birth of the Hero and Demon Lord. Is that the priestess from the fairy tales?"

"Yeah. But they aren't fairy tales."

"That's odd. The priestess in those stories couldn't see the future. She just sensed the birth of the Hero and Demon Lord a little before it happened."

"Beats me. The imperial family's got a gift for magic, so maybe that combined with her priestess blood."

"You heard everything you just told me from the princess herself?"

"Sure did," Gly replied. "Nobody knew her mother was descended from the oracles, but just as Fiona was born, she foresaw the birth of the Hero and Demon Lord. That might be why her mother passed away right after. She heard that from her foster parents, and that's when she learned what her power was. At first, her mother's prophecy was treated as the delusion of someone suffering during childbirth, but the empire's intelligence soon confirmed it. Similar information seemed to be circulating among the demons as well, yet for some reason they didn't know of the birth of the Demon Lord. That's probably why Fiona was confined to her home. She's the sole oracle in the empire's grasp. Though I'm sure they didn't expect her future sight."

"If all that's true, then I can't imagine it's a coincidence. The emperor must have known Fiona's mother was descended from the oracles."

"I wonder. Normally I wouldn't buy it, but with the emperor, it's possible he planned the whole thing."

"Does the emperor know who the Hero and Demon Lord are?" I asked.

"How the hell would I know?" Gly practically spat. "Fiona was a baby when

the Hero and Demon Lord were born, so she probably didn't see an actual revelation about them. That said, I bet she knows who they are from her future sight. I thought it was weird that she wanted to meet an ordinary student so badly, but now that I've fought her, I know why—that Amyu girl's the Hero." Gly looked at me. "That's a scary expression on your face. Guess you knew too, huh?"

"It's a long story," I said, looking at the ground.

"Don't go involving yourself with the Hero and Demon Lord, Seika."

"It's strange to hear you worry about me."

"I'm not," Gly said with a scowl. "Don't get in Fiona's way. Despite how it might seem, she's looking toward the empire's future."

"The empire's future, huh?" *I guess I should expect that from a politician*. I took a deep breath. "For someone telling me not to get involved, you sure are talkative. Was it okay for you to share all this with me?"

"It doesn't matter. She's gonna make all this public eventually anyway. If you doubt me, then ask her yourself. Just don't mention it to her maids. They'll kill me."

"You've given this a lot of thought. I'm surprised. I figured you'd just be celebrating serving a beautiful woman."

"Ha, like hell!" Gly swung his sword in irritation. "I don't give a damn about women!"

"Huh..." I was bewildered. Something had to have happened to him to warrant such an extreme reaction.

"You be careful, Seika. Having all those women around you can only lead to ruin as far as I'm concerned."

"I-I'll keep that in mind. But if that's how you feel, why did you agree to become her holy knight? From what I've heard, I feel like you could have just stayed at the military base."

"I thought it'd be a promotion. I had no idea it'd turn into such a pain in the ass."

"Then what are you gonna do? It's not too late to decline."

"It's way too late, dumbass! Besides, I can't do that," Gly said as he looked into the distance. "I'm curious about the future she sees."



"Master Seika." When I got back to my room, Yuki called out to me from atop my head. "Is what he said true? I think he holds a grudge against you."

"It didn't seem like a lie to me." I couldn't think of any reason for Gly to go out of his way to deceive me. "Fiona's ability is a little hard to believe, though."

"You mean seeing the future?" Yuki asked, slightly confused. "Why is that? Can't you do the same with your divination?"

"Divination and seeing the future are two different things," I explained.

"Divination can only show you specific results regarding specific matters. For example, seeing someone's fate from their birth star, interpreting omens from the cracks in a tortoiseshell, and predicting good or bad fortune from the layout of a house or city."

"How is that different from future sight?"

"Divination requires you to have tools, information, and knowledge beforehand, and what you can learn from it is limited. In addition, it has an established methodology, it can be performed by anyone, and it can be taught to others. None of those hold true for future sight—you just suddenly know the future without any sort of preparation. You can't teach it to others. It's a supernatural ability entirely removed from the realm of sorcery."

"So it's like a kuda-gitsune's foresight?"

"Strictly speaking, that's also a form of divination. The closest thing I can think of would be the prophets spoken of in the West or the ayakashi known as kudan." Kudan were ayakashi capable of speech, with a human head and bovine body. They would prophesize a significant event immediately upon their birth, then die. It was said that their predictions always came true.

"I've heard of kudan, but I've never seen one."

"I have one, actually."

"Huh?! How?! Don't they die right after giving a prophecy?"

"There was a kudan that predicted the birth of another kudan in a village in the Tango province. I stayed there for a while, monitoring any cows that went into labor."

"That sounds like a lot of work!"

"Then, when it was indeed born, I sealed it before it could speak. Sorry, but I can't show you. If I released it from the other plane, it would give a prophecy and then die."

"Uh, that's fine. I didn't really want to..." Yuki said, sounding slightly grossed out, before pulling herself together. "Anyway, what are you gonna do? That princess could be a threat to you."

"I don't think so. She may see the future, but that power isn't omnipotent. Prophets and kudan can't see the future as they please. As long as I don't flaunt my power, I should be fine. Politicians are a nuisance, but..." I gave a slight chuckle. "I just need to avoid getting too involved."

## Glass Mirror

A spell that creates a glass mirror coated in silver. The technology to create mirrors using the silver mirror reaction had yet to be created both in Seika's current world and in his past world before reincarnating. However, a very small number created by sorcerers and alchemists aware that covering a pane of glass in a thin layer of silver could create a highly reflective mirror were in circulation.

## Act 4

"Seika, how about some tea?"

"Oh, this is where you were, Seika. Would you like to chat?"

"Seika? Where are you? Seika!"



Resting my back against the wall of a shed, I let out a long sigh. It wasn't visible from the manor, so I was finally able to relax knowing I wouldn't be found. Fiona seemed to have taken a liking to me and had been following me everywhere I went since that day.

Just when I decided not to get involved with her... Maybe I shouldn't have been so friendly with her. However, it came to an end today. We would leave tomorrow, and after escorting Fiona back to the capital, I probably wouldn't have to interact with her anymore. As I thought to myself, a figure passed by.

"Whoa! Seika?! What are you doing here?" Amyu said in shock. She had a mock sword in her hand and looked a little sweaty.

"Back at you. Were you training?" I asked.

"Yeah, I had your brother practice with me a little."

"Huh?! You mean Gly?"

"Obviously."

"Why would you do that?"

"It just kinda happened. He was training in the courtyard when I stepped outside this morning."

Training late at night and early in the morning—he really was diligent. Granted, his motivation was beating me up. "Are you okay? Be careful, he might have ulterior motives. He didn't try to touch you or anything, did he?" I felt obligated to ask just in case.

"Huh? That's disgusting. No, he didn't. We were just sparring. I couldn't win at all," Amyu said with a sigh. "Guess I should expect as much from your brother. Whoa, what's with that look?"

I'd rather not think of him as my brother. Having said that, he's not as bad as he was in the past. He's more serious, more considerate, and has the strength to back it up. He still has some flaws, though, like his weird hostility toward me and his grudge against women.

At the same time, another thought occupied my mind. Why can't Amyu win? She was the Hero. She certainly wasn't lacking in talent. It didn't seem like Gly was overbearingly strong either. The obvious answer was that she was simply weak—at least, for now. Regardless of how the public saw her, her strength was a far cry from the Hero of legend. But she's almost fifteen. How can that be?

"Getting lost in your thoughts again, huh?" Amyu said as I fell silent. I heard a hint of annoyance in her voice. "Anyway, your turn. What're you doing here?"

"Hiding from Her Highness."

"Oh." Amyu sounded like she understood. "She's taken a liking to you, huh?"

"I wish she'd leave me alone. Dealing with people in positions of power isn't my forte."

"You're not? You seem pretty used to it to me. Then again, I guess that's not something a person who wants to become an adventurer would be good at." Amyu gave an awkward smile. "Still, today's the last day. We're leaving tomorrow," she said, her tone a little softer. "You could at least chat with her a little."

"Amyu."

"I saw her moving warboard pieces in the window all by herself. She looked lonely. I just thought I'd let you know. See ya." Leaving me with that, Amyu walked away.

I stared at her back as she left and sighed. Fine, I guess I'll go. It might be good to talk with her a little.



Like shogi, xiangqi, and chess in my previous life, this world had a board game called warboard where the players moved pieces representing soldiers. Fiona sat alone at a table by the window on the second floor of the Lamprogue manor and moved an infantry piece forward.

"You aren't going to ask somebody to play with you?"

Fiona raised her head and smiled at me. "No one will do it. They all just say they can't win. Do you know how to play warboard, Seika?"

"I know how the pieces move, at least."

"Then shall we play?" Fiona asked, returning the pieces to their starting positions.

I sat down opposite Fiona. "If nobody else can beat you, I don't think a beginner like me stands a chance," I said softly.

Fiona giggled in response. "I'll play with fewer pieces, of course," she said, clearing away some of the pieces on her side. She removed the mage, the sage, and even the powerful dragon knight and chariot pieces, leaving her with only infantry, knights, and her king.

"Can you even win with so few pieces? You can't use pieces you capture from your opponent, so all I have to do is trade one-for-one."

"In theory, you're correct," Fiona giggled. "However, warboard's victory condition isn't capturing all of your opponent's pieces. That said, using your opponent's pieces is an interesting idea. Perhaps we should try playing with a rule like that sometime. You may have the first move, Seika."

I moved one of my infantry pieces forward. "If you're giving me the first move, then it must be advantageous to go first. Are you sure about this? I'm not good enough to know how to hold back, so I may well end up winning."

"Go right ahead. If you can, that is. In fact, how about we make a wager?"

"What kind of wager?"

"The loser must do one thing the winner asks."

"That's a pretty big wager!"

"It's just for fun, of course, so you're welcome to refuse any request you find unreasonable. What do you say?"

"All right, I'll take you up on that."

"I'm going to hold you to it," Fiona giggled.

"That's a little scary."

"Just so you know, I'm going to win," Fiona said cheerfully as she moved a knight. "You might not expect it from me, but I'm actually quite good at this game."

"No, I wouldn't call it unexpected. Having an eye for tactics is important in governing."

"My, you're giving me too much credit." Fiona moved her king. "This is merely a hobby. I didn't have too many forms of entertainment before I was free, you see. My battlefield isn't this sort of bloody place."

"Then where is a politician's battlefield?"

Not answering my question, Fiona giggled and moved one of her pieces. "Seika, what do you think the most powerful piece in the world is?"

"I assume we're not talking about warboard anymore?"

"No, I mean right here. Why don't you try pointing out where it is? If it's not here, then that's fine as well."

"Sure," I said, pointing right at Fiona. "The strongest pieces here are you and I, Princess Fiona. From infantry to the king, we manipulate all the other pieces from behind, and we can't be slain on the battlefield. Politicians are the strongest pieces in the world."

"My, that's a very pleasing answer, Seika," Fiona said with a bright smile. "I think most people would have said the dragon knight or the king. Your answer was exactly what I was looking for."

"Then was I correct?"

"Nobody knows the correct answer. However, my answer is different."

"What do you think the strongest piece is?"

Fiona giggled. "The strongest pieces in the world are the people right here," she said, drawing a large circle behind the board with her finger. There was nothing there. It was just the surface of the table. "There's nothing here right now, but in reality, soldiers, kings, and politicians have countless people around them. The people who live in this country."

"You think the nameless common man is the strongest?"

"Yes." Fiona nodded without hesitation.

I wasn't convinced. "Sure, the people can rebel and bring down the government, but that's the exception rather than the rule. Most of the time, the people are powerless and exploited."

"That's quite true, but nonetheless, the people are the strongest." Fiona smiled in response to my frown. "Kings and politicians don't create anything themselves. They simply pilfer the crops and resources produced by the people in the name of taxation. In reality, they're more like parasites—fleas feeding on a wild beast."

"That's a rather extreme thing to say, even if you are the imperial princess."

"Fleas aren't stupid," she objected lightly. "Their jumping ability is quite impressive."

"This sounds like you're mocking me."

"In addition, they suck blood, spread disease, and inflict pain on a host several times their size. It might even be a simple feat for them to kill said host—much like the common man to a king. However, a flea will never do that. It isn't even an option. Killing the host would ensure its own destruction. A flea cannot survive on its own."

"…"

"Politicians can't exist without tax revenue. An army can't function without supplies. The people are our lifeline—a single, massive host. We can never destroy them." Taking one of my pieces, Fiona kept going. "In short, the people hold great power. The power of overwhelming numbers. Were they to unite, the empire's military would be helpless in the face of their resources. It takes a lot to get to that point, but displease the people enough and it could happen.

So long as the people remain eternal, they can't be defeated. Do you follow, Seika?"

I silently let her continue.

"The people are a massive, undying beast with immeasurable strength. If it awakens from its nap and bares its fangs at us, we fleas are powerless to stop it. The people are the strongest piece in the world."

I hadn't expected that point of view. In my past world, the people were stolen from by bandits and nobles. They were powerless weaklings who died of starvation, cold, and disease. That was the case in Japan, the Song dynasty, and even the Islamic world and the West. Yet the logic of Fiona's argument held true even in my past world. Perhaps it was a matter of national character.

According to legend, the first emperor of the Urdwight Empire was a heroic figure who had risen up from the common people. To this day, there was still a ceremony during imperial succession where the people gathered in the capital to recognize the new emperor. It probably wasn't possible for them to ignore the will of the people.

"Is that why you're actively spreading your name among the people?" I asked.

"Indeed. I have no kings or dragon knights at my disposal, so I must use the piece nobody pays attention to. If that piece is the strongest, then all the better." Fiona gave a slight smile. "For the time being, such things are nothing more than a weakness. But I'm certain that in the distant future, all politicians will have to pander to the people. In time, the people will seize control of royal authority in every country."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Is it truly so strange? It's only natural that authority be in the hands of those with the most power. As surely as water flows to the lowest point, that day will eventually come—a world where people choose their leaders and condemn their wrongdoings," Fiona said as though viewing a dream.

She really is a politician, even as a young girl with no real power or backing. She can see dynamics and perspectives I can't even fathom. "You're certain?" I asked quietly. "Surely even your future sight can't see that far ahead."

"My, did Gly tell you?" Fiona asked. I nodded and she continued, sounding surprisingly relieved. "I'll have to thank him. I'd been fretting over how to tell you."

"So it's true?"

Fiona giggled and played with one of her captured pieces. "When I was young, I didn't understand what this power was. The futures I saw and the accompanying memories all felt like fleeting possibilities—things that could change with the mere flap of a butterfly's wings. It was only when I realized there were currents of fate like raging storms that couldn't be altered by a single flap, that I understood the nature of this waking dream. Then, when I was told who my mother really was, that realization turned into conviction and I understood why I had been born."

"To use your future sight to benefit the empire?"

"No, not that," Fiona said with an ephemeral smile. "People's lives have no meaning, Seika."

I remained silent and Fiona continued.

"The future is constantly changing. Even the currents of fate are simply the most probable futures. People's lives have no meaning determined by the heavens. When I realized that, I decided to live as I pleased. Rather than live in confinement, I chose to live by my own will, unbound from anyone else's intentions." As I remained silent, Fiona ended her turn with a smirk on her face. "You're at quite the disadvantage, Seika. Do you want to continue?"

"I'm not giving up until it's over. We still have the same number of pieces."

"My, what a lovely attitude. But I must inform you—it's checkmate in seven moves."

"Then I forfeit. I'd like to know how you would checkmate me from here, though."

"I move this here, and then..." Fiona's slender fingers moved her pieces.

Seeing that it really was checkmate, I let out a heavy sigh. "I was completely defeated. You really are good at this game, Your Highness."

"You're not going to say that being able to see the future is unfair?"

"I doubt your power is that convenient. And even if it was, our moves aren't hidden. Anyone could predict their opponent's next move if they tried. Future sight doesn't matter. I think you're just actually good at warboard."

"That makes me happy to hear," Fiona said with a happy grin. "Though if I may be greedy, I would've liked you to say I wouldn't do something so cowardly."

"Ha ha, I can't go quite that far. I'm afraid I don't know you well enough yet to say that your personality doesn't have a dark side."

"In that case, how can I get you to trust me?"

I went silent. Despite the smile on her face, Fiona's tone and expression were serious. Maybe her concerns stretched beyond my trust and into the realm of political alliances. Thinking that responding with a joke might have been a mistake, I spoke in a similarly serious voice. "Generally speaking, by voicing your true thoughts and exposing your weaknesses."

"My true thoughts and weakness, you say?"

"If you want someone to trust you, you have to be frank with them. Then they'll open their heart to you as well...or so they say. That may be difficult given your status, though."

"Hmm..." Fiona had a pensive look on her face. "Very well, then. Shall I begin?"

"Uh, sure?"

"I don't like pigeons."

"Huh? Pigeons? Why is that? Did you have a bad experience with one or something?"

"No, it's not that, but... Anyway, I'm just afraid of them. Especially their eyes. Have you ever seen a pigeon's eyes up close?"

"I don't think so."

"Then try it if you get the chance. The whites of their eyes are actually red,

and their pupils are tiny and perfectly round. Their eyes are bizarre and you can't tell what they're thinking. Of all animals, pigeons are the only ones I'm certain don't have a soul. They're like insects. I used to cry whenever I heard a pigeon outside my window."

"That was quite the rant. I can't say I've ever met someone that afraid of pigeons before."

"I was also afraid of stew when I was little."

"S-Stew? Like, the food?" I asked. "You mean you just didn't like it?"

"No, I loved it. But I was afraid of it. I was especially afraid of eating it in a room with a hearth during winter."

"Why?"

"I found out that stew was made from wheat, and I was quite well learned as a child, so I knew bread was made from wheat as well."

"R-Right."

"Bread is made by baking wheat. And when you eat stew, there's wheat inside your stomach, no? So I thought that if I got near a hearth with wheat in my stomach, it would expand inside me, turn into bread, and come back out my mouth."

"Aha ha ha ha! A-Are you being serious?"

"Yes, I am. That's why when I was a child, I would immediately run to a cold room after eating stew and cover myself in blankets. I caused a lot of trouble for my attendants."

"Aha ha ha ha ha!" I laughed at the top of my lungs. How could I not? "Heh heh, p-pardon me. I-I'm sure you were seriously worried about that. Heh heh!"

"I'm sure you'll face a terrible punishment for the crime of laughing at a member of the imperial family. How very sad."

"Even the most loyal retainer would laugh at that!"

Fiona giggled. "Is that so? It does feel somewhat nice. I've never had someone

laugh at my life story before. Oh, and I have one more thing. This one is a true thought rather than a weakness. I want to help," she said quietly, a gentle smile on her face.

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose there was a child playing in a field. A large hole opened up nearby, and the child didn't notice. If the child keeps playing, they'll eventually fall in. I want to help them. I'm the only one aware of the hole, so I'm the only one who can do something."

After thinking for a moment, I responded. "Is that child the empire?"

Fiona answered my question with only an ambiguous smile. "I'm sorry, but I can't go into detail. The future might change in unforeseen ways."

"Was meeting Amyu part of that?"

"Well... Yes, you're welcome to think that."

"And these are all things you wish for of your own will?" Fiona gave me a firm nod, and I returned her simple gesture. "Then you have my support. If there's anything I can help you with, please let me know."

"I'm happy to hear that."

Immediately after speaking, I realized I had once again gotten myself involved in something I didn't have to, but it was too late now. I'm sure Yuki will tell me off later. Best not to think about it for now. "Personally, I'm no good with carriages."

"Carriages? That's surprising."

"They make me really sick. That said, I've started to get over it recently."

"I'm fine eating stew now as well."

"Is this a competition?"

Fiona giggled. "I had fun chatting with you, Seika," she said, standing from her chair. Come to think of it, we had been at it for a while. "Thank you for coming to see me."

"The pleasure is all mine."

Giggling again, Fiona looked down at me. "I'll have to think hard on what request I'll ask of you."

"Oh... Ha ha." I looked away and gave a dry laugh. Crap. She didn't forget.



The next morning, our brief vacation was over, and it was time to depart for the academy once again.

"Is this all the luggage, Seika?" Luft asked as he looked over the line of carriages.

We weren't the only ones heading back. Fiona was going as well, along with Gly's platoon that had been assigned to guard her. In addition to the impressive number of carriages, there were also lightly armored soldiers on horseback. It seemed like it would be an even safer journey than my trip to Astilia.

"Should be," I replied. "Thanks, Luft."

"Keep it up at the academy."

"I know."

"Also, decide what you want to do after you graduate soon. Father will probably want you to continue your education."

"Oh, y-yeah. I will," I said, my smile freezing on my face. I hadn't told Blaise or Luft that I was going to become an adventurer yet. I was planning on keeping quiet until the last minute. I didn't want him to refuse to pay my tuition.

"You take care too, Yifa. You were working this whole time. Did you make sure to get enough rest?" Luft asked.

"I'm fine. Don't forget to take care of yourself too," Yifa said bashfully. Yifa had been helping the servants and slaves with housework during her stay at the manor. She didn't have to anymore, but she said she didn't have anything else to do. Maybe she had wanted to speak with some of the people she was close to. It would probably be a while before she saw them again, if ever.

"And you as well, Miss Mabel. Do come again if you ever get the chance."

"Okay..." Mabel nodded slowly as though she was reluctant to leave.

I looked at her in annoyance. Mabel had done nothing but laze around the entire time. I couldn't blame her too much since she was a guest, but I still wanted to chastise her a little.

"Ugh... I wish I could stay here forever," she said.

"Is this how you act at home?" I asked.

"No, I have to act all proper there. It's exhausting."

"Would it kill you to act proper here too? What are you getting so relaxed for?"

"I understand where the girls who wanna marry nobles are coming from now. I could do this for the rest of my life."

"You know, those girls are expected to raise kids, participate in high society, and support their husbands with their work. They don't just sit around all day like you!"

"Why are you being so mean?"

"Everyone has to get by on their own strength. So get right back to studying when we return to the academy."

"Ugh... I don't wanna..." Mabel said with tears in her eyes.

So this is her real personality, huh? She's nothing like Yifa or Amyu. They're the type to take action even if you leave them alone.

"Hey, Seika! What are you doing over there?!" Gly's voice suddenly filled the air. Having returned from his platoon's carriages, he was glaring at me with his hands on his hips. "It's time to go. Hurry up!"

"Quit yelling."

"Sorry, Gly. I was holding him up," said Luft.

"Hmph. Fine then. See you later, Luft."

"Gly..."

"What? You're gonna come to the capital again at some point, aren't you? We can just see each other then."

"That's right." Fiona appeared from behind Gly with a grin. "That is, if Gly doesn't fall to the assassins sent after me."

"Now's not the time for that ominous crap," Gly grumbled.

"I'm just kidding," Fiona giggled. "That was a joke. There's no need to worry." "R-Right..."

Fiona smiled. Maybe that was her way of being considerate—by implying that a future where Gly was slain by an assassin would never come to pass.

"Your Highness," said Luft.

"Thank you for the warm welcome, Lord Luft. It has been a wonderful comfort before my trip back to the capital. I apologize for any trouble caused by my prolonged stay. Please convey my gratitude to Lord Blaise as well."

"I'm terribly sorry that my father, both the head of the family and lord of this territory, was unable to see you off." Luft sounded genuinely remorseful.

"It's quite all right. Lord Blaise is busy managing his territory and his research. If we consider that to be his contribution to the empire, then I'm not offended. And I understand that it's difficult for him to speak with me given our difference in age."

As they said, Blaise was nowhere to be found. Despite it being the imperial princess's departure, he had found an excuse to leave seeing her to his heir, Luft. To be honest, it felt a little inappropriate to me, but Fiona had probably picked up on the type of person Blaise was during her stay here. Had it been an attempt to signal to other factions that he didn't take the princess seriously, Fiona likely would have said something. However, since it stemmed purely from laziness, it was clear she had given up on trying. The worst part was that Blaise seemed to have expected as much and had done it deliberately. He was a surprisingly shrewd man.

"Hearing that makes me feel a little better," Luft replied awkwardly. I got the feeling he was more suited to being a benevolent lord than a shameless researcher or noble family head engaged in factional disputes. "Your Highness, it has been a great honor to have you choose to stay in our territory. Nothing would please me more than to have allowed you to relax during your

inspection. For the sake of the empire, I will continue to devote myself to the prosperity of this land and the advancement of magical studies."

"And I'll be borrowing your capable little brother," Fiona said.

"Please use him however you see fit."

"Hmph!" Gly grumbled.

A moment later, I saw a red-haired girl's face peek through the window of a nearby carriage. "Huh? You guys aren't ready yet? Should I get out?"

With a short chuckle, I raised my hand toward Luft. "See you, Luft. Take care." I wonder when we'll see each other again. I never thought of him as family, but I can't help but hope that time comes sooner rather than later.



For the return trip, I didn't end up riding with the same group I had arrived with. This was because Fiona had insisted that I ride in her carriage. Her two maids had been furious, but Fiona had been as stubborn as ever. Now I was sitting face-to-face with the beaming princess, with Gly, who had also been requested, seated right next to me.

What's with this lineup?

"You don't talk much on carriages, do you?" Gly asked, sounding annoyed.

"Talking too much makes me feel sick," I replied with a grim expression.

"I suppose you weren't lying about being bad with carriages. You've been like this the full two days since we left. The carriage isn't even shaking much right now," said Fiona.

"I'm sorry I can't be a good conversation partner at the moment. Not to get graphic, but I can at least assure you that I won't cause any trouble."

"It's nothing to worry about," Fiona assured me with a giggle.

"I can't believe there's actually something you can't handle," Gly said.

"Yifa said the same thing two years ago." Everyone has things they're not good with. It's part of being human. I turned my attention to a shikigami I had flying overhead. Our line of carriages was proceeding down a road flanked by

trees on both sides. "Gly."

"Yeah?"

"Are you sure it's okay for you to be here? Aren't you the platoon's commanding officer?"

"It's fine. I've handed most of my duties over to Lauren at this point. I'm not gonna be around to give them orders when they head back to the base after this. And it's not like I can disobey an order from the imperial princess anyway."

Fiona giggled in response. "You seem displeased."

"I didn't say that."

"But what if there's an emergency?" I asked.

"The whole reason we have this huge escort is to prevent emergencies," Gly explained. "They aren't here to fight—they're here to intimidate."

"But what if there's one anyway?"

"Why're you being so persistent?" he demanded irritably. "If that happens, then I'll take command while protecting the princess. It's no big deal."

"All right, then," I relented. "Not to change the subject, but how many members would you say the average bandit group has in the empire?"

"Bandits? They can range anywhere from a few people to a hundred. But I haven't heard of any large groups around here."

"Really?" I mumbled. "Then what's that?"

At that moment, a thunderous roar echoed from in front of the carriage, immediately followed by shouts and the cries of horses.

"Wha-?!"

"It sounds like they got the decoy carriage," Fiona said calmly despite the increasingly tense atmosphere.

I gave a slight smile and opened the door of the carriage. "Guess there's an emergency." I jumped up and grabbed the edge of the carriage's roof, spinning around in midair to land on top of the carriage. "Phew. It's been a while since I did any acrobatics." Once I had a clear view of our surroundings, I could see

dozens of rough-looking people spread out to either side of the road. In front of us, the decoy carriage had been crushed by a massive boulder. No cliffs were nearby—it had to have been earth magic.

"It was a bust! Topaz, move to six! Corundum, fire at carriage eight! Back left, aim for the guy on the roof! Three, two, one..." The voice of their leader rang out from somewhere, and the nearby bandits aimed their crossbows at both Fiona's carriage and me on top of it. It appeared that they intended to fire straight through the walls.

They seem pretty well-equipped for bandits. Oh well. Portability must have been their priority, as their crossbows were much smaller than the ones I'd seen during my time in the West. At that size, they likely wouldn't have too much force. This should do the trick.

"Fire!" With impressive synchronicity, the bandits unleashed their bolts.

In response, I cast a spell using the hitogata I had flying overhead. *Phase of yang: Magnetic Force Cloud.* The oncoming bolts veered off course, completely missing me and the carriage. The corners of my mouth curled into a smirk. "Ha ha, where are you guys aiming?"

"B-Boss?!" one of the bandits shouted.

"What the?! Nephrite, provide backup at eight! Corundum reserve unit, kill the guy on the roof!" The remaining bandits who hadn't fired took aim at me, but the result was the same. Their bolts all swerved away, flying into the forest or empty sky.

"I-Is that magic?!"

"It sure is," I replied to the astonished crossbowman with a chuckle. When metal approached the powerful magnetic field created by yang ki, it would become magnetized and be repelled. So long as they used metal-tipped bolts, they would never be able to break through my Magnetic Force Cloud.

"Boss! Six and seven were decoys too!"

"It's eight! They've got a mage with them! Topaz Squad, crush them with your spell!" Among the group rushing toward us, there was a man holding a staff and hurriedly chanting an incantation. "Towering yellow! Spirits of immovable

stone, fall and turn your rage into a hammer! Rock Fall!" A giant boulder appeared far above the mage's head and began falling diagonally toward me. That must have been how they crushed the first carriage. However, it disintegrated just before it reached me. "What?! A-A barrier?!"

"It's nice fighting against mages." A basic barrier was all it took to invalidate anything they did.

The leader's eyes went wide with panic and he looked over his men as he shouted. "Draw your swords, boys! Ignore the mage! Attack together and get our target inside the—"

Wind suddenly burst from within the carriage. Several bandits directly in front of it were blown away, and the enemy group immediately fell silent. "Done with the crossbows? Finally, I get to have some fun." Stepping out of the carriage, spellblade in hand, Gly shouted in a loud voice. "Men! This is your chance to save the princess! Any of you want poets to write about your valor?!" Brave battle cries rang out from the soldiers locking swords with the bandits. The enemy's morale, on the other hand, had been considerably dampened.

Huh. Guess there's a leader in him after all.

"Seika." As I admired my brother, I heard Fiona's voice from inside the carriage. "Can you capture the enemy alive?"

"How many of them?"

"As many as possible. The leader in particular."

"As you wish." *Phase of wood: Binding Vines.* Green vines erupted from the earth all around us, wrapping around the bandits, then hardening and lignifying to restrain them. Gly watched dumbfounded as the plants bound the enemy. The energized soldiers were also taken aback by the sudden turn of events.

The roadside battlefield had fallen silent. "How was that? They've all been captured," I said to Fiona, who was similarly silent inside the carriage.



"Huh?! B-Bandits?!"

"That explains all the commotion."

"And you caught them all?"

After explaining the situation to Yifa, Mabel, and Amyu, I nodded. "Yep." Their carriage had been traveling a ways ahead of us, so when their driver had realized we were under attack, he'd immediately fled. Since their carriage was a random one that had been hired locally, the bandits had probably thought they were unrelated. I'd been watching everything through my shikigami, but I never would've guessed they hadn't even known we'd been attacked.

For the time being, we had paused our journey and were treating the wounded. Healers capable of light magic were hurrying from person to person. Fortunately, it didn't seem like anyone had been injured so severely they were beyond treatment. I didn't need to step in myself.

As for the bandits, they'd all been gathered in one place, still tied up. Fiona and her escort were currently discussing what to do with them.

"Th-That must have been scary. I'm glad they didn't come after us," Yifa said, timidly glancing at the bandits.

"We could've handled them easily," Amyu replied. "Right, Mabel?"

"No thanks. That sounds like a pain," Mabel answered.

"You guys sure are carefree." I, on the other hand, had been pretty stressed. Granted, the girls would probably be fine against bandits. Assuming they were actually bandits, that is.

"I-I'm surprised they attacked a carriage with a military escort," said Yifa.

"Yeah... It's odd," I replied.

"What's gonna happen to all of them?" Amyu asked. "Are we gonna take them with us to the capital or something?"

"And make them walk? That would make us late for the new semester," said Yifa.

"I don't think we have to worry about that," I answered. We could probably fit all of them in the carriages if we had to. The carriages Fiona had been using as decoys were empty, and all our stuff didn't take up too much space. Of course, that came with its own set of issues.

"Seika." I heard a voice call out to me from behind. Turning around, I saw an elderly man standing there. Gly's second-in-command, Lauren, spoke to me with his posture perfect and back straight. "Princess Fiona has summoned you."



"Thank you for your assistance, Seika," Fiona said, sitting on a chair inside a simple tent the soldiers had set up. Neither Gly nor any of the soldiers were present now—there was only one of the princess's maids.

"Those two scary maids of yours aren't here?" I asked, glancing around the tent.

"My, so you realized they were my holy knights? They're tending to the soldiers right now. The elder sister is skilled with light magic."

"I see," I said, sitting in the chair her other maid had pulled up for me.

Seated in front of me, Fiona was smiling happily despite the attack that had just occurred. "I appreciate you capturing those assassins."

"So they were assassins." I figured as much.

"You knew?"

"I think anybody would be able to figure it out. Normal bandits wouldn't be that well-equipped, and they definitely wouldn't dare attack a carriage guarded by the military."

Fiona giggled. "The deception wasn't very effective, was it?"

"I'm not sure there was much they could do." I followed up with a question.

"Did you want them alive in order to use them as leverage against your political rivals?"

"Correct. Of course, first we have to find out who sent them."

"Any ideas?"

"Who can say? I have too many enemies to count."

"Sounds like you've got it rough."

"Oh, I'll be fine since you caught them all for me. Ordinarily, that wouldn't even have been possible. Someone is in for a shock when we bring them back

to the capital alive. None of my opponents will so much as consider doing something this foolish again." Fiona smiled whimsically.

I paused a moment before asking another question. "So you're really planning on bringing them all back to the capital?"

"Of course. I intend to take good care of them. They're a gift from you, after all," Fiona added with a note of mischievous glee.

"You knew this was going to happen, didn't you? That's why you had so many extra carriages ready."

"Some of them might perish if they were forced to walk the entire way, and more importantly, I didn't want to delay our return. I would hate for you all to not make it back in time for the new semester."

"I appreciate your concern, but I don't think taking them all back with us is a good idea. You should leave them tied up here except for the leader and a few others."

"My, and why is that?"

"What if they managed to break free and fight back? While we may have numbers, that's less of an advantage if we bring them all with us. We could end up getting wiped out. Cutting their tendons is an option, but..."

"There's no need for that—they should behave themselves. They know they have better odds waiting for a chance to escape rather than taking action themselves."

"What do you mean?"

"They're waiting for the next attack."

I couldn't help but frown. "There's another group? Doesn't that mean we're in even more danger? Keeping an internal risk around when there's another attack looming isn't smart."

"There won't be another attack. The other mercenary group isn't coming."

"How do you know that for sure? I doubt your future sight showed you that much. The future is prone to changing."

"No, Seika. Fate has raging currents that can't be overturned by the flap of a butterfly's wings. This is their fate," Fiona said as though looking somewhere far away. "The future you speak of won't come to pass."

#### Magnetic Force Cloud

A spell that utilizes Lenz's law to deflect arrows and bolts. When an arrow enters the magnetic field created by yang ki, a special electric current called an eddy current is induced in the metal arrowhead, causing the metal to create its own magnetic field. This magnetic field always opposes the magnetic field that created it, causing the arrows to veer away from the original field. This is known as Lenz's law, and it is utilized today in things such as train brake systems.

# Interlude: Mercenary Commander Howser in the Forest

It happened a few days before the surprise attack.

Howser, the commander of the Howser Mercenaries, had a dream. It had been five years since he'd left behind his life of less-than-savory activities. He had assembled other failed adventurers and formed a group that started calling themselves mercenaries. Taking on jobs like eliminating bandit groups and protecting villagers from monsters, they had steadily improved their equipment and gathered allies.

Little by little, they had gained renown until a big job suddenly came in. The request, passed through multiple intermediaries to conceal its origin, was to assassinate the Holy Princess. Howser had been hesitant—despite his situation, he still tried to take jobs that helped people as much as possible. But this time, the reward had been too enticing to ignore.

The advance payment alone had been enough for them to purchase highquality gear. On top of that, other mercenary groups had received the same request, so they had to move first if they wanted the full reward. Even powerful adventurers and knights might have given into temptation in his situation.

If the mercenary group's strength increased, they would be able to take on more lucrative jobs from high-ranking clients. By steadily building up their reputation, they'd eventually be able to negotiate with a developing city and be formally hired as knights in charge of its protection. Then they wouldn't have to live a vagrant lifestyle anymore.

No longer a band of suspicious drifters, they would be able to live quiet lives as inhabitants of the city. Once uncertain and distant, Howser's dream was growing more realistic by the day. Or at least, it had been until just a moment ago.

His dream had been crushed in an instant. In a forest by the road leading to

the imperial capital, Howser felt a cold sweat run down his back as he gazed upon the end.

"Human warriors are so frail. They make a good meal, but they aren't even close to a good fight," an ogre with a ruddy brown complexion grumbled in boredom. He was far larger than a human and held a bloodstained club in his hand.

Men who had once been Howser's allies were sprawled out in front of the ogre. One's skull had been crushed, one's torso had been smashed from the side, and another had a massive footprint on his chest. His former comrades lay scattered on the ground, their corpses mangled in ways that would have been impossible for a human to cause—and those were far from the only impossible deaths.

Some of his men had been turned into stone. That was no metaphor. Their skin, hair, and even eyes were hard and gray, leaving only their clothes and weapons their original color like some sort of sick joke.

"Fishies, what are you eating?" a girl yawned. She was curled up in a ball and floating in the air with dark element magic. "That's a star..." She wore frilly clothes unsuited to the forest, and her long, tawny hair fluttered in the wind. The words coming out of her mouth were utterly incoherent, and with both of her eyes closed, she seemed to be asleep. However, the third, wide-open eye on her forehead—the red evil eye that had turned his allies to stone—squirmed around, surveying the area. Even for a tria, a race known for possessing the evil eye, her power was abnormal.

Some of his comrades were still breathing, but Howser knew he couldn't save them. Two shadow wolves tugged at and played with a groaning body. They were dangerous monsters with sharp fangs and the ability to conceal themselves in shadows. Sitting in the center of the pack was a small beastfolk boy with long ears, brown fur, and a smile on his face.

"Aha ha ha! Dee, Tess! You two have so much energy! Huh, you're giving this to me? Thanks! You're such a good boy!" The rabbitfolk boy happily thanked a minotaur next to him who had just presented a human corpse. The minotaur was a monster that had belonged to a tamer working for Howser, and the

corpse it was offering was its former master whom it had just strangled to death. Suddenly betrayed, he had died wearing an expression of shock. To be able to win over someone else's monster in an instant, the rabbit boy was more than just a skilled tamer—he was a prodigy.

Looking to his right, Howser saw one of his men burst into flames. Orange fire gushed from his mouth, nose, and eye sockets. Still barely alive, the man staggered and eventually fell to his knees as flames tore through his stomach.

Nearby, a devil clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Tch, already dead. I made the flames too strong and didn't teleport them to the right position. Damn it! My accuracy still isn't good enough! I'm never gonna live up to my brother like this!" The expression of the black-furred devil with twisting goat horns warped with frustration as he spat out his words. He teleported his magic fire inside his targets and burned them from within. Despite having turned so many of Howser's men into charred corpses with his bizarre technique, the devil lamented his inexperience.

"Why..." Howser groaned vacantly. "Why are demons in a place like this? And such an odd group..."

"Are you the leader?" a lone demon standing in front asked Howser. He had black hair and black eyes. Though he resembled a human, his skin was deathly pale and covered in black markings that resembled tattoos.

"What's a divine demon...doing here?"

"I'm the one asking questions. Why were your soldiers hiding in this forest?"

Howser was frozen in place by his abyss-like eyes. He had no option but to answer truthfully. "We were waiting in ambush...to assassinate the Holy Princess..."

"Hmm... Human political conflict. Then I suppose it had nothing to do with us."

"Guess you were worried for nothing, Captain." said the rabbitfolk boy.

"Better safe than sorry," said the devil. "Anyone would be on guard seeing unknown soldiers lying in wait."

"Mmm..." the tria mumbled. "How confusing..."

"Gah ha ha! We got an unexpected resupply, so it all worked out! But I gotta say, Zolmnem"—the heartily laughing ogre's voice did a complete reversal and took on a chastising tone—"that human is a warrior, and the leader at that. You shouldn't approach him carelessly."

"No way the captain would lose to a human. Look, he's scared outta his mind. I bet he's weak," the rabbit boy said.

"No, I can assure you he isn't weak." The divine demon named Zolmnem peered at Howser with his dark eyes, then mumbled to himself in a voice so quiet his allies couldn't hear him. "His level and stats are fairly high—particularly his HP and endurance. His Economic Fortune and Motivation skills are also quite useful for a mercenary leader. His stats aren't half bad."

"Ha... Ha ha..." Howser had no idea what the divine demon was talking about. Feeling that it had been praise, he gave a stiff smile. "Th-Thank—"

Then his head went flying. His field of vision rolled along the ground, catching sight of his body from the neck down being engulfed in flames. The strike was so fast it couldn't be seen, and the magic had been cast without any incantation. As his consciousness faded away with his life, the last thing he heard was Zolmnem's cold voice.

"But you don't compare to me."

## Interlude: Divine Demon Zolmnem in the Forest

Zolmnem was deep in thought in a forest a little ways off from an imperial highway. Ro Ni's monsters and Mudelev were feasting on the bodies of the mercenary group they had just slain.

"Humans sure taste good. Eating their flesh is the only time I don't mind this journey! Gah ha ha!" Tossing aside a thigh bone, the ogre warrior Mudelev gave a hearty laugh. Although he was one of the ogre race's most capable warriors, Zolmnem wondered if the journey was hard on him. Zolmnem observed Mudeley.

Name: Mudelev / Lv: 81

Race: Ogre / Job: Heavy Warrior

HP: 18423/18423

MP: 4906/4906

Strength: 1510 Endurance: 1301 Agility: 588 / Magic: 451

Skills: Club Technique Lv 7, Martial Arts Lv 6, Elemental Resistance Lv 5, Status Condition Resistance Lv 3, HP Enhancement Lv 5, Strength Enhancement Lv 7, Endurance Enhancement Lv 6

"Hey, Captain. Can I take this one with us?" the rabbitfolk tamer Ro Ni asked, stepping out from the shadow of the minotaur he'd tamed.

Zolmnem shook his head. "No, it stands out too much. It doesn't compare to your monsters either. It's dead weight."

"All right, then. Meede! Eat up!" A moment later, a massive dragonkin known as a wyrm emerged from underground, twisting around and swallowing the minotaur whole. Ro Ni smiled as he watched it unfold. "Is it tasty?" The wyrm

named Meede was one of Ro Ni's monsters. He had given all of them names. Zolmnem observed Ro Ni.

Name: Ro Ni / Lv: 38

Race: Beastfolk / Job: Tamer

HP: 2970/2970

MP: 2158/2158

Strength: 253 Endurance: 198 Agility: 922 / Magic: 360

Skills: Beast Tamer Lv MAX

"I'm full..." Pirislaria, the tria user of the evil eye, floated in the air as she napped nearby. The only time she was wide awake was when she was eating. After eating some of the mercenaries' rations, she had promptly fallen back asleep. Naturally, most tria were nothing like her. Zolmnem believed her condition was the result of her evil eye being particularly powerful, even for a member of her race. Zolmnem observed Pirislaria.

Name: Pirislaria / Lv: 46

Race: Tria / Job: Sorcerer

HP: 5236/5236

MP: 25486/27644

Strength: 150 Endurance: 181 Agility: 247 / Magic: 1723

Skills: Dark Magic Lv 4, Evil Eye Lv MAX, Evil Eye

Enhancement Lv 7

"Uhh..." Zolmnem raised his head at the voice and saw the devil youth Gal Ganis holding food in his hand. "You should eat something too, Zol. You've been spacing out this whole time."

"I appreciate it, but I'm fine. I didn't have to do much fighting thanks to you

all."

"You sure? Don't overdo it," Gal Ganis said with concern in his voice as he bit off a piece of dried meat.

He's a good kid, Zolmnem thought to himself. Gal Ganis was a member of the Black clan, a family of devils, and was expected to become the next head of the family. Zolmnem sometimes wondered if it had been a mistake to goad him into taking revenge and joining the party by telling him his brother had been killed by the Hero. Zolmnem observed Gal Ganis.

Name: Gal Ganis / Lv: 66

Race: Devil / Job: Mage

HP: 10011/10011

MP: 21060/22948

Strength: 700 Endurance: 589 Agility: 692 / Magic: 1213

Skills: Fire Magic Lv 9, Earth Magic Lv 2, Dark Magic Lv

9, Magic Enhancement Lv 3

Everyone had grown strong—and not just in ways limited to their level or stats. There were things Zolmnem couldn't see even with his skill, and they were the most important of all. That was something he had learned over the course of this journey. Finally, Zolmnem observed himself.

Name: Zolmnem / Lv: 88

Race: Divine Demon / Job: Magic Swordsman

HP: 14307/14307

MP: 33211/33473

Strength: 1550 Endurance: 1035 Agility: 1411 / Magic:

1593

Skills: Swordsmanship Lv 9, Martial Arts Lv 7, Fire Magic

Lv 5, Ice Magic Lv 8, Wind Magic Lv 6, Earth Magic Lv 2, Light Magic Lv 9, Dark Magic Lv 6, Elemental Resistance Lv 4, Status Appraisal Lv 4

Zolmnem had never seen anyone else who possessed the Status Appraisal skill. What was a "status" to begin with? Why was it that things he had no way of knowing were visible to him? Who had gathered this information? Zolmnem silently closed his eyes, clearing away his doubts. The power that had troubled him so much in his childhood and that he hadn't even shared with his allies wasn't important right now.

"Everyone, this will be our final resupply." His party members all stopped what they were doing and looked at their leader. "Our goal is near. And with it, the end of our journey." Zolmnem continued as his party listened silently. "It's been a difficult road. We're fortunate to have made it this far without being pursued and without having lost a single member. We must accomplish our mission. Our odds are good, but they are not guaranteed. I need you all to be prepared for even greater challenges ahead." A weighty silence fell over the party. It had by no means been a comfortable journey—Zolmnem knew that.

Mudelev had been constantly worrying about his wife and children he had left back in his hometown. When they had killed humans, the only time he quietly averted his eyes from the corpses was when it was a parent with a child.

Ro Ni might have seemed cruel, but Zolmnem had seen how he cared for his monsters. When one of his shadow wolves had died, he had dug a grave for it all by himself and remained there for a long time.

Due to the burden placed on her by her evil eye, Pirislaria was gradually spending less and less time awake, yet she tried to act like it was nothing to avoid concerning everyone else.

Zolmnem knew Gal Ganis didn't actually want to take revenge for his brother. He was just trying to live up to Black's expectations of him. Nonetheless, for the future of demonkind, he had pretended to be onboard with Zolmnem's offer.

Further hardship awaited them, yet Zolmnem was undeterred. "However, I wish to make this journey even more challenging. I want us to set a new goal

beyond our current mission. Because I believe that all of us together can accomplish it." It was something he had resolved to one day announce. "To preserve demonkind's future, we shall slay the Hero. And then..."

The Hero had been born, yet the Demon Lord had not. That imbalance would inevitably plunge the world into war—a war in which the demons would be at a disadvantage. That was why they had to kill the Hero. With his Status Appraisal skill, Zolmnem would likely be able to identify the Hero at a glance. As he couldn't be fooled by any body doubles, he had felt that it was his duty to set out with powerful warriors of every race. The Hero's defeat was all of demonkind's dearest wish. But being driven by that alone goal was far too tragic—so Zolmnem continued.

"And then, I want us all to return home together." Zolmnem knew well the difficulty that would entail. When the Hero's death was discovered, they would be pursued. Although their party was small and elite, they couldn't match a horse's speed. When they raided a village to resupply, the human military could be waiting for them. If they were surrounded while resting, they would be put in a terrible position. Everyone else knew that as well. Their journey was one that led to certain death.

"Gah ha ha! That's what you had to say?! Obviously we're going home. What, were you planning on living here?" Mudelev laughed loudly.

"Mmm... I wanna sleep in a soft bed..." Pirislaria mumbled.

"I'm bringing some crop seeds back with me. I wanna be able to feed everyone in my village," said Ro Ni.

"I wanna be able to boast of my bravery and say that I avenged my brother," Gal Ganis added.

Zolmnem thought to himself as he looked over his cheerful companions. *It's* been a harsh journey—but not a bad one.

The heavy warrior Mudelev, the sorcerer Pirislaria, the tamer Ro Ni, the mage Gal Ganis, and finally, the magic swordsman Zolmnem. The days they'd spent together as a party had been fulfilling. Indeed, it had been a grand adventure to face the powerful foe known as the Hero.

"We shall carry out justice," Zolmnem declared to his party. "For demonkind's future, and for our own."

# **Chapter 2**

#### Act 1

At the end of a several-day trip, Fiona's group safely made it to the capital.

"It wasn't long, but I enjoyed our time together, everyone," Fiona told us in front of the massive city gates. Carriages from outside weren't allowed to enter during the day, and even the Holy Princess wasn't exempt, so we had all disembarked in front of the gates. Fiona would swap to a different carriage inside and head to the imperial palace, while the rest of us would spend the night in the capital, then depart for Lodonea. That meant this was goodbye.

"There really was no second attack," I said, watching as the assassins were taken away with their hands tied.

Fiona giggled. "Didn't I tell you?"

I nodded in response to her bright smile. No attacks and the assassins had behaved themselves—it had been a perfectly peaceful trip after that. I looked over at the gates, which were a little crowded due to all the assassins being processed.

"Still, it looks like it's gonna take us a while to get inside. The capital's security is strict, huh?"

"It isn't usually this bad. The imperial court is slightly on edge at the moment."

"Why? Nothing's going on."

"Who can say? I haven't the slightest clue." Fiona gave a suggestive smile. "I wish I could invite you all to see the court, but unfortunately now's not a good time," she said regretfully. "Would you have liked to see the palace?"

"For sure. I'd brag about that for the rest of my life," said Amyu.

"Jeez, Amyu," Yifa giggled. "I'm sure Her Highness is busy."

"I'm fine with whatever if it means we get to stay at an expensive inn," said Mabel.

The girls had all bonded quite a bit during their stay at the Lamprogue estate. Women sure are sociable.

"I'd never had many opportunities to speak with people my age. It's been fun. I mean that." Fiona turned to Amyu, her smile slightly pained. "I'll have to invite you again sometime."

"Hey, Your Highness! We're done over here!" I looked over and saw Gly leading his horse. After turning command over to Lauren, he had said his goodbyes to his men. We'd be saying goodbye to him too, and I wasn't certain when we'd see each other again. "Hmph. Later, Seika," he spat.

"Take care, Gly. Do your best to get stronger," I replied.

"You got a big mouth," he said flippantly, turning his attention to Amyu. "Hey, brat!"

"What? And stop calling me that!" Amyu shouted.

"Keep up the training. Don't try to wing everything—practice your forms. You've got potential."

"I-I don't need your advice!"

They get along pretty well after how they met. Or maybe not? It's hard to tell.

"Now, we should be on our way," Fiona said, looking up at the gates.

"Stay safe. It's been an honor to accompany you," I replied with a smile.

"My, is that all? And here I thought we'd become friends."

"Sure, we can go with that."

"I see neither of the Lamprogue sons treat me with the respect I'm due. I may be something of an illegitimate child, but I'm still an imperial princess."

"Sorry. Luft's the only one of us who's proper."

Fiona giggled softly, then silently approached me. "Seika." Though still smiling, her tone was serious. "I'm on your side. I mean that. Don't forget it."

"R-Right."

"Farewell," Fiona giggled. Her back turned to me, Fiona left for the gates alongside her maids and Gly.

I couldn't figure out what her final words meant. Wasn't she the one who needed allies? She's mysterious to the very end.

"Are you gonna visit your brother's grave, Mabel?" Yifa asked.

"I was planning on going tomorrow morning," Mabel replied.

"Then let's go buy flowers."

"Hopefully they sell them at the market. C'mon, Seika," said Amyu.

"S-Sure," I answered, following after them.



After spending the night in a luxurious inn, we departed from the capital the next morning as planned. After two days of riding a bumpy carriage eastward down the highway, we returned to the academy city of Lodonea for the first time in around a month.

I was surprised at how much the academy dorm felt like home. I'd only lived there for two years, but a lot had happened in that time. Only a few days of spring break remained, and this year's entrance ceremony was rapidly approaching. As the academy started to grow busy, I spent my days tutoring Mabel and shopping in the city until I was suddenly called to the headmistress's office.

On the top floor of the main school building, I was met by an elderly dwarf woman. "No need to be on edge. This isn't anything serious." So she said, but the headmistress both knew Amyu's true identity and had an idea as to how powerful I was. She was absolutely someone to be on guard around. Seeing that my expression wasn't budging, the headmistress begrudgingly opened the conversation. "Would you like to be the representative?"

"Representative for what?" I asked.

"The student body. Do you remember the speech at the entrance ceremony? That's all I want from you."

"Why me?"

"What a foolish question," she tutted. "Because your grades are good, of course."

"Is that all you wanted?"

"I'm not sure what you were hoping for, but yes, that's all. You're a student. The only time I have business with students is when it's time to pick a representative or I have to expel someone. Usually, anyway."

"Is that right?"

"You're allowed to refuse. I'll just ask your servant or some other student. Anybody can do it," the headmistress said nonchalantly. It did seem pretty inconsequential compared to talking about the Hero, demons, or the empire's future. I was a little disappointed.

After pondering a moment, I responded. "I'll do it."

"Oh, that's a surprise. I was certain you'd decline." The headmistress chuckled. "I get the feeling I said the same thing a year ago."

"If you want me to do it, then I don't mind. I assume it's an honor."

"That's right," the headmistress said with a laugh. "To normal students, at least. It looks good on your resume, and it gives you an advantage in becoming a government official. I don't imagine any of that concerns you, but...just accept. That's what a normal student would do."

"Yes," I said, looking down. "It is."



"Master Seika, are you sure about being the representative?" Yuki asked after I left the building. The sun was still high in the sky, but all the gray clouds made it somewhat dark.

"Yeah, it's fine."

"But you're going to draw attention to yourself again," she said with worry in her voice.

"Nobody's gonna care. Same with the tournament in the capital. The kind of

person who draws the eyes of those in power doesn't have an ordinary resume like being a student body representative. They lead more extraordinary lives. Something like being taken from an orphanage because they showed promise in sorcery, then killing their senior disciples and master to rise through the ranks, then disappearing and traveling abroad, only to return home and train disciples of their own. That kind of thing."

Yuki fell silent, so I continued.

"And lately, I've started to feel like it's okay to just be normal."

"What do you mean?"

"Opportunities to wield extraordinary power don't come very often if you live a normal life. I think I grew a little cowardly because of how I died in our previous world. Maybe I didn't need to go out of my way to find someone to be the strongest in my place. I didn't have to get involved with the Hero or Demon Lord. If I hadn't come to the academy, I probably could have lived a peaceful life as a wandering mage."

Yuki didn't respond.

"It's not like I regret meeting those girls or anything. The academy is a good place, and I'm interested in seeing what life as an adventurer is like. I'm not going to change plans this late into it. It's just, I think I'll try to live more normally from now on. I won't be so fixated on avoiding standing out."

"In that case," Yuki said quietly. "Are you going to run away from the enemies who're approaching like a normal person would?"

"You noticed them too, huh?" They were still outside the city for now, but they would likely attack soon. "I'll do something about them. I was just chosen to give a speech at the entrance ceremony. I can't do that if the ceremony gets canceled."

"Do you hear yourself, Master Seika? An ordinary person can't do things like that," Yuki said sharply.

"I'm already involved—I can't ignore it now. Besides, as long as nobody finds out who did it, there's no problem. It'll be easy."

"Master Seika..."

"Yuki, you should stand back. Things are about to get a little hectic." I floated a hitogata in the air. Guess this is my first job as representative.

Summoning:

### Interlude: Divine Demon Zolmnem in Lodonea

It was just before dusk, as the sun fell. Zolmnem looked up at Lodonea's walls before him. Lodonea was nothing more than an ordinary city. Though many students were studying magic, there were no adventurers capable of hunting powerful monsters or elites from the imperial military stationed there. The Hero was still just a child. There was nobody who could pose a threat to the powerful party he had assembled.

Therefore, the fear he felt had to be from the gravity of their mission. The time had finally come to fulfill the purpose of their journey. Zolmnem had long since forgotten that he was capable of feeling such emotions.

Everyone knew the plan. They would corner the students from all four directions, herd them toward the central building, and then slaughter them all. In the event that a student who seemed to be the Hero was found, a signal would be sent using a magic item that had been given to each member. Even if they couldn't find one, the turmoil would be bound to draw out anyone courageous and powerful enough to fight back.

It wasn't a particularly reliable strategy, but it was all they had. Unlike the Demon Lord once had, the Hero wasn't going to just sit on a throne and make themselves easy to find. Zolmnem wished they had more intel. He was well aware of how crucial information was, but they didn't have the necessary personnel.

All they had was a map of Lodonea and the academy, made by capturing a few merchants, then comparing the merchants' drawings and making something trustworthy. Using that map, Gal Ganis would teleport them all to their designated locations. It could be considered a stroke of luck that the merchants' goods—and the merchants themselves—had become an unexpected source of supplies. Now, they would simply have to leave their success to that same luck.

"I have a feeling things are gonna go well," said Ro Ni, breaking the nervous

silence. "Dee and the wolves and Meede are all raring to go. We won't lose to anyone."

"That's the spirit," Mudelev said to the rabbitfolk boy. "Keeping your heart firm is essential to accomplishing great things. A frail heart will lead to failure—in more than just battle."

"Mmm... You've said that six times now..." Pirislaria mumbled.

"We get it already," said Gal Ganis.

The corners of Zolmnem's lips curled into a small smile. He was certain they would succeed. "Let's go," the divine demon said to his companions. A few moments later, the demons had disappeared, leaving only the afterglow of magic circles.



Upon teleporting to the western edge of the magic academy, Gal Ganis immediately knew two things. The first was that everyone, himself included, had been successfully teleported to their destinations. The second was that there was an unexpected fog covering the area. There had been no sign of it from outside the walls, yet the academy grounds were filled with a dense haze.

Even someone who wasn't too knowledgeable about weather conditions like Gal Ganis knew that dusk fog was an exceedingly rare phenomenon—and he'd never once heard of dense fog occurring in confined spaces such as within a city's walls. It was thick enough to get lost in. Nonetheless, they couldn't change plans this late over a minor setback.

"Tch." Gal Ganis created countless flames, slightly thinning out the fog around him. Raising the temperature would clear out the fog, but the heat he could create with magic was just a drop in the bucket. There were too few buildings around him for the fire to spread if he ignited them. In the end, his flames amounted to little more than a light source. Still, it was better than nothing. It at least allowed him to get a grasp of his surroundings.

Much to his surprise, there were humans nearby. They had stopped in the middle of the path and were chatting with each other. They must have been students. They didn't seem particularly bothered by the fog—perhaps it was a

normal occurrence to them.

Gal Ganis clicked his tongue. "Tch! Peace has made them soft. Don't blame me for this." He knew he was being unreasonable. How could they not blame him? Obviously, they would curse their fate. They were about to be killed despite having done nothing wrong. But it was too late for sentimentality.

He had resigned himself to being despised the moment he had taken up the mission his brother had failed and had decided to kill the Hero for the future of demonkind. And this place was his brother's grave—he had a right to revenge.

Gal Ganis took aim at a chatting girl and teleported a flame. It burned her heart and lungs, sparks flying from her mouth and killing her in an instant—or at least, it should have.

"Huh? The hell is this?"



Ro Ni and Pirislaria were teleported to the southern edge of the academy.

"Looks like it worked. This is some crazy fog, though." Pirislaria yawned, and the rabbitfolk boy continued speaking cheerfully. "Oh well. It's not a big deal." As a beastfolk, Ro Ni possessed exceptional senses. He could handle slightly impaired vision.

"You're really dependable..."

"Pirislaria? You're awake?"

"Yeah..."

Ro Ni looked behind and saw Pirislaria nod, her eyes slightly open. It was unusual for her to be awake when nothing was going on. He was sure she'd soon doze off again, but that never stopped her from performing during battle. Ro Ni wondered how it was even possible. "What's got you complimenting me all of a sudden?" he asked.

"You've grown strong..."

"Me? What are you talking about?" The rabbit boy gave an awkward smile. "I haven't changed a bit. Dee, Meede, and the others are the ones putting in all the work. I'm still the weakest one here."

"No... You're stronger than me now." There was a reason Ro Ni had been paired with Pirislaria. Although Ro Ni could control numerous monsters, he was helpless against enemies more powerful than them. Meanwhile, Pirislaria's evil eye was formidable, but its extreme capabilities came with many downsides. That was why they had to make up for each other. Compared to Gal Ganis who could teleport his fire magic with pinpoint accuracy, Mudelev who possessed overwhelming strength, and Zolmnem who was a master of both swordplay and magic, they were weak.

"You've gotten better at using monsters, and your will is stronger..." Pirislaria continued.

"Aha ha, you think so? I guess my mindset has improved a little. I was the strongest back in my village—I didn't think I'd lose to anyone. Meeting the captain and Mudelev and going on this journey was a serious wake-up call." At first, he hadn't accepted that and had often lashed out at Pirislaria. She was the one person he had been unable to accept losing to—it would make him the weakest member of the party. He remembered his constant hostility toward her, but in the end, he had been the one in the wrong.

"I also feel...a little more confident now..."

"You? Weren't you the strongest in your hometown too?"

Pirislaria slowly shook her head. "My power is useless when it's peaceful... All I did was sleep and cause problems for everyone...but today, I feel like I can finally take pride in myself. I wanna tell my mom and dad that I defeated the Hero."

"Then let's hurry up and get this over with." Ro Ni's shadow stretched out, and a pack of shadow wolves appeared one after another. Ro Ni had just noticed the figures of several humans. They were likely students of the academy. "Go, everyone!"

The shadow wolves rushed at the figures. They were a threat even to high-ranking adventurers—an amateur wouldn't stand a chance. The wolf pack would easily be able to corral the humans. However, something felt off. Ro Ni couldn't tell exactly what was going on due to the fog, but the screams he was expecting never came. The shadow wolves seemed confused as well. "What

the? Come back!"

The shadow wolves returned to his side, and Ro Ni squinted at what they were holding in their mouths. "What is that?"



Teleported to the eastern edge of the academy, Mudelev looked out at his surroundings and grumbled. "This fog is thick, but it's manageable." Unlike his uncertain words, his stride was confident. With his surroundings unclear, he determined his destination on instinct alone. Mudelev trusted his warrior's instinct—it had proven itself reliable in all his experiences thus far.

There was no sign of any humans nearby. Mudelev was in charge of the research buildings on the eastern side of the academy's campus, but his intuition was telling him there were no humans inside either. It was possible that the area was seldom used.

"I don't mind that, but it *is* a slight problem." Mudelev didn't desire mindless slaughter. He sought worthy opponents deserving of his full strength, and he only wanted enough to eat his fill. That was plenty. He tried to avoid fruitless killing, be it man or beast. But just this once, he couldn't afford to stick to that principle.

He needed to cause a commotion and draw out the Hero. Screaming and fleeing humans were a necessary part of that.

"Still, there's not much I can do if no one's here. I guess Zolmnem miscalculated—" Mudelev suddenly stopped mumbling to himself and raised his club. With a sound like an axe striking a massive tree, two throwing knives embedded themselves in Mudelev's weapon. "Well, now!" Mudelev looked at his club and raised his voice in admiration.

He could count the number of times his club—carved from an ancient living tree he had once felled—had been damaged, whether by sword, spear, or magic. How had it happened? The knives were no bigger than Mudelev's fingers, yet they had pierced his club, albeit only slightly. He had felt the impact through his weapon. It was no ordinary technique. He immediately assumed it had to be some sort of magic.

"State your name, mighty one." Mudelev addressed his opening, his lips curving with joy. It was a small, female, human child. Her hair was an unusual gray, and she was carrying a large battle-axe that didn't suit her short stature.

"Who are you?" the girl asked, not giving her name.

"I am Mudelev of the ogre race. The one who will defeat you."

"Who hired you? There wasn't anyone like you at the company."

"Company? Gah ha ha! I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Whatever. You're not going any further." The girl immediately closed the distance between them and swung her battle-axe.

Mudelev had expected as much, but she was faster than he thought she'd be. He caught her downward swing with a metal ring reinforcing his club. The impact shook Mudelev to his core as the loud, heavy sound of metal striking against metal filled the air. Had he attempted to block her axe with the bare wood, its edge would have sunk deep inside.

The girl quickly pulled her battle-axe back and followed up with a low sweep along the ground aimed at his legs. Mudelev planted his club on the stone paving, blocking her once again, only to immediately swing his fist after. The girl ducked low, deftly dodging the attack. Next, she swung her battle-axe upward in one swift motion. Not only was she fast, but she showed no hesitation in the face of an ogre fist capable of pulverizing a human skull.

"Gah ha ha! All I can do is defend!" The ogre warrior thought calmly as he fended off the girl's fierce barrage. Her technique didn't make sense. Each strike was exceedingly heavy, yet she moved nimbly as though her weapon were completely weightless. One could supplement their physical strength with magic, but body weight was different. She was far too small. Unless her body was made of lead, her movements shouldn't have been possible.

A deep smile etched itself on Mudelev's face. It didn't matter. A battle against a formidable foe with unusual techniques was exactly what the ogre warrior had been looking for. The girl swung her battle-axe again, diagonally this time, and Mudelev deliberately caught it with the wooden part of his club.

The battle-axe's blade cut deep into the club, but not deep enough to slice

through it. The girl's expression twisted slightly, and the weight Mudelev felt from the axe suddenly lightened. He immediately swung his club with the battle-axe still stuck in it. "Hrmph!" The weapon was torn from the girl's hands and went flying into the fog. Mudelev didn't have time to think about whether she had let go of its handle on purpose or not.

The girl leaped back, putting distance between them. Throwing knives appeared in her hands, and she threw them in one fluid motion. The knives were aimed precisely at his neck. Mudelev raised his left arm, catching the blades with brawny muscle they couldn't penetrate.

A wide grin on his face, the ogre looked at the girl. "How naive! It'll take more than that."

"You're the naive one." All of a sudden, numerous shadows spouted from the blades embedded in Mudelev's arm. Belt-like shadows coiled around him, tightly binding the ogre.

"Hrm..." Mudelev mumbled, a slightly perplexed expression on his face.

"I'm capable of more than you think. Now, be good and stay put."

"Sorry, but..." Mudelev flexed his arms and the shadow bindings were effortlessly torn apart. "According to Zolmnem, I'm resistant to magic of every element," he said to the wide-eyed girl. "Gah ha ha! Come at me with your strength, not cheap tricks! With skills like yours, surely you know how to fight empty-handed."

Without a moment's delay, the girl reached down to the knives at her thighs and hurled them. Mudelev had already taken a step forward and swung his club upward, batting the knives out of midair. Not missing a beat, he swung his club back down at the girl's head. Her expression frozen on her face, the girl didn't move. It was too late for her to avoid the attack. The thick club, reinforced by metal rings, was going to crush her skull—

"Hrm?!" The club found only empty air. It forcefully struck the ground, shattering the cobblestone beneath it. The girl was nowhere to be seen. She had vanished. Mudelev looked around, expecting a counterattack, but there was no sign of her. There was no one at all.

All that remained was a single talisman. "Hmm... That's odd." Mudelev picked it up. Curiously, it was cut into the shape of a human.



Zolmnem paused and surveyed his surroundings. He was in a wide-open area with no buildings around. It wasn't where they had planned to regroup. He had been carefully confirming his location within the fog, yet somehow he had ended up here—and that wasn't the only strange thing. He hadn't found any of the students or instructors he'd been expecting. In their place was...

"Zol?" Turning to face the familiar voice, Zolmnem saw Gal Ganis emerge from the fog. "I don't think this is near the main building," the devil youth said, clearly confused. "For some reason, my feet just moved in this direction."

"The same happened to me," Zolmnem replied.

"Hmm? Is that Zolmnem over there?"

"Huh? Captain?"

"Mmm... What's going on?"

Mudelev, Ro Ni, and Pirislaria appeared shortly after the sound of their voices. Zolmnem's suspicion grew even deeper. "You guys too, huh?"

"Everyone's here? This isn't where we were supposed to meet, is it?" Gal Ganis asked.

"It's probably not too far off," said Mudelev.

Pirislaria yawned. "The humans...are acting strange..."

"As I thought." Zolmnem pulled a scrap of paper out of his pocket. It was a human-shaped talisman that had been cut in half. "There was no reaction from anyone I cut down. These talismans just fell to the ground. I suspect it's some form of magic."

"I fought against a powerful girl, but when I went to deal the finishing blow, she turned into this talisman," Mudelev said, holding up a similar piece of paper.

"Ah, that happened to us too!" Ro Ni exclaimed.

"Same here," Gal Ganis agreed.

Ro Ni produced a talisman that had been pierced by fangs, and Gal Ganis pulled out one that had been burned.

"What should we do, Captain?" Ro Ni asked, uncertain. "Something isn't right."

Zolmnem hesitated. It was clearly an abnormal situation, that much was certain. There was probably someone lying in wait for them, but if they didn't kill the Hero now, they wouldn't get another chance. Deep in enemy territory with no way to resupply, they couldn't wait and try again. Their journey would end in failure.

That said, pushing on in this situation would surely prove fatal. Zolmnem's intuition was telling him that. They needed to retreat. It was dishonorable, and they might be criticized by their brethren when they returned home, but he couldn't throw his comrades' lives away for nothing. Just as Zolmnem was about to open his mouth to speak—

"Take heed, for the child who comes at twilight shall bare his fangs, wreathed in fire." The strange, resonant words struck the party's ears. They all turned to the voice in unison, only to find a lone human boy. "That was a poem written by a swordsman who hunted youkai for a living."

Sitting on an unusual magic circle floating in the air, the boy looked down on Zolmnem's group with a faint smile. How had nobody noticed him? He now spoke in understandable words, no longer using the strange language he had started with.

"It means beware of visitors who show up as night falls. A being taking the form of a child may suddenly bare its fangs and clad itself in oni flames. The man who wrote it was a coward, but he had a good point. The twilight makes it difficult to discern the human from the inhuman. You experienced it yourselves, didn't you? Because of this evening mist, you didn't immediately notice that all the humans around here were actually my shikigami."

Zolmnem silently drew his treasured blade. The opponent before him was dangerous—his warrior's intuition told him so. The boy's smile widened, seemingly picking up Zolmnem's intention to fight.

"You'd notice right away if you got a good look at them, though. Unlike animals, people are really sensitive to human features and mannerisms. There'll always be something off about human shikigami. Skilled sorcerers with a knack for it can make good ones, but I'm not too great at it. Then again, you're demons, so you might not have a sense of what human faces are supposed to look like." The boy seemed to be enjoying himself as he continued. "Oh, but you there, big guy. The girl you fought was real. She's strong, isn't she?"

How should he open? With his sword, or with magic? What was the boy's weakness? What did he have hidden up his sleeve? Information was crucial. Knowing the enemy was advantageous, no matter the fight. Zolmnem fully understood how beneficial his Status Appraisal was when facing off against an unknown enemy. Zolmnem observed the boy.

"Hmm... He seems like a strong one. To an exceptional degree," Mudelev said, stepping toward the boy. Perhaps from the excitement of facing such a powerful foe for the first time in his life, he had an expression of pure joy on his face. "I couldn't ask for a better opponent. Come, let us compare our stre—"

The warrior's head went flying. It rolled across the stone paving, blood trailing behind it. The joyful look was still stuck on his face. Shortly after, his now headless reddish-brown body crumbled to the ground. It happened so suddenly that everyone was frozen in shock.

"Oh, he died," the boy mumbled, sounding somewhat disappointed. He grasped a knife and a human-shaped talisman in his hands. However, the talisman was headless. The head was probably the piece of paper that had fluttered to the ground just a moment ago. "His curse resistance was way too low. A bandit leader I once fought was hit by this technique and continued charging at me, blood pouring from his neck. Your training was really lacking." The boy looked down at the ogre's corpse dismissively.

Mudelev had died in an instant. The ogre race's greatest warrior hadn't even been able to raise his club. He'd died before he even knew what had happened.

"Mmm... Die..."

Sensing a power that made his hair stand on end, Zolmnem turned and saw the evil eye on Pirislaria's forehead wide open. It was glowing an ominous red he'd never seen before. She was likely going all out for the first time. But it was pointless. "Stop..." Zolmnem couldn't help but blurt out.

"Interesting." The boy simply mumbled in amusement. "The evil eye, huh? From the looks of it, you must be a tria. I hear the evil eye your kind possesses is even stronger than a human's. Why don't you see how it compares to this guy's?"

Talismans floated in the air. As the space around them distorted, a giant white snake nearly as large as a wyrm appeared. Its eyes had been crushed and were devoid of any light. It was an odd summoning spell—was it a contracted monster? Zolmnem had never heard of any monster like it. The white snake slowly pointed its snout at Pirislaria.

"Agh! Ah!" Hovering in midair, Pirislaria writhed in pain. Her normally shut eyes were open as wide as they could go, while her third eye spun erratically. She clutched her chest with both hands, and all that escaped her mouth were hoarse gasps. Finally, her gravity magic faded and she fell to the ground. The tria sorcerer had perished, her eyes still open.

"What do you think? Its evil eye is powerful enough to stop a person's heart," the boy said with a faint smile.

Evil eye? That wasn't possible. The snake was missing both its eyes.

"Did you know that some species of snakes have a third eye? This one's called a hakuda. It's a pit viper that's grown old and been transformed. It can see infrared radiation using an organ near its nose. I wonder if you understand what infrared radiation is. It's light beyond red on the rainbow that carries heat. Of course, that's just a literal translation of the ancient Greek word."

Zolmnem had no idea what the boy was saying. Was it some kind of natural history? He had never heard of a monster called a hakuda or a language called ancient Greek.

Suddenly, the white serpent reared back, and a moment later a massive wyrm smashed through the stone paving from below. It was Ro Ni's Meede. Having failed to bite off the snake's head, Meede rotated in midair and once again attacked the boy's monster. The moment the snake pointed its snout at Meede, Meede's body went stiff. It then fell sideways and began convulsing on the

ground. However, Meede had accomplished its goal.

Hidden by the dust kicked up from the wyrm's collapse, Ro Ni had managed to get close to the giant snake. He looked at the dangerous monster with an innocent gaze and spoke, his words full of affection. "Let's be friends!" Ro Ni could make monsters serve him through his voice alone. Neither ferocious wild monsters or monsters that had already been tamed by someone else were exceptions. It wasn't a technique he had trained—it was an innate talent, bolstered by his Beast Tamer skill.

But it was pointless. It was all pointless. "Stop, please..." Zolmnem muttered, his voice hoarse.

The white snake curiously turned its head toward Ro Ni. Then, it opened its mouth wide and swallowed him whole.

"Wha—?!" Nearby, Gal Ganis gasped in shock.

Ro Ni's wolves emerged from the shadows, and the massive snake began killing them off one by one. The pack of wolves, enraged by their master's death, fell to the serpent's unseen evil eye.

"Was he trying to do something?" the boy mumbled, clearly perplexed. "Oh, did he want to tame it? Ha ha, good luck taming an ayakashi transformed by its hatred of people." The boy gave a scornful snicker.

The rabbitfolk tamer had died without being able to do a thing. He hadn't even managed to show the enemy his incredible ability. How had that boy gotten a monster even Ro Ni couldn't tame to obey him? It didn't make sense.

Nothing about him made sense. Zolmnem had known that from the beginning. The very act of challenging him had been a mistake. Mudelev, the ogre race's greatest warrior. Pirislaria, the wielder of an abnormally powerful evil eye. Ro Ni, the prodigy tamer. He had thought that just maybe, they had a chance of victory. But he'd been wrong. None of them did—not against that monster.

"Zol, I'll give you an opening. Then you—"

"No." Gal Ganis was the only one left. Zolmnem had to ensure that he survived. "Run. Get out of here."

"But we came all this—"

"Survive. Live and tell our people."

"Zol—" Gal Ganis cut himself off. Maybe he'd noticed.

Zolmnem's hand was shaking. He had observed the boy at the very start. He had seen everything.

Name: Seika Lamprogue(Heruseshe Kasa) / Lv: MAX

Race: Human/Divine Demon(Demon Lord) / Job: For is

HP: 6527/6527

MP: 843502364/843502705

Strength: 391 Endurance: 254 Agility: 347 / Magic: 0

Skills: Swordsmanship Lv 3, Sorcery Lv MAX, Exorcism Lv MAX, Barrier Technique Lv MAX, Cursed Energy Enhancement Lv MAX, Curse Resistance Lv MAX, Spirit Vision Lv MAX, Dragon Vein Vision Lv MAX, Only du Lv MAX, Que go g Lv MAX, I Cling vilation Lv MAX, Liner lans n Altricog Lv MAX, Di iu Rin Disinition Lv MAX, Fing Siui lisio Lv MAX, Que Men Din lia limation Lv MAX...

No—Zolmnem didn't know what he had seen. How was he casting spells with zero magic? What had made his vast pool of MP decrease ever so slightly? What were his indecipherable job and countless skills? Zolmnem knew there were some values he couldn't perceive because his current skill level was too low, but was that truly what they were? It was all too strange. He had never seen a status like the boy's before.

Nonetheless, one thing was clear.

Race: Human/Divine Demon(Demon Lord)

"He's...the Demon Lord."

"Wh-What are you saying?"

"Tell them. You must inform our people, whatever it takes."

"I know why you guys are here. To kill the Hero, right?" the boy said with a faint smile. "Sorry, but I'm not letting you lay a hand on Amyu."

Zolmnem had expected as much. The boy was here, wearing the academy's uniform, attempting to strike them down—what reason could he have but the Hero? However...

"She's under my protection."

That declaration shattered any remaining hope Zolmnem might have had. With his voice on the verge of breaking, he desperately conveyed his final words to Gal Ganis. "The Demon Lord has been born after all. And in the worst possible way."

"What are you talking about, Zol?! Calm down!"

"Listen to me. Get out of here right now. With your teleportation magic, you're the only one who might be able to escape. Do whatever it takes to flee and take this miserable reality with you back to demon territory."

"Reality?"

"Hear me well, Ganis. That boy is the Demon Lord." It was a reality so devastating it would plunge all of demonkind into despair. "The worst possible Demon Lord—one who's taken humanity's side."

"Finished already?" the boy asked, sounding bored.

Under the gaze of the boy's cold, black eyes, Zolmnem's trembling hand gripped his sword. "Go. I'll buy you time."

"No, you come with me," Gal Ganis protested.

"We can't escape together. Don't let my—no, everyone's resolve be in vain."

"I guess you can die, then," the boy grumbled.

Before either of them knew it, a single talisman was floating in front of Zolmnem and Gal Ganis. Zolmnem could only assume it was about to unleash a fatal spell onto both of them. With his final breath, Zolmnem let out a

desperate scream. "Hurry, Ganis!"

As Zolmnem shouted, he aimed the tip of his treasured sword at the boy, casting a spell. It was a powerful light-element spell that unleashed a combination of multiple searing-hot beams of light. Zolmnem had mastered light magic to the extent that he could cast it without an incantation. A dazzling white light appeared at the tip of his blade and—

At that moment, Zolmnem's vision was consumed by scorching crimson, and his consciousness faded away.

#### Act 2

I looked down at where the demons had been. Boiled by molten iron, the training ground had been dyed scarlet and the demons were nowhere to be seen. The onbo-no-yasu didn't like the heat, so the fog around the molten iron had thinned slightly.

Suddenly, I noticed a faint glow—a magic circle on the verge of disappearing. Upon closer inspection, it looked similar to the one Galeos had used.

"Guess one got away," I mumbled to myself.

#### **Brilliant Iron**

A spell that pours waves of molten iron on the enemy. When surrounded by the 2800-degree Celsius iron, all the water in the body is instantly boiled and evaporated, causing a small-scale steam explosion. After the body bursts, the remaining organic matter begins to burn. The molten iron is so hot that it's capable of melting bones, but because it doesn't cause the carbon to sublimate, part of the carbonized corpse remains.

### Interlude: Gal Ganis Outside Lodonea

Gal Ganis fled. Teleporting away from certain death, he appeared outside Lodonea. After that, he teleported several more times in quick succession until the city's walls were just a blur in the distance. Once he exhausted all his magical power, he started running. He'd barely run anywhere, yet he was already out of breath and tripping over his own two feet—but he couldn't stop.

"Damn it... Shit!" Gal Ganis stopped in his tracks, frozen by fear. He couldn't believe he had been about to try and fight that boy back then. Zolmnem was likely no longer alive. Gal Ganis couldn't get the waves of molten red he'd seen right before he had teleported out of his head. Everyone had died. Despite how strong they'd been, they hadn't been able to do a thing to that boy. How had it happened? Who could have predicted there would be someone like him?

"He's the Demon Lord?!" Gal Ganis panted. "Th-That's absurd!" He didn't know how Zolmnem had come to that conclusion, but now he was the only one who knew. He had to let the devil king—no, he had to let all races know of this danger.

Gal Ganis suddenly directed his attention forward. Off in the distance, he saw a horse-drawn cart headed toward Lodonea. It was probably a merchant, as the cart had no escort. Gal Ganis felt his emotions calm. He was still far from demon territory. He would need to resupply several times, and now that he was alone, he couldn't afford to let a single opportunity slip. On top of that, the sun would soon set, and he'd put some distance between himself and Lodonea. Surely even the Demon Lord wouldn't be able to locate and pursue him that quickly.

For now, he should attack the cart to secure food, then find a place to camp for the night. That was his best option. Racing toward the cart, he created a floating magical flame. He couldn't do any large-scale teleportation anymore, but he could still manage simple fire magic. That was all he needed at the moment. Just as Gal Ganis launched the fire—

"Gah..." He suddenly vomited blood. His floating flame went out and the devil

youth collapsed on the ground. As he bit into the dirt, he glanced at his chest, where a sharp pain was coursing through him. Blood was flowing from a vertical wound as though he'd been pierced by a long blade.

"What the?" Gal Ganis didn't know how or when it had happened. However, he knew exactly who had caused it. "I-Is he really the Demon Lord?" His consciousness flowed out of him along with his blood as his body grew cold.

It wasn't possible. The Demon Lord of legend hadn't had powers like that. It just didn't make sense—it was as though he was from an entirely different world. "Who is he?" Shortly after his final words, the devil drew his last breath.

The powerful demon warriors who had set out to slay the Hero had all met their end.

## Act 3

"Well, it doesn't really matter if he runs," I said, swinging a knife in my hand. Its point had stabbed right through a hitogata.

"That's terrifying, Master Seika." After I collected the onbo-no-yasu and was tearing up all the talismans I had used to keep people away, Yuki suddenly called out to me.

"Hmm?"

"Whether or not you have a curse medium doesn't even matter to you. You did all that with just a hitogata."

"Oh, no, it definitely matters. There are a lot of restrictions if you can't use your target's hair or blood. Also," I said with a strained smile, "it's a bit of a pain."



Just like that, the second demon attack was resolved without incident. I'd come up with several countermeasures after the last incident, so there wasn't much damage this time around. Aside from some destruction of the magic training ground, it concluded without anyone noticing.

The demons' bodies had been carbonized by the molten iron so there were some remains, but after going back and forth on it for a while, I'd decided to leave them. There were rumors concerning a few merchants visiting Lodonea also going missing, and the demons had likely attacked a few settlements on their way here. If the empire wasn't stupid, they had to have at least realized that a group of demons had infiltrated—otherwise, they wouldn't have increased security around the capital. Even if the empire hadn't been able to pin down their location, they should be able to tell the demons were headed to Lodonea. If they found signs of a battle and bodies there, they should be able to figure out that the demons were dead. Probably.

The devil died elsewhere, so hopefully they'd just interpret it as a falling out

among the demons. At any rate, it was a better outcome than the academy being unable to find the bodies again and canceling classes as a result. The giant wyrm's corpse was still there after I canceled the spell and got rid of the cooled iron. While I was pondering cleaning up the massive corpse, I bumped into a short figure turning the corner.

"Whoops. Oh, Mabel?"

"S-Seika?" Mabel looked up at me, out of breath and wide-eyed. A panicked look on her face, the gray-haired girl ran up to me. "Where is he?!"

"Who?"

"Th-There's an assassin!" she exclaimed. "You noticed too, didn't you?" "Well..."

"And he's a demon! An ogre, he said! I'm sure he's still looking for me!

Someone might get attacked if we don't find him!" With a desperate expression, she continued pressing me. "I-I've gotta stop him! You said you'd help me before, right?! And there was that fog again... If you know where he is, tell me! Everyone else should be fine if I go out there! Even if I can't win, still..."

"Mabel, calm down." I patted her head and Mabel finally stopped talking for a moment. However, her expression didn't change. "You're pretty impressive," I said with a small smile.

"Huh?"

"You could've run away, but you put the other students first. That was kind of you."

"I-I mean..."

"That's proof you have a lot of courage. Not everyone could do that. I'm sorry I never noticed. I thought you'd gotten used to the academy, but you've been worried this whole time, haven't you?" My spell to clear people out didn't work on anyone with a strong conviction. I'd wondered why only Mabel had come out while all the other students and teachers had been holed up inside. Apparently, she'd been on guard for the company's assassins the entire time. "Are you like this at home too?"

"The company knows about my adoptive parents, so..."

"I told you not to worry. That said, it hasn't even been a year yet. Old habits are hard to break." She might have been so relaxed visiting my family because it was the first time she'd felt like she could actually let her guard down since it was far away and there was a military platoon there. "You're gonna be fine, Mabel. You can live a normal life now."

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"B-But, he—"
  "He wasn't after you."
  "Huh?" Mabel looked baffled. "Really? Then why was he here?"
  "Um... I guess it's okay to tell you. He was after the Hero."
  "Huh?! A-After Amyu?!" Panic reappeared on her face. "Th-Then we need to
do something."
  "About that..." I hesitated for a moment. "It's already over."
  "What?"
  "They aren't a concern anymore," I replied simply.
  "'They'? He wasn't alone?"
  "Uh... Yeah. There were five of them."
  "Five?" she asked incredulously. "And you beat them all by yourself?"
  "Yep."
  "W-Were you okay? The one I fought was really strong."
  "It wasn't a big deal."
  "Really? Were they all weak except for the ogre?"
  "Hmm..." I gave an awkward smile. "I'm not really sure which of them were
```

I put my index finger in front of my lips. "Keep this a secret, okay?"

"S-Seika?" Bewildered, Mabel took half a step back.

strong and which were weak."





Several days after the demon attack, the entrance ceremony was being held as planned. The auditorium was adorned with multitudes of magical lamps—a sight I was now used to given it was my third ceremony. The sight of new students stiff from nervousness was also the same as every year. But unlike last year when I just watched, this time I had a part to play. As I watched the ceremony proceed smoothly, Amyu suddenly walked up to me with a smile and slapped me on the back.

"What are you getting all scared for?" she asked.

"Ow. I'm not scared."

"Liar."

"I'm surprised you could tell. I am actually a little nervous," I admitted. Roles like this weren't my specialty. Nonetheless, I had agreed, so there was no going back now. "What was it like when you gave your speech?"

"Huh?"

"I'm talking about two years ago. You were the representative for the first-years, weren't you?"

"Oh, then?" Amyu stopped reaching for her food. "I wasn't nervous at all."

"Really? That's impressive."

"I had a bit of an attitude back then, so I thought the whole thing was stupid. I'd probably be a bit nervous if I had to do it again now."

"Hmm..."

"That really takes me back, though. I never got to finish everything I had to say thanks to the demons."

"You came up with your speech yourself, didn't you? What would you have said?"

"What was it again? Uh..." Amyu thought for a moment. "I don't know everyone's reason for being here today, but my reason for enrolling at this academy is simple—to get stronger. What I want is to become the strongest

adventurer out there. To take down monsters and protect my friends. Maybe I'm the only one who came here for such a purpose, but I doubt I'm alone in wanting to get stronger. You all may seek strength for different reasons, but we're still comrades who share the same goal. Let's all work hard." Amyu paused. "I think it was something like that. It feels kinda standard, but I put some serious thought into it."

"I like it," I said honestly. "You're good at choosing your words and moving a conversation along."

"H-Huh? You don't have to flatter me."

"I'm serious. Did you study rhetoric somewhere?"

"I dunno about that, but my mom and dad used to tell me stories about the Hero and legendary adventurers. I used lines from those stories and from the speeches of drunk adventurers at bars for reference. Most of the time they just go on about nonsense, but every once in a while there's some gold."

"That makes sense." That was Amyu for you. She wasn't stupid—she'd probably unconsciously picked up on what she'd seen and heard. "The other students might have seen you differently if you'd been able to finish."

"Knock it off already, jeez. Though hearing you say that does kinda make me feel like I got robbed. What was that attack about, anyway? There were a whole bunch of rumors."

"Who knows."

"It took everything I had to bring down a single demon. Come to think of it, what were you doing at the time?"

"They seemed like summons, so I was looking for the summoner. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find anyone."

"That sounds like you." Amyu had no idea she'd been the target of that attack. Nor did she know that there had been another one just a few days ago.

I decided to change subjects. "I felt bad for you after that. You risked your life for them, and the other students just feared you."

"I do remember you saying that. Were you actually serious?"

"Of course. Did you think I was lying?"

"I figured you were just saying that. You were pretty sketchy back then."

"That's not very nice."

Amyu just laughed. "I had no idea we'd become friends like this."

"Relationships tend to change as time passes."

"Yeah. It's been two whole years since then."

Two whole years, huh? To someone who just turned fifteen, that probably seems like a long time. The entrance ceremony had been proceeding smoothly, and soon it would be time for my speech. "I should get going."

"You're going already, Seika? G-Good luck!" said Yifa.

"Good luck," Mabel followed up. The two of them had been talking behind me.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what you say in your speech," Amyu said with a smile.

"Don't expect too much. I'm just going to play it safe," I replied. Just as I started walking to the podium, I heard a commotion near the entrance of the auditorium. I turned and saw around a dozen armored men armed with swords pushing through the crowd of first-years. I almost sent a shikigami at them by reflex, but I held back. They didn't show any signs of hostility. That said, they didn't seem to be here to celebrate the new students either.

A man who seemed to be the leader raised his voice. "Silence! We are the Dirac Knights! We're here by the order of our lord, Marquess Greville! Is there a girl named Amyu present?!" The students' murmuring grew even louder. "She's supposed to be skilled with the blade!" One by one, the students all started turning in our direction.

I was at a loss. What's going on? What should we do?

"U-Um..." A voice spoke up next to me. "I'm Amyu." Amyu timidly raised her hand.

The armored knights all look our way. Then, their leader in front, they pushed

their way through the crowd. "Move!" One of them shoved me, and I silently fell on my rear.

"Hey!" Amyu shouted.

"You're Amyu? Daughter of the adventurer Clauden?" the leader asked, ignoring Amyu's protest of their violence.

"That's right! What do you want with me?"

"You've committed crimes against the empire. Do you acknowledge that?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" Amyu asked, clearly confused.

"A few days ago, you betrayed the empire and killed a demon envoy visiting the academy. Do you admit to your crimes?"

"Huh?" Amyu's eyes went wide. "I-I have no idea what you're talking about! I didn't do that!"

"You won't confess? No matter. We'll be taking you to the capital. After you're questioned, you'll be put on trial. Don't expect a light punishment. Men, restrain her."

"H-Hey! Stop it!"

Several knights grabbed Amyu and tied her hands behind her back.

"U-Um! Wait! Amyu didn't do anything!"

"Yifa." Still on the floor, I tried to placate Yifa. "Don't. That goes for you too, Mabel." Mabel froze up for a moment, then returned something she had grabbed back into her uniform. Forcing a smile, I spoke to Amyu. "No need to worry."

"Huh?"

"You're innocent. I'm certain everyone will understand that soon. They won't have a choice."

"What was that, kid?! Are you mocking us?!" one of the knights shouted.

"Knock it off." The leader halted the knight who had approached me. "The students here are all the children of nobles. Don't cause any unnecessary trouble. Let's go." The leader turned around and the rest of the knights

followed him. This time, the students silently cleared the way for them.

Amyu looked back at us for a moment as she was taken away. Then her rope was pulled and she turned around, her red hair hiding her uneasy expression.

I silently watched them go until they all disappeared out of the auditorium.



"A demon envoy is an odd story."

The next day, I visited the headmistress's office on the top floor of the main building. The stout dwarf woman was before me.

"Demons are the empire's enemies—we have no diplomatic relations with them. That said, there are no significant hostilities taking place, so we effectively have a truce. In addition, they're not a unified nation. Demonkind is made up of several races, and those races are divided into different clans. While they formed a united army under the Demon Lord, they've never formed a country. What business would an envoy have? And why would they come to Lodonea instead of the capital or a city near the border?"

"Spare me the obvious questions," the headmistress replied with a bitter expression. "You know that's just a pretense to take the Hero."

"Yes, I do."

"But demons did in fact come to this city. Of course, not as envoys."

"Indeed. It would seem they came to kill the Hero, just like they did two years ago. I almost feel bad for them—even in their death, they're being used for human scheming."

"Was it you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, smiling faintly.

"Regardless, that isn't important right now." The headmistress's voice was sharp. "As you saw, the imperial court learned of the demons' raid and their deaths, and Marquess Greville used it as a pretext to abduct the girl. So, why are you here? Have you come to blame me for letting a student get taken from under my nose?"

"No," I said, casting my eyes down at the floor. "I just want to know why she was taken. It seems like this Marquess Greville guy wants to eliminate the Hero, and is willing to fabricate whatever excuse he needs to do it. I don't understand why a nobleman who holds so much power would want to get rid of someone who could become the empire's savior and throw away an advantage the empire holds over the demons."

"Because—no." The headmistress started to say something, then stopped herself. "I'm not a military expert. Let me not speculate. But I will say this—the empire is not a monolith. You're a noble, Lamprogue, so I'm sure you understand. There's the imperial court, the assembly, academic society, merchant companies, nobles—all sorts of factions are jumbled together. Naturally, academy alumni are among them as well. Do you understand what that means? The academy having control of the Hero would grant our faction immense power, and there are some who don't find that agreeable."

"They would do this for such a petty reason?" I finally said after a short pause. "They would betray their country and kill the Hero? Kill an innocent girl?"

"That's not it. That isn't why, Lamprogue." The headmistress tried to make me see where she was coming from. "They aren't motivated by simple greed. Few people are. Politics is complex, and in their own way, their maneuvers are for the sake of their families, their allies, and the empire as well. I suspect that even applies to last night's show of force."

"Yes... I understand, Headmistress. The political struggles I've witnessed before were the same way." But that didn't have anything to do with my and Amyu's situation.

"You aren't planning on doing anything reckless, are you, Lamprogue?" The headmistress stopped me as I turned to leave. "I'm working on pressuring the court any way that I can. No matter their motives, their outrageous behavior can't be allowed to stand. They likely acted without securing proper support behind the scenes. Just wait for good news. I'm certain we'll get the girl ba—"

"What do you mean by reckless, Headmistress?" The headmistress fell silent, so I asked her another question, my faint smile still lingering. "Surely you don't think I would go rescue her by myself, do you?"

"Lamprogue, you—"

"I'd never be able to do such a thing. I'll do as you say and await the good news. By the way..." I piled on yet another question. "How long would you say this pressuring of yours is going to take? Can you guarantee she'll be rescued before she loses her mind due to torture or dies mysteriously from poisoned food?"

The headmistress didn't respond.

"Pardon me, that was in poor taste. I know you're doing everything you can for Amyu. I appreciate and support your efforts. Do your best, Headmistress. Now, if you'll excuse me." I once again turned around and started to leave. This time, she didn't stop me.



The sun had sunk below the horizon, and the purple sky had turned a deep, dark blue.

"Politicians always seek to justify their privileges with something other than power." I stood in an open area on academy grounds that was devoid of people and muttered to myself under the cover of night. "Lineage, law, faith, the consent of the people—they claim that they possess their privileges because they're a member of the royal family, because the law decrees it, because the gods have spoken, or because they've been recognized by the people. That's what makes it acceptable for them to levy taxes, set rules, and take from others. It's an absurdly self-serving justification, but maybe it's because they believe in something more noble than mere power that people can live together without conflict. Still, there's one thing they often forget, Yuki."

I undid the invisibility on a floating hitogata and it appeared before my eyes. "At the end of the day, those things are nothing more than illusions." I then opened a gateway. "They can all be taken away by someone stronger."

Summoning: Mizuchi. A long, turquoise-scaled body stretched out of the spatial distortion. The ryuu flew into the night sky, twisting around in an attempt to shake the shikigami covering it off. "Look at me, ryuu," I commanded, filling my voice with cursed energy. "Do you find me unfit to be your master as I am now?"

Mizuchi's movements relaxed and it turned to face me. It stared at me, its blue eyes like lakes turned to spheres. Slowly, it lowered its massive body before me. As it descended, the supernatural power surrounding it kicked the dirt and leaves on the stone pavement into the air.

"What a troublesome ayakashi," I mumbled, clicking my tongue. "You're not strong enough to be this arrogant." Still, it could probably destroy one of the empire's cities easily enough.

"Master Seika," Yuki said from atop my head. "I mean no offense, but if you've truly decided to live a more cunning life in this world, I think you should give up on saving that girl."

"I'll hear you out. Explain yourself, Yuki."

"You decided to hide your power so you wouldn't get involved in any political conflicts in this life. You were going to use the Hero as cover and nothing more. Now you're putting yourself in the rain to save the umbrella—it's completely backward."

"What are you talking about?" I said quietly. "That umbrella is irreplaceable. There's no substitute for the Hero. Now's the time to take a risk. If it's raining, then I need only clear away the clouds."

Yuki was at a loss for words for a moment. "Master Seika, do you realize what you're doing? The people you're opposing are the ones who control this country. You said it yourself! If you flaunt your power, you might meet the same fate you did in your last life!"

"So what?" Yuki was speechless. "Like I said, it's time to take a risk. There's only one Hero. Saving her is the only way to carry out my plan. Besides, I just have to eliminate anyone who sees my power."

"B-But they're the people who make up the backbone of a powerful empire. It's not gonna be that simple."

"Do you really think there are that many situations I can't solve through force?"

"W-Well..."

"Look, Yuki. Just like our previous world, this world has many countries. It's no big deal if I have to destroy one of them."

"Master Seika..." Yuki said bitterly. "The Hero is a means to an end. She's just a way to ensure you can live a happy life in this world."

"I'm aware."

"Then why..." Yuki's voice was faint—as though she was barely forcing it out. "Why are you so angry?" Seeing my silence, she continued. "Don't you think you should reconsider?"

"Give it a rest," I said, lowering my voice. "Is a mere ayakashi trying to rebuke me?"

"No," Yuki replied, her tone surprisingly firm. "If this is your decision, then I'll drop it."

"Don't poke your head out. You'll get blown away." Walking on floating shikigami, I stepped onto Mizuchi's head. With a slight smirk tugging at the corners of my mouth, I mumbled to myself. "Let's see what you're made of, politicians from another world. Do you have what it takes to bring down the strongest? To the west, ryuu," I directed Mizuchi.

The supernatural power surrounding Mizuchi grew stronger. Riding on its head, I turned to face the western sky as the stars twinkled above. The ryuu's massive body coiled around, stirring up a tempest. The water ryuu that had once protected a sacred lake in Japan now soared through the skies of another world, headed to the capital.

# Interlude: Hero Amyu in the Imperial Palace Dungeon

Amyu was hugging her knees on the hard dungeon floor. How long had it been since she'd been left there? She couldn't see the sun, so the passage of time in the silent dungeon was ambiguous at best.

Following the entrance ceremony, she had been immediately thrown on a carriage that had traveled through the night. Though her wardens had swapped horses along the way, there had been next to no stops, and the carriage had reached the capital the next evening. She didn't know why they had been in such a hurry, nor did she know why she'd been accused of crimes of which she had no knowledge.

After passing through the city gates, she had been brought to the palace and then thrown into the dungeon with no explanation. It didn't seem like a place for ordinary lawbreakers. Given it was the palace dungeon, it was likely intended for political criminals. Unfortunately, with her limited education, the adventurer didn't understand why she'd been imprisoned or how long she would be there.

Amyu strengthened her grip on her knees, curling into a ball. It was cold. It was probably late at night outside. Although it was spring, the nights were still chilly, and the stone floor only served to further rob her body of its heat. All Amyu had were the clothes she happened to be wearing at the time. She'd had her spellblade as well, but it had been confiscated before she'd been loaded onto the carriage, so she couldn't use magic.

What's gonna happen to me? she thought to herself as she shivered. Her shivering wasn't simply due to the cold. Amyu didn't know why this had happened. Just the other day, she'd been reflecting fondly on her final year at the academy and her coming life as an adventurer. What had happened at the entrance ceremony after that? Yifa and Mabel were probably worried. Then Seika was supposed to give his speech.

Amyu wiped away the tears welling up in her eyes with her arm. She might be unable to keep her promise to go on another adventure with Seika.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps on the other side of the iron bars. She put herself on guard as a figure holding a light gradually drew closer. Then, she realized who it was and her eyes went wide. "Huh? Wh-What are you..."

#### Act 4

"This country is surprisingly small." As we soared through the sky, I looked down at the city below from atop Mizuchi's head and mumbled to myself. A journey that took two days by carriage had taken less than twenty hours. At such a pace, I'd be able to travel the entire country in under a month.

The imperial capital was sprawled out beneath me, a massive city that only grew with my bird's-eye view. Rows of countless buildings were surrounded by vast walls, and the roads were lined with lights that gave the city a dim glow despite it being the middle of the night. It was far more developed than any city I'd seen in Japan, let alone the Song dynasty or the West. How much work did it take the people of this world to achieve such prosperity? Not that it makes any difference to me, I suppose.

I transformed all the shikigami around me into bats and sent them into the city. Innumerable black wings descended through the night sky, like a deluge of shadows. Their target was the conspicuously bright building in the city's center—the imperial palace. The voices of guards holding lanterns reached me through the ears of the bat shikigami.

"Whoa, what the hell is this?"

"Bats? Why are there so many?"

Soon all the bats alighted onto rooftops or the ground, and this time I turned them all into rats. The shikigami rats set off running, slipping into buildings through any conceivable gap—chimneys, ventilation, holes in walls, and even slightly open windows. The rats diverged at every branching path, searching every single building within the palace walls. There was no need for me to control them directly as I had set them up to operate in that manner beforehand.

Before long, a faint smile appeared on my lips. "Ah, found her. So that's where you were, Amyu." Jumping off Mizuchi's head, I threw myself into the night sky. Stepping on shikigami floating in midair, I silently descended into the

city.

"You know..." The imperial palace consisted of a main building, rows of smaller buildings around it, and a large wall surrounding them all. There was no moat, and the gate was flimsy. It was clearly intended to be a residence and social environment rather than a defensive structure. As I stood in front of the walls, I pointed a single hitogata at the unmanned gate. "This castle looks pretty frail."

Phase of earth: Hurtling Stone. I launched a massive boulder that crashed right through the gate and the walls around it. Rubble scattered everywhere, kicking up a cloud of dust. A moment later, I heard guards shouting loudly. They probably won't realize what happened right away. I wonder if there are any mages in this world capable of creating a boulder larger than a fortress's walls? I calmly strolled onto the palace grounds through the hole I had made in the wall.

"Stay calm! What happened?!"

"Wha— The walls..."

I heard the voices of guards through the hum of my rites.

"We might be under attack! Take arms and wake up anyone off duty!"

"Hey, there's someone over there! Alert the tower!"

"Oh?" I was somewhat impressed. They were quelling the chaos in their ranks immediately. They seemed to be rather competent soldiers. The night sky of the other world, illuminated by its two moons, was now serving as a hindrance.

"An intruder?! Pay attention! Fire!"

"If you say so!"

By pure coincidence, arrows came flying at me from two nearby towers in the palace walls almost simultaneously. I proceeded on without even looking at them, silently casting a spell. *Phase of yang: Magnetic Force Cloud.* The arrows aimed at me careened off course. I had used a little too much power, causing them to veer in the wrong direction long before reaching me. I heard confused voices from the towers.

"What happened to the arrows?"

"Fire again! Don't let him near the palace!"

Arrows flew at me once again, but there was no chance of them ever hitting their mark. However, that didn't make it any more pleasant. "This is annoying." I floated a hitogata toward each tower and made a hand sign with one hand. *Phase of earth: Keystone.* Two massive stones with sanctifying rope tied around them fell from the sky, landing on both towers and crushing them entirely. The voices I heard through my shikigami fell silent.

"Halt!"

I squinted at the light from a row of torches. At some point, guards had gathered far ahead of me. A man standing at the center who appeared to be the leader shouted at me.

"Who goes there?! Why have you come to the palace?!"

Stalling for time, huh? I realized as I came to a stop. They were probably trying to get the nobles to evacuate while they waited for reinforcements. Whatever. I'll just give them a warning. "Get out of my way." Their leader flinched in response to my voice. "Clear a path and I'll spare your lives."

"Fire!" The man who seemed to be the leader gave an order as though unable to hold back anymore. The bowmen released their arrows and I started to cast Magnetic Force Cloud once again before jumping back with a click of my tongue. Several fire arrows embedded themselves in the ground where I had been standing.

My spell was less effective against fire arrows. The metal didn't generate enough magnetic repulsion when heated. As far as I could tell, they hadn't done so deliberately, but it was still irritating.

Their leader was sharp. He directed his men to use fire arrows once again, seemingly having deduced they were my weakness. As I was about to switch to a new way of avoiding arrows, I caught sight of soldiers closing in on me with their swords drawn.

Suddenly, I felt ridiculous. At this point, what reason did I have to hold back? "I'm tired of this."



Phase of yang and fire: White Blaze. Ivory flames lit up the night as bright as day. The oncoming fire arrows were instantly vaporized, and several of the guards in the front began to burn as well. The flames hadn't even directly touched them, but the radiant heat alone had been enough for their equipment to combust. The guards fell to the ground on the spot. White Blaze was simply that strong when I didn't curb the excess heat with yin ki.

As I healed the burns and blisters covering my body, my scorched lips twisted into a smile. "Ha ha."

Summoning: Kamaitachi. A whirlwind emerged from a spatial distortion, slicing through the remaining soldiers. After its rampage, the kamaitachi briefly landed on the palace roof, licking blood off the sickles on its hands as though grooming itself. Then, it transformed back into a whirlwind and began cutting down the guards once more. Even by kamaitachi standards, it was a particularly powerful specimen. Its sickles and blades of wind didn't merely leave cuts—they cleaved right through people.

I listened to the screams and watched blood fly with a smile as I floated two more hitogata in the air. "Ha ha ha."

Phase of yang and water: Boiling Cascade.

Summoning: Raijuu.

A torrent of boiling water crashed into the soldiers. They threw away their weapons, writhing in pain before several blinding flashes of lightning from the raijuu finished them off. The energy from the lightning altered the composition of the air, filling the area with the characteristic metallic smell of ozone.

Laughing, I floated yet another hitogata. "Ha ha ha ha!"

All people bow before overwhelming force!

Those were Galeos's words; I once had believed the same thing. Lineage, law, faith, and the consent of the people were all powerless before overwhelming force. Ultimately, authority was a concept founded on violence. A weak authority was unable to exist in the face of violence that overpowered it, and that violence would then become the new authority. The world was simply a repetition of that cycle. So long as you possessed power greater than any other,

the world would bend to your whims—that was what I had thought.

I had driven off all manner of bandits, beasts, and spirits, protected the people from the private armies of oppressive nobles, and silenced ill-intentioned masses. I had done all this believing that by conquering the forces of violence that preyed on the weak, I alone would remain untouched by the injustice and tragedy that filled the world. That was why I had sought strength and had striven to become the strongest—and I had succeeded. No army, spell, spirit, or disaster could defeat me. Even in another world, that fact remained true.

That was why it was strange. Why was I acting so desperate when everyone except for me was so weak? With a swish of white flames, I melted soldiers and buildings alike. A whirlwind ran through their ranks, leaving spurts of blood in its wake. Lightning tore through the steamy air, bringing down one guard after another. It could hardly even be called a fight.

"Ha ha ha..."

#### **Hurtling Stone**

A spell that launches a boulder roughly ten meters in diameter. The size can be altered. Used for destroying buildings and terrain.

#### Keystone

A spell that drops a massive boulder wrapped in sanctifying rope. The size can be altered. The stone contains exorcistic power, preventing those killed by it from turning into vengeful spirits.

#### **Boiling Cascade**

A spell that unleashes a torrent of boiling water. Originally used to defend elevated fortifications.

## Act 5

I silently descended an underground staircase in one of the towers on the palace grounds, the path ahead illuminated by a hitogata. I sent my shikigami out to scout and didn't find anyone standing guard, which was odd, but nonetheless convenient for me. When I reached the bottom of the stairway, I arrived in a dungeon.

It was quite spacious. Given its location, it must not have been intended for ordinary prisoners. I called out a girl hugging her knees in one of the cells. "Amyu."

Huddling under a blanket, still in her uniform, Amyu raised her head. "Huh? S-Seika?"

"Are you okay? I'm here to rescue you." With a smile, I placed my hands on a hitogata I had stuck to the iron bars of her cell. Gallium created from metal ki had made the bars so brittle that a light touch was enough to make them crumble.

Amyu's eyes went wide. "Wh-What are you doing here?"

"Like I said, I came to rescue you. Come on, let's go," I said with a faint smile.

Amyu still seemed bewildered. "H-How did you even get in here?"

"Well... I kinda forced my way in. I'm strong—you know that."

"Wh-What are you thinking?! Why would you do that?!"

I didn't answer.

"And what do you mean, 'let's go'?! How are we supposed to get away?! Also, this isn't just your problem! You might get your family dragged into it! You could get your territory confiscated!"

"Amyu, your life is in danger."

"I know that! I-I'm fine!" It was immediately clear to me she was just trying to put on a brave face. Her voice trembling, she continued, as though trying to convince herself more so than anyone else. "I didn't do anything! I don't know about any demons! I'm sure I can get them to understand! They'll let me out soon!"

"..."

"So get out of here! I don't know what you've done, but it's nighttime. They won't know who's responsible. Escape while you still can and wait at the academy. I'll be back. I'm sure the nobles aren't gonna bother to keep some commoner here forever!" Amyu forced a smile onto her face and I closed my eyes for a moment.

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"They aren't letting you go, Amyu."

"Huh?"

"You're the Hero."

"H-Hero?"
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"That's right. The one from the fairy tales. The savior of humanity, born every few hundred years alongside the Demon Lord. You're the current Hero, Amyu."

"N-No way..."

"You're not just a commoner. They have a reason to kill you. Those who have power are feared, ostracized, and eliminated by those who do not. It's true in any age and in any world. Let's go, Amyu. You'll be killed if you stay." I extended my hand to Amyu, who was wide-eyed and speechless. "Come on, we need to be gone before—"

I directed an invisible hitogata down the dark hallway. *Phase of fire and earth: Oni Flame.* The blue phosphorus flame cast a gloomy light over the dungeon as it flew down the hall, only to be quickly intercepted by wind magic. The shattered remnants of the phosphorus smoldered on the ground. I called out to the figure emerging from the dim light. "Hey there, Gly."

With his spellblade in hand and a stern expression on his face, Gly didn't respond.

"Guess we ended up having our reunion pretty soon," I said with an awkward smile. "I really didn't want to meet you here, but oh well. Wanna have our duel

now? I did promise you."

Instead of answering my question, Gly asked one of his own, his voice tense. "Seika, what in the—"

"That isn't necessary." Another voice echoed from down the dark hallway.

"Fiona, huh?" I mumbled as the figure slowly approached. As she stepped in front of Gly, I gave her a cynical smile. "You're not someone I'd expect to see in a place like this. You arrived at an awfully convenient time. I guess you must have seen this moment." Erasing the smile off my face, I continued in a low voice. "What do you want, Fiona? Are you here to justify all this? Or do you intend to have the ones waiting outside deal with me?"

At some point, several people had surrounded the building—and they weren't just ordinary guards. They seemed skilled enough to rival Galeos or the demon party I had fought. They were probably Fiona's holy knights. *Quite the dangerous bunch she's gathered. But it makes no difference.* 

"No," Fiona said plainly. There was none of her usual whimsical atmosphere, and she continued on in an entirely serious voice. "I won't be doing either of those things. None of that is necessary here. The holy knights are simply to prevent us from being disturbed. I fully understand how foolish it would be to challenge you, Seika."

"Hmph. Future sight sure is handy. So, why are you here, then?" I asked.

"Before that, know that I intend to answer all your questions. I'm sure there are several things you're wondering about. As a show of good faith, I can at least offer you an explanation. I hope that will make you more amicable to my proposal."

"Proposal, huh? That's an interesting way of phrasing it. All right, then." I started with my biggest question. "Why are you trying to kill Amyu? Demons are the empire's enemy. A very clear enemy at that. No matter how cowardly you may be or how much you put your own faction's interests first, killing the Hero and throwing away that advantage doesn't make any sense. Are you people really that stupid?"

"Well... No, we're not." Fiona began speaking after a moment of hesitation.

"In the past, the empire was much smaller than it is now. Its population was sparse, its farmland was limited, and it didn't have any vassal states. There was no national military, forcing regional lords to conscript their own population and bear the costs themselves. Naturally, their equipment was poor and it was impossible to employ any proper tactics."

"I can only imagine how dependable the Hero must have seemed during a time like that. The Hero's strength was equal to a thousand warriors—perhaps even more. Holy sword in hand and reliable allies at her side, the Hero ventured into the demons' land and slew the Demon Lord. The Hero was a symbol of hope, worthy of being immortalized in legend. Back then, anyway. However, things are different now. Seika, are you aware that the empire is capable of mobilizing tens of thousands of men at a moment's notice? And I don't mean conscripted peasants—they're trained soldiers with quality equipment and advanced siege weaponry. And the same goes for the demons."

The full picture of what she was saying was slowly becoming clear.

"Do you follow, Seika? The Hero and Demon Lord both are relics of the past. Their strength may be equivalent to a thousand men, but that's a mere rounding error in the grand scheme of things. It isn't enough to change the course of a war. Even if the Hero were to defeat the Demon Lord—the enemy's leader—that doesn't mean they would be able to capture the enemy's capital. The Hero is an individual, and one person alone can't occupy a city. The wise among us have come to realize this fact."

"So what?" I demanded. "Is not being useful in war a reason to kill her? If you can't use her, then just leave her be."

"The Hero's very existence is a cause for war. Think about it for a moment.

The demons currently have no Demon Lord, while the human side has the Hero

—a person whose strength is legendary."

I had no response.

"Who can say with certainty that the human side won't take this opportunity to attack? What if the humans are too foolish to realize that the Hero holds little value in a war? Or what if they were to deliberately elevate the Hero as a banner of antidemon sentiment, despite knowing their lack of real strength? A

massive war would be inevitable at the first sign of hostility. That being the case, there's nothing strange about the demons' leader deciding to take preemptive action. The Hero is liable to become a spark that ignites a larger conflict."

*"…"* 

"The empire doesn't desire war. We're far removed from the days when battles were fought over land and security. Demon culture is too different from ours for us to take them as a vassal. Even if we were to win, there is little to be gained. And I suspect the demon side is the same. That's why they sent assassins to eliminate the Hero. It wasn't to give themselves an advantage—it was to extinguish the sparks of war. The optimal relationship between us and the demons would likely be limited to informal trade via merchants, exchanging resources and goods. In other words, the current situation. Nobody seeks a great war. Any conflict would be detrimental to both parties."

I opened my mouth to speak for a moment, then held my tongue. Seeing that, Fiona continued.

"Furthermore, I'm certain Amyu will never attain the same strength as past Heroes."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you're here, Seika," Fiona said quietly. "The Hero gains strength by overcoming hardship. It's only by repeatedly facing powerful foes, risking their life and things that are precious to them, that the Hero finally obtains such strength. Would you allow Amyu to go through that? You, someone strong—and kind—enough to storm to the imperial palace?"

I remained silent.

"I don't know why you're so fixated on the Hero. Even with the power of future sight, I cannot see that which is hidden away deep within someone's heart. But, if her strength is the reason, then things will not go as you hope."

"So what?" I asked again. "Are you saying I should just let her die because she won't grow as strong as I hope? That I should just sit back and watch for the sake of peace?"

"No, I'm not. That isn't what I want either." Fiona denied my claim, her tone as clear as could be. "What I just said is but one aspect of the matter. In fact, the people who seek to eliminate the Hero are nothing more than a small minority. There are many influential people who see value in the Hero, who point out the potential her death has to strengthen the demons, and who worry about the existence of the Demon Lord. Even among those in power, there are numerous dissenting voices. This atrocity can be attributed to the recklessness of Marquess Greville alone—it is by no means the empire's consensus. The academy's faction is working to protect Amyu, as am I."

"Seika, I have but one request. Please stand down for now," Fiona finally declared. "I won't let anything happen to Amyu. I'll do everything in my power to ensure she returns to the academy safely. I won't let any harm come to your family either, nor will you be held responsible for what has happened tonight. Turn back now, and I promise she will be able to return to her normal life. There won't be any need for you to make an enemy of the empire. So please..."

"Ha ha, now I get it," I said with a dry laugh. "You wanted to meet Amyu—no, me and Amyu, all so you could make that request."

"Yes, you're correct. I wanted you to understand who I am. And even if only for a short time, to forge a friendship with you."

"Ha ha ha..."

"Do you remember the promise we made over our game of warboard? The loser will do one thing the winner asks. I'd like you to uphold your end of the wager. Please, believe me. If you can place your faith in me, I swear to keep my word."

"Heh heh..."

"S-Seika." Amyu grabbed my arm. "Um, Fiona and your brother are—"

"Amyu," I said curtly. "Be quiet for a second." As Amyu silently averted her eyes, I spoke to Fiona. "For a friendly wager, that's quite the extravagant request, Fiona."

"Well..."

"And I believe you said I could refuse any request I found unreasonable. Tell

me—why should I have faith in you?"

Fiona pursed her lips, falling silent with an expression that seemed to hold back pain. The atmosphere was strained by the tension of a definitive breakdown in negotiations.

Readying his spellblade once again, Gly opened his mouth, unable to hold back any longer. "Seika, you—"

"Don't," Fiona cut him off. "Very well, Seika. Go ahead and take Amyu, then."
"Well, aren't you understanding?" I said sarcastically.

"A carriage is waiting for you in front of the gate. The horse is capable of running at night, so you should be able to depart immediately. I don't imagine you'll be returning to the academy, so do you have a destination in mind?"

I didn't answer.

"If not, then I would suggest the free city of Rakana. It's a city of adventurers that developed around a dungeon. The city's leader is a collaborator of mine, and I've already discussed the details with him. I intend to conceal your involvement, but I won't be able to hide the fact that Amyu disappeared. However, if pursuers come after you, they should be willing to help."

"It's almost like you expected me to refuse. So, where's the trap?"

"I know well how meaningless such a thing would be against you. If you find anything of the sort, you're welcome to destroy both Rakana and the imperial palace." Fiona stepped forward with a smile, then passed by me and stood in front of the stairway before turning her head. "Come, this way. I'll guide you to the carriage. Or if you still don't trust me, shall I accompany you all the way to Rakana?"

"Fiona, there is no need for that." Suddenly, a low voice echoed out of nowhere. The voice's owner was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't sense anyone's presence. "Do you intend to make yourself a hostage? Our agreement—"

"Be quiet."

Fiona silenced the voice before I could cast a spell. Her tone was sharper than I'd ever heard before, causing me to unintentionally freeze on the spot. "I will

not tolerate your interference on this matter. Know your place. Not even you stand a chance against Seika." Her words had a hint of urgency to them. Once she confirmed that the voice had gone silent, she forced a smile and turned to me. "Pardon the interruption. That's another of my holy knights. He's a bit of a worrywart, so pay it no mind. I'll give him a stern talking-to later. Now, let us be on our way."

I watched Fiona climb up the stairs for a moment, then took Amyu's hand. "Let's go." She nodded quietly and followed along as I set foot on the ascending stairway.



As I stepped out of the tower, the palace grounds held only a dead silence. It was as though my prior rampage had all been a lie. Fiona had presumably already handled matters on that front. Just beyond the destroyed gate lay the square.

"There really is a carriage waiting." I saw a one-horse carriage tied to a tree in the corner of the square and muttered, half in disbelief. I realized something at that moment and my face twitched.

Fiona giggled. "Of course there is. Both the horse and carriage are of the highest quality. I didn't want to make you sick," she said cheerfully. "I've provided food and travel expenses as well. It should last you until you reach Rakana. Amyu's sword is also waiting in the carriage."

"A-All right."

"So, what will it be? Shall I accompany you there?"

After a moment of silence, I cast my eyes down and responded. "That's okay."

"I see. Well, I'll take that to mean you trust me at least a little bit. Remaining here makes what I plan to do easier, though I must admit, traveling to Rakana with the two of you does sound like fun," Fiona continued with a smile. "Now, on you go. You should be able to leave through the northern gate. Time is of the essence. Staying here for much longer wouldn't be a wise decision."

"Come on, Amyu."

"Y-Yeah... Uh, Fiona." Amyu stopped in front of Fiona as she went to board the carriage.

"Yes?"

"Thanks for the blanket. I appreciated it." Amyu held out the blanket still in her hands. When she realized I was looking at her curiously, Amyu began to explain. "A little after I was left in that cell, Fiona and your brother came to see me. She brought me food and a blanket and said she'd definitely get me out."

"Huh?" I mumbled.

"This is probably an expensive blanket, isn't it? It was really warm."

Fiona took the blanket, then wrapped it around Amyu's shoulders with a faint smile. "Take it with you. The nights are still cold, so I'm sure you'll want it on the road."

"Are you sure? Thanks."

"Take care. I'll be sure to inform Yifa and Mabel that you two are headed to Rakana. Let us meet again one day."

"Me too. Though, uh...you don't have to bring him," Amyu said, pointing at Gly.

"Gly truly is awful, isn't he? I couldn't believe he said 'I guess anybody can look good in the right clothes' when he saw your uniform. He has no idea how to treat a lady. I'll have to educate him."

"And you just slapped him on the spot. I'm definitely not meeting him again until he learns some manners."

Fiona giggled in response, then waved goodbye as Amyu boarded the carriage.

"See you, Fiona. Thanks again."

"Goodbye, Amyu." Fiona turned to face me. "Farewell, Seika."

"Fiona." I took a deep breath and said her name.

Fiona tilted her head in confusion. "Yes?"

"It was just a friendly wager, but I'm sorry for not keeping our promise."

"Think nothing of it," Fiona answered with a smile after a short pause. "You were quite right. That wasn't an appropriate request for a wager over a game."

"Still, a promise is a promise. I'm in the wrong for not keeping it. So at least let me do this for you."

"Do what?"

I walked past the confused Fiona and fixed my gaze on the imperial palace. I got here around two hours ago. Going back eight blocks should be enough. I quietly chanted a Sanskrit mantra, then countless hitogata spilled out of the other plane into the night sky. They glided through the air, arranging themselves in a systematic pattern with the palace at the center. Before long, lines of cursed energy connected them all, creating a three-dimensional magic circle.

I made a hand sign with both hands and chanted another mantra. It was a spell rivaling the Spell of Reincarnation, one which I had only used a handful of times—the Spell of Transcendence.

The change began. A piece of rubble from the walls began to fade, its outline growing blurry. And it wasn't alone. The rubble and dust scattered all over wavered like the reflection of the moon on a body of water, then disappeared. In return, the destroyed gate and towers began to reform. The faint shadows, which seemed as though they would fade away if I so much as rubbed my eyes, gained color and restored themselves to their original forms.

And the changes didn't end there. The power of the Spell of Transcendence restored the melted walls, the fallen trees of the garden, and even the lives of the soldiers to how they had been a little under two hours ago.

"That should do it." I finally lowered my hands. The palace had been restored to exactly how it had looked when I'd arrived. All that death and destruction was nowhere to be seen. "Everything should be back to normal," I said, facing Fiona. "I can't guarantee the state of the soldiers' souls, but I think they'll be fine. If any of them seem hollow, please put them to rest."

Fiona was speechless as though she couldn't believe her eyes. Suddenly, her expression turned grim. "Do you have any idea what you've done?!"

"Huh?"

"I was going to smooth this over by saying it was a massive demon attack! How am I to explain it now that you've repaired the destruction and brought the soldiers back to life?!"

"W-Well... Couldn't you just say it was an illusion or something?"

"What kind of illusion is capable of all this?! Are you trying to torment me?!"

"N-No... I thought you'd be happy..."

"Then why did you at least tell me what you were doing?!" she demanded.

"Uh..."

"Give me a break! This is exactly why you..." Fiona cut herself off. Seeing me looking at her nervously, she let out a sigh and gave a resigned smile. "That said, this is quite like you. It won't be easy, but I'll manage. I promised you." Fiona turned around, then looked over her shoulder. "Farewell, Seika. I'm certain we'll meet again."



After watching Fiona head back to the palace, I untied the horse from the tree, climbed into the driver's seat of the carriage, and took hold of the reins. It's a bright night and the horse is calm. There shouldn't be any issues. But...

"Seika." I heard Amyu call out from behind me.

"Hmm?"

"To be honest, none of this feels real yet. What was all that about the Hero? I couldn't follow anything you and Fiona were talking about. I was about to die? I won't grow strong even though I'm the Hero? And we're leaving the academy? None of it makes sense. I'm not smart like you and Yifa. You're gonna explain everything, right?"

"Sure."

"All right, then. We should hurry up and leave. Fiona said not to stay too long."

"Say, Amyu... Can I ask you one thing?"

"What?"

"How do you drive a carriage?"

"Huuuh?!" I heard Amyu bend forward behind me. "You don't know how to drive a carriage?"

"How would I?! You know they make me feel sick."

"Then why'd you get in the driver's seat?"

"Because you sat in the back."

"Seriously? You're giving me a headache. What were you thinking this whole time? Why didn't you just ask Fiona for a driver?"

"How could I ask in that atmosphere?" It'd just be pathetic to be given a carriage and not know how to drive it after causing all this trouble and running away.

"I-Is now really the time to save face?! Fiona would've had a driver ready immediately!" Amyu sighed. "Men really are stupid."

"I have nothing to say for myself."

"Oh yeah, you're a man too, aren't you?"

"That wasn't necessary."

"Sometimes I forget you're even human. Get outta the way," Amyu said, climbing to the front of the carriage.

"Can you drive a carriage?"

"I've only done it once, but it's better than letting you drive. Hurry up and move." I did as I was told and swapped with her. "I don't feel great about the future," she said, grabbing the reins.

"Sorry about that."

"But I'm also kinda looking forward to it. I've always wanted to go to Rakana. I'm happy to have you along, Seika." Amyu flicked the reins, and the carriage slowly started moving toward the capital's gates.

## Interlude: Holy Princess Fiona in Front of the Imperial Palace

Fiona watched the departing carriage from afar, a faint smile slowly gracing her lips. She had been hoping Seika would return and beg her for a driver, but it seemed he had either managed on his own or asked Amyu for help. It was a little unfortunate.

The situation on the other side of the gate was hectic. The soldiers who had been returned to life were likely baffled. The question now was how did she get back inside? She hadn't expected the destroyed gate to be restored to its former state. Naturally, it was now shut. She wasn't certain the soldiers would hear her if she called out.

"Fiona." As she was lost in thought, she heard a low voice that seemed to be coming from below the ground. "It is dangerous here. Allow me to return you to the palace." The voice was terribly frightening, but it was one she had known since she was a child. It was her very first, highest-ranking holy knight. His only flaw was that he was a worrier.

Fiona closed her eyes, then answered in a slightly irritated tone. "I'd like to enjoy the night breeze a little longer. I'll only request your assistance if thieves make an appearance."

"Just for a little while. Stay out here too long and you may catch a cold."

Fiona looked up at the night sky. It was a clear, pleasant spring night. She had once looked up at a similar sky with Seika. Of course, that wasn't a real memory. It was merely one possible future she had seen as a child. A fleeting future altered by the flap of a butterfly's wings, not the grand currents of fate.

"I was quite anxious back there," Fiona said with a sigh. "Please refrain from doing anything reckless. Even Seika may not show mercy to a being like you. I can't afford to lose you yet."

"What were you trying to do?"

"I had hoped Seika would agree to my initial proposal, but no such luck. I suppose our time together was too brief. Had I been able to get him to retreat, everything could have been resolved peacefully. At least he seemed to trust me in the end and went to the escape route I prepared for him. I'll take that as a victory." Fiona giggled. "And I was able to be just a little mean."

"Does that mean tonight was so important you had to take action yourself?"

"Yes."

"Who was he?" the holy knight asked with a stern tone. "In all my aimless, long existence, I have never known such a being. I cannot imagine one so distant and powerful is an ordinary individual."

"He's the current Demon Lord," Fiona replied simply.

"His Majesty the Demon Lord? Indeed, I did sense a faint demonic presence. Yet..."

"The Demon Lord you knew wasn't that powerful?"

"Correct."

"I see. It seems Seika truly is special."

"Why do you sound happy?"

"Just so you know, the reason for Seika's strength is a mystery even to me. I may be able to see the future, but I can't see the past."

"He was that strong from the beginning?"

"As far as I'm aware, yes." In other futures she had seen, she had met Seika at a much younger age, yet even then, he had been just as powerful. She had never seen him doing any special studying or training.

"I do not understand. Why would he protect the Hero? And go so far as to attack the palace to do so? I have never heard of the Demon Lord aiding the Hero."

"It's because—"

"Wait, do not tell me! I know the answer. I have spent enough time in human lands to sense such things. The two of them are in love. There is no mistaking

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Fiona said sharply. Her voice held a hint of displeasure, but that was only due to the cold. "I never would have expected you to sound like a gossiping schoolgirl."

"Hrm... Then what is the reason?"

"Because they're close."

"And nothing more?"

"Yes. He would save anyone close to him. His servant, his friends, his brothers, his parents—I'm certain he would even save me were I in such peril."

"That sounds like wishful thinking." A hint of confusion then sneaked into the holy knight's voice. "I have a hard time believing one so powerful would act out of compassion. You make him sound like a normal human."

"Seika is a normal human."

"Ridiculous. You say that only because you do not truly comprehend the power he possesses. He frightens me. I have never felt such fear, even when I once faced the Hero. He could likely destroy the entire world with ease."

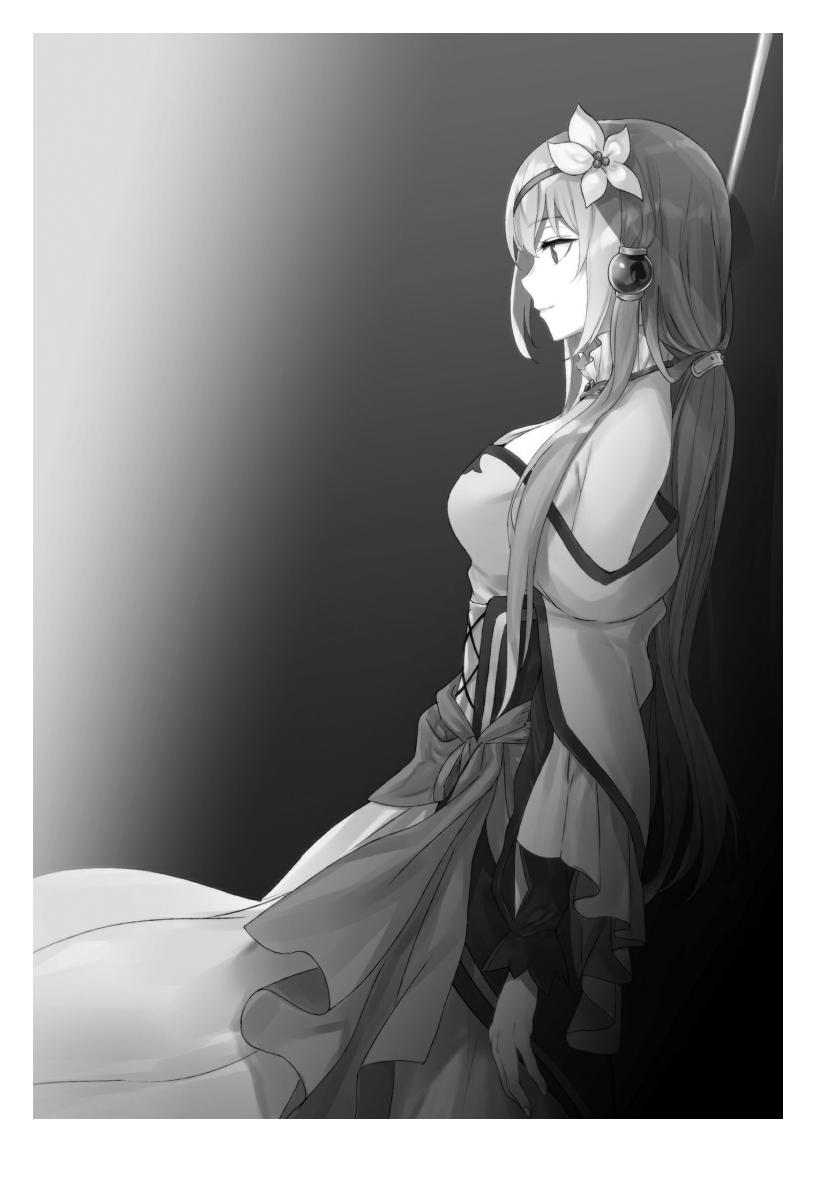
"Is that so? But Seika would never do that."

"What makes you so sure? What do you know about him? What could you possibly learn from seeing his future a few times?"

"It's not just a few times. When I was young, I used this power of mine over and over, trying to meet him." Fiona still remembered it well—that fleeting future, burned into her eyes as a child with a faint sense of longing. "Seika..."

There was a touch of pride in Fiona's smile. He was always kind, and always strong. It was because of that kindness and strength that he always suffered in the end. It was his kindness that forced him to wield his power, even if he knew ruin was what awaited him. That was why she too had decided to live with strength. To find a future she had yet to see—the best future for both Seika and the empire.

"Seika is a kind person."



## **Epilogue**

Panting filled the air. That night, Neal, a squad commander in the palace garrison, was struggling to calm down and catch his breath. He could still hear screams outside, though they seemed to be dying down. It wasn't because his fellow garrison members had gained the upper hand—it was because their numbers were diminishing.

"Damn it!" Neal cursed quietly. On top of having run at full speed the entire way, his anxiety and stress made it impossible to steady his breathing. He had been given but one order by his superior officer—to take the emperor to a hidden passage and escape.

It was a mission that would have ordinarily been carried out by his superior's superior. Neal, a mere squad commander, had never so much as spoken with the emperor. However, his superiors had another objective at the moment. They had to face the palace's unknown assailant.

Not too long ago, in the middle of the night, powerful magic had obliterated the palace gate. Shockingly, the attacker seemed to be alone. Nonetheless, his magic was abnormal, and even the elite palace garrison had been no match for him. They had been utterly defeated.

The attacker appeared human, but whether he truly was or not was unclear. It was hard to imagine a being like him as an ordinary human, but even a demon seemed unlikely to possess such unbelievable strength.

Neal took a deep breath. The palace garrison's mission was to defend the palace. By extension, it was to defend the people living there as well. His superiors and allies had taken on a suicide mission to fend off the attacker. That was why he had to do everything in his power to carry out the mission he had been entrusted with. Steeling himself, Neal shouted with as calm a voice as he could muster.

"Your Majesty! I'm Neal Curran, squad commander in the palace garrison! Pardon the sudden intrusion, but it's an emergency!" Neal pushed the door open.

It was his first time seeing the emperor's bedroom, and it was surprisingly plain. The paintings on the wall, the carpet on the floor, and the furniture lined up against the walls were all modest in size, with subdued, calming colors. They were likely all expensive, but it was still surprising that the man who ruled over a country of extravagant nobles would live in such a room.

A middle-aged man was sitting in the wide bed in the center of the room and gazing out the window. He was a plain man whose stature didn't match the bed's size. He was thin and his face had no notable features—he seemed like the sort of man who could be found anywhere. Neal had felt that way when he'd first seen the emperor in the capital, but the feeling was even stronger now that he wasn't dressed up. He looked like a man with no connection to the emperor.

"There seems to be a commotion outside," the emperor of the Urdwight Empire, Gilzerius Urd Alegreif, said calmly. "What's the emergency?"

"The palace is under attack! You need to evacuate immediately! With your permission, I shall guide the way!"

"Under attack? Has the capital fallen into enemy hands?" The emperor turned to face Neal, his voice sounding rather unconvincing.

At that moment, a chill ran down Neal's spine. The emperor was indeed facing him—but his head was missing its face.

Neal blinked several times. It had to have been his imagination. While moonlight from the window behind him made it difficult to make out the details, the plain features of his face that he had laid eyes on many times before were right there. "N-No," Neal replied, trembling. "The enemy seems to be a single individual. He is believed to have passed through the city and attacked the palace directly."

"Is that so?" The emperor turned his attention to the corner of the room. "What do you think, granny?"

Following the emperor's gaze, Neal looked closely and noticed a small shadow hunched over in the corner.

"Keh heh, keh heh heh." The shadow laughed hoarsely.

Neal was bewildered. The empress had passed away over a decade ago, and the emperor had been single ever since. He didn't have any mistresses at the moment either, and there was no reason for a servant to be in his room so late at night. Who was that shadow? It was too small to be a human. It was the size of a child. It had a terrible hunchback, and it was supporting itself using a staff topped with metal rings that heathen priests were known to carry. It had long ears, a hooked nose, and greenish skin. The ragged robes it wore were a deep crimson color.

"Ah!" Neal suddenly remembered. Among goblins, there were rare individuals adept at light magic, capable of healing their companions. That crimson robe was a characteristic trait of a superior variant of goblin priest.

"A-A goblin cardinal?! What's a monster doing here?!" Neal shouted, drawing his sword. The unforeseen circumstances had him on edge. How had a monster that was only supposed to appear in goblin hordes in high-difficulty dungeons gotten here?

"No need to worry about her. Please, sheathe your blade," the emperor said calmly.

"Her"? Was he talking about the goblin? As Neal struggled to take in the situation, the elderly goblin began to speak.

"Keh heh. First, let us get the facts in order. Your Majesty, you did not anticipate this attack."

"Indeed, I had no idea it was coming. That means it's very probable that the masterminds are few in number. If there were many people involved, information would have leaked, and they likely would have been caught in my web. Particularly someone that powerful. Was he sent by someone, or did he come here of his own volition?"

"And now, the imperial palace is in turmoil."

"The garrison doesn't seem to be able to put up a fight, and I don't think it's because they were taken by surprise in the middle of the night. This is our most crucial piece of information."

"The final thing we know is that he came here now, at this exact moment."

"That one's less certain. He could have come here now by pure coincidence, acting on some old grudge. But, if we are to assume there's meaning in his timing...then I suppose he must be after the Hero."

The monster was speaking the human tongue fluently. Not only that, she was having a genuine discussion with the emperor. As Neal stood there frozen, the emperor scratched his head, seemingly at a loss.

"Goodness, Hans has certainly caused me some trouble."

"Keh heh heh, shall I dispose of him?"

"Heavens, no. I need Hans to continue to exert himself for the empire's sake." Hans was Marquess Hans Ned Greville, imperial noble and assemblyman. The emperor tended to refer to those close to him by their given names rather than their family names. Neal had heard that Marquess Greville had brought a student from the academy to the palace, but what was that about the Hero?

"Those are all the facts we know at this time. Keh heh, it would be difficult to logically deduce an answer."

"Then let us think it over with open minds. If we presume the Hero is his goal, then it would be natural to believe the enemy is a demon. A group of them was recently wiped out at the academy, but it's possible there was a survivor. However, there are two flaws with that assumption. The first is that the enemy is simply too strong—if the demons had someone that powerful, our spies in demon territory would have reported it."

"Keh heh. Then what about a demon separate from that group? Say, the Demon Lord?"

"I hadn't considered that. Indeed, if he were the Demon Lord, it would make sense to have kept him hidden. That would also explain his strength. But there's one thing that concerns me." The emperor continued as though talking to himself. "He got here too fast. Hans only brought the girl to the palace earlier today. Even if he excels at teleportation magic and can cut down the travel time, there's no way for an outsider like a demon to have found out so quickly. It would be difficult even if he had an informant on the inside."

"Keh..."

"Which makes me think..." The emperor's voice took on an excited tone as though he'd come up with a good idea. "What if *he's* the real Hero? He's the Hero, and the girl Hans brought is his classmate. Perhaps she was acting as the Hero's double and was taken by mistake, prompting the real Hero to come to her rescue. What do you think? That would explain both his strength and the speed of the attack. On top of that, his reckless bravery for the sake of his friend perfectly fits the image of the Hero."

"Keh heh heh. Your theory is quite sound, but I'm afraid it's impossible. The Hero must meet certain conditions regarding gender, age, and hair color. There are no other students at the academy who fulfill the requirements."

"Hmm, right you are. There are many ways to hide those things, but I suppose we should rule it out for now. Well then, given all the options we've come up with so far, what do you make of this?" The emperor's lips curved into a faint smile. "He's the Demon Lord, and the Hero girl is his friend from school. The Demon Lord attends the academy, so he immediately knew that the Hero had been taken, and he used his powers to launch a surprise attack and rescue his friend. What do you think?"

"Keh keh, keh heh heh! Keh heh heh heh heh heh!" The elderly goblin woman flew into a fit of laughter. "An excellent theory, Your Majesty. If he's of mixed blood, he may appear human despite being a demon. It's a possible answer, though I personally think it's a stretch."

"Fair enough. All right, then, shall we flee, Neal?"

"Huh?" Neal was brought back to his senses when he suddenly heard his name. The emperor, still in his bedclothes, had gotten off the bed and was approaching Neal with nothing in his hands.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Please, guide me to the escape route."

"U-Um, Your Majesty. What was all that about the Demon Lord and the Hero being captured?" Neal asked, clearly flustered.

"Oh, that?" The emperor gave an apologetic smile. "Nothing more than a mental exercise. It seems I made you take it seriously. I've always had a habit of

doing it whenever something strange occurs. It's simply a game of coming up with a solution that doesn't contradict the situation, so the answers tend to be a little unrealistic."

"B-But..."

"It's true that Hans brought a student here, but she's nothing more than a criminal claiming to be the Hero. It was an interesting setting, so we included it. I don't blame you for being confused. I haven't the slightest clue who that attacker is. All I can say for certain is that we should make haste to escape. I know I can't really talk after wasting all that time, so I won't try to excuse myself. That said, I'll do my best to run, so I'd like you to hurry as well. You too, granny. I know you're faster than you look."

Neal suddenly realized that he was breathing heavily. His breathing was even more ragged than when he had parted ways with his allies who had faced certain death, ran all the way to the emperor's room, and pounded on his door, filled with anxiety and stress. "A-As you wish. This way, please." Trying to shake it off, Neal turned around and started running down the hallway.

Behind him, he heard the clacking of the emperor's shoes and the footsteps of the elderly goblin. He was evacuating the emperor and his attendant. He should have been fulfilling the mission entrusted to him with determination, yet for some reason, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being pursued by a terrible monster.

## **Extra Story: The Flutter of Fleeting Days**

It was a momentous, once-in-a-lifetime day. As rays of sunlight streamed into the grand cathedral, the man who would soon be my husband stood before me, a gentle smile on his face. I wore a similar expression, though one tinged with a hint of shyness. It was clear that the me standing there was genuinely happy.

Finally, the ceremony reached its climax. The man raised the veil covering my face, slowly bringing his lips closer to mine. I silently closed my eyes, accepting the kiss that would seal our vows—

I suddenly dropped my spoon. It clattered to the floor as I sat there in a daze, the stew I had been eating dripping from my mouth. The dimming light of the setting sun streamed into the modest yet well-kept room. I wasn't in a cathedral—I was sitting at my usual dining room table. Naturally, there was no wedding either. At the time, I was still only three years old.

"Lady Fiona?!"

"Oh, my! We need to get you some new clothes. Are you not feeling well?"

The maids panicked, wiped the stew off my clothes and the corners of my mouth, and then picked up my fallen spoon. Still spacing out, I abruptly stood up from the table and raced down the hall. I ran to my dimly lit room as fast as I could and dove under the covers of my bed, curling into a ball.

"Lady Fiona? What's the matter?"

"Did something happen?"

"Who knows."

"Hmph, what an odd girl. It must be because of her messed-up birth."

I could hear the maids talking. Some of them had less than pleasant things to say, but I wasn't in the state of mind to dwell on that.

What the heck was that?! My face was burning up and my heart was pounding. It was my first time ever seeing anything like it. Was that me and my

future husband? I still remember his name. I believe it was...

"Seika?"

That was the day I first laid eyes on Seika Lamprogue.



I had been able to see the future for as long as I could remember. That said, it took me a while to realize it was the future I was seeing. Once, in one of my visions, snow was falling outside the window.

"It's gonna snow tomorrow."

That vision became reality, and the next day, we lit the fireplace for the first time that year. Another day, I saw myself playing with a wild rabbit.

"A bunny's gonna come play in the garden the day after tomorrow!"

Two days later, I waited in the garden with my maid all day long, but the rabbit never appeared. In a different vision, I saw myself enjoying a festival with my maid.

"It looks like the weather for the festival is gonna be great! I can't wait!"

The day of the festival came and the skies were indeed clear, but I had gotten so excited the day before that I came down with a fever and spent the day bedridden, unable to attend.

"Your predictions sure do come true a lot." My predictions sometimes proved true and sometimes did not. The maids discussed them in a lighthearted manner, often in jest. I personally considered the visions I saw to be fleeting dreams that couldn't be seen at will, only sometimes becoming reality.

I was oblivious to the fact that the future was prone to change. Whether intended or not, even actions that seemed entirely unrelated could significantly alter the future. Had I realized that sooner, perhaps I would have arrived at a different future than the one I found myself in now.



Ever since the day I saw myself marrying Seika, every aspect of my life seemed to be colored with new meaning. At the time, I didn't know who my

parents were. I was told that my mother died giving birth to me, and my father was a powerful man who was unable to see me due to certain circumstances.

I lived a quiet, dull life in a small, remote manor, tended to by my maids. I remembered thinking that life would continue until the day I died—that there was nothing more to human existence. Given I was confined to that manor, it was a reasonable thing to believe.

Yet, one day I would have a spouse! Of course, it was possible such a future wouldn't come to pass, but the mere concept of marriage, something I had only heard about from my maids, filled me with hope that a new life awaited me.

That Seika was a wonderful man played a role in this as well. He was composed, intelligent, kind, and bore features both refined and handsome. On top of that, he was strong. Instead of a wand, he used paper talismans to cast spells, and occasionally even summoned powerful monsters. He seemed strong enough that nobody could challenge him, yet he never flaunted that strength.

We should have been around the same age in my visions, but I seemed so childish I was almost ashamed of myself. With that in mind, I made a decision despite my young age. I was more careful with my speech, and I began to take the etiquette lessons I had always hated seriously. Of course, that alone wouldn't be enough. I had to improve myself on the inside as well.

"Teach me how to govern," I requested of my home tutor one day. While Seika was the son of a count, he didn't seem to be making a living as a noble. However, given his apparent affluence, he must have maintained ties with his family and other noble houses. As the daughter of a lesser noble family, I was to be engaged and married off, so I couldn't afford to be ignorant of such matters. That was why I had spoken up.

My tutor seemed a little hesitant but soon acquiesced. I began to study government and politics and found myself unexpectedly suited to it. My tutor must have been skilled as well, as it didn't take me long to grasp the essence of what I was being taught. Like rainwater sinking into the dry ground, I absorbed everything I was told.

Now I'll be able to help Seika! Contrary to that belief, the Seika I saw in my visions started to appear more and more troubled.

"Why?" I couldn't understand the reason. Nevertheless, hoping to be of use to Seika, I continued to devote myself to my studies. I learned commerce, law, military studies, debate, and rhetoric. Yet the future didn't change. In fact, the situation grew even worse.

Seika's expression became more grim, and the situations in which he used his powerful talismans increased. Finally, I realized that the more I studied, the more Seika suffered. The way he looked at me never changed, but in the future, I saw problems that never would have arisen had I remained an ignorant young girl.

I started to hear the words "Hero" and "Demon Lord" frequently. At the time, I didn't know the significance the two names from the fairy tales would hold in the future. Yet whenever people talked about them, the atmosphere was always somber. The visions I saw were growing more and more unstable.

The timing of my encounters with Seika, our respective statuses, and the scenery we shared changed every time I saw a glimpse of the future. Eventually, I even began to see futures where Seika and I didn't get engaged. That was when I reached my limit.

I stopped studying. My tutor and maids asked if something had happened, but I maintained my silence. I was afraid of changing the future any further. If I didn't do anything else, I would be able to continue seeing happy dreams.

"Fewer merchant wagons are coming through."

"We're not making as much from tariffs."

"Ever since the current lord took over..."

Around that time, an unsettling atmosphere began to overtake the remote region in which I lived. A viscount had recently taken over as lord, and unlike the previous lord, I heard talk of him being a debauched, cruel person. Soon I began to see more unpleasant futures. Nonetheless, I decided it had nothing to do with me and focused solely on my future with Seika.



One morning, I sprung awake from a terrible nightmare. My nightclothes were glued to me from sweat, and I ran through the manor, calling the name of

the maid I was closest to.

"My goodness. What's the matter, my lady?" I soon found her and clung to her on the verge of tears. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I saw a dream of you dying, -," I answered.

— gently patted my head. "I'm right here, my lady." My face was buried in her clothes, and hearing her voice helped me relax a little. But a bad feeling remained in my chest.

Due to my drowsiness, I couldn't tell if it had simply been an ordinary nightmare or a vision of a very real future. I raised my head and saw — looking down at me, her expression slightly groggy.



That bad feeling became a reality. I was forced to face that fact one morning. Clinging to a faint glimmer of hope, I spoke to a maid at the dining table.

"Where's —?" One look at her face extinguished that hope. — had committed suicide. As the city's revenues declined, her lover had become indebted and taken his own life, and she had followed suit.

She was the third daughter of a noble family who had been working to support herself with no prospects of marrying into money. She was the maid who had sat with me at the fireplace the first time snow had fallen. The maid who had waited for the rabbit with me in the garden. The maid who, in that lost future, had looked forward to the festival even more than I had. She was courteous, yet somewhat childish, and I had adored her deeply. I couldn't accept it.

I couldn't forgive the lord who had caused it all, her lover who had killed himself, or her for leaving me behind. And most of all, I couldn't forgive myself. I could have done something. I could have avoided this future. Seika would have taken action without hesitation, yet I had only paid attention to my future with him, ignoring the reality before my eyes and the future just ahead.

I began to read again, absorbing knowledge even faster than I had before. It wasn't structured learning—I focused on practical knowledge I could use to corner my foes. I already had a general idea of what was necessary.

I wrote countless letters, using even the most minor connection at my disposal to get in contact with someone I'd met briefly in the past. I saw many different futures, learned all that I needed to know, pondered the contents of my letters, and plotted a course toward my goal.



Finally, the day arrived.

"It's an honor to have you here, Your Highness—or rather, Lady Fiona. I don't believe we've seen each other since I was given my title." The viscount who was the lord of the territory rubbed his fat chin as he spoke. His complexion looked healthy, and despite his territory's deteriorating condition, he seemed to be living quite the extravagant life. "To what do I owe the pleas—"

"Your title." I abruptly cut him off and gave no introduction. "Would you be so kind as to relinquish it to the empire, Lord Broad?"

"What are you talking about?"

At my signal, one of my maids tossed a bundle of papers on the floor. "These are ledgers recording the amount of gold sold in the surrounding area. I don't believe I need to say any more."

The viscount had been smuggling gold. For certain goods handled by merchants, there was a separate tax that had to be paid to the empire in addition to the local lord's tariffs. Gold was one such item. The viscount had been embezzling taxes owed to the empire by disguising gold circulating in the region as other goods. Despite his repeated mismanagement and the declining financial state of his territory, he had done no self-reflection and had instead turned to illegal practices. That was the type of man the lord was.

Viscount Broad's face warped, half with anger and half with indignation. "A forbidden bastard child dares oppose me?! You were foolish enough to waltz in here without any forces to call your own—"

"As it so happens," I said, not letting him finish. I had heard his speech far too many times already. It was a waste of time. "Tomorrow, the Darlek Knights, the Mered-Mille Knights, and the Forlort Mercenaries will all be convening at my manor for a joint military exercise. They should be on their way here as we

speak."

"Huh?"

"Should you kill me, I can only imagine they would deem you a traitor and your territory would be ceded to their lord."

"Th-That's ridiculous."

Of course, most of it was a bluff. But I knew it would be effective.

"Th-There's no way. The empire forbids territorial conflict between lords."

"Territorial conflict?" I giggled. "How odd, Lord Broad. You seem to be dreaming while wide awake. They would simply be defeating a traitor to the empire. I, Fiona Urd Alegreif, am the emperor's daughter and possess a legitimate claim to the throne. Killing me would be taken as an undeniable act of rebellion, particularly by those who would stand to benefit from it. Leave this land, Lord Broad. The only choice left to you now is what to leave behind—your title, or your head. Make your decision."

Viscount Broad was stripped of his title, and his territory was given to a promising young noble from the capital. But all I knew at the time was that I had irrevocably changed.

That night, I had a long dream. I saw myriad futures and learned many things, but I never again saw a future where I was wed to Seika. I was only a little over the age of seven, but given how many times I had seen my matured self in my vision of the future, my actual age might not have held much significance.



Not long after, I learned who my mother was and decided on my goal in life. Oddly enough, it filled me with energy. All that was left was to act on it.

Then, only a short while later, I learned of a fate that had to be avoided at all costs. No matter how many times I peered into the future, I couldn't find a solution. Left with no other choice, I decided to face it head-on.



It was a bright, moonlit night. Fixing the position of the table and the tea I had prepared, I patiently waited. Before long, the person I was awaiting finally

appeared.

Though "person" might not have been the correct word to describe him. The figure that emerged from the distortion in the room was a massive, gray skeleton twice my size. His body was wrapped in tattered rags, and a pale, ominous light glowed in his hollow eye sockets. He was dragging a dull golden greatsword, its blade alone as tall as me. He didn't appear human, nor did he seem to be a demon. It seemed more likely that he was one of the powerful creatures known as monsters that ruled over the depths of dungeons.

Sitting in a chair, I tilted the cup in my hands and smiled at him. "Welcome. I've been waiting for you." The skeleton stirred slightly, appearing confused. The greatsword at his side scraped along the ground. "The moon is beautiful tonight, isn't it? I'd invite you to take a seat, but I fear the chair is too small for you. My apologies. I'd be happy to pour you some tea if you're capable of drinking it, but if not, I hope you can at least accept the sentiment."

"How did you know I was coming?" he asked. His voice was low, as though echoing from below the ground. His question seemed reasonable, but it wasn't quite as simple as it appeared.

"I'm sure you can fathom a guess. Let me return the question—why have you come to me?"

The skeleton didn't respond.

"Pardon me, answering a question with a question isn't very forthcoming. As an apology, allow me to take your question a step further. I'll tell you why I'm sitting here awaiting my death without running or hiding, despite knowing of your arrival. To put it simply, this is my fate."

"What?"

"The future holds great currents of fate that can't be changed by something so meager as the flap of a butterfly's wings. Meeting you here is one such current. In other words, fate. As I'm powerless to avoid it, I decided I might as well welcome you."

"You..."

"Looking back, perhaps his struggles were the same. They weren't caused by

my gaining knowledge—rather, I simply hadn't noticed them back when I was an ignorant young girl. I'm sure he was suffering from the very beginning. The Hero and Demon Lord both were unavoidable fates." When I finished speaking, I returned my gaze to the being, which seemed to be taken aback. The light in his eye sockets wavered as though he were looking at something dangerous. People feared that which they could not understand. I had learned through experience that incomprehensible behavior could at times turn negotiations in my favor. That said, it did sting a little to be met with such a reaction from a monster.

"What do you intend to do?" he finally asked. "Surely you did not come here without a plan. If you have a means of opposing me, show me. A human girl's petty schemes could never—"

"I have no plan," I said flatly.

"Excuse me?"

"No schemes, no plan. On the contrary, I'm here to welcome you."

"What are you thinking?"

"I wanted to speak with you. You kill me in every single future. It doesn't matter if I run, hide, or prepare countless soldiers. However, the one thing I never tried was talking to you. So I'd like to know—why are you targeting me?" I looked directly at the being. "Please, tell me. Why do you seek to kill me? No one is on the way here. You'll have ample time to carry out your goal after answering my question."

Eventually, he responded quietly. "Because you are descended from the oracle priestesses."

"I expected as much." I couldn't imagine any other reason. "Then let me ask you something else. Why do you seek to kill the oracle priestesses?"

"There can only be one reason. To aid His Majesty the Demon Lord."

"I see." His answer told me several things. First of all, he had called the Demon Lord "His Majesty." "You once served the Demon Lord in the past, and now you seek to serve the current Demon Lord? Are you aiming to offer my head as a gift?"

"I seek no such thing. I am unworthy. My only goal is to atone for my sins. I failed to protect His Majesty in the past, and now I must atone for the sin of living on in disgrace. Thus I hunt humans who would oppose the next Demon Lord and kill them. Whether this is enough to clear my sins, I do not know. Think me a fool and mock me if you wish, human, but there is no other purpose left to me."

He was like a ghost that couldn't pass on—in terms of his way of life even more than his appearance. Yet despite that, he seemed remarkably sane. Though he had lived many long years burdened by guilt, his goal was logical, and he was committed to it. And most importantly, in all the times he had killed me, he had never made me suffer. Aside from my soldiers, he had never killed anyone unrelated.

I smiled at the skeleton. "Thank you for answering. Allow me to offer some information in return. The Demon Lord has been born, as has the Hero."

"What?!"

It seems like he really didn't know, despite knowing exactly who I am. How odd. Well, judging from his appearance, he can't be using his eyes to see or ears to hear. He likely has his own methods of gathering information. It's not important at the moment, I thought to myself.

"What do you stand to gain from telling me that?"

I giggled. "I'm happy to have finally met someone worthy of being my ally. You need not kill me. Our goals are aligned. I want to help the current Demon Lord as well."

"Ridiculous," the skeleton said firmly. "Why would a human aid the Demon Lord? You will not talk your way out of this with that pathetic excuse."

"I owe the Demon Lord a great deal. Though we technically haven't met yet."

"Enough nonsense."

"I don't blame you for finding it hard to believe, but if you can cast your doubts aside, I think you would find it an agreeable proposal. I'm a human and one of high status at that. In addition, I know how to strategize. All of these are things you lack. In return, I ask for your strength. With you at my side, I should

be able to overcome most threats. That is what I need most right now."

"This is not even worth discussion," the skeleton practically spat. "Such a partnership can only function if your intent is genuine. How will you prove that to me?"

"I never had any intention of earning your trust here and now."

"Hmph. Then you—"

"That being the case..." I traced my finger along my neck. "If you ever sense deceit in my words, by all means, take my head on the spot. I want you by my side as my most trusted guard. Of course, it can't be made public, but with your abilities, remaining close without being noticed should be a simple feat. You're welcome to strike me down from behind whenever you see fit."

"I do not understand. Have you lost your mind?"

"I'm trying to show you that I'm serious about this. What about you? Were your previous words nothing more than a pretense to console yourself? If so, then you aren't someone to place my hopes in. Finish your business and be on your way."

A lengthy silence fell over the room. Finally, it was broken by the skeleton's solemn voice. "Very well. I will allow myself to fall for your provocation."

"My, it's nothing of the sort. But I'm glad. Let us give our utmost for his sake." I was in high spirits. I had skillfully navigated a crisis and obtained a powerful ally. It was only natural that I couldn't contain my excitement. "From now on, you're my knight!" I exclaimed, springing up from my seat.

"To think the day would come where I am called a knight."

"Now, kneel down."

"Hrm?"

"So that I may knight you."

"Is this necessary?"

"It is. These sorts of things are important in human society. Now, on with it." The skeleton reluctantly knelt in front of my chair. "Ah, hold on. Give me your

sword."

"Why?"

"I have to tap it on your shoulders like this. That's how you're knighted."

"My sword is too heavy for you. Do not even bother."

The skeleton poured cold water on my jovial mood. Truth be told, I probably should have restrained myself. "It'll be fine! A knight must obey his master's orders!"

"Very well, then. Hold it with both hands. And take care not to drop it."

I accepted the dull, golden-hued greatsword, its edge dragging across the floor. The moment the skeleton let go, an overwhelming weight bore down on my hands. It was so heavy I wasn't sure I could support it even if I used my entire body. Naturally, the hilt slipped from my hands and landed right on my foot. The intense pain had me seeing stars, and I couldn't stop myself from bursting into tears.

"Waaaaaah!"

"What did I tell you?! S-Stop crying! Someone will hear!"

Looking back on it now, his flustered cries were amusing. However, in the moment, it was anything but funny. Fortunately, he wasn't discovered, though the next day my foot was wrapped in bandages.

"You must promise me one more thing," the skeleton—the first of those who would come to be called my holy knights—said. "Never again attempt anything beyond your stature! You may well die without my aid! You are far too weak!"

I puffed out my cheeks and turned away, earning myself a scolding.

"Are you even listening?!"

I wasn't even ten years old at the time.



After that, things proceeded smoothly. I gained supporters, gathered funds, and gradually increased my influence. My future sight was incredibly useful to that end. Knowing someone's true character and intentions allowed me to

forge alliances with the right people at the right time.

The foundation of any political base was built on two elements: people and money. To incite the growth of these things was to increase your influence. By the time I moved to the capital, my claim to the throne had begun to attract the attention of powerful people. I would occasionally be targeted by assassins, but they were no match for my most powerful holy knight. Eventually, as my holy knights increased in number, the assassination attempts decreased in turn.

I began to see futures where I was with Seika again. Of course, we weren't married. Rather, it meant that my influence had grown enough that I was able to meet him of my own will. I had gained the power to move the future with a force far greater than the flap of a butterfly's wings.

I began my next move. Under the pretense of an inspection tour, I traveled through the countryside and arrived at the imperial military's eastern base to meet a person by the name of Gly Lamprogue. He was a young officer and skilled swordsman capable of also using wind and fire magic. And he was Seika's older brother.

In one future I'd seen, Gly had seemed to have a good relationship with Seika, despite their constant fighting. It made me wish I had siblings. By appointing Gly as one of my holy knights, I hoped to form an indirect connection with Seika. That would make the actions I planned to take later on easier. Naturally, I hadn't forgotten to promise to generously compensate and provide skilled personnel to General Petrus, who would certainly be displeased at having the promising officer he had raised poached from him.

"H-Holy knight?! Me?" Gly was an ordinary person. Though he was a little rough around the edges, he grew nervous in front of the imperial family like everyone else and was surprised to be chosen as a holy knight. "I-If you think I'm a good fit, then I'd be honored." Nonetheless, he accepted in the end.

Compared to my other holy knights, even though he had become an officer at the young age of seventeen, Gly was considerably weaker. However, he had a distinct quality that set him apart from all the others. He was *ordinary*.

It might sound harsh, but my other knights were all eccentric and difficult to engage with. With our relatively close ages and his easygoing nature, he was a

rare individual with whom I felt like I could interact freely. I might have teased him a little too much as he seemed somewhat disillusioned with me now, but oh well.



I grew fond of Gly. I had ulterior motives, but I was glad I had made him a holy knight. That was why when I saw him in the courtyard of the Lamprogue estate, about to duel Seika, I almost fainted on the spot. What was he thinking? He was ruining everything. Perhaps they weren't on great terms at this point in time.

"Oh my, a duel." At that moment, it took everything in my power to restrain my anger and anxiety. My face was likely tense as well. "What in the world is going on here? My holy knight is in a duel? It must be my fate to witness such a thing." Muttering something that seemed more meaningful than it actually was, I did my best to calm myself, managing to just barely regain my composure.

After that, I was finally face-to-face with the two people I had been dying to meet. The first was Amyu, the current Hero. I knew of her, of course. I had seen her face in several futures, including ones where I had been married to Seika. She was a lovely person. I had seen many noble ladies who were akin to treasured jewels, dressed in fancy attire, but Amyu's beauty was something different entirely—a powerful beauty that stood all on its own.

Meeting someone I had seen in the future so many times was deeply moving. I couldn't help but stare. No, that wasn't it. In truth, I was simply nervous. Yet I couldn't talk to Amyu forever. Steeling my resolve, I turned to face him.

"Seika Lamprogue." Ah, Seika! I've seen you in so many different futures! I thought to myself, seeing him eye to eye for the first time. He was the same age as me, so he should have been around fifteen years old. His face was exactly as I had seen in my visions—youthful for his age and with a somewhat feminine charm. Eek! "Thank you for listening to my sudden request." Though I spoke nonchalantly, with a composed expression on my face, inside I was running wild with excitement. Seika asked me a question, but I wasn't sure what he meant.

"Um, is something wrong?" He seemed confused.

Realizing that I had been staring at his face, I came to my senses and shook my head. "It's nothing. I've heard you possess considerable strength yourself.

You even won a tournament in the capital..." My mouth moved on its own. Using my skills as a politician, I was able to comport myself as a member of the imperial family should. But in my head, I was filled with emotion.

"Are you sure there's nothing wrong?"

I once again came to my senses. I couldn't let things go on like this. I was going to reveal my secret. I responded appropriately, making the decision to retreat for the time being.

"I hope we can get along during my stay here." The last words out of my mouth were the only ones that perhaps weren't suited to a politician.



I was in high spirits my entire stay at the Lamprogue estate. I had intended to conduct myself properly, but I might have behaved a little strangely.

I found myself uneasy about the number of girls around Seika and ended up teasing him. I went into town to deepen my bond with him, then pouted when things didn't go as planned. I was elated to have received a gift from him, and it convinced me we'd grown closer, so I pushed my luck. Speaking and laughing with him filled me with joy.

I asked my holy knight about it, but all he said was, "You are no different from usual." Yet I couldn't help but feel something was off. It was in a different form from the visions I had seen as a child, but I was simply happy to spend time with Seika.



That was why I grew increasingly nervous as the day of our departure approached. It wasn't that I would miss Seika when we were apart—it was that I wasn't confident we had established enough of a bond. I wasn't sure it was safe to leave things as they were.

Seika would be able to easily handle the demon attack. The problem came after. Amyu's situation was a major current of fate even I couldn't prevent. The anti-Hero faction was too large. Forcing Marquess Greville to act on his own was the best I could manage. That fateful night was coming whether I liked it or not.

After attempting to cheer up the exhausted Amyu, I waited. The damage to the palace was within my expectations. Finally, Seika appeared to rescue the captive Hero. Though his harsh words pierced me to the point of nearly crying inside, as a politician I stood firm, facing him directly and stringing together words with a graceful flow.

"Please stand down for now." I knew how difficult a demand it was for Seika to accept. I was telling him to leave Amyu in the cold, dark dungeon. I probably seemed like the mastermind behind her confinement to him. Being told to leave by such a person would defeat the purpose of him having come in the first place. Nonetheless, if I could get him to trust me—if we could have faith in each other like in the visions I'd once seen, I was certain he would understand. I believed he would trust in my intention to resolve things peacefully.

"Tell me—why should I have faith in you?"

Hearing those words made me feel as though the ground had fallen out from beneath me. Yet somewhere deep down, a part of me had expected his response. In all the futures I'd seen, and in the present as well, Seika had never revealed everything to me. He was hiding some sort of major secret, and I felt in my heart that I could never fully gain his trust until I knew what it was.

"Very well, Seika. Go ahead and take Amyu, then." Despite my internal feelings, I let my politician self take over and smoothly explained what I had decided in advance. I was no longer the ignorant little girl I once saw in my visions of the future. I had the cunning of a politician and knew how to sway others. I could put on a sincere act, and I knew well how effective those tactics were on those who were genuine and kind.

It might not have been the ideal outcome, but I could steer it toward the second-best result. And I could only do it because I was now a different person from the me I had seen in those happy futures.



"Was that for the best?"

"Yes." I nodded in response to my holy knight's question, standing in front of the fully restored palace gate after Seika left. One crisis had been averted. "I cannot imagine having such a being as our enemy. I suspect you saved the empire tonight."

"The empire?" I giggled. "What an odd thing to say. You certainly are acting funny tonight. Have you been watching humans live their lives for too long? Our goal isn't to save the empire—it's to help the Demon Lord. That shared objective is why we joined hands, no?"

"I suppose I forgot at some point. Perhaps what you said that night was true and my words were nothing more than a way to console myself. Maybe what I truly sought was to give purpose to my unending life." A hint of doubt sneaked into my holy knight's voice. "Are you different? Is all that you do truly for that dreadful Demon Lord? Your words were not merely a means of avoiding certain death? I thought you cared for this country and its people."

"I certainly do, but to me, there's something even more important. That's all." Helping the empire was simply a means to an end. It was a way to prevent him from standing in opposition to the world. On my last day at the Lamprogue manor, Seika had asked me about my reason for living.

"Is that child the empire?"

No, that child is you. I want to help you, Seika—my first love. That night irreversibly changed me. The future I saw during that long dream will never leave me.



A blue, snakelike dragon, its body twisting through the sky. A chimera with the voice of a bird, the head of a monkey, the body of a raccoon dog, and the limbs of a tiger, wrapped in dark clouds. A massive skeleton surrounded by floating balls of fire, seeking the dead. A hideous, gaunt goblin with a protruding gut. A harpy crying ominously in search of its child.

Surrounded by numerous powerful, terrifying monsters, Seika sat in the center of the ruined capital and mumbled hollowly as he held the Hero's lifeless body in his arms.

"I failed again. But next time... In my next life, I'm certain I'll find happiness..."

I didn't know what sort of tragedy had occurred to result in that future, nor

what he meant by next life, but it was undeniably a future that could come to pass.



The futures are wavering now. Even the widest currents aren't stable. It could mean that my power to change the future has grown, or it could be proof that Seika's heart is wavering. I can't rule out the possibility of that tragedy occurring. But it'll be okay, Seika. I'll save you.

I had a long, long dream of the future, and on that day when I was told who my mother was, I decided my life's purpose. Once, as the forbidden, illegitimate child of the emperor and a priestess, I thought I had no choice but to live a life devoid of freedom. I thought it was my fate to be at the mercy of others. But I was wrong.

Because the Demon Lord helped the Hero. If their conflict isn't destiny, then is there even such a thing as human fate? Seika, you gave meaning to my life when I was young. You painted my colorless days with vibrant hues. It's only because of you that I've grown this strong.

So this time, it's my turn to save you. Rest assured, Seika. I promise I'll make you happy.

## Extra Story: Yotte Kudan no Gotoshi

"A rare ayakashi will soon be born in a village around this area. Are there any pregnant cows here?"

Just yesterday, a priest came from the capital and made an odd claim. He was a handsome man with delicate features who wore a spotless kariginu robe. At first glance, he had the bearing and dress of a noble, and the village headman had tried to drive him away, thinking he was suspicious. However, the priest offered to pay for his stay, producing a bag full of rice and a roll of silk out of nowhere. Subsequently, the headman's attitude immediately reversed.

"My goodness, you've come a long way. Stay as long as you like. I do believe two of Rokusuke's cows are pregnant at the moment," he proclaimed cheerfully.

That afternoon, the priest came to Asamaru as he was tending to the cows.

"Hey there. Are you Rokusuke's son Asamaru?" The man introduced himself as an exorcist by the name of Haruyoshi Kuga.

Asamaru furrowed his brow as the priest explained that he had come to seal an ayakashi that would soon be born in the area. He claimed to have gotten permission from the local governor and village headman, and that when he'd spoken with Rokusuke a moment ago, Rokusuke had said that his son was the one to ask about the cattle.

"You came all the way from the capital to Tango to seal a single spirit? We appreciate it, but you're pretty odd for a noble," Asamaru said, taking a break from cleaning the barn.

"I'm no noble. I no longer work for the government—I'm simply an independent sorcerer. That said, I do still go by the Kuga family's name for the time being."

"Huh." An odd priest, then, Asamaru thought to himself. Why cross such a distance to seal a spirit that had yet to cause any damage? Asamaru had heard

that some sorcerers used sealed spirits as pawns, but was it worth coming all this way? Surely the area around the capital was crawling with spirits.

He was a strange man, and Asamaru didn't particularly want to interact with him, but if he had the governor's and headman's permission, Asamaru couldn't simply brush him off. If Asamaru were to treat the man poorly, it might cause issues for his adoptive parents.

"I know what you're after," Asamaru said reluctantly. "We have two pregnant cows here. They'll both probably give birth in the next few days."

"I see. Then I came at the perfect time. I didn't have any luck in the other villages I visited. Hopefully, it'll be born from one of those two," the priest said, sounding relieved. It seemed he had been to other villages as well.

"This ayakashi thing is born from a cow?" Asamaru asked.

"Indeed. However, it's not a dangerous ayakashi, so you need not worry about it causing any harm to your cows or the people of this village."

"That's a relief." Asamaru wasn't entirely convinced a spirit could be born from a cow, but he went along with it for now. "I'll come get you when one of them goes into labor. Stay at the headman's house or something until then. I'm sure he'd love hearing about the capital. We don't get travelers here very often."

"No, I'd like to stay here."

"Here?" Asamaru blinked at the unexpected response.

"Yes, here in this barn. You said they'd give birth in the next few days, did you not? I'll keep an eye on them until then," the priest said calmly. Asamaru was momentarily at a loss for words.

"I'm not sure why you're so serious about this, but I'm telling you, it's fine. I'll come get you when it's time."

"No. In the previous village, the cow gave birth overnight. Fortunately, it was an ordinary calf, but if it hadn't been, it would have given its prophecy to the first person it saw and then died. Then it would all be for nothing. I may never have another chance to get my hands on one of them."

"What are you talking about? Give a prophecy and then die?" Asamaru asked in confusion.

"That's the sort of ayakashi it is," the priest replied. "It's called a kudan."



Kudan were ayakashi capable of human speech with the head of a human and the body of a cow. After being born, they would give an important prophecy then die immediately after, and that prophecy would come true without fail. Haruyoshi said he had come all this way to obtain that rare ayakashi.

"This might be a stupid question," Asamaru said as he shoveled soiled dirt out of the barn. "But how do you know a kudan is going to be born here? Divination?"

"No," Haruyoshi replied. His sleeves were tied up and he held dry straw in his arms. He had nothing better to do, so Haruyoshi had volunteered to help Asamaru. Asamaru had refused at first and told him that his expensive robe would get dirty, but Haruyoshi wouldn't have it. Asamaru relented and was surprised to find that the priest was actually rather skilled. He found himself growing curious about Haruyoshi.

"Around a year ago, a kudan was born in the distant province of Hitachi," Haruyoshi continued. "Normally they predict things like floods, famine, or volcanic eruptions, but that kudan foretold the birth of another kudan in the Tango province, right around this time."

Asamaru was intrigued. "Still, Tango has a lot of villages. Are you planning on visiting all of them?"

"Certainly not. Only some of the bigger ones. If that doesn't work, I'll just give up. I can't afford to be away from my estate for too long."

"Estate, huh? You must live somewhere nice."

"I have disciples, so I need the space. Kids right around your age. And to be honest, the location isn't great. It's in a place called Sagano, a little ways off from the capital. Because there's a large river nearby, the drainage isn't very good."

"Hmm. A river, huh?"

"That reminds me, the village the kudan foretold is supposed to be by a large river, so there actually aren't all that many options. I arrived here simply by following the river downstream." As Haruyoshi said, the village Asamaru lived in was near the large Furube River.

Asamaru looked away from Haruyoshi and returned to the conversation. "So how did this kudan ayakashi get its name?"

"Hmm?" Haruyoshi seemed confused.

"The names of spirits are usually pretty straightforward. 'Hitotsu-me nyuudou' means 'one-eyed monk,' since they have bald heads and a single eye. 'Oomukade' means 'giant centipede.' 'Kamaitachi' means 'sickle weasel' because they're weasels with sickles for hands. 'Satoru' means to 'perceive,' and satori can read minds. But what does 'kudan' mean?"

"The name 'kudan' actually represents the ayakashi perfectly," Haruyoshi said with a slight smile. "The phrase 'yotte kudan no gotoshi' is often used at the end of documents. It means something along the lines of 'the matter is as stated,' but kudan also say it at the end of their prophecies."

"Hmm. Maybe it actually is a straightforward name to a noble who writes a lot of documents."

"That's not all. The character for kudan is written with the characters for human and cow."

"Huh?"

"It's the perfect name for an ayakashi with a human's head and a cow's body, don't you think?"

Asamaru's hands froze up in confusion and he turned to face Haruyoshi. "Wait... Which of those came first? Was the character for kudan made because of the kudan akayashi? Is the word 'kudan' itself derived from the ayakashi?" It all seemed too perfect for that not to be the case. A human-headed cow used the word "kudan," and everything it predicted occurred exactly as stated.

However, Haruyoshi simply smiled and shook his head. "No, the character for

kudan came from China, so it's entirely unrelated. They don't have kudan ayakashi over there. In addition, the word 'kudan' comes from the word 'kudari,' meaning passage or paragraph—it has nothing to do with the ayakashi. The phrase 'yotte kudan no gotoshi' was first used by humans as well."

"So it's just a coincidence?"

"I doubt it. I suspect kudan are ayakashi born from that very phrase."

Asamaru was only growing more confused. "Is that possible? Aren't they born from cows?"

"I mean the very existence of the kudan itself was born from that phrase. Some ayakashi are like that. They're beings that depend on human recognition to survive. A kudan expends all its supernatural power shortly after its birth to give a prophecy and then dies, simply to capture the attention of humans, much like many other similar ayakashi. They don't have metabolisms, and their source of power is different from ours. Without human recognition, they soon fall into a slumber and their existence begins to fade. Ayakashi function differently from living beings such as humans and cows."

Asamaru was at a loss for words. Everything he had heard was inexplicable to him.

"Still, if handled well, they can be quite useful. I have an acquaintance who often sends letters via ayakashi. In that sense, they're not so different from livestock like horses and cows after all. Speaking of which, I have a question I'd like to ask you regarding your cows." Haruyoshi abruptly changed the subject.

"What?" Asamaru asked back.

"Could you tell me the names of the cows that are about to give birth? It feels rude to just call them cows in front of their owner, so I ask this question every time," Haruyoshi said as he gazed at the pregnant cows.

Impressed with how conscientious he was, Asamaru answered honestly. "Mikan and Biwa."

Haruyoshi fell silent for a moment, then broke into a wide grin. "Mandarin and loquat? How cute. Did you name them yourself?"

"No, my little sister did," Asamaru replied, smiling as well.



The next night, Biwa went into labor. Haruyoshi heard the cow making strange noises and came to tell Asamaru. Asamaru's adoptive father wanted to help, but Asamaru stopped him and headed to the barn with Haruyoshi.

When Asamaru entered the barn, he found it already illuminated by strange human figures cut out of paper that were floating in the air. Haruyoshi called it sorcery. Asamaru's eyes went wide—it was his first time ever seeing sorcery of any kind. The priest truly was a sorcerer. But he had to put that aside and focus on the delivery.

"The head's already coming out." The head and forelegs of the calf were already visible. Biwa was on her side, and Asamaru approached her and pulled lightly on the calf's legs, helping her give birth. The calf didn't immediately start crying like a human, but it seemed to be healthy.

"Phew." Asamaru sighed with relief as he watched Biwa lick the amniotic fluid off her calf. They both appeared to be doing fine. Asamaru helped wipe the calf down with a bundle of straw.

"You're quite experienced at this," Haruyoshi said from behind, sounding somewhat impressed. "You seem every bit as calm as the veteran cattle herders in the other villages, and at such a young age. Why is that?"

"My dad was the best cattleman in the village," Asamaru replied without raising his head. "He would even look after other family's cattle, and I helped him ever since I was little."

"You mean Rokusuke?"

"No, my real dad. He died in a flood two years ago with my mom. Rokusuke is just my dad's friend who took me and my little sister in."

"Is that so?" Haruyoshi said quietly.

Asamaru turned around to look at him. "Anyway, looks like this one is a normal calf, not an ayakashi. That's too bad." Biwa had given birth to an ordinary cow. It didn't have a human head, nor did it show any sign of being

able to speak.

"Oh, you're right," Haruyoshi said as though just now realizing the fact.

"That's okay. It's more important that the two are healthy and safe." The corners of his lips curved into a smile. "The calf is going to need a name too."

Asamaru found himself taking a liking to the priest.



The days continued, the autumn sky high and clear.

"I realized something today," Haruyoshi said, gazing out at the village next to the barn. "This village's rice fields are at a slightly higher elevation than the river. Do you get your water from elsewhere?"

"Yeah," Asamaru replied, sitting next to him. They had just finished doing some work, so they were taking a break. "This area has a lot of riverheads. There's no shortage of water."

"Ah. That's quite fortunate." Seeing that Asamaru wasn't responding, Haruyoshi continued. "I suppose that must be why your village has so many rice fields for the amount of people who live here. And fertile land needs a lot of cows to pull the plows." The village had a relatively high number of cows as well. "It looks like there's a lot of land down by the river. Have you ever thought of cultivating it? If the village's population continues to grow—"

"That land isn't usable," Asamaru said sharply, cutting Haruyoshi off. "The Furube River floods whenever we get a lot of rain. Nobody's dumb enough to try and cultivate that land."

"Brother!" Asamaru heard a familiar, high-pitched voice in the distance. Looking closer, he saw a young girl running toward him.

"Yuzuha? What's wrong?" Asamaru immediately stood up and raced over to his sister.

Despite being out of breath, she had a smile on her face. "Dad said he wants you to come home early today."

"What for?"

"We got some good boar meat today, so he wants everyone to eat together."

Asamaru didn't respond.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah. I'll come after I clean up a little. You head on back."

"Okay! Oh, and dad said you can join us if you want, Mr. Priest."

Haruyoshi gave Yuzuha a gentle smile. "I appreciate the offer, but I need to remain here to make sure a bad ayakashi isn't born. It's unfortunate, but please give Rokusuke my regards."

"Aww." Yuzuha looked disappointed. "That's too bad. Boar is really good. Anyway, hurry up, brother!" With that, Yuzuha ran back the way she came.

"Was that your little sister?" Haruyoshi asked with a smile. "She's adorable."

"Yeah. She just turned eight this year." Asamaru's mom and dad were dead, and he didn't have any other siblings anymore. Yuzuha was his only blood relative left. "Why exactly are you looking for this prophecy ayakashi anyway?" Asamaru asked. His sister had told him to hurry, but for some reason, he was very reluctant to head back. "Is there something you wanna ask it?"

"No, nothing like that. I simply have a hobby of sealing away rare ayakashi. Sealed ayakashi make convenient servants, and there's a certain collector's desire that drives me. I have several different colors of hitodama."

"They come in different colors?"

"Not very often, but there are yellow, green, and blue in addition to the usual orange. My colleagues get sick of hearing about it. Most sorcerers don't care about the color of hitodama. Even I think I'm being a bit silly at times. But..." Haruyoshi hesitated for a moment, then gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "My wife liked them. That was the original reason."

"Hmm? Your wife?"

"Yes. It was a marriage of convenience, and at first, we didn't get along at all—rather, I never had a clue what she was talking about. But she was thrilled when I showed her an ayakashi one time. After that, I started collecting all sorts of ayakashi to please her. Ayakashi extermination isn't a job people typically want to do, so my colleagues treated me as quite the oddball."

"Huh. So, is your wife..."

Haruyoshi silently shook his head. "At one point, I returned from a three-day job, and she had already been cremated. She always had a frail constitution. It's been fifty years since then."

The priest didn't look anywhere near that old, but there was something about his words that made them ring true.

"Guess you've been through a lot too," Asamaru said as he turned around and started walking away.

Haruyoshi gave a bitter smile. "Of course. Everyone has their own story."



That night, Asamaru woke up with a vague uneasiness in his chest. After a moment of hesitation, he silently made preparations to leave the house. Thanks to the full moon, he could see the night road clearly. He soon arrived at the barn where Haruyoshi was leaning against the wall, seemingly with his eyes closed.

"Hey!"

"Hmm? Oh, Asamaru. What are you doing here at this hour?" Haruyoshi immediately opened his eyes. It wasn't clear if he had actually been asleep.

"I just kinda had a feeling..."

"Is this about Mikan? It's been a few hours since I checked on her, but nothing seemed amiss. She isn't making any strange noises right now either."

"Hopefully it's nothing. Could you light the barn up?"

After a brief pause, Haruyoshi silently nodded. Talismans filled the air from out of nowhere and illuminated the area with orange light. When they entered the barn, the cows seemed to be asleep. Laying on their sides, the sudden light made their large bodies stir slightly.

Asamaru was relieved for a moment, then noticed that one of the cows was standing.

"Is that Mikan? Why's she standing?" Haruyoshi asked behind him.

Asamaru ran over to Mikan. Her breathing was heavy—she had already gone into labor. He looked down and saw a pair of legs sticking out of her, but something seemed off. Then he realized they were hind legs.

"This is bad. It's a breech birth."

"Wh-What?"

"I need your help, Haruyoshi!" Asamaru hurried and grabbed a coil of rope in the corner of the barn. Rushing back to Mikan, he tied it around the legs of the calf. "Its hind legs are sticking out. The head and forelegs are supposed to come out first, but it got turned around in the womb. If we don't do something, even Mikan's life might be in danger. Pull the rope with me on my signal. I don't think my strength alone is gonna cut it."

"I-Is the calf going to be okay if we pull too hard?" Haruyoshi asked hesitantly.

"Hard to say. We might have to give up on it, but we can at least save Mikan. Here we go! Three, two, one!" Asamaru gave the rope a powerful tug. Mikan cried out and the other cows began to way up, but the calf wasn't budging. "Damn it! It seems like a big one."

"Is that a problem?"

"Kinda, yeah. Even my dad might've freaked out a little in this situation."

"Very well. Let's try to pull even harder this time." Haruyoshi sounded like he'd found his resolve.

Asamaru nodded. "Three, two, one!" He gave the rope another big tug, and the calf that seemed to have been stuck in the birth canal came right out and the momentum sent Asamaru tumbling onto his rear. Blinking in surprise, he looked up at the priest behind him. "You're actually pretty strong."

"I may not look it, but I'm quite confident in my physical strength. Granted, it's the result of qigong techniques. More importantly..." Haruyoshi looked ahead with a stern expression, prompting Asamaru to follow his gaze. Then he frowned.

Something was off about the calf's appearance. Its snout was short, and its head was oddly round. Long black hair, wet with amniotic fluid covered its face.

Mikan refused to approach the strange calf. In fact, she seemed to be backing away.

"What the...?" The calf's body began to dry right before Asamaru's bewildered eyes. It wasn't being licked clean. The amniotic fluid and even the amnion covering its body evaporated and crumbled away. It was completely bizarre.

Finally, the calf began to stir, and it raised its round head. Then Asamaru saw it clearly—it had the head of a human.

Through its long hair, he could see unfocused eyes, a nose that was neither too high nor too low, and lips that were neither too thick nor too thin. Its face was ordinary in every way, yet there was something off-balance about it. It was eerie and seemed almost artificial.

Suddenly, Asamaru's ears began to ring. An invisible, wavelike force emitted from the calf—a mysterious, incredible power that engulfed its surroundings in an uncanny feeling. Reflexively covering his ears, Asamaru stared directly at the calf as it opened its mouth to speak.

"What I am about to say concerns this land—"

"Ha ha, we finally meet, kudan." Talismans filled the air. Paper cut into human shapes surrounded the calf, which immediately stiffened up as though unable to move. Its words were cut off as well. "I can't have you dying, so I'm going to need you to not expend any more power. Sleep well in the other plane until I call upon you." Haruyoshi started to chant some sort of incantation. It seemed like a foreign language.

"Wait!" Asamaru reached out without thinking, but it was too late. The kudan was already being sucked into a distortion in the air. Before long, it completely disappeared. The talismans that had been stopping the kudan fell to the ground, and the barn returned to its usual state.

"Ha ha! I did it! It was worth all the effort! I'll have to brag to them at our next banquet! I'm sure they'll be surprised! Or maybe they'll just be fed up with me. Either way, it'll make a good story to tell over a meal! Ha ha ha!" Having finally completed his goal, Haruyoshi seemed overjoyed.

Asamaru silently lowered his outstretched arm. He didn't move from that spot for a while.



Haruyoshi decided to depart in the morning two days later.

As the sun began to set, Asamaru vacantly gazed up at the sky next to the barn. Despite what had happened the previous night, Mikan and the other cattle were the same as ever. The only one who wasn't was Asamaru himself.

"Ah, I thought I'd find you here." Asamaru looked toward the source of the voice and saw Haruyoshi.

"What are you doing here?" Asamaru asked. "Weren't you drinking at the headman's place?"

"I said I had some unfinished business to attend to and stepped out."

"Unfinished business?"

"I haven't thanked you yet," Haruyoshi said, his tone gentle.

Asamaru gave him a slight smile. "Well, aren't you considerate? You don't have to do anything else. You already helped me with my work, and you left us some rice, right? Besides, the headman was the one who referred you to Rokusuke. No need to do anything special for me."

"Still, you're the one who was the most helpful. It wouldn't sit right with me if I left without doing anything. Is there anything you desire? Just name it. Back in the capital, they refer to me as the strongest exorcist."

Asamaru averted his eyes from Haruyoshi's smile. "In that case," he mumbled, "free that thing."

"What thing?"

"The kudan. Set it free and let it give its prophecy. The one about the disaster coming to this village. I wanna hear it."

"Why is that?" Haruyoshi asked after a brief silence. His tone was calm—he wasn't trying to criticize Asamaru.

"You said this land is fertile, yeah?" Asamaru replied, still avoiding Haruyoshi's

eyes.

"Yes."

"Well, you're right. We've got plenty of water, so we'll be fine even if there's a shortage, and we have so many rice fields that we'll be better off than other places if there's a bad harvest. So there's only one kind of disaster that can affect this village."

"You mean..."

"A flood," Asamaru said flatly. "The Furube River overflows its banks whenever we get heavy rain. And once every few years, there's a major flood. The rice fields are at a higher elevation, but most of them still get submerged. The rain fills the drainage channels with debris, and villagers get swept away and drown. That's what happened to my mom and dad. The situation when the water clears isn't much better. There's mud everywhere, and if it's summer, the rice crops get diseased and die off. In autumn, the plants might fall over and sprout before we can get them upright again. Other crops in the fields get root rot. That's how we get a poor harvest."

Haruyoshi listened silently.

"It's not that this village has a lot of fields—it's that it has few people. Our population decreases with every flood. Before Yuzuha was born, my brother who was two years younger than me was sold off. My youngest brother was sick and weak. The year our parents died, I left him up in the mountains. If there's another bad flood, Yuzuha is the next one being sold off."

Asamaru wouldn't stop talking—it was like he'd always been waiting for someone to listen.

"Rokusuke isn't a wealthy man. It's better than everyone going broke. I'd do the same thing if I were him. No one in the village is to blame. That greedy headman buys cows to keep the village afloat. Rokusuke's the only reason the village can maintain so many fields with its small population. Maybe you could tell when you met him, but even the governor is an honest man who doesn't care to hoard wealth. Weird for a government official, huh? So unlike other villages, we aren't suffering under a heavy tax burden. The villagers are all good people. There're even people who will take in their friend's children and raise

them like their own. It's no one's fault, so there's nothing to be done. Floods are just natural disasters," Asamaru said as though trying to convince himself.

"What would you do if you knew when the flood was coming?" Haruyoshi asked quietly. "Would you flee the village with your sister?"

"No way." Asamaru chuckled feebly. "We wouldn't be able to survive. I just wanna be ready."

"What do you mean?"

"Every summer, I wonder if we're gonna be okay. I wonder if it'll be the last year I'm able to be with Yuzuha. I'm so worried, it hurts. If it's gonna happen before she gets married off, I wanna know. I wanna be ready for it. Then maybe I'll be able to avoid hating Rokusuke for selling her off. Maybe I'll be able to be truly grateful to him for taking us in instead of being so distant as I am now. I don't wanna be afraid of the future anymore. Please, Haruyoshi."

After listening silently, Haruyoshi maintained his silence a little longer. Finally, he slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't release the kudan. I've gone through too much effort to lose such a rare ayakashi for a reason like that."

Asamaru chuckled feebly once again. "It's fine. I'm sorry for being unreasonable. Forget about it. If you wanna thank me, just give me some cloth for Yuzuha—"

"However." Haruyoshi cut Asamaru off, a gentle smile on his face. "I will grant your wish to no longer fear the future. I promised you."

"Huh?"

"But I can't do it right away. It'll take a day. I should be able to finish this area by morning, so please wait until then."

"What are you—"

"Take care, Asamaru the cattleman." With that, Haruyoshi turned around and left.

Asamaru watched him go, dumbfounded. He never saw the priest again.



The next morning, Asamaru awoke to some sort of commotion outside. "Mmm... Is something going on over there?"

"Oh, Asamaru," Rokusuke replied. "Supposedly there's something odd going on over by the river. I just heard about it myself."

"Huh? But it hasn't rained recently."

"No, it's not a flood. I'm not sure what it is, but there's no point in talking about it here. Why don't you go check it out?"

Asamaru was curious as well, so he nodded and jogged over to the river. As he got close, he saw a crowd of villagers around the riverbank. And then he saw why.

"Huh?" Asamaru slowed down and soon came to a complete stop—because he couldn't get any closer to the river. A gray, hill-like mound had risen up along the riverbank. "What is this?"

It hadn't been there the night before. It almost seemed like an illusion, but it felt solid as stone. It continued along the river both ways as far as the eye could see. Shockingly, he couldn't find any seams in the stone—it seemed like it was all one piece.

Asamaru decided to try climbing up it. The slope had ridges like stairs, allowing him to climb without needing to use his hands. When he reached the top, he saw a similar hill on the other side of the river. The river, which he had thought he knew, flowed far below. It was tall. The peak of the hill was far higher than even the highest-elevation rice field in the village. A minor surge wouldn't send muddy water flowing through the village anymore.

"It can't be." Asamaru finally realized what it was—a levee. Long ago, a tall earthen hill had been built to prevent the river by the capital from overflowing. However, this one was made of stone and couldn't have been built by ordinary means.

"I will grant your wish to no longer fear the future."

"No way... It can't be..."

"Ah, brother!" Asamaru heard a familiar voice. He looked down and saw his

younger sister among the crowd of people, then quickly climbed down to her.

"So you came too, Yuzuha."

"Um, Mr. Priest gave me a message for you before he left this morning." Asamaru's eyes went wide as Yuzuha seemed to be trying her hardest to remember. "Um... 'Your wish has thus been granted. Let this serve as my thanks on this occasion.' Then he said some weird phrase... What was it... 'Yotte' something?" Yuzuha tilted her head.

Asamaru recognized it immediately. "Kudan no gotoshi?"

"Yeah, that was it! You're so smart!"

"Ha ha." Asamaru found himself looking up at the sky. "What a guy." It must have been true—he really was the strongest exorcist in the capital.

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The oldest river levee in Japan is the Manda Levee built by Emperor Nintoku. It was constructed around the Yodo River, which flows from Lake Biwa to Osaka Bay. The oldest surviving levee is rather famous, so you all might be familiar with it. Indeed, it's the Furube Levee, built in the latter half of the eleventh century along the Furube River, which flows north of Kyoto.

It's said to have been built by the exorcist Haruyoshi Kuga's sorcery. This was long believed to be nothing more than a legend, but in the early twentieth century, a sorcery decryption test established its age, proving the story's authenticity. However, I believe that fact was self-evident even without the test. It has an unusual structure made up of ancient concrete surrounding quartz pillars. Who else, from any era, would have been capable of building such a thing?

Its structure isn't entirely unprecedented, as ruins of similar flood control structures remain in the Middle East. He likely encountered these techniques during his travels abroad. Using an established method might not sound impressive, but it was wise to choose a proven example for a levee with a chance of collapse.

The ancient concrete, devoid of any rebar, is erosion resistant, and unlike steel piles, the quartz pillars used don't corrode. In addition, as centuries

passed, soil accumulated around it and vegetation grew on top, shielding it from the elements. The levee has protected the villages around the Furube River from flooding for nearly one thousand years.

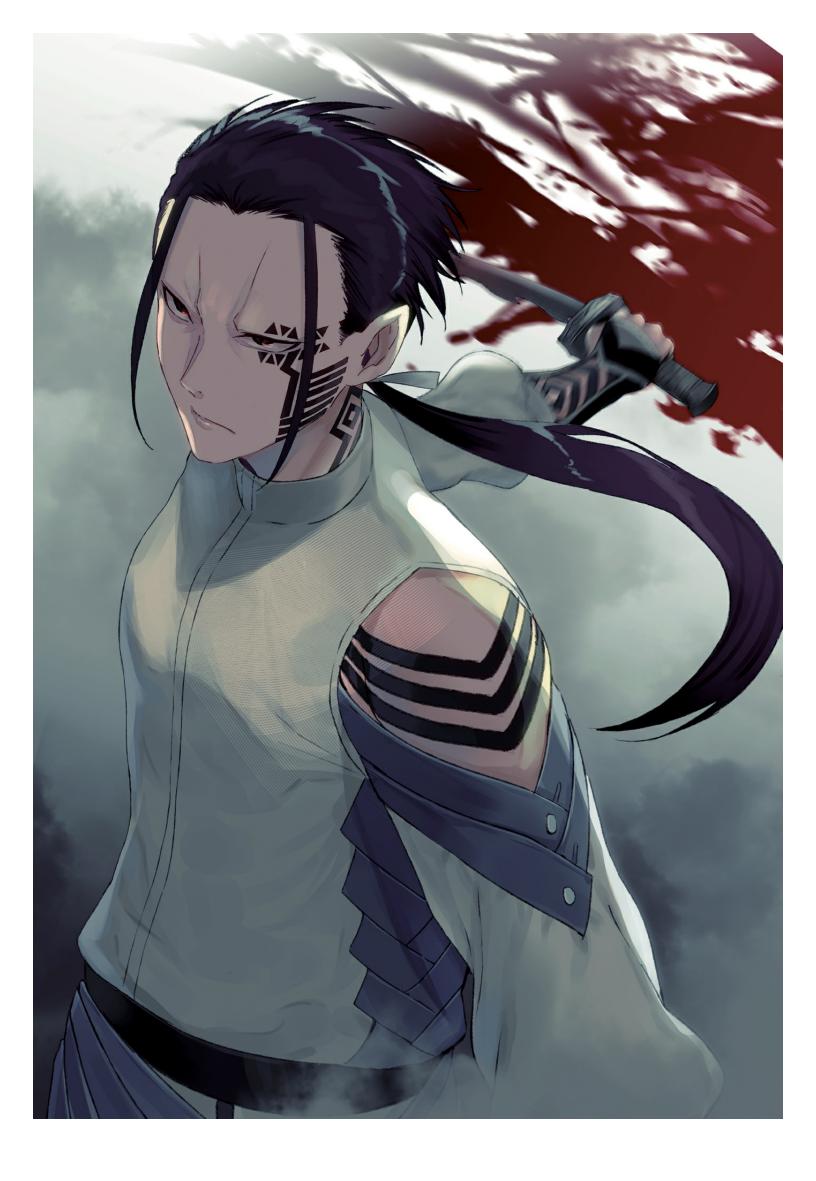
According to legend, it was built overnight in response to a single boy's wish. From that night on, flooding damage around the Furube River was drastically reduced. The boy probably never would have imagined that his wish would be spoken of in flood control history a thousand years later. The future can be changed by even the smallest catalysts.

Getting back on topic, the next significant event in Japan's flood control history takes us forward to the latter half of the Muromachi period, when the shogun at the time was—











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by Kiichi Kosuzu

Translated by Jarod Blackburn Edited by Aldia Elwood

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