











O Prologue

Is This Love?

War and Wedding Bells

3 To Be a Tianzi

The Late Monarch's Guidance

> O Epilogue





Kotei Kobayashi Illustration by riichu



Copyright

The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess 7

Kotei Kobayashi

Translation by Sergio Avila Cover art by riichu

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

HIKIKOMARI KYUUKETSUKI NO MONMON Vol. 7

Copyright © 2022 Kotei Kobayashi

Illustrations copyright © 2022 riichu

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at <u>yenpress.com</u>

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: June 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Maya Deutsch

Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kobayashi, Kotei, author. | riichu, illustrator. | Lund, Evie, translator. | Avila, Sergio, translator.

Title: The vexations of a shut-in vampire princess / Kotei Kobayashi; illustration by riichu; v1: translation by Evie Lund; v. 2: translation by Sergio Avila.

Other titles: Hikikomari kyuuketsuki no monmon. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY: Yen On, 2022-Identifiers: LCCN 2021058967 | ISBN 9781975339494 (v. 1; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975339517 (v. 2; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975339531 (v. 3; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975372606 (v. 5; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975372606 (v. 5; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975379643 (v. 6; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975379667 (v. 7; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Vampires —Fiction. | Princesses—Fiction. | Humorous stories. | LCGFT: Vampire fiction. | Fantasy fiction. | Humorous fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.7 .K676 2022 | DDC 741.5/952—dc23/eng/20220107 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021058967

ISBNs: 978-1-97537966-7 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7967-4 (ebook)

E3-20240523-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

C	0	۷	e	r

<u>Insert</u>

Title Page

Copyright

0: Prologue

1: Is This Love?

2: War and Wedding Bells

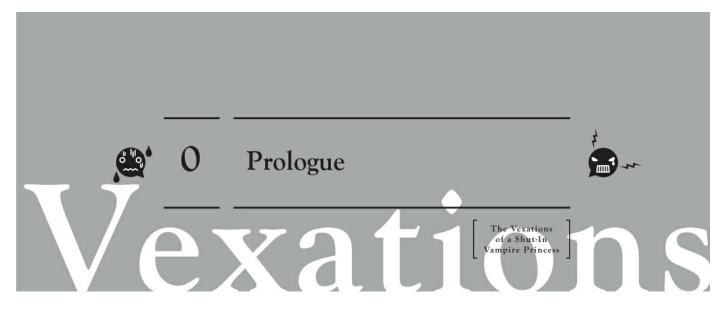
3: To Be a Tianzi

4: The Late Monarch's Guidance

0: Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter



"Look, Lingzi. The snowdrops are blooming."

The garden of the Enchanted Lands' Jingshi. Deep within the grand paradise where the Immortals resided, Tianzi Yizhu Ailan smiled like a child while pointing at the Snowdrop Stone imported from the Polar Union.

"You don't find this sort of thing in the Enchanted Lands. You place it and let it spread its white mana, and it looks like a blooming snowdrop flower. There's still even rarer stones out there in the Dark Core Zone, though."

The Tianzi was almost two hundred years old, yet his every movement brimmed with childish naïveté. Unable to stand his behavior any longer, Lingzi said:

"Your Majesty, your love for nature is very admirable...but should you not be focusing on the court right now?"

He looked at his daughter with surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"The council will begin soon, and we would be very grateful for your presence."

"No need."

Snowflakes pranced down the sky. He played with them on the palm of his hand, wearing an innocent smile.

"Let the grand chancellor take care of things. That would be best for the Enchanted Lands."

Trying to talk him into it would be useless. Apparently, the Tianzi used to be full of energy. Lingzi knew not what could have possibly made him fall to this level. Either way, his decadence was about to bring down the curtain on the six-hundred-year history of the Ailan dynasty. It was her job as Gongzhu to avert this.

"If I may, I would suggest that the grand chancellor is the one behind the decay of the Ailan Dynasty."

"Don't say that. Shikai's been doing a great job."

"You are too ignorant of the state of the world. You have no idea how many misdeeds the grand chancellor has—"

"—Oh! Have I performed any misdeeds?!"

A man in uniform crept up behind her. Shikai Gudo, Grand Chancellor of the Immortals.

His round eyes glimmered like the full moon. Lingzi was paralyzed by his otherworldly glare, which was like that of a jester wandering through a wasteland.

"Ohh, Shikai!" the Tianzi exclaimed dimly. "Would you like to take a look around my garden?"

"Ahh! This place is like a painting come alive! It's a beautiful cosmos of nature! No wonder they call you the Refined Tianzi! *Très bien, très bien!*"

"Right? Come, take a seat. I'll bring you tea."

"I refuse!"

Lingzi was taken aback. That was no way to talk to the Tianzi. Yet it was this very behavior that exemplified Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo's power.

"I thank you for the invitation, but I am here only for the Gongzhu," the grand chancellor said. "Now then, Lady Lingzi! Please come converse with me about our rose-colored future!"

"Huh...?"

"The council! We're going to the court council! The meeting where we shall

determine the future of our nation!"

The grand chancellor grabbed Lingzi by the arm and pulled her out of the garden.

They went into the hallway, not hearing a single objection from the Tianzi.

A passing officer was shocked to see the pair and prostrated himself before them. Everyone was afraid of the grand chancellor. Lingzi knew well why—she, too, dreaded the man.

"Lingzi! I'm stunned! How dare you speak ill of me behind my back. It's like my heart has been pierced by the thorn of a rose. Do you hate me? Is that it?" he shouted as he came to a halt.

His manner of speaking had roughened outside the presence of the Tianzi.

"I'm baffled. Is that innocent princess act you put on in front of me just a facade?"

"...I'm sorry."

"Ahh! The most superficial of apologies! Lady Nerzanpi would lose her mind if she heard that. She'd lecture you on how essential trust is for interpersonal relationships."

"No, it's just..."

"Don't talk back to me."

His stern voice demolished her train of thought. The next thing she knew, he was right in her face.

"I see it in your eyes. You think I'm doing as I please with the court. But listen carefully. You hear the leaves rustling? The voices of the people praising my name?"

Shikai opened his arms wide with egomania.

"Which means! Ahh! That the Ailan dynasty would crumble without me!"

"Yes..."

"The Tianzi is a refined man, but he does not see reality. You are a beautiful woman, but you do not see reality. And it is because your family is such a mess

that I have to work like a dog! You can stick to appreciating the flowers just like your father. After all, the season of the cherry blossoms is right around the corner, isn't it?"



"But I am a Draconic Meteor."

"Heh." He chortled. "Oh, excuse me! What a good joker you are! The civil official is supreme in the Enchanted Lands—soldiers like you have no say in anything. You can go and enjoy your pretend war while waiting for the wedding. I'll make you happy soon."

Lingzi clenched her trembling fists.

This man was really plotting to take over the Enchanted Lands. He was taking advantage of the Tianzi's disinterest in politics. Bending the law. Bending morals. Embezzling the country's finances.

What was the next thing someone who obtained all the prosperity in the world would look for?

Likely a longer life and better health.

There was no evidence yet, but rumor had it that Shikai Gudo experimented on people for the sake of his ambitions. People had been disappearing out of nowhere one after the other in Jingshi, and according to the investigations of Lingzi's retainer, Meihua, the grand chancellor was under suspicion of being involved.

"Now then, Lingzi! Let us put the Tianzi at ease and begin that council!"

Before she knew it, they had reached the court auditorium.

The council was normally supposed to take place in the morning, yet the sun had already dipped behind the southern sky. It was proof of the court's discipline decaying after Shikai became grand chancellor. Lingzi could hear vulgar laughter beyond the door. The tardy ministers clamored.

The darkness showed no hope.

She could do nothing by herself.

She needed a savior—the girl who had been turning the world on its head as of late.

Terakomari Gandesblood.

It had been one month since she visited the Mulnite Empire.

Would she be the one to pull up Lingzi Ailan from the depths of darkness?



It was the middle of March.

The world was heading straight into spring. I could feel the vampires of the Seventh Unit growing more energetic and hostile by the day. You know what they say—the warmth makes freaks freakier.

However, the weather mattered not for an intellectual scholar like me.

No matter the season, I cooped myself up in my room and put words to paper.

Today, as always, I sat at my desk and picked up my pen.

u n

Yet no words would flow.

I was not in a slump, no. Our hot springs trip had solved that problem. So what was the issue, then? You see, a monster had taken residence in my mind.

I though back to my meeting last month with Lingzi Ailan, one of the Three Draconic Meteors of the Enchanted Lands. Her country was apparently on the brink of collapse at the hands of evil. She'd asked for my help with that.

"It doesn't need to be right now. Just help me when the time comes," she'd said before leaving.

It was my philosophy to lend my aid whenever someone depended on me. I couldn't just say "good luck" after how earnestly and urgently she'd looked at me. And so, I decided to give her my support... But...

For some reason, her face wouldn't leave my mind.

That enchanting expression. Her quiet demeanor. Her peacock-like green clothing.

Since our encounter, my dreams had been filled with thousands of Lingzi faces, like I was gazing into a kaleidoscope. Maybe I was going senile.

"What is happening to me? Is this...love? No, get ahold of yourself, Komari... It's gotta be some sort of mistake. My heart must race every time I think of her

because it's sending me an SOS signal. I *have* heard that Lingzi has the power to make your heart explode... Yes, I know how you feel, my dear little heart..."

Anyway. Novel. Write. Surely immersing myself in my world of fiction would rid me of any carnal distress. I dropped my gaze to the manuscript.

Then I realized that I had already written a lot.

Huh? What happened? Was I moving my hand unconsciously?

What did I even...

Lingzi Li

"WAAAAH?!"

I fell off my chair.

My brain was mush. Somehow, my right hand had acquired the skill to write on autopilot. *Ah-ha-ha*. *Now that's handy*.

"Did you call for me, Lady Komari?"

"WAAAAH?!"

I fell off my chair (again).

The sicko maid had popped into existence right behind me.

"Wh-what do you want from me?! If you're looking for snacks, they're over there in the cupboard!"

"I am not here for snacks. I came after hearing you lovingly call my name without rest."

"You misunderstand! I was just practicing for the tongue-twister world championships, you see..."

"Don't try to play dumb. I could feel your love for me in every movement of

your lips. Now allow me to return that same affection to you: Lady Komari Lady Komari Lady Komari Lady Komari Lady Komari Lady Komari..."

"STOPPP! LET ME GOOO!!"

I didn't want to deal with having to explain what really happened. I could never tell her.

Vill finally chilled out after a bit of struggle. I put on my serious face the moment I saw her sicko attack wind down.

"...Hey, Vill. Could you give me some advice?"

"What is the matter? I can give you all the pointers you need to win over your favorite maid."

"Okay, so I'm just talking hypotheticals here. Hypothetically speaking...what would you do if you were in love with someone?"

"...Excuse me?" she exclaimed most seriously.

"Oh, no, it's nothing. I'm just asking for reference for my novel. I wanna hear your opinion."

"Well, the answer is simple: I would throw myself on her and hug her to show my deep affection, just like this."

She threw herself on me like one of those crying old man spirits from folklore. This didn't feel like what you would normally do...

I mean, what would happen if I just hugged Lingzi out of nowhere? She'd probably hate me. Oh man...I'm feeling hurt just imagining her rejection... Wait, why am I picturing that?! Why do I have to use Lingzi for these fantasies?!

"Dammit... I just don't get it..."

"It is fiction, so you should just write down your fantasi—Hmmm??"

Vill stared at my manuscript. At Lingzi's name covering the whole page.

Shoot, she found out! It's over!

"...Lady Komari? What is the meaning of this?"

"It's nothing! I was simply practicing for the national handwriting

tournament!"

"I'm pretty sure you're making up that and the tongue-twister championship. And this Lingzi..."

"It's...you know... Yeah! I was just thinking about Lingzi Ailan because she asked me such a huge favor!"

Vill glared daggers of suspicion at me.

Her sicko-ness somehow gave her this supernaturally sharp intuition. Just the other day, when I'd simply asked her, "Is there anything you've been wanting to get lately?" she immediately figured out I was trying to get her a birthday present, and her answer was, "You." Her birthday was on March 12, by the way. We threw a party last week with everyone.

"...That can't be. You wouldn't do that," Vill said.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Nothing. In any case, Lady Lingzi Ailan certainly looked like she had her back to the wall. She would have to be desperate to ask us complete strangers for help."

"Yeah. I hope we can help her..."

"She said the evil grand chancellor was taking over the Enchanted Lands. That Shikai Gudo is scheming to overthrow the dynasty... This is like a rehash of the Aruka Kingdom."

"So Lingzi's essentially in Nelia's place now?"

"We can't know for sure, but from what I hear, it seems like Shikai Gudo is even more vicious than Madhart. Just look at this."

Vill handed me a newspaper.

"...Six Nations News, really?"

"Yes. The Gandesblood family has a subscription."

"Cancel it right now!!"

"That can wait for later. Just read it."

"No, it can't! Look... They've got a picture of me yawning on their 'Today's Commander Komarin' section! Get them to recall every copy this instan—Hmm?"

My eye caught the section Vill was pointing at. The headline read:

ENCHANTED LANDS PRINCESS LINGZI AILAN'S UNEXPECTED MARRIAGE?! MEET HER FUTURE HUSBAND: GRAND CHANCELLOR SHIKAI GUDO.

"...What in the world?"

"It appears Lady Lingzi will be marrying Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo."

"Why?!"

"I don't know. Perhaps it's part of his plot. It appears he's planning to destroy the Enchanted Lands' government little by little from the inside."

My hands trembled as I skimmed the article.

Marriage. Reception. The start of a beautiful relationship. Shocking keywords pierced my gaze.

The article was accompanied by a picture of Lingzi and a person who appeared to be Shikai Gudo.

She had a bright smile on her face.

She was holding his hand. So happy. He was beaming at her. So joyful.

"It might be too late now. Not to make excuses...but we haven't done anything because we haven't heard from her since that meeting a month ago."

"Ah... Ahh..."

"But she seems happy in the picture. Although we can't yet rule out the possibility of coercion."

Then I remembered. Lingzi had mentioned a wedding the first time I met her. Was it all in the works even back then?

"Besides, the truth is, Shikai Gudo's approval ratings are quite high. They see him as a genius who will restore the Enchanted Lands to its former glory. He's cut through the fat of the government and lowered taxes. This contradicts Lady Lingzi's view of him." If only I had gotten closer to Lingzi sooner... No, but she looks so happy. Is that smile real? Or is it coerced, like Vill said? I don't know... I was so lost that I wanted to break into dance out of desperation.

"Aww... Bwuhh... Awww..."

"Should we get in contact with her? We better find out what truly is going on before we—Lady Komari?"

"WAAAAAAAH!!"

I crumpled up the paper and screamed my lungs out.

What the heck? What's wrong with me? I feel like my heart is about to explode.

I couldn't stand seeing Lingzi fall into the mitts of this (alleged) evil grand chancellor.

But...at the same time, the mere news of Lingzi getting married shook my brain.

She's never smiled like this at me...

"Vill! We gotta go meet Lingzi right now!"

"Excuse me? Why so suddenly?"

"I can't sit on my thumbs after seeing this! Lingzi might... She might get married to the grand chancellor!"

"I mean, yes, that's true, but this is out of character for you."

"She probably hasn't reached out because they're preventing her from communicating with anyone! We need to go to her ASAP!"

I pulled Vill by the arm and ran to the door, but the maid kept me in place with her elephant-like strength.

"Please hold your horses, Lady Komari! We mustn't rush things."

"We're already late! Moooove!"

"I'm not budging! Just calm down! Here, grope my breasts and relax!"

"I'm not groping anything! I don't care about your boobs!"

"That can't be! You massage them so lasciviously in your sleep!"

"Don't make up crap just because I can't know what I'm doing in my sleep! Just move already, Vill!"

"What's come over you?! You never want to go outside, and I always have to make you suffer by abducting you from your room! This isn't how it's supposed to be!"



"So you agree you've been making me suffer all the time?! Whatever, I'm going to the Enchanted Lands!"

Just as we began struggling wildly, the sunlight coming through the window darkened out of nowhere.

I peeked outside, and then, CRACK!! The window shattered as something came flying inside.

"Lady Komari, watch out!"

"Whaaa?! Blergh!" I exclaimed as Vill tackled me.

I should be watching out for your attacks! No, she saved me. I shouldn't be getting mad at her.

I looked around from beneath Vill.

Is the Seventh Unit playing baseball outside or something?

"Ugh... I failed. I failed..."

My eyes landed on a familiar-looking girl.

She didn't leave that strong an impression, but I recognized her as the Immortal retainer who'd accompanied Lingzi.

She was lying on the floor, glass wounds all over her body.

"A-are you okay?! What're you doing here?!"

I tried holding her up, then noticed that she wasn't just bleeding from shards of glass. The girl had bruises all over.

The next moment, I felt a presence outside the window and shifted my gaze.

Some people were floating in the air, the blue sky on their backs. They quickly flew away the moment they noticed me staring.

"Judging by their outfits, they must've been from the Enchanted Lands' army," Vill said while looking through a pair of binoculars. "Why would they come here? It seems they were scared off the moment they saw you, Lady Komari..."

"...They're after me."

Lingzi's retainer, Meihua Liang, staggered to her feet.

Blood was dripping down her body. I let out an "Eep!" at the sight of her.

"Terakomari... I must ask you a favor. Please, save Lingzi..."

"You should worry about yourself first! Vill! Get some bandages!"

"I'll bring everything for first aid."

Vill dashed out of the room. I turned back to Meihua to care for her...but I had no idea what to do. It wasn't as though there were doctors like Kuya all over the place.

"Lingzi...is going to become the grand chancellor's plaything. That will be the end of the Ailan dynasty... I fought to prevent this... But I didn't stand a chance..."

"Don't force yourself to speak! Should I give you CPR?!"

"No. It's not that serious..."

Meihua's eyes were filled with a sense of duty. A pure desire to rescue Lingzi.

She looked straight at me, her gaze pleading.

"Terakomari Gandesblood, I understand I'm overstepping my bounds, but please, save Ling—"

Her voice cut off as she slipped on a pair of Vill's underwear (?!) on the floor.

What're her panties doing here?! The shock didn't come out my throat.

Fortunately, the Draconic Meteor's retainer gracefully regained her balance and only fell to her knee.

Thank goodness.

Just as I sighed in relief, the inertia of Meihua's tumble sent a splash of blood flying at me. It flew right into my gaping mouth.

The moment I tasted the viscous red liquid, my heart thumped faster.

The world turned crimson.



"Lady Komari, I just realized we could just teleport to the Dark Core Zone. I

brought a Magic Stone... Umm, Lady Komari? Is something wrong?"

Vill had returned.

I shook my head as I stood up.

Meihua stared up at me with confusion.

Maybe her blood didn't actually get into my mouth. I'd felt a strange surge of mana for a moment there, but I was already back to my cool, collected, and scholarly self.

I reached out to Meihua while looking at Vill.

"Thanks, Vill! Let's go somewhere her Dark Core is in effect ASAP."

"Yes. Is that all right, Lady Meihua Liang?"

"? ...Yeah. Thanks..."

Vill approached us and activated a teleportation Magic Stone.

Bright light filled my room. A floating sensation I would never get used to hit my whole body.

I had no idea what was going on in the Enchanted Lands, but I wanted to help Lingzi and Meihua.

First, we had to get to the Dark Core Zone so I could ask Meihua some questions.

I also gotta give Vill a scolding for leaving her underwear on my floor... Just as that thought struck me, I was whisked away somewhere else.



Dark Core Zone—Frezier Hot Springs.

We were sitting together in a lounge at the Crimson Snow Hut—the place where we'd had my birthday party, and where I'd gotten caught up in that serial murder incident. We couldn't think of anywhere else to cool down.

"...Thank you. You saved me."

Meihua had composed herself with the help of a cup of hot cocoa.

The Dark Core was healing her wounds, too.

"Lady Meihua, what happened? Were those Enchanted Lands soldiers that showed up at the Gandesblood residence?" Vill asked while munching on a choco bun.

Could you not smack your lips in gluttony while talking about serious matters? You're gonna make me crave some.

"...Those were Enchanted Lands soldiers, yes. They're trying to get rid of me for opposing Shikai Gudo. Or, more to the point, they're suppressing anyone who allies with Lingzi."

"Why would they need to do that?"

"Isn't it obvious? They want to strip her of her power. She is set to become the next Tianzi... If they neutralize her, he can take over her position, or so they think."

"But I hear Shikai Gudo is very popular with the people, isn't he? He cut taxes and strengthened welfare and such. Six Nations News said the citizens are

building statues and monuments in celebration of his achievements."

"His popularity was built on innocent blood. Do you think there's any value in approval rates obtained through force and sacrifice?"

"What do you mean?"

"He is willing to do whatever it takes to obtain power. Because of that, Lingzi's supporters... Lingzi herself...! We can't let him get away with it!"

Meihua tried standing up, but I rushed to stop her.

"Hold on! You'll only get hurt again if you charge in without a plan!"

"I don't care! If you won't help me, I'll go by myself! Whoa! W-wait, don't cling to me!"

Meihua peeled me off her, red in the face.

Hmm? Something's strange about her reaction. Oh well.

"Komari's right," a serene voice said. "There's no point rushing it. First, we need to gather intel."

A Warblade with peach-colored hair was sitting beside me. Nelia Cunningham. My friend and the president of the Aruka Republic.

Meihua sat back down in dismay.

"Apologies... By the way, why is Aruka's President Cunningham here?"

"I came here to meet Komari, and then I heard about the emergency and decided to...not postpone my meeting. I was already planning on talking about the Enchanted Lands."

That was right. Just as we arrived at Frezier, Nelia had called me and said, "Can we meet today?! I know we can! Thanks, I'm on my way!"

The Moonpeach Princess appeared at the Crimson Snow Hut before I knew it.

Nelia had been patting my head the whole time, and she'd even given me half of her choco bun. Did she think I was her little sister or something? How vexing! But the pastry was sooo yummy.

Nelia wiped away the chocolate around my mouth and continued.

"Tell me, Meihua. The grand chancellor is popular with the people of the Enchanted Lands, yet in the shadows, he commits unspeakable evils... That is your view on the matter, right?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you're wrong."

"What are you saying?" Vill sighed. "We shouldn't act on conjecture. Also, please let go of Lady Komari."

"It's not conjecture. I've been going through the confidential files from Madhart's administration and discovered he was making illegal deals with Shikai Gudo."

Nelia took out some documents.

"More specifically, he provided technology produced in the Daydream Paradise prison. They also engaged in Divine Instrument smuggling and drug trafficking. Madhart and Shikai Gudo were in cahoots."

"Seriously?!" Meihua leaned forward in shock. "If that's true, then that's even more reason to stop him! I have heard rumors of him kidnapping people for experimentation. He might be continuing the research that started in the Daydream Paradise..."

"Yeah, which is why I personally can't overlook what's going on in the Enchanted Lands," she said with a serious expression while giving me a shoulder massage.

Stop it. It feels so nice.

"This is a mistake from Aruka's previous administration, so I cannot say it's none of my responsibility. I need to look into the grand chancellor more closely."

"I appreciate your support, President Cunningham!"

An alliance was forming without a word from me.

Anyway, to recap. The grand chancellor of the Enchanted Lands was super popular with the people. But he was actually doing bad stuff in the shadows. The country might collapse if he kept going. And...a poor girl was in the middle

of this chaos.

"What...what about Lingzi?"

"She's confined to the palace. They're trying to assault her."

"Assault?!"

"It's sickening... If Shikai allies with the Ailan family, there will be no stopping him. He's trying to force an abdication to change the dynasty. And if that happens, Lingzi will lose her freedom forever."

My heart raced.

I couldn't allow that to happen.

Just thinking of her marrying him made my chest hurt. It made me want to be the person marrying her instead. Wait. No, that couldn't be. I was just worried about her. I had to stop the grand chancellor. Yes, it was only my sense of justice that moved me. Or was it?

Am I...in love? No, no, that's ridiculous.

"...I'm sorry, Terakomari."

"Huh?"

Meihua frowned; it seemed like she'd noticed something.

I had no idea what it was. Then Nelia cut in.

"So, it's settled! Aruka, Mulnite, and the Enchanted Lands will ally against Shikai Gudo. First, we have to decide on our course of action. We need to be careful this time."

"I don't understand. Couldn't Lady Komari use her Core Implosion to solve things in a second?"

"No, that's no good. Shikai Gudo has the support of the people. We'll be the object of criticism if we try to solve it by force. We need to obtain proof of his misdeeds and expose him."

So the approach we used against Madhart won't work this time around.

"You agree, don't you, Komari? You got that message asking to help the

people of the Enchanted Lands, remember?"

"Yeah... You're right."

My feelings of resentment over Lingzi being taken from me supplemented my tiny sense of justice telling me to stop the fall of the Enchanted Lands. And the message from my mom that Kilty had relayed to me at the inn gave me the final push to solidify my will. I couldn't throw a tantrum and yell about wanting to stay in my room this time.

"All right! Let's do this, for Lingzi! First, we go to the Enchanted La—"

"I heard it all!!"

I couldn't believe my ears.

Meihua and Vill turned around in shock.

A pair of paparazzi from Six Nations News was right there.

"The Commander's going to throw herself into a big battle?! Wonderful!! Inspiring!! Would you allow us to follow you for close coverage?!"

"I don't wanna do close coverage please they're not gonna pay us extra for the overtime let's just go home."

"Shut up, Thio! We're not doing this for the money! We're doing this for the good of journalism and the world! Please excuse her, Commander Gandesblood! First, allow us to take your picture!"

Melka began shooting before I could even say anything.

I rushed behind Nelia's back, but she pushed me forward.

"Nelia! Those two shouldn't be here! Why aren't you chasing them away?!"

"I called them. They'll be useful."

"How in the world?! I mean, the Six Nations News periodical comes in handy when eating watermelon, but..."

"That's right! We are useful!"

The Sapphire girl slithered right up to me. Like, she got right in my face. She had no concept of social distancing.

"It's shocking to hear that Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo has a hidden face! President Cunningham just mentioned confidential files; would you mind us publishing them?! Also, what do you think will become of Her Highness Lingzi Ailan?! What will be the direction of this newly formed alliance between Aruka, Mulnite, and the Enchanted Lands?! Do I take it Commander Gandesblood will be charging no holds barred against the Enchanted Lands?!"

"Yes."

"Shut up, Vill!! No! Were you even listening?!"

"We weren't! Please go over it again, in detail!"

"Just give me some space to breathe..."

"Hold your horses, paparazzi. That overbearing act will only make Komari hate you." Nelia gave me a helping hand.

Yet I was all too aware this sham of a journalist wouldn't be stopped by such a trifling statement. Knowing this, I grabbed my half-eaten choco bun to use as a tasty bribe to get her off my case, when...

"My oh my! My deepest apologies! I did not know you had such a distaste for pushy coverage!"

...Melka took a step back with a smile.

Wha...? Was she always that quick to give up? Maybe it's the power of the President of Aruka? God, I wish I was president.

"Heh. No need to be in a rush in the first place. We'll give you the exclusive. In exchange, we'll have you work for us later down the line," Nelia said.

"Ohh! That sounds very exciting! It's a deal, then," said Melka.

"Ms. Melka, it's best we don't agree to this deal. It's obvious we'll get sucked dry, then get slapped like mosquitoes in the end. Ugh, but I know nothing will stop you, so I'll just get off this ride right now. I'll just go relax at the hot springs, so you take care of the res—MEOW?!"

"Silence, you coward! We've got the scoop of the century right here, and you're letting it go?! Do you have the brains of a cat or what?!"

"Yes, I do!!"

Melka put Thio in a headlock, and the poor girl meowed her lungs out.

I had no idea what was going on, except that Nelia and Melka were clearly hiding something.

"...Hey, Vill. What do they have in mind?"

"I surmise they're forming an alliance to get embarrassing pictures of you in secret, Lady Komari."

"Seriously?! Sick bastards...!"

I shivered with trepidation. Once again, I was reminded of how every single person in this world was a sicko.

"In any case," said Nelia, changing the subject. "I have but one goal: expose the grand chancellor's misdeeds to the world and impeach him. That way, Lingzi won't have to marry him, and everyone will live happily ever after."

"And we journalists will be the loudspeakers to broadcast his aforementioned misdeeds across the globe."

"Exactly. Which is also why I want you to refrain from publishing fake news until we're done with this... Melka Tiano, was it? Do you accept these terms?"

"Of course!" Melka grinned.

"I don't," said Thio before getting slapped in the head.

"We've no choice but to hold back! Wouldn't want to waste this great opportunity. Very well, Miss President. We'll do as you say. For the sake of a better world. For the sake of business."

"Huh, you're more reasonable than I expected."

Nelia, no! You can't trust her! They'll publish an article about you and your maid fetish! But if it happens, please join hands with me to denounce their libel.

"Now then, how should we unmask Shikai Gudo?"

"There is no doubt that he's evil," Meihua said. "He's even got His Majesty the Tianzi in the palm of his hand. The court is in shambles under his leadership... I hope Lingzi is unharmed..."

Something pricked at my chest. Lingzi was locked up. Was she crying all alone?

"Can you meet with Lingzi?" I asked.

"I haven't seen her in half a month. I was exiled from the Enchanted Lands."

"Shoot. I'm worried about her..."

"Of course you are. Let's ask about her, then," Nelia said.

"...? Ask whom?"

"The Grand Chancellor," she replied, before producing a luxurious green Magic Stone from her pocket.

"No way." Vill jaw's dropped. "Is that...a hotline? The one they say all countries' leaders have?"

"Yup. I'll just ask him about her."

Nelia poured mana into the Correspondence Crystal.

Wait, what? You'll ask him? Is he really gonna pick up? Everyone seemed to be thinking the same thing as me while we watched Nelia in silence. Soon, a cheerful voice came from the other side of the crystal.

"Yes? This is Grand Chancellor and Starquake Minister of the Enchanted Lands, Shika Gudo speaking!"

...

...He actually picked up. Now what?

"Is something the matter, President Cunningham?! I am honored to receive your call! It must be the work of the Tiannu celestial maidens guiding fate to us!"

"Whatever. There's something I want to ask."

"Na-ha-ha! I see, so it's Meihua Liang!" Shikai cackled. "I heard she fled to Mulnite! Good to hear she's doing fine! I wouldn't want a precious life to be lost! I take it she went to Aruka for help in the end?!"

"Grand Chancellor... You despicable...!"

"Ahh! I can hear a beast roaring. I wonder to whom it's baring its fangs? In any case, what do you want to ask me, Miss President? I can tell you all the perfect sightseeing spots in the Enchanted Lands!"

"I've been informed you are covering up some misdeeds."

Subtlety was not Nelia's strong suit. She cut right to the chase.

"Is it true that you want to usurp the Ailan dynasty? That you're kidnapping citizens and continuing the work of the Daydream Paradise? That you're making them build monuments in worship of you?"

"Oh dear, this is harsh. All unfounded slander! I work myself to the bone trying to make the Enchanted Lands a better place!"

"Uh-huh... Here, I'll give the phone to Komari. She's got some words for you."

Nelia handed me the Correspondence Crystal.

Huh? Why? I couldn't react before I heard his voice:

"Komari? You mean Commander Gandesblood?"

"Th-that's me!" I couldn't waste time panicking. I clenched my fist and yelled: "Is Lingzi okay?! I heard you're treating her badly!"

"I just told you that those charges are baseless. There's no evidence that I've harmed Her Highness Lingzi! You're saying that I'm locking her up? Ahh! How could I ever think to do something so dreadful?!"

"And yet Lingzi hasn't been seen outside!"

"Yes, it's truly terrible! You see, she's in bad shape... But you must understand that she is first and foremost my fiancée! No upstanding man would ever try to make his bride suffer!"

Meihua ground her teeth. Nelia glared coldly at the crystal.

Shikai was acting provocatively. I could feel no concern for Lingzi's well-being in his voice.

"When did she say she wanted to marry you?! Aren't you forcing her?!"

"I would never! She chose her future of her own volition! Have you not seen the papers? Oh, you haven't? Then take a look! You'll see that her smile is full of bliss! Ahh! Such a beautiful grin! Très bien!"

I felt like he was crushing my heart on his hand. What the heck is with this très bien, you blowhard?

But...come to think of it, Lingzi really was smiling in that picture with Shikai.

"I am intent on marrying Her Highness Lingzi. I believe that is best for the country. And more than anything, she fancies me! The truth is undeniable!"

"M-maybe it's all in your head!"

"It is not! She said to me, and I quote: 'I love you.'"

"What?! That's a lie! You're delusional!!"

"I have a recording. Listen to this—to her voice as beautiful as the chirping of birds!"

"I love you."

I heard Lingzi's voice come from the Correspondence Crystal. I wanted to admonish him and shout, What're you recording her saying that for, you sicko?! but I couldn't get the words out of my throat.

I love you. I love you. I love you—I felt my brain turning to mush. I would lose my goddamn mind if she said that to me. My heart would instantly explode. No, Komari, that's not it!

Lingzi... Lingzi really wanted to marry him...?

"By the way, she cooked for me just yesterday!"

"WHAT?!"

"And she caressed my head to ease my exhaustion from all my work."

"WHAAAAAT?!"

"I'm supposed to be delusional? Hah! Perhaps, in a way. But know that the things I just said were a joke. Do you really think we would engage in such improper conduct before marriage? I just said that because I knew it'd get a reaction out of you."

"You little...!! Stop giving me vexations!!"

"Um... Lady Komari?"

"You're acting a bit strange. Why are you getting that annoyed by his comments?"

My sense of justice and my personal feelings mixed to light a fire in my chest.

I couldn't let this man take Lingzi from me. Much less in marriage! Then, Shikai Gudo threw me the biggest white glove: "That reminds me! We'll have our reception next week! And you're all invited."

"Wha ...?"

"It's a tremendous occasion. We're going to have a huge celebration with VIPs from every country. Now that's what I call très bien!"

"Nothing bien about this, let alone très!! Divorce her!!"

"Heh. How could I when we're not even married yet? Her union with me will bring her a stable future—I'm only doing it for her! Ahh! What a wonderful husband I am!"

A stable future? You'll only ruin her! And the Enchanted Lands, too! You'll make a mess of the country, just like what Madhart did to Aruka! Heck, you're continuing the Daydream Paradise and everything!

"I won't allow it... I will not allow it...!"

"You don't have the authority to call things off. Only the heavens can decide."

That shattered my patience. I rose so violently from my seat that my chair fell. Then I shouted what came to mind without stopping to think: "Lingzi will not be marrying you! She came to me for help! She asked me to help her before you could do terrible things to her! Her eyes weren't lying! The picture of her in the papers is fake! Lingzi is MINE! Just you wait! I'll crash that reception and—"

"My, I need to go to the bathroom! Later, Commander Gandesblood! Adieu!"

"What?! I'm not done talk—"

He hung up without hesitation.

I felt a twinge on the back of my hand. The glass wound hadn't healed yet. I'd gotten it back when Lingzi came to the Mulnite Palace, I think, and it had been

quite a while... But this wasn't the time to worry about that. I shoved the crystal to Nelia and yelled: "I will take Lingzi back!"

"I mean, I don't like the grand chancellor's attitude, either, but you're more fired up than I thought," said Nelia.

"She's not only fired up—she's charred. Did she just say, 'Lingzi is mine'? I cannot believe my ears. Surely it was just me hearing things, right, Lady Komari?" asked Vill.

"Y-yeah, you're hallucinating!" I responded.

"Yes, of course." Vill sighed.

"Anyways! I can't stand by and let those things go down in the Enchanted Lands!"

"Right!" Nelia stood up with a smile. "It looks like the Grand Chancellor knows about our plans now, but in any case, let's go there right away!"

"Thank you," Meihua whispered with tears in her eyes. "Lingzi was right to trust you, Commander Gandesblood."

"Don't worry, Meihua. With Vill and Nelia on our side, we won't lose to any army."

"Yes. And if push comes to shove, you'll surely blow the enemy away."

"..."

Oh no. I'd rather solve things peacefully. Hopefully with a chat or perhaps a bribe...

Then I heard a camera shutter snap. Melka was taking pictures like crazy.

"How brave! The gallant spirit to stand against the treacherous subject of another nation! Now this is the Terakomari Gandesblood I know! The woman who will turn the world into omelet rice!"

"You've got that right. Except that part about me turning the world into omelet rice. I never said that."

"So, the Aruka-Mulnite-Enchanted Lands alliance declares war against Shikai Gudo! Now this is a scoop! Our sales will be through the roof!"

"Aruka will inspect the article before it's published, okay? Don't write anything weird."

"Roger that!" said Melka, her face looking like a crook's.

And so began a new war revolving around the Enchanted Lands.

"We're the most upstanding, trustworthy paper out there! We report nothing but the truth!"

×

Six Nations News, March 18th Morning Edition

COMMANDER KOMARIN SAYS: "LINGZI IS MINE!"

IMPERIAL CAPITAL — BY MELKA TIANO

Crimson Lord of the Mulnite Empire Terakomari Gandesblood recently conversed with Grand Chancellor and Starquake Minister of the Enchanted Lands Shikai Gudo. During the talk, Grand Chancellor Gudo announced his marriage to Her Highness Draconic Meteor Lingzi Ailan, and Commander Gandesblood voiced her objection, clearly stating: "Lingzi is mine. I will not let you take her." She also asserted she would crash the reception planned for the 21st next week and steal Gudo's bride. Experts continue to fervently discuss Commander Komarin's ships, and now it seems a new candidate has been thrown into the fray. Rather, it appears that the decision has been made: Could Her Highness Lingzi Ailan be the Commander's true sweetheart? We all look forward to new and dramatic developments in this international romcom story.



"Wha... Wha... WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!?!" Vill screamed as she tore the paper apart.

Jingshi—the Floral Capital of the Enchanted Lands.

I sighed as I looked out the window.

A magnificent eastern city sprawled outside.

Buildings lacquered in vermillion lined up in a panorama so fantastical I felt as though I'd been thrown to another world. I'd imagined that Jingshi would be like the Eastern Capital, but it was actually quite different.

The Heavenly Paradise's City of Flowers was an elegant place full of eastern, low-rise buildings.

Meanwhile, the Enchanted Lands' Floral Capital was a grand place full of gorgeous high-rises and skyscrapers. Not to mention they were all connected with arched bridges. It was a tridimensional city.

We had successfully infiltrated Jingshi and were awaiting our chance to strike.

Actually, "infiltrate" wasn't the right word. Shikai really had sent us invitations to the reception. He'd even reserved the hotel for us. We were quite welcome here. As if he didn't even consider us a threat... But anyways.

"Outrageous! Preposterous! Let's go protest at the Six Nations News HQ! Blow up the entire building right this instant! In its place, we'll build a statue of you and me kissing to show the world our love and power!"

"Chill out, Vill! Why are you getting so violent?!"

"Because they're publishing falsehoods!"

"That's what they always do."

After saying that, it hit me. Even though Vill was rampaging, I was oddly calm, despite knowing I should be indignant at Six Nations News's fabrications.

Or...was I?

My heart had raced reading the article. I wasn't so much annoyed at them making things up as I was embarrassed. The feeling was a bit different from usual.

"We need to find those journalists and boil them to death as soon as possible. Only atop their corpses can the world regain its proper order. And we *also* need to retaliate against Lady Cunningham for setting up this report."

"You're taking it too far. We don't have the time to do that to begin with."

"You still say that even after seeing her?" Vill pointed at Sakuna, who was sitting on the floor and hugging her knees.

She was hammering nails on the newspaper clipping. An ominous gray aura oozed out of her every pore. With every new nail, she muttered nonsensically,

"This isn't right. This isn't right. The world has gone mad." What was up with her?

"Did you have a nightmare or something, Sakuna?"

"Not quite, but very close. My nightmare is reality."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

Then I heard a shy voice. "Excuse me!" It was from a girl with reddish brown hair, Esther Claire.

"I don't think you should be that worried about this, Vill, Commander Memoir."

"What do you mean? And you call yourself a Komari fan? How can you not worry?" Vill asked.

"Ms. Vill is right... Ms. Komari will only slide further away if we don't do something... I should kill her right now and alter her memories...," Sakuna said.

"I-it'll be fine! President Cunningham must've had something in mind when allowing this article to be published. Perhaps she wanted to make clear the Commander's opposition to the grand chancellor," said Esther.

Sakuna raised her head.

"I didn't consider that," Vill said, her eyes wide.

"We can't solve the issue with magic or Core Implosion this time. The grand chancellor has tremendous support from the public. We would be the bad guys if we tried taking him out by force. The voice of the people is important. I'm sure the president let this article come out as a stepping stone to changing public opinion... Ah! But this is only my half-baked assumption!"

"Esther is right." Vill regained her composure. "Lady Komari has no plans to get married in the first place. It's none of our problem if society gets swayed by whatever the paper says. Lady Memoir, you can halt your hexing ritual. Stand up."

"Yes...I wasn't thinking straight." Sakuna froze the paper with a bashful smile.

Esther really was amazing. I wanted one of her in my house.

"Speaking of which, where is Ms. Nelia?"

"She's sneaking around Jingshi with her maid. I believe she's gathering evidence of the grand chancellor's misdeeds... We must be on standby until she calls us."

"That shouldn't be a president's job. What are we supposed to do?"

"Commander! We are the execution team."

According to Esther, the lineup was as follows: Nelia, Gertrude, Meihua, and the Seventh Unit (who had not been invited, so they were the real spies here) were to snoop around Jingshi. Vill, Esther, Sakuna, and I were to stay at the hotel. Once Nelia's team exposed the grand chancellor's misdeeds, we would take Lingzi by force.

Just hearing about it made me sigh. In the end, we had to resort to violence. I would have preferred sorting out everything without anyone getting hurt. I didn't want to unleash that meteoric superpower all the time.

Just then, I heard a song. A band was playing in celebration of Lingzi's wedding.

"It's a festival out there. Everyone is talking about the Gongzhu's wedding."

"The wedding's the day after tomorrow, right? Will we really make it in time?"

"Umm... What if we blow up the venue?"

"Wha...? What're you saying, Sakuna?"

"It's a wonderful plan, but it won't work. VIPs from every nation have been invited to the reception. The Mulnite Empire will be in trouble if any of them get hurt. Coincidentally, Commander Leona Flatt and Lady Butchersky are here, too."

"She's always everywhere... Wait, Karla wasn't invited?"

"I don't know. I heard she was busy, though..."

Either way, the whole world had its eyes on Jingshi. She would be unable to ask for a divorce afterward if they really got married under the circumstances.

My stomach growled. I blushed, and Vill shrugged.

"It appears your stomach demands meat. Let us go eat some."

"My tummy is doing no such thing! And wait, should we be going outside?"

"It'll be fine." Sakuna smiled. "We are the grand chancellor's guests, after all. There's no need for us to hide like that time we sneaked into the Holy City. We aren't going to be attacked out of nowhere..."

"Please don't say that. It might actually happen if you do."

"No worries! I'll protect all of you! But wait...the Commander is a billion times stronger than me! I'm sorry!" Esther exclaimed.

"Now then, I hear Jingshi has all sorts of exotic foods. Let's go."

"Hmm. I see. Okay, then. No harm in going for some food, right?"

That was how we decided to take a walk around Jingshi.



The Zijingong—the towering residence of the Tianzi.

Inside a detached tower on its grounds was a prison for those who opposed the dynasty, built by a past Tianzi. But now, it was being used to confine one of the dynasty's own: Lingzi.

"Why...?" Lingzi ground her teeth as she gripped the bars of the window.

The busy landscape of Jingshi spread out below. The people were in a celebratory mood. Many praised Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo's government. Qilu poems in his honor were framed on the front gates of the Zijingong.

Yet Shikai Gudo was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Lingzi's supporters had been imprisoned. The mere thought that people had been harmed because of her tugged at her heartstrings.

"Shikai Gudo, I will not lose."

"Ahh! What an honor to hear my name coming from your lips!"

The grand chancellor had popped up behind her, taking her by surprise. Then she recalled the one-way gate in the tower. He could have teleported here.

"How's life in the tower? Cozier than you'd think, right?"

"...Cozy how? This is a prison."

"Oh, that's not true. I am only trying to protect you from a disgraceful fate. I give you three square meals a day and even tea time. What don't you like about this?"

What didn't she dislike about this?

She worried for Meihua and for the dynasty, and she feared the upcoming marriage. But saying anything would only get Shikai to dodge the issue with a "très bien!" This man didn't care about her. He was only interested in the "value" inside her body.

"Hmm." Shikai crossed his arms. "It seems Meihua Liang went out for help."

"?! Is Meihua all right?!"

"She is. You think I would harm an Immortal? Perish the thought. You should start trusting me a little. Have you ever seen me hurt anyone in the first place?"

"..."

"In any case, Meihua Liang asked the Mulnite Empire and the Aruka Republic for help. Six Nations News said so. More importantly, those two nations directly declared war against me."

"They did ...?"

"Terakomari Gandesblood said she would take you from me."

Shock shook Lingzi's chest. Hope, joy, and guilt welled up inside her.

She realized that Komari was only acting under Meihua's Core Implosion, which had made the girl infatuated with her.

"Na-ha-ha! You are so blessed. Any normal person would be trembling in their boots if the world's hero, the savior Terakomari Gandesblood, threatened to take their bride."

"And...you're not?"

"Naturally! I've achieved so much as grand chancellor! I have total support from our citizens!"

"But...that's because no one knows what you're doing in the shadows..."

"No one cares about the shadows, so long as they're happy under the light. This is what separates me from Gerra. He was too violent. 'Most precious are the people; next come the spirits of land and grain.' 'The water carries the boat; the water overturns the boat.' I taught him so many maxims, yet he didn't put them into practice."

Shikai was talking about the former president of Aruka, Gerra Madhart. This man really was linked to Gerra-Aruka in his misdeeds.

"...What are you getting at?"

"That I have no reason to fear Terakomari Gandesblood's threats. She'll steal you from me? By force? Just try it! Not even the great hero would escape outcry from the Immortals!"

He was thoroughly prepared. Shikai had zero combat ability, but he was a master of controlling people's psyches.

"Lingzi, just give up already. Your status as Gongzhu and Draconic Meteor mean nothing. They are but chains holding you down. What has the Ailan dynasty done for you? Nothing! In fact, it's only cursed your body. It's all the dynasty's fault."

"That's...no reason to hurt anyone."

"Na-ha-ha! Your innocence is so beautiful."

She clenched her teeth in frustration.

Would she spend the rest of her days in this prison?

"Hmm? Lady Nerzanpi?"

Shikai took out his Correspondence Crystal—he had a call from the minister.

All of a sudden, there was an uproar in Jingshi.

Lingzi glanced out the window, and saw that explosions were going off one after the other. Not celebratory gun salutes. People were fighting. Was there a riot?

Just as she wondered that, all her hairs stood on end. She felt a massive burst

of mana. A vivid murderous aura enveloping everything. Something was approaching.

"What?! Terakomari...?" Shikai exclaimed in an unusual show of distress.

Lingzi felt her heart race. It was the same grand power she'd felt during the Six Nations War. Only one thing was capable of producing that—Terakomari Gandesblood's Core Implosion.

"Oh! So she is as radical as the rumors say! She must've known power would not solve anything! Lingzi! Seems like they're here for you!"

A golden gust of wind blasted the prison.

☆ (Going back in time a little)

Jingshi was pretty busy compared to the Imperial Capital. The high-rise buildings seemed to reach all the way to the sky. Immortals were going every which way on the ground and in the air. Nice smells were wafting from a single direction, maybe because it was lunchtime.

"Ms. Komari, is there anywhere you would like to go?"

"Hmm? I don't knowww. I want omelet rice, but I feel like I should be trying something new..."

"Lady Komari, they're selling live turtle blood there."

"No, thank you."

"It says it will boost your height."

"You're not tricking me this time!"

I'd decided not to fall for anything of that sort. I could only believe in milk now.

"By the way, should we be sightseeing without Nelia? She's working so hard without us."

"Lady Cunningham just called and said she was having lunch at a luxury *yum* cha place in the nicest zone of Jingshi. She bragged about the exquisiteness of the dumplings."

"No fair! I want dumplings, too!"

"We should go against her with something more exotic... My! Look, there's bear paw and chicken legs over there. Let's go inside."

"Ms. Villhaze... Her face clearly says she doesn't want any of that..."

"If I may interject!" Esther shyly raised her hand; she was as stiff and formal as always. "The guidebook recommends the Tianzhu Hall, saying every item on the menu is great. Would you like to try it out?"

"What's with that book? It's got sticky notes all over," I said.

"It's a trip guide! I did some research after hearing we would be infiltrating Jingshi!"

Good on Esther. The most (only) sensible and thoughtful member of the Seventh Unit. Even Vill nodded at her suggestion with wonder. My maid often followed whatever Esther said. If only she obeyed me, too.

I had no objections, so we went to this Tianzhu Hall.

An employee showed us to our seats, and I immediately opened up the menu.

Dumplings. Steamed buns. Vegetable sides galore. Soups and a lot of noodles. It all looked so good that I was getting decision paralysis.

"Look, Lady Komari. 'Authentic giga-spicy mapo tofu that tastes like magma.' It says your mouth explodes upon eating it, leaving your gums a wasteland."

"Order it for yourself if you want it, then."

"Um... The guidebook says there's a staple course meal. If you can't decide, how about we go with that?"

"Yeah. I trust you to make good choices, Esther."

"You make it sound like I make bad choices," Vill grumbled.

I ignored Vill's objection and ordered as Esther suggested.

A great variety of dishes arrived after a bit of waiting.

I grabbed a steaming bao with my chopsticks and took a nibble. Meat juice flowed into my mouth, as did happiness. This. Now this was the true thrill of the trip, even though we were here for "business."

"It's amazing... The Immortals sure know how to make food..."

"Lady Komari, juice is dripping from your mouth. Here, allow me to lick it off."

"Get away!!"

"Ms. Komari, would you like to try a dumpling?"

"Hmm? Yes, please."

Sakura held her half-eaten dumpling up to me. I chomped it. Chewed it. Relished it. How could something be so good? I had to boast about it to Nelia later...

"Lady Komari." Vill glared at me with puffed cheeks. "This has been bothering me for a while now, but why do you have no qualms about eating the food Lady Memoir offers you? The last time I tried feeding you bell peppers, you wailed and threw a tantrum."

"You just don't understand. There are two kinds of people in this world."

"Commander! You should try the chili shrimp, too! It's spicy but tasty!"

"Really?! Let me see..."

"Hold on, Lady Komari. What are these two kinds of people?"

"Ah, basically: perverts and non-perverts. From my experience, about ninety percent of humankind is in the pervert group. People like Sakuna and Esther are very rare members of the remaining ten percent. This is why I can safely eat what they offer me."

"Esther aside, are you sure you have an accurate read on Lady Memoir? This former terrorist takes peeping photos of you any chance she..."

"That's not true! This is slander!" Sakuna denied it, red in the face with anger.

It was true that there had been photos of me plastered all over her room once, but I thought she'd taken them down now. Esther was wincing after she went to hang out in Sakuna's room the other day, but surely it wasn't anything like that.

"It's not fair!" Vill fumed.

If you really believe that, then show it in your actions. Stop creeping into my bed, for starters, I grumbled internally while enjoying the Immortal dishes.

Sakuna, Esther, and Vill also seemed to be enjoying it. At the very least, this moment was a pleasant one—but then, somebody appeared.

"Excuse me, may I take a seat with you?"

A woman in black clothing stood before us.

I looked around anxiously. No other seats were open.

"Sorry. I suppose taking up a table for six with only four people was too much of an imposition... Please, go ahead," I said.

"Thank you. Your altruism bleaches my soul." The woman said something odd as she sat down beside me.

I was taken aback by how close she was. And was she a smoker? She smelled of tobacco. Not to mention her all-black outfit. She didn't feel like an Immortal, but she didn't strike me as being from any country in particular.

"Excuse me. May I have a giga-spicy mapo tofu that tastes like magma set?" Is she for real? I respect anyone who can handle that heat.

I continued eating my meal while in shock. I glimpsed to the side and saw the staff bring out some mapo tofu that literally looked like magma. Even Sakuna and Esther's eyes grew wide at the sight of that.

The woman grabbed her spoon, put her hands together and gave thanks for the food, then scooped up some of the bright-red, seething stuff. Slowly, she carried it to her mouth and...chomped down. The next moment: "BWOOOH?!"

She spat fire out of her mouth. She shrieked in a coughing fit, like, "COUGHAAEUGHHHH!" and reached out for a cup of water but knocked it over, spilling all of it over the table. I stood up in a panic.

"Are you okay?!"

"I-I'm not... It's spicy. Too spicy. Like real magma... Bwoeeegh!"

"Waaah! I'll bring some water!"

I gave her a cup and she gulped it down like a traveler dying in the middle of a

desert.

"Thank you, thank you," she said repeatedly as she handed me back the cup. "The water courses through my body again... Sorry. I can't handle spicy food."

"Then why did you order it?!"

"As they say, 'Those whose strength is lacking fall halfway.' I don't want to give up halfway. I try to overcome the giga-spicy mapo tofu that tastes like magma time and time again, and yet..."

"Lady Komari, perhaps you were right about ninety percent of humankind being comprised of perverts."

"Don't be rude! Anyways, I'm glad you're fine now."

"You saved my life. Excuse me! Please bring her some grape juice."

"Wha—?! Please, that's okay. I only gave you a cup of water..."

"I must respond to kindness with kindness. I owe you my life...Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood."

I staggered.

An employee brought me the grape juice right away. They also wiped the damp table.

"Ah!" Esther exclaimed out of the blue. "She's... This woman is the Enchanted Lands' Minister of Military Secrets!"

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Nerzanpi Rocha. I have the honor of being the Ailan dynasty's Minister of Military Secrets, overseer of the Three Draconic Meteors. Though basically, I'm just Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo's stooge."

The mood turned tense. So she was on the side of those tormenting Lingzi.

"Hey, don't look at me all frightened like that," she said with a smile. "It's not as though everyone at the top of the government participates in Lingzi's torment. In fact, I sympathize with her."

"Suspicious. I'll stuff mapo tofu into your mouth."

"Stop it, Vill... What do you mean by that?" I asked Nerzanpi.

"I mean I feel bad for her. No one listens to her. Her father, the Tianzi, is a coward lazing around the rock garden, and the grand chancellor is plotting to take over the dynasty."

I had no idea what Nerzanpi's true intentions were. Her words and gestures were completely devoid of emotion. She seemed like she was already dead.

"In fact, it was I who let Meihua Liang escape," she said nonchalantly. "The other Draconic Meteors were in charge of pursuing Lingzi's followers, but I ordered them to keep it in moderation. Otherwise, she wouldn't have made it to the Mulnite Empire."

"Really...? So you're on Lingzi's side?"

"Of course. I may be a villain, but I'm discerning about the paths of evil I walk. I don't like Shikai Gudo's petty style."

"Hmmm..."

"Ms. Komari, should I kill her to check her memory?" Sakuna whispered into my ear.

Kill her? You wanna be the perpetrator of a homicide just like that? I mean, I don't have faith in her, either, but...

"Oh, it seems like we're lacking trust here. Allow me to give you this, then."

Nerzanpi searched her pocket and produced a picture. A picture of...

"Lingzi?!"

"Yes, Lingzi Ailan. This is a photo of her being held captive in the palace's tower," said Nerzanpi.

Vill peeked at it from my back. I stared at it so hard I could have bored a hole in the picture. Lingzi was sitting down on the other side of a barred window. She didn't look hurt...but her expression was dyed in despair.

"The government explained away the Gongzhu's disappearance from the public as convalescence, but that's clearly a lie. Shikai Gudo doesn't want Her Highness undermining his plot."

The girl in the picture clearly wanted help.

My heart thumped out of my chest. I wanted to see her no matter what.

"You shouldn't feel at ease just because she has no visible wounds. Remember that the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core is at work. Although I imagine Shikai Gudo wouldn't use unnecessary violence—he's more the scheming type."

```
"Still...," I said.
```

"Rumors say he's forcing her to whisper him words of love."

"Love?!"

"I also heard he's had his way with her whole body."

"WHAAAT?!"

"Calm down. Just take a sip of grape juice."

"Gnnn... Yeah..."

"Lady Nerzanpi, as Minister of Military Secrets, could you not stop Shikai Gudo?" Vill asked with brimming suspicion.

"That would be difficult." She sighed. "Shikai Gudo holds massive power over the Enchanted Lands. He also has a short temper and kills and imprisons anyone who disagrees with him. He is truly the chancellor of ruin. Which is why I have no choice but to butter him up. I'm quite fond of my life, you see."

There were posters praising the grand chancellor all over Jingshi. That sicko really was popular with the people. He knew how to keep his light side and dark side separated.

I dejectedly grabbed the grape juice and took a sip.

"So, what should we do? We would like to hear your opinion," Vill said.

"I can only think of two ways forward," responded Nerzanpi. "One: to expose and overthrow him. Two..."

My heart leaped and raced.

A few drops of something else were mixed in the grape juice. I knew this flavor. A crude taste I couldn't bring myself to like.

"...to use force. Subjugate him and be ready to face criticism from the

people."

"No. We cannot expose Lady Komari to public censure. She's too kind and will break under the pressure... Umm, Lady Komari? Is something the matter?"

I wasn't listening to Vill anymore.

The next moment, a storm of mana brewed.

Screams erupted all over the restaurant. Plates shattered. The chair and table I was touching turned into shining gold.

Right. This was my Core Implosion, the Blood Curse. I was the source of all this mana.

"[...]..."

I was still conscious, but golden swords were whirling around me before I knew it.

"Commander?! Is there anything that troubled you?! Did you not like my choice of restaurant?! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!!"

"No, Ms. Esther! There was blood in the food!"

"Calm down, Lady Komari! You can't just awaken your powers in the middle of a comedy scene! C'mon, kiss me, I'll bring you back!"

I'm fine. I'm already sixteen—I'm a grown-up. Holding back my meteoric power should be easy.

"Shiny. This one's the best of the Blood Curses."

Nerzanpi lit up a cigarette, ignoring the sign that said NO SMOKING.

She puffed a cloud of smoke and let out a stifled, dead chuckle.

"Shikai Gudo said he would be seeing Lingzi this noon. Who knows what they're doing in that tower? Probably something so terrible I dare not speak it."

"|"

"She's on the twenty-second floor of the palace."

"..."

"You don't know where it is? The building has a sign like this on the wall."

Nerzanpi grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and drew some characters that looked like stick figures doing gymnastics. It said "Gekong Tower."

My emotions exploded. I could not take it any longer.

My consciousness began to fade, until the gold mana shrouded the world.



"Security's going to be tough to crack. There's also a magical barrier."

"How about I break through it with Diverse Divide?"

"Wouldn't be impossible for you, Lady Nelia... But that would create a rift with the Enchanted Lands government if we're wrong. I also don't think it would be physically possible to take on all the Immortal guards."

The outskirts of Jingshi.

Nelia, Gertrude, and Meihua were hiding in the bushes, observing a building. Meihua had said this place was suspicious and that it held the key to revealing the grand chancellor's misdeeds.

"Hey, Meihua, what exactly is the grand chancellor planning?"

"He's investigating willpower. Studying the workings of the soul. He's probably trying to do the same sort of things they did in the Daydream Paradise to artificially activate Core Implosion."

"Hmmm. He's learned nothing from Madhart's failure."

"According to my peers' investigation, the grand chancellor has been kidnapping citizens of Jingshi for experimentation. If that's true, he's no different from Madhart. But we haven't gotten any decisive evidence..."

The building they were observing was supposed to be a laboratory.

It looked like any other building in the Enchanted Lands, but it was oddly large. Big enough to compete with the palace. It was also tightly secured. There was a perception barrier around the structure, preventing it from being viewed from outside. Moreover, the illusory magic was Effulgent-level. If Nelia hadn't cut through it with her Diverse Divide, they wouldn't have even realized it was there.

"Lingzi and I found this place by looking into some secret files, but we don't know what exactly they're doing inside... That part of the documents was destroyed."

"So we have no choice but to break in and find out."

Nelia's goal was to wipe away the holdovers of Madhart's reign, along with exposing the grand chancellor and rescuing Lingzi Ailan. She would have to do something about this lab to accomplish that.

"Should we have Komari take care of it? She could blow it up with her Core Implosion," Nelia said.

"But then the evidence would be gone with it."

"And it would put Immortal society against us. We can't cause a scene after being invited to the wed—" Meihua cut herself short.

Nelia felt a massive burst of mana and turned around.

"Huh?"

She couldn't believe her eyes.

In the skies far away, just by the main street of Jingshi, a golden pillar shot up to the heavens. Emergency sirens roared all around.

"What is that?!" Gertrude yelled, staggering.

Isn't it obvious? It could only be one thing.

Nelia gazed at the absurd sight—a shimmering golden Vampire Princess flying off to the west.

Just then, she got a call from one of her subordinates, who she'd left behind to do reconnaissance.

"Abercrombie here. There's trouble, Miss President. Commander Gandesblood is heading off to take back Lingzi Ailan, and she's fighting the Enchanted Lands' army along the way. The Empire's Seventh Unit has also come out of hiding and is starting to riot. Oh, and they're screaming about 'Komarin,' of course."

The report was unnecessary. It was clear that everything was going off the rails.

"Komari?! What the hell are you thinkiiing?!"

The commander had used the Blood Curse's Saber Hills and Blade Groves, a golden power that was brought about by drinking Warblade blood.

Nelia immediately turned around to Jingshi's center, pale in the face.



The bars were cut apart in an instant—the entire tower wall was smashed to pieces, actually.

Lingzi looked away to cover her face from the incoming golden gust, but she turned back around upon feeling someone's presence. It was a vampire, clad in gold mana and emanating hostility. *She's like a prince charming coming to rescue a captive princess*, thought Lingzi inappropriately, swept away by emotion.

"Give Lingzi back." Komari glared daggers at Shikai.

The grand chancellor responded with a cackle.

"Na-ha-ha-ha! What a dynamic entrance, Commander Gandesblood!"

His laughter was warranted—his position hadn't changed.

"But what will happen after you've gone on your rampage? I'll immediately become a victim! Oh no, an invader came here to steal Gudo's bride by force! What will the people say about you once I call you out on that? Your rampages have only been justified up to now because you had the support of the people. Using force when everyone hates you will only make you another despot! No different from Gerra Madhart!"

Terakomari Gandesblood had solved myriad issues through sheer willpower. And her achievements had stuck because the people wished for them. But by the same token, this meant she couldn't do something that went against the will of the people. She couldn't overthrow Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo without just cause.

"Do you get it now? Put away that beautiful yet horrific golden spear!"

Komari could do nothing but obey.

Her golden mana weakened bit by bit. The swords swirling around her turned

to glowing specks, leaving only a stumped vampire behind.

"Huh? Uh..."

Komari looked around.

The window was wrecked, as was the wall. Then she turned her eyes to Lingzi and Shikai.

"How did this happen?!" She clutched her head and screamed.

"Na-ha-ha!" Shikai laughed. "You don't have control over it?! Still, your Core Implosion really is powerful! So much so I want you as my subordinate. What do you say? Care for a workplace transfer?"

"I'm not working for you! Lingzi, are you all right?!" Komari rushed to her.

Lingzi raised her head with a hopeful expression.

What beautiful eyes. Lingzi's were radiant, unlike those of the other Ailan dynasty Immortals. Komari felt herself getting sucked in. As she kept staring, Komari's face turned red like a tomato.

"Um... Would you mind saying something...?"

"Ah! Sorry..."

"Don't apologize! Are you hurt?"

"No. Thank you."

Lingzi curved her lips into a smile. Was she doing it right? Meihua always told her she was too inexpressive. She wasn't sure she could make one.

Komari immediately looked away.

"...Sorry I have such an ugly smile."

"That's not true! It's...beautiful..."

Lingzi's heart raced. It was the first time someone had said something like that to her.

"Really...? Thank you... But why don't you look my way?"

"Huh?! Well... Oh, you see...it's just self-preservation! I feel like my heart could explode if I look at your face..."

"... What in the world have you been talking about?" Shikai glared at them.

Sure enough, this wasn't a conversation to be having in front of your enemy.

"Nothing!" Komari shook her head before turning to look at him. "Shikai Gudo! Stop making Lingzi suffer!"

"Who's really making people suffer here? The reports said your Seventh Unit are rampaging across Jingshi."

"WHAT THE HECK, GUYS?!" Komari ran up to the smashed window, then yelled, "Heeey! Stop iiit! Stop shouting my naaame!"

Shikai shrugged.

"Good grief! You're a fun girl, I'll give you that. But it's over now. You've made an enemy of the Immortals. It seems they're beginning to protest against the Imperial Army."

"Ugh... Sorry..."

"You haven't gotten involved with the Enchanted Lands until now. Perhaps people upheld you as a hero elsewhere...but the Immortals think nothing of you. Their hero is not some foreign vampire, but their grand chancellor. The state benefits I've distributed have done me well."

"What am I supposed to... For starters, it's your fault for locking Lingzi away! Convalescence?! She looks perfectly healthy to me! If anything, she's only in bad shape after being imprisoned here!"

"I can think of countless ways to excuse tha—hmm? Wait, could it be that you like Lingzi?"

The mood shattered. Komari faltered for a second before shouting:

"It's not that I like her! I feel sorry for her! That's why I came here!"

"But your reaction just now was obvious. I could feel your pure, pure love blooming for her! Ahh! Sweet innocence!"

"N-n-n-n-n-no-no-no way! You're seeing things!"

"Of course you'd deny it! After all, the papers say you're in a relationship with your maid."

"That's all baloney!!"

"So you do like Lingzi, don't you? I see, that's why you had to resort to your Core Implosion to get here. Oh, beautiful! Marvelous! One could base a whole romance novel off this!"

Shikai opened his arms like a stage play actor and walked toward Komari.

He was right: Komari was in love with Lingzi—but her feelings weren't natural. It was a forced, artificial affection.

The grand chancellor got right in front of Komari, then grabbed her by the collar and whispered: "I will not give you Lingzi. She will be the foundation of my ambitions."

The man hid his atrocious fangs behind a facetious demeanor. Whenever he threatened Lingzi like that, she could only shiver in fear. She hated how it brought forth the weakness of her heart.

But Komari wasn't that way. She was entirely unlike Lingzi.

"Just try and do it," she provoked Shikai in return. "I won't let you have her! Lingzi will be hurt if she stays with you! She'll be sad! You don't care at all about her!"

The grand chancellor's brows twitched.

Komari declared war oh so easily.

"So I'm going to save her!"

Ba-thump! Lingzi felt as though her chest would burst.

Komari's earnest words had landed a critical hit on her heart. Just looking at the girl bravely stand against the corrupt chancellor was enough to make Lingzi's heartbeat audibly quicken. She felt her consciousness flying away. Ahh. This was Terakomari Gandesblood.

"Ahh! I see! You are a vampire brimming with pathos!"

"Guh?!"

Shikai lifted Komari by the collar, then slowly approached the destroyed wall of the cell.

"Grand Chancellor! Wait! What're you doing?!"

"I've been moved to my core! I'm shocked that you care that much for Lingzi! In honor of your passion, I will give you a chance."

Shikai ignored Lingzi's yells of protest. Komari flailed her arms and legs; there wasn't anything underfoot. Nothing but the ground far below.

"One must respect people's feelings! Particularly when it comes to love! Perhaps it was unjust to force marriage upon her! So I'll give you an opportunity to fight, fair and square! Let's duel!"

"Stop... Let me go...!"

"Let the bout begin. Adieu."

Shikai released her with a cackle.

Komari fell without even having the time to scream.

Lingzi launched herself off the floor in shock. Surprisingly, Shikai did not stop her.

She braced herself and jumped off the tower. As she plummeted toward the earth, she reached out to Komari. The ground was getting closer. Komari's dreadful expression took hold of Lingzi's heart.

And then...she was unable to reach her.

×

◆March 19 – Grand Chancellor's Statement

Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood deceived Gongzhu Lingzi Ailan while the latter was returning to health and snatched her away. We believe the brawl in Jingshi's main street was a consequence of Commander Gandesblood's orders. Still, we would like you to refrain from attacking her. She only did so out of displeasure with Gongzhu Lingzi Ailan's marriage. Not for political reasons, of course. This was because she did not want anyone to take the Gongzhu from her—the commander's crimes were a lapse of judgment stemming from feelings of romance. The administration will be lenient in its handling of the matter. The wedding ceremony between grand chancellor Shikai Gudo and Gongzhu Lingzi Ailan planned for the 21st will be postponed. Instead, we will

hold a Matrimonial War between grand chancellor Shikai Gudo and Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood. Whoever wins will marry the Gongzhu. The method to decide on the victor is under consideration, but it has been suggested that we hold a national referendum, as we did a hundred years ago. Allow us to clarify that the Tianzi has approved all of the above. Whoever objects will be treated as a traitor to the Ailan dynasty—beware.

Ж

"Matrimonial War...? What is this ridiculous event?"

Prohellya read the grand chancellor's statement while eating skewered chicken from a stall in a back alley of Jingshi.

The statement was on an Ailan dynasty bulletin board. Usually, the board was full of solemn political notices, but it was oddly sensationalist this time around.

"Terakomari likes Lingzi? Now that's a surprise!" cat-ear girl Leona Flatt said blithely.

The two had run into each other at their lodging, and Leona invited Prohellya to go sightseeing as they had back in the Heavenly Paradise.

"You're way off the mark, Leona. Terakomari couldn't be in love with Lingzi Ailan. That's impossible."

"What do you mean? Also, you got sauce around your mouth."

"What I mean is that this statement is all false. Or, at least the part about Terakomari being in love with Lingzi Ailan. I imagine the so-called Matrimonial War will actually take place."

Prohellya wiped her mouth with a handkerchief while putting the bulletin inside her uniform.

The General Secretary had instructed her to show up for Lingzi's wedding, but she wasn't sure what was going on behind the scenes. It seemed like Terakomari was plotting something.

"That aside, Jingshi sure is a peaceful place," Leona said.

"Hmm?"

"I feel totally at ease here, even in this back alley. If this was the Polar Union's

Federal District, we'd have thugs coming here to mug us."



"Is that a declaration of war? Fine, then. I'll fight to protect the future of my motherland's children. I'll begin by listing a hundred good points about the Federal District."

"I'm just kidding. Let's not fight and just have fun going around sampling the local cuisine, okay?"

"I was also joking... It's true that the Enchanted Lands feel very welcoming. It's somewhat similar to the Heavenly Paradise, but different at its core. This country doesn't have its feet on the ground."

"Yeaaah. The Immortals fly all over the place."

Prohellya chomped down her last bite of meat and stared at the wall of the back alley.

There were a few pictures plastered there, apparently from non-governmental organizations.

They read: Looking for missing persons.

Residents of Jingshi had been disappearing out of nowhere for a while now.

Though the city seemed peaceful on the surface, it had a dark underside. Perhaps Terakomari's group had noticed something—so thought Prohellya as she threw her skewer into a trash can.

 $\stackrel{\wedge}{\sim}$

I woke up in my hotel room.

Sunlight was streaming through the west window. Seemed like I'd been out for a while. I examined myself in a hurry.

"Huh? Did I die?"

I was unharmed. There was no pain. Even though Shikai had thrown me off the tower.

I shouldn't have been able to heal even a scratch in the Enchanted Lands, far away from the Mulnite Dark Core.

"Ahh, Lady Komari! You're awake! Thank goodness!"

"Vill? What in the world... Bwugh?!"

She tackled me like a bull. Not only that, but she also pulled up my shirt and stuck her head in while trembling with joy. "Ahh, Lady Komari, thank goodness," she shouted like a sicko.

"There's nothing good about this! What're you doing?!"

"I'm checking to see there's nothing wrong with your body. Let me inspect you more closely. Take off your clothes. No wait, let me do that for you. Freeze like a sea cucumber and stare up at the ceiling."

"AAAAAHHHH!!"

"Stop it, Villhaze. You're scaring her."

Someone grabbed Vill's shoulder.

The peach-colored Warblade—Nelia—sighed.

"Nelia! What happened to me?! I'm not dead, am I...?"

"Let me go, Lady Cunningham! I'll sue you for sexual harassment!" shouted Vill.

"You're the only sex offender here... Of course you're not dead, Komari. You were thrown off the tower, but fortunately, there was a mat down there that saved you."

"What? A mat?"

"A mat vendor who was visiting the palace just so happened to drop one of his wares there. And you fell on it. You also happened to do a 'parachute landing fall' and absorbed the shock of the hit."

"No way, that's too many coincidences."

I felt like I had used up my entire life's worth of luck. This was too good to be true. Was God doing everything in his power to keep me alive? *Please don't go dropping a meteorite on me tomorrow to balance the karma.*

"...Where's everyone else? Sakuna, Esther?"

"They're out shopping. Gertrude is outside keeping watch."

"Forget them, Lady Komari. Would you like some snacks? I'll feed you."

"What about the city? I hope I didn't cause a hubbub."

"Lady Komari, are you thirsty? Here, I'll let you drink water directly from my mouth."

"Yeah, there's a huge hubbub. Jingshi is in shambles because of you."

"Lady Komari, I am your closest aide, so may I hug you for no reason? I can, yes? Thank you. Excuse me."

"In shambles? What in the world... Vill, quit it already!!"

The maid buried her face in my chest out of nowhere.

Vill rubbed her cheeks against me. It was ticklish. *An irredeemable pervert to her very core!* I thought, but her behavior felt a bit different than usual this time.

"What's up with you?"

Vill puffed her cheeks.

"You will be marrying me."

"She's sullen." Nelia chuckled. "Regardless of your true romantic feelings, you ended up getting involved in a fight for a bride. I think Vill's mad that the bride in question is Lingzi, not her."

"Lingzi...?! That's right, Lingzi! Is she okay?!"

"She is. Let me explain in order."

Nelia took a mooncake from the table and threw it in her mouth.

That reminded me, my lunch had been ripped away from me. I was starving. But just as I was about to ask for food, my whole brain exploded when I heard the next words out of Nelia's mouth: "You've gotten yourself into a battle with the grand chancellor over who gets to marry Lingzi."

That didn't make any sense. I understood the individual words in her statement, but nothing else.

"First, you met Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha at the Tianzhu Hall. She is not on Lingzi's side. She's a true villain on the grand chancellor's side."

"Really?!"

"Nerzanpi slipped some blood in your drink. Then she gave you Lingzi's location to get you to go save her. That way, you'd look like a villain trying to steal the grand chancellor's bride. And sure enough, a ton of people in the Enchanted Lands are criticizing you and the Seventh Unit."

"Ugh... But why the Seventh Unit, too?"

"They followed their commander's rampage. They got too riled up."

What are you guys—dogs barking at an alarm?

"Do not worry. Esther, Lieutenant Cerbero, and I put a stop to them before they could go overboard. They only blew up about a couple shops in the surrounding area."

"That's a couple too many!"

"They're billing us damages of a hundred million liang."

"How much is that?"

"About a million plates of omelet rice."

"What now, Vill?! I can't make that many!"

Was this Shikai's plan all along? Sneaky bastard.

"I must say..." Nelia looked up at the ceiling with worry. "I wasn't expecting him to do this. I figured he'd just treat you like a criminal... Why would he set up this Matrimonial War? Maybe he's looking to boost his fame even further by defeating the strongest of the Six Valkyries?"

"I don't wanna battle to the death."

"It won't be a battle to the death," Vill said, fondling my belly. "Shikai Gudo said it would be a fight to decide who's more suitable for Lingzi. That doesn't sound like a simple contest of strength."

"That man is no military officer—he's a civil official. He should be aware that he would end up dead if he duked it out with you."

"So it's gonna be a test of intellect. And I, being the intellectual scholar of the century, cannot lose."

"It'd definitely be faster to save Lingzi from him by doing it his way," Nelia said.

That was when it hit me. The Matrimonial War would decide who was going to marry her. So...

"Wait... So if I win, I get to marry Lingzi?"

"You win the *right* to marry her. But I know you would never marry anyone other than me, Lady Komari, so just think of it as a fight to defeat the grand chancellor."

"...Yeah. Of course."

"That means you can marry me whether you win or lose."

"What's Lingzi doing now? I imagine she's safe, or else the battle would be pointless."

"She's upstairs." Nelia pointed at the ceiling. "Grand Chancellor's letting her be, for some reason. He also seems to have stopped pursuing Meihua. She'll be with us for the time being."

"Isn't that suspicious? After how he had her basically bound hand and foot?"

"Well, yes. I imagine he thinks he can trounce you in the Matrimonial War. That aside..." Nelia sighed. "Lingzi's on the roof right now, and she seems pretty bummed out. How about you go see her?"



The hotel rooftop was dyed sunset red.

In fact, the whole of Jingshi looked like it was stained with blood. Immortals flew between the endless sea of skyscrapers. The fantastical view caught my eye as I walked forward.

Lingzi Ailan stood before the safety fence.

She turned around as soon as she heard me arrive, her peafowl-like attire gliding in the air.

"Ms. Terakomari... You're awake."

She was so pretty it made me dizzy. Oh no. I'm really not doing okay. Usually

Cold Komari transforms into Hot Komari at the sight of her.

"Y-yeah. Are you okay?"

"I am, thanks to you."

"Yeah, great job, Commander. Thanks to you, we'll have to rethink the whole plan."

I heard an exasperated voice. Suddenly, Meihua was standing right next to Lingzi.

"Huh? When did you get here?"

"I've been here the whole time! Do you only notice Lingzi, or what?!"

"Sorry."

Yes, my eyes had been locked on Lingzi. It was her fault for being so dazzling, though. Just glancing at her made my chest prickle. And yet, for some reason, I couldn't look away.

"Oh well," Meihua muttered. "Judging by the back of your hand, it seems like Lovebird Infection is in effect."

"What're you talking about?"

"Nothing, forget it... Anyways, your rescue operation made a real mess of things. We don't have any evidence to expose the grand chancellor with yet. We'll need you to win the Matrimonial War now."

"Meihua, don't be so forceful."

"Right... Sorry." Meihua bowed.

Perhaps these two were part of the rare 10 percent.

"I know it's brazen of me to ask, but I would like you to save Lingzi. I can't do it... Only you are up to the task, Commander Terakomari Gandesblood."

Help people. Unite the world.

That was the mission my mom left me.

I couldn't sit back and watch as the Enchanted Lands fell into peril.

"I know. I'll help her."

"Thank you. You're so kind." Lingzi smiled shyly, then looked down at the crimson-dyed Jingshi. "My whole life, I've only had bad people around me. This is my first time meeting someone like you."

"You're a commander, aren't you? Can't you use your power to stand against Shikai?" I asked Lingzi.

"The Three Draconic Meteors aren't like the Seven Crimson Lords." Meihua's face darkened in powerlessness. "Civil officials are considered superior to the military in the Enchanted Lands. Commanders have little authority. And the Minister of Military Secrets oversees the Three Draconic Meteors. Even Lingzi's unit is under Nerzanpi's control. They're all basically her enemy."

"Yes... The Ailan dynasty has many enemies. My father, the Tianzi, is powerless. He's letting the Enchanted Lands be taken over—the worst consequence of this being the reestablishment of the Daydream Paradise. The grand chancellor has been kidnapping residents of Jingshi and using them as guinea pigs in Core Implosion experiments. That's why I need to act against him...but he's trying to strip me of all power."

A giant balloon floated above the crimson city. Propaganda for the grand chancellor's rule, clearly. A huge picture of his face was plastered over it. What a narcissistic dude.

"The grand chancellor captured everyone who agreed with me, and now he's trying to strip me of my status as Gongzhu and Draconic Meteor. He wants to marry me to justify his actions—to show everyone within and without that he deserves to succeed the Tianzi...and to steal everything from me. If a new dynasty begins, I will spend my life confined to the palace..."

Lingzi's words were faltering; I could feel she wasn't good at talking.

Still, I felt the strong emotion behind them. Her sadness, her anger, her impotence, and a faint hope...

"So..." She turned around, wearing a sorry expression. "I need your help, Terakomari."

Lingzi's green hair fluttered in the spring breeze. Paralyzed by the sight, I forgot to answer.

"I want you to marry me."

What a beautiful girl. It wasn't because of her looks that I was charmed by her, but she really was as pretty as a flower. Like a fairy straight out of a book.

"Um... Would you give me a reply...?"

"Huh?"

"Like I said, I'd like you to marry me...," Lingzi repeated, straining her voice and fidgeting.

Her face was bright red. Not because of the sunset. What did she just say? My brain was shaken by waves so hard it was about to evanesce. Lingzi repeated herself one more time: "Please...marry me!"

"WHAAAT?!"

What? Marry? Did she just say 'marry me'?

I mean, sure, every day would be beautiful and exciting if I were to marry her, so I welcome it with open arms... No, hold on. Something's not right with my head. Someone call a medic.

"You always leave out the important part, Lingzi," said Meihua.

"S-sorry! I only meant that figuratively...! What I meant to say was, please win the Matrimonial War for me! As in, take me away from the grand chancellor!"

"O-ohh, right! You had me going there for a moment!"

"Yes, I'm sorry. So please..." Lingzi took a deep breath to calm down and looked me straight in the eye. "Please marry me."

C'mon girl, stop saying that already—you're gonna give me a heart attack. Those thoughts aside, there was only one thing to do: Give it my all for Lingzi.

"Okay. I will." I smiled as soothingly as I could. "I'll do my best to get to marry you!"

"Lady Komari!"

I thought myself dead for a moment. The voice of a ghoul from hell echoed in my ear.

"Lady Komari. Lady Komari. What's this about marriage I hear? Why are you accepting Lady Lingzi's proposal? You have me. Are you going to cheat?"

"Whoa! Vill?!"

The sicko maid appeared behind me like a ghost. Alarm bells rang in my head, and I immediately tried running away, but I stumbled when she grabbed me by the belly.

"We drank each other's blood! I make you omelet rice every day! We sleep together every night! We promised we would marry each other! I've made an album of us flirting to show at our reception! And yet you fell for some random woman who only showed up in the middle of the series?"

"You're just making stuff up! Let me go!"

"Ms. Komari."

I was going to die again. Demise sprouted from my feet. I fearfully looked down.

"WAAAH?!"

Sakuna was on all fours, grabbing my ankles and looking up at me.

Did she just pop up out of the floor?!

"You can't do that, Ms. Komari. You're still too young to marry. And you don't really want to, do you? Lingzi's tricking you, isn't she?"

"Huh? Sakuna? Is that really you?"

"I see. I understand. I just need to get rid of her, then. You wait here, Ms. Komari. I'll bring you back to reality."

"No, stop! Where did that fly swatter come from?!"

"Let me go! I can't k*II her if you don't let me go!"

"Calm down, Sakunaaa! You're supposed to be a decent persooon!!"

Sakuna tried to carry out a suicide attack on Lingzi. I clung to Sakuna's waist. Vill clung to my waist. Nelia headed out onto the rooftop and exclaimed, "What is going on?!" while cackling and clapping. Esther jumped to Vill's waist in a flurry, yelling, "Compose yourself!"

Lingzi and Meihua were flabbergasted. So was I, to be honest.

The attack continued until Lingzi explained what she really meant by me marrying her.

The look of disgust in Meihua's face was burned into my retinas.

So began our preparations for the war.



Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo had another title: "Starquake Minister."

His job was to oversee the Starquake Agency, a department that had existed since the inception of the Ailan dynasty. This government office was in charge of recording the movements of the stars. But the task of logging this information was just a front.

"Hmm! Things aren't looking good, I see."

The outskirts of the Enchanted Lands.

Shikai Gudo stood in an atrium of the secret facilities that Nelia Cunningham had scouted out at noon.

"The recipe says we're close. It will all be for nothing if we don't hurry. There's not much time left... Ahh! Are the heavens trying to end us?!"

"We're not dead yet. No need to get so pessimistic."

A woman in black appeared beside him. It was Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha, the grand chancellor's mysterious right hand.

She gazed upward, her eyes dead, and lit a cigarette.

"There were the experiments on Monique Claire. Dr. Kuya did great work at the Crimson Snow Hut. Now I'm closer to understanding the mechanics of willpower. It's essentially similar to the Dark Core."

"You mean in that it creates infinite energy?"

"Yes. Willpower recovers on a whim. No matter how much you batter the spirit through etiolation, you cannot kill it completely. Little wonder they call it the source of creation of the world."

"Wouldn't a Baolu be enough, then? Why do we keep failing?"

"The model must be wrong. Any random person's Baolu won't get us the Waidan. Which means we need to make a Baolu out of someone with a stronger will. Maybe one of the Six Valkyries? They all have powerful Core Implosions."

Screams rang out behind them—from people being tortured to create a Baolu. Shikai knew that his reputation would be in tatters if anyone found out about this place.

"I think we should go for Commander Gandesblood. You're already set to hold the Matrimonial War anyway. But why bother going through with it in the first place?"

"I want Lingzi to resign of her own volition. She would fight back if I took her by force. But she'll give up if it's a consequence of the Matrimonial War. She'll abandon the irksome titles of 'Gongzhu' and 'Commander' and resign herself to being a bird in a cage. Beautiful maidens shine best when decorating a closed room."

"I see. So you did have something in mind... Still, be wary of Mulnite's Seventh Unit. They might launch an attack in retaliation."

"Na-ha-ha! That's no issue! Terakomari will be the one to meet her ruin if that happens. Military might has no value in this country."

"I hope you're right."

The screaming stopped. The victim dropped to the floor, their soul sucked out.

"We've got one. Will this do?"

A tall woman in military uniform holding a faintly glowing sphere approached Shikai and Nerzanpi.

"Wonderful," Nerzanpi said flatly after glancing at the orb. "It's pretty. The source's heart must've been so pure... Poor thing. By the way, have you been making good use of the Cogito Staff II?"

"Yes... How long must I keep working here?"

"Until you've achieved your goal. Heh-heh."

Shikai tilted his head as he watched the two talk.

"That woman isn't an Immortal, right? Who is she?"

"Her name is Mary Fragment. She's a Warblade and former Illustrious General of the Gerra-Aruka Republic. Madhart's loyal subject."

"I heard they imprisoned most of the Eight Illustrious Generals, though."

"She escaped on her own. She had nowhere else to go, so I took her in."

Mary the Warblade clicked her tongue as she threw the Baolu.

Nerzanpi just barely caught it.

"I only care about getting revenge on Nelia Cunningham and Terakomari Gandesblood. You said you'd give me the opportunity, and that's the only reason I'm in this drab place putting on the sequel to the Daydream Paradise. When do I get to meet the Moonpeach Princess?"

"The time will come eventually. Everything has its moment. We're not there yet, so don't hurry yourself. Just keep focusing on making Baolu."

"I just heard you say these things are pointless."

"Oh, you were listening? I only said they wouldn't become Waidan, not that they have no use at all. Move on to your next assignment. Be patient, and you will have your revenge."

Mary clicked her tongue again and returned to the test area.

It seemed like Aruka had their own plot in mind—but that would be of little issue with Nerzanpi in charge. Shikai smiled and left the Starquake Agency. The facility was concealed by the power of a Magic Stone imbued with Effulgent illusory magic that he'd taken from the palace treasury. No mage could ever find it.

Perhaps he could send some of the guards here over to the Matrimonial War.



The next day. The morning before the Matrimonial War.

We were having breakfast when Meihua said something unbelievable:

"Commander, go on a date with Lingzi."

My hand froze as I was scooping up a bite of omelet rice. Sakuna sent a glare of confusion at Meihua. Vill wiped the tea she dropped on the floor with a cloth. Lingzi curled into herself, red in the face. Only Nelia and Gertrude kept enjoying their meal: "This meat bun is delicious!" "It really is."

"Meihua...there's no need. I can't burden Ms. Terakomari like that."

"No, there is. We must show the people of Jingshi that you and Terakomari are close. The grand chancellor is probably trying to win by getting public opinion on his side."

"That makes sense," Nelia said while eating her meat bun. "The source of his power isn't physical strength, but his popularity with the people. Showing Immortal society that Komari and Lingzi love each other would be pretty effective. After all, it looks like the winner of the Matrimonial War will be decided via popular vote."

""No, never!!"" Vill and Sakuna yelled at the same time.

"As her actual girlfriend, I cannot allow her to go on a date with anyone else! If you keep up these shenanigans I will have no choice but to steal Lady Komari's panties to simmer down."

"Vill is right! Why is that okay with you, Ms. Nelia?! Are you just going to let Ms. Komari get married? What if the world ends as a consequence?"

"There's no way they're getting hitched for real. The date and the wedding are only for show." Nelia calmly poured milk into her glass. "Right, Komari? You only accepted Lingzi's proposal to show her you'll defeat the grand chancellor in the Matrimonial War, right? There's no way you actually like Lingzi, right?"

".....No, I don't. You're right."

Indeed. I don't feel anything romantic for Lingzi. This is only part of the plan to save the Enchanted Lands.

Then my eyes met hers. Lingzi's cheeks turned redder and redder.

Somehow that made me blush, too. My heart was about to explode just remembering her proposal from yesterday. Unable to stand it, I looked away.

"...Hmm? Hold on, Komari. You can't be for real," said Nelia.

"In any case, we must go outside to also check how Jingshi is doing. The grand chancellor shouldn't try anything until tomorrow. Lingzi is in your hands, Commander," said Meihua.

"Komari?! What was that reaction?! Your face wasn't even that cute when we drank each other's blood!" exclaimed Nelia.

"Huh? No, nothing, I...," I mumbled.

"Lady Nelia, calm down! Terakomari always looks like that!" said Gertrude.

"Hey, that's rude! I've always acted like a gallant commander!" I said.

"No, Ms. Gertrude... Ms. Komari never makes that face... This isn't right. Something's wrong. This can't be. She must be possessed or something... This can't be. This can't be."

"I think you're the one who's possessed here, Sakuna."

"Lady Memoir is right. The devil must have taken over your body, Lady Komari. We must secure an exorcist ASAP. To start things off, I'll be tying you up to the bed."

"Let me go, sicko!! I'm perfectly sane!! You're not taking me to bed!!"

"Hang on, everyone," Lingzi said as she stood up. They all looked at her. "Terakomari doesn't really like me at all... Don't worry. We'll just be pretending during the Matrimonial War... I won't take her from you. Rest assured."

My heart ached to hear that, for whatever reason.

Meanwhile, everyone seemed to come back to their senses, as though what Lingzi said was only obvious.

"Very well." Vill nodded while massaging me. "I will approve of this date...no, this outing, because it is necessary for the Matrimonial War. But you must be home by three. You only get three hundred mells. Don't you dare hold hands or do anything else indecent."

"Who are you, my mom?"

"Lady Lingzi, if you try anything with Lady Komari, I will put poisonous

mushrooms in your dinner that will have you laughing non-stop for three days. Beware."

"Understood."

"Good. We will be watching from a few feet away."

Vill's eyes were bloodshot.

So began my date (?) with Lingzi.



The people of Jingshi watched us from afar. No one spoke to us, but their stares full of curiosity and confusion tickled.

"Um... So, shall we get going?"

"Yes, let's..."

"Where do you wanna go? I... Um... It pains me to say this, but...I don't know what people do on dates..."

Lingzi's face boiled red. She looked down and muttered, "Date..."

No, no. No, no. You can't make a big deal out of it, c'mon, you'll make me more embarrassed. I'll apologize for saying that, just stop. Why do you look like this is your first date?

"Lingzi! Don't think too much about it! We're just acting!"

"R-right! Just acting! I'll show you around Jingshi!"

"Wah-ha-ha! You're so reliable! Who better to show me around the Enchanted Lands!"

"..."

There was a pause, but she soon smiled.

"Leave it to me. I always sneak out to town. I know some good places."

"Wow. You're amazing, huh?"

"I'm not the Gongzhu for nothing. I need to know about my country..."

That reminded me—I didn't know anything about the Imperial Capital. I guess that should have been obvious, since I'd cooped myself up for so long... But this

really emphasized how different someone like Lingzi was from someone like me. Heirs were just on a different level.

"Ah!" Lingzi exclaimed. "...May I call you Komari?"

"Hmm? Sure..."

"Thank you. That makes it sound more like...we're a couple."

I felt like I was gonna die then and there. My heart was racing faster than when I'd gotten death threats from the chimpanzee.

"There's a good shop over there. Shall we...? Komari."

"Yeah! Let's go, Lingzi!"

We walked side by side. I had to avoid focusing on the tension here. Otherwise, I'd blow up, and I was already at my limit.



"AAAHHH!! LADY KOMARI!! LADY KOMARI IS WALKING AROUND THE CITY WITH SOMEONE OTHER THAN ME?!?!?!"

"Calm down, Ms. Vill! That much isn't strange!"

"I can't calm down!! I have to wedge myself in between them and do a courting dance... I need to take her back..."

Vill, Esther, Sakuna, Nelia, and Meihua were watching Komari and Lingzi from a back alley.

"Something seems off." Nelia furrowed her brow as she looked through a pair of binoculars. "They actually look like they're a couple. An innocent young couple... I gotta commend Komari's acting if it really is just that."

"That's unexpected. Terakomari aside, why would Lingzi...?"

"Did you say something, Meihua?"

"Nothing." She cleared her throat. "In any case, it's important that they act the part. They need to be more explicit to appeal to the masses. I'd rather they hold hands, at least."

"Things will get spicy if that happens."

Esther was taken aback. Snow-white girl Sakuna Memoir sat on the ground, hugging her knees, as she stared at Komari and Lingzi with a smile on her face.

"...Commander Memoir, what do you mean by 'spicy'?"

"Things will get spicy if that happens."

"I heard you, but how exactly...?"

"Things will get spicy if that happens."

Sakuna stared at Meihua.

"Eek?!" Meihua shrieked like a bird and stepped back.

Esther knew that Sakuna Memoir was a huge fan of Komari's. She knew that Sakuna had plastered pictures of Komari all over her room, forming a giant Komari mosaic. And so she knew that blood could spill as a consequence of this date.

"Th-they went into a business. What do they sell there?"

"It's a famous general store, although only tourists go there."

"Hmmm." Then Nelia noticed something and narrowed her eyes.

Esther also felt something strange. Hostility. Hatred. The source wasn't clear—but perhaps someone else was following Komari.

"Things are going to get messy." Nelia curled her lips while looking through the binoculars.



Lingzi took me to a souvenir shop brimming with exotic vibes. It was a nice place, full of shiny goods closely lined up together.

"Is there anything you want to buy?"

"No, but browsing is fun... Is that bad?"

"No, not at all! Let's window-shop together!" Lingzi chuckled and began walking through the shop.

There were pretty gem keyholders. Earthenware with flower designs. Dragons carved from wood. Fans of all colors. Playing cards bearing images of Tianzi

from across history. The shelves were full of unique items that you never saw in Mulnite. I liked this shop.

"There's a lot of cool stuff. Any recommendations?"

"Recommendations...?!"

Lingzi started acting weird out of the blue. She fidgeted and looked around, until finally, she set her eyes on the back of the shop. I followed her gaze and found a display that read, Local Specialty: Hermit's Stone.

"What about that? Hermit's stone is a rock they mine in the southern Enchanted Lands. My father tells me it's a popular souvenir because of its pretty color."

"Really? Oh, look. You can get your name engraved on a stone."

"Oh, you're right. Then... Um... Should we get a pair?"

"Huh?"

"You can also get your stone in a custom shape. We could order a unique pair, just for the two of us...," Lingzi said, glowing red.

Right. We're on a date. Wouldn't be weird to do that sort of thing.

"All right! Let's do it! I like stars, so how about a star shape?"

"Okay, then." She called the clerk. "Excuse me."

"The hermit's stone, yes?" a kind-looking old man answered. He was stunned when we told him our names, but he didn't worry about it much and processed our stones with magic.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as I received the stones from the old man.

They glowed softly. Mine was green, and Lingzi's was crimson. They respectively read terakomari gandesblood and Lingzi Allan.

"Hee-hee... We did it," said Lingzi.

"Yeah. I'll treasure it," I said.

"I'll pay for them as thanks for taking your time."

"Huh? No, I'll pay for mine."

"Don't worry. I wanted to try giving a gift... How much is it, mister?"

"Thirty liang for the both of them."

"Please take this," Lingzi said before taking out a gem from her wallet.

It wasn't the Enchanted Lands' currency—it didn't look like currency, period.

"What? No, no, Your Highness... Isn't this the court's Frithia Crystal? The one they use to store the taxes in the treasury?"

"I can't pay with this ...?"

"I wouldn't be able to give you change for it. Please pay with Jingshi money."

Lingzi hurriedly looked inside her wallet, then froze. Her face went crimson to the ears.

"Ha-ha-ha. You're so innocent, Lady Gongzhu."

A puff of smoke practically blew out of Lingzi's head.

"N-no! I just happen to not have any on me! I always carry money to use in normal stores! It's just that I was in a hurry today and forgot to bring some!"

"I do need you to pay, though."

"Nn...!"

"Don't worry, Lingzi. I have money."

I'd exchanged some currency when I came to Jingshi.

"No, no!" Lingzi shook her head and grabbed my sleeve. "I can't make you pay! I'm the one showing you around..."

"It's okay, no big deal. Here, mister."

"Thank you."

Lingzi shivered as she watched me pay.

It really wasn't a big deal...at least for me; it looked like a huge deal to her.

The moment we left the shop, she grabbed my hand.

"Huh?! Lingzi?! What's going on?!"

"N-next time I'll take responsibility! I'll pay you for the hermit's stones later,

too!"

"You really don't need to..."



"It was just coincidence. I just happened to not have money on me now. I'll give them a check next time, don't worry."

"I'm not worried at—wait!"

Lingzi got worked up and pulled me away.



"AAAHHH!! LADY KOMARI!! LADY KOMARI IS HOLDING HANDS WITH SOMEONE OTHER THAN ME?!?!?!"

"Please calm down, Ms. Vill! She's only pulling her around!" said Esther.

"Ah-ha-ha. Things got spicy, huh?" said Sakuna.

"Um... Commander Memoir? Why are you sharpening a knife?"

At a sidewalk café opposite the souvenir shop, a distressed Esther tried to stop her superiors' rampage.

These two loved Commander Komarin to no end. Esther understood the feeling, but theirs was in freakish territory. Perhaps only weirdos could be soldiers.

"Lingzi sure is assertive, huh?" Nelia said while sipping her coffee through a straw. "Look at how the bystanders are staring at them in shock. They don't seem to realize."

"That is our aim here. Rumors of Terakomari and Lingzi going on a date are already making the rounds across Jingshi. People are theorizing that her true love is not the grand chancellor, but Terakomari. We're turning the tables on him good," Meihua replied.

"We do have Six Nations News on our side. I think I'll get them to report on me and Komari later on. Have them say we're actually sisters separated at birth... Deliciously dramatic, don't you think? Besides, we really are, in a way."

Sakuna finished sharpening her knife and rose from her seat in fury, taking aim at Lingzi.

"Think this through!" Esther clung to Sakuna to stop her.

"They're going to a restaurant district. Let's move," said Meihua.

"Lingzi sure is going fast. Was she that embarrassed about the flub at the shop? And why did she take that huge gem to pay in the first place? Is she stupid?" said Nelia.



"I will admit she's not the sharpest tool in the shed. But that's not it." Meihua frowned.

"Her Highness and the Commander are out on a date!" people all around them remarked. More and more rubberneckers were gathering to watch them. Everything was going according to plan.

Then Nelia's brows twitched. Esther noticed a moment later, too.

A few men were following the couple.



"It's already noon. Should we get something to eat?"

Lingzi showed me to none other than the Tianzhu Hall.

The delicious smell of good food seeped through a door adorned with twisting dragons. My tummy started growling.

I felt weird about this, though. It was the same place I went to yesterday with the girls.

"The Tianzhu Hall is a famous restaurant that gets a three-star rating every year in a prestigious guidebook. It offers authentic, traditional Enchanted Lands cuisine. A lot of people travel here just for this restaurant, apparently... A LOT of people," Lingzi recited quickly, as though reading from a cue card.

I couldn't tell her I was just here yesterday. I guess it's fine. The food IS good.

"So, how about we go in?"

"Yeah. Thanks," I said with relief, for some reason.

The moment we entered, everyone turned their eyes to us like, "Commander?!" "Your Highness?!" The price of fame... There was no point in reacting, so we ignored them and walked to our table.

"This restaurant has a staple course meal. I think that would be the best choice for you since it's your first time here. Is that okay?"

"Huh? Yeah..."

"Don't worry, I always come here. I guarantee you it's good."

Lingzi put in the order before I could say anything. That's the same thing I ate yesterday... But I can't go back now. I gotta react like I've never had it before, too. I can't disappoint her. Time for my acting skills to shine!

"...Commander? The Commander is here!"

Then I heard a familiar voice. I screamed internally at the unexpected encounter.

Caostel, Bellius, and Yohann. The guys were eating at the table right next to ours.

"What a coincidence! Didn't expect to see you here!"

"Yeah. What a pleasant coincidence."

"I can't wait for us to take over the Enchanted Lands."

Hey, hey. You can't just say that. Look at Lingzi's face. Lingzi, it's not true. He's cuckoo.

"Komari... Who are these people?"

"Ah-ha-ha. I wonder. I don't know them."

"Ohh, Your Highness, Lingzi Ailan! It is a pleasure to meet you! I am Lieutenant Caostel Conto, leader of the PR Team of the Mulnite Imperial Army's Seventh Unit! The dog here is Bellius Hund Cerbero. The other idiot is Yohann."

"Ah... Yes. Pleased to meet you?"

Lingzi and Caostel shook hands. Watch out, Lingzi. This guy's a criminal. Suspected of little girl abduction. Considering how petite you are, he might try to kidnap you, too. Good thing I'm safe.

"Y-yeah, what a coincidence! So, how have things been going on your end? Everything good?"

I had no idea what they were supposed to be doing in the first place. Gathering intel to expose the grand chancellor with Nelia? I pondered this while drinking my cup of water.

"Definitely!" Yohann answered while munching meat. "Idiot honcho Mellaconcey just planted a bomb in the palace. We're ready to blow it up the

moment you give the green light!"

"Bwugh?!" I spit out the water.

What the heck are you doing, you bunch of terrorists?!

"Guys... What did Vill ask you to do?"

"Hmm? I heard this was a direct order from you, Commander."

"O-of course! Now then, repeat my exact words."

"Yes, m'lady. The Seventh Unit's role in this operation will be intimidation. Set bombs and other traps to gain an advantage over Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo."

"Why would we need to do that?"

"Isn't this wonderful plan your brainchild...?"

"Yes, yes! I'm testing you to see if you really understand it!"

"Excuse me! A-hem. Jingshi is the grand chancellor's home turf. We don't know what sort of traps he might have set for us. Thus, it would be in our benefit to have as many cards in hand to use against him. In essence, we are the ultimate weapon in the Matrimonial War."

"Let's cut the boring shit and blow the place up already, Terakomari," Yohann said.

"We cannot just go around flaunting violence! Have you forgotten how our Komari Unit has won every battle up to now? With brains! Strategy! Are you too stupid to understand?"

"What'd you just say to me?! I'mma burn you well-done like this steak!"

"Whatever. So, Commander, was my answer the correct one?"

"Yes! Ten out of ten!"

"You flatter me!" Caostel saluted.

There were way too many holes in his response to point out, but I figured I better let Vill take care of all the mess.

Then my eyes met Bellius's. He'd kept quiet the whole time, wearing a tired

look on his face.

No wonder the dog man got along with Esther. He was relatively decent among the sicko unit. Although he, too, was a murderer.

"Komari, the food is here."

"Ohh...!"

I wasted my time listening to them until the staff came back.

It was the same meat buns and dumplings I'd eaten yesterday.

"This is really good. I'm getting hungry just looking at them," I said.

"Huh? Komari..."

"No, wait! I meant it *looks* really good! I'm glad I came to the Enchanted Lands!"

"Yes. We use spices that are rare in other countries. I hope you enjoy it..."

It did not feel good lying, but she looked so happy that I couldn't tell her the truth.

Besides, the food really was good. Genuinely. Everything was fine.

"Commander! We'll be returning to work now."

The Seventh Unit guys stood up. They'd finished eating by the time we arrived.

"Okay. I expect great things from you, soldiers."

"We will do our best to meet your expectations. By the way..." Caostel's face twisted like a criminal's who was sure he'd pulled off the perfect crime. "I heard you came to this restaurant yesterday."

"Wha-?"

"I also heard you ordered this same course meal. Yet you're reacting as though it is your first time."

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on, man.

"Lieutenant Villhaze told me you loved the dumplings... Oh well, I suppose there are special circumstances behind all this. Now then, if you'll excuse us." *"……"*

Y-you piece of...! Special circumstances?! If you were aware of that, then show a bit more tact! Why did you spill the beans, you bastard?!

"Enjoy your meal, Commander," said Bellius.

"Call us once you feel like blowing up the palace! I wanna ignite the thing!" said Yohann.

"Wait, you...!"

My men ignored their boss's pain and left.

Only silence remained. I couldn't bear to look Lingzi in the face.

"Komari...," she whispered. "I forced you to put on an act..."

"You're not forcing anything! Really!"

Lingzi looked like she was about to cry. I was about to die from guilt.

"I do love this place! The food is really good!"

"I'm sorry. We should go somewhere else..."

"Don't worry! It's my fault for lying! Sorry! I want to eat here! Please, sit dow —Ah."

I grabbed her arm as she was standing up, and then something fell from out of her clothes.

I looked down on reflex and saw a yellow book.

Hmm...? I think I've seen that before.

Wait, that's the Jingshi guidebook Esther brought. Why does Lingzi have it? Did she borrow it? No, this one doesn't have any sticky notes, so it's a different copy...

As my mind churned with questions, I noticed a look of despair on Lingzi's face.

"I'm sorry... The truth is...I don't know anything about Jingshi..."

"Huh...?"

"I rarely go outside the palace. I have no right to show you around. I'm sorry..."

So she's basically a newcomer here, just like me? And she was showing me around with this guidebook so I wouldn't notice?

As I tried to catch up with the facts, every window in the restaurant shattered.

Men I'd never seen before yelled as they charged at us.



"Lingzi really doesn't know much about our country," Meihua said with a sigh.

They were at the plaza opposite the Tianzhu Hall. Esther pushed back Sakuna and Villhaze with all her might as she listened to Meihua.

"She was brought up entirely within the palace. Her father, the Tianzi, insisted that a Gongzhu wasn't to go out to Jingshi without a proper reason."

Oh, Esther thought. So Lingzi Ailan is a sheltered girl.

"She didn't want Komari to know that. I guess she's more concerned about her image than one would expect," Nelia said.

"Lingzi's more fragile than you'd think. You can tell once you get close to her."

"You sure don't mince your words for a retainer, huh."

"We've just known each other forever... Still, it's true that she's worried about the Enchanted Lands. She really wants to stop Shikai Gudo, no matter what."

"Hmmm. That feels a bit odd..."

"I want to have lunch with Lady Komari! I want to go on a date with her! It should've been me, not her! It's not fair!" moaned Vill.

"Ms. Komari might really end up marrying Ms. Lingzi if she wins the Matrimonial War... Oh, I know. I just have to supplant Ms. Lingzi," said Sakuna.

"Calm down, you two! This is just part of the pla—" Just then, Esther realized that the men who'd been tailing Komari and Lingzi had sprung into action.

Nelia and Meihua also noticed. They glanced at the Tianzhu Hall with stern looks on their faces. The men were outside the restaurant. They raised their

hands, channeling mana.

"President Cunningham."

"They're Warblades. I don't recognize them, but I imagine they have some connection to me."

The next moment, the windows of the Tianzhu Hall shattered loudly into pieces.

The men raised war cries as they charged into the restaurant.

Esther could only watch with her jaw open. Who would launch an attack out of the blue in the middle of the city? *Right. This isn't sports-war.*

"Everyone! We must help the Comman..."

By the time Esther came to her senses, there wasn't anyone around.

Nelia, Meihua, Sakuna, and Villhaze were already dashing toward the restaurant.



"DIE, TERAKOMARI GANDESBLOOD!!"

The mysterious men poured into the restaurant, throwing the staff and clients into a fleeing frenzy.

Meanwhile, I was paralyzed.

The man at the front raised his longsword. His target was clearly me.

Wha? I'm just gonna die now? There's no Dark Core here. The second after my mind was plunged into despair...

"Komari!"

...Lingzi blocked the man's sword. She was equipped with a fan. Her peacock feather fan stopped the blade with ease. The assailant clicked his tongue and tried to jump back, but before he could, Lingzi shot a mana bullet at him that pierced his midsection.

"Gwagh?!"

His large frame was hurled backward.

However, there were at least three more men to deal with. They attacked from every direction with loud war cries. I did away with any shame and curled myself up like a turtle.

"Die already!! Ogweh!"

A gust of green mana blew one man away.

Then another slipped through Lingzi's defenses and ran toward me.

"This is for the president!"

"Komari, run!" Lingzi shouted.

The remaining assailant immediately stalled her.

I was paralyzed as the assassin rushed to me. His eyes, tainted with hatred, had frozen me in place. Then, just as his long sword was about to reach my throat...

I tripped.

I slipped like I had stepped on a banana peel. I glanced down and saw that there was indeed a banana peel at my feet. Talk about good luck. The man yelled in surprise before he, too, tripped, hitting the back of his head during the fall to top it all off.

He went still. The blow seemed to have been critical.

My luck ran out there, though. Men in similar outfits rushed into the restaurant in droves. I noticed that they were fighting Nelia and Vill outside, too.

"Let's withdraw!"

"Huh? Wh-whoa!"

Lingzi grabbed my arm, then used some of her power, lifting me into the air.

"Wait! Where are we going?!"

"Somewhere safe! We can't stay here."

"But we haven't paid! Are we dining and dashing?!"

Lingzi ignored my fear of the law and floated farther up, pulling me higher and

higher with her. I clung tightly to her out of fear.

"Eep!" she shrieked.

"Wait! Wait, please! I can't handle heights! I've got trauma from the time I tried grabbing a ball from the rooftop and my sister rocked the stairs to make me fall!"

"Okay. Let's just go to that bridge."

"Fine—Uhh?"

My hands filled with a strange sensation. I was grabbing Lingzi's chest. I was a sex offender now. But rather than feeling shame or guilt, I found it...strange.

"Lingzi...isn't your chest too hard?"

"?!?!?!?!?!"

Lingzi's face turned redder and redder right up next to mine. It was then that I realized the absolute depths of my sexual harassment. I was worse than the sicko maid now.

"Sorry! I didn't mean it! I just—sorry! It's very soft, actually! Nice breasts! Uhh, no wait, what am I saying, stupid?! I'm sorry, really!"

"I-it's fine! Don't worry."

Lingzi ascended fast enough to cool her blushing.

I tried not to pee myself while regretting my words and deeds.



"They're from Gerra-Aruka. I didn't expect them to escape all the way to the Enchanted Lands."

The Warblades were out on the main street, unconscious. They weren't dead; they'd just been tied up together. There were nine of them in total. They had been trailing Komari, looking for the perfect time to strike.

"Could they have done this on Madhart's orders?" Villhaze asked while putting her poison away.

Sakuna had recovered her cool, too. She looked around in alert, staff in hand.

"That can't be. Madhart's gone. Even if that was the case, he wouldn't do something this reckless. I imagine the remnants of his regime just acted on their own," Nelia responded.

One of the man's hands caught her eye. He had a star-shaped scar on his palm.

After the Crimson Snow Hut ordeal, Komari had told her that a monster called Yusei was ravaging the Netherworld. Apparently, Yusei was slowly working their way into this world, and anyone under their influence bore a stigmata like the one that had been on Monique Claire.

The stigmata decreased one's "willpower." In short, it caused mental illness.

"These guys are like dolls. They don't react no matter how much I poke them," said Villhaze, poking at the Warblades' cheeks with a stick.

The men only muttered "Ahh" or "Uhh" in response, despite having been so energetic a moment ago. Weren't these the same symptoms as Monique Claire's etiolation?

"Anyways, my subordinates will look into the details. Let's just report the assailants to the Enchanted Lands authorities," Nelia said.

"Yes. There is something else that needs our attention." Villhaze looked in the direction Komari flew off before turning to Meihua and continuing, "It appears I've been of unsound mind up to now, but I've come back to my senses after seeing this occur. It is impossible to keep duping a born Komari sommelier, Lady Meihua. Are you not hiding something?"

Everyone looked at Meihua, and she flinched.

"Hiding...what?"

"Lady Komari clearly holds special feelings for Lady Lingzi, but that is impossible. It is unnatural. It should be obvious to anyone that I'm her number one."

"You sure you're not of unsound mind?" Nelia said.

"Yes, Ms. Villhaze. Ms. Komari belongs to all of us," Sakuna added.

"Anyhow, what I mean is that too many things don't make sense. Now that I

think about it, everything began when you visited Mulnite in February. You... used Core Implosion, didn't you?"

Meihua shivered. That was admission enough.

"I knew it." Villhaze sighed. "What did you do to Lady Komari?"

A short silence.

"...I'm sorry," she muttered with an apologetic expression. "I had to do it to save Lingzi. We needed Terakomari's power, but there's no one in this entire world odd enough to help a stranger without compensation."

"Explain what exactly you did. I won't get mad."

"The truth is...I put a curse on her that made her fall in love with Lingzi."

"All right, I'm taking out the poison."

"Didn't you say you wouldn't get mad?!" Esther put Vill in a nelson hold.



Lingzi and I stopped on a bridge connecting high-rise buildings.

It was like ten giraffes tall. The oriental landscape spread everywhere I could see beneath me, while another mazelike land extended in front of me.

"Who were those people? It looked like they were going after you...," Lingzi said while sitting down on the bridge's handrail.

How can you sit there? You'll fall headfirst the moment you lose your balance. Aren't you afraid? Wait, I guess you aren't. You can fly.

"It could be...that the grand chancellor or the Minister of Military Secrets is behind this. They must be planning on getting rid of you before the Matrimonial War. They're not above playing dirty..."

That was beyond just cheating, if what Lingzi said was true.

I looked down over the bridge and saw that Nelia and the girls had subdued the attackers.

"Do you...hate me now?"

"Hate you? Why?"

"Because I don't know the first thing about Jingshi. Not even that there were people like them..."

Apparently, Lingzi barely left the palace. With her sheltered upbringing, there was no way she could have been knowledgeable about the outside world...yet she continued blaming herself.

"I'm not worthy of being Gongzhu. I've criticized my father's indifference time and time again...but I'm no different from him. Maybe I'm even worse than him. How can I say I want to change the Enchanted Lands when I don't know the first thing about it?"

"Why do you want to change the Enchanted Lands?"

"Because I'm the Gongzhu. It's my duty."

That felt constricting. It didn't sound like it was what she wanted.

"But that's not all," she added. "The grand chancellor is doing bad things. He's hurting so many people. Even those who were kind enough to help me...even Meihua..."

"...I see. We gotta win this Matrimonial War, then."

"Yes..."

Suddenly, Lingzi's pocket began glowing. She was getting a call on her Correspondence Crystal.

"Yes, Meihua?"

The exchange only lasted a couple words. Lingzi's expression darkened, as though tormented by guilt.

"...Komari, I've been hiding something from you."

"You have?"

"Yes. You see...I..."

Before she could say anything else, she was seized by a coughing fit. I didn't think anything of it at first, but soon she fell from the handrails and got on all fours on the bridge, covering her mouth in pain.

"Lingzi?! Are you okay?!"

I stroked her back in a panic. She wheezed, her face growing whiter and whiter. Is she sick? But we're within range of the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core, aren't we? So why?

Lingzi looked up at me and said, "I'm okay...I just forgot to take my medication."

She took a pill out from her pocket and gulped it down. After a few moments, the color returned to her cheeks.

"See? I'm fine." Lingzi smiled like a kid who'd just showed a magic trick. "I've been unwell lately, but I'm fine when I take my pills."

"Are you really okay? Should I call Meihua?"

"She's coming already. Don't tell her I forgot to take my medication, okay? She'll get mad at me."

Lingzi stood up like nothing had happened.

Then Vill landed on the bridge, Meihua clinging to her. She sighed in relief the moment she saw us.

"Lingzi, are you unharmed?"

"Yes... Thank you for your concern."

"Ahh, Lady Komari! Lady Komari, Lady Komari, it's so good to see you well! You might have internal injuries, so please allow me to fondle your entire body to make sure nothing's wrong."

"Whoaaa?! That's too much worry, woman!"

"Not enough, I would say. How could I not be, after these pesky Immortals put a curse on you?"

"What're you talking about?"

I dodged Vill's lecherous hands and looked at Lingzi and Meihua.

They both looked awkward, but Lingzi took a step forward with determination.

Her expression quiet as though she was about to confess her love to me, she asked: "Komari...do you love me?"

My brain short-circuited.

It was no confession. The question could even be taken as presumptuous. Either way, it shattered the ounce of calm I had left in me.

"W-well, if you ask me whether I love or hate you, I'd say yes, I love you, if those are the only two options!"

"I know. I knew that you loved me. You think about Lingzi Ailan at every turn. And the mere thought makes you feel like your heart is about to explode..."

I felt like an egg in a boiling pot. My body temperature rose to levels that disrupted logical thought.

Behind me, Vill was emanating a pitch-black, murderous aura. Now *this* was a slaughter champion.

Lingzi stared at me. I couldn't squirm my way out of a response.

"...Maybe. I don't know why...but my chest hurts when I think of you. I mean, I get an idea, considering I am an intellectual scholar with multiple romance novels under her belt. I think...I...I think I might be in love with you..."

"BLWEEEEERGGGHHH!!"

I heard a freakish noise behind me.

The sicko maid was screaming and puking.

"What happened, Vill?! Did the enemy snipe you?!"

"I-I'm fine, Lady Komari... It's just a little spasm... Please, don't mind me and continue..."

She clearly was not fine. But come to think of it, she never was. I decided to ignore her fit for now and turned to Lingzi once again.

"I don't know what to do. It's the first time I've felt like this..."

"Your feelings are fake. You do not love me."

I was shocked by Lingzi's cold response. She furrowed her brow as though holding in pain.

"You are under the effects of Lovebird Infection, Meihua's Core Implosion.

She has the power to implant people with feelings of affection for me."

"Hm? Hmm?? I don't get it."

"Look at the crow mark on the back of your hand. It's proof that you are under the effect of my spell."

Indeed, there was a scar-like thing on my hand.

So...I was just being manipulated?

"Wait, what?! But I really feel my heart race when I look at her!"

"Usually, it only provokes sympathy. You're probably too sensitive. I was not expecting you to fall so explicitly in love."

"But I do love Lingzi!"

"BLWEEEERGGGHHH!!"

"Waaah?! Calm down, Vill!"

"I'm sorry, really. I didn't want to push your feelings aside like this."

I didn't understand. I tended to Vill, who had collapsed like a corpse, and asked: "Even if my feelings are artificial... Why would you do that?"

"Because I thought you wouldn't help me unless you liked me..."

"Huh?"

What's she mean by that? I seriously can't wrap my head around this.

"These two were using you, Lady Komari. If I hadn't questioned them, they would have kept quiet about this until the end of the Matrimonial War. They plotted to make it a done deal so you would marry her. In other words, I saved you. Please praise me."

Vill presented the top of her head to me, lining up for a pat. I ignored her.

"No use hiding it anymore." Meihua sighed. "There's only going to be conflict if we keep up this charade. Commander, stay still, I'll undo the spell."

"You will? I don't really get it... But is that okay?"

"You'll hold a grudge if I don't. Although I guess you already do."

Meihua looked me straight in the eye. Her lips parted—*Core Implosion:* Lovebird Infection.

The next moment, I felt my heart grow more and more serene. Not as in it was going to stop beating. Just that my previously elevated heartbeat slowed down to normal levels.

I stared at Lingzi. She looked like an ordinary girl to me.

She was pretty, sure. A once-in-a-lifetime knockout beauty (like me), perhaps.

But I felt no particular exaltation. My heart wasn't about to explode.

Which meant...I really had been following a feeling artificially implanted in me.

"I'm sorry...I'm just a manipulative weakling. I had no other choice. Now you have no reason to help me. You can withdraw from the Matrimonial War and go back to your life."

"What are you talking about?"

I took a step toward her.

This was it. This was what didn't make sense to me.

"You asked me for help. That's why I came to the Enchanted Lands. I can't just go back now, even if you grant me permission to leave. Though it might be another story if I'm simply of no help at all..."

"But...you don't like me, do you?"

"I do like you."

I covered Vill's mouth before she could scream and puke again.

Lingzi's eyes grew wide. I grabbed her hand and said:

"You're acting out of concern for the Enchanted Lands. You're trying to stop Shikai from doing bad things. You do what you do for other people, not for yourself... You have a beautiful heart. And I like that."

"Why? Why are you saying that?"

"Because I want to help you!"

Lingzi blinked in shock.

Her cheeks turned pink. Her eyes darted around before she hung her head.

"But, but I..."

"You didn't need to make me fall in love with you. I'm repeating myself, but... you came to me for help. That's enough to convince me to give you my support."

"...?!"

Red in the face, Lingzi froze and went silent.

Meihua was baffled and equally paralyzed.

"There you have it," Vill concluded, a brazen look on her face. "Sincerity is more effective with Lady Komari than any trick. She is the kind of vampire who can't say no to someone asking for help."

"That's not true. I'm a strong-willed, unyielding vampire."

"In any case, we will keep on giving you two our aid. But do not think about doing anything improper again. As punishment, use Lovebird Infection on Komari again, but make her fall in love with me this time."

"You're the improper one!! Gosh."

I brushed aside Vill's nonsense and looked at Lingzi.

"Awawa!" she exclaimed before looking away.

I walked around and stared at her again. She shrieked and stepped backward. I thought she hated me now, but there was something off about her reaction. It was like she was too embarrassed to say anything.

"Lingzi, no," Meihua muttered with a shiver. "Don't tell me the arrow was pointing in the other direction... You've been acting strange since that proposal..."

"No! It's really not! I... Komari!"

Her green hair floated in the air as she turned around.

I got a whiff of apricot. Lingzi stared straight at me with innocent eyes.

"I'm sorry for using you. I know I don't have the right to ask this...but I would still like you to help me."

"I'll do anything I can!"

"Thank you... I want you to win the Matrimonial War. To defeat the grand chancellor. To marry me... Ah! I didn't really mean that... I know you already have a lot of girlfriends."

"No, I don't have a single one." I chuckled and put out my hand. "But I gotcha. Let's do this."

"Yes. Thank you." She grabbed my hand.

Lingzi's way of doing this had been strange, perhaps, but she'd only done so out of concern for the Enchanted Lands. There was no harm anyways, so I had no intention of blaming her for anything.

Now we just had to fight and expose the grand chancellor's misdeeds.

The flames of battle began burning within me.

"Your Highness, it is time."

A group of Immortals appeared in Lingzi's shadow. They were wearing frilly clothes.

"Ailan retainers," Vill whispered into my ear.

"Who are you?! Are you here to take Lingzi?!"

I stepped in front of Lingzi to guard her.

She grabbed the hem of my coat. I could feel her trembling.

Weird. She should be much stronger than me in battle.

"Oh," Meihua said, realizing something. "No... Wait. These aren't the grand chancellor's lackeys."

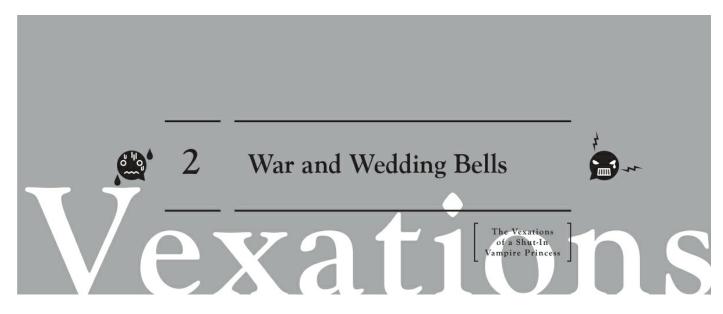
"We are the Tianzi's personal guard." The man in the middle stepped forward. "He ordered us to fetch Her Highness in preparation for the Matrimonial War. His request has nothing to do with the grand chancellor's will. This imperial notice should be proof."

```
"This really is the Tianzi's handwriting. And his mana."
  "Yes. He wishes to speak with Her Highness."
  "I understand."
  Lingzi walked up to Komari and the others.
 She turned around and bowed. Once again, I caught a whiff of apricot on the
wind.
  "Well then, Komari. See you tomorrow."
  "Sure."
  "Let's go, Your Highness."
 They used teleportation magic, enveloping the area with dazzling light. By the
time I could see again, Lingzi and Meihua were gone.
 I stood frozen on the bridge and clenched my fist.
 I understood Lingzi's feelings. I had to do my best to meet her expectations.
First, we had to draw up a plan for tomorrow. I turned to Vill.
  "Lady Komari, we're in a pinch."
 The sicko maid grabbed the handrail and looked at the cityscape below.
 Then she said something that shook me to my core:
  "How are we supposed to get off this bridge?"
 There was no entrance to the buildings it was connected to.
 It was only a decorative bridge for sightseeing.
  "You can't fly, Vill?"
  "Normal people don't fly."
  "...Can't you call someone?"
  "I dropped all my Correspondence Crystals when Lady Meihua was clinging to
me."
```

""

Vill and I spent the time playing word games.

By the time the sun was setting, an Immortal patrolling Jingshi finally passed us. We yelled for help, and our feet were back on the ground at last.



Six Nations News was operating as usual.

A silly article titled "Special Feature on Her Highness & the Commander" was set to be published in the next morning's issue.

The report claimed that Lingzi and I were lovers brought together by destiny who had pinky-promised to get married when we were little. It also said that our relationship restarted when we met again at the party before the Heavenly Ball, and that we'd actually been going on dates once a week in secret until now.

Moreover, the paper criticized her relationship with Shikai through haphazard arguments.

It said that Lingzi actually hated Shikai, but she had to marry him to fulfill her duties as Gongzhu. That Shikai, despite being a capable chancellor, was a terrible partner. That he did not respect Lingzi's feelings. That he'd sent assassins to tear me apart from Lingzi (a dramatization of the events at the Tianzhu Hall).

Shikai Gudo was popular, yes, but as the paper made its rounds, people began to go, "Hey, maybe we can ship Lingzi with Komari?" I had no idea how in the world this sham article convinced them of that, but in any case, the polls ran by Melka and Thio revealed that "about 30 percent of Jingshi's citizens are Lingzi x Komari shippers." Nelia's opinion on the matter was simply that we were getting close to victory.

And so the Immortals were divided into two camps.

The person who would wed the Gongzhu would be decided by today's Matrimonial War.



The Matrimonial War was to take place in the plaza inside the Zijingong, the Enchanted Lands palace.

I entered the venue alongside Vill and Sakuna. That instant, everyone trained their sights on me.

Aww, I'm getting nervous. I wanna go to the bathroom... I shouldn't have drunk that much water.

"Hey, Vill, we're not gonna kill each other, right?"

"Please look at the people in the audience. All big fish. It would be chaos if a battle to the death were to take place here."

"Don't worry, Ms. Komari. I'll protect you."

Sakuna rubbed my back.

What a good girl. I had vague memories of her going berserk yesterday, but surely I must have imagined it. Sakuna was a pure, pretty girl.

"Where's Nelia?"

"Lady Cunningham and the Seventh Unit are elsewhere. Your only role here is to leave the grand chancellor in the dust, so don't worry about anything else."

"Hey, if it isn't Terakomari! Can't wait for the Matrimonial War!"

I turned around at the sound of that voice. There, I found a girl with silver hair — Prohellya Butchersky. Beside her was Leona Flatt, from the Lapelico Kingdom. The latter swayed her tail with eyes wide open.

"Terakomari! What a fabulous outfit! You've got this, girl!"

"Outfit? Ah..."

For whatever reason, I was wearing a tuxedo. Meihua had insisted I wear it to complement Lingzi being the bride. These clothes were easier to move around in than a dress, though, so no big deal.

"Marriage at sixteen, eh? I don't even have anyone to consider...," Prohellya

said.

"Yeah, I can't see you getting married!" Leona retorted.

"Shut up. I have more important things to do than tie the knot. And what about you, huh? Do you really have any right to mock me like that?"

"Fweh...? I—I have a boyfriend! Maybe two!"

"Your kitty kingdom is beyond amoral, I see. Couldn't put some more effort into lying?"

These two got along surprisingly well. I almost felt jealous.

"By the way, Terakomari." Prohellya turned to me. "Watch out for what the grand chancellor's crew might do. I imagine you're already being careful, but still."

"I know. I'm doing what I can to stop him from harming Lingzi."

"The grand chancellor is one thing, but my gut tells me there's someone even more dangerous in the shadows."

"A bigger sicko than Shikai? Maybe, yeah."

"I just came to the Enchanted Lands, so I'm not well-versed in the situation. I have no idea why you're running to marry Lingzi Ailan, either. I'll observe from afar for the time being."

Prohellya walked away commandingly.

"I'm not lying! I mean it!" Leona argued while following behind her.

Prohellya was smart enough to rival my scholarly intellect. Perhaps she could see something the others didn't...

"Ahh! Commander Terakomari Gandesblood! Good to have you here!"

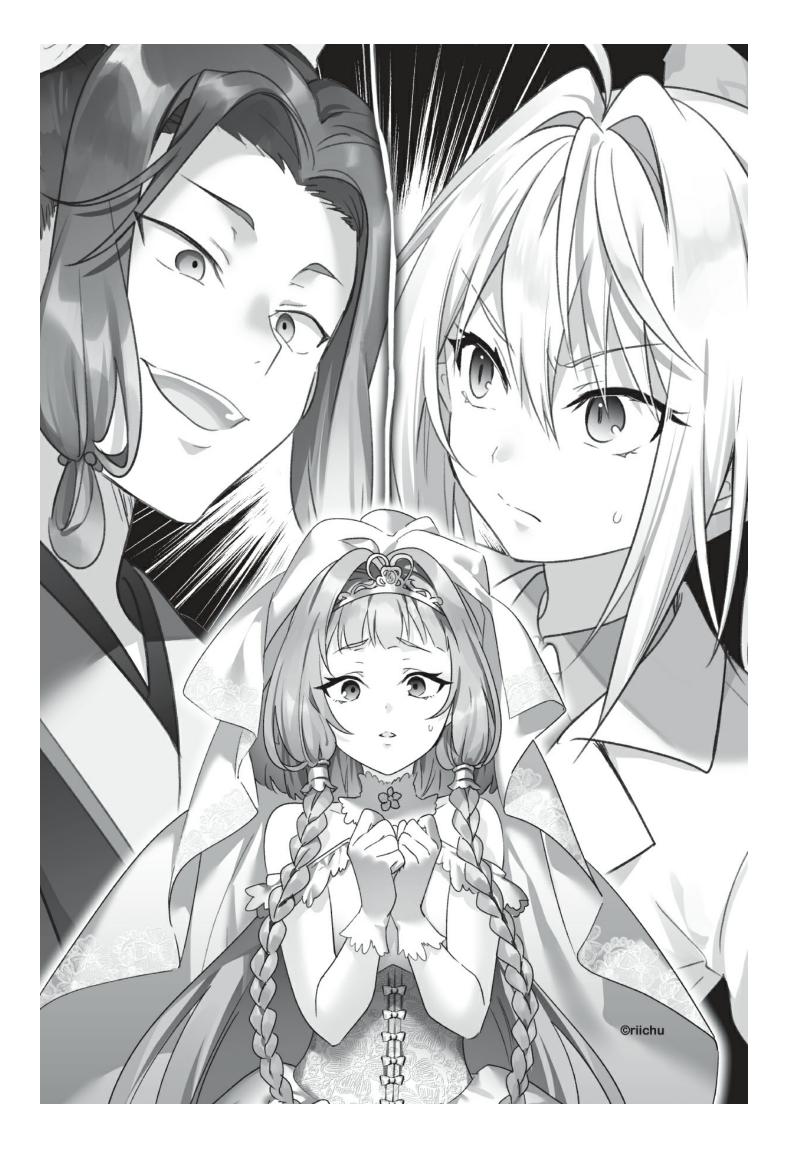
"Shikai...!"

A man extended his arms dramatically as he walked up to me.

Cheers followed. "Chancellor! Chancellor! Chancellor!" the Immortals yelled in unison, like how people would chant "Komarin" for me. I guess celebrities have it the same no matter where you are.

"I imagined you'd run away in fear! But I should've known better from the Omelet Queen of Darkness! Do you really want Lingzi that bad?" he asked me.

"O-of course! Even if the heavens above approved your marriage, I would never sanction it!"



"Why? I love her so very much."

"You lie! And she doesn't like you, for starters! Aren't her feelings most important?!"

"Then who does she love?"

I shut my mouth. Everyone stared at me.

The grand chancellor sneered, lording my hesitation over me. *Oh, whatever!* The plan's already set!

I pointed my finger at him and declared:

"Lingzi loves me! Terakomari Gandesblood! I'm gonna make her mine! I won't let you have her!"

A moment of silence. Then, furor.

"UOOOOOOH!! KOMARIN!! KOMARIN!! KOMARIN!!"

Cheering and hollering. Leona's capybaras ran all around the venue. Vill and Sakuna stared at me like vengeful spirits from a paranormal photo.

"Na-ha-ha! I see, I see! You are a very passionate girl! But I wonder what the woman in question will have to say about it. Lingzi?"

The grand chancellor looked at the entrance to the venue, and I followed his gaze.

There was the bride. The jade girl wore a pure-white wedding dress, a departure from what you'd normally expect for the Enchanted Lands. Lingzi Ailan's cheeks turned red. She kept silent, her bashfulness only boosting her sweetness. I would have died then and there had Meihua not undone her Core Implosion. Even now, it felt like my heart was about a second away from exploding.

"...Huh? Why's she dressed like that?"

"That's a weird thing to say. Isn't it obvious the wedding will take place once the war ends?"

Ohh. That explains it, sure.

Anyhow, she really was super cute. I couldn't take my eyes off her...and then they met hers. She gazed arrestingly at me with crimson eyes, and in the smallest of voices, she said, "Good luck." Perhaps she'd been too embarrassed to raise her voice, but even so, I'd heard it.

"Shikai! Lingzi is mine!"

The grand chancellor put on the smile of a villain.

"Let us begin the fight, then."

₩

"Advanced barrier spell: Clear Wall."

One of the Tianzi's personal guards used magic to lock the grand chancellor and me inside an invisible force field. I tried touching it. I could still hear the noise outside, but it didn't look like I would be able to leave freely.

"It's just to prevent cheating. Don't think badly of it," Shikai said as he gallantly sipped black tea.

He and I were the only people in this isolated space. Vill, Sakuna, and the other spectators could merely watch from outside.

I was on the south side of the venue, and he was on the north. To the east, outside the barrier, stood Lingzi in her wedding dress. To the west stood Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha, also outside the barrier. Further out was the audience.

"Now then, let's explain the rules! If you please, Lady Nerzanpi."

"Yeah."

Apparently, she was the umpire. Vill raised an objection from behind her:

"Hold on. She's on the grand chancellor's side. This isn't fair."

"My, my. You're being paranoid, Villhaze. The umpire will not be deciding the results of the Matrimonial War. Lingzi Ailan herself will."

"But..."

"Besides, it wasn't us, but His Majesty the Tianzi and his guard who chose the rules of the duel in the first place. The grand chancellor's faction cannot

interfere, so set your worries aside." Nerzanpi dealt with Vill's objection. "Okay. The rules are simple: The first person whose LP falls to zero will lose."

"LP? What's that?"

"It's short for Lingzi Points."

What the...?

"The Matrimonial War will consist of three rounds, all of which are themed around Lingzi Ailan. First, a duel to see who understands her better. Second, a duel about her feelings. Third, a popular vote. You will lose LP depending on the results of each phase. Points can only be lost, not gained. You could also say they are Life Points."

Yeah. I don't get it.

"Whoever retains the most LP by the end of the three rounds gets the right to marry Her Highness. Whoever gets to zero LP loses then and there."

So it'd be possible to just skip the second/third round?

"...It's not a physical battle, is it?"

"Funny you ask, Commander Gandesblood. You'd have too much of an advantage in that sort of competition. The grand chancellor has no way to stop your Blood Curse."

"Wa-ha-ha! Of course! I could turn Shikai into ketchup if I really wanted to!"

Nerzanpi smiled like a ghost. Merely looking at her face seemed to chip away at my soul. This woman was just...like, the polar opposite of people like Nelia, Karla, and Prohellya. Even so, she didn't feel evil, exactly, like Spica.

"Thank goodness! I would have a hard time sleeping if I ended up killing him in the blink of an eye!"

"Still, we would be lacking stakes if the possibility of dying was completely out of the picture. So, I made some adjustments." Nerzanpi's dead eyes pierced mine. "The moment either party's LP reaches zero, the bomb set above your head will explode."

"Wha—?" I looked up on reflex. A black sphere was floating above my head. "...Huh? What'd you just say? A bomb?"

"Yes. A mana bomb that has the power to raze everything within a half-mile radius. But don't worry. It cannot break this barrier, so aside from your body being blown to pieces, there will be no harm done."

"WHAAAAAAT?!"

What...what the hell are they thinking?! You can't kill me outside the Dark Core's AoE! I'm gonna die! Not that I'd be fine blowing up even within the Dark Core's AoE!

"Nerzanpi! Take that thing away right now!"

"My, Commander, are you afraid? To think the slaughter champion was capable of feeling fear..."

"I-I'm not! I'd just feel bad if Shikai exploded after I win!"

"I don't mind! A battle to the death is sweeter, more beautiful! Let's begin, Commander Gandesblood! May the more gallant fighter win Lingzi's love!"

"You little... You have the Dark Core on your side!"

"Be humble even in wealth. I understand, but there is no need for modesty. You have great power. Surely you can stop the bomb with your Core Implosion? We don't want to kill you, either. It's just that it would be more interesting if things went out with a bang—or a boom, rather."

Ha-ha, so funny. Bastard. Meanwhile, I'm almost peeing myself just standing here.

I couldn't let myself lose before this thing even started, though. Besides, surely Vill would save me if anything happened. I looked at the maid, and she gave me an expressionless thumbs-up. I'll trust you. It's gonna be your fault if I die!

"Alright, Nerzanpi. I'm good at battles of wits, too. I won't be blowing up today."

"Oh, it seems there's a little misunderstanding here. This is not a battle of wits, but of passion. You'll understand as soon as we begin. A picture is worth a

thousand words, as they say," Nerzanpi replied while lighting a cigarette. "Each party will receive two thousand LP to begin. First round: Lingzi's personal information."

Things got weird from the get-go.

The guards set a long table before Lingzi and placed six cards on it. They read as follows:

- 1: What she does in her free time 200
- 2: The name of the cat she had as a kid 200
- 3: Her favorite food 400
- 4: The gift her father gave her for her fifth birthday 400
- 5: The person she loves 600
- 6: Her height and weight 600

"We had Her Highness answer the questions in advance. You will take turns guessing the right answer. The questions are on the front of the card, and the answers are on the back. We will check if the answer you give matches the one on the card. Each of you have three opportunities to answer. If you are correct, the question you responded to will be discarded. If you answer incorrectly, we move on. You can keep on answering so long as you have enough tries."

"What do the numbers mean?"

"They represent the amount of LP you'll take from your opponent if you answer correctly. You will not be gaining the points, though. And Her Highness cannot speak. No giving hints."

"Huh?! Uh... Mmm!" Someone gagged Lingzi in her seat.

You scoundrels! I was hoping to get her to tell me the answers!

"Hey, Vill! What now?! I don't know anything about her!"

"Wasn't that the point of your date yesterday?"

"I mean, yeah, but! How am I supposed to know the answer to such specific questions?!"

"Geez. I would be able to answer those questions within a second were they about you. Forget about weight, I have your bust-waist-hip measurements memorized."

Who cares! Before I could say that out loud, Nerzanpi pulled out a coin and flipped it. It spun in the air, drawing a curve until it fell on the floor.

The side facing up had "Gu" written on it.

"Gu. That means Gudo begins. Your turn, Grand Chancellor."

"Na-ha-ha-l' I'll show you how it's done, elegantly!"

The duel began before I could even wrap my head around it.

The grand chancellor looked at the table and hummed pensively with his fingers on his chin.

Wait... Isn't this rigged against me? Shikai's known Lingzi for way longer. And I don't know the first thing about her...

"Lady Komari, is there any question you can answer?"

"Not one... Well, maybe one..."

"You need to avoid the six hundred LP damage. You only have two thousand; that much would be lethal."

Surely I don't need to worry about that. The "person she loves" question is clearly a trap the grand chancellor wouldn't take, and there's no way he knows her height and weight. He'd be a certified perv if he did.

"All right! I'll go for number six: her height and weight! She's 146 centimeters tall and 40.7 kilograms!"

"You sick perv!"

"You got it right, to the decimal. Correct, Grand Chancellor."

"Certified sicko!!"

The audience went wild. I guess they were all sickos, too.

Lingzi was petrified and beet-red. I glared daggers at Shikai.

"Y-you inconsiderate prick! How can you expose her personal info like that?!"

"Na-ha-ha! Because she's mine! Does an owner not have the right to publicize the data of his possessions?"

"Fuck off! The world's as terrible as it is because of freaks like you!"

"Easy, Commander Gandesblood. Also, you just lost six hundred LP."

"Wha-?!"

Suddenly, a giant screen went up inside the venue.

SHIKAI: 2000 TERAKOMARI: 1400

It's over... But the moment I clutched my head in despair, I felt something move above me. It was the bomb, descending according to the LP I'd lost. Like death approaching from the heavens. I wanted to run away with my tail between my legs.

"What now, Vill?! I'm gonna actually die for real if that thing explodes!"

"I have a teleportation Magic Stone."

"Nice! Hurl it over!"

"I can't. Barrier and all."

"ААААААААННННН!!"

I'd forgotten this maid was a master of giving me false hope. Darn her!

"It's your turn, Commander Gandesblood."

"Ugh..."

I turned to look at the remaining five cards as Nerzanpi urged.

I had no idea what most of the answers could be. What was her hobby? You can't judge a book by its cover, so who knows. I mean, Vill's hobby was beetle breeding, as baffling as it sounded.

There was only one option I could rely on.

"Number five: the person she loves."

"Oh! Cutting right to the chase! I cannot wait to see what Lingzi wrote down! Hopefully it's my name!"

"There's no way it is! The answer is..."

I glanced at Lingzi. She was redder than an apple.

I know. I know how you feel, girl. If I were in your place, I'd be dead right from peeling off all my own skin. It's admirable you can take so much still.

But you want to win, don't you? You want to marry me, right?

Then the answer is obvious. I clenched my fist and yelled:

"The answer is me! Lingzi loves Terakomari Gandesblood!"

"Wrong. The answer is Mom."

"..."

Huh? Mom? You mean her mother?

Ohh. I see. She's a mommy's girl.

"Na-ha-ha! You're too full of yourself, Commander Gandesblood!"

"I-I'M NOT!!" I screamed in tears.

I felt my blood evaporate, not leaving even one ounce behind. Lingzi begged me for forgiveness with her eyes. If I'd thought about it, the answer wouldn't have been obvious. Who would honestly write the person they're in love with after being asked that question? I would also go for a safe answer if it were me. But wait. I was Lingzi's prospective fiancée, officially. Why would she get embarrassed about it? Why hadn't she written my name? Wouldn't that be more obvious? If she wanted to win, why wouldn't she endure the embarrassment and just write Terakomari Gandesblood?!

"What a shame, Lady Komari. She dumped you," Vill said.

"Wipe that grin off your face!! I'm losing, you realize?!"

"Now then, it's the grand chancellor's turn," Nerzanpi announced without mercy.

It's over. I have no idea what Lingzi's thinking, and my whole body is burning like I dived into a volcano. I can't make full use of my brilliant mind like this.

"Let's see... Three: her favorite food! Napa cabbage!"

```
"Correct."
```

"Wha?!"

Shikai kept getting correct answers as I plucked my hair out. *Also,* that's *her favorite?! How was I supposed to guess that?! You should've taken me to a place that served cabbage, girl!* Meanwhile, the numbers on the screen: Shikai: 2000 Terakomari: 1000

The bomb descended in reaction. I didn't have much time left.

"Are you okay, Lady Komari?"

"It's over... I gotta figure out her hobby, at least..."

"I am reading a book on physiognomy right now. I'll try to guess what she's thinking through her expressions."

"Right now?!"

"A shapely nose. Faint eyebrows. Big eyes with a fold... I've completed my analysis. Her hobby is flipping skirts."

"NO FREAKING WAY!!!!!!"

"Don't worry, Ms. Komari. I obtained her real personal information." Sakuna pushed Vill aside.

I tilted my head.

"What do you mean ...?"

"I don't want you to marry her, but I would hate for you to explode, so I will fight alongside you."

"Sakunaaa! I knew you were a pure, kind, pretty girl!"

I was moved to tears. She was no sicko maid trying to learn this "physiognomy" crap on the spot. But what truly separated the two of them was Sakuna's kindness. I saw her eyes turn red for a moment.

"Four...the gift her father gave her for her fifth birthday. My investigation revealed that it's a pocket watch."

"How do you know?"

"Don't worry. Trust me."

"No, Lady Komari! Trust me! She likes flipping skirts!" Vill yelled.

I didn't get it, but I sure knew which choice was the good one.

"Well, Commander Gandesblood? It's your turn."

"Y-yeah... Four! Her father gave her a pocket watch!"

I glanced at Lingzi. Her crimson eyes grew wide, which meant...

"That's correct. Good job, Commander."

"HAIIILL!! KOMARIN! KOMARIN! KOMARIN!" Diplomats from Mulnite and Aruka began cheering my name. Indeed, the other side of the card said "pocket watch" in Lingzi's handwriting.

"Na-ha-ha! Talk about surprising! Although I also knew about the pocket watch!"

"Sour grapes! I know her better than anyone!"

The screen changed to Shikai: 1600 Terakomari: 1000. The bomb above Shikai descended, too.

I sighed in relief. At least I'd gotten to take some LP from him. But there was something odd about this... How did Sakuna know about that?

"Hee-hee. I used my Core Implosion," Sakuna said, as though she'd read my mind.

She grinned. Chills ran down my spine.

"...Hmm? What'd you just say?"

"I used the Wheels of Asterism. I killed the Tianzi."

"……"

Sakuna's Core Implosion allowed her to examine and alter the memories of whomever she killed.

No. No way... No freaking way...

"There's an emergency, Grand Chancellor!"

Uniform-clad Immortals rushed into the venue. I had nothing but a bad feeling about this, but before I could mentally prepare myself, the man at the front of the group threw a news bomb: "His Majesty the Tianzi has been murdered!"

Commotion. Of course. That was Lingzi's dad. The head of the Enchanted Lands. Of course his assassination would shake the entire nation.

"Calm down, everyone! Is that true? He's not been killed with a Divine Instrument, has he?!"

"We believe someone stabbed through his abdomen with their bare hands. There was also a threat letter left on his body... It must be from the killer."

"Absurd! What does it say?!"

"It says... A bomb will go off every ten minutes throughout the palace."

Chaos. International VIPs muttered to each other. Some of them were pale with fright. Back by the wall, Prohellya took a sip of juice and grinned with excitement. Lingzi froze in confusion.

Then I saw a crack form in Shikai's composed expression.

"Do you know who the culprit is?"

"No idea, but circumstantial evidence says..." The Immortals looked at me, for some reason.

Whoa. Whoa, whoa. Hold on. You don't know we did this. You don't have actual evidence, do you?

"Vill, I don't get what's happening."

"You see, Lady Memoir killed the Tianzi."

"Why?"

"Because I asked her to. We left no evidence whatsoever. At the very least, nothing that could give us away during the Matrimonial War. Besides, the Seventh Unit's operation has only just begun."

Then I heard thunder.

An earthquake followed. What in the world? Just as I asked myself that, more

Immortals came in, kicking open the door.

"T-terrible news, Grand Chancellor! An explosion went off at a detached building in the west!"

Oh. It's so over.

Ha-ha. It's so painful I can only laugh now.

"...Hey, Vill. Is this act of terrorism related to the Matrimonial War somehow?"

"We have two goals. The first is to help Lady Cunningham. She needs time to get what's needed to expose the grand chancellor, which means distracting the top brass of the Enchanted Lands."

"What's our second goal?"

"To rattle the grand chancellor and prevent him from being able to exercise good judgment. Now, Lady Komari." She looked me in the eye. "Transform into Cockymari as always and say the following..."

She muttered something into my ear (through the invisible wall).

Shikai glared daggers at us.

"...Commander Gandesblood, don't tell me you're messing around with the Enchanted Lands? Do you understand? It will not be good for you if we find out you're behind this. Losing the right to marry Lingzi will be the least of your problems."

"We'll see. I can do whatever darn I see fit."

I couldn't grumble any longer.

I put on my Crimson Lord smirk and said:

"By the way, Shikai. Shouldn't you be going to check on the palace? You're Grand Chancellor, right? Don't you think it's important that you observe the scene of the crime yourself?"

"Wha—?! Don't tell me...! Lady Nerzanpi!"

"Hold your horses, Grand Chancellor. You'll lose if you exit the cage."

"But Lady Nerzanpi!"

"Them's the rules. We established that at the start of the competition."

"Gnnn...!"

Shikai glared at me, sweat on his forehead.

I'm gonna piss myself. No, Komari. It'll really be over if you give in to fear.

"I see, of course! You want me to take my eyes off the Matrimonial War and turn them to whatever is happening in the palace? It won't be that easy."

Shikai took out a Correspondence Crystal and gave all sorts of instructions.

After a while, he returned to his usual calm expression and sat back down.

"I've called back the army. They will take care of looking into things. Let's continue the Matrimonial War, Commander... Though I imagine we'll be arresting you before the game ends!"

After a boastful smirk, he yelled: "Number one: her hobby! Bonsai!"

Correct answer. I lost even more LP. But meanwhile, unbeknownst to him, the Seventh Unit was plotting something—something surely fit for a sicko.



"The Enchanted Lands has three commanders. Leader of the First Unit, Lingzi Ailan, is in the middle of the Matrimonial War. Rainsworth is stalling the leader of the second in the Dark Core Zone."

"My brother challenged them to sports-war, correct?"

"Yes. He's taking his sweet time to keep Jingshi's defenses low... The leader of the third is guarding the Starquake Agency, but it looks like they just left for the palace."

Immortals were leaving the agency. Out of all six nations, the Enchanted Lands placed the least emphasis on military might. Shikai Gudo had won his popularity by cutting military spending and moving the funds to social benefits. That meant the country's defenses were weak. And *that* meant the secret lab would be left unguarded if its military went off to protect the palace.

Nelia looked through her binoculars and grinned.

"We've got an opening. Let's go take a look."

"Yes, ma'am! I will protect you, Lady Nelia," said Gertrude.

"Umm! Should we really...go in?" asked Esther.

"What're you saying? No guards means we can go in, of course."

"But it says 'No Entry' right here. This is breaking and entering!"

"Are you for real right now?! Stop feeling bad for the enemyyy!"

"Whoa?! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Stop tickling meee!"

"Lady Nelia, you shouldn't waste time playing with that vampire."

Puffing her cheeks, Gertrude took out a Magic Stone with the power to create a teleportation portal.

"We're setting it here, right?"

"Yeah. Somewhere easy to find the moment we come back."

Nelia let Esther go and grinned. The attendants of the Matrimonial War were all gathered in one place. The perfect place for all of them to bear witness to the grand chancellor's misdeeds.



Sakuna really had killed the Tianzi, and her advice saved my life.

"Number two: the name of the cat she had as a kid! Youxie!"

"Correct."

Cheers, followed by more Komarin ovation.

The back of the card said "Youxie." One could always rely on the Wheels of Asterism to look into people's memories... But I was still anxious to no end.

I could hear a ton of people running around outside the venue.

The Enchanted Lands government was in disarray, and it was all thanks to the Seventh Unit's rampage.

"Captain Mellaconcey called. They're going to blow up the southern building of the palace next," Vill told me.

"Stop it with the terrorist threats," I said.

"Don't worry, they won't catch them. Your troops are professionals."

"Professional terrorists?! For starters, what's the point if they can get evidence later?!"

"There is very much a point. We only need to temporarily keep the grand chancellor here."

I didn't understand one word of what the maid was saying.

It was obvious this would all lead to us getting yelled at and killed later. Although, the bomb could kill me before that. I was there either way... I could do nothing but chuckle.

"That's the end of the first round. The grand chancellor is in the lead."

The numbers on the screen were hopeless.

SHIKAI: 1600 TERAKOMARI: 800

He had double my points. I was definitely gonna lose. I could hear the audience talking about me. "The Commander's in trouble." "I guess the grand chancellor is worthier of Her Highness." "I bet 50,000 mells on the Commander..." Hey, that's not my fault. And if you think losing your money's bad, just think about how I feel.

None of them seemed to care about the palace exploding. I guess those who lived in the cruel, cold word of fighting were simply built different.

"Komari! Are you okay?!" Lingzi exclaimed—they'd taken off her gag. "I've made you go through so much...for my sake... You could've run away."

Oh no, she knows I'm afraid of the bomb? She knows I'm actually the weakest ever? But even if she did, that didn't matter.

"I'm okay. I won't run away."

"Komari..."

"Even if I don't know your hobby or your favorite food... I know very well how much you want to change the Enchanted Lands. I will defeat this sicko."

Lingzi fidgeted, red in the face. The audience began whistling and clapping.

They really just saw this as entertainment.

"You're a formidable enemy, Commander Gandesblood! Even I did not know the name of her cat!" Shikai clapped, a creepy smile on his face.

I knew he detested me deep in his soul, but I had to keep up my slaughter champion bluff.

"Hah! This is nothing! I'll destroy your sick plans!"

"Yet I have more LP than you..."

"Aw..."

"Which means, for the moment, I am worthier of her than you! It is only natural, of course, as it was the Tianzi himself who offered me his daughter's hand. You are nothing but a thief trying to take her away."

"Stop treating Lingzi like she's an object! Can't you at least pretend to care for her?!"

"Na-ha-ha-ha! I'll care for her once she's mine!"

"You little...!"

"Calm down, Lady Komari. We just need to beat him."

Vill's warning brought me back to my senses.

Right. The fist of justice will smash this sick villain in time.

"Now then, the first round to see who understands Lingzi better is over. Now it's time for the round regarding her feelings." Nerzanpi snapped her fingers.

Immortals appeared and approached Lingzi. They carried a belt with extreme care and wrapped it around the confused girl.

"W-wait, what are you doing?! Nothing perverted, I hope!"

"Who do you take me for? This is a magic item that measures mana, vibration, willpower, heartbeat, body temperature, and such. We call it the heartthrobmeter."

What's with that ridiculous name?!

"The second round is a love confession contest. Each of you will profess your

feelings for Her Highness. You will lose LP according to her reaction shown through the heartthrobmeter."

"What the heck?!"

WTF, seriously. And yet the audience kept hollering, "You've got this, Commander!" "Boil her like an octopus!" Lingzi, restrained by the heartthrobmeter, was already as red as boiled octopus.

"Interesting!" Shikai yelled. "It seems His Majesty cares about Lingzi's feelings, after all! The heartthrobmeter will prove whether she reacts to my words!"

"Piss off! No way I can believe that shady thi—"

Nerzanpi threw a knife. The sharp blade flew toward Lingzi and barely grazed her cheek as it stabbed the wall behind her.

"Wha ...?"

I froze, letting my mouth hang open like a fish.

The next moment, the screen showed the number 16.

"A heartthrob rate of 16. It's working fine, as you see." Nerzanpi pressed her cigarette on the ashtray with a smile.

Lingzi was unharmed, but her eyes welled up from the shock.

I had no idea how the 16 was calculated, but everyone in the audience nodded in trusting acknowledgment.

"Wh-what're you doing?! You could've harmed her!"

"No. I did it so I wouldn't."

"But what if you did?! That stunt of yours isn't enough to get me to trust that machine! I don't know how you got that number, for starters! Change how we're approaching this duel!"

"Hey, hey, no point telling me that. His Majesty the Tianzi himself chose it. Take it up with him—is what I would say if he wasn't dead now."

"I'm sorry!" Sakuna apologized in a panic behind me. I clenched my fist and pursed my lips. The audience was going wild. I'd only incur their wrath if I kept complaining, and that would put me at a disadvantage for the vote during the

third round. Darn it! Keep it together, Komari!

"I like those eyes! You're as strong-willed as ever, Commander. But I must tell you that I have the upper hand for this round. I am something of a poet, you see. My master wordsmithing can shake the heart of any girl."

Overconfident much? Meanwhile, I had no self-assurance at all in that department.

Why? You see...I'd never told someone my feelings like that.

I simply had zero experience to pull from.

"Commander Gandesblood will begin. You have fifteen seconds to whisper Lingzi sweet nothings."

Aaand I'm first... I can't think of anything...

Embarrassment and despair filled my brain. The audience gazed at me expectantly. Vill and Sakuna stared at my back like expressionless dolls. And Lingzi watched me with anxiety.

Cast aside your shame! Whisper all those sweet nothings! To save her!

"I..." I tensed every muscle of my body. "I... I don't...know how to put it...but I...want to be...with you...Lingzi... So...could you please...marry me...?"

uuuu				""	,,,,

Everyone present froze, like a bug trapped in amber.

My face was burning. I felt like my heart was getting ground in a mortar and pestle.

Still, I endured the sensation and looked at Lingzi.

Hooo. Smoke puffed from her head.

The next moment, I felt like my heart had exploded, but no, the explosion came from a faraway building. Mellaconcey had fulfilled his threat. Darn terrorists were a great job. Then the heartthrob value showed up on the screen.

195. Apparently, that shook her more than almost getting killed with a knife.

"HAAAAAIIIIILLLL!!!!! KOMARIN!! KOMARIN!! KOMARIN!!"

Terakomari's high score was received with cheering, clapping, and Komarining. The audience clearly cared more about the Matrimonial War than the terrorist attacks in the background.

Prohellya Butchersky watched while crossing her arms.

Nothing was off. Or so it seemed... But she had a bad feeling about this.

"Kyaaa! You heard that, Prohellya?! That's love! Romance!!"

"Keep it down, Leona. I don't think Terakomari really means it."

"She's gotta! Look at how red she is!"

Leona clapped her hands like she was enjoying a play. As did everyone else in the audience. The only one frowning with displeasure was Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo.

"You're crafty. Are you trying to get my LP to zero on top of blowing up the whole palace?"

"Wh-what're you talking about?! I'm not blowing up anything!"

"Na-ha-ha! Let's see how long you keep up the act! The Enchanted Lands' army is arriving here as we speak. They'll find evidence of your terrorist plans right away."

"You don't know that! I'll give you the chance to surrender now! How about you leave this duel and go catch the real terrorists instead?!"

"No need! Our Third Unit will take care of it! I must focus on beating the vampire trying to take away what's mine all while committing crimes. I'll be the one winning the Matrimonial War and taking Lingzi."

Prohellya thought things over as she observed the grand chancellor. It was he who'd proposed the Matrimonial War. He could have easily ignored Terakomari if he wanted to have Lingzi for himself.

"Lady Prohellya, it seems the Mulnite Imperial Army really is behind the terrorist attacks." Pitolina's voice came from the other end of the Correspondence Crystal line; she was undercover in the palace. "The Enchanted

Lands' forces haven't caught them yet, but it's only a matter of time. The Seventh Unit is too reckless, and there's a rapper guy dancing provokingly."

"I see. Thanks. Keep your eyes peeled."

"Roger."

She hung up. If Pitolina was right, the Seventh Unit wasn't being serious.

"Hmmm." Something was off.

The woman in black, Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha, smiled like a corpse and said, "Next is the grand chancellor's turn."

"All right! In short..."

 $\stackrel{\wedge}{\nabla}$

"Lingzi, be mine."

That was all he said.

I was baffled. There was no way Lingzi would be moved by such a simple sentence. For starters, she didn't even like the grand chancellor. This round was in the bag... Or so I thought.

The screen showed the number 202.

...Huh? How? What the—?

"Na-ha-ha! Looks like Lingzi wants to be mine!"

"WHAAAT?!"

"HAAAAAIIIILLLL!!!!! Long live the chancellor! Long live the chancellor! Long live the chancellor!" The Immortals lost their minds.

I didn't get it. My hands were shaking.

SHIKAI: 1405 TERAKOMARI: 598

I was losing LP. The bomb approached.

I felt betrayed. I turned to look at Lingzi and she kept quiet, eyes wide.

"Lingzi?! Why are his words having an effect on you?!"

"Th-they're not! The numbers just..."

"Why, Lingzi?! Did you really want to marry him?! Were you lying when you proposed to me?!"

"Your proposal just now certainly was a lie, Lady Komari," Vill guipped.

"No! The heartthrobmeter must be...it must be broken..."

"It is not! The magical device digs deep into the wearer's psyche to unearth feelings that not even they knew they had. That means it just exposed how you really feel, Lingzi," said Shikai.

"That's ridiculous!!"

"Yell as much as you want, Commander Gandesblood. It won't change the fact that your life is running out."

I looked at the screen again. 598 LP left. It could end with the second round. I could die—and not just any regular death. Real death. No Dark Core. No coming back.

I clenched my teeth.

This can't be. He's gotta be cheating. But how?! I don't wanna die. I wanna run away... Then I noticed Lingzi's gaze on me.

She looked on the verge of tears. She must've been in situations like this before. Setups.

I couldn't allow this to keep going. A switch flipped within me. My fists trembled as the fire of courage burned in my chest.

I have no choice. I gotta make her fall in love with me.

"My turn next, yeah?"

I gotta. I should be able to do it. I'm not a scholarly intellectual for nothing.

The Strawberry Milk Formula. Orange Season Love. Twilight Triangle. *And that's not all. I've written over half a million words' worth of love stories. Deep within me lies the power to make Lingzi's heart melt with desire.*

"You get ten turns each to profess love. Go ahead, Commander. Do your best." Nerzanpi exhaled white smoke with a smile.

Cast aside your embarrassment. Cast aside everything. Simply voice aloud the

words that spring to mind. Become one of your novel's characters. Yes, like, Count Marionette from Orange Season Love. You've got this. You're a scholarly intellectual!

"Lingzi, I've been thinking about this for a while now." I turned to her. "My body warms up whenever I look at you, as though bathing in the sunlight. My heart is at peace in here, in your soft presence."

"Huh? Komari...?"

"My world was crimson before I met you. An endless onslaught of bloody battle. Perhaps it was fun for what it was, but it left my heart parched. And it was you who gave me the hydration it needed. Now when I'm with you, the world is a more vibrant color."

"Really ...?"

"The birds chirp, the flowers shine, the skies are clear. It was your simple smile that made me take notice of the world around me. My heart truly burst before the power of your grin. I want to share the joy of this beautiful world with you. Now, come with me."

"Bwuh?! Uhh, but...!"

"I won't let you say no. You're going to let my blasted heart go on without you? Listen: I, and I alone, have the right to feel the gentle touch of your peacock hair."

The screen changed.

Heartthrob rate: 334

"HAAAAAIIIIILLLL!!!!! KOMARIN! KOMARIN! KOMARIN!"

The venue exploded (figuratively, in case you were worried).

"See that score?!" "She's undefeatable!" "Look at Her Highness's eyes spin!" "Who knew the Commander was such a Casanova!" "Who wouldn't melt upon hearing that?!" "Not to mention Her Highness has a hard time saying no to begin with!" They sure were having a blast (figuratively, again).

I emptied my mind. I had to get my head empty to do this.

I mean... I just actually asked her out?! And with lines more embarrassing than anything I'd ever written?! I'm gonna have to scream into my pillow for a good few minutes tonight before falling asleep!

"Lady Komari... I'm crying tears of blood... Are *you* going to let me go on like this...?"

Vill and Sakuna looked like zombies.

Sorry, but I really don't understand you.

"Ahh! How vexing! This brazen vampire has cajoled Lingzi!"

Looking at her, it seemed like my pickup lines had a strong effect. I mean, yeah, after hearing that, whose heart wouldn't be racing from embarrassment?

"Good, very good! I thought the slaughter commander was only good at killing, but I see you also excel at battles of passions."

"Of course! I am a scholarly intellectual, after all!"

"Riveting! Now then, it's my turn!" Shikai looked at Lingzi and yelled, "I'm sorry, Lingzi!"

"Huh?"

"It seems I'd been neglecting you! I apologize for treating you like an object! But that was only a show of my affection! I care for you more than anybody else. You are as beautiful as a flower blossoming on top of a cliff. You've concerned yourself with the Enchanted Lands all while enduring my rude behavior. Ahh, how lovely! Your sweetness has struck my heart!"

This guy spits drivel as naturally as he breathes!!

And he makes it sound like he's sorry for what he's done? You're not fooling me! It's all nonsense! Lies!

"Now, let us join hands and build the future of the Enchanted Lands! There is nothing to fear! I know we can overcome any hurdle with glory!"

Then he reached out his hand.

This man had no idea. There was no way such shallow words would move her heart. I know that because she's marrying me. Or so I thought.

"Oh dear. Looks like that hit 'er hard," Nerzanpi said maliciously.

I looked at the screen in a flurry.

Heartthrob rate: 112

A despairingly high number.

"Lingzi?! What's with you all of a sudden?!"

"I don't know...I really don't! The heartthrobmeter is just doing that on its—"

"Ahh! So she says, but her body is more honest!"

Our LP was: Shikai: 1081, Terakomari: 486. Oh no. I'm gonna die. I haven't been to every one of the Top 100 Omelet Rice Places of the World! Rather, what I really couldn't stand was the fact that Lingzi was falling for this bastard. I wanted to scream.

"Lingzi, open your eyes! Don't let this sicko trick you! I'm the only one who can make you happy! Marry me, and I'll whip up tasty omelet rice for you every day!"

"Bwuh?!"

SHIKAI: 909 TERAKOMARI: 486

"Stop, Lingzi! Don't let that vampire deceive you! I apologize for everything up to now! Please let it only be me who's reflected in your shining eyes!"

"HAAAAAIIIILLLL!!!!! Long live the Chancellor! Long live the Chancellor!"

SHIKAI: 909 TERAKOMARI: 390

"Lingzi, I'm the one for you! I can point out everything good about you as proof of it! You tried your best to show me around Jingshi! Your bashful smile is super cute! And I like that you're the same height as me!"

"Na-ha-ha-ha! I can list her virtues, too! You are diligent, no matter what you do! You know the holy texts by heart despite not taking the imperial examination! Your poetic talent leaves even me in the dust! One day, I want you to write me a Tang poem!"

"You want her to write you a poem?! Why not write her one yourself?! Look, Lingzi, here's mine: From the day I met you, Storms have brewed in my heart.

Every time I see the color green, / I remember your shy smile."

"Too wordy! Lingzi is introverted! She responds better when you keep it short and sweet! Listen to me, Lingzi! Let us build a future together! You are beautiful!"

"Wha?! Lingzi, don't let him trick you! I know you best! You're cute! Earnest! A hard worker!"

"You are noble, the most concerned with the Enchanted Lands! Come with me!"

"Come with me, Lingzi! Marry me!"

Passionate words were hurled one after the other. The audience hollered like crazy every time either of us said anything. Screams, yells, and explosions (literal) could be heard in the distance. The entirety of the Zijingong was rowdy.

I couldn't think straight anymore. I was focused entirely on getting Lingzi's attention. I'd gotten swept up in Shikai's frenzy, and my vocabulary had dropped from that of a scholarly intellectual to a simpleton. The next thing I knew, I'd become a sweating machine that could only yell, "I love you!" and "Marry me!"

"Lingzi! I'll count to ten! Give me your answer before..."

"Stop, Ms. Komari! Ms. Lingzi will lose her mind if you keep going!"

"She's right!! Hurl your affections at me instead!!"

Sakuna and Vill both yelled at me. That was when I noticed that the bride was covering her face with both hands. Of course. She was the target of a barrage of saccharine silliness.

"I'm sorry, Lingzi! I went too far."

"I—I don't mind... It's just a bit embarrassing."

"Sorry! I'll be more careful with my words next time!"

"No need for that, Commander Gandesblood!" Shikai grinned like the devil.

Everyone in the venue gulped. I turned to look at Vill, a sinking feeling in my gut. She was staring ahead, pale in the face. I followed her gaze—to the screen.

SHIKAI: 141 TERAKOMARI: 0

"Wha...?"

"That was close! You were so loose with your courtship that I thought I would lose for a moment there! But it seems Lingzi chose me!"

"Hold on! There's gotta be something wrong with those numb—wergh?" I bumped my forehead on the invisible wall as I tried to walk up to Nerzanpi. I glared at her with tears in my eyes. "Wh-why's mine zero?! It makes no sense!"

"It does make sense. The grand chancellor shaved off our LP."

"No way..."

Something was fishy. There was no point in a duel so arbitrary. What the hell was up with this LP...? It was just there to make the competition seem fair by introducing an element of gamification.

I looked at Lingzi. She was trembling and pale. The pink in her cheeks from a moment ago was gone. That expression made it obvious—the grand chancellor had not charmed Lingzi. He was cheating.

"C-c'mon! There's no way you can accept these results!"

"Indeed, Lady Nerzanpi. Please allow us to check the heartthrobmeter," Vill said.

"You think you have the right to do that? Not even the grand chancellor can check it. This is a fair bout. One that Terakomari Gandesblood lost. Everyone in the audience agrees."

Even as I was struck by waves of despair, I listened closely.

"The Commander lost?" "Oh, well, that was expected." "Yeah, not like it was a physical battle." "THE slaughter champion couldn't beat him in a romantic duel." "It was a fun show." Everyone was fine with the results. I even heard someone yell, "Blow her up already!"

"Na-ha-ha! It's over!" I shivered in reaction to the grand chancellor's jester-like cackling. "Lingzi is mine. And you will be arrested under suspicion of terrorism. Too bad, slaughter champion, hero of the Six Nations. None of those titles mean anything in the Enchanted Lands. You cannot steal Lingzi's heart.

You cannot stop my endeavors."

Vill and Sakuna were lodging complaints at Nerzanpi, but I could only hear the grand chancellor's words. That, and sense the bomb slowly descend upon me.

"I doubt this explosive will be able to kill you, but it will make for an exciting show before our wedding. Lingzi will love the fireworks of your demise."

"What...are you planning to do to her...?"

"Lock her up for eternity. She's but a tool for me to become the Tianzi."

I knew it. His apologies were nothing but lies.

Vill and Sakuna punched the invisible barrier. The audience cheered in anticipation of my gallant escape. Then Shikai solemnly declared: "Now then, Commander. Time for you to go out with a bang."

"Halt!" someone exclaimed.



Only a skeleton crew remained at the Starquake Agency.

Nelia trashed the soldiers coming after them.

The place really was a rehash of the Daydream Paradise. Paralyzed people languished in prison cells all over the place. They showed no reaction to Nelia and company's arrival. They seemed dead at first glance but were actually conscious.

"Wh-what is this place?" Esther stiffened and scowled.

Perhaps it was too harsh a sight for a novice, Nelia thought.

"Thio, c'mon! Get the electrovideo box ready! Get that scoop!"

"Okay, okay, just please stop clutching my tail, or I'll sue you for workplace harassment!"

The Six Nations News journalists were running around in high spirits.

Just then, Nelia noticed some glimmering spheres on the squeaky-clean floor. The crystals were about the size of a baseball. Were they used in their experiments?

"Is this...willpower?"

"Lady Nelia? What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure, but...the people here look like they underwent psychological shock. Maybe the research here is going beyond Core Implosion..."

"Seriously?! They can't get away with this, the scoundrels! Thio, get filming already, you dunce!"

"I'm setting up the camera, so please let go of my neck! ... There we go!"

An alarm Magic Stone blasted its noisy sirens upon detecting the intruders. But it was too little, too late. Nelia and the others were already in a position to smash the grand chancellor's plans.

The soldiers left in the facility came at them with desperate looks on their faces.

Nelia gripped her twin swords with a bold smile.

All she needed to do was bifurcate these fools who were trying to take over the world.

"The gate is ready. We can go any time."

"Good job, Gertrude! C'mon then, scoundrels!"

The Immortals let out cries of war and charged.

In a pink flash of light, she struck them down before they even had time to scream.



A silver girl stood up from the center of the audience, her anger plain to see.

Prohellya Butchersky. For some reason, her gaze was trained on Nerzanpi.

"What is this farce? It's obvious you were cheating."

"Ahh! Ms. Arctic Master! And what exactly did I do?"

"If you won't admit to it, then I'll show you. Leona."

"I know, I know!" Leona jumped from the stands with a meow and landed near the brick wall on the opposite side. She unleashed a wild punch on the wall, easily smashing down the bricks.

"What?!" the international VIPs exclaimed in worry. However, they pursed their lips the moment they saw beyond the bricks.

"Meihua?!" Lingzi stood up with a scream.

"Tsk." Shikai clicked his tongue.

There was a chamber on the other side of the wall. Meihua Liang lay inside on the floor, gagged and covered in blood. Beside her stood an Immortal holding a knife—Shikai's subordinate.

"Surprised, are we? Gudo Shikai is a sham. Every time he spoke those ridiculous pick-up lines, they assaulted the girl behind the wall to get a reading of her level of agitation, then used it to lower Terakomari's LP. They must have planted one of those heartthrobmeters on Meihua Liang."

The crowd was shocked, as was I. Lingzi ran up to Meihua in tears. It was all I could do not to let my jaw drop. Shikai Gudo was a true villain who did not hesitate to harm other people in pursuit of his goals.

I held back my anger as I glared at him.

A bold look crossed his face as he said:

"Do you have any proof I did this?"

"You wretched...!" I grunted.

"On the other hand, I do have evidence of your misdeeds."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Grand Chancellor! We've captured the terrorist!"

Immortals opened the door and rushed into the venue, dragging along someone they'd tied up with rope. My face fell. How I wished I didn't know that blond hair.

"This is Lieutenant Yohann Helders from the Mulnite Imperial Army's Seventh Unit! We caught him as he was about to set the palace's treasury on fire!"

"Why'd you let them catch you?!"

Yohann was bruised and battered. I can't deny he deserves it... But Mulnite's Dark Core isn't active here! Have you no mercy?!

"Sorry, Terakomari... I couldn't hold back, and they caught me dancing in excitement... Damn it all..."

Oh, you really deserve it.

"Na-ha-ha! This proves that Terakomari Gandesblood is a terrorist! What should we do now? I suppose arresting you and throwing you into prison would be the proper thing to do."

"No, wait! Let me explain!"

"Can you worm your way out of this one when we have undeniable proof? Your lackey here is proof that you're a scoundrel trying to take my bride by force! Oh! But don't think about using your Core Implosion now. The Immortals won't turn a blind eye to that."

A spell deactivated with a *bwoon*. The invisible wall vanished. It was no longer needed now that the Matrimonial War was over.

"Stop...Grand Chancellor...," Lingzi begged in tears, right beside Meihua on the ground. "Komari did nothing wrong. Let her go..."

"I would love to, but criminals cannot be allowed to escape the law."

Immortals surrounded me.

The audience watched it all happen with bated breath. Leona and Prohellya didn't seem intent on helping me. Of course, they had every reason to avoid being considered accomplices.

It's over. It's all over...

I was paralyzed, feeling as though I'd lost everything.

"...? What is this?" Shikai frowned.

The VIPs in the stands also looked confused.

Faint lights shone all over the venue. I just stood there frozen, baffled. Meanwhile, Nerzanpi pouted in amusement.

"It's the sign of the teleportation spell. Are you trying to escape?"

"What?! Commander Gandesblood...!" Shikai exclaimed.

"We're not running away," Vill said with composure. "We're simply teleporting everyone en masse to end this charade. We're taking you somewhere fun."

"What...? Soldiers! Seize that maid!"

Vill held up the Magic Stone she'd showed me before.

That's when it hit me. She must've been preparing this spell ever since then.

The soldiers charged at Shikai's command, but Sakuna easily shook them off. The spell activated before they could do anything.

"Stop this! You're slighting the will of the people!"

"We'll see who's really doing that. Now then, Mr. Shikai Gudo. It's time for karma," Vill declared victoriously.

Vast light enveloped the area in the blink of an eye.

Then everyone in the venue was sent elsewhere.



"Hello, everyone! Melka Tiano from Six Nations News reporting! We have a giant scoop here for you! The popular and talented Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo has been conducting an illegal operation in secret! Take a look!"

Journalist Melka Tiano reported loudly from the Starquake Agency.

There was unrest in Jingshi—no, all across the Six Nations, including the Dark Core Zone.

"Lady Nelia! The gate upstairs has opened! Terakomari, Shikai Gudo, and the VIPs are being teleported!"

"Great! Tell Villhaze to take care of things while we look deeper into the building," Nelia commanded before heading into the bowels of the Starquake Agency.

The prison was only the first floor. Further evidence of Shikai's crimes lay hidden deeper underground. He had been heading an operation to develop narcotics, and not just one kind—the facility was filled with all sorts of strange

flora.

"What is this? They didn't do this in the Daydream Paradise, did they?" said Gertrude.

"Look, President Cunningham! They have all sorts of pharmacy equipment. Were they making drugs?" said Esther.

"I don't know, but burn everything you see here into your memory." Nelia looked around as she defeated soldiers tackling them.

After some walking, they found a door reading, Authorized Personnel Only. Gertrude turned the knob, but it was locked.

"It's not just locked. It's protected by a magical barrier," she said.

"Well, isn't it locked because only authorized personnel can enter?!" Esther asked.

"Are you really Terakomari's subordinate...? Take a note from your boss and get more violent."

"Move aside, Esther! I'll kick this door open!" Nelia exclaimed.

"Huh? Uhyaaah?!" Esther fell on her butt, overwhelmed by Nelia's peach-colored swordplay.

Diverse Divide sliced the steel door like it was tofu. The AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY sign split in half and drifted down to the floor. On the other side of the door was an armory of Divine Instruments.

"Ohh?! An illegal weapon stash?! Now that's a scoop!"



"You're pulling my tail off, please!! Let me go, or I'll hand in my resignation!!"

"I won't accept it!! You'll work here until the day you breathe your last!!"

The journalists intruded further without reserve or consideration.

Nelia, Gertrude, and Esther peered into the room—the armory. It was mundane for something so tightly guarded. Was there something more terrifying hidden deeper within? Either way, they had to uncover the secrets of the Starquake Agency while Komari was occupying the grand chancellor above.

"Hmm? What is this...?" Esther picked up a piece of paper lying on the ground.

Was it somebody's notes? Just as she started reading, the entire world shook.

"...?!"

A surge of hostility rushed from the shadows.

She felt someone's gaze coming from behind a pillar.

"That's... It can't be..." Nelia shivered.

The next moment, the enemy struck at imperceptible speed.

 $\stackrel{\wedge}{\sim}$

The lights of mass teleportation converged.

The air around me felt different. I fearfully raised my head and found myself standing in the middle of a drab, prison-like location.

It was even bigger than the venue for the Matrimonial War. There were rooms lined with iron bars all over, with people piling on top of each other inside. I gasped. What happened to those people? They're not mannequins, are they? But they're not moving.

"Grand Chancellor, what is the meaning of this?!" someone shouted.

It was a haughty-looking elderly male Sapphire. Apparently, everyone in the venue had been transported here. The place was full of confused people.

"Vill...where are we? Who are these people?"

"This is the Starquake Agency," Vill said loudly. "The place where Grand

Chancellor Shikai Gudo had been conducting experiments on people."

"Wha...?!" Everyone gasped.

The spectators muttered to each other. They looked at the prison cells and Shikai's face sequentially, suspicion crossing their faces.

"P-preposterous! Don't listen to her!" Shikai yelled, shaking. "Is there any proof that this is the Starquake Agency?! Who are these people?! Prisoners?! This is clearly the scene of a crime! We must get the army and the police to investigate this place!"

"Indeed, which is why President Nelia Cunningham and Commander Gertrude Rainsworth are surveying its depths as we speak."

"What?! What...what are you plotting?!"

"We should be asking that of you." Vill took a step forward, a sadistic smirk on her face.

Shikai clearly wasn't acting naturally. From the look on his face, it was clear she was poking at something he was hiding.

"I see." Prohellya extended her arms to speak for the audience. "Villhaze, how exactly did you get wind of these flagrant crimes? Mind explaining in simple terms so everyone understands?"

"We are standing in the Starquake Agency, which is under the direct command of the Ailan dynasty government. The place had been hidden for a long time, but thanks to the efforts of Lady Meihua Liang and Lady Nelia Cunningham, they uncovered its location and infiltrated its depths. They planted a gate for mass teleportation here to reveal everything to you. All at the behest of Lady Komari, of course."

"Commander Gandesblood... You rotten little...!!" Shikai glared at me like I had killed his parents.

Whoa, don't look at me. I didn't do this. I didn't have the mental capacity to answer, though; I couldn't take my eyes off the prison cells.

"Shikai...who are these people? What were you doing here?"

"Indeed, Lady Komari. The Starquake Agency was, in fact, a prison. And its

head is its Minister and Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo. He brought about everything you see here," Vill said.

"Enough of the bullshit!!"

"Oh? I've seen the person over there before." Prohellya glanced sternly at a cell. "There was a poster in a back alley of Jingshi saying they had disappeared. Their face matches the photo, if I recall correctly... What could this mean?"

"Yes. Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo was kidnapping the Immortals of Jingshi to carry out his experiments. It is the Starquake Agency that is behind the serial disappearances in this city...all under the direction of Shikai Gudo!"

The VIPs gasped. All eyes were on Shikai.

"Th-this has to be a mistake!"

"It is not. And look. Everyone is angry."

"I can't believe this." "His reputation was just a sham?" "This is inhumane." "How could he do this to his own people?" "We can't let him go on like this." "Seize him!" The people criticized Shikai's faction one after the other. Vill snorted.

"It seems the Matrimonial War is not of importance anymore. Lady Lingzi couldn't possibly marry someone behind this evil. And such a criminal couldn't possibly be allowed to be grand chancellor, either."

"Listen to the voice of my citizens! They all trust me!"

"It's useless. Six Nations News is already reporting to the entire world on everything happening inside this place."

Shikai's face lost all color.

Now I understood what was going on.

The Matrimonial War was only a distraction. Vill and Nelia's goal was to get Shikai's eyes off the Starquake Agency and loosen its security. Then they surprised him with the teleportation to reveal his misdeeds to everyone. The people watching the competition made for perfect witnesses.

Vill took a step forward. Prohellya and Leona got ready to throw down.

"Hee-hee-hee," Nerzanpi giggled as she stomped her cigarette. "How about you admit it already, Grand Chancellor? This was their aim all along."

"What?! Lady Nerzanpi?!"

"What's so shocking? You should've seen this coming after seeing President Nelia Cunningham was absent. I thought you noticed... Did you not?"

"What are you...?"

"Oh, so you didn't. Well, this just means your luck's run out. What did you say about criminals not being allowed to escape the law?"

"Cease your yapping! As if you weren't working with me all this—!"

"With you? With you how, grand chancellor?"

Shikai turned around like a child who was afraid of the dark.

"No... This is a misunderstanding! Both Lady Nerzanpi and I are innocent! This is all a setup! And we already have proof that Terakomari Gandesblood is a terrorist! Shouldn't we go over that first?!"

"Explosions at the palace or kidnapped citizens... I wonder which case the people will care most about. You got your power as grand chancellor from the will of the populace, didn't you?" Vill said.

"Guh ... But ...!"

"I don't know what exactly you were doing here, but it is an undeniable fact that you were up to no good. Turn yourself in already."

"No... That's ridiculous... I won't allow it!" Shikai turned heel and fled.

A gunshot echoed. Shikai tripped on the floor, startled.

Prohellya lowered her weapon with a bold smile.

"Running away, coward? I take it that's a confession?"

All calm disappeared from Shikai's face. He looked around with eyes wide for a few moments but found no allies. No one trusted him.

"I—I...! I only did it for the sake of the Enchanted Lands! That is still true even now! The Tianzi's clan is rotten to the core, and it shall be up to me to rule with

an iron fist! Isn't it natural for a ruler to sacrifice the few for the sake of the many?! Everyone here should realize this! And yet..."

"Shikai. I'm extremely disappointed." Someone sighed.

It was a soft, elegant voice. Everyone turned to its source. The Immortals opened the path in prostration. A man I'd never seen before approached with a light step.

"Your Majesty?!"

Huh? Your Majesty? You mean Lingzi's dad? The guy Sakuna killed? Then I noticed his extravagant clothes were drenched in blood. They must've resurrected him quickly with healing magic. I wasn't expecting him to be teleported here, either.

"Father! Why ...?"

"Oh, Lingzi. Great weather today, isn't it?"

"Your Majesty!" Shikai ran up to the Tianzi in desperation. "I must report in detail! About what's been going on in the Starquake Agency unbeknownst to me! About Terakomari's terrorist plots! About what an evil vampire she is! We must capture and interrogate her right away!"

"No need," the Tianzi said. "I can tell by looking at this place how much the people have been suffering. It's a shame... A real shame. I thought you were taking good care of the government as grand chancellor."

"I have. I've worked myself to the bone for the Enchanted Lands. You must know better than anyone else how hard Grand Chancellor Shikai Gudo has worked. And still, you don't believe me?"

"I don't. No one here does."

Shikai was paralyzed. The Tianzi immediately ordered the grand chancellor's arrest. His personal guard swept him silently to apprehend the villain.

"Your Majesty...are you sure? You think we ought to stay like this...?"

"We have peace—what else do we need?"

"What do you think I've been managing the Starquake Agency for?! It's

because you do nothing! I must take matters into my own hands because you idle about all day!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm asking if you give a damn about your daughter's life!!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Why would Lingzi die?"

Shikai looked as though he had been kicked down to hell.

Prohellya furrowed her brow. Vill placed her hand pensively on her chin.

"Now take him away."

The guards followed the Tianzi's order and arrested Shikai. He showed no resistance. He looked dejected, accepting of his fate. Her wore the face of a man without any will—an expression I'd seen somewhere before.

"Lady Komari," Vill whispered to me once he was out of our sight. "You've won. Congratulations."

"Yeah. That's one thing taken care of..."

Then I heard something move overhead. I looked up nonchalantly.

A bomb was being pulled downward by gravity.

"Huh?"

"I'll see you in hell, Terakomari Gandesblood!" Shikai yelled from afar.

Oh. The bomb teleported, too. Shikai activated it out of desperation. I felt like I was dreaming. I could hear the footsteps of the reaper approaching, and all I could do was stay there frozen like an idiot, waiting for my demise.

The bomb fell, instantly turning the whole world white.

".....!"

I thought I was dead for sure. It was obvious my puny body would be pulverized like a cookie before a point-blank explosion.

But I felt no pain. Was I really dead?

My senses are too clear for that...

The smoke dissipated. I saw the shocked faces of the audience.

"Lady Komari!" Someone was weeping behind me. "Lady Komari... Are you okay...?!"

"Vill? Huh? I..."

I looked down at myself. Unharmed. No pain to speak of. My heart was pounding like crazy...but I was still the same Terakomari Gandesblood. A moment later, I realized I'd survived the explosion somehow.

"Hee-hee-hee. You never cease to amaze me, Terakomari Gandesblood," Nerzanpi muttered, her rotten gaze fixed on me alone. "That bomb was fabricated in Jingshi's Magic Stone factory. They have a failure rate of one in two thousand. You sure pulled a rare one... What unearthly luck."

A chill ran down my spine. So I just survived out of sheer luck?

The audience roared. "That's our Commander!" "You saved us!" "You saved us from the chancellor's stink bomb!"

I had to take advantage of the opportunity. I put strength into my legs and rose to my feet.

"You're too shocked! You think this toy was ever going to kill me?! Bring out the big guns if you wanna take me down!"

"HAAAAAIIIILLLL!!!!! KOMARIN! KOMARIN! KOMARIN!"

The crowd's feverish cheering and the mere fact that I was still alive felt unreal, like I was dreaming.

Shikai screamed as the Immortals took him away. He hadn't just tried to kill me, but everyone else in here, too. What a villain.

"Amazing. Wonderful, Commander Gandesblood." The Tianzi approached with a smile. "Not only did you win the Matrimonial War, but you also saved our lives. You really are worthy of Lingzi's companionship... Now then, everyone! A hurrah for her efforts!"

"UWOOOOOHHHH!!" The Immortals went crazy. I'd lost count of how many times they'd cheered my name today.

My brain wasn't keeping up. The grand chancellor, the bomb, the Matrimonial War, the people imprisoned here... I didn't know what to tackle first. Then Lingzi walked up to me.

"Komari, umm...," she said shyly. "Sorry for causing you trouble... I put you through so much, didn't I?"

"Huh? Oh...nah. I'm just glad you're okay."

Lingzi cast her eyes down, red in the face.

"A-anyways! We should investigate the Starquake Agency. We must set these people free..."

"Right! Hey, Vill! Open the cells alread—"

"That can wait, Commander Terakomari Gandesblood," the Tianzi said.

He had a soft look on his face, his eyes were gentle, and he was wearing the most elegant of clothes (albeit stained with blood). He resembled Lingzi, too.

"I am Tianzi Yizhu Ailan, Lingzi's father. Pleased to meet you."

"P-pleasure's mine! Umm... But shouldn't we help those people right away?"

"Who cares?"

Lingzi froze over. I was also speechless.

"...Excuse me, that wasn't quite the expression I was looking for. The court will take care of everything later. We cannot have our hero deal with these chores."

"But...I would gladly help..."

"Ha-ha-ha. No need to be so formal. We'll be family, after all."

"""WHAT?!?!""" Vill, Sakuna, and I exclaimed in unison.

"What are you saying, Father?!" Lingzi turned red.

"You are amazing. I'll show you my rock garden later—it's my pride and joy. I'd also like you to see the masterpieces on display at the court. Also...would you like to attend a Tang poetry presentation?"

Something was off. Wasn't the Tianzi too calm after everything that had

transpired? Too unfazed before so many people in an emergency situation? Was this just the majesty of a sovereign? But the Empress and the General Secretary looked different. And more importantly...

"Excuse me! What do you mean by, 'We'll be family'...?"

"Oh, sorry. I meant that you will be marrying Lingzi."

What's he saying?

Nah, nah, I only earned the right to marry Lingzi...

"Let's go back to the wedding venue, then. The guests are waiting."

"Uh... Wait...?!"

The Immortals had already prepared their mass teleportation Magic Stones.

Light diffused everywhere. We were transported back to where we came.

Ж

Yusei had said the Dark Core should not be stuck in its current role.

Nerzanpi Rocha deeply agreed with her opinion. Theirs was not a loose partnership like that of the members of Inverse Moon, who did not properly understand their boss's ideology. Spica La Gemini had failed to adequately explain her ideals to her followers, and that disparity had allowed Mulnite to defeat her organization.

But us? Unlike them, we have conviction.

Absolute trust in Yusei. Empathy. A sense of purpose.

They were as stars gathering around the brightest one in the sky, coming together to strengthen their evil.

"Heh. What a pitiful man, that Grand Chancellor." Nerzanpi lit a cigarette as she walked down the hallways of the palace.

It was her seventh today. She recalled Yusei telling her to abstain from it, but she was not here now.

The idiots who'd been teleported to the Starquake Agency were now at the venue holding a wedding.

Good. They wouldn't notice one woman in black disappearing. This country truly was full of oblivious, peace-addled morons.

"Congratulations, Your Highness. Too bad the path you've chosen is painted in red... Hmm?" Nerzanpi's Correspondence Crystal glowed; she picked it up without stopping. "Hello? Minister of Military Secrets speaking."

"It's Mary! My work here is done!"

The Warblade sounded more excited than usual.

The former retainer of Gerra-Aruka, Mary Fragment, was guarding the Starquake Agency.

"I feel amazing! All that bullshit I put up with under you was worth it."

"Well done. Did you have a hard time?"

"It was nothing. I escaped the Metropolis for this moment."

Mary chuckled like a wild beast.

"I've captured Nelia Cunningham. I get to do anything I want with her, right?"



They pushed me and Lingzi up to the stage as soon as we were back at the venue.

Stares of excitement and felicitation fell upon us from every direction. Even Leona and Prohellya were grinning. However, Vill and Sakuna's expressions were totally flat. Meihua—healed thanks to the Dark Core—only shrugged.

The personal guard and Nelia's team had stayed behind to take care of things at the Starquake Agency.

Meanwhile, it seemed like the wedding was about to happen for some reason. Why do I have to get married? Why am I up here looking at Lingzi?

The green bride wore a pure-white wedding dress. She looked into my eyes super-duper shyly.

"What should we do ...?"

"You're asking me...?"

"Lady Komariii! Should we resume the terrorist attacks?! Of course we should, I'll get right on it!!" Vill yelled.

"Ms. Komari!! Should I kill the Tianzi again?! Of course I should, I'll get right on it!!" Sakuna shouted.

"Calm down, you two!"

As I appeased both criminals, I did some thinking. What would happen if I refused to marry Lingzi? The crowd would boo me to hell, clearly. But I didn't have the courage to go through with it to begin with. Also, we were both girls—was same-sex marriage legal in the Enchanted Lands?

The Tianzi smiled like the kindly old man he was and said:

"Well, for starters, how about you kiss the bride?"

"Huh? Whoa, whoa—kiss her?! You mean, like, putting our lips together?!"

The crowd went wild. Some of them started chanting, "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!"

No way. Don't you get that a kiss isn't something you do lightly?

"Wh-what do we do? That'd be awkward, right?" I asked.

"R-right... I'm sorry, Komari...for making you go through this..." Lingzi looked down in embarrassment.

She was so unbelievably gorgeous that I couldn't take my eyes off her.

No, wait, what are you thinking?

I had to clear up this misunderstanding—but then I started to feel unsettled.

The pretty glow in Lingzi's crimson eyes took hold of my heart.

A strange, deep emotion welled within me. That crimson shade gave me a sense of déjà vu.

Vill. Sakuna. Nelia. Karla. My friends' eyes had all glowed that same hue in battle.

Wait, is she...?

The moment I realized the shocking truth, Lingzi collapsed on me. Is she really

gonna kiss me?! I was practically losing my mind at the thought, but no matter how much I waited, her lips didn't come.

"Cough!"

Instead, someone screamed. Unrest spread through the venue.

Lingzi coughed, splashing blood on my tuxedo.

I was paralyzed with shock.

Blood was pouring from Lingzi's mouth like a waterfall, but I couldn't even process what was going on.

Meihua shrieked, pale in the face. The Tianzi kept quiet, oddly spaced-out. Everyone else just stood there, unsure what to do.

Lingzi spat blood everywhere as she crouched down.

"Wha...? Wait, but I... I took my medication..."

Cough. Her pure-white wedding dressed was dyed crimson.

At first, Lingzi reacted to things like it was no big deal, but soon, she went quiet, unable to say anything anymore.

I just stood there, at a loss for words, in the middle of the red wedding.

I thought everything would be over once I defeated Shikai. But that wasn't the case. Lingzi was still suffering. Peace had not come to her.

The curse on the Enchanted Lands had not been lifted.



Esther Claire ran down the streets of Jingshi—or rather, she crawled. Her uniform was tattered, and she was covered in wounds. She was far from Mulnite's Dark Core, and the pain would not cease.

"Commander...!"

The passersby were startled at the sight of her, but she couldn't have cared less. She continued toward the palace through the tears.

She thought back to what had just transpired.

Esther had gone to the Starquake Agency with Nelia. It was an important

mission to expose the grand chancellor's misdeeds, and everything was going smoothly: Nelia, Gertrude, and the journalists mowed down the soldiers defending the place and successfully revealed Shikai's transgressions.

But then a single woman turned the tables.

A Warblade with a nihilistic smile used her mysterious Core Implosion to defeat Nelia in an instant. But it wasn't because she'd simply been stronger than Nelia—the woman had done something to her.

It all went downhill then.

Gertrude could not possibly defeat someone who took out Nelia. The journalists were hopeless as well. Esther, too, was crushed immediately. She was powerless against the woman's attacks. But at the last moment, Nelia yelled, "Go to Komari!" and Esther switched gears to escaping, obeying her superior's command on reflex.

"Why...? How did it come to this...?"

The Correspondence Crystal showed no response.

Perhaps there was magic jamming at play.

And maybe...maybe they had been led by the nose from the very beginning...?

Esther opened the guidebook on Jingshi. She had to get into a back alley first. This should be the shortest route..., she thought, going away from the street, when...

"Well, well, if it isn't Second Lieutenant Esther Claire."

A woman clad in a coal-black outfit was standing beyond the alleyway.

Esther was too dazed to say anything. She had crossed paths with the Ruist, Minister of Military Secrets of the Enchanted Lands: Nerzanpi Rocha. The evildoer who'd collaborated with the grand chancellor to continue the experiments of the Daydream Paradise.

"Looks like Mary let a critter escape. I'll make sure to scold her next time I see her."

"You... What do you want ...?!"

"Why would I tell you? By the way, did you go into the Starquake Agency?"

"...Yes! We got proof of your wrongdoings! Six Nations News reported on it! There's no use escaping no—"

Esther felt a jolt in her chest.

She looked down in disbelief.

Blood was spurting from a hole in her chest. All strength left her body, and she dropped on the ground. Her Chain Metal rattled as it fell down with her.

"Wha...?"

"You saw something you shouldn't have. Learn the truth in the morn and you shall not object upon dying by dusk. Although, since it's been reported on now, I suppose that means I should kill everyone in the world? Ah, well. All according to plan."

Nerzanpi's lips curled in a faint smile around her cigarette as she aimed her revolver.

It was only after the shot that the pain set in.

"A...Ahh...!"

"Does it hurt? I would think so. But you brought it upon yourself. I'll make you my Baolu... Actually, I changed my mind. I don't think you'd be as compatible."

What is she talking about? It hurts. I can't get up.

A vampire killed in Jingshi would not return to life. The sheer dread left Esther's mind blank. She could only shiver in cold and despair at the thought that she would die here.

"Commander Komarin..."

"It's useless. She's in the middle of her wedding. Your wounds will not heal, and they're fatal. Too bad, Esther Claire... I'll give you a proper burial, so forgive me, okay?"

"...!"

Then Esther heard the sound of her life being extinguished.

She'd graduated at the top of the Mulnite Military Academy. She'd managed to get into her dream position, the Komari Unit. She'd gotten to make friends with Commander Komarin and the members of the Seventh Unit. And finally, she'd been put on her first big mission in the Enchanted Lands.

But now her life was over.

Nerzanpi took Esther in her arms. All sensation in Esther's body was already fading.

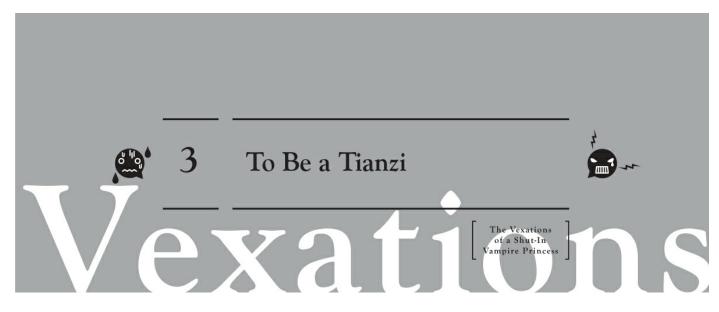
Nerzanpi was going to toss her corpse somewhere.

"I'm...so...rry..."

No one heard Esther's last whisper.

She repented in her heart as her tears overflowed.

I'm sorry, Monique. I couldn't be a good soldier.



Lingzi Ailan is an ordinary girl, Shikai Gudo thought.

She was not fit to be a ruler. As her retainer Meihua Liang said, she was "fragile."

Yet that was no bad thing. The world was made up of such small, weak people. Not being worthy of standing above the rest was no reason for criticism.

She simply had to bear the weight of far too much suffering.

"Because I'm the Gongzhu," "because I'm the next Tianzi," "because I'm a Draconic Meteor"—this unjust reality inflated her ideals. The standards she imposed on herself were a curse.

That was why Shikai Gudo wanted to save her. It wasn't for the sake of the Enchanted Lands, but rather, for her.

Shikai came from humble origins. He had no choice but to take the imperial examination, the public servant test, in order to raise his family's reputation. From a young age, he studied like hell, sitting at his desk fourteen hours a day. His father would thrash him if he made the smallest mistake reciting the holy texts. To avoid this, he took to cheating, writing the text out in tiny letters and hiding it in his clothes. When he was found out, he was locked in a shed for a whole day in the middle of winter, nearly dying in the process.

He cried every night. He hated this life. He didn't want to be a servile civil officer, but a commander who traveled around the world. He wanted to be like the dazzling Seven Crimson Lords or the Eight Illustrious Generals in the Dark

Core Zone.

Yet he could not go against his family's plans.

He ground away at his studies until he at last passed the final section of the exam and joined the center of the Ailan dynasty. He had no talent in battle, only in words.

"Bring a bright future to the Gudo name."

Shikai hated his father's flattering smile.

It was an honor for the whole family to have a member pass the imperial examination, yet Shikai despised his lot. His father had stolen his youth from him. He did no real work himself, yet forced his son to study. He would yell at him if his grades were not good. The beating was not an exceptional case, either.

I don't care about my family. I only work for my own sake.

Shikai's heart turned ice cold. He decided to live for himself.

And he didn't care about who he had to kick down in the process. He didn't care about developing a reputation. He toiled away for his own ambitions. He fawned and bribed to climb the ladder. He put on a soft facade as he waited for his chance to rise.

Then one day, he met Lingzi Ailan.

"You're like the jester of Aruka."

She was under ten at the time. She had the same innocent smile as any other kid you could find running about the streets of Jingshi. He found it strange to think that she was the daughter of the Tianzi, the most powerful man in the world.

"Your Highness, I am no jester. I am not a Warblade, either."

"No, I can tell. You're lying."

His brain froze for a moment.

The girl, unaware of his mental turmoil, gave him a bouquet.

"Studying all the time must be tiring. I picked these flowers with Meihua. You

can have them."

The human soul was a strange thing. Sometimes, one felt like crying by just looking up at the sky.

Not even he understood what tugged at his heartstrings, but Lingzi's normal kindness was like a balm on his tired soul.

*

Nelia Cunningham awoke in a dark room. Her body felt leaden. Dull pain assaulted her joints. Her muscles tensed as she tried to get up on reflex, only to find that she could not.

Then she realized she was tied to a bed. Her body was covered in wounds, too, and the bed was stained with her blood.

A terrible memory replayed in her head.

She'd fallen into a trap while investigating the Starquake Agency.

"President Nelia Cunningham, you're finally awake."

A tall woman emerged from the darkness.

Nelia remembered everything. Her vision turned red with anger.

"You're...from Gerra-Aruka...!"

"Heh. So you remember me."

The woman approached silently, her eyes gleaming like a beast's.

Former Illustrious General Mary Fragment. A Warblade who'd worked under Madhart to oppress the citizenry. Nelia remembered clashing with her almost as many times as with Rainsworth.

Mary was imprisoned in the Metropolis after the Six Nations War, but Nelia heard she had killed herself with a Divine Instrument not too long ago. They'd held a funeral, too, so she thought her completely dead—who knew she would be in the Enchanted Lands working for the grand chancellor?

"Where's everyone else?! Gertrude?!"

"Who cares. I've been training to get my revenge on you, Nelia Cunningham. I'm overjoyed to finally get to take your life, you sorry excuse for a president."

"We've already alerted the entire world to the grand chancellor's evildoings. You'll go down with him."

"We're talking about you and me here. He has nothing to do with this."

Nelia clicked her tongue. She'd been defeated with ease at the Starquake Agency. Not through an honest swordfight, but because of Mary's special Core Implosion; it had felt as though the woman had burrowed into Nelia's mind.

"Where are we? The Starquake Agency?"

"A hideout. One whose location I've taken great pains to conceal."

"Where's Komari?"

"She left you and went back to the palace, conveniently."

Mary unsheathed the sword at her waist—the same one she'd slashed Nelia with before. Even a child would understand what she was about to do. Nelia suppressed her fear and looked for a way to escape.

"...Do you resent me? Stubbornness doesn't make you friends, you know."

"This is for President Madhart. He lost everything because of you."

"What are you talking about? He admitted defeat and withdrew."

"No. I won't believe it." Mary bored into her with an irate glare. "Do you have any idea how many people despise you, Nelia Cunningham? You might be delighted that you've imparted justice, but at the end of the day, what you did was nothing but arbitrary violence."

"That's rich coming from a tyrant like you. I do not regret my actions. I did what I did for Aruka."

"Haah... Foolish. You're ignorant of how many innocent people you've made suffer."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Many of Gerra-Aruka's officers were framed, and their families ostracized. Many of whom were not involved in any violence whatsoever."

Even in Madhart's administration, many people in office had been innocent. Sacrifices were inevitable in a revolution—but Nelia had known that before

becoming president.

Nelia's approval ratings were high. Unprecedentedly so, even when you factored in Aruka's days as a monarchy.

Still, she also endured constant criticism. People put up posters and graffiti that disparaged her every day—She's full of herself; Give us back our life, resign; Not my president.

Gertrude told Nelia not to mind them. Rainsworth suggested killing anyone who opposed her. But that would make her no different from Madhart. Nelia thought it was the president's job to listen seriously to any and all opinions, and this ideal had cost her dearly many times.

Nelia Cunningham was but an immature little girl. Too kind for her own good.

"I'll kill you here and now."

Mary raised her sword.

Nelia gritted her teeth and struggled, but her bonds refused to break. The magical stones she'd hidden in her pockets were gone, too. If Mary chopped off Nelia's head here, there would be no coming back. She was genuinely trying to kill her... But just as Nelia's eye caught the dreadful gleam of Mary's blade: "Wait."

Something even worse arrived. A woman in black marched up to them.

"I can't make a Baolu if you kill her. Use that little brain of yours, okay?

Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha. Nelia had no idea who she truly was, but the sight of her sent shivers down her spine. There was something terrifying about her presence.

"What are you doing here? You promised to let me do as I pleased with her."

"You can. But enjoying hurting people is tasteless. If you really hate Nelia Cunningham, you should destroy her dignity."

"You sure you don't just want to make that Baolu?"

"I do. Mind stepping aside for a bit, then?"

Mary relented, sheathing her sword and opening a path for her with crossed

arms. Nerzanpi approached with the smile of a dead woman. Nelia clenched her fists and yelled.

"What're you plotting?! Do you want to get your hands on Lingzi to take over the Ailan dynasty?!"

"That we will do, but it is only a means, not our end."

This woman really was evil. She was trying to use Lingzi by collaborating with the grand chancellor.

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm not really on the grand chancellor's side. I was only using him... You thought he was Lingzi's enemy and ensnared him, the poor thing. But oh well, it's his fault for acting in a way that would turn people against him."

"What?"

"Anyways, Baolu. Do you know what they are, President?"

Nerzanpi produced some sort of staff.

It was designed for combat and resembled the one Dr. Kuya had used at the Crimson Snow Hut.

"This is the Cogito Staff II, a Divine Instrument that lends us the power of our leader. With a single swing of this cane, we can steal a person's willpower."

"You mean...like Monique's etiolation?"

"That was the power of the original Cogito Staff. That only scraped off part of the willpower—but this upgraded Cogito Staff II can steal all willpower to transform its objective into a Baolu. Forget about etiolation—this will make them entirely hollow."

Nelia couldn't understand a word of what Nerzanpi had said.

Like the wind in the graveyard, her voice stoked Nelia's fear.

"By the way, your buddies have already been hollowed out."

Nerzanpi snapped her fingers, activating the Void spell of invocation. Something dropped from thin air. Nelia was shocked, as though she'd just been slapped.

"Gertrude?! And the journalists...!"

Nelia's allies fell on top of one another like junk on the floor.

Gertrude Rainsworth, Melka Tiano, Thio Flatt.

Their expressions were vacant, and they were completely still, their limbs splayed out like puppets whose strings had been cut. Nerzanpi's choice of words—"hollow"—was completely accurate; the three girls were silent and drooling.

"I haven't killed them. Out of the hollow people I turn into Baolu, I like freezing and keeping the pretty ones. They certainly are beautiful, especially the orange Warblade."

"G-go to hell! I'll kill you first!"

"Oooh, how scary. Hee-hee-hee. All the Six Valkyries have such massive willpower. The Baolu I make out of you will be gorgeous."

Nerzanpi brought the Cogito Staff II close.

Nelia could only stare at the faint light glowing on its tip.

"Now, Nelia Cunningham. Forget about your duties as the president—you will be my doll."

"I won't let you take me out without a fight! I am Aruka's president!"

"Sure. And yet so many people have a grudge against you."

Nelia's mind went blank. She couldn't do away with her kindness entirely, and it corroded her heart like poison.

Nerzanpi began to speak as though reading from a picture book.

"Once upon a time, there was a Warblade boy who lived in the Metropolis. His father was a public servant. The family was not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, but the boy lived peacefully with his father, his mother, and his sister three years younger. But one day, everything changed when the sky was painted gold."

Komari—the girl Nelia asked for help—had enveloped the Metropolis in a golden Core Implosion.

"President Madhart disappeared. Many of his workers were arrested, robbed of their jobs. The boy's father was no exception. Unbeknownst to him, the true purpose of his position was supplying the Daydream Paradise with funds, and because of this, he was imprisoned. The boy's family lost their house. He was bullied at school for being 'Madhart's lackey.' The townsfolk looked down on his family, ridiculed them, and tried to drive them out of town. Soon, they had nothing to eat and nothing to wear, so they escaped the Metropolis and headed to another country, where they eventually killed themselves. Happily ever after."

There was no guarantee anything she'd said was true.

Yet the mere possibility of something like that happening was crushing.

Madhart did not care about who he hurt, but perhaps he needed to be that way to rule. Nelia felt her heart being torn to shreds just thinking about the people she could've made suffer.

Ah... What should I do?

What would she do? How would that vampire princess answer?

"The heavens entrust their child, who we call the Tianzi, to rule over the earthly realm. If the Tianzi is judged unfit for the role, a revolution will arise, and a new Tianzi will be appointed. I thought you had what it takes to be a ruler... But perhaps the burden was too great."

Something left her body. Nelia felt something important being robbed from her.

"Oh dear. This is what one of the Six Valkyries are made of. Double the beauty of a regular person's Baolu."

Her vision darkened. Her soul closed, and sensation left her body.

"Wonderful," Nerzanpi said emotionlessly.

The last thing Nelia saw was the shining glow of the sphere in Nerzanpi's hand.

The glow of her lost will.

Nerzanpi looked down at the Nelia Cunningham doll and smiled.

The Moonpeach Princess, beloved by her fellow Warblades, stared at the ceiling with vacant eyes, a scar in the shape of a star on her chest. For whatever reason, that mark appeared whenever Nerzanpi used Yusei's power.

The young president's body was now an empty shell.

Nerzanpi stared excitedly at the Baolu glowing on the palm of her hand. She loved shiny things. Just looking at them gave her peace of mind. Not to mention the Valkyrie's was more beautiful than any other.

Mary Fragment broke the silence and grimaced.

"Uhh, I know I should've asked earlier, but what're you going to use that for? Why did the grand chancellor want it?"

"The Baolu? He thought this would become a Waidan."

"A Waidan ...?"

"But it can't. He was duped by villains. We needed the help of a whole country to mass-produce Baolu—covering up even one kidnapping would be hard enough. So, I went to the Enchanted Lands, since it seemed the easiest prey. This country's really in decline, rotten to the very core."

"That didn't answer my question. I know you betrayed him, but..."

"Isn't it shiny and pretty? And it can also be used as tool for murder."

Mary frowned in confusion.

This meathead was far from competent at explaining things.

"Nerzanpi... You aren't going to use Nelia Cunningham's for anything else, are you? I'll take her now."

"Oh dear. You're interested in her hollowed-out body? You have some nasty predilections... But I advise you to hold it. You can throw your victory party once your revenge is truly over."

"Truly...?"

"You hate Terakomari Gandesblood, don't you?"

Mary's expression immediately clouded with anger.

"The Moonpeach Princess will be the weapon that destroys Terakomari. I can't have you breaking it already."

"What're you really after?"

Nerzanpi lit a cigarette. She held the Baolu aloft and smiled.

"Our wish—Star Citadel's wish—is to end humanity. Terakomari Gandesblood represents an obstacle to this goal, and I've been tasked with eliminating her."

"Star Citadel? End humanity...?"

"The preparations are complete. First, we shall intimidate the Tianzi to tell us the Dark Core's location."

Nerzanpi quietly unleashed the willpower within her body.

Her dead eyes glowed crimson. Mary shrieked in shock. Nerzanpi raised her hand, and the "dolls" around the room instantly shambled to life. Like the dead rising from their graves.

"Core Implosion: Twisted Pedagogy," she said. "These soulless husks have fallen to despair, and it is I who will teach them the way. For you see, Ruists are also teachers."

The dolls stood up. They stared at Nerzanpi with lightless eyes.

Among them was Nelia Cunningham, naturally. The president who'd saved the world was no threat now that she was mindless. She was but a puppet without human dignity.

The Cogito Staff II imbued with Yusei's power could transform people's willpower into Baolu, which Nerzanpi could wield as a weapon. And the bodies of people drained of willpower became her puppets. She didn't just preserve them because she liked them—she could also control them with her Core Implosion.

"Now then, my children. Jingshi is about to be torn apart after the Matrimonial War and the grand chancellor's scandal. It's the perfect time to make some noise, don't you think?"

The dolls said nothing. Instead, they scattered in every direction.

So began the final stage of the Death Master's plan.



Jingshi had fallen into turmoil, like it had been hit by a hurricane.

Grand Chancellor and Starquake Minister Shikai Gudo's evildoings had been exposed.

The people who respected him had changed their tune. The posters praising him all over the high-rise buildings were torn to shreds. Activists popped up at the Zijingong to demand he quit. The monuments erected in his honor across the Enchanted Lands were smashed one after the other.

That had nothing to do with me, though. The guard had taken Shikai. They would look into the Starquake Agency's secrets. Meanwhile, the issues surrounding Lingzi were not solved in the slightest.

The truth behind the hijinks of the Matrimonial War revealed itself to me.

Lingzi was suffering from an incurable illness.

"No treatment works. The Dark Core has no effect on it. Her body just gets weaker and weaker...until she ends up spitting blood. It's a terrible disease."

Vill, Sakuna, Meihua, and I were in Lingzi's room in the Zijingong's villa, watching Lingzi sleep.

The wedding had been canceled, obviously. Lingzi's attack calmed down...but it wasn't clear if she would wake up again, and the thought of it tore my chest apart.

"There is a drug that delays the progression of her condition. She should be able to lead a normal life so long as she takes it every day...but it seems the disease has advanced to a stage that even her medication can't adequately curtail."

"There's really no way to cure her? I'm guessing the Enchanted Lands government has been trying to find it?" Vill asked.

"No, His Majesty the Tianzi pretends the sickness doesn't exist. He's escaping reality. The grand chancellor, too, of course... She had to find a way to manage

things herself."

"Hold on. But Lingzi is his daughter! How can ignore her illness?" I objected.

"That's the kind of person he is," Meihua said, full of hatred.

I was reminded of the Tianzi and his kind-looking eyes. I could have never imagined what he was thinking behind that smile.

"We visited the Mulnite Empire in February. Remember how I told you we had two objectives?"

"Sorry, I don't, really. One was defeating the grand chancellor, though, right?"

"The other was to find the Waidan. There is a medicine called the elixir of life in the Enchanted Lands' legends. This wonder drug has the power of immortality, and you can get the recipe from any bookstore."

"And you tried to heal Lady Lingzi with that?" Vill said.

"Yes, but it's not easy to make... There is one unknown ingredient in the recipe: the Waidan. We just couldn't find it—not in the Enchanted Lands, and not anywhere in the Six Nations."

"Then why did you visit Mulnite?"

"We heard the gate to the Netherworld opened during the vampire riots. We thought there might be a clue to the Waidan in that mysterious alternate world...though we weren't getting our hopes up. Simply grasping at straws."

"Um... What form does this Waidan take?" Sakuna asked timidly.

Yeah, I was wondering that, too.

"The ancient recipe says it's a sphere that shines like a star."

Everyone lapsed into thought. Neither Vill nor Sakuna had a clue about it, much less an ignorant recluse like me.

"Hmm...? Where am I...?" A voice came from the bed.

Lingzi had regained consciousness. Meihua jumped and rushed to her aid.

"Lingzi! Are you all right?!"

"Meihua...? Yes, I'm fine."

We hurried to the bed, too.

Lingzi was out of her wedding dress and in her pajamas. She seemed calmer now—her once deathly pale face had regained some color.

"Komari... Did I faint?"

"Yeah. I was startled by all the blood... Are you really okay now?"

"It's just a cold. I'll be fine once I take my medicine."

Her pained smile stabbed my heart.

This girl was trying not to worry us. There was no need for her consideration at this point... Or, well, I guessed maybe she didn't want people to know about her disease.

"...Sorry, Meihua told us about your illness."

Her crimson eyes grew wide. She looked at her retainer asking for confirmation, and understood it from her expression.

"I'm sorry," Lingzi said with a faint smile, bowing. "I have an incurable disease. My body has a breakdown if I forget to take my meds. I was certain I took them today... I didn't mean to dirty your clothes with my blood. I'm sorry."

"What?" I was baffled.

"That's the kind of girl she is." Meihua sighed.

"No...I don't care about that. I'm worried about you. I... What should I do? How can I help you?"

"Don't worry. You've already helped me enough. You exposed the grand chancellor. Now that I don't have to worry about him locking me up, I can go look for the Waidan."

Lingzi stood up. Meihua immediately tried to stop her, but she smiled and said she was just going to the bathroom.

Still, I had a vexing haze in my head.

Don't worry? She doesn't need me now that I did what she planned?

No, that's not it. She's a kind girl. She just doesn't want to bother me

anymore. She doesn't want to get me into more trouble with the Enchanted Lands.

But...I can't stand it.

"Lingzi! I will not go home like this!"

"Kya?!"

I grabbed her shoulders without thinking. I moved so quickly the inertia pushed me and her on the bed.

She looked up at me with confused, damp eyes. I heard Vill and Sakuna throwing a fit behind me.

Huh? This position is a bit strange... But I can't stop now!

"You asked me to help you! And now you're telling me you're done with me just because I defeated Shikai?!"

"Um... Uh... You're too close..."

"Besides, I have the right to marry you! Just the right... But I'll take responsibility until the end and stay with you! I want to help you!"

"Don't say that... I can't stand it..."

"You can't stand it?! Am I bothering you? Do you hate me...?"

"No! I like you!"

"Oh? Really? Thank goodness..."

Then I felt a cold touch. I turned around and found Sakuna grabbing my ankle with a smile on her face.

"Sakuna? What's up?"

"Nothing. I just couldn't bear not touching you any longer."

I don't know what that means, so I'll just ignore it. I turned back to Lingzi and continued: "Anyways! I also like you, Lingzi. Which is why I want to he—WHOA?!"

Then I felt a hot touch. I didn't need to turn around this time. The maid was hugging me tight.

"Hey, Vill! What's wrong with you?!"

"I just couldn't bear not having you on top of me like you're doing with Lady Lingzi. I think I'll have to grab you and jump out the window."

"Don't!!"

I wrestled with the maid. Meanwhile, Sakuna clung to my thigh. Lingzi felt herself in danger and began squirming away. Whoa! Who put their hand inside my clothes just now?! Huh? Sakuna? Dammit, Vill! She's imitating your sicko behavior now!

"Let me go, Vill! You're a bad influence on Sakuna!"

"I don't get it. It's unfair that you only leap to Lady Memoir's defense."

"AAAH!! DON'T TICKLE ME!!"

"...I'm sorry, Commander. Would you mind hearing Lingzi out?" Meihua asked in a truly apologetic tone.

Vill and Sakuna stopped as well.

Right. Lingzi. No time to waste on perverts.

"Sorry! Heard her?! Back off!"

"Exactly, Ms. Villhaze. This isn't the time to horse around."

"Sakuna's right. I'll play with you later on, just compose yourself for a minute."

"Wha...? Just me...? What about Lady Memoir...?" Vill was frozen in confusion.

I regained my composure and turned to Lingzi. She was hanging her head, red in the face.

"...Thank you for worrying about me, Komari."

"Of course. There's no need to be cold like that anymore, okay?"

"Yes. I will...tell you everything."

Lingzi looked me straight in the eye. The moment her small lips parted, I heard someone rush in from outside.

"Commander! There's trouble!" Bellius Hund Cerbero kicked the door open.

No manners. He paid no heed to his conduct as he delivered a report.

"Second Lieutenant Claire...I mean, Esther is missing!"

"Wha ...?"

"There's also a riot in Jingshi. According to Mellaconcey, government buildings are being attacked one after the other..."

Just then, a huge explosion went off outside.

We hurried to the window, but we couldn't understand what was happening.

"Let's go to the rooftop!" Meihua yelled as she ran away.

"Let's go, Lady Komari!"

"Huh? Wait! Sakuna! Watch over Lingzi for a minute!"

Vill pulled me away following behind Meihua.

The teleportation Magic Stone took us to the rooftop right away. What we saw there was unbelievable.

Jingshi was on fire. People were running every which way. The high-rise building right in front of where we were looking began splitting in half; the upper part slid down and crushed the street with an apocalyptic cacophony.

"Wh-what's going on?! Don't tell me the Seventh Unit is behind this chaos again!"

"That can't be. They are discriminate in their chaos."

"How can you even have discriminate chaos...?"

"In any case, Lieutenant Cerberus is right—I can't get ahold of Esther. I don't think that a vampire as diligent as her would neglect communication like this, so there must be trouble."

"You don't think...she got hit by the riots?"

"I don't know. For starters, I can't get ahold of Lady Cunningham, either. They were both surveying the Starquake Agency, but they haven't reported since the sham wedding began. I'm sure the president is fine, considering, but..."

Nothing made any sense. And I couldn't stop thinking about Lingzi's disease.

"The grand chancellor might be behind this...," Meihua said, looking at the disaster in the city. "Maybe these riots were a contingency plan in case he lost everything. Cunning bastard..."

"Should we go ask him, then?" Vill said.

"Yeah. He must be in the underground prison."



As soon as we told her we would be going to see Shikai, Lingzi insisted on coming with us, too.

She'd just fainted from coughing blood. We told her she should rest, but she wasn't having it. She wanted to go meet him to check something.

"Commander, we will be going to look for Esther."

"Yeah. I'm worried about her, too. Take care of it, and make sure not to get injured."

"Roger." Bellius bowed before leaving.

We let them look for Esther and Nelia.

Vill, Sakuna, Meihua, Lingzi, and I went to the prison.

The giant building was west of the Zijingong. Anyone who rebelled against the Enchanted Lands was detained here. The warden showed us to the underground prison.

Shikai Gudo sat on the other side of a cell that was more tightly secured than the others.

"Ahh," he said upon seeing us. He sounded tired. "What a large group. Are you here to laugh at me?"

"Yes. Serves you right. Let's take a picture in commemoration," Vill said.

"Put that camera away! Shikai! We're here to ask you a question." I approached the cell.

Suddenly, the grand chancellor looked beyond me.

I heard Lingzi gasp. Then I saw something strange.

Shikai seemed relieved for a moment.

"Na-ha-ha! Looks like Lingzi is doing well! Thank goodness."

"...? Are you really glad to see that?"

"What? You doubt me? Why wouldn't I be glad to see my ex-fiancée in good health?"

I was convinced. He looked sincerely worried about her. That honestly shocked me.

"I heard she coughed up a ton of blood, so I thought she'd kicked the bucket...
Anyways, why are you here? Is it about the riots going on in Jingshi?"

"Y-yeah! Shikai! Don't tell me you planned this!"

"Outrageous! Isn't it obvious that I love the Enchanted Lands? Why would I destroy its capital by my own hand? Unbelievable."

"Then...who caused it?"

"Nerzanpi."

I was startled by the coldness in his voice. His face was composed, as though he was wearing a mask, yet a mix of hatred and regret overflowed from his eyes.

"...Nerzanpi? The Minister of Military Secrets?" Vill asked.

"I was duped. She aided me in running the Starquake Agency and convinced me she was on my side. Yes, I'll own up to it—I was kidnapping people for human experimentation."

"You bastard!" Meihua scowled. "And you say you love the Enchanted Lands?! You were only making Immortals suffer!"

"I won't deny it. However, everything I did was for the sake of the Enchanted Lands in the long term."

"Don't justify your evildoings! Because of you, so many people—"

"Calm down, Ms. Meihua. Let's hear Shikai out first." Sakuna put a hand on her shoulder.

That cooled her head. "Sorry." She pursed her lips.

"I don't mean to justify my actions, but I needed to dirty my hands to bring order to the world. And by that, I mean I was making Baolu at the Starquake Agency."

"Baolu?"

"We abducted compatible people and used a special spell on them, sapping them of their willpower and transforming it into matter. We call that product Baolu. Its appearance is that of a sphere, shining bright like a star."

Lingzi and Meihua raised their heads in shock.

I noticed, too. I had just heard that description.

"The first time I saw a Baolu was when Lady Nerzanpi offered me one. I felt it was destiny. It was exactly the thing I'd been looking for since forever. But her offering was not enough. I needed a purer one. Then she offered to cooperate with me to make more of them! Ahh! She had a tool to produce Baolu artificially! I accepted the offer. I followed her instructions and abducted people, locking them up in the Starquake Agency. Then we turned them into Baolu one after the other."

"Wait, Grand Chancellor... Why were you making these Baolu things?"

"The truth is, I've been lying this whole time." Shikai smiled, so innocently. "I didn't pursue making Baolu for the Enchanted Lands. Everything I did was for Lingzi Ailan."

"What...are you saying?" Lingzi's voice trembled as she furrowed her brow.

Indeed. Shikai was a villain trying to take over the Enchanted Lands. He'd stolen away Lingzi. He'd hurt Meihua in the Matrimonial War.

"Your Highness, I wanted you to lead a peaceful life. I mean... It's not fair that you have to suffer just because you are the Gongzhu, right? It's unfathomably cruel."

"Sh-shut up! Don't try to get on her good side with your nonsense!"

"Interpret it that way if you prefer, Meihua Liang. But I know I am only telling the truth."

"What was your goal...?" Lingzi asked.

"Simple. To ease your pain even the tiniest bit I could...I was trying to cure your illness."

"My illness?" Lingzi staggered. Enduring the trembling of her body, she grabbed my clothes. "You...you knew about my illness? And that it couldn't be cured by the Dark Core?"

"Of course. I have control over the Ailan dynasty."

Lingzi blinked in shock.

"Na-ha-ha!" Shikai laughed loudly and changed the subject. "In essence, I was trying to make the Waidan—the last ingredient of the elixir of life—for you. I believed the Baolu to be it, and ran the Starquake Agency to obtain it."

"Then...why did you hurt my friends? Capture all my supporters?"

"You are too ignorant of the world. Countless traitors try to get cozy with the Gongzhu... You don't know who your subordinates were? That's why it all ended like that."

"What do you mean ...?"

"I can name every last person who offered to become your ally...because I captured them all and turned them into Baolu. They spilled the beans at the slightest beating. From the safety of their positions, they engaged bribery, blackmail, and violence on a daily basis. It was a pain stopping their backdoor deals, I'll tell you. The Enchanted Lands really was a corrupt, declining nation. Everyone who approached you with a smile on their face only saw you as a tool to manipulate for their own ends—a stepping stone for increasing their renown."

"But...! You ruined the court! You let things get undisciplined... You began meetings after noon..."

"It was more convenient for me to hold them then. I was busy with my duties in the morning."

"You...you made them build monuments in your honor..."

"I'll admit that was a problem, yes. Those things only embarrass me. But the

Immortals genuinely thought highly of me, from the bottom of their hearts."

Lingzi's eyes were wide. My jaw was on the floor. I would have been unable to believe my eyes if it turned out everything he said with such a sincere gaze turned out to be lies.

"You don't know what the citizens want. You don't know anything about Jingshi to begin with. Yet you were trapped by your status and forced to work tirelessly. So, I thought to take your duties as Gongzhu and Draconic Meteor off your hands—by marrying you."

"I—I do know what my people want. I'm the next Tianzi, so of course I..."

"Can you tell me the names of everyone in the court? Explain each of their policies? The most pressing social issues to prioritize in the Enchanted Lands? And politics isn't the only issue. Do you know the total area and population of the Enchanted Lands? Its birth rate? The murder rate? There's no way you know all that."

"…"

"But that is no crime. You're the Gongzhu, not a politician. You can keep admiring flowers and stones like your father. You won't suffer that way—that's what I've been saying this entire time."

Shikai's words must have hit home for Lingzi, for tears began to form in her crimson eyes. It must have been so painful for her to realize that everything she'd done until now was pointless.

I stroked her back while thinking.

Shikai's intention to save Lingzi was admirable. And yet. I couldn't look over many of the things he'd done.

"Lord Shikai Gudo, can this Baolu cure Lady Lingzi's illness?" Vill asked.

"Ahh! How tragic reality is. As it happens, a Baolu is only a clump of willpower. It isn't the Waidan needed for the elixir. No matter how many times I tried making the elixir with the Baolu we made, it never worked out."

"Then...it was all for nothing. All those people you sacrificed."

"'Nothing' doesn't even begin to cover it. In truth, it made things worse."

Then the underground prison shook.

Something had exploded on the surface. The riots were still going on. Were the Seventh Unit guys okay? I had a really bad feeling about this.

"Lady Nerzanpi claimed Baolu was the Waidan to convince me to gather the resources for making them. I abducted people for her. I followed her instructions... But that was foolish of me. She only made the Baolu for herself and used the hollowed-out people left over like puppets. Her Core Implosion lets her manipulate people like that. I imagine that's the source of the turmoil up there."

"You haven't found a way to save Lingzi's life, and Nerzanpi plotted to use your misdeeds to carry out even greater crimes... I see."

"Unfortunately, yes. I don't know what her end goal is. Maybe she wants to take over the Enchanted Lands... Or maybe she wants to destroy it... There are many possibilities, but none of them can be good. And it is my fault for not being able to keep her in check."

It sounded like the worst-case scenario was happening.

I glanced at the green girl standing beside me. It was hopeless. I'd come all the way here trying to help her...but I could do nothing.

"...Grand Chancellor, I understand what you were trying to do," Lingzi said, clenching her fists. "I truly am an ignorant failure of an Immortal. I spent my whole life inside the palace and know nothing of the world. Still, I have a duty to fulfill as the Gongzhu."

"Your Highness... Weren't you listening? I locked you away to keep you from doing just that. Your illness will only worsen if you overexert yourself."

"Still, I am the Gongzhu all the same. I must stop the Minister of Military Secrets' rampage."

"Listen already! You're gravely ill! And you think you can stop Nerzanpi? There's no way. She's a monster. She can kill a regular person like you in an instant."

"Still! I can't let her destroy Jingshi!"

"You're just a kid! Let the adults take care of that!"

"You couldn't do anything yourself!"

Shikai flinched, his heart gouged by her words.

"Which is why I have to do something. I'll stop Nerzanpi...and become the Tianzi. Then I'll find a way to cure my illness on my own..."

Shikai clicked his tongue and glared at us, gripping the iron bars tight.

"You shouldn't be the Tianzi! Leading a country only wears your spirit out day in and day out."

"I don't mind."

"Do you have the determination I or Gerr—Madhart had?! Just so you know, your father certainly doesn't! That is why he stays home all day playing in his stone garden! And he was passionate at first! He only wound up like that after experiencing setback after setback! He should've ceded his title from the beginning if he was going to turn slothful like that! And I can tell a fragile girl like you will only end up the same! Stop dreaming of things beyond you!"

"Stop it." I stuck up for Lingzi.

She had tears in her eyes. There is nothing "beyond you" or "within you" when it comes to dreams. I could not stand to see someone lay out another person's life for them based on their own preconceived notions.

"You underestimate Lingzi. She might be weak and ill, and ignorant about Jingshi, but she wants to do her best for the sake of the Enchanted Lands. I will not let you disrespect her feelings."

"Komari..."

"Besides, she won't have to do it alone. I'm here for her."

"What?" Shikai exclaimed. "What are you talking about, Terakomari Gandesblood? Are you not a slaughter champion here to conquer the Enchanted Lands?"

"What're YOU talking about?! There's no way I'd do that!"

"The newspaper said you were going to take over the world! And you actually

blew up the palace! The vampires from your unit we captured said you're trying to achieve world domination! Are you telling me you *aren't* plotting to take over the Enchanted Lands by using Lingzi?!"

"Hey, Vill, what should I say to him?! I can't let them ruin my reputation like this!"

"This is convenient. Let's make the misunderstanding even worse... Lord Shikai Gudo, Lady Komari is intent on turning the land of your country into a frying pan in order to cook the greatest omelet rice in history. Its ketchup will be the blood of your people."

"Stop making shit up!!"

I didn't have the time or energy to deal with the sicko maid.

I had to clear up this misunderstanding... Or did I?

It didn't matter what other people thought. I'd already decided I was going to fight for Lingzi.

"You do what you want to do, Lingzi. I'll help you out any way I can."

"Komari... Thank you. You're so kind." She wiped her tears and smiled.

I wasn't kind. I just couldn't stand Shikai or Nerzanpi.

"...Commander Gandesblood, will you really help Lingzi?"

"To the best of my ability. That's why I came to the Enchanted Lands."

Shikai glared at me with his jester-like eyes. Lingzi clung to me in anxiety. After Shikai and I stared each other down for a few seconds, he sighed in resignation and smiled.

"Do your worst! That little girl's weaker than you imagine."

"You don't know anything about her."

"I know everything about her. But I have no right to say anything after how hard I failed. Take care of her now."

He bowed meekly.

Shikai may have cared about Lingzi, but it didn't change the fact that he made

so many people suffer by continuing the work of the Daydream Paradise. And in my opinion, forcing tragedy upon other people to fulfill one's wishes was unforgiveable.

"You don't need to tell me."

"...Right. You are her fiancée, after all."

I shot him one last glare before turning heel.

"Let's go, Lingzi. The officers will take care of interrogating Shikai."

"Yes..."

We left the cell. Lingzi seemed worried about Shikai until the very end. It was only natural. He wasn't simply her enemy. He was also the only Immortal besides Meihua to care about her.

"Why was he trying to cure my illness?"

"That's obvious—to let you grow up and take advantage of you. He could make the court his if Gongzhu was his puppet."

"But...it doesn't feel like that's the case."

"Should I kill him to check his brain? That would solve everything."

Stop it, Sakuna. Wipe that grin off your face.

And so, filled with trepidation, we walked through the prison.

Just then, I heard an explosion right above us. A tremendous shock and quake followed. I protected myself from the dust falling from the ceiling as I looked up.

"Lady Komari, we just got a report from Captain Mellaconcey. It seems the rioters have begun attacking the prison."

"...What? Why?"

"It must be because this is a government building. Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha has also issued an official statement: If you don't tell me the location of the Dark Core, I will be destroying the main bases of the Ailan dynasty one by one. So she really is behind the riots."

"She's... after the Dark Core?" Lingzi asked, holding her hand up to her chest in worry.

"It seems so," Vill replied. "She is threatening the Tianzi for it."

Every scoundrel was after the Dark Core. Inverse Moon alone was enough... Or could it be that Nerzanpi was also working for Spica? Somehow, I doubted it. It felt more like Nerzanpi was a star in the darkness to Spica's moon.

Meihua clicked her tongue and yelled:

"Let's move! We gotta get to Nerzanpi ASAP!"

"R-right! We'll die if we stay here anyways! Let's make a break for—"

The moment I tried running, the ceiling exploded. Or rather, collapsed.

I could only scream. Am I gonna die? I thought, but Vill tackled me, holding me tight as we rolled across the floor. I tried to keep the salad I'd had for lunch in my stomach as I looked ahead.

"Die, Terakomari Gandesblooood!"

A bunch of men were charging at us, swords in hand.

Huh? Why are these guys here? Does Nerzanpi want me dead? As I wallowed in despair, Vill threw kunais at them. The blades plunged into their arms, spraying fresh blood everywhere.

"Lady Memoir!"

"Yes."

Sakuna waved her staff immediately. Her white mana turned to ice and shot at the attackers. They froze over without resistance.

I shivered in the cold. Vill noticed and clutched me tighter to warm me up... But she wasn't acting out of pure kindness—*Stop groping me, you sicko!*

"Let me go! Thanks for saving me, though! But why are they after me?!"

"It's an inescapable truth that people will come after your life... But I don't know what Nerzanpi is planning."

"Are these people the puppets the grand chancellor mentioned? I can't see

vitality in their eyes." Meihua stared curiously at the ice statues.

Sure enough, they didn't look alive. They also had a star-shaped scar on their foreheads. Maybe that signified they had fallen under Nerzanpi's control. *So then, Monique...?*

"Lady Komari! A second wave's coming!"

"Wha? Gweh?!" I shrieked as Vill pulled me by the collar.

Hostile murderers fell from the wrecked ceiling one after the other. They glared at me like they wanted to kill me. But why? The next moment, they started throwing grenades at me. One just barely grazed my cheek and exploded behind me. Why?!

"Ms. Villhaze! I don't have access to the Dark Core's supply of mana! There's a limit to my freezing magic! We should withdraw!"

"I understand. Excuse me, Lady Komari."

"Huh? Whoa, Vill, don't carry me like that! You're embarrassing me!"

"Should I give you a bridal carry, then?"

"That won't help!"

Vill ignored my screams and ran away.

I heard screams and spells flying from behind. I was trembling. I could die any second. But I couldn't whine.

I glanced at my side. Meihua was also bridal-carrying Lingzi, and my eyes met hers.

We looked away awkwardly. Still, I decided to do my best for her. I had to speak with Nerzanpi, at the very least.



"This is an announcement from Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha. The riots are a result of His Majesty the Tianzi's failings. A revolution is coming. This is fate. Hand over the right to be Tianzi to Lady Nerzanpi—give her the right to the Dark Core. The riots will continue until this is done."

The voice of Nerzanpi's subordinate echoed from speakers all over Jingshi.

"A band of miscreants is attempting to stop the revolution—Gongzhu Lingzi Ailan and Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood's clique. We have placed a bounty on their heads. Citizens, we ask you to kill them on sight or report their locations. I repeat..."

"What the hell?! This is beyond outrageous!!" Prohellya Butchersky yelled.

She was on a bridge connecting some high-rise buildings, crossing her arms. Beside her was catgirl commander Leona Flatt.

"I don't know what's going on anymore. Why did this Nerzanpi woman do this? For starters, does she have the power to do all this?"

"First, because she's after the Dark Core. Second, she has the power to manipulate other people. Look at the rioters. They're not doing this out of their own volition. Something has been planted inside them where their souls should be."

"How can you tell?"

"That much is obvious from their hollow expressions. Their willpower is being manipulated from the outside. It's probably a worse version of Monique Claire's etiolation."

Prohellya observed Jingshi, gun in hand. Quelling this much chaos by herself would be impossible. The only way to stop it would be killing Nerzanpi.

The problem was she only sent instructions to her subordinates while in hiding.

Pitolina was running around looking for her, but she hadn't found even the slightest lead so far.

Prohellya and Leona couldn't afford to act recklessly.

The Enchanted Lands' Tianzi had asked all other national leaders not to interfere with the riots, as it was an internal problem. He even went so far as to say he would mobilize the army in retaliation if anyone tried. Prohellya had no idea what he was thinking; perhaps Nerzanpi had threatened him to say so.

"Darn General Secretary...so upright in the worst places. At this rate, the Minister of Military Secrets will be able to do whatever she wants."

"What is it?" Prohellya asked, but received no answer. She waved in Leona's face, and nothing; she danced a *kozachok* in midair, and nothing. The catgirl just kept staring blankly.

"Did the airwaves hack your brain? Your hair's on end, and your tail's getting thicker."

"No... That's not it... Sister?"

"Sister?" Prohellya followed her gaze.

She was looking at a bank managed by the Enchanted Lands government. Its ceiling was blown apart.

There, Prohellya saw two familiar faces.

"Thio!! The money!! Grab all the money!!"

"Yahoo!! Now I don't have to work for the rest of my liiife!!"

"Hold it!! We're using all of this to fund Six Nations News!!"

"Look at this, Ms. Melka!! There's a heap of treasure behind this frame!! You can't get anything past me, punks! I can sniff out a single speck of gold in the middle of a desert in one second flat!! Hand over all the money, or I'll gouge your eyes out!!"

"Good job, Thio!! You were born to be a thief!! I'll allow you to keep that as a side gig!!"

•••••

•••

"My sister's turned to a life of crime?!"

"No, relax. She's being manipulated, too. Probably. I think."

"But I can't let her keep going like that! Gosh, what a troublemaker my sister is!"

Leona jumped off the bridge, descending toward the bank with meteoric speed.

Prohellya sighed and followed with levitation magic.

"Yahoo!! Hand over everything, down to the very last pennyyy!"

"Stop making trouble!!"

"Gweh?!"

Leona came up to the catgirl—who was armed with a hatchet—and stopped her rampage by landing a dropkick on the side of her face. Thio flew away like a billiard ball and smashed into the wall, losing consciousness immediately. Her eyes swirled as she lay there.

"Thio?! Who's the scoundrel trying to stop our robber—IEGH!"

Prohellya subdued the Sapphire with a karate chop.

Quiet returned before the civilians trembling by the walls cheered, "Commander Butchersky!" "She's come to save us!" Applause enveloped the bank. *All right, let's enjoy this for a bit.*

"Wah-ha-ha! You have nothing to fear, for I, Commander Prohellya Butchersky, am here! You can go back home and rest easy, regular citizens!"

"No, they can't!" Leona bopped Prohellya across the head and stood there in discontent. "Is this really Nerzanpi's doing? I could see this just happening."

"You have zero trust in your sister, huh? But look, the journalists have star marks on their chests." Prohellya tore apart Melka's clothes to show Leona. "I am guessing this is the mark of etiolation, as Monique Claire had a similar one, too."

"Who's Monique Claire?"

"Don't worry about it. You only need to know that this star mark is proof those two were under Nerzanpi's control. She stole their willpower and ordered them around."

Leona tilted her head, a question mark popping above it.

But soon, she accepted it. Her eyes gleamed sharp as she exclaimed, "So we

just need to take Nerzanpi down!" Indeed, it was that simple.

That got Prohellya thinking. Where was Nerzanpi's next target, Terakomari Gandesblood?



Something was making her nose tingle. It smelled like the medicine Lieutenant Villhaze sometimes made. Then she realized she was in bed. She squirmed and felt a sharp pain in her chest.

Finally, Esther Claire woke up.

Her uniform and underwear had been taken off. In their place were bandages around her injuries. What was going on? Why was she in such a state?

"What...happened...?"

"Hmm. You barely managed to avoid taking a one-way trip to heaven."

Esther turned to her side in shock. There was an Immortal with her hair in buns standing next to her. Esther practically leaped out of her bed.

"Dr. Kuya?! What're you doi—Ow!"

"Simmer down. You're going to open your wounds." Dr. Kuya sighed and pushed her down.

She didn't seem hostile. In fact, she seemed worried.

"It's good to see you're okay," she said to the flustered vampire. "You were in a horrible state. You'd be dead if it weren't for me."

"Um... Thank you...?"

"I'm sure there's a lot you wanna say. Just calm down first."

Dr. Kuya made her lie down. Esther stared at her with conflicted emotions.

This was the woman who'd made her sister Monique suffer. She had been missing ever since Commander Komarin blew her away—so she ran off to the Enchanted Lands?

"That gunshot wound is clue enough. Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha did you in, didn't she? Not that I need to ask; I was watching. It was awful."

Esther's memories were hazy.

"Want some water?" Dr. Kuya offered. Esther accepted gratefully. Only after taking a sip did it occur to her that the beverage could be poisoned. But she dismissed the idea right away. Dr. Kuya wouldn't have helped her if she wanted her dead.

"Back on topic. Nerzanpi shot you and threw you into a garbage dump. I was shocked, really. Didn't think she'd shoot someone in the middle of the day. I pulled you out the moment she left and brought you here."

"And...where are we?"

Esther looked around. It looked like she was in a small hospital room, full of a vast number of books. The walls were lined with texts on medicine and plants and other things she didn't understand.



"This is my hideout. We're under the eastern section of Jingshi."

Dr. Kuya pulled out a chair and sat down. She crossed her legs, her expression serious.

"The bullet pierced your body, but it missed your vitals. The Baolu she shot you with was pure willpower, not matter. It won't leave shrapnel behind, so you don't need to worry about that."

"What ...?"

"Basically, treating you wasn't hard. You were unbelievably lucky."

"Sorry if I'm just being ignorant, but...couldn't you have taken me to the Dark Core Zone?"

"Nerzanpi's gun is a Divine Instrument. The Dark Core couldn't have helped you."

Esther gasped. She really had been on death's door.

Either way, this woman had saved her. There was no doubt about that, at least.

"Um, Dr. Kuya... Thank you for saving me, but... Why? After all you did to Monique."

"I am really sorry about that. I am a doctor; I'm supposed to help the weak."

Dr. Kuya chuckled self-derisively, then bowed earnestly. Esther stared at her hair buns and thought, *Did she have a change of heart? Or is she not a bad person at her core to begin with?*

"Nerzanpi ordered me to conduct experiments on Monique to reveal the workings of willpower. I followed her instructions and made Monique suffer... until Commander Gandesblood told me off. I figured I should change my ways."

"…"

"I know it's hard to believe. You can punch me if it makes you feel better."

Esther couldn't chastise her.

It was too much to keep up with. She didn't have the energy to punch Dr.

Kuya. And most importantly, the woman had given her a sincere apology. And saved her. Esther thought it was best to put her feelings aside for now.

"...I must do my job. Could you tell me what Minister Nerzanpi is scheming? What happened to President Cunningham, and what is going on in Jingshi?"

"Very well. I can't let Nerzanpi get away with this, either."

Dr. Kuya looked up at the ceiling.

"She's after the Dark Core. Her underlings are rioting in Jingshi as we speak."

The mana lamps on the ceiling swung. Intermittent explosions went off in the distance.

"Her underlings have been tasked with killing Terakomari Gandesblood. That vampire is trying to stop Nerzanpi."

"...!"

It was then that Esther was finally hit with a wave of anxiety.

She couldn't stay in bed. She had to go to Commander Komarin. She reached for her uniform on a hanger.

"Esther! You need to rest!"

"No! I can't! I have work to do! I need to find the Commander...and defeat Nerzanpi! I have to help President Cunningham!"

"You'll waste my efforts if you reopen your wounds! Besides, Nerzanpi disappeared! No one knows where she is!"

Esther understood Dr. Kuya's points, but she couldn't just obey her.

She was fumbling pulling her uniform on when Dr. Kuya threatened her: "I'm gonna paralyze you if you keep trying!"

Then a piece of paper fell out of her pocket.

"?"

Esther grabbed it on reflex. On it was some text that read:

We'll settle things at Death Dragon Cave.

"What is this?" Dr. Kuya looked at it in suspicion. "A note of sorts? Death

Dragon Cave is the Tianzi family grave on the outskirts of Jingshi."

Suddenly, Esther remembered. She'd picked up that note in the Starquake Agency.

More memories came back to her. She'd seen this handwriting before. Characters like stick figures doing gymnastics. Right. She saw that same handwriting when she went to the Tianzhu Hall with Commander Komarin.

"I think...this is a message...from the Minister of Military Secrets..."

"What ...?"

Dr. Kuya's face twisted in shock as she grabbed the note. She read the trace of mana on it and clicked her tongue.

"You're right—this is Nerzanpi's! Did she mean to give it to a colleague?"

"They were meeting there? Or is the Death Dragon Cave their hideout...?"

"No idea but it might be worth checking out."

"Let's go. Now."

"I just told you to stay—Hey!"

Esther ignored Dr. Kuya and stood up.

It felt like her organs were going to give out, but that was nothing compared to the rigorous training she'd undergone at the Mulnite Military Academy.

I'll be there, Commander Komarin.

Esther gritted her teeth and left Dr. Kuya's hideout.

But then she remembered she was half naked and hurried back inside, her face burning.

☆ (Going back a little)

Nerzanpi Rocha stood before His Majesty the Tianzi.

He was as ordinary as ordinary came.

He had no interest in politics. He didn't care about who his daughter would marry. He spent his days inside the palace, running away from reality. It was laughable to think he was the head of state.

The Enchanted Lands was in a precarious position without Shikai Gudo.

The Tianzi was incompetent. His successor, Lingzi Ailan, was a weak idealist.

The Enchanted Lands was as good as over. And its demise would come even sooner once deprived of its Dark Core. It seemed like the Immortals' country would be the first of the six nations to fall. Once Nerzanpi got rid of Terakomari Gandesblood, no one would be able to stop her.

"Now, Your Majesty. Tell me where the Dark Core is."

The Tianzi trembled on his luxury chair.

No one was coming to rescue him. Nerzanpi had already done away with everyone.

The man's eyes wandered like a lost child's as he twiddled his thumbs.

"What are you talking about, Minister of Military Secrets? Why are you confining me here?"

"You're still playing dumb? Don't tell me that you're too stupid to realize what trouble you're in."

"I have no idea what you mean. Are you incapable of listening to the Tianzi's command, traitor? I'll have my personal guard arrest you right away."

"Your personal guard is dead. By my hand."

"Don't jest. I have a poetry presentation coming soon..."

"Are you not interested in what is happening in Jingshi? The hardships the Immortals are going through as we speak?"

"The commanders will stop the riots. There's nothing for me to do."

The Tianzi had no idea where these commanders were now.

The First Unit's commander had escaped with Terakomari Gandesblood. The Second Unit's commander was stalled in the Dark Core Zone. The Third Unit's commander had been arrested under suspicion of aiding Shikai—who the Tianzi himself had power over.

"Stop this foolishness and release me. I will turn a blind eye to this if you do."

Nerzanpi approached the Tianzi.

He looked up at her with idle eyes. She pressed her lit cigarette on his forehead. He screamed and fell off his chair, crying "It burns!" as he crawled on the floor. An overreaction to something the Dark Core would heal.

"I see you're not used to the pain. Naturally, considering you've spent your life in this walled garden. You are not fit to be ruler. Your self-indulgence allowed miscreants like me to run rampant."

"Wh-wh-wha...?"

"A ruler who doesn't know the pain of his citizens has no value. Your only worth is your knowledge of the Dark Core's location."

"I... I..." The Tianzi shivered as if in the middle of a blizzard.

He stood up, holding his forehead. The Dark Core had healed his burn.

"I...I know the pain of my citizens..."

Nerzanpi found this odd.

He wasn't begging for his life, much less telling her where the Dark Core was. What was he yapping about now?

"I don't live like this because I want to... Once, I wanted to be a ruler to go down in the history books...but I couldn't. They say a gentleman is not a tool of limited uses...but I was limited and a tool. I worked fervently after I succeeded my father...but I could not bear it. I couldn't stomach the reality of people turning miserable with the slightest change of policy. By bringing one person fortune, I brought another misfortune. And they filed grievances against me... Some even plotted regicide..."

"I see. But only the people who can bear that pain are fit to rule a country."

"Which is why I'm saying I can't! So I had no choice but to shut myself in! I don't want to hurt anyone! I don't want to get hurt myself! I can hide away and indulge in my hobbies, and that's enough for me! I didn't want to be Tianzi! I'm not worth it!"

Bang. Nerzanpi pulled the trigger.

Her Baolu bullet pierced the Tianzi's shoulder at an imperceptible speed. He was blown back, blood spurting from his body. The Dark Core wouldn't be healing this wound. The Tianzi howled and drooled like a wild beast. The pain was so strong he couldn't speak coherently.

"No surprise here. You're as weak as I figured. I wonder if Nelia Cunningham would turn out like this if I exacerbated her symptoms."

```
"A... Aaa... Aaahh..."
```

"If you don't want to die, then tell me where the Dark Core is. You don't like getting hurt, do you?"

She pushed the muzzle of her gun to the Tianzi's temple. He wriggled like a child throwing a tantrum, all rationality gone. *Did I overdo it?* Nerzanpi lamented internally before kicking the side of his head.

"I'll give you some time. Ten seconds."

His eyes trembled like an animal's. Once she said "eight," he began talking in between sobs.

```
"Th-the Dark...Core..."
```

"Yes? Speak up, I can't hear you."

"There...is...no Dark Core in the Enchanted Lands..."

She was taken aback.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. It doesn't exist. There is no Dark Core...in the Enchanted Lands."

"…"

He was dead serious. He'd have to be a master actor to be lying about this.

There wasn't much time left. She had stopped the other countries from interfering by sending a message in the name of the Tianzi, but if she didn't wrap this up quickly, the Aruka Republic or the Mulnite Empire would send their troops.

There was simply no way the Enchanted Lands didn't have a Dark Core. What was he talking about?

Nerzanpi lit a new cigarette and mulled this over in silence.



The surface was filled with dread, too.

The first things to receive us after leaving the prison were unthinking puppets.

"Die, Terakomari Gandesbloooood!!"

"Why are they after me?!"

Puff. A wall of smoke went up.

Vill had thrown a smoke bomb as she ran across Jingshi, carrying me bridal-style. Spells were flying every which way. The Tianzhu Hall, which was undergoing repairs, was blown up again. I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you guys.

"Oh no. Now the Seventh Unit is rioting, too."

"Why?!"

"The idiots on the special team said it wasn't fair that the enemy got to rampage but they didn't. They're pillaging the palace while killing the rioters."

The members of the Seventh Unit just marched to the beat of a different drum, huh.

But where was Esther? How I wished she'd take my place as Crimson Lord... The next moment, I saw her reddish-brown hair below a public bath signboard. She was tottering on her feet. Her clothes were covered in blood. "Commander!" she yelled out tearily after she noticed me.

"Esther?! You're all right?!"

"Yes...! Thanks to Dr. Kuya..."

I stared in shock at the woman standing beside Esther, whose hair was done up in buns. It was the Immortal I'd accidentally blown away at the Crimson Snow Hut.

"It's been a while." She crossed her arms and frowned awkwardly. "Glad to

see you're well, Commander Komarin. Too well, I would say, actually."

"Watch out, Lady Komari! Shove your head into my clothes and sniff my breast to hide from the enemy!"

"Do you think I'm a breast ostrich or something?! I'm not sniffing any part of you!"

"DIE, TERAKOMARI GANDESBLOOD!!"

Another Immortal charged at me from behind.

Fortunately, Sakuna pierced the dude with an ice pillar.

This wasn't the time to clown around. We had to move on, or I would actually die for real.

"Esther...what happened? Where were you? And what's with those injuries?"

"The Minister of Military Secrets shot me. Dr. Kuya healed my wounds... And... at the Starquake Agency... President Cunningham...!"

"Calm down, Esther. I'm here now. It's okay."

"Commander...!"

Tears welled up in her eyes, which she wiped away with her sleeve before putting on a serious face. She took a deep breath and gave a military salute.

"Allow me to deliver my report... We successfully infiltrated the Starquake Agency and exposed the grand chancellor's secrets, just as planned. It played out exactly as you saw on the Six Nations News' broadcast. But after that...we were caught by surprise and defeated."

"What?! Where's Nelia?!"

"President Cunningham, Commander Rainsworth, and the two journalists were captured. It was all a trap laid by the Minister of Military Secrets. I did as the President ordered and escaped, just barely clinging to dear life...but I ran into the Minister on my way to the palace. She shot me and took me out. I'm sorry." Esther bowed.

There was nothing she needed to apologize for. I couldn't believe her report. There should have been no way Nelia would get caught off guard like that... But

sure enough, we couldn't get in contact with her.

More importantly, however...

"Are you okay?! What about the gunshot?! Your clothes are drenched in blood!"

"I healed her already. Don't worry," Dr. Kuya said, her expression tense. "She would have died if no one found her, since her wounds were from a Divine Instrument, but I was born to treat patients like her. As long as Esther gets some rest, she'll make a full recovery."

"There won't be any aftereffects? She'll be okay?"

"Yes. More importantly... Uh..."

Dr. Kuya trailed off. She seemed to be pretty scared of me. Or rather... nervous? Anyway.

"Thanks for saving Esther!" I told her.

"Huh? Y-yeah...," she responded.

"Despite everything that happened with Monique...I'm glad you saved her big sister. And I'm glad you're okay, too. I was worried about you after I blew you away... I overdid it... Sorry."

"...Huh? Yeah... I am a doctor, after all. Of course I'd be fine."

"Thank you, really. You're an amazing doctor."

Dr. Kuya looked like she was seeing things. She turned away for some reason and wiped her eyes before speaking hoarsely: "No, I'm not amazing. I hurt the people I should've been helping after I was tempted by Nerzanpi... I should be dead, yet here I am. I don't know why the heavens still keep me alive."

"Now's not the time to be sentimental, Lady Dr. Kuya," Vill said, rolling her eyes. "Getting back on topic, Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha was behind everything, correct? And this madness will stop if we butcher her?"

"Probably...but I don't know where she is," said Dr. Kuya.

"I just got a message from Captain Mellaconcey. It seems the Starquake Agency was blown to bits, too. Getting rid of the evidence...? Now we have no

trail to follow," said Vill.

Was Nelia okay, though? Hadn't she been subdued there?

Knowing her, we shouldn't have to worry... But I couldn't help but feel as though my heart was being torn apart. We had to find Nerzanpi ASAP.

"I think I know...where she is," Esther said, frowning in pain. "Death Dragon Cave. I found a note saying We'll settle things there."

"Death Dragon Cave? That's the name of the Tianzi family grave," Meihua said, coming back from repelling the attackers.

Lingzi raised her head sharply.

"There's this tradition of revering the mausoleum of the past dynasty when a new one begins. Nerzanpi is serious about ending the Ailan dynasty..."

"Let's go, then. I will accompany you, Comman—" The moment Esther stepped forward, she crouched down and clutched her chest.

I ran up to her, worried. She was pale. She really had to rest.

"I'm sorry, Commander... A little pain won't stop me..."

"Stop! Don't do this! You wait here with Dr. Kuya!"

"But..."

"Don't worry. I will take care of everything."

My assertion was baseless, but as her superior, I had put on a brave face. That's what I'd done up to now. Esther spaced out for a moment before tearing up and saluting me with an "It's in your hands, Commander."

I replied with a smile and ran away again—or rather, Vill ran away with me in her arms.

Making a fool of myself after bluffing was an everyday thing at this point, so I didn't care.

The only thing on my mind was stopping Nerzanpi.



"Dr. Kuya! Take care of Esther!" the crimson commander said before leaving.

That girl really had no sense of self-preservation. Dr. Kuya was her enemy. The evil woman who'd made Monique Claire suffer so much.

"Thank you, really. You're an amazing doctor."

Her earnest smile had moved Doctor Kuya.

"Terakomari Gandesblood..."

Nerzanpi had killed Dr. Kuya in Frezier. And yet, here she was, alive and well. Someone had saved her back then. Though her memory of it was foggy, she recalled a voice amid the blizzard.

"You cannot die here. The Goddess's foresight can't be used now, but you have a skill like no other. Your medical abilities will be of great help to her."

She felt like she had heard that voice before.

Perhaps it was a dream. It had felt like the heavens were telling her to live.

Either way, Dr. Kuya had indeed aided Terakomari Gandesblood with her skills. Perhaps it was fate. It had been years since the last time she felt such joy.

"Dr. Kuya, I want to sneak after the Commander..."

"No. Go back to bed."

"But...! I can't be the only one resting! I'd be a failure of a soldier!"

"A good soldier rests when she has to."

She pulled Esther back into the room while the girl demanded to go back to work.

A doctor's job was to heal her patients. Saving the world was best left to the heroes—so thought Dr. Kuya while tying her patient to the bed.



She was in the middle of endless fog.

Her surroundings were blurry. There was no light wherever she went. The golden mana inside her had disappeared, along with the bright memories of having saved the world.

Everything that made her her was fading away. Only insults remained.

You're not worthy of being president. It was Terakomari who defeated Madhart. You did nothing. You have no talent. Your policies are useless. Madhart was better. You don't care about your citizens. My family is in shambles because of you. Resign. Apologize. Die.

Her heart's defenses had been lifted.

The delirious insults stabbed her chest like knives, but she felt no pain. Even her ability to feel that had been taken away.

What should she do?

She couldn't think. She had things to do, but she couldn't act.

After walking endlessly through the fog, she finally saw light.

A faint glow, like a star in the darkness.

She reached out for salvation. Then someone punched her head. She turned midair before falling to the ground. She let the sharp pain wash over her as an angry voice yelled: "Don't act on your own, puppet."

She was pulled up by her hair.

A malignant whisper in her ear:

"Now go. You will kill Terakomari Gandesblood."

She had no sense of right and wrong. She didn't know what she should do.

So, in the middle of the fog, in her addled mind, she thought: Obey the voice.

*

The mausoleum was on the border of Jingshi.

The guards had rushed to the city proper to quell the riots. A giant, wide-open hole in the ground awaited us. A massive chasm.

Step by step, I carefully descended the spiral staircase on the wall. I looked below but couldn't see anything in the pitch-darkness. Maybe there was a magical barrier in place that prevented people from looking in from the outside.

"...Have you been here, Lingzi?"

"No, I don't think so."

"This is a grave, after all. Revering the ancestors is the Tianzi's job, not the Gongzhu's," Meihua added.

Apparently, they buried everyone in the Tianzi's family here. Lingzi's ancestors lay inside this hole. I felt like we'd get cursed entering here without permission.

An eerie gale blew from within the darkness, like breath from the underworld.

After walking for a while, we passed through a sort of thin film. An instant later, my sight was restored. There really was a barrier in place.

Before us lay an underground ruin.

A circular space with walls decorated brightly and with vibrant colors. Tons of doors everywhere. It was like we were in Death Dragon Cave's terminal.

"Wow. Are the corpses behind the doors?" Sakuna looked around with curiosity, her voice oddly cheery.

You into this sorta thing?

"I don't know the structure of this place, but I would guess so, logically speaking. The Tianzi from six hundred years ago, seven generations of the Ailan dynasty, must lie there," Meihua said.

"How exciting! Would it be wrong if I took a peek inside their coffins?"

Of course it would! What are you saying?! I retorted internally to Sakuna's twisted comments while walking down the center of the hall.

Nerzanpi was nowhere to be found. I looked up and saw that the sky had turned dusk-red. The riots were still going on in Jingshi—you could hear the screams and explosions if you paid enough attention.

Then I noticed Lingzi staring at a point on the wall. Her expression was indecipherable, like a mix of despair and resignation.

"What are you looking at?"

"...Oh, nothing."

She was gazing at a door that was plainer than the rest. I checked the plate above it, which read, HISTORIC DANSHOUZHI MAUSOLEUM. No idea what that meant.

"Komari... I...," Lingzi said hesitantly. "Can I really become the Tianzi? Would I be capable enough?"

"I know you can do it."

"...Of course. Yeah," she said, half to herself.

I knew she would be fine. Lingzi was gravely ill, but there was still hope we could cure her. We just had to look for a treatment together.

Just then, one of the doors opened with a thud.

Everyone turned around in shock. I was sure one of the corpses inside had woken up, but no.

I recognized the people who revealed themselves.

"Nelia?! And Gertrude...!"

Nelia Cunningham and Gertrude Rainsworth.

The pair who'd gone missing at the Starquake Agency approached us in silence.

"Hmm?" Vill furrowed her brow, but I paid her no heed and walked toward them. Nelia was fine! How could I not be happy?

"Nelia! Thank goodness! You oka—"

"Lady Komari, get back!!"

I heard something slash through the air. I tried approaching Nelia, but I couldn't anymore. Vill had pushed me aside. C'mon, you're usually more discerning of the time to be a pervert.

Before I could tell her that, however, I felt something gooey.

Blood was spurting from Vill's belly above me.

"Huh? Vill...?"

"Ms. Komari!" yelled Sakuna.

Ice shards shot from her staff at Nelia and Gertrude. The duo silently jumped into the air to dodge the attack.

What was going on? Next thing I knew, Sakuna was standing on guard in front

of me—glaring at Nelia and Gertrude.

I finally realized there was something wrong with them. The light in their eyes was gone. Usually, they shone like jewels overflowing with strong will, but now they were murky. Neither girl seemed to recognize us.

Not to mention Nelia's twin blades. They were stained red.

What? No way...

"Ugh... Gegh. Lady Komari..."

"Vill?! You okay?!"

"I-I'm fine. Just... The puppets in the city had eyes like these... They must be... under Nerzanpi's control..." Vill panted, pale in the face.

I looked at Nelia in shock. Vill was right. Otherwise, they would have no reason to attack us. Vill shouldn't have gotten hurt like this. I had to help her somehow. But I didn't have the Dark Core to help her. She'd die unless I took her to Dr. Kuya or the Dark Core Zone.

"The time has finally come, Terakomari Gandesblood."

Someone emerged from the shadows. A tall Warblade in military uniform. I had no memory of her face, but I immediately knew, from the evil air about her, that she was Nerzanpi's peer.

"A Warblade?! Are you in cahoots with the Minister of Military Secrets?!" Meihua yelled.

"She's in cahoots with me. I was only using her."

The woman came up to us slowly, stopping beside the husk of Nelia.

Then she hit Nelia with the back of her hand right on the face. Her small body blew back from the force of the woman's blow. I shrieked.

"Wh-what are you doing?! Are you okay, Nelia?!"

She didn't answer, only staggered up and returned to her place. Like a puppet. Upon seeing her vacant expression as blood dripped from her nose, I was sure of it—she and Gertrude were being manipulated.

"Lady Komari... Be careful. That's former Illustrious General Mary Fragment."

Vill took an ointment case out of her pocket and opened it.

Her wound was bad. A bit of medicine wouldn't do anything.

Mary Fragment grabbed Nelia's shoulders as she glared at me.

"The maid is right. I am one of Gerra-Aruka's Eight Illustrious Generals. One of the Warblades who lost pathetically to you and this brat."

"And what do you want now?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" Mary exuded hostility from every pore. "Vengeance. I helped with Nerzanpi's experiments so I could get my revenge on you."

"What're you talking about...? Where's Nerzanpi?"

"Not here. She called you here so I could end you. And you fell for it."

"Ms. Komari, that thing Ms. Esther had...," Sakuna said.

Yes, the note Esther picked up. Maybe she knew she'd survive. All to lead us here.

I clenched my fist in chagrin. But...no. It was good that we'd fallen for the trap. We wouldn't have been reunited with Nelia otherwise.

"Mary Fragment... Give those two back. I'll forgive you if you do."

Mary snorted.

"Are you stupid? Forgive me? Who do you think you are?"

"The slaughter champion! Now let them go, or I'll butcher you! You'll be dead in one second! Got it?!"

I couldn't stop trembling. She must've known how my Core Implosion worked, and what my weak points were. Otherwise, she wouldn't have shown herself here like this.

"You really are stupid. I get sick just looking at you."

"Hah? What do you mean?"

"You truly believe that you're acting in the name of justice. The nerve! You smashed Madhart's administration with your golden sword, but do you have any idea how many people suffered because of it?"

"I fought alongside Nelia because so many people were suffering!"

"No! More people suffered thanks to you destroying Gerra-Aruka! The people I was close to all fell apart after losing their power... They all died!"

"Wha...?"

"Ms. Komari, look out!"

Nelia turned around and attacked me.

Her twin blades and Sakuna's staff clashed in a burst of sparks.

I nearly fell on my butt pushed back by the pressure. There was no warmth in Nelia's eyes, but no hostility, either—she was just cold like a machine. The Nelia I knew would have never looked like that.

"Terakomari! Stop dawdling!"

"Whoa?!"

Gertrude slashed with her longsword, but Lingzi and Meihua just barely blocked it. I felt so sorry. Meihua aside, how could I let sick Lingzi defend me?

"Your Blood Curse's only weak point is your naïveté. You cannot use your power against your friends... Nelia Cunningham! Kill her already!"

"You...! That's unfair... You coward!"

"You were unfair first! There is nothing more wicked than false justice! So many people suffered because of you! Don't you feel any guilt?!"

"|...|..."

"And you're doing the same thing again! You're trying to destroy the order in the Enchanted Lands! Was destroying Gerra-Aruka not enough for you?! You don't even think about how many people will die because of your actions!"

"But...! I can't let Nerzanpi go free!"

"Nelia Cunningham couldn't cope with the guilt! That's how she ended up like that!"

I looked at Nelia with shock.

She was exchanging blows with Sakuna. The trails of her shining twin swords

clashed with the ice shards, whipping up a storm. Nelia moved as though dancing, and I couldn't possibly guess what was on her mind. Still, I could feel a deep despair beyond her eyes.

"Many people in Aruka hold a grudge against that brat. Popularity polls don't matter. This all happened because you and her started that selfish, violent revolution. She regretted the tragedy brought about by her rise to power, and that's how she became my puppet."

Nelia shot a series of razor spells. Countless slashes rushed toward Sakuna.

I watched their fight with my mouth agape.

Dr. Kuya had said something similar back at the Crimson Snow Hut: "Have you ever given a thought to those who were driven to ruin under your fists of justice?"

Nerzanpi and Mary had wormed their way through the opening in Nelia's heart.

"It's obvious the same thing will happen in the Enchanted Lands. The riots will stop if Lingzi Ailan becomes Tianzi...but what will happen to those who followed Shikai Gudo? What about those who obtained peace under his policies? Nerzanpi says that Lingzi is weak. That she'll end up like her father, a shut-in who couldn't cope with the guilt."

"Guh...?!" Sakuna failed to block Nelia's next attack.

Nelia's twin blades dug into her shoulders, drawing blood. I watched on in silent despair as Sakuna fell to the ground. Nelia ignored her and slowly approached me. I trembled as her hollow eyes trained on me.

"Terakomari Gandesblood, I hear you're revered as the hero who will change the world... But you're nothing more than a criminal spreading misfortune!" asserted Mary.

"…"

Sakuna begged me with her eyes to run away.

Vill was already passed out beside me.

Lingzi and Meihua were in an intense battle against Gertrude. Both sides were

injured.

Nelia pointed her blades at me.

Mary Fragment was right. She felt guilt. I could feel the sadness in her despairing eyes.

It came out of nowhere.

I never could've thought someone would come out to criticize my past actions right now.

Nelia and I had fought to change Aruka, and I was currently fighting with Lingzi to change the Enchanted Lands. But now the woman before me was asking me to think about those who would suffer as a result.

Nelia was far too kind; that was the only explanation for how she'd let Nerzanpi and this woman confound her.

What would Karla have thought of this? The Empress? Spica? I tried to imagine other people's reaction, but then I shook my head to banish those thoughts.

I could not allow the current situation to go on.

That was enough.

"All right," I said, glaring at Mary. "I apologize if I hurt you. Nelia and I fought thinking that revolution would be best for Aruka... I didn't think about who would get hurt as a result. At this point, I don't care about your prior wrongdoings. I'm sorry I made you suffer."

Mary froze, as though time itself had stopped.

She looked at me like I was a rare animal, but soon, she screamed in vivid panic.

"I-it's too late now! Are you stupid?!"

"Yes, I am. And I know it's too late. I can't undo what I've done. But we can think about what to do next."

"What ...?"

"I want to change the world. I won't allow people getting hurt in front of me. I

cannot let Nerzanpi keep getting away with it."

"Bullshit!! People like me will suffer as a result!!"

"I'll take responsibility for that. I'll make it a world that those who suffered can accept eventually. I want to change people's hearts. That is the mission my mom gave me."

Nelia raised her blades as she charged against me.

I had no way to dodge her attack.

So...

"Komari!" "Terakomari?!" Lingzi and Meihua screamed. They had already knocked out Gertrude. No problem over there anymore.

Nelia's right blade approached at terrible speed. But then I stumbled on a rock and dodged her slash by a hair. What tremendous luck. For some reason, I'd kept surviving in the weirdest of ways since coming here.

Nelia's left blade approached without delay. That one I couldn't dodge.

My cheeks burned. Bright-red blood spurted from my slashed skin.

"…!"

But it was no lethal wound. I stomped with all my might before I could feel any pain.

A crack showed in Nelia's frozen expression.

I lurched forward and clung to her. She slashed wildly at my shoulders. I shrieked with pain, but I could not let go. Nelia was suffering in the darkness. I had to pull her out of it.

"Commander! Be more ca—"

"No! It's okay, Nelia! I'm here with you!"

I held her as tightly as I could.

Mary gasped in shock.

I bit into Nelia's neck—into the star-shaped mark. Nelia screamed and struggled, trying to push me away, but I did not let myself lose. I tore into her

soft skin and slurped the crimson liquid gushing out.

I could not let Nerzanpi and Mary get away with their violence.

It was beyond cowardly of them to put themselves on a pedestal and point out other people's faults. And Nelia had fallen for it because she was too kind. She'd done the right thing for Aruka—and I had to show her.

"Ko...ma...ri...?"

The light of willpower returned to her eyes.

And then the world turned gold.

₩

She was in the middle of endless fog.

The feeling of something dear breaking. Blood gushed every time she swung the blades her teacher gave her. She had no idea what she was cutting. Just that she had to do it, as she was ordered.

Yet her heart cried out.

She shouldn't have been able to feel anything anymore, but her sense of reason—sleeping dormant in her chest—was telling her to stop with every slash.

Her body wavered. Something was clinging to her.

She had to carry out her orders. She had to bifurcate any hindrance for the sake of the star shining in the dusk. So she raised her sword, but then someone grabbed her arm.

"Stop it, Nelia."

She raised her head. She had heard that voice before.

A voice she'd heard countless times when she was young—the voice she loved the most.

"Miss Gandesblood...?"

"Those blades are for altruism. Not for murder."

She woke up. She had been cutting people down unconsciously.

Her memories came back. She'd lost to Mary Fragment, and Nerzanpi had taken away her soul. The guilt was crushing. She felt she didn't have the right to stand at the top. But her teacher shook her head kindly and said: "You are in the right."

"But..."

"Don't let the enemy confuse you. Raise your head high and keep on living. Komari's with you. Everything will be okay once you change the world with her. That is your duty."

"Really ...?"

"Yes. But Komari can be careless. As the older...or maybe the younger sister, you must take care of her."

Her teacher hugged her. That smell, that warmth brought her back. Nelia tried to close her eyes. Suddenly, she realized that it wasn't her teacher she was hugging, but someone else.

Shining gold hair. Crimson eyes brimming with a mix of kindness and hostility.

Terakomari Gandesblood.

"Don't worry," she said. "I will carry half of your pain."

Ж

The Minister of Military Secrets had said this:

"They use their kindness as a weapon, which is why they abhor hurting people so much. Deep down, they're just like the Tianzi. Take advantage of this. Make them realize how many people are suffering because of them."

Mary found it genius.

Mary Fragment never had a family. She was a lone wolf who'd risen by her own power. Her sole motive in life was slaughtering people as Aruka's Illustrious General. She could get away with any crime under Madhart's authority. It wasn't rare of her to prey on innocent people for sport.

But that glorious life of hers did not last for long.

Nelia Cunningham and Terakomari Gandesblood reformed Aruka.

All of Mary's misdeeds were exposed. She was thrown into prison and lost her freedom. Her peer Pascal Rainsworth repented and now worked for Nelia Cunningham—but she was not as simple as him. Nor did she have the acting skills to feign a change of heart.

She wanted revenge. To destroy those little girls, no matter the cost.

She would have been able to escape from prison through sheer force, but she faked her suicide to shake off any pursuers. She wandered the Metropolis after escaping and bided her time to exact her revenge.

"Oh dear, looks like the heavens are on your side." One day, a woman in black smoking a cigarette appeared before her. "Would you mind getting played by me? I'll give you the chance to get your revenge on Terakomari Gandesblood and Nelia Cunningham."

The mysterious Ruist of unknown race—Nerzanpi Rocha.

Ж

Golden mana blew across Death Dragon Cave.

The surge of bloodlust was coming from the crimson vampire, Terakomari Gandesblood. She held Nelia Cunningham up as she glared at Mary.

Mary gritted her teeth and took a step back.

She'd ensnared Nelia Cunningham to prevent Terakomari from using her Core Implosion.

She'd stirred the guilt in her heart to take advantage of her kindness.

But none of that worked. Terakomari was stronger than Mary thought. *Bullshit*. *Bullshit*. *Bullshit*.

"Nelia Cunningham! What are you doing?! Kill Terakomari already!"

Nelia did not move.

Light had returned to her eyes. A bright light brimming with will. Nerzanpi had transformed it into the Baolu. People who'd been robbed of willpower were supposed to become hollow shells. So why had the Moonpeach Princess recovered hers?

"You will pay."

A voice trembling with anger pierced her ears. A crimson glare pierced her eyes.

"You're not getting away with this! I'll end you!"

Propelled by golden mana, the Moonpeach Princess rushed at Mary with her twin blades.

Mary clicked her tongue and raised her longsword. She couldn't rely on tricks anymore. She dodged the pink slash coming from the side and unleashed her Core Implosion—Mindblade Annihilation.

"...!!"

Nelia staggered.

Mary had obtained this power under Madhart. Born from her desire to dominate, it allowed her to turn people into playthings. Simply by locking eyes with someone, she could scramble their brain and stun them.



She'd beaten Nelia once with this power. If fortune was on her side, she could even defeat Terakomari Gandesblood. But the moment her lips curved in assurance of her victory...

"Gwah?!"

...the twin blades sank into her chest.

Mary ground her teeth in agony. All strength left her arm, and the longsword fell to the ground. The Moonpeach Princess stood before her, gallant and possessed of her senses. She yelled so hard that drops of blood flew at Mary: "I am NOT falling for that twice!!"

That was when Mary realized what had happened. Before she could activate Mindblade Annihilation, Nelia had used Diverse Divide to counteract Mary's powers of delusion. But then Nelia *acted* like it worked to get her to drop her guard. Mary cursed her carelessness for falling for that trick.

"Y-you little shit!!"

She swung her weapon recklessly, only to be hit by a similar blow.

A golden blade had cut into her shoulder. And that wasn't all. Her body began turning into gold particles from that wound.

Spitefully, she looked beyond Nelia at the golden vortex.

Terakomari Gandesblood. Countless swords spun around the hostile vampire. The fear left Mary at a loss for words. Simply staring down Terakomari made Mary realize that no normal person could ever stand up against her. She knew it was foolish to think she could exploit her sense of guilt.

That girl's willpower was too strong. She could never compare.

The blades all pointed at Mary.

"Repent."

"Komari, step aside."

Murder took the form of shining blades.

Nelia slashed Mary clean with her twin swords. Hatred gushed out her throat, but she could not keep standing. The Gerra-Aruka survivor collapsed in a pool of

her own blood, her vengeance incomplete.

☆

Calm returned to her heart.

The pink mana evaporated the moment she sheathed Diverse Divide.

Nelia then turned to Komari. She was still enveloped in golden mana. The vampire had saved Nelia from the fog. It was always Komari saving her. Ashamed, she walked up to her.

Then, it hit her. Villhaze, Sakuna Memoir, and Gertrude lay wounded on the ground.

"Hey, President Cunningham! We gotta take them to the Dark Core Zone now!"

"R-right. Sorry...," Nelia responded glumly to Meihua's request.

Her friends were covered in blood. She wanted to die from the shame of knowing that she caused this. But she could repent later. They had to take them to where the Dark Core could help them first.

Then Nelia sensed someone standing behind her.

It was Komari, shining gold. Nelia wanted to cry. There was a slash wound on Komari's shoulder, again her fault.

```
"Komari... I'm sorry..."
```

"You are my little sister."

"Huh?"

"Don't worry. You're in the right."

Her faltering words struck her heart.

Nelia wiped her tears and looked straight into her crimson eyes as she yelled: "Thank you! I'm over it now, thanks to you!"

"…"

"But I'm the elder sister! Miss Gandesblood asked me to take care of you!"

"_____?"

Komari cocked her head. Nelia lost her mind at the adorable gesture.

One needed the determination to stand at the top of a country—Nelia thought she had attained it way back during the Six Nations War, but Nerzanpi's and Mary's every word had thrown her into a vortex of despair. She still had a long way to go.

Was she unfit for the job? Was she so fixated on leading that she'd overlooked how she hurt people?

Nerzanpi had opened a hole in her heart and paralyzed her.

But then Komari called out to her. With her at her side, she would be all right.

Willpower shone radiantly in the fog. There was no need for doubt anymore.

"Hurry up, President!" Meihua yelled, carrying Gertrude.

The truth was, she wanted to fight alongside Komari, but they had to heal everyone first.

Nelia took a Magic Stone out of her pocket and turned around.

"Komari. I'll go to the Dark Core Zone with Meihua. It's my responsibility for getting them hurt. I'll be right back... You go and defeat Nerzanpi. Alongside the Gongzhu."

The green girl's shoulders jolted.

Lingzi Ailan looked at Nelia like she had seen the most terrifying monster in the world.

```
"...What's wrong?"
```

"Ah... Err... N-no... Nothing..."

Was she afraid of Nerzanpi? There was no need to fear, though. Everything would be fine with Komari by her side. Lingzi Ailan, too, should puff out her chest like Nelia Cunningham and take the title of Tianzi.

Komari walked up to Mary, who was collapsed on the ground.

She grabbed her by the collar and in a faint and quiet voice asked: "Where is Nerzanpi?"

"Ugh..."

"Where is Nerzanpi?"

Mary looked up at the sky with hollow eyes.

After a while, she muttered hoarsely:

"With the Tianzi... In the Zijingong... She's getting him to spill the beans on the Dark Core's location..."

"No tricks?"

"Ha-ha... Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha... I was only being used... You'll pay, Nerzanpi... Suffer at her hand..."

After that, she only laughed like a broken record. She had sold off her ally in her desperation. *An unsalvageable woman to the very end*, Nelia thought.

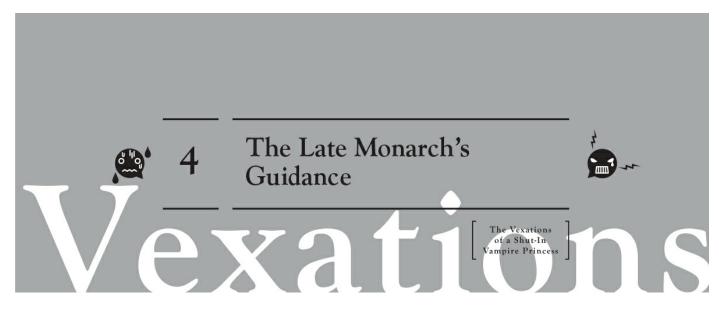
A moment later, Komari activated the teleportation spell. Nelia looked back at Komari, enveloped in the light. She was already in the air, holding Lingzi close.

Her small lips parted. "Take care of them."

Nelia nodded and shouted, "Sorry, Komari! You take care of the Enchanted Lands!"

Komari also nodded.

The golden pillar extended to the heavens at tremendous speed. Nelia stared at the fantastical sight before closing her eyes. The Magic Stone's glow increased, until it made them disappear.



Strong light was like poison to those who lived in the shadows.

The Moonpeach Princess. The Crimson Vampire Princess.

Being in the presence of someone who shone brightly only highlighted one's insignificance.

Facing the disparity between her and them only made her want to slip a noose around her neck.

The fight between Mary Fragment and Nelia Cunningham was like deadly poison to Lingzi Ailan. Nelia's willpower had been stolen, and she'd been turned into a puppet who couldn't muster any resistance—and yet she'd stood once more for the sake of the Aruka Republic.

Lingzi Ailan could never do something like that.

The moment she saw Terakomari and Nelia shine within the light, her heart froze at the thought of how indecisive she'd been throughout her life. It was beaten to a pulp.

Beaten down by the fact she could never reach their heights.

From a very young age, Lingzi Ailan had been told she needed to be worthy of the title of Tianzi.

She had no siblings, so there was no question she was to succeed her father in leading the Enchanted Lands. The fact had been decided upon her birth.

The people of the court raised her with rigor. It was then that the Tianzi began to show disinterest in politics. The top brass of the Ailan dynasty felt at

risk and put their efforts into making his successor a worthy Tianzi. She was locked up in the palace and taught classic Ruist writings from morn to dusk. The teacher told the young Gongzhu countless times that the future of the Enchanted Lands rested on her shoulders.

Lingzi thought it only natural.

Education decided a person's fate. The teacher. The writings.

Her days spent as a bird in a cage guided her willpower in a single direction: "I was born to lead the Immortals." "As Tianzi, I must act for the sake of the Immortals." "Happiness in my life can only be found in the prosperity of the Immortals." A sense of duty was ingrained in her mind.

She was forbidden from fraternizing with outsiders. The teacher said it was because she would be infected with unnecessary ideologies.

Lingzi understood. She could not resist upon being told it was for the sake of the Immortals. And besides, she was content with staying inside studying in the first place.

The only friend she was allowed to have was Meihua Liang.

She was employed as her caretaker.

Meihua was a functionary in the inner palace. Lingzi found her commendable for it, despite being the same age as her. She was a wise and considerate caretaker. She quickly noticed whenever Lingzi wanted something. She brought her a brush whenever she thought she needed one and scratched her back whenever she felt itchy.

"You're like a doll. Like a puppet. You only do what you're told."

"You think so ...?"

"Yeah. Girls your age should be more capricious."

Lingzi had never seen other girls, so she wouldn't know.

Still, she didn't mind. The Zijingong was her entire world. And it would remain that way even after she grew up. She would stay in the palace and work for the Immortals—though she could only imagine what her work would be like from reading the history books, because her father spent all his time idling.

"You're too ignorant of the world." Meihua laughed. "You won't be able to see reality if you stay inside the palace all the time. You should go outside. You should know the people you'll be ruling over."

"But they told me not to go outside..."

"I know a few ways out. I lived in a normal family in Jingshi before working for the palace. I can show you around."

"But..."

"There's lots of cool stuff in Jingshi. I know you want to go outside, don't you?"

Outside. Out of her cage. Into a world she could only imagine.

Lingzi gave in to the temptation.

Thinking back on it now, perhaps Meihua had felt sympathy for her.

Perhaps Lingzi's circumstances were not fortunate. She had been locked up since infancy and made to study. In her spare time, she only watched the birds fly on the other side of the window.

She sat at her desk reading Ruist writings day in and day out. Her each and every day was dedicated to learning how to be a proper sovereign.

And yet she'd never even found it abnormal.

Lingzi never felt the need to rebel. They had groomed her into a diligent child who found no grievance in her role as Gongzhu. Despite her life being far from normal.

"Let's escape during your noon break. There's a small hole beside the eastern gate. Wide enough for us kids to go through."

"But what if they find out...?"

"Don't worry. I'll be there with you."

Which was why Meihua's presence was toxic to Gongzhu Lingzi Ailan.

Meihua pulled her by the hand, and they left the Zijingong.

Her heart was racing.

She felt bad about breaking the rules but simultaneously intrigued about setting foot into an unknown world. She felt like her heart could explode at any moment.

They went down a narrow path after going through the hole.

Lingzi trembled in fright while Meihua cheered her on to keep going.

After a while, her field of view opened. The world overflowed with light.

The bustling sight of Jingshi revealed itself before her eyes.

Lingzi saw color for the first time. Vibrant, glowing, lively.

People of all kinds were going to and fro. There were carriages and oxcarts. Glaze-coated buildings lined up endlessly, all plain in comparison to the palace, yet full of life thanks to the scratches and graffiti on their walls.

The voices of people having fun. The smell of food and perfume. Shiny products of all sorts filling the shops. A child bumped into her and bowed, saying, "Sorry," before they ran off with a giggle to continue playing tag with a friend.

Lingzi was shocked beyond belief.

The city was filled with all sorts of things she would have never gotten to see if she'd stayed holed up in the palace.

"Let's go. We gotta go back before break time is over." Meihua smiled and pulled her Lingzi by the hand.

It was a fun world. A far cry from the gloominess of the palace. What had she been doing all her life? Why couldn't she live like everyone else?

Then Meihua went off to buy something.

"They sell these skewers over there. That guy is a cheapskate, but they're really good. The lamb is so soft, try it."

"Okay..."

"How is it? I ate this all the time as a kid and... Whoa, what happened, Lingzi?! Why're you crying?! Was it that bad?!"

"No... No, that's not it..."

Tears spilled from her eyes. She couldn't hold back her sobs.

"Then why? Does your tummy hurt?"

"It's good. It's so good...that it hurts..."

Meihua was confused as Lingzi kept weeping loudly. Passersby looked at them with worry. Someone came up to ask, "Are you okay? Where's your mommy?" The kindness stabbed Lingzi's heart like a drill.

She felt something break inside her.

The recoil was devastating.

From that day on, Lingzi Ailan fell ill.

*

Nerzanpi Rocha was in a grand hall in the Zijingong.

The Tianzi lay at her feet. She had gouged him with a knife a few times. He resisted like the ruler he was for a while, but soon, he reached his limits. The Tianzi dropped all pretense of shame and dignity and spat out the details on the Dark Core.

Nerzanpi was honestly shocked. If what he'd said was true, then the Enchanted Lands was a wicked nation indeed.

"Let... Let me go...already...," the Tianzi wailed, squirming to grab Nerzanpi's ankle.

She nearly laughed out loud at the sight. A man like him stood atop the tragedy that was the Enchanted Lands. Rulers who'd inherited their positions were all despicable.

"I told you what you wanted to know... You have no business with me anymore..."

"I'll give you peace, then."

She pulled the trigger without mercy. The Tianzi was sent flying at the sound of the gunshot.

Nerzanpi exhaled white smoke and looked up at the ceiling.

Now she had intel on two of the six Dark Cores: the Enchanted Lands' and

Aruka's.

The first she'd gotten from the Tianzi; the second, from the hollowed-out Nelia Cunningham.

A third of the total. The pieces were falling into place.

Yusei called her organization Star Citadel.

Unlike Inverse Moon, Star Citadel had always been a small organization. They didn't amass followers like Spica to carry out terrorist attacks. They didn't have bases in every country to add more people to their cause. Increasing their member count would muddle their ideology. Yusei wanted an organization comprised of an elite few.

"Let's see who gets the world. Only God knows."

The names of three people who could take over the world came to mind.

The Crimson Vampire Princess: Terakomari.

The Head of Inverse Moon: Spica.

The Boss of Star Citadel: Yusei.

Terakomari was working to change the hearts of all people.

Spica was working to select the pure of heart to build a utopia.

Yusei was working to destroy all people and reset the heart.

Nerzanpi found Yusei's approach the correct one. Humans were too filthy of creatures, so they were better off extinct. Resetting the world would not be hard with the six Dark Cores in hand.

"...Oh dear."

Nerzanpi heard people calling Komarin's name all throughout Jingshi. Then she sensed a staggering mana. One with the power to destroy everything. Mana so massive it matched Yusei's. Massive willpower. Endless kindness.

She heard something crack overhead.

The next moment, the ceiling blew up with ear-piercing noise.

Nerzanpi dodged the rubble hail as she looked up.

Golden mana. Countless blades swirling in the air.

Bloodlust.

"You'll pay."

Terakomari Gandesblood.

She'd foreseen this. Mary Fragment had failed to end her.

Then she noticed Gongzhu Lingzi Ailan clinging to her. Evidently, the duo's full-fledged sense of justice had motivated them to stop the villain who was trying to take over the country. What a waste.

"Blow away."

A storm of raging mana.

The swords behind her approached like a hurricane.

Aruka's Warblades fell helplessly before Komari's Core Implosion.

There was no way Nerzanpi could escape with her life if Komari hit her.

So all she had to do was avoid getting hit.

"The virtuous are quiet. So shut up."

Nerzanpi pulled the trigger before the blades flew at her.

A bullet of pure willpower made from a Baolu shot from the muzzle at high speed.

Right before the golden sword could strike it down, with a little prayer, it changed course.

Terakomari gasped softly.

The Baolu bullet hit her side.

"Komari?!"

Blood splattered. Lingzi Ailan screamed.

The golden mana began to fade. The blades lost their power and fell to the floor. Terakomari staggered, a look of disbelief on her face. She must have never even considered the possibility of someone breaking through her Core

Implosion head-on.

"Oh dear... I didn't hit any vitals. I see you're as lucky as ever, huh?"

Blood dripped from Komari's tiny mouth.

The vampire princess descended, pulled down by gravity.

Nerzanpi shot her five loaded Baolu bullets consecutively. Lingzi hurried to erect a magical barrier, blocking two of the bullets, but three remained. They flew directly at Terakomari's face. Then something odd happened.

The golden mana disappeared. This time, rainbow-colored mana stormed.

A rainbow raiment enveloped her body—but only for an instant. Suddenly, she was back to being a helpless little girl.

It was like how the flame of a candle burned brightest the moment before it vanished.

Then rubble fell from the ceiling with miraculous timing.

The debris struck the three remaining Baolu bullets. Nerzanpi used the void spell *Summoning* to obtain a new Baolu and transformed it into a bullet. She loaded it while taking aim, but by then, Terakomari was already hidden on the other side of the rubble.

She was too lucky. Unnaturally so.

Nerzanpi put down the gun, a cynical smile on her face.



Sharp pain greeted me as I regained consciousness.

I writhed on the floor and wailed.

"U...Ghh... Agh...!"

It hurt. Blood spurted everywhere. It felt like my stomach had exploded. There was no Dark Core here. I would die. I was scared. But I couldn't lose. I'd decided to fight for Lingzi. I couldn't let Nerzanpi go after she'd made my friends suffer so much.

"Komari! Are you okay?! No ... You're clearly not ... Look at all this blood ... "

```
"I'm...fine... I won't...die..."
```

Upon closer inspection, the wound on my belly wasn't that big. Just a little gouge.

My troops in the Seventh Unit got cut in half and blown up every day. This was nothing compared to that. Although it was also true that they were crazy.

```
"Komari... Don't push yourself..."
```

"I'm not."

I gritted my teeth and sat up.

I was losing my mind at the pain. But I had to keep it together.

"I'll take care of Nerzanpi. I won't let her wreck the Enchanted Lands. I won't let her take the Dark Core. Although I don't know where it is... But anyway! I'll help you so you can become the next Tianzi! My goal hasn't changed!"

So please rest easy. I looked at her pleadingly.

The green Gongzhu Lingzi Ailan looked like she was about to cry.

"Huh? What's wrong, Lingzi?"

"I... I... Why...did I turn out like this...?"

I didn't get it. Was she worried about my injury?

Clearly that wasn't all. I could feel the regret in her eyes. What was going through her mind?

Just as I thought to ask her, I heard someone move beyond the debris.

I had to defeat Nerzanpi, and for that, I needed to do this.

"Lingzi, I'm sorry, but I need you to help me. I need blood to activate my Core Implosion. Give me just a little bi—"

"Coff!" She coughed.

I froze, forgetting all about my pain.

A huge rush of blood dyed the floor red, soaking my boots and skirt. Blood was gushing from Lingzi's mouth like a fountain, and there was no sign of it stopping. More blood mixed in with saliva dropped every time she coughed.

I didn't need that much.

"Lingzi?! Are you okay?! You hurting?!"

"...Ugh... Yes..."

I could only rub her back.

I felt like everything had turned dark.

Right. Defeating Nerzanpi wouldn't solve everything. We had to find the Waidan and make the elixir or Lingzi would have no future. At this rate...she would die soon.

Why wouldn't the Dark Core help her?

It healed everyone else, even when their limbs got chopped off or their hearts exploded.

So why would it not cure this ill girl? I hugged Lingzi, trembling in frustration, when...

"That is the curse of the Enchanted Lands. Poor girl."

...I heard the voice of death.

The next thing I knew, the woman in black was standing right in front of me.

Nerzanpi Rocha. I glared at her in tears.

"You... What do you know?"

"The Tianzi told me. It seems their Dark Core broke six hundred years ago."

Nerzanpi leaned on some debris and lit a cigarette.

It looked like she wasn't going to attack right away. Was her guard down because my Core Implosion wasn't in effect? I stayed vigilant as I listened to her speak. I needed to listen to what she had to say.

"More specifically, it didn't break so much as it stopped working. Not even I know why that happened. The Tianzi didn't, either. Regardless, the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core lost the ability to grant infinite recovery by itself."

"That's ridiculous... The Immortals' wounds are still recovering. The Tianzi came back after Sakuna killed him. It's just Lingzi who's special..."

"Indeed. Lingzi Ailan is an exception among exceptions."

Lingzi's breathing was heavy.

I rubbed her back powerlessly.

"The Dark Core needed support to function correctly, but there is no spell that could do that. After all, the Dark Core itself is a source of mana. Even if there was such a spell, no regular person would be able to use it perpetually. So they needed the power of something other than magic."

"Something besides magic...?"

"The glimmer of will. The whisper of fate. Core Implosion." Nerzanpi laughed as she spun the gun in her hand. "Haven't you realized that Lingzi Ailan's Core Implosion is always in effect?"

"...?!"

It wasn't me who gasped in shock, but Lingzi.

Nerzanpi was right. I had noticed that Lingzi's eyes were always shining crimson—the sign of Core Implosion. Evidence of her eternally burning willpower.

"No...I... They've always been red..."

"Don't speak, Lingzi. You have to rest."

"Indeed. Rest, Your Highness. Your illness comes from your perpetual consumption of your willpower. That's why there's no cure—you're always using Core Implosion. I was shocked, too, when the Tianzi told me. To think the entire country was pushing this huge burden on one girl."

"No, no," Lingzi muttered in tears.

Nerzanpi continued, disregarding her pleas.

"Your Core Implosion's name is Late Monarch's Guidance—the power to turn matter back to its proper state and fix it in place. An appropriate ability for this country, born from its ancient Ruist ideology. Through this power, the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core maintains its form from before it broke. This is why it appears as though it's been functioning properly."

"But hasn't it been six hundred years since it stopped working? Lingzi isn't that old..."

"The Late Monarch's Guidance doesn't come from Lingzi Ailan's will. It is just like the experiments Gerra Madhart carried out in the Daydream Paradise. The poor Gongzhu was implanted with this power beyond her capabilities. She is the bearer and guardian of the Dark Core for the Ailan dynasty."

Lingzi's expression was pure despair.

I could tell from her reaction that everything Nerzanpi had said was true.

"Originally, the Late Monarch's Guidance was but a Core Implosion that appeared in a single person six hundred years ago. The Dark Core would have stopped working correctly after they died, so the Ailan dynasty passed the ability down generation after generation to keep it functioning. Core Implosion is a power of the heart, so as long as one has a similar heart, they can possess a similar Core Implosion. That's why generation after generation of the bearers of Late Monarch's Guidance were manipulated to make their hearts similar to that of its original bearer."

"What...what in the world...?"

"No regular person would understand, much less a foolish one like me. Either way, the Ailan dynasty was diligent. With every generation, they selected one of their daughters to become the bearer. They locked them up from a young age and raised them strictly, repressing the ego these girls would naturally develop to shape their hearts to conform to the original bearer's. Your Highness, you weren't brought up to be the next Tianzi—you were raised to be a disposable tool."

"No..."

"Lingzi Ailan's personal information was made public during the Matrimonial War: her hobby is bonsai, her favorite food is napa cabbage, she treasures her pocket watch, she had a cat as a child—all the same as the original bearer. None of these traits belong to Lingzi Ailan herself."

It was all so convoluted I couldn't understand.

An artificial personality. A forced Core Implosion. A sick body.

Six hundred long years of history rested on her little shoulders.

Lingzi twisted her face in agony and started panting. How great a tragedy did she have to carry? How much agony had she been holding in all by herself?

"Every bearer dies an early death. The burden of their Core Implosion makes them gravely ill. By the way, the people of the Enchanted Lands have been called 'Immortals' since ancient times based on the irony of this situation—their long lives are sustained by the premature death of the bearer. Although it seems the Tianzi of the Ailan dynasty all looked for ways to extend the lives of the bearers—one of which is the elixir of life."

"...Right! The elixir! We can save Lingzi if we find the Waidan, right?!"

"Not so fast. The Waidan is probably the Dark Core."

"Wha...?" Lingzi muttered.

"It is believed that each Dark Core has a unique shape. That is the reason why Inverse Moon had trouble finding them. However, their original form is that of a sphere shining bright like a star—so said Yusei. Which means the Waidan is not the Baolu. It's more likely that it is the Dark Core. And to make the elixir from it, one would obviously have to expend it."

All color drained from Lingzi's face. She trembled in fear.

Her illness wouldn't be cured unless she used the Dark Core.

Which meant...

"You must make a decision, Your Highness." Nerzanpi stomped over to her, a malicious grin on her face. "Your life, or those of your citizens."

"……"

It was outrageous.

The Dark Core's regenerative ability was the foundation of modern society. Too many people would die if it were lost. But Lingzi would die if we didn't make the elixir using the Dark Core.

How could one make a choice?

Nerzanpi took out a knife.

Shivers ran down my spine. I had to stand up to protect Lingzi, but an imperceptible kick to my midsection blew me away. My gunshot wound screamed, but I couldn't waste time paying attention to it—I had to stop Nerzanpi.

"Stop! Don't hurt Lingzi anymore!"

Lingzi's face twisted in fear.

Nerzanpi ignored me and swung her dagger. I endured the pain and raised my hip. I would not let this woman get away with everything. But just as I steeled myself to charge against her...

...Lingzi took a slash to the chest.

No blood. It took me a second to realize that Nerzanpi had only torn her clothes.

Lingzi's fair skin, so pale it looked sickly, was exposed. *Is she feeding herself correctly?* I thought, trying to turn away from reality by focusing on irrelevant details.

"Look. This is the symbol of the Enchanted Lands' foolishness."

"Wha ...?"

Something was stuck in Lingzi's chest.

A tiny, tiny blade. Still, it was gouging into her flesh.

The hilt moved up and down with her every breath, as though it was a parasite growing out of her chest.

"Don't look," Lingzi pleaded in the smallest of voices. But I couldn't take my eyes off her chest. It was too bizarre. Not to mention that I had an inkling of what the blade could be.

Nerzanpi confirmed it flatly:

"That's the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core, the Willow Sword."

"No...! This...this isn't the Dark Core..."

Lingzi could only deny it; she couldn't admit that her enemy was correct.

But even I could tell.

That sword was sucking Lingzi's life dry.

It was the target of Late Monarch's Guidance.

"It must hurt. It must be suffocating. Your destiny was set in stone from the moment of your birth. How cruel. But people are always cruel. They live like nothing's wrong while sacrificing innocent girls such as you. They would be better off extinct, don't you think?"

"No... No..."

"This is reality. You will die in pain. You'll draw your last breath exploited by the evil Immortals. Which reminds me, they don't have someone to take over after you, do they? The Ailan family had no other suitable daughters—that means the Dark Core will cease functioning completely once I kill you."

""

"This world is sick. Don't you agree? You mut have wanted to live like any other normal girl. But the circumstances of your birth bar you from that. The Tianzi was torn up over that, too, you know. 'Ahh! Why did she have to be born as the daughter of the Tianzi?!' he said. But I'll put an end to that legacy today—by burying you. And don't you worry, it'll be a proper funeral."

Nerzanpi slowly raised her gun.

I couldn't move, paralyzed by the facts.

The curse binding Lingzi was too much. It was way out of my reach. Stopping the riots would accomplish nothing. Defeating Nerzanpi wouldn't save Lingzi's life. She was carrying too great a burden. If only I could share half of it. But I couldn't. It wasn't fair. What could I even do?

"Now die."

I raised my head.

Lingzi was about to get killed. She was lying there paralyzed, wincing. Nerzanpi's finger was on the trigger.

For an instant, Lingzi directed her exhausted crimson eyes at me. Like a baby

asking for help.

"S-STOP!!"

I shot myself at Nerzanpi and desperately grabbed hold of her. She didn't move an inch. She only sighed.

"C'mon, Commander Gandesblood. Don't you find it pitiful for her to keep on going like this? Don't you think it would be more merciful to put Lingzi out of her misery instead of prolonging her pitiful life?"

"I won't let you hurt her! She wants to live!"

"I mean, no one wants to die. But sometimes, it's the better option. She's only suffering because she's living."

"Shut up! I'll save her!"

"Oh dear."

I shoved Nerzanpi with all my might.

I nearly blacked out from the blood spilling out of my belly, but I endured it and yelled: "Lingzi! Let's go to Dr. Kuya! She might be able to cure you!"

"Y-yeah... Thanks, Komari..."

I helped her to her feet. We staggered toward the exit, but Nerzanpi wouldn't allow it. Another bullet gouged my side. I couldn't stay up anymore. I brought Lingzi down to the ground with me.

She gazed at me, pale in the face.

Don't look that sad. I'll make everything right.

"Don't fret, Lingzi... You don't have to worry about a thing."

"No, Komari... You'll die."

Coff.

Lingzi threw up blood again. She was at her limit, too.

I couldn't let things end like this. The other day, my mom had told me to help those who needed me. I'd just started to overcome my shut-in tendencies, and I was going outside of my own volition. Yet I couldn't even help a single girl who'd come to me for support?

"It's okay, Komari," Lingzi said with a smile.

I felt like I'd been thrown to the pits of hell.

"Wh-what do you mean? I'll cure your illness. There's gotta be a way. And once you're better... You'll lead the Enchanted Lands as the new Tianzi."

"I'm sorry, Komari. I lied to you."

I was taken aback.

There wasn't a shred of hope left in her. Lingzi's face was contorted in regret over her sin. She took a breath before confessing.

"I don't want to be the Tianzi. I don't care about the Enchanted Lands."

The light of dusk set in, painting the Gongzhu red in blood and twilight.

"I don't have the power to lead. I have no talent whatsoever."

"What are you talking about...? You said...that you wanted to stop the grand chancellor's misdeeds. That was for the sake of the Enchanted Lands, wasn't it?"

"No. That's just the Gongzhu's duty. What I had to do. I was only trying to fulfill my duty... In truth, I've never thought about the future of the Enchanted Lands. I can't. I am not fit to be Tianzi. I realized that after seeing you and Nelia. I can't be like you. I don't have it in me to be that kind. I've got too much on my plate just worrying about myself..."

Tears spilled from her eyes, mixing with her blood on the floor.

"I wanted to live a normal life."

"Normal...?"

"Ever since that day Meihua took me out of my cage... I've wanted to live like a regular person. One without a blade in my chest. One without this strange illness. One where I don't have to sacrifice myself for my country..."

"…"

"I want to open a shop in Jingshi. A gardening shop. I'd gather seasonal

flowers and take them to my customers... I wouldn't have to think about life and death... That's the kind of peaceful life I've yearned for. A life with a normal person's joys and sorrows. And I wanted to marry someone kind like you. I wanted a life suitable for my capabilities..."

"……"

"I'm really sorry."

Lingzi fidgeted.

"I'm irreparably weak."

She smiled with resignment.

"You don't have to get hurt for a cowardly liar like me. After all, you're the hero who'll change the world."

She might have meant that as a sort of goodbye.

Just then, something fell from her person. The hermit's stone we'd gotten engraved on our date sank into the pool of Lingzi's blood. I cursed my folly at the hopeless sight.

"Can I become the Tianzi? Would I be capable enough?"

Lingzi had asked that in Death Dragon Cave. I immediately said, "I know you can do it," without hesitation. But she wasn't looking for that sort of empty encouragement. She needed kind denial.

I had been poisoned by the world.

Nelia wished to change the world, from the bottom of her heart. The Moonpeach Princess had been overflowing with willpower from the very beginning.

Karla was the same. While she said she didn't want to be commander, she hadn't been able to let Karin and Fuyao get away with what they were doing. In the end, she'd decided to fight.

But Lingzi was different.

And a bit of encouragement wouldn't change that.

She could not fight against adversity on her own like Nelia or Karla.

She had accepted that her circumstances were well beyond her power and resigned herself to suffering.

There were tons of people who were crushed under the duties given to them—but I was only realizing that now. Lingzi Ailan was a regular girl who'd been made to carry a heavy fate. She didn't have the willpower to fight against it. She was just a normal kid, with the most normal of hearts.

Tears fell from my eyes.

I put the blood-drenched hermit's stone back in her pocket.

"Lingzi... I'm sorry. I didn't understand you in the slightest..."

"No. I'm sorry."

Lingzi rose to her feet slowly. Blood flowed from the wound of the Dark Core. Her body was at its limit. I watched her stand up in silence.

"It's my fault you got hurt. I let my half-hearted sense of duty dictate my actions and got you embroiled in this. So...I'll take all the responsibility."

"What do you ...?"

"If it'll save you, I'll gladly give up my life."

Her smile was strained with fear.

Mistress Death stood before her eyes.

The devil exhaled cigarette smoke and sneered.

"It seems I underestimated you. How brave. You'll set aside your fear to face your fate?"

"You're only after me, right? Leave Komari out of this."

"Of course I'm after you... But are you sure? The Enchanted Lands' Dark Core will break. A lot of people will be hurt. Can you take responsibility for that? His Majesty sure couldn't stand the guilt."

"...!"

Lingzi flinched. Even Nelia had fallen to the devil's whispers.

But she only hesitated for an instant.

"I... I...! I only care about myself!"

Blood flowered from her mouth, yet she did not stop.

She fixed her eyes—red with the power of Core Implosion—on Nerzanpi in a glare as she yelled: "Because I'm just a kid! I don't care as long as Komari is safe! Getting rid of the Dark Core won't kill anyone in the first place! It just means we won't be able to participate in sports-war anymore! So! I! Don't care about the Immortals! I only care about saving Komari!"

By now, I was baffled.

At the very least, I understood that Lingzi was worried about me.

Despite being so wounded herself, and despite being on the brink of death, Lingzi was using what little strength she had for my sake. She looked Nerzanpi in the eye and shouted: "Now then, Minister of Military Secrets! Kill me right this moment!"

"You don't have to die!"

Before I knew it, I was hugging her. We tottered a few steps and nearly tripped. I endured the pain to keep her upright. She gazed at me with confusion at point-blank range.

"I know how you feel. But you've done enough. Just forget about the Gongzhu, about being commander or the bearer and everything else that burdens you, and keep on living."

"But...my life..."

"I'll do something about it! I'm the strongest commander in the world! The slaughter champion capable of killing five trillion people with just a pinky finger! I can get rid of your illness, easy-peasy!"

"…"

How irresponsible of me. I was but an ignorant child yelling nonsense.

Yet I felt the strength leave Lingzi's body.

She pondered things quietly for a while.

Finally, tears spilled from her crimson eyes. A shiver ran through her

shoulders as an awkward smile painted her face.

"Thank you, Komari... You really are a hero. That's why I love you."

"Yeah? Then don't waste your life anymore."

"Sorry to interrupt, but...," Nerzanpi said as soon as she found the opportunity. "Are you ready to die now?"

"No way! I'll protect her!" I shouted.

"That's very commendable and all, but I've got a job to do here. Yusei will be sad if I don't get the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core."

Nerzanpi slowly raised her gun.

Lingzi trembled in my arms. I ground my teeth in incontrollable anger. Lingzi was trying to survive, and this woman was about to make her efforts go to waste.

I could not allow it.

I had to stop Nerzanpi here and now.

Countless people had gotten hurt because of her. Nelia, Sakuna, Gertrude, Vill, Esther, Meihua, Dr. Kuya, the Tianzi, Shikai, the Immortals...and above all else, Lingzi.

"Lingzi! Excuse me! I'm gonna suck your blood!"

"Huh...?!"

I turned to her with determination. Ignoring her bewildered stare, I placed my mouth on her neck—but our enemy didn't just let it happen.

"Off with you."

A thundering gunshot.

She remorselessly pulled the trigger.

Her shining bullet advanced at dreadful speed.

I looked at Nerzanpi in befuddlement. The world slowed down around me as my mind accelerated in the face of death, but my body was frozen. At this rate, we would both be dead. This was not the time for fear.

I could not let Lingzi die.

She had already endured such an unjust fate.

She had the right to live normally like she wanted. So I glared at the bullet with tragic determination.

"...?!"

Nerzanpi's false composure broke for the very first time as her face twisted in shock.

Just then, rubble came flying at indiscernible speed from the side, hitting the bullet. Nerzanpi came back to her senses right away and fired the other rounds in revolver—but they were all struck down by mysterious attacks.

That's when it hit me: The wall of the palace had been demolished.

There were two people on the other side.

"Terakomari! Use your Core Implosion already!"

"She's the source of all trouble? We gotta kill her, then."

A Sapphire in winter clothing and the catgirl commander looked at us.

Prohellya Butchersky and Leona Flatt. Prohellya's gun was smoking, and Leona was playing with a rock in her hand, a killer look on her face. They'd protected us from Nerzanpi's attack. But just as I was about to bask in the joy of salvation...

BLAAAM! A hilariously loud explosion went off behind me.

Lingzi and I turned around in shock. A ton of vampires flooded into the wrecked entrance.

"Commander! Is this who we gotta kill?!" "The commander's bleeding! That woman's gonna pay!!" "Let's kill this terrorist and take over the Enchanted Lands!" "Beginning murder. Beginning murder. Target: woman in black." "It's a bloodbath, people!!"

For some reason, the Seventh Unit charged in.

This sight would usually be the stuff of nightmares, but now, it was cause for celebration.

Never before had I been so moved by this bunch of barbarians.

"G-guys! What're you doing?!" I yelled as I wiped my tears. "There's no Dark Core here! Don't be crazy!"

"We are not crazy."

The next thing I knew, a man who resembled a stripped tree was standing beside me. Caostel had warped in with Void magic. He smiled like the criminal he'd always been and said: "It's our job to fight under you, Commander. The presence of a Dark Core here is as inconsequential as Yohann's constant deaths. And besides, Commande—! Ahh! What happened to you?! You're hurt all over!"

"Huh?! I... Y'know! It's a handicap! It'd be too boring if I just massacred Nerzanpi without a fight!"

"Ohh!" "Praise be our Commander!" the vampires cheered.

Yeah, you guys are not all right in the head. How'd you believe that?

"Terakomari! Take a rest! I'll burn that bitch to ashes!" Yohann said.

"Stay away, kid. It's obvious you'll fall like a swatted fly," Bellius said.

"What'd you say?! I'll swat you, poochie! Look, I can't hide this anymore at this juncture—Terakomari's power is all a bluff! She's a weakling! We gotta take care of shit or she'll die!"

"What? Are you stupid?"

"You're the stupid one, stupid! Lemme kill 'er!"

"Check it! Yohann always dies. Consider this foresight. He'll meet a flaming demise. He won't even get a hit in again. We'll have to see him off with an amen."

"I'm gonna kill every last one of you fuckers!!"

Yohann began struggling with Mellaconcey.

He sent a flaming fist at Mellaconcey, but before his punch could land,

Mellaconcey kicked him up the chin. "Ubwoeh!" Yohann cried out before losing consciousness.

Idiots! Read the room, okay? Look how creeped out Lingzi is.

I'm sorry, girl. That's just how they roll.

"Stop wasting time, Terakomari! We'll keep the Minister busy, you use the Blood Curse!"

"R-right!"

Upon hearing Prohellya say that, I came back to my senses.

I couldn't let this chance go. I turned to Lingzi once again and smiled.

"I need your blood. Would you give me a little?"

"Umm... I heard vampires only suck the blood of those they love."

"And I love you. Let me protect you."

Lingzi turned beet-red.

Without waiting for her reply, I put my teeth on her neck. She exhaled with a little whimper, then hugged me tightly and awkwardly. Warm blood flowed from her veins into my mouth.

"Don't get too cocky."

A gunshot echoed.

Nerzanpi finished reloading and fired.

"It's rude to interrupt a vampire's bloodsucking session."

Caostel used Void magic to open a teleportation gate between me and Nerzanpi, and the bullet disappeared inside it.

Now there was nothing to worry about.

"Err... Komari...," Lingzi moaned, petrified.

Core Implosion was the power of the heart. As Lingzi's blood melted inside me, her emotions flowed into me. She had not given up on living. I had to give her all the support I could.

"Komari..."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

Blood dribbled out of the corner of my mouth.

Her crimson eyes wavered in confusion as she stared at me.

Then the world was dyed in the colors of the rainbow once again.

*

An explosion of mana.

A rainbow-colored torrent to change the world. In its center stood a vampire whose eyes were glowing like the rainbow—Terakomari Gandesblood. The palace walls groaned under the pressure of the energy and crumbled. Trees rattled in the howling wind. The vampires jumped like little kids, yelling, "Komarin! Komarin! Komarin!"

A rainbow garment floated around Terakomari.

A raiment like the Tiannu wore, rendered through mana.

"You'll pay, Nerzanpi."

The woman in black chuckled in the face of Terakomari's death glare.

Nerzanpi knew she had to avoid this at all costs. There were still too many unknowns about the Blood Curse. And the way its power changed depending on the variety of blood Komari had sucked was particularly hard to work around.

The blood of a vampire gave her extraordinary mana and physical capabilities. The blood of a Sapphire gave her a durable body. The blood of a Warblade gave her the power to control golden swords. The blood of a Peace Spirit gave her the power to accelerate time.

So what abilities would the blood of an Immortal grant her? Belatedly, Nerzanpi realized she should have given Komari Immortal blood instead of Warblade blood at the Tianzhu Hall.

"That's my cue to leave."

Nerzanpi was not stupid enough to directly challenge an opponent whose powers she knew nothing about. Not that the details of Komari's powers

mattered much. Facing the Blood Curse by herself would be stupid enough.

Not to mention that the situation was far from favorable. Nerzanpi was surrounded by enemies. Prohellya Butchersky. Leona Flatt. The Seventh Unit's relentless vampires. She could also sense that the puppets who'd been freed from Twisted Pedagogy were approaching the palace. Terakomari's immense willpower must have undone their brainwashing.

"Say your prayers, Nerzanpi!"

The rainbow-clad vampire sprinted up to her adorably, like a child playing tag. The sight was so adorable that Nerzanpi wanted to turn Komari into Baolu to decorate her room with. But she knew that she could not underestimate her.

"Heh. I could never put up a fight."

She took a Magic Stone imbued with a teleportation spell out of her pocket.

Retreating was the wisest move here. Nerzanpi was satisfied enough with having uncovered the location of the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core. She would have plenty of opportunities to take it down the line. So she grinned mischievously as she poured mana into her Magic Stone.

"...?"

But for some reason, its teleportation spell didn't start.

She looked down and noticed that there was a crack in it. The circuit must've fried. It wouldn't activate in this state, no matter how much mana she poured into it. Maybe it had gotten damaged when the ceiling had fallen in.

"This can't be..."

"Repent!!"

The next thing Nerzanpi knew, Terakomari's fist was right in her face.

She couldn't dodge. The timing was perfect.

A weak jab enveloped in mana crushed her face.

Nerzanpi slipped on the puddle of Lingzi Ailan's blood. Her balance lost, Nerzanpi fell like a spinning top.

"HAAAAAIIIILLLL!!!!! KOMARIN!! KOMARIN!! KOMARIN!!" An eardrum-shattering cheer echoed across the Zijingong.

Nerzanpi spun in the air as she flew away.

She hadn't flinched when I jumped at her just seconds before. Was this the magical assistance of Core Implosion?

It was then that it hit me—I was still fully conscious. In fact, I felt just like I did when lazing around in my room, even though my body was clearly overflowing with the rainbow mana of the Blood Curse. Maybe my clear head had something to do with the Immortal's power?

"Heh... Heh-heh-heh. You never cease to surprise me, Commander Gandesblood."

Nerzanpi struggled to her feet, keeping a hand to her forehead.

She'd banged her head on some debris. Blood was dripping down her face.

"You prevented me from retreating without even meaning to. I only have few Baolu bullets left. I'm surrounded by enemies on all sides. This reception is so warm that I could tear up. It's far too much for a small fry like me."

"Stop resisting! I'll catch you here and now!"

"You wish."

Nerzanpi fired a bullet with a smile on her face.

I dodged like crazy while pulling Lingzi by the hand. That would get me killed for sure. My body wasn't extra durable right now, like it had been when I sucked Sakuna's blood.

"Whoa?!"

"Eep!"

We tripped over a step.

Then the shining bullet just barely whizzed above my head. It hit the stone pillar behind me with a loud explosion, wrecking it in an instant.

I had no time to celebrate my survival, though.

Nerzanpi closed the distance with ninja-like movements.

"You die hard, eh, Commander Gandesblood?"

Then she pulled out a knife, as though she were doing a magic trick.

She slashed at my throat with godlike speed, but Lingzi pulled me back by the arm; the blade of Nerzanpi's dagger missed me by a hair's breadth.

"Why are you so fixated on Lingzi Ailan?"

"Because she's my friend! Because she asked for my help! I can't abandon her!"

"Oh, how commendable. What a humanitarian you are."

She slashed at my side.

Fortunately, I dodged it by falling on my butt. On top of that, Nerzanpi tripped and lurched forward. But now she was going to crush me from above! So I tried to stand up and book it, but...

"Bwegh!"

Nerzanpi's face slammed into my head.

She held her nose while staggering backward. Blood dripped from between her fingers and the vampires yelled, "HAAAAAIIIIILLLL!!!!! KOMARIN!! KOMARIN!!" Can't you see that was just dumb luck?

"Heh. Heh-heh... I see. Interesting," Nerzanpi muttered.

"What's so interesting, huh?! You'll see! I'm gonna beat you to a pulp!" I said.

"Komari! Don't push yourself!" Lingzi shouted.

"Just stand back and watch, Lingzi! I'm the strongest Crimson Lord of all! This sneaky coward's got nothing on me!"

I let out a war cry and threw a punch at Nerzanpi.

Usually, I would have never done something like that, but I was filled with a sense of omnipotence right now. No wound hurt too much when Lingzi was in danger, and no attack would frighten me. I had to defeat Nerzanpi, no matter what.

"That childish jab won't — Gwuh?!"

Somehow, I landed a clean hit on her chin.

Cheering followed again.

Then I noticed something. A giant boulder had fallen behind Nerzanpi. Her escape route had been miraculously sealed off. I couldn't let this chance slip.

"You did all those terrible things to everyone! Who cares about the Dark Core! Who cares about the Baolu! I won't let you hurt people for that stupid crap! Repent! Apologize to everyone!"

I hit her again and again with my feeble fists, every strike followed by shouts of, "HAAAIIILL!!! KOMARIN!! KOMARIN!!"

I had no idea what was going on anymore. I'd lost myself to my wrath and hatred. How in the world were my amateurish punches even landing, though?

"That's enough."

"Ugh?!"

Nerzanpi grabbed me by the neck.

It hurt. I couldn't breathe. But the rainbow mana remained strong. I could keep going.

"Let me go! I'm gonna save Lingzi!"

"Stop with your nonsense. Your kindness is nothing but poison. You heard her panting and suffering. You know that dying is her only release. Giving her false hope will only heighten the despair she feels when she meets her demise."

"I won't let Lingzi die! I'll cure her illness!"

"You really never learn. Your selfish sense of justice only breeds people like Mary Fragment. Can you take responsibility for your actions? No, you can't."

"Yes, I can!!"

"Can you? You're even sicker than Yusei, huh?"

Nerzanpi threw me away, hard. My back hit the wall, and I blacked out for an instant. But it seemed like I hadn't hit anywhere bad—I wasn't too banged up.

Lingzi called my name in pain. Someone yelled, "Commander, watch out!"

Then I noticed that Nerzanpi had trained her gun on me.

"It's over. Rest in peace."

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! Terakomari's not your only enemy!"

That same instant, Prohellya broke the silence and fired.

Nerzanpi clicked her tongue and triggered a spell. Her right hand glowed faintly. She threw a punch, neutralizing Prohellya's bullet with her bare fist.

"Wha...?"

"Regular bullets won't work against me."

Prohellya froze in shock. Nerzanpi seized on the opening and threw a knife. I ran in to try to protect the Sapphire, but then more debris fell from the ceiling, sending the bullet to the ground.

"This can't be..."

"You sure you should be looking away, Minister?!"

Leona unleashed a meteoric kick from above. But Nerzanpi couldn't dodge immediately—she was getting caught on the flooring, which had tilted from the impact of the debris. The catgirl's dropkick landed right on her hand.

Nerzanpi was blown away, and unfortunately for her, she flew right into the Seventh Unit, who were ready to rumble.

"Die." Bellius swung his ax.

Nerzanpi activated a magical barrier in the nick of time, and the whole palace shook as ax met mana. Still, Bellius's strike was enough to pin her there. The other vampires raised their weapons and charged at her, spouting off lines that would normally foreshadow death.

"GO TO HELL!!"

"HYA-HA-HA!! IT'S TIME FOR YOUR NAP, LITTLE LADY!!"

Nerzanpi raised her gun to respond.

Bang!! A series of Baolu rounds flew at the vampires—but none hit. In a series

of ungodly coincidences, the mana bullets they were firing back at Neranpi collided with each and every one of her shots. The fluke brought further happenstance, and she ran out of ammo. A clicking noise rang out as she pulled the trigger to fire again. Nerzanpi sucked her teeth and tried to summon new Baolu, but it was too late.

"Check it! Blow it!" Mellaconcey blew up her newly formed bullets.

Her zombie-like expression twisted ever so slightly. The vampires yelled valiantly as they raised their swords and hammers and whatnot. Nerzanpi tried dodging backward, but it was in vain.

Out of nowhere, a pair of hands grabbed her by the ankles.

"My goodness, Minister. Running away isn't very admirable," Caostel said.

He'd teleported his arms alone.

It was then that Nerzanpi grumbled in vexation for the first time.

"C'mon. This is too much. You think it's fair ganging up on one lady like this?"

"We don't care! It's your fault for picking a fight with the Komari Unit!"

"Yeah! You moron!!"

"You'll regret ever raising a hand against the Commander, bitch!!"

The Seventh Unit attacked without mercy.

Countless slashes hit and blood drops flew.

Nerzanpi went flying backward, then tumbled on the floor before she hit the back of her head on a pile of rubble.

That triggered a landslide of debris. Nerzanpi hurried to her feet, only to slip and fall again on the blood on the floor.

"Wait... This isn't fair... This..."

Nerzanpi stared up in a daze at the veritable mountain crashing down on her.

In the end, she couldn't resist. She could only stare, like a deer in headlights.

The earth rumbled and the avalanche echoed as the woman in black was buried in stone.

"Retreat! Retreat!" Prohellya yelled, doing just that.

I got out of there while pulling Lingzi by the hand. The collapse didn't stop at that pile of rubble. A chain reaction had started, triggering wave after wave of destruction. The Zijingong began crumbling with a resounding echo.

"Komari...!"

"We gotta get out of here! Move it, everyone! You wanna be buried alive?!"

The Seventh Unit shouted my name as they flew out of the palace. I ran as fast as I could, fighting through the agony of my wounds. Still, I was confident this was the end. There was no way Nerzanpi could have survived the entire palace collapsing on her.

Just then, Lingzi's eyes grew wide.

"Wait. That mana..."

"What is it?! I can carry you if you can't walk!"

"No, under there... Something's moving."

"Wha...?"

Lingzi clung to me.

The next thing I knew, I was being pushed to the ground.

I looked up and saw Prohellya and Leona standing there frozen, pale in the face. Caostel and Mellaconcey, too, were uncharacteristically taken aback. *What's wrong?* I wondered, unable to move.

The next instant, an incredible shock wave rocked the whole world.

My vision went white.

 \star

It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest.

Nerzanpi had thought to erase all trace of her activities after obtaining the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core. So she'd set a trap, burying a mana bomb underneath the Zijingong, one that would erase all record of her work as Minister of Military Secrets. Then the Ailan dynasty would collapse, and Yusei would take over.

"Heh... Now's the time to use it...," Nerzanpi muttered under the rubble.

She was covered in wounds. How many years had it been since she was this banged up? She had to admit she'd left her guard down—but Nerzanpi Rocha was not one to admit defeat fair and square.

By now, she was starting to make sense of Terakomari Gandesblood's power.

To push through, she would need all the bad luck she could get her hands on.

So she had no choice but to use the mana bomb.

"Someone else will hold your burial. For now, just die, Commander Gandesblood."

Nerzanpi took a Correspondence Crystal from her pocket, the one to send mana to the fuse. Unlike the last Magic Stone, this one wasn't broken. In the very end, the heavens sided with her. Nerzanpi savored her luck as she quietly poured in mana.

Just then, something moved underground.

The Zijingong was enveloped in mana flames the next moment.

*

I lost consciousness for a moment, only to be woken up by the pain. I panted as I slowly opened my eyes.

The first thing I saw was the vast twilight sky. The sun had already dipped behind the horizon. Glowing stars were showing their faces in the purple sky above.

How beautiful.

The sky seemed clearer here than it did in Mulnite.

"Komari... Thank... goodness..."

I heard a voice beside me. I sat up and whipped around.

The green girl lay right at my side.

"Lingzi?! You oka..." I couldn't finish my question.

Her clothes were so badly tattered that you could no longer tell what they

had looked like originally, and she was terribly wounded all over. Yet despite the damage Lingzi had sustained, the Dark Core in her chest was intact. It had survived, and it continued to eat away at her life.

Lingzi coughed up blood.

She smiled faintly as she wrung out her voice.

"Thank goodness...you're all...right."

I finally realized what happened.

Nerzanpi had set off a bomb she'd planted in the palace. Our surroundings had been turned into a wasteland. My comrades crawled out of the earth, groaning. Everything was drenched in blood.

I was about to lose my mind.

I wanted to scream and escape reality.

This had to be a dream. One of those nightmares I'd had when I was a shut-in.

"It's okay." Lingzi grabbed my hand. "Everyone's okay. They'll be fine if you... go to the Dark Core."

"Lingzi... Lingzi...!"

"Everyone...other than me is okay. I think...your Core Implosion kept them safe."

Other than you?! What's the point of this power if I can't use it to help you?!

She had protected me. There was no other explanation for how I was so lightly injured. I'd wanted to save her—but she'd ended up saving me.

"Lingzi... I'm so sorry... I..."

"Don't cry. I'm glad I was able to save you."

"Don't say that... I'll save you, too... I'll cure your illness..."

"No. It's okay."

She forced a smile, one so painful I wanted to look away.

"It'll be all right, as long as you're okay."

Ahh. I...

"Because I love you."

How foolish could I be?

Back with Vill. Back with Sakuna. Back with Nelia. Back with Karla. Back with Monique.

During all those times, the only thing I'd managed to do was run and fight, frantically and recklessly.

I'd thought that would solve everything.

I'd sincerely believed my efforts would bear fruit.

I'd thought I could do anything so long as I had Core Implosion.

"Komari... You helped me. You kept fighting for me even when you were hurt."

"Lingzi...please..."

"You called me your friend... A fragile coward like me... But I didn't want to be your friend... I wanted to be your bride..."

Her warmth faded.

Tears spilled from her crimson eyes.

"And that's why I'm content just being able to save you."

"D-don't be... We'll still have a lot of fun after this... You'll live like any other normal girl... Don't give up..."

"No."

"Please don't give up!! Let's go to Dr. Kuya!! It's okay... I can carry you there..."

Terror struck me.

Lingzi's eyes changed color.

Their vivid crimson hue faded.

They had returned to their original appearance.

"It's okay. Don't worry about me."

Cracks formed in the sword in her chest.

The Dark Core began falling apart. Lingzi no longer had the strength required to maintain Core Implosion.

"Don't say that..."

"Use your power to help other people in need."

"Don't... Don't say that... I'll protect you... I'll find a way you can live a normal life... So please, don't say that..."

"I appreciate the thought. But...leading a normal life...would be pretty hard."

"……"

In the end, I was a shut-in vampire princess to my core. I hadn't been ready to face the outside world.

I didn't have the power to save people.

I couldn't grant my mom's wish.

I didn't have it in me to change the world.

I couldn't stop Lingzi's life from slipping away.

The strongest Crimson Lord? The hero who'd saved the world?

That wasn't me. I was just a pathetic weakling who couldn't save one girl.

"Thank you, Komari."

Lingzi smiled.

And with that smile on her face, she bade me farewell.

"Our time together was short, but I savored every second of it."

Pop.

I heard the sound of something bursting.

Blood gushed out of Lingzi's body.

The red spread, tainting my skirt.

Lingzi went limp.

She was still, like a broken doll.

"And happily ever after. At last, Lingzi has been freed from her burden as the bearer."

Mistress Death laughed behind me.

I could feel my mind breaking.

In its place, a tingling, uncanny emotion boiled up inside me.

I turned around.

There stood Nerzanpi Rocha, gun in hand.

A lit cigarette was tucked between her smiling lips.

Even on the verge of losing my mind, I could understand what happened.

She'd stolen Lingzi's dream. Stomped on her tiny, simple wish of leading a normally life without being trapped by the circumstances of her birth.

Nerzanpi had taken everything from Lingzi Ailan.

"Please don't misunderstand, Commander Gandesblood. You know Her Highness had no hope of surviving. She would've died eventually, even if I hadn't sped up the process."

"…"

"I keep telling you, I did this for her. It's better to make a quick exit than to draw out your life in agony. She already wanted out."

"……"

"Reality is harsh. The heavens are cruel. It's easier if you let yourself go with the flow instead of struggling in vain. Just let the river carry you away."

"…"

"Now move, Commander Gandesblood. I gotta collect the Dark Core from her corpse. Looks like I'll have to break her bones to pry it out. My work is never done."

Nerzanpi chuckled.

What was so funny about this?

I had lost my senses, my rationality. This woman had killed Lingzi—that was all I needed to know.

I really was a useless vampire. I hadn't been able to save Lingzi.

But I still needed to stop Nerzanpi.

I couldn't let even more people suffer at her hands.

"...Stop."

Mana burst. Willpower burned.

The next thing I knew, I was on my feet.

"Nerzanpi."

"Hmm? We're gonna keep going? Your luck's already over, ki—"

Mana blew like a storm.

A rainbow raiment enveloped my body.

Pillars of light in five different colors rose to the heavens, slashing apart the evening sky.

I stomped the quaking earth and glared at the woman in black.

"You'll pay."

"...!"

Nerzanpi flinched for a moment.

That was it. I only needed one blow. That was all it would take. I would not allow the woman who'd stolen Lingzi's dream get away with it. I would make her pay. Apologizing wouldn't be enough. She'd lied. Nerzanpi needed to repent from the bottom of her soul.

"You... This can't be..."

"I'm gonna send you flying."

×

According to Enchanted Lands legend, pillars in five colors would pierce the

heavens upon the birth of a Tianzi.

The grand sight before her couldn't be anything but the reenactment of that legend.

The light of night filtered through the evening sky.

Rain began wetting her hair.

No—this was not rain. This was an omen to celebrate the Tianzi: the Ganlu.

The sweet and smooth liquid washed the ground of blood. Purified the world. The people of Jingshi looked up at the rainbowy sky and cheered.

"...Still got some luck left in you, huh? You don't know when to quit."

Nerzanpi clicked her tongue.

The Immortals were a long-lived people. Thanks to their particular way of breathing, their lifespans were just about triple that of other people. Nerzanpi had trouble understanding the workings of that trait—and she certainly didn't expect them to achieve pseudo-longevity through manipulating luck.

A Core Implosion like the Blood Curse came along only once every thousand years. And by ingesting Immortal blood, the wielder of this ultimate power could produce miracles through the manipulation of fate itself.

"It all makes sense now."

The rainbow Blood Curse was the power to don the raiment of luck.

The explosions of mana Komari had produced were just a signal of when its effects started and ended.

Here was how it worked. Upon activating, the Blood Curse would paint the world in rainbow and create the raiment of luck. At this point, Komari would regain consciousness, and her good fortune would persist for a while. (She also appeared to go back to "normal" while she wasn't actively using her Core Implosion—this was why she had been able to use the gold version of the Blood Curse back at the restaurant). Then once she incurred a certain amount of ill fortune, her raiment was undone, the world was dyed rainbow again, and her last bit of good luck was triggered.

Komari must have ingested Immortal blood when she'd arrived at the Enchanted Lands. That explained the unreasonably good luck she'd had while she was sightseeing in Jingshi and competing in the Matrimonial War. Then, once Nerzanpi shot her in the Zijingong, Komari's raiment broke from being pushed past its misfortune limits and unleashed its last bit of good fortune. This was what caused Nerzanpi's shots to be miraculously negated by debris.

But after that, Komari triggered the rainbow Blood Curse again by sucking Lingzi Ailan's blood. Her luck pushed Nerzanpi to injury, but in the end, her fortune ran out when the bomb went off.

Now, Komari's mana had exploded again, signaling the end of the Blood Curse's effects.

What sort of tremendous, heavens-twisting last bit of fortune would she unleash this time?

Terakomari slowly raised her hand.

Nerzanpi had no idea what could happen. The detonation of her bomb had turned the Zijingong into a wasteland. Their surroundings were practically featureless.

In a space as empty as this, there was no way Komari's burst of luck would be enough to turn the tables.

"Heh-heh. Time to end this."

Nerzanpi loaded the Baolu she'd created from Nelia Cunningham's willpower into her gun.

Nerzanpi, too, had been gravely wounded in the explosion. She needed to procure the Dark Core and rest as soon as possible.

The moment she raised her gun, she heard something approach.

Not a person. Not magic. Not even an attack.

"Meteorite," Terakomari muttered with brimming rancor.

Nerzanpi looked up at the sky in shock.

Something was quickly approaching, tearing the rainbow sky asunder.

"—?!"

A star.

A star was falling.

A giant meteorite was plunging down on her from the glowing rainbow sky.

The sky fractured. Someone screamed.

A tremendous noise was accompanied by crackling particles of light.

Heaven's net has large meshes, but nothing escapes—Divine punishment arrived to annihilate the evil.

"Guh..."

The earth erupted around them.

Debris flew every which way like scraps of paper.

The vampires regained consciousness and looked up at the sky. "Ah," they muttered.

Nerzanpi couldn't move.

Her limbs were completely paralyzed.

"This..." Her cigarette fell out of her mouth. "This...is fate...? No... This means you...you have a will strong enough to bend fate..."

"Get crushed." Terakomari handed down her sentence.

The meteorite descended, aiming for the villain in black. The approaching shock wave nearly blew her away. There was no point in firing back. Nothing could stop that. Nothing could stop her death. But before the fear could hit—the meteorite crushed her.

"A-aaaaaaagh!"

Her eardrums burst, stripping Nerzanpi of her hearing. The bones in her body crumbled, rendering her unable to feel any pain. Still, Nerzanpi resisted—but it was all for naught. Fate had been manipulated beyond significance. Nerzanpi yelled her bitter enemy's name mutely as her consciousness was ripped out of her body.

Intense shock.

Rainbow light filled the Enchanted Lands.



Some fates were set in stone, no matter how much you tried to change them.

Perhaps I'd gotten too cocky.

The hero who saved the world. The slaughter champion. The strongest Crimson Lord.

There was no meaning in those grandiose monikers. Who would follow a useless commander who couldn't even help the girl she wanted to save?

"Lingzi..."



In the ruins of the palace, I stared at Lingzi lying on the ground and cried.

Her expression was peaceful, but her flesh was pale. Her body was limp and still. Blood continued to ooze from her chest.

Her life had been snuffed out by Nerzanpi's bullet.

I touched her hair.

Our enemy was no more.

No one would make her suffer anymore.

"Please wake up..."

Her eyes did not open again.

Memories from the brief time I'd spent with Lingzi Ailan played in my mind. I had surprisingly little in common with her, yet I was still able to experience her kind, regular heart.

Our date in the Jingzhi. The Matrimonial War. Her wedding dress. Her wish to lead a normal life—all of it was burned into my brain.

It wasn't fair.

Lingzi was just a normal girl. What value was there in a world that allowed fate to torment her until she faded away? I wailed in despair.

"What a terrible sight. Star Citadel knows no limits."

Suddenly, someone was standing behind me.

Fluttering eastern clothing. A gaze as sharp as a knife.

It was Karla's older brother—Kakumei Amatsu.

He slowly walked up to me.

"Are you all right? You should go back to Mulnite or the Dark Core Zone soon."

"Why...are you here...?"

"Just checking on you, under Her Highness's orders."

Who's Her Highness?

That's when it hit me.

Karla could do it.

Karla Amatsu could turn back time and save Lingzi—but just as that thought came to me, Amatsu shook his head.

"Waving Moment can only turn back time. It cannot cure Lingzi Ailan's illness. The Dark Core's curse devoured her from the moment of her birth—turning back time would not change her fate."

"But..."

"Or do you intend to make Karla turn back time by six hundred years, to the period before the curse was in place? If you do that, then Karla would be the one to die. I will not allow it."

""

There was no way out.

Profound despair took hold of my heart.

"Are you frustrated at being unable to save her?"

"O-of course I am...!" I cried out in tears. "I should've saved her... This isn't fair..."

"Your first loss, eh...? But going through defeat is important, too."

Amatsu looked up at the sky.

The curtain of night was already lowering.

"Things had gone too well for you until now. Experiencing the fear of loss is what makes you stronger."

"...!!"

Blood rushed to my head, and I clenched my fist, only to let go the next instant. I didn't even have the energy to say anything back to him.

Amatsu sighed in annoyance.

"Perhaps it was too much. You won't be able to contend with Yusei or the Wicked God Slayer like that."

" "

"Don't worry, Miss Gandesblood. Your willpower is far greater than you think."

Huh? I raised my head.

Amatsu had a scowl on his face, like always.

"There's blood in your pendant."

I looked down at my chest in reaction.

The pendant my mom gave me was bright red, covered in the blood that Lingzi had coughed up.

"Now go to the Dark Core Zone. Lingzi Ailan is not one to go down in the history books—she's a normal girl, and saving her will be of no real value. But it is what your heart needs to heal."

"What do you mean ...?"

"You'll know once you go there. There's still hope for the girl yet."

I felt like he'd stirred my brain.

I stood there frozen as Amatsu gave me a Magic Stone. Its spell was already at the brink of triggering—teleportation, most likely. A bright light enveloped me and Lingzi.

I'll know once I'm there. Wait... That means...

"Amatsu...!"

I felt my heart race as I raised my head, but by then, he was already gone.

My vision went white. I decided to do as he said. I hugged Lingzi's cooling body close and wiped away my tears while praying, "It's okay. It's okay."

She and I were instantly transported to the Dark Core Zone.

*

Lingzi Ailan was a normal person without any determination.

She wasn't grand enough to be a Tianzi. She wasn't even cut out to be Gongzhu or commander.

She wanted to live a normal life, like any other person in Jingshi.

Yet she'd been bound by the curse of the Ailan Dynasty. Though she played at looking for the elixir of life, deep down, she had resigned herself to die for the sake of her country.

She lacked willpower. Her heart was too weak to lead the people.

Yet Terakomari Gandesblood had faced this spineless girl with sincerity.

Lingzi's time with the vampire had been delightful. Her life may have been worthless—but she was happy to have been able to save someone in the very end.

She had no regrets.

She surrendered herself to watch over Komari from the shadows.

But... After all that...

She still wanted to live a little longer.

"Meihua... Komari... Father... I'm sorry..."

Her eyes warmed up. Lingzi shed tears. She couldn't help it. Everyone was afraid of death. But then, she noticed something strange.

Why was she able to cry?

After death, people were supposed to become spirits tied to the transient world.

Could one shed tears even without a body?

Lingzi thought she heard someone calling her name.

She could see a faint light.

A glow like a star in the middle of the darkness.

It wasn't just one voice. Several people were calling Lingzi Ailan's name.

Lingzi slowly raised her petrified body.

She reached out to the light, and in that moment...

"Lingzi!! You're awake!!"

"Huh...?"

Someone grabbed her hand.

Lingzi opened her eyes wide in shock.

Terakomari Gandesblood's teary face jumped into view. The vampire sobbed and wailed while holding Lingzi's hand tight.

"Thank goodness...! I thought you were dead...!"

"Lingzi, are you okay?! Does anything hurt?!"

"Komari? Meihua...? And everyone else..."

She was in the morgue.

The ward was full of familiar faces. Terakomari Gandesblood. Meihua Liang. Villhaze. Esther Claire. Sakuna Memoir. Nelia Cunningham. Gertrude Rainsworth. Even Prohellya Butchersky and Leona Flatt.

They were all sighing in relief.

Lingzi couldn't keep up. Wasn't she supposed to be dead?

Meihua wiped away her tears.

"I'm sorry, Lingzi. I couldn't go help you...even though I'm your retainer... I put you through so much..."

"What's the meaning of this ...? Ow!"

Sharp pain ran down her side the moment she tried to sit up.

Lingzi fell back to bed. "Call Dr. Kuya, quick!!" Komari exclaimed, looking around in a panic. "Please don't die, Lingzi!!" Meihua yelled, like it was the end of the world.

"Don't push yourself, Lady Lingzi," Villhaze scolded.

"Umm... I'm not. It just hurt a little."

"Naturally. Nerzanpi shot you in the stomach with a Divine Instrument.

Fortunately, the wound isn't lethal."

"Yeah! Remember the hermit's stone we bought? It stopped the bullet and saved you!" Komari showed her the shattered pieces of the stone.

There was still so much that Lingzi didn't understand. How had she been saved? What happened to Nerzanpi? And most of all...why was the sluggishness caused by her illness completely absent?

"Komari... I..."

"Don't sweat the details!"

Komari hugged her out of nowhere. Lingzi felt her heart race as she savored Komari's warmth. She smelled nice. It made her feel lighter somehow.

"Thank goodness..." Komari repeated like a broken record. "I'm so, so glad. Your illness was cured. You'll recover little by little."

"Cured...? Wait, what about the Dark Core...?"

"It's over there. They say it will break in about a week." Villhaze glanced at the bedside table.

The Enchanted Lands' Dark Core, the Willow Sword, was just sitting there inconspicuously, like it was a wallet or something.

Taken aback, Lingzi looked at her chest. The portion that was stuck in her ribcage would normally grate on her bones in this position, but she felt nothing now—nothing except Komari's softness. So that was why she felt lighter. The Dark Core had been removed.

Komari clung to her in tears.

"It's okay now. You don't have to worry about anything now."

"Yes..." Lingzi froze in place and blushed.

Tears fell from her eyes like waterfalls, soaking Komari's clothes.

Her kindness resounded in the depth of Lingzi's heart.

And not only Komari's. Everyone here worried about her. Her heart felt full—but at the same time, guilt welled up inside her.

"I'm sorry. You did all this for someone like me... A girl as weak as I am isn't worth saving."

"Don't you apologize. And you're not a weakling. You're amazing! You saved my life with yours."

"...!"

"So stop belittling yourself. You're amazing. You're way better than I ever could be. And I think you have a right to make your dream come true."

Komari quietly let go of her.

She smiled with bliss.

"Your life might've been hard until this point, but now it's yours to do what you please with. No worrying about being a commander, or Gongzhu, or Tianzi. You can do whatever you want."

"Um...?"

"I took care of it," Meihua said apologetically. "I couldn't honor your feelings before. I'm really sorry about that. So, I beat the Tianzi into an understanding. I convinced him to not force anything on you and let you do as you please."

"You beat him...?"

"Uh, no, I... It was mostly talking. Anyway, he got the point. You don't have to worry about the curse of the Ailan dynasty anymore. And he was sorry about forcing that on you, too. He should be here to say that to your face, but..."

"…"

A fresh breeze blew across her lighter, blade-free chest.

The next instant, she was crying twice as hard as before.

"You okay?!" Komari and everyone else exclaimed.

Lingzi dropped her head, unable to contain her emotions.

She composed herself after a moment of deep breathing.

At the same time, her chest filled with warmth.

"...Thank you, everyone," she said, grinning awkwardly.

They all responded with pure smiles.

"Let's throw a recovery party!" Nelia clapped.

"I'll go get the food," Prohellya said, raising her gun for some reason.

"Wait, Lady Lingzi isn't fully recovered yet." "Celebrations gotta be done in the moment! Right, Gertrude?" "Huh? Yes! Lady Nelia is right!" "This maid just says whatever she says." "I'll bring you traditional Polar Union dishes! Cat hot pot, fellas." "Meow?! What?! I'll gouge your eyes out if you keep joking like that!" "Wah-ha-ha-la! I'd like to see you try!" "Hey, don't start fighting right here!! You're gonna kill me!!" "You should join the fight, Lady Komari. You'll be cooked in the hot pot if you lose." "No freaking way!!" "Don't worry, Commander! I'll protect you!" "I'll protect you, too, Ms. Komari!" "Stay away, sycophants. I'll take all the glory by hunting the cat." "Stay back, you!!" "Are you forgetting we're in an infirmary?! What if you open Lingzi's wounds?!" "Meihua's right, stop it, you crazies!!"

Lingzi was confounded.

She didn't get it, but the sight of her friends making a fuss filled her with emotion.

Ahh, I'm so blessed.

Up to now, she had only lamented her unfortunate circumstances. But she wasn't unfortunate—she had all these people to support her.

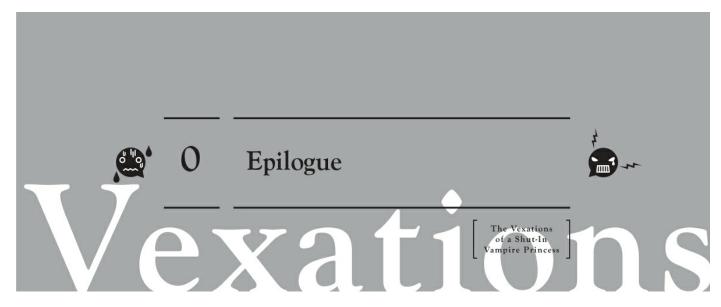
"For goodness' sake." Komari sighed before looking back at her. "...I'm sorry, Lingzi. I don't think they'll start fighting for real. They're just playing around."

"It's okay. It's fun."

"Y-you think? If you say so..." Komari looked at her with worry.

Her eyes brimmed with endless kindness. *I have to repay her*, Lingzi thought while wearing a smile from the bottom of her heart.

(THE END)



Six Nations News, March 23rd Morning Edition COMMANDER GANDESBLOOD TAKES THE TITLE OF TIANZI His Majesty the Tianzi of the Enchanted Lands announced on the 22nd that he would be abdicating his title to Terakomari Gandesblood, Crimson Lord of the Mulnite Empire. Commander Gandesblood emerged victorious in the Matrimonial War held on the 21st and swiftly suppressed the riots instigated by Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha. In a press conference, His Majesty the Tianzi declared, "The Immortals of the Enchanted Lands overwhelmingly support Terakomari—she deserves the title. I could not have found a worthier partner for my daughter and successor." Ms. Gandesblood declined the position three times before she finally accepted. The dynastic cycle has ended, and the Enchanted Lands switches from the Ailan dynasty to the Gandesblood dynasty. Ms. Gandesblood has been welcomed as the spouse of the former dynasty's Gongzhu, Her Highness Lingzi, becoming the founder of a new generation. Rainbow pillars of five colors appeared throughout the Enchanted Lands to herald and welcome the succession. We can all look forward to Commander Komarin's bright future.



"Hmmm. Things sure are getting interesting!"

Spica La Gemini laughed as she tossed the newspaper aside.

She elegantly sipped a cup of blood-infused coffee on a terrace 165 feet above ground, on a giant skyscraper in Jingshi.

Cannon salutes went off in the distance. Everyone in the Floral Capital was celebrating.

Tianzi Yizhu Ailan was retiring, and his successor was vampire girl Terakomari Gandesblood. And the celebration wasn't confined to Jingshi. The announcement had taken everyone in the Six Nations by surprise.

"Terakomari has made an ally of another country. Do you think we can afford to stay behind much longer?"

"It's not a race. Inverse Moon only needs to fulfill its goals."

"That makes sense! And I will win, so there's no need to worry!"

"..." The man in eastern clothing sat across the table from Spica with an awkward look on his face.

Kakumei Amatsu. A Peace Spirit who held the title of Luna, top brass of Inverse Moon.

"Either way, the Enchanted Lands is a nice place! This takes me back! This was a raging battlefield back in the day. And by that, I mean thirty generations before yours."

"Hah. Sure is different to be a six-hundred-year-old child."

"Yup! I'm your elder by a ton! So if you ever need someone to pamper you, come to your big sister here. I'll pat your head."

"Big sister? More like great-great-grea— Blegh!"

Amatsu spat out his coffee and fell into a coughing fit. The drink soaked into the tablecloth.

"You fell for it!" yelled Spica with a wide grin. "I mixed my blood in it. You really can't stand the stuff, huh?"

"No Peace Spirit can." Amatsu wiped his mouth and sighed. "Now, why did you come all the way here, Your Highness?"

"To check on the Starquake Agency."

"Couldn't turn a blind eye to Shikai Gudo's misdeeds? You have a surprisingly strong sense of justice, you know?"

"Nice joke. I'll give you some candy for it later."

Spica smiled as she summoned something. A strange object fell on the table.

A giant bracelet... No, a necklace?

It looked like a simple metal ring. Six giant spheres were incrusted around it, glowing blue.

"What is this? A giant rosary?"

"Are you going to find someone to hold this thing with you and pray? That'd be funny! Introduce me if you do—but no. This is a Divine Instrument I stole from the Starquake Agency. Every ball is an armillary sphere. It's an antique used to read the movement of the stars."

Spica stroked a sphere merrily as she continued.

"Did you know that the Starquake Agency's official purpose was to research star movement? Of course, this was just a front to continue the research of the Daydream Paradise. Its real purpose was to produce Baolu. But originally, it was supposed to be a place for studying the cosmos."

"Right back to the starting point."

"Everything is a circle—but well, Shikai Gudo twisted it. Still, Starquake Ministers throughout history have devoted themselves to researching the stars, along with protecting this Divine Instrument, the Nightsky Ring. They've been doing this for six hundred years. That means this rosary is an ultra-rare treasure, and not just on an Enchanted Lands scale—but all six nations."

"What do you use it for?"

"You don't know what armillary spheres are for? You use them to learn the names of the stars. That way, you can rattle them off while looking at the night sky with your sweetheart."

Spica cackled. She sure had a knack for saying pointless drivel.

Each of the six armillary spheres looked had a different constellation engraved on it. And Amatsu only recognized two. The sky of this world, and the sky of the Netherworld. He had never seen the other four.

"To be more specific, this is our map to a great journey. Our guide to fulfill Inverse Moon's goal. I got to steal it easy-peasy thanks to Meihua Liang and Nelia Cunningham exposing the Starquake Agency. Shikai Gudo, Nerzanpi

Rocha, Terakomari Gandesblood—they were all dancing on the palm of my hand. And they're all happy, ignorant of the fact they were being used. How adorable! They're so cute I could suck their blood."

"We should be wary of Nerzanpi's organization. They could end up using us instead if we're not careful."

"Yup. The other reason I came to the Enchanted Lands is to meet with her." Spica threw a sugar cube in her coffee. "But that didn't happen. The Minister of Military Secrets was captured by the Mulnite Empire. And it would be such a pain to infiltrate the Imperial Capital again, so I gave up."

"Did you find evidence of anyone besides her?"

"No. I walked in the direction of the Dusky Venus, but I found no one. I guess only Nerzanpi was here."

"Speaking of Star Citadel, what do you think of them, your highness?"

"We gotta kill 'em!" Spica exclaimed gleefully. "Those villains destroyed our utopia. They're trying to extinguish all humanity. Even the ones with pure hearts—the shut-ins! I will not renounce murder. Sometimes, you need to sacrifice people to achieve things—which is precisely why we must be choosy about who we kill! Yet Star Citadel doesn't understand that basic notion! My wishes won't come true with those berserkers around."

"I see. Indeed."

"Yusei herself is devastating my boxed garden. We need to kill her as soon as possible. That's why we need to break the Dark Cores and open the door to the Netherworld... By the way, Amatsu." Spica shot him a testing glare. "Did you find out what the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core is?"

"No. The Ailan dynasty hid it cleverly."

"You lie."

More cannon salutes went off, celebrating the coronation of Terakomari Gandesblood.

"Your role was infiltrating the Enchanted Lands to uncover their Dark Core's secret. There's no way THE Kakumei Amatsu would come back without anything

to show for it."

"You overestimate me."

"I'm not kidding! But you keep being sneaky! That's why Tryphon doesn't like you! Though I must admit that I like your spy-like character."

"…"

"I trailed you, Amatsu. I know that the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core is the nearly-broken Willow Sword. Guess they managed to pull it out of Lingzi Ailan's chest."

"Don't say..."

"I'm not gonna do anything. There's no need to, in any case."

Amatsu's expression darkened. In contrast, Spica's eyes shone like stars. She took a blood candy out of her pocket and put it in her mouth with a childlike grin. "Can't wait to see what happens!"

As if reacting to her emotions, the stars of the Nightsky Ring glowed.

 $\stackrel{\wedge}{\sim}$

How was Lingzi saved?

The only thing I could say was that Lingzi Ailan was registered to the Mulnite Empire's Dark Core. Her illness was cured in the Dark Core Zone thanks to Mulnite's Dark Core's mana. Come to think of it, the Dark Cores weren't discriminatory in who they healed. Bellius was a dog, after all, and he'd come back to life again and again with the rest of the Seventh Unit. But anyways, I didn't know much about how the system worked. What mattered was that a miracle happened. Lingzi's wounds healing also meant that she could stop using Core Implosion for the first time in ten years.

Without the protection of the Late Monarch's Guidance, the Enchanted Land's Dark Core quickly crumbled.

According to the Zijingong's Immortals, it would shatter completely in one week. Apparently, this was the period of functionality it had saved after ten years of Lingzi's Core Implosion.

That backup was a blessing, too.

During that week, Lingzi healed entirely—and decided to become the bearer again and resume using the Late Monarch's Guidance.

"It's something only I can do. Something I must do."

There were many downsides to losing the Dark Core. Still, the Tianzi and the rest of the Enchanted Lands' top brass weren't sure what to think of the decision. Lingzi would fall ill eventually by becoming the bearer again, and everyone felt bad about binding her to her duty once more.

That said, Lingzi was assertive. She stated she would not do anything related to the Ailan dynasty besides maintaining the Dark Core. She would prioritize doing what she pleased.

She also assured there was no need to be pessimistic about her illness. She would use the Late Monarch's Guidance for a set time to save up the Dark Core's backup. Then she would stop her Core Implosion and heal in Mulnite. She said she could keep the Willow Sword intact by repeating that cycle.

That didn't change the fact there wasn't anyone to become the bearer after her, though. Tianzi Yizhu Ailan said he had no intention of raising a next generation. That meant the Enchanted Lands would eventually lose its Dark Core. The Immortals needed to think of a way around it when the time came—but that day was still far off.

Lingzi got her freedom. She didn't have to be burdened anymore. She could live however she wanted. And she'd won that future herself, with her own willpower.

As it turned out, that thing about Lingzi lacking strength of will wasn't true. It just so happened she felt strongly about having a normal life instead of being the Tianzi. Her wish was just as powerful as Nelia's or Karla's.

It was wonderful.

It also gave me hope. Maybe if I kept a mind of steel and was steadfast in my determination, then maybe I, too, would one day be able to quit my job.

					_				_	_		
97 i	ling	norting	SUD	s on	tocus	ot r	had	iust		for now,	aside	That
z.		אוווו וטעי	Sup	5 011	10045	่ม เบ	Hau	IUSL	, I	TOT HOW,	asiue,	IIIal

.

.....

...No, hold on a sec.

I think there's a few things I'm still missing?

"Congratulations, Lady Komari, on becoming the Tianzi."

"WHY?!?!?!"

"This here is the symbol of the Tianzi, passed down through generations of the Ailan Dynasty: the Imperial Seal."

"What am I supposed to do with this?!"

The Tianzi's abode, the Zijingong. I grabbed my hair in a room of a building that managed to stay standing.

I was about to be in this mysterious event they called my "coronation ceremony." The Tianzi said it was only natural, as I would be his successor, but I had no idea what was natural about this whole thing.

"This isn't right! I'm a vampire! How can I be the head of the Enchanted Lands?!"

"You never know until you try. And besides, take a look at the results of this survey Six Nations News conducted in the capital: ten thousand people out of ten thousand agree with your coronation. You have an approval rating of one hundred percent, Lady Komari."

"This is clearly a hoax!!"

Outside, the Seventh Unit guys chanted, "Komarin! Komarin!"

They were celebrating my coronation. I couldn't get Caostel's wicked sneer out of my head. "At last, the preparations to take over the Enchanted Lands are in place," he said.

"Komari... I'm sorry about all of this...," Lingzi Ailan said, casting her eyes down. She went red in the face and fidgeted, then looked at me. "Umm... My father said that your coronation is the natural legal conclusion."

"Well, your law sounds whack."

"It's not whack." Meihua sighed. "It's nothing strange for you to succeed the

Tianzi. I mean, you are officially married to Lingzi."

"Hold on, Lady Meihua. May I see the papers confirming this? I have a bonfire to ignite."

"Put that match away! Control yourself!"

"But it's not fair! Even if it is in name only, I will not allow you to marry anyone other than me, Lady Komari, not even if hell freezes over! I've already used Pandora's Poison to see our future together! We have a nice, happy family! So come! You may kiss the bride!"

"Get off of me!! Shoo!!"

I shoved Vill away and backed off.

The maid was as nutty as ever, but I felt her confusion.

I mean, I didn't even know when when me and Lingzi had gotten hitched.

Meihua said it happened the moment I won the Matrimonial War. Apparently, that's how their laws worked. I'd gone past the point of return without even knowing it.

"I-it's okay, Komari. You're only married according to Enchanted Lands law. As far as the Mulnite Empire goes, you are still single."

"I don't get the logic... But that aside, what am I gonna do about the coronation?"

"Well...if you manage to convince my father, and the people, and the law..."

Too many people (and concepts?!) to convince!

"Lady Lingzi, allow me to have a serious discussion here with you." Vill cleared her throat and gave her a cool-headed glance. "I will ignore the marriage entirely. It is fate that Lady Komari and I marry sooner or later. In fact, we have strict plans to whisper sweet nothings to each other as we indulge in gazing at the starry sky."

"Are you being serious?" I interjected.

"So, I will ask only about the coronation. Will Lady Komari truly become the Enchanted Lands' Tianzi? Even though she hasn't even become the Mulnite

empress yet?"

"What do you mean yet? I am NOT becoming empress."

"Don't worry, Komari. We're going to hold the coronation...but you haven't earned the title yet. Perhaps if you throw a tantrum..."

My only choice is to act like a baby?

I couldn't say that throwing tantrums had gotten me anywhere before... Well, I could give a try at yelling "I don't wanna be the Tianzi!" with all my might. That strategy had worked pretty well for Lingzi. I couldn't let myself go with the flow!

Anyway, I was a tiny bit relieved.

I felt like I had taken one step forward in my mission: helping those in need—and uniting the world.

And yeah, I had to do that because my mom had asked me to, but I genuinely wanted the world to come together. I wanted to help people in pain like Lingzi. I wanted to cheer up people who were suffering like I had during my days as a shut-in. That way, I could meet my mom again with my head held high.

The Mulnite Empire, the Aruka Republic, the Heavenly Paradise, and the Enchanted Lands had been taken care of.

The missing pieces were the Polar Union and the Lapelico Kingdom. Mulnite's relationships with those two countries weren't bad per se, but... I just had this feeling things would be tricky with them, and my hunches were usually right.

I sighed before looking at Lingzi and Vill again.

"All right, all right. I'll go meet the Tianzi."

"Yeah. I'll go with you," said Lingzi.

"I'll be by your side, Lady Komari. I'll expose the extent of your sloth to His Majesty and crush all his expectations. I'll explain how you still cannot eat your bell peppers at this age. I'll tell him all about the list of diseases you keep on hand to get sick days off. I'll recount to him that time you went to the bathroom late at night and thought a tree branch outside the window was a ghost, and you cried your eyes out."

"You keep your mouth shut!!" I yelled as I walked away.

Everything was settled for now. I just had to stop this coronation and go back to my safe indoor life—or so I thought, unaware of what awaited us.

"Hmm...? Lady Lingzi?" Vill said in surprise.

Meihua gasped.

The workings of heaven were inexplicable.

We had a week of backup? Who'd decided that?

Lingzi's chest was shining.

She quickly put her hands in her clothes to take it out. The Willow Sword was already in shambles. It glowed in signal of its last moments.

Lingzi was on the verge of tears.

"Ah... The Dark Core..."

Everyone was bewildered at the fact.

The sound of glass breaking echoed.

And the Willow Sword burst into pieces.

The shards turned into light dust and spilled out of Lingzi's hands. Vill and I could only watch in shock. A strong flash exploded from the center of the broken Dark Core.

One of the six was lost at last... And the despairing silence only lasted for one second.

It must have been just like this during the vampire riots.

The door to the Netherworld opened.

I felt my body being pulled.

"Whoa..."

"Lady Komari! Hold on to me! No, I'll hold on to you!"

"Stop taking advantage of the situation to grope me! Don't you see this is not the— WAAAH?!"

I felt ashamed of myself for thinking I only had the Polar Union and the Lapelico Kingdom left. My hunches never worked during tests back when I was in school.

Resistance was futile. Before I knew it, the light was already sucking me in.

And so, I was transported somewhere else.

Afterword

Nice to see you again. Kotei Kobayashi here.

As you might have noticed, the countries in this story each have real-world inspirations.

That said, I only take the slightest, vaguest ideas from real life. I don't put a lot of detail into reproducing cultures. They really are just a point of reference.

I think the easiest to tell would be the Heavenly Paradise. And the Polar Union.

Of course, the Enchanted Lands isn't hard to figure out, either; it's based on pre-modern China. I would say a mix of about the Ming to the Qing dynasties. You can expect a very Eastern-ish adventure for Komarin and the gang.

Now, some special thanks.

To riichu, for carefully illustrating the feats of Komarin and friends. To Ryo Hiiragi, for bringing color to this story with the book designs. To Yoten Sugiura, my editor, for pointing out the smallest details of my writing. To everyone involved in the production and selling of this book. To all of you my readers for holding it in your hands. I give you my deepest gratitude—Thank you so much!!

We are at the halfway point of the series with this seventh volume, and I wasn't expecting it to turn out like this with such serious fighting. The following volume will be something unusual for *Vexations*—a cozy road-trip style story in the Netherworld... Or I guess we'll see!

I also have an announcement to make.

The manga adaptation of *The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess* is being serialized in *Monthly Big GanGan*, with art courtesy of riichu. You can see Komari's feats in the same style as the novels, so I'm also very excited as I follow it. It also contains some characters and scenes not depicted in the novels,

so I hope you enjoy it. Please give it a read!

Kotei Kobayashi

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink