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Chapter 1: The Lady of the Mist's Oath

There was no sky here. Even the land was gone. It was just a gaping hole of pitch-black void. This was the inner world created by Majima Takahiro's ability. Salvia stood alone in front of a school gate.

She sighed, failing to repress a feeling of grief, of loss. Even at the beginning, when the boy had first created this place, it was already a damaged and tattered mess. Ever since, every last portion of it had crumbled away.

It had happened more than once too. The last time had been inside the labyrinth they'd been teleported to so that he could fight against the marshal of the Holy Order, Harrison Addington. In order to protect what was dear to him, the boy had expended another piece of himself. This was the result. All that was left was enough ground for the school itself.

He was just half a step away from a fatal collapse. But that wasn't the only change. Salvia spent most of her time in this world, so there was something only she was capable of sensing.

"It's gotten deeper again..."

Back when this was just a world of light, Majima Takahiro had described coming here as "sinking into the depths." Salvia felt like the entire world was sinking deeper and deeper each time his ability evolved.

It'd only been a vague feeling before, but this time, it was strikingly obvious. She didn't know what that signified, though. Maybe it was nothing more than a delusion to begin with. It only felt that way. She couldn't quantify the sinking in any meaningful way.

"But if I'm right..."

This world was the mental path itself—what connected hearts together. What was it sinking toward? There was only one answer she could think of.

"Who was that...?"

What came to mind was the strange intruder she'd seen twice in this world. The first time was right before they arrived in the imperial capital. The second was while they were in the world fabricated by the Dimensional Cornerstone. When the boy she was contracted to had come to his inner world, they'd met a young man with dark brown hair. In the end, they couldn't figure out who he was, but something about him bothered her.

"I feel like...he's a little familiar."

She sounded uncertain. She hadn't given it any thought the first time, but the second, it had suddenly started bothering her. It was as if a veil blocking her memories had been torn away. That didn't bring her any conviction, however. It couldn't be helped. The Misty Lodge had wandered the world for a long, long time, meeting and parting ways with many humans.

With the exceptions of her contractor and his group, as well as the carapace wyrm Malvina and her family, Salvia only ever met people in passing. It'd been so long that she barely remembered any of their faces. Having a hunch that she recognized someone wasn't much of a clue.

"I might remember something if I talk to him..."

However, when her contractor had asked who he was, the young man hadn't given much of an answer. It hadn't even been a real conversation. That young man hadn't done anything. He'd simply broken into this world.

"No, rather than break in, it's more like..."

Salvia muttered to herself thoughtfully, when suddenly...

"Oh my."

A small hand grabbed her skirt. Noticing this, she smiled gently.

"What's wrong?"

It was a small girl. She looked younger than ten. Her vivid green hair went down to her waist, and she wore a simple white dress. She looked up at Salvia with bloodred eyes. Her plump lips opened, but no voice came out. The girl pouted, then sulkily hugged Salvia's leg.

"Oh dear. Don't be so sad."

Salvia's smile deepened as she patted the girl's head. The girl looked up as if wanting to say something, and Salvia shook her head.

"Ah, please wait a moment. I still have something to do."

Realizing that she'd lost herself in thought over a question she had no answer for, Salvia got back to what she had to do. She spent most of her time holed up inside Majima Takahiro's internal world, but she didn't spend that time idly. She soothed the green-haired girl with one hand while holding out the other to the boy's blank world.

A white fog filled the black void. This was the true value of the wondrous magic known as the Misty Lodge. The power to make impossible ambitions reality repaired the boy's broken world ever so slightly. The cracks filled in and the black nothingness slowly regained substance.

That said, compared to the total loss, the repairs were minuscule. Salvia furrowed her brow at the heartbreaking thought. Even if she were capable of repairing this world with her unique power, it wouldn't be enough to keep up.

This world was the boy's very memory. There wasn't much he remembered anymore. How frightening was that for him? The boy's determination to protect what was dear to him was beyond what would be considered normal, but his sensibilities were no more than those of a typical boy. Such things still inspired dread. On the contrary, it was precisely because he was who he was that he feared the loss even more. His determination and feelings helped him endure that fear.

When Salvia thought about the bleak sense of loss that must have been tormenting him, she felt a sharp pain in her chest. She felt an urge to embrace and protect him. These feelings weren't love. What Salvia felt for the boy wasn't as sweet as love. She simply felt warmth.

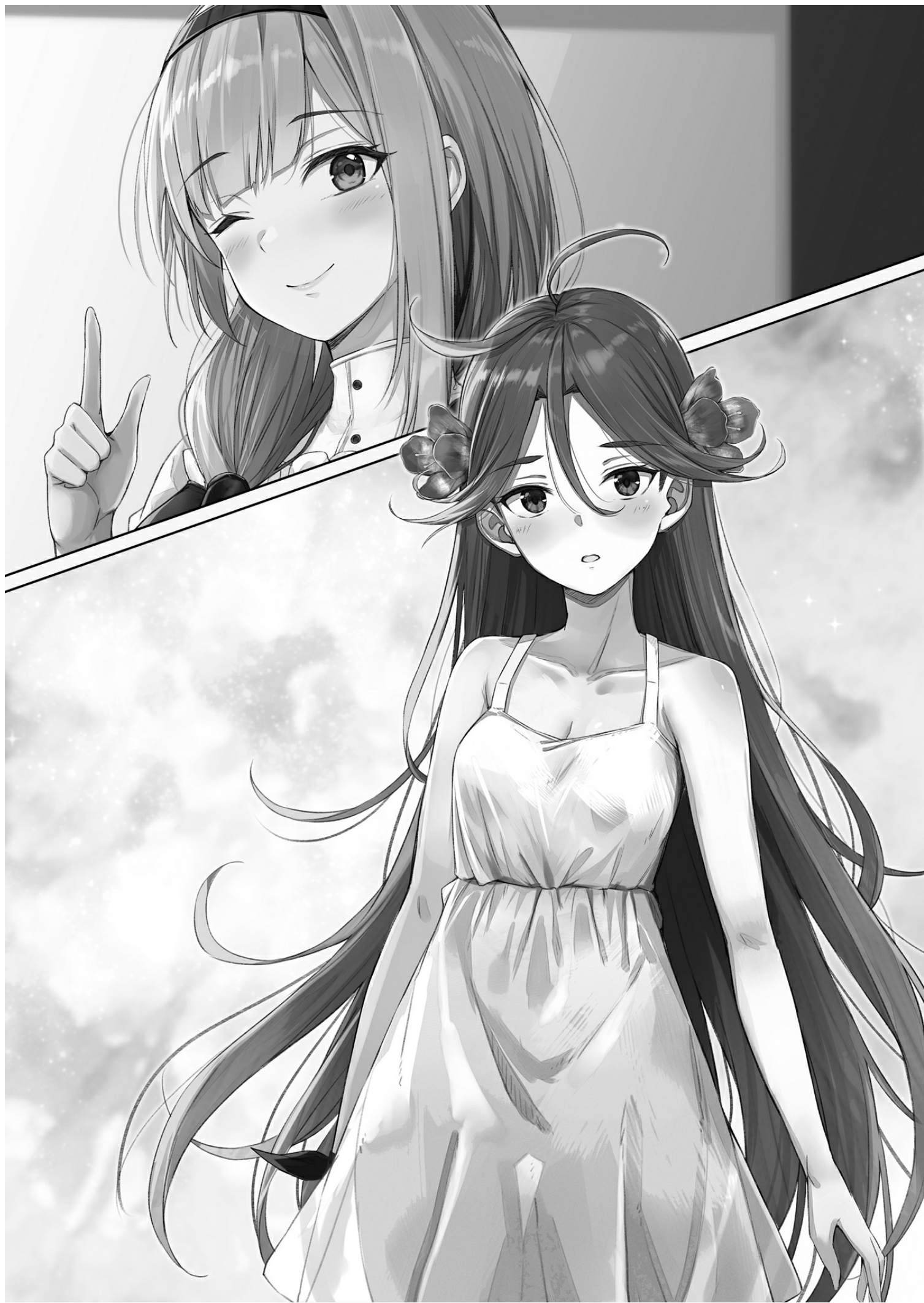
Those children nestled together and protected one another. The way they kept one another in their hearts was so precious and adorable. As no more than a bystander in this world for countless ages, that was something she'd never been able to obtain.

The boy and his servants were family to Salvia. She saw him like a little brother, or perhaps even a son. As no more than an embodiment of magic, she

knew such feelings were beyond her station, so she'd never informed him of this. Still...

"I have to protect them."

The little girl listened to Salvia's oath, then silently mouthed, "Ssster."



Chapter 2: Notice of Danger

“What’s going on?”

Gordon’s deep, hoarse voice shook the room. We were within the imperial palace inside the room that was being lent to the exploration team’s nicknamed cheater, the Fairy Ring Shimazu Yui.

In the middle of using Shimazu’s teleportation to return to the capital and see off the Holy Order’s vice marshal, Gordon Cavill, we witnessed something truly abnormal. We could see the Holy Church’s headquarters, the grand cathedral, through the window. It was an enormous building composed of a large central dome and six spires. Two of those spires were broken, and the remaining four were crumbling apart all over. We’d been forcefully teleported away from the capital two days prior. At the time, the cathedral hadn’t been in this state.

Gordon and his men looked out the window in shock. From their perspective, it was like the sky was falling. The Holy Church protected the world and possessed the greatest martial might and authority there was. The tremendous damage to their headquarters signified far more than what could be seen. It was as if the entire world had been shaken.

Shimazu Yui and the Skanda Iino Yuna, who’d come along as an escort, were frozen by the sight too. The only ones who noticed my gaze as I looked around were Lily and Shiran. We nodded to each other.

“There’s no point standing around,” I said.

Gordon and his knights unfroze at the sound of my voice. Iino and Shimazu also came back to their senses and looked at me. I waited for all of them to regain their faculties, then addressed them.

“Sir Gordon, we’ll be leaving here as planned. I don’t know what happened, but it doesn’t change the fact that the Holy Church is my enemy. We can’t afford to go knocking on their door.”

“I see...”

“What will you do?” I asked.

“We will... We will also act as planned,” Gordon answered, a strong glint in his eyes. As was to be expected, he’d regained his composure quickly. “We’ll return to the church. We must confirm what happened.”

“It’s clearly abnormal. It might be dangerous,” I said.

“I understand that.”

“Very well. I don’t want you to die in vain, though. I’ll give you a long-distance communication runestone, so if it looks like you’re in danger, please contact me.”

This was the magic tool Mikihiko had used to keep in touch with the commander.

“Are you sure?” Gordon asked. “Much like the man aiming to take your life, I, too, am part of the Holy Order.”

“It’s not like I want to crush the Holy Order or anything,” I said, handing him the magic tool. “Rather, it’d be problematic if it got crushed. We both seek to protect the world.”

“Such a pragmatic analysis...” Gordon smiled slightly, then accepted the runestone. “Thank you very much.”

“I’m not saying you need to pay me back, but if you figure anything out, please let me know. I don’t mind if it’s only the things you can share with me.”

“Understood. I’ll be sure to,” Gordon answered, nodding.

“Sorry, Shimazu,” I said, turning my attention to her. “Things have gotten a little weird, but can you stay with me a while as we planned? Depending on how things turn out, we might have to go get Sir Gordon.”

“Mm, okay,” she answered immediately. “I’m curious about the church, but I’m not in perfect condition yet either. I might just be a burden if I went there.”

“Thank you. What’ll you do, lino?” I asked.

“I’ll... I’ll consult our leader and...” she started hesitantly, but shook her head. “No. Not that. I’ll stay with you. I’ll protect all of you. I promised.”

“Got it.”

Iino sounded somewhat unstable. She must have been wrestling with the fact that she’d fought her former exploration team members in that fabricated world. Or maybe not. Even before that, she’d been acting a little strange.

“You okay?” I asked, concerned.

“How so?” she replied grumpily as she always did.

Well, Iino had had plenty of friends in the exploration team. Shimazu or their leader could probably console her better. It wasn’t my place to butt in.

“Okay, then. Sir Gordon, be careful out there.”

I changed gears and saw Gordon off, then asked Shimazu to get ready to return.



Having witnessed something completely unexpected, we quickly teleported out of the capital. We’d hit another unforeseen event too. We’d predicted that the exploration team members would notice us while we waited for Shimazu to gather mana to get us out. At present, if anything was going to pose a threat to us, it would be the authorities of the Holy Church planting some strange ideas into the exploration team’s heads after having lost their shadowy force. We’d meant to contact their leader, Nakajima Kojirou, or pass a verbal message to him so that this wouldn’t happen.

However, in all the time we spent before teleporting out of the capital, they never showed up. It seemed they were all away. Giving it some thought, I realized this wasn’t all that strange.

“Something happened to reduce the grand cathedral to that state,” I said. “The exploration team is full of guys with a strong sense of justice. They probably headed that way.”

“Well, that’s a source of relief, right?” Lily said, shrugging. “If that’s the case, we can feel at ease about Sir Gordon.”

“Yeah.”

After all, the exploration team was made up of about sixty cheaters. They

could handle anything that could be solved through violence. And any problems they couldn't solve were likely impossible for anyone else.

“Just as I told Sir Gordon, the Holy Church is essential for maintaining this world's stability. No matter what happens at the grand cathedral, the exploration team should be able to deal with it...”

That was supposed to be the case, but for some reason, I felt restless. I had a bad feeling about this.



The situation changed a few hours after we left the imperial capital. At the time, we were discussing what to do next. There was no point wasting time in the prairies. Now that we'd failed to contact the exploration team, we decided to return to Aker sooner rather than later.

Having learned the truth of the world, our goal was to gain access to a Dimensional Cornerstone. By changing the World View that made up this world through common cognition, we could make it so that our existence was allowed. Acquiring a Dimensional Cornerstone—a magic tool that maintained and controlled the world itself—was an absolutely necessary step to achieving that.

However, the Dimensional Cornerstones were held by the Holy Church, so they weren't simple to access. Harrison prioritized the world's safety above all else, so if he didn't allow it, it would be impossible to borrow one from them. Trying to take one would mean forcing our way through the church itself. If we did that, this time we would have the entire might of the Holy Order against us. If handled poorly, it was possible the exploration team would become hostile too. That approach was definitely out of the question.

This didn't leave us at a dead end, however. We had one other trail to follow. The Holy Church had assembled the vast majority of the Dimensional Cornerstones, but there was an exception—Draconia. For a long time, the settlement had been protected by the Mist Barrier, which had been maintained by a Dimensional Cornerstone that the Misty Lodge Salvia had given them. Unfortunately, the settlement had been destroyed by visitors. Ella had gone back to Draconia, but she hadn't been able to find the Dimensional

Cornerstone. Regardless, this didn't leave us out of options.

Draconia had been in possession of two Dimensional Cornerstones. I'd even seen the other one before. The settlement's explorer, Thaddeus, had it on his person. The young man, who'd led me to the settlement, was responsible for searching for another location where the Mist Barrier could be deployed. He carried a Dimensional Cornerstone for that purpose. If we could find him, we could get access to it. We would then be able to research how to overwrite the World View.

Also, so long as the Fairy Ring and the Skanda were with us, we were capable of returning to Aker immediately, whereas the Holy Church's forces couldn't. The trip normally took over four months. Now that Harrison's special forces had been annihilated, it would take time for him to recover, giving us more than enough time to conduct our research.

As for finding the all-important Thaddeus, he'd taught us a way of contacting him upon our parting. It took time to reach out to him this way, but we'd already sent a message when Draconia was destroyed a little over a month ago. We hadn't received a reply yet, but considering how long it'd been, he must've received it already.

More than half of Draconia's residents had stayed behind in Aker's royal palace. Thaddeus had probably gone to see them by now. If things went well, we'd be able to get a Dimensional Cornerstone upon returning to Aker. That was our plan.

If nothing happened, things probably would've gone that way. The situation changed when we got word from Gordon, though.

"What...? Dead?" I repeated in astonishment.

He'd informed us of a major incident in the capital—a crisis to the world that I couldn't possibly ignore.

Chapter 3: Mystery of Death

Some time before, when everyone was released from the fabricated world by Harrison, Kudou Riku was freed with Kaneki Mikihiro and Shimazu Yui.

“My king. According to Ayame, Majima Takahiro is safe.”

“Is that so? That’s good to hear.”

Fortunately, Ayame was capable of sensing Majima Takahiro’s well-being through the mental path, and Berta was able to inform the others of this. They had no reason to stick around here.

“Are you leaving?”

Kudou Riku was about to depart, but came to a stop at Berta’s voice. He turned around and met a certain girl’s sad eyes. It wasn’t really her, of course. Her lower half wasn’t that of a wolf to begin with, and she’d never looked at him like this.

Those eyes were those of someone who wanted to say something. He knew what it was. Being as artless as she was, Berta was incapable of masking what she sought from him.

“Go guard Majima-senpai. It isn’t like all the danger has passed.”

After a moment of silence, the boy gave her an order as her king. He had no hesitation. He wasn’t supposed to.



He began moving right away. He only had Dora with him, so he had to go on foot. However, shortly after, Anton’s spawn detected that her king had returned and brought a firefang to him. That said, having completely broken his arm in the battle against the horror that Travis had become, Kudou Riku found it extremely difficult to ride on a mount. If he were riding Berta, she’d be able to use her tentacles to keep him from falling, but he’d left her with Majima Takahiro. In the end, he had to ride the firefang with Dora’s support.

Before long, he reached his destination. It was one of the small forests dotting the prairies. This wasn't a Dark Woods—a leftover of the Woodlands; it was just a forest. However, the place had been transformed into a wicked haunt that couldn't be described as a simple forest anymore.

Kudou Riku stepped within, and an enormous monster that looked like a solidified shadow came to greet him alongside a brawny beast clad in a dreadful atmosphere. This was the doppelqueen Anton and the vestige of Takaya Jun, the Mad Beast Emil. There were even more monsters behind them.

If anyone else saw this, their shock would be overwhelming. The swarm of monsters was of many different types, hidden within the shadows of the forest. These were the servants Kudou Riku had brought with him. The Demon King's army numbered over a thousand, so strong it could even take on the imperial capital, which housed the greatest military force in the world.

However, this was a strange situation. Kudou Riku had left Aker around twenty days ahead of Majima Takahiro. Even accounting for the extra time, Majima Takahiro had traveled using Fairy Ring, so Kudou Riku had had at most a month. Setting aside monsters that could travel quickly, it would be very difficult to bring such a large assortment of monsters with wanton disregard for what they were. If not for a certain special method, that is.

"Well done. Looks like nobody noticed you," Kudou said.

"Of course. I've striven to act in secrecy. Neither Heinrich nor Ida have made a move," Anton's spawn, one in the form of Juumonji Tatsuya, reported.

"Very good." Kudou nodded in satisfaction. "They have tremendous hatred. If handled poorly, they might go on a rampage."

The forest squirmed in front of his eyes. No. To be precise, something that had flattened the land deep in the forest, hidden from the outside, had started moving. It was a monster large enough to make it seem like the trees themselves were alive.

"AaaAaaah..."

It let out a hair-raising cry like a curse and shook the foliage. What slowly rose from the ground was an enormous dragon's head. However, its eyes were

empty cavities and all signs of life had left its body. This was the mere shadow of the dragon that had fallen to madness and hatred to protect her precious children.

The name given to her by the Demon King as his ninth named pawn was Ida. Her original name was the carapace wyrm Malvina. Her natural aegis had been shattered and her flesh was rotting. She was the elder of Draconia who had been roused by her hatred into an undead monster. She was over fifty meters tall and capable of flight. This was how Kudou Riku had brought over a thousand monsters from Aker to the imperial capital in just about a month.

Next to her was a zombie dragon towering over twenty meters tall despite losing its head. This one was given the name Heinrich. This was the undead monster born from the corpse of Draconia's guardian, Rex. The mother and son who'd been murdered by visitors were now part of the Demon King's army, intent on taking revenge on the world.

"Looks like you've been obedient," Kudou said to Ida.

A growl came through her fangs and rotting jowls. Naturally, she possessed no sense of reason as she had in life. Her growl had simply come from the hatred and resentment that fueled her body. Listening to the chilling voice, Kudou Riku's smile remained unmoving.

"Relax. So long as you follow me, I'll grant your wish."

Hearing him, Ida's growling stopped. At the same time, the Mad Beast Emil started. Those were the same words Kudou Riku had used on him. A dead dragon fueled by hatred, and a beast driven to insanity by his fixation on a single girl—this boy said he would grant their wishes. How serious was he? It was impossible to tell through his fake smile.

"Hurry up and get ready to move out," the boy ordered, still masking all emotions beneath his smile. "Things might get stormy again."

If Majima Takahiro's group heard this, they would probably find it suspicious. What could he be doing to warrant such an ominous prediction? There was even conviction behind his voice.

"My king. Will it be a battle?" Dora asked.

“Yes. A very big one...” Kudou answered, his smile deepening. “One big enough to stake everything I’ve built to date on.”

A lurid smile twisted his features. It gave a glimpse of the dark fire blazing inside him, one that wouldn’t stop until it burned him to ashes in despair. These were the flames of rage that would burn the world.

With a swarm of monsters capable of destroying the imperial capital at his command, the Demon King would soon ride atop the cursed dragon. Taking a look at her brethren, Dora suddenly spoke up.

“My king. Even though it will be such an important battle, you aren’t bringing Berta along? Are you sure?”

“It’s fine to leave that one by Senpai’s side,” he answered without hesitation. “I’m sure of it now. That one is a failure. I can’t possibly bring it along.”

Dora fell silent. However, she looked at her king as if she wanted to say something.

“What is it?” Kudou asked. “If you have something to say, then say it. Do you object to my decision?”

“Of course not!” Dora protested immediately. “How could I ever object to your decisions?!”

There wasn’t a hint of hesitation in her voice. She had fanatical faith in her king. She believed he was absolute. Given this, it was impossible for her to object to anything he said. Even if that weren’t the case, none of the Demon King’s subordinates could defy his will—with one single exception. However, precisely because Dora believed her king was correct, there was a part of her that wanted to know his thought process.

“Please forgive my ignorance,” she said. “There must be a reason for you to keep Berta at a distance that I do not know of. What is that reason? According to you, Berta is a failure. However, as your second servant, she must also possess significant strength. She is far stronger than I am. She continues to get stronger. Berta is your strongest servant.” There was the slightest hint of frustration in her voice at this fact. “If you use her as a sacrificial pawn, she’ll be more than useful enough. She’ll also gladly accept that role. You should

understand this too. So why?”

“Leave it at that,” Anton cut in. Dora had been asking out of pure curiosity. Anton, taking on a role of matronly responsibility, bowed to their king in her stead. “Please forgive our insolence.”

“I’m going to get a little rest,” the boy-turned-Demon King said with a sigh. “Anton, make sure the army is ready to attack at a moment’s notice. Use your spawns to gather information in the capital. Also, dispatch some spawns to get any necessary information from Berta.”

“As you will.”

“Dora, explain what happened in that labyrinth to Anton.”

“Understood.”

Leaving behind those commands, Kudou Riku took Emil deeper into the forest. After watching him depart, Anton turned to Dora.

“Very well, let’s hear about the current situation.”

“Right away, mother.”

Dora complied obediently and detailed everything that had happened during her absence.

“I see,” Anton said, nodding after listening to her whole story. “Meaning you accompanied Majima Takahiro for a while.”

“Yes.”

“I see. So that’s why you questioned our king’s reasoning all of a sudden.”

“Huh?”

“Well, if you’re not aware, then that’s fine too,” Anton said indifferently.

“I don’t really get it... Do you know, mother?” Dora asked curiously. “Why does our king go to such lengths to keep Berta at a distance? I want to know.”

She still wasn’t aware that she’d never so much as harbored such doubts before. She didn’t know she was changing. Anton didn’t bother to point this out either. She didn’t possess such useless functionality or emotions and simply rebuked what could be called her child.

“Know your place, Dora. Surmising your king’s intentions deviates from being his subject. We simply have to obey his commands.” Anton paused there for a moment before adding, “Besides, you wouldn’t understand Berta’s matter even if I told you.”

“Very well...” Dora nodded somewhat reluctantly.

However, strangely enough, Anton didn’t stop the conversation there.

“You’re mistaken on one matter.”

“Mistaken? About what?”

“You called Berta our king’s second servant, remember?”

“Yes. I did.”

Dora couldn’t tell what was wrong about that.

“That one isn’t the second,” Anton said.

Dora was dumbfounded. That only stood to reason.

“Even though she’s B?” Dora asked.

Kudou Riku used a phonetic code from his world when naming his servants.

The doppelqueen Anton.

The scylla Berta.

The dirty sludge Caesar.

The nightmare stalker Dora.

The Mad Beast Emil.

The elemental dragonfly Friedrich.

The tripdrill swarm Gustav.

The headless zombie dragon Heinrich.

The servant of a past savior, the corpse of the carapace wyrm Ida.

Each was given a name in alphabetical order from A to I. Naturally, Dora knew nothing about the details of how Kudou Riku had subordinated his first named servants, Anton and Berta. She believed they’d simply come in that order. There

was nothing forcing him to name them that way, but there wasn't much point to messing with the order either.

"You mean the first were out of order?" Dora asked.

"No," Anton answered, shaking her head. "I was the first to be given a name. That's why I'm Anton. However, that doesn't necessarily mean we became his subordinates in that order."

"Ah..."

Anton nodded upon seeing that Dora was beginning to understand.

"We were only given names after surviving the kudoku poison jar method. Unlike you and Emil, who possessed strength from the very beginning, I was given a name after becoming our king's servant. In truth, there were countless others dominated by him before me."

In contrast, in Majima Takahiro's case, the order he'd given names to his servants was the same as the order he'd acquired them in. Kudou Riku's servants were different. Almost all of them were normal monsters with nothing special about them. Only those who'd clawed their way to greater heights had been given names. Dora hadn't realized this because she'd been given a name upon her birth, and all those after her except for Friedrich had followed this pattern too.

"I see. Then I'm mistaken," Dora said. "Berta was the second to be given a name. Much like you, there were many servants under our king's command before her."

Dora sighed in understanding. She frowned a bit because she was ashamed of how ignorant she'd been. She rebuked herself to be more careful so that she could live up to being one of her king's servants.

That was why she didn't notice that Anton clicked her tongue at Dora's sudden understanding. Dora also didn't notice that this was a hint as to why Kudou Riku kept Berta at a distance.

Anton knew. She knew about their king, and she knew about the pitiful wolf. Berta had expressed her thoughts many times now. For example, she'd spoken to Ayame about it before.

“It’s a memory of failure, back before I had a name. I’m filled with regret every time I recall it. Why couldn’t I be Anton? Why am I Berta? I know regretting it doesn’t mean anything at this point...”

This fact frustrated her greatly. She’d also said something similar to Lily.

“Slime, I heard about it. You saved the one who is falsely similar to my king, didn’t you? If you had chanced upon my king instead, maybe things would’ve been different.

“But you weren’t there during my king’s beginnings. Instead, it was...

“Or maybe...if I weren’t Berta...if I were Anton, then maybe something would’ve changed.”

Once again, there had been regret behind her words. What did it mean to be Anton? What did it mean to not have become Anton?

The monster given the name Anton didn’t speak on this matter any further. She was like a machine, possessing no emotion. She existed only to do what she was meant to. At the very least, that was how she saw herself. Thus, she moved on to what was necessary right now.

“More importantly, I still haven’t heard about one thing,” Anton said. “Our king mentioned that things might get stormy. Why did he say that?”

“Ah, right. Forgive me. I didn’t mention that part,” Dora said, making an awkward look before answering. “That said, I don’t really understand either. It seems our king realized something when he spoke to Kaneki Mikihiro.”

“Meaning?”

“Our king told him that he saw Okazaki Takuma’s corpse.”

Kudou Riku and Majima Takahiro had discovered Okazaki Takuma’s corpse inside the fabricated world. Okazaki Takuma had used his Almighty Vessel to imitate the Fairy Ring’s ability to teleport. He was the perpetrator behind the forced teleportation. However, when he did, the true Fairy Ring, Shimazu Yui, had resisted, causing the teleportation to fail and dealing him a fatal blow.

Weakened by this, Okazaki Takuma had found himself alone in a labyrinth rampant with monsters. It wouldn’t have been strange for him to die in there.

That was why, upon encountering the horror that was once Travis right after finding the corpse, Majima Takahiro had naturally assumed that Travis was responsible for the visitor's death. The course of events had simply led him to believe that.

However, in truth, that had been no more than conjecture. Kudou Riku had seen things differently. As the one who'd inspected Okazaki Takuma's corpse, there was something only he knew.

"Our king asked Kaneki Mikihiko whether he killed Okazaki Takuma. He then informed me later that Okazaki Takuma had been killed with a sword."

At the very least, the wound was far too unnatural to have come from Travis. It made more sense if a human had killed Okazaki Takuma rather than a monster. Kaneki Mikihiko had been the prime suspect. After all, he'd done everything in his power to help his best friend and to obstruct Harrison's forces. That was why Kudou Riku had questioned him.

"So? What was Kaneki Mikihiko's answer?" Anton asked.

"I didn't kill him,' or so he said."

Anton's spawn, using Juumonji Tatsuya's form, stood there in contemplation for a short while.

"The only other ones there were the Holy Church forces...but it's very unlikely they killed Okazaki Takuma. They had no reason to."

"Yes. I believe that's the case," Dora agreed.

"Likewise, it's unlikely Majima Takahiro's servants killed him while they were separated. If so, they would've been able to link up with Majima Takahiro near Okazaki Takuma's corpse."

In that case, one possibility came to mind.

"In short, there's one answer," Anton said indifferently. "Someone who isn't part of the Holy Church or Majima Takahiro's group was there with their own agenda, and..."



This happened immediately at the start of the incident. Right after forcefully

teleporting Majima Takahiro's group from their room, a boy was writhing in pain on the floor inside a fabricated world.

"Gah! Hak! Hrrrgh...!"

He scattered vomit all over the corridor's floor.

"Gah... Aaah... Th-The hell?! Why me?! D-Dying...! I'm dying...!"

This was the exploration team's Almighty Vessel, Okazaki Takuma. He'd allied with the Holy Church and was responsible for bringing Majima Takahiro into this labyrinth. Here, he found himself covered in his own vomit and tears, screaming into the nothingness. The recoil from failing the forced teleportation tortured him in both body and soul. The sight of him squirming in agony didn't show a hint of his usually heroic act. Unable to withstand the never-ending pain, he continued screaming.

Many monsters prowled these halls. It was extremely dangerous for him to spend so much time here wallowing in his pain. However, the agony easily wiped such thoughts from his brain. He didn't have the willpower to withstand it. Ever since coming to this world, he'd never so much as suffered an injury. He was just that strong, after all. Having pretty much forgotten what pain felt like, this was enough to shatter his mind.

"Why...? Why do I have to go through this...?"

He no longer had the composure to make calm decisions. All he could do was curse the irrational fate that had befallen him.

"How dare you... How dare you... How dare you..."

Even if he deserved this for enacting the forced teleportation, he didn't possess the capacity to admit it.

"Majima...!"

His thoughts focused entirely on venting his anger on someone else. He didn't see it this way, though.

"How low do you intend to drag me down...?!"

Memories of his meeting with Majima Takahiro came to mind. Because of Majima Takahiro, he'd been falsely labeled as the culprit behind the attack on

Draconia in front of the exploration team—that was how he saw it, at least.

“I was set up. They have no right...no right to look at me like that!”

Inside Okazaki Takuma’s mind, Draconia didn’t even exist. He just kept making excuses upon excuses to justify his actions. Still, he had a reason to believe this.

“People lived there?! Like hell that’s possible! Nobody said anything about that!”

He wasn’t lying. The visitors who’d attacked Draconia could be split into three groups: the visitors who’d received the dragon subjugation request from imperial nobles; Okazaki Takuma, who’d joined them last; and the ones who’d linked up with the first group, Jinguuji Tomoya and his comrades.

The three groups had split up their roles to an extent during the attack. In short, there was an advance group who’d launched a preemptive attack once the Dimensional Cornerstone that maintained the Mist Barrier was neutralized, and the main force who’d followed after them.

If there was any time to question Draconia being more than a den of monsters, it would’ve been in that first stage, before they blew up the settlement with magic and before the residents revealed their true nature as dragons. Okazaki Takuma had been in the main force that followed after, so he hadn’t been involved during that stage.

Seeing Okazaki Takuma wail on and on about not knowing any of this when Ella confronted him, Majima Takahiro’s group had concluded that he hadn’t taken part in the preemptive attack. They were right in this regard. However, they’d missed out on getting one other piece of the truth because Okazaki Takuma had been so immersed in trying to justify his actions.

“It’s all a lie. Majima set me up. I mean, Jinguuji and them didn’t say anything about that crap.”

Jinguuji Tomoya and his comrades had been the ones to launch the initial attack on Draconia. That had been a natural outcome. After all, faced with a barrier that only allowed dragons through, he’d been the only one capable of breaking through because of his ability to transform into a dragon.

However, if someone more prudent were to hear about this, they would’ve

felt something was out of place. For example, the one to bring the tremendously powerful Almighty Vessel into this had also been Jinguuji Tomoya.

What's more, because nobody had brought translation runestones, it'd been impossible for the residents of Draconia to explain themselves. However, as someone who'd been traveling the world on his own, Jinguuji Tomoya had been in possession of a translation runestone. Nevertheless, the assailants hadn't realized the truth behind Draconia, and the dragons had been incapable of explaining themselves, ultimately leading to the tragedy.

Had that all been a coincidence? Naturally, it was possible Jinguuji Tomoya's group had attacked the settlement immediately upon arrival and simply hadn't noticed that Draconia was more than a monster's den. However, that would also mean they hadn't grasped the full picture of their targets, launching an attack so thoughtlessly that they hadn't even considered any of their targets getting away. Was Jinguuji Tomoya really that careless a person? Or was he...?

"It's all Majima's fault. It's not my fault."

Still, that didn't change the fact that over half of Draconia's residents—intelligent beings who were half-human—had all been killed by Okazaki Takuma.

"It's not my fault. It's not my... Hrgh... Gaaah!"

With no intention of admitting his sins, he continued lamenting the misfortune that had befallen him, cursing Majima Takahiro's name the whole time.

Just then, as Okazaki Takuma wiped his mouth, he suddenly turned around. Footsteps were drawing nearer to him.

"You're..."

He sluggishly focused on the oncoming presence when his eyes shot open. In the next instant, he was cut down and fell dead to the floor.

Chapter 4: The World's Guardian

Harrison remembered well the day his dream was shattered.

“That is the truth of the world.”

Upon becoming the marshal of the Holy Order, the truth was revealed to him by Gerd Kruger, who'd already become an archbishop.

This was the end of the dream Harrison had devoted his whole life to. He couldn't protect everything in the saviors' stead. Faced with that cruel reality, he started down the road of whittling away at his own soul.

Publicly, the Holy Order had supported saviors all throughout history. However, behind the scenes, they were one part of the system that enforced the absolute authority of saviors. It wasn't a matter of good or evil, but rather a necessity from the point of view of statesmen.

For example, what was to be done if an evildoer were to appear as a savior? What if they turned to depravity? What if they resorted to tyranny?

The saviors had far too much influence on the world itself. If things took a turn for the worse, the entire world could be thrown into chaos—which would damage the World View and potentially trigger another Grand Calamity, ending the world itself.

Those who knew the truth had a duty to guide visitors down the proper path. If necessary...they also had to kill said visitors behind closed doors. It was a detestable job, but if nobody did it, the world would be destabilized.

On that point, the advent of saviors this time around imposed horrible working conditions. From Harrison's perspective, the situation was pretty much a series of nonstop nightmares. The appearance of visitors on an unheard-of scale was far beyond the abilities of the Holy Church to manage. What's more, because they'd appeared as far as humanly possible from the imperial capital, it had been impossible to deal with the situation immediately. By the time Harrison had personally rushed to Fort Ebenus, half of the confirmed visitors

had already scattered.

For many reasons, saviors couldn't be allowed to cause trouble in a world they were unfamiliar with. The visitors had to be brought in quickly before any chaos could be wrought. And yet, more than sixty had already dispersed into the world. This left Harrison at his wits' end as it was, but the situation deteriorated further.

Around the time he started his desperate pursuit of the scattered visitors, he had received a report that humanity's greatest stronghold, Fort Tilia, had fallen because a visitor had gone on a rampage trying to return to his own world. Soon after, it came to light that two monster tamers, beings who posed a threat to the world simply by existing, had appeared.

Even as Harrison devoted all his time to manipulating information and dealing with the aftermath, the visitors made grave mistakes all over the place, creating the fake savior panic. Continuously hounded by problems the visitors created, he found himself unable to make any moves, and needed some plan that would take immediate effect. In other words, he had to make a rash move.

Just maybe, if the only visitor who'd appeared had been Majima Takahiro, there might've been a more reasonable way of handling this, even if he was a monster tamer. However, reality didn't afford Harrison that leisure.

"I'm sorry."

Just once, Gerd apologized to Harrison. Gerd was the guardian and warden of the world, even more so than Harrison. He watched the scales of this so-easily shaken world emotionlessly. For the sake of protecting it, he would do quite literally anything. That didn't mean he was a cruel man, though.

"Your nature would make you unsuitable for this role. However, this world is far too fragile. You're the only one capable of doing this job."

Gerd knew that Harrison suffered over having to commit evil deeds. Harrison didn't believe that what they did out of necessity to preserve the world was wrong. And yet a necessary evil, no matter how justified, went against everything he stood for. Knights were the embodiment of justice, so as the one called the knight among knights, this contradiction tortured Harrison.

He never gave up, though. He continued doing his duty. There was no other way of protecting the world.

This world was so fragile and unstable. *Someone* had to protect it. Harrison was sure that it was his destiny to continue doing so until his last breath.

Even if there were many problems at a fundamental level, the people of this world lived earnestly. They cared for each other and stood against the cruelties of reality hand in hand. He couldn't possibly allow the world to end. He had to protect them, no matter what.



“To think I would be so badly beaten...”

Having returned from the fabricated world using the Dimensional Cornerstone, Harrison immediately fell to his knees. The wounds carved across his body by the Abomination Katou Mana were deep. Her feelings had just been that strong.

“How impressive.”

Regardless of her being an enemy, Harrison felt respect for that girl's way of life. At the same time, his sense of responsibility put a lid on the despair boiling in his heart.

“I must do my duty...”

He had to protect the world. To that end, Harrison Addington didn't need such feelings. He was the marshal of the Holy Order. He was the world's guardian.

“Sir Harrison!”

The one who called out to him was a boy who'd exited the fabricated world with him—Kouzu Asahi. He was one of the former exploration team members being sheltered by the Holy Church. When expelling all foreign matter from the labyrinth, Harrison's skill with the Dimensional Cornerstone hadn't been enough to differentiate friend from foe. Everyone had been forcefully removed. He'd coincidentally managed to keep Kouzu Asahi inside with him. Thanks to that, he was the only one with Harrison when he exited himself.

“W-We need to stabilize your wounds!”

After being carefully cared for in the capital, Kouzu Asahi had recovered emotionally and now felt deeply indebted to the Holy Church. He had genuine concern for Harrison’s critical condition.

“Please calm down, Mister Kouzu.”

Harrison was grateful for his concern, but he couldn’t allow himself to depend on it. The plan had failed and they’d suffered greatly for it. Even if he needed treatment for his severe injuries, he couldn’t take any breaks.

“There’s no time to drag things out...”

Harrison encouraged his screaming body to move. First, he had to order his subordinates to...

He realized the abnormality immediately after that. Harrison was in a top secret sector of the grand cathedral that led directly into the fabricated world. There were several entrances to the labyrinth, but this one was kept a secret even to those who knew about that world.

There was a specific reason it had to be that way. That was why he normally had subordinates who were in the know standing guard here at all times. However, those knights were nowhere in sight. If they were, they would be panicking like Kouzu Asahi over Harrison’s wounds.

He couldn’t sense anyone. It was ominous. The space was empty. Harrison felt blood draining from his already-pale face.

“What happened...?”

His question echoed vainly in the empty room.



It had all happened before Harrison was defeated in the battle against Majima Takahiro and returned everyone to the world using the Dimensional Cornerstone. There was a figure running down a secret corridor leading to the fabricated world.

It was a suspicious man wearing a hood. He had a blood-soaked sword in hand. On his way here, he’d encountered many knights guarding the area. He’d

killed all of them and forced his way through. Normally, it would've been far harder to break through, but the current crisis made it easier.

This was a secret sector that led to the fabricated world. The personnel who could be assigned as guards were limited. A majority of them had been dispatched in the plan to attack Majima Takahiro. Who could possibly predict that an intruder would appear with such perfect timing to attack a place that hadn't seen an intruder in centuries?

That said, even short on hands, security was strict. It would be impossible to infiltrate this far through normal means. Those serving as guards were without a doubt the strongest knights in the world. They all surpassed even the strongest knight of the northern Woodlands—without the help of her spirits, at least. Some even matched her prowess *with* the support of her spirits.

“Stop!”

A man so large his armor looked tight on him stood in the intruder's path. He had a beard that went down to his chest and a distinctive tattoo on his cheek.

“My name is Jackson! The Raging Bull Knight of the Prairies!”

He wielded an enormous axe in two hands and proudly announced himself. The mana in his body swelled. He had an abnormal capacity for a resident of this world. It was extremely rare for such an outstanding knight to have been born among commoners. He had surely overcome many trials with clear conviction in his heart, devoting himself endlessly to his improvement. The knight boldly took a stance and glared at the intruder.

“For the sake of my people, I—”

“Shut the fuck up.”

The intruder's voice cut him off, and in the next instant, a tremendous crash shook the corridor. The intruder had suddenly accelerated to inhuman speeds, ramming the knight head-on.

“Guh?!”

Caught off guard, the knight barely managed to block the attack with his axe. His eyes shot open, trying to figure out what had happened, and witnessed

something sticking out of the intruder's back.

"Th-Those are...?!"

They were large dragon wings made of an explosive amount of mana. Such power was surely enough to even save the world. Unfortunately for the knight, he identified his opponent.

"A savior?!"

Faced with the enmity of an absolute savior, the deeply religious knight's heart broke. Using that fatal opening, the intruder struck mercilessly. His sword flashed, cutting a deep diagonal gash through the knight's armor. The next attack lopped off the knight's arm. The prodigious knight screamed in agony, but still wielded his axe in one hand to resist. After the third strike, however, he reached his limit.

The knight collapsed wordlessly and the intruder slipped by him without giving him a second glance. He proceeded farther. His path was one smeared in blood. If anyone got in his way, he would cut them down mercilessly too. The intruder ran at full speed down the gloomy corridor.

"Gah?!"

And letting out a scream, he was impossibly sent flying the way he came. His neck arched back as if his head were a ping-pong ball. It was like he'd run headfirst into an invisible wall. This was enough to send him reeling off-balance and falling on his rear.

"Wh-What?"

The impact had had enough force to break a human's neck, but the man stood back up immediately. However, the blow had removed his hood. Beneath, his face was hidden by a mask. It had many feathers decorating it that stretched to the back of his head.

Because of the collision, cracks ran all over his mask. The intruder held it in place as someone appeared before him. It was a slender old man with a perfectly straight back. The intruder's eyes shot open.

"Archbishop Gerd Kruger..."

“Unfortunately, I cannot allow you to pass,” Gerd said quietly. “May I ask you to withdraw, Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya?”

The masked intruder froze. Coincidentally, his mask chose this moment to crumble to pieces, revealing a boy with cold eyes.





With no more need to hide his identity, Jinguuji Tomoya took off his mask. Watching him, Gerd let out a huge sigh. It was a truly sorrowful gesture, one sad enough to make anyone feel guilty over their sins even if they'd done no evil.

"Please stop this, Mister Jinguuji. I believe we've built a good relationship with you. Why are you resorting to such violence?"

The Holy Church and the Dragon were secret collaborators. In exchange for his helping the church, they'd promised to give him a way to return to his world. The attack on Draconia had been part of this deal, as was helping in the battle against Majima Takahiro. And yet, here he was cutting down every knight he came across. It didn't look like anything more than a wild rampage.

"I don't know what happened, but please calm down," Gerd pleaded. His tone was calm and devoted, befitting a clergyman. "There's no reason for you to oppose us."

"Cut the shameless bullshit." However, his pleas fell on deaf ears. Gerd's white eyebrows furrowed as Jinguuji Tomoya spat back at him. The usually affable boy's voice was far rougher now. "A good relationship? Don't you mean a convenient one? I was supposed to be paid with a way back to my world for helping you out, but you have no intention of giving me anything of the like, do you now? I'm just a fucked-up kid who believed in a convenient dream after being driven to the end of his rope—a pawn. That's what you think of me."

"You're..."

Gerd held his tongue. Jinguuji Tomoya was right. Visitors had no way of returning to their world. That was common sense here. Even the Holy Church, who knew everything that happened behind the curtains, didn't know of a way.

Jinguuji Tomoya was obsessed with the idea of getting all surviving visitors back home. At this point, his obsession could only harm the world. If manipulated well, he could be of use in Majima Takahiro's assassination. That was the cruel plan that had been put into action.

"How unfortunate for you. I've got a plan of my own," Jinguuji Tomoya said,

his lips curving into a sneer at this thought. “You’re gonna let me through. The Dimensional Cornerstones are this way, yeah?”

“Wha?!” Gerd’s eyes shot open. In all sorts of ways, this was an impossible question. “How do you know that...?”

Jinguuji Tomoya was right. The Dimensional Cornerstone Harrison was using was but one of the many the Holy Church had gathered. There were others under strict watch. This corridor led to their storage vault. That was why Gerd had believed that Jinguuji Tomoya had become emotionally unstable and had reached this place by coincidence while going on a rampage. But that wasn’t the case.

“Judging by your reaction, they’re really here,” he said, his smile like that of a snarling fanged dragon as he watched the old bishop’s face twist in shock. “I doubted that guy big-time, but looks like the asshole was right. I get it. The reason you had me attack Draconia was that you wanted to recover the Dimensional Cornerstone that was taken out of the capital a long time ago, yeah? You said something like, ‘I’d like you to retrieve the magic tool responsible for the Mist Barrier.’ Well, that plan ended up failing...”

With that, Jinguuji Tomoya pulled something out of his bag and held it out ostentatiously. It was a jewel—the Dimensional Cornerstone responsible for the Mist Barrier.

“Aah, my bad. I mean I pretended it failed.”

“So you really retrieved it?” Gerd said, trying to keep his shock hidden, but his mind was shaken.

Jinguuji Tomoya had been informed by someone about the Dimensional Cornerstones. Judging by his doubts about the information, he didn’t have a good relationship with whoever that was, though. In any case, Gerd’s reaction had now given him conviction.

It was careless of the archbishop to have let it slip, but he immediately reevaluated the situation. Regardless of his suspicions, Jinguuji Tomoya would’ve come here to confirm it for himself. What Gerd had to focus on now was Jinguuji Tomoya’s goal; the one that had driven him to such lengths.

“Did you come here because you’re after the Dimensional Cornerstones...?”

Gerd had several questions. Did Jinguuji Tomoya know that the Dimensional Cornerstones were tools to maintain and manage the world? If he did, why was he trying to access them? Also, who could possibly have told him about the vault, which nearly nobody knew about?

If someone who knew had let it slip, then that was fine in its own way. But if an outsider had told him...it was extremely bad. This suggested a certain possibility that only Gerd was capable of recognizing. If that really was the case, he had to deal with it immediately. To that end, he had to remove the threat right before his eyes.

“Do you really think I’ll let you through?”

His voice echoed down the corridor, filled with so much rage it could freeze one’s spine. All emotion vanished from Gerd’s face. He wasn’t the clergyman who guided the people to salvation anymore. He was the world’s guardian who would commit any atrocity necessary to protect it.

In the next instant, mana that rivaled that of any knight swelled within his withered body. Facing him, Jinguuji Tomoya’s eyes widened slightly.

“This is...a wall?”

A practically invisible wall appeared in the corridor to block his way. This was what had brought Jinguuji Tomoya’s full-speed charge to a halt.

“It’s called the Barrier of Devotion,” Gerd said from the other side. “Even a great savior’s attack cannot pierce it.”

“So you’re of blessed blood too, huh? I thought you were a total civvy.”

Jinguuji Tomoya drew his sword and struck immediately. He put all of his supernatural strength behind it. A terrifying crash resounded down the corridor.

“Tch.”

However, the transparent wall didn’t budge. It didn’t even have a scratch on it. It was actually the sword that had bent from the unreasonable force.

“I told you, you can’t break through,” Gerd said calmly. “It’s just as you say, I’m no combatant. All I’m capable of is creating a wall. That in itself is more than

enough, though.”

Gerd Kruger sat at the summit of the Holy Church as an archbishop. However, he saw his true nature as something else entirely. He was a living defense mechanism to protect the root of the world, which had to remain untouched. His inherent ability, the Barrier of Devotion, and all those who wielded it, existed for this purpose. Gerd’s family line had started not too long after the first savior’s arrival and had protected the world like this ever since.

To protect the world, he would resort to inhuman acts. If necessary, he would pull a knight who was filled with hopes and ideals into the darkness. He knew with all certainty that he wasn’t going to go to the same place as saviors in death. As an archbishop, as one of the most devout people in the world, Gerd believed this with all his heart.

In other words, his life was like that of a slave. Nevertheless, he’d decided to protect the world by his own will.

“You won’t pass,” he said with determination.

He had no idea why Jinguuji Tomoya was trying to reach the Dimensional Cornerstones, but that didn’t change what needed to be done. He had to protect this place. He absolutely couldn’t let an intruder through.

Gerd had a grasp of Harrison’s current situation through a magic tool. He’d confirmed that the knight had met unexpected resistance in the plan to use a Dimensional Cornerstone to attack Majima Takahiro. Gerd couldn’t expect reinforcements anytime soon. With this in mind, he was ready to endure until Jinguuji Tomoya gave up and backed down.

The old man stood there unmoving. He was like a manifestation of the will to protect the world. What did the boy in front of him see in this?

“I get it...” A deep sigh shook the air in the corridor. “It looks like I won’t be able to get through here.”

Staring at the old man and the barrier blocking his way, he admitted his predicament. Did that mean he’d given up? No. That was impossible.

“Oh well. Time to get serious.”

Jinguuji Tomoya casually threw aside his bent sword. There was no time to parse his ominous tone. A dreadful amount of mana surged from the boy's body.

"I'll destroy the Dimensional Cornerstones. Then, I'll return to my world."

"Wha...?!"

Gerd's eyes widened at the unbelievable statement. If the Dimensional Cornerstones were destroyed, the world would collapse. That was one thing that could never be allowed. Gerd also couldn't understand how that led to returning to Jinguuji Tomoya's world. Destroying the Cornerstones wouldn't allow him to go home, after all. Nevertheless, Jinguuji Tomoya was serious.

"I don't got time to keep up appearances. I can't afford to stop here."

He spread his mana-made dragon wings behind him. The ferocious blow with his sword had been nothing but child's play. The inherent ability within him was his true power.

"Don't regret it."

"Wai—"

Gerd screamed upon realizing what the boy was about to do, but it was too late. Jinguuji Tomoya's mouth opened wide and let loose the destructive breath of a dragon—a torrent of pure mana. The torrent collided with the Barrier of Devotion, and as the boy turned his head, the tremendous power slammed against the underground corridor's wall and finally broke through.

Chapter 5: At the End of the Desperate Struggle

“How could you...?”

Gerd raised his voice in astonishment. Even faced with that beam, he was perfectly safe. That was because his Barrier of Devotion had withstood the Dragon’s attack. However, the same didn’t go for the underground corridor.

The attack destroyed the walls and ceiling, piercing the foundation of the building and shooting up into the sky. The corridor was beneath the grand cathedral’s dome. The torrent of destruction blew away part of the cathedral and damaged several of its spires as it shot upward. The destructive force rivaled grade 5 magic—the greatest magic known to the world. This boy had demonstrated this with but a breath. However, even this had been nothing more than the prelude.

“Aaah...”

An enormous dragon stood in the aftermath of the destruction. Cold sweat ran down Gerd’s withered face. He’d wrought such devastation just to secure enough space to take the form of a dragon. The next attack wasn’t going to be as half-baked as the one from his human form.

“Vanish.”

The dragon calmly declared the archbishop’s death, then unleashed a torrent of mana that doubled what he’d used before.

“Oooh?!”

The destructive force slammed against the Barrier of Devotion, the transparent wall creaking under the pressure immediately.

“S-So much power...?!”

This was pretty much the worst case possible. Jinguuji Tomoya’s inherent ability was without a doubt among the strongest of any savior who’d saved the world. The purity and strength of his wish surpassed all others. His wish had

basically driven him to the verge of madness.

“Still...!” Even knowing this, Gerd clenched his teeth. “I won’t lose! I can’t afford to lose!”

He was protecting the world itself. Even though he knew it was reckless, his only choice was to stop the lethal attack head-on. Naturally, cracks formed all over the Barrier of Devotion.

“Hak...”

Gerd started vomiting blood. His barrier was an unmovable wall that was even capable of repelling a savior’s attack. However, when it was damaged, the wielder suffered from the feedback. This wasn’t a means of defending himself—it was a power that turned his own body into a bulwark to protect others.

Blood gushed out from all over the old man’s body, dyeing his clothes a dark red. If he let the pain loosen his focus even a little, the barrier would vanish in an instant. Nevertheless, the Barrier of Devotion stood strong.

“I protect the world...!”

Screaming hoarsely, Gerd mustered all his strength.

“Shut the fuck up.”

And in the next instant, he heard a terrible noise.

“Gah...?! ”

It was the sound of his barrier, his bulwark against the end of the world, cracking apart. Gerd’s eyes shot open. The torrent of destruction pouring out of the dragon’s mouth had grown even stronger.

“Protect the world? And what of it?” The boy’s voice resounded around him. “I’m protecting everyone. She asked me to, after all.”

He possessed a tenacious and pure determination that verged on insanity. No. This had long crossed the line.

“That’s right. She told me to protect everyone. So I’m gonna do it... But that’s wrong... The one I wanted to protect... So why...? Why did she die...? But she said! She said to! She told me to!”

His incoherent rambling exposed his inner thoughts. The mental trauma of losing his beloved had taken his ability to the next stage. Just maybe, it had brought him to the depths of a darkness he could never return from.

Jinguuji Tomoya had acquired power to protect his lover. And yet, he'd let go of his beloved's hand. He'd only realized his mistake after losing her. He could never take it back.

That was why he only had one path before him now. His departed lover had implored him. She'd told him to protect everyone and bring them home. That was all. There was nothing else to it.

So long as he had the power to fulfill his goal, he didn't need anything else. He didn't need to turn back to his original form. He didn't need human emotion. He'd had more than enough pain, suffering, and sorrow already.

"He's losing control...?!"

Gerd screamed upon realizing the situation, and in the next instant, he vomited more blood. The dragon attacking him grew even bigger, and the torrent of mana grew even stronger. It was just like an evil dragon threatening the world itself. Not even the Barrier of Devotion could stop it. Fatal cracks ran along its entire surface.

"Ah... Guh..."

In that instant, Gerd had a choice. If he escaped the path of the dragon's breath and minimized his barrier to protect himself, he could just barely survive this. But he didn't consider opening the path to an intruder. The worth of what was behind him and the sight of the people who came to the cathedral every day to pray stirred him into action.

"Ooooooh!"

Gerd roared and stood before the torrent of mana. In the span of seconds, cracks ran all over his barrier. At the same time, the withered old man convulsed greatly. It was feedback from his ability. The barrier was his very existence. He wouldn't get off lightly if it broke. Pain ran through his entire body down to his bones. The blood pouring out of him dyed him completely red. This was a fatal wound. The old man's figure swayed unreliably like a dead tree.

“Not...yet!”

Watching him, even the Evil Dragon widened its eyes. The old man’s feet supported his swaying body in pools of blood. Using tremendous spirit, Gerd kept his fading consciousness intact. Despite being so wounded that it wouldn’t be strange for him to perish at any moment, Gerd refused to fall over. This was impossible to accomplish without extraordinary willpower.

He was without a doubt the world’s guardian. He protected the world to his very last moment.

A few seconds later, the Evil Dragon exhausted itself by using all the mana it had, and the barrier shattered.



With the short yet intense collision over, silence returned. Gerd was nowhere to be seen. The only thing left was a growling dragon.

“Oh. You defeated him.”

Several boys showed up just then. They gathered around Jinguuji Tomoya and called out to him. They were his supporters. There were only five of them, but they were all warriors who used to be part of the exploration team.

“That sure was flashy.”

One of them smiled at Jinguuji Tomoya, who was still in the form of a dragon. He got no reply, though.

“Hm? Jinguuji?” the boy asked curiously. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...” Jinguuji replied, remaining somewhat reticent from exhaustion.

The dragon shook its head. Its enormous body then stooped over and its clawed hands swept the floor, revealing a Dimensional Cornerstone.

“That was...”

Jinguuji Tomoya recalled the last moments of the clash. When the barrier shattered, a figure had run over to Gerd as the torrent of destruction was about to engulf him. It had been the Holy Order’s marshal, Harrison Addington, and the exploration team dropout, Kouzu Asahi.

Seeing them getting caught in the attack, Jinguuji Tomoya had stopped at the last second. Setting aside Harrison, Kouzu Asahi was one of the visitors he'd sworn to protect. They were probably severely wounded, but definitely still alive.

The Dimensional Cornerstone on the floor was the one Harrison had dropped upon getting caught in the blast. This was a mistake on Harrison's part, but in a certain sense, it was fortunate for him.

After all, the Dimensional Cornerstones resonated with each other. Jinguuji Tomoya was in possession of Draconia's Dimensional Cornerstone, just as he'd shown Gerd, which was why he'd been able to find Harrison's stone so quickly. Had Harrison not dropped it, Jinguuji Tomoya probably would've hunted him down and killed him.

"Hey. What's wrong? Why're you still in dragon form, anyway?" one of the boys asked casually.

Jinguuji Tomoya looked down at him. He didn't mind explaining, but it felt like it'd be a huge pain to do so. There was a haze over his thoughts. His emotions felt so distant, as if a thick cloth had been draped over them. His ability to focus on anything aside from his goal had been sacrificed for strength. And that wasn't all. He was significantly exhausted. He'd used far too much mana to remove Gerd from his path.

"Whatever, it's nothing."

In the end, he kept his reply brief. Gerd had definitely suffered a fatal wound. And seeing as how Harrison wasn't coming out, he was probably unconscious under the rubble. If they weren't getting in his way, there was no reason to dig them up. It was a waste of time to talk about it. That was what he believed, and he didn't feel any emotion about it either.

His desire to speak with his comrades had dried up. But that was fine. He didn't need anything unnecessary. Nothing mattered anymore except for his goal.

"Shall we, then?"

The one to speak up was the last person to show up. He was wearing a mask

much like Jinguuji Tomoya had and held a bizarre black sword in one hand. The eyes beneath his mask narrowed sharply as if he understood Jinguuji Tomoya's current situation.

"We don't have time to waste, right?" he said.

"Yeah..."

The boy's desire to get things moving matched his own, so Jinguuji Tomoya had no reason to object. He ignored his exhaustion and advanced while still in dragon form. One of his objectives was down this hallway. It was a door—the door to the Dimensional Cornerstones' vault.



A boy beneath the rubble stared at the group departing, stifling his breath.

"S-Sir Harrison, they're gone," Kouzu Asahi whispered in a fluster. "I'll go after them. If necessary, I can at least take one with me..."

His will was the real thing. This wasn't the flimsy sense of justice he'd once possessed. He seriously wanted to stake his life on this. However, Harrison stopped Kouzu Asahi from acting rashly.

"You'll only die in vain if you face them all at once. Well, Jinguuji Tomoya might not kill you, but it'll still be useless on your own. You have to survive..."

His voice was calm, but his mind was full of anger and panic. Harrison clenched his teeth hard, holding Gerd's corpse in his arms. He'd saved Gerd from Jinguuji Tomoya's attack, but the feedback from the barrier being destroyed had been fatal for the archbishop.

Still, Gerd had resisted to the very end. In the short time before his death, he'd left behind a message. Someone had given Jinguuji Tomoya information about the Dimensional Cornerstones. Jinguuji Tomoya was planning to destroy the Dimensional Cornerstones. And...

"There's still hope."

Already suffering from severe injuries before this, Harrison's wounds were even deeper now. Nevertheless, he resolutely spoke his will.

"The world will be destroyed at this rate. None who live here can claim to be

unaffected. So, we must tell him—we must tell the one who holds the *key* and *compass* to save the world.”

Chapter 6: Compass and Key

Using the long-range communication device, Gordon had informed me of an unbelievable situation. I immediately gathered my companions and started discussing it.

“This Jinguuji Tomoya fellow betrayed the Holy Church and raided the cathedral’s innermost sanctum?” Gerbera said, her eyes wide in surprise. “And his goal is to destroy the Dimensional Cornerstones? Is that the case?”

“Sir Gordon isn’t the type of person to tell such terrible lies,” Katou said calmly.

“I suppose not,” Gerbera agreed. “If that is in fact true and there was an attack, isn’t it too late to contact us about it from so far away?”

“No, if it were too late already, we wouldn’t even be talking about it,” Lily joined in. “If the Dimensional Cornerstones were destroyed, the world would’ve ended shortly after.”

“I see. That makes sense... So what’s going on?” Gerbera cocked her head in confusion.

“Strictly speaking,” I said, “what’s hidden beneath the cathedral is only the door leading to the Dimensional Cornerstones.”

“Hm? The door?” Gerbera repeated, inclining her head further. “I don’t really get it. How is that different? A door leads to a room, right?”

“Not in this case. The only thing there is the door,” I explained. “It’s a magic tool called the Dimension Door. It doesn’t lead directly to the storage vault. It apparently opens the way to another fabricated world, different from the one we were sent to. You can’t get to the vault without passing through it.”

“So they have even more security. How thorough,” Gerbera said. “I suppose that’s natural when it comes to the existence of the world itself.”

“If entered through proper means, the storage vault is apparently right

beyond the door, though,” I added. “When entered any other way, it leads to a dangerous world. It’s said it’ll take even a savior three days to cross it on foot. That is of course based on a savior traveling on their own. Jinguuji is accompanied by other visitors, so they’ll probably get through faster. If we’re unlucky, he might even reach it within the day.”

“It seems we have no time to waste,” Gerbera said, nodding.

“Even inside the Holy Church, the only ones who knew the truth were Harrison and Archbishop Gerd,” I continued. “But Gerd died trying to obstruct Jinguuji Tomoya. Harrison tried to save him, but took a hit when he was already suffering from severe injuries. Kouzu Asahi had noticed Jinguuji’s strange behavior and was with Harrison. He managed to get Harrison back to the church right away and get him treated, but Harrison isn’t going to be moving around anytime soon.”

“Unbelievable...” Gerbera muttered sourly, understanding how bad the situation was. “That means they have no leadership.”

She was right on the mark. The grand cathedral was a mess and no small number of civilians had been caught in the destruction. The imperial capital had been thrown into unprecedented chaos. The head archbishop was dead and the Holy Order’s marshal was out of action. That was extremely bad.

Still, thanks to their sacrifice, we’d been informed of Jinguuji’s goal. If not for that, we would never have learned of his intent to destroy the Dimensional Cornerstones, meaning we would’ve been far too slow to act against him. It was precisely because the world was at risk of ending that Harrison had ignored all pretense and had a message sent to me. Some of this still didn’t make sense, though.

“Harrison is apparently giving Sir Gordon directions from his sickbed,” I said. “They provided the exploration team with limited information about this case and asked for their cooperation.”

“So they’ve already made a request for the exploration team’s help?” Rose asked curiously, a dubious expression on her face. “I don’t understand what Harrison is thinking. If the exploration team is helping, wouldn’t they have more than enough strength as it is? I don’t believe there is any reason for them to go

out of their way to ask us for help too.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” I agreed.

Rose had a point. We’d accumulated strength in this world, but we still couldn’t be compared with the exploration team. If the church had managed to borrow their power, they didn’t need to beg an enemy for help too. However, I could tell how serious Harrison was about this.

“We’ll have to ask about that too…” I said.

Just then, the situation changed. I sensed a peculiar wave of mana in front of me. This was the omen of the Fairy Ring, something I was starting to get familiar with.

“I’m back,” Shimazu said, smiling as she appeared out of a distortion in space.

Her expression was a little stiff, likely because she understood the dire calamity we were up against. Three others had come with her: one was a large bald man, the vice marshal of the Holy Order Gordon Cavill; another was a young man with graceful features, the exploration team’s leader Nakajima Kojirou; and the last was a man in a wheelchair, his entire body covered in wounds.

“I didn’t think we’d meet again so soon,” I said to this last man.

“Neither did I,” the marshal of the Holy Order, Harrison Addington, replied hoarsely.



The other day, we’d been at each other’s throats. Tension ran through my camp and everyone put themselves on guard. Their wariness was unnecessary, though. Harrison clearly wasn’t in any condition to fight. He’d already been severely wounded when I last saw him, but after his encounter with Jinguuji, his injuries looked fatal. He definitely couldn’t stand up and walk around. His gaunt face was deathly pale and the bags beneath his eyes looked like the shadows of death.

His muscular body wasn’t stirring the slightest bit in his wheelchair. In his current state, we could defeat him with ease. To expose his vulnerability to his

sworn foes, he must have been desperate for our help. Only the severe glint in his eyes remained untarnished by his defeat.

“It’s been two days, Majima,” Nakajima said, his voice cheerful enough to make anyone relax just by hearing it. “I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

He faced me with his usual affable smile.

“I assume you’ve heard what’s going on?” I asked.

“Yeah. That’s why I’m here,” Nakajima answered. “Things being the way they are.”

Harrison had revealed the truth of the world, at least partially, to Nakajima. Considering the gravity of this information, such knowledge had to be kept from as many people as possible. However, if all the people being sent after Jinguuji were unaware of the details, that was a problem in itself.

For example, say Jinguuji told them the truth when they caught up to him. If it didn’t match what they already knew beforehand, it would shake their conviction. Depending on the circumstances, it was possible the whole operation could fail right then and there. At the very least, someone in the exploration team had to know and convince the others. On that point, nobody was more suitable than their leader. Harrison’s judgment on this matter had been correct.

In hindsight, this was convenient for us. If someone on the exploration team knew about the situation between us and the church, the church would no longer be able to misinform them. Iino and Shimazu were with me, so it was unlikely for the exploration team to become our enemies, but it was good to have a guarantee for the future.

In other words, Harrison had decided that my cooperation was necessary enough to vindicate my reputation among the exploration team members. He understood how dangerous the current situation was, after all.

“After hearing of the world’s impending doom, I know we’ve got no time to drag things out,” Nakajima said, a serious look in his eyes. “Besides, my comrade is responsible for this. I don’t know why he’s suddenly planning to destroy the world, but I can’t leave him be. I’ll be the one to stop Jinguuji.”

His words were reassuring. I'd once seen the ability that set him above all others. I didn't doubt for a second that he would stop the Dragon. He was the savior who wielded the ultimate radiant sword. There was nobody more suitable to be put into action in this situation. That said, it was precisely because I felt this way that I couldn't understand why Harrison had contacted us. I turned to look at the marshal.

"Let's cut right to the chase. There's no time to waste," he said.

"Yeah, let's," I agreed. Now wasn't the time for idle chatter. "Why did you contact me?"

"Because you're necessary to stop Jinguuji Tomoya," Harrison answered.

"That's what I don't understand," I said. "You have the exploration team, don't you? They should be more than strong enough for this."

"It's because fighting is the *only* thing we're capable of," Nakajima said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"There are those like Shimazu, but they're exceptions. We're called saviors here, but we're basically nothing more than mercenaries."

Nakajima derided himself casually, but remained relaxed. To him, despite having so much power, those who had the true potential to be saviors were something else entirely. Even during this exchange, I could sense something fundamentally different in him from the warriors who depended entirely on strength.

"Even when we're only talking about fighting, I'm pretty sure your group covers a wider range of capabilities."

"Meaning there's something only we can do?" I asked.

"You catch on quickly. Exactly that." Nakajima nodded and glanced at Harrison to explain.

"Jinguuji Tomoya stole the Dimension Door that leads to the storage vault and flew away."

"He took the door...?"

I frowned at the curious expression, then suddenly realized something. A door connected two rooms. There was no point to picking one up and taking it away. However, the Dimension Door was a magic tool. It was possible to carry it around.

“Hang on,” I said. “I thought this was just about chasing Jinguuji into the world beyond the Dimension Door. The door itself is gone too?”

“That’s right,” Harrison confirmed. “We must first search for the Dimension Door. If we at least had a Dimensional Cornerstone, we could use its resonance as a compass to locate the door, but the church is no longer in possession of any.”

“So you can’t even find it?”

“That’s correct, but I’m afraid the situation complicates things further. A Dimensional Cornerstone serves as the key to that world. Without one, it’s impossible to even step foot inside.”

“You’re missing both the compass and the key...? So what can you even do?”

The situation was far worse than I’d imagined. Forget chasing Jinguuji, we couldn’t even track him. If he traveled by foot, Lily or Ayame could follow his scent, but all hope was lost if Jinguuji turned into a dragon and flew through the skies.

“No. There’s still a possibility,” Harrison said, shaking his head. His hazel eyes stared right at me. “Majima Takahiro. Your very existence is the answer.”

“Me...?”

Harrison nodded deeply. “You’re capable of interfering with a Dimensional Cornerstone. Nobody else is capable of such a feat.”

“Well, that’s true, but still...”

A Dimensional Cornerstone had the power to create worlds. The only one capable of interfering with one was the contractor to the Misty Lodge, who possessed the same kind of power. Harrison had apparently found some possibility in that fact.

“It was Lord Gerd’s will,” Harrison said. “Upon his death, he stated that you’re

capable of becoming both the compass and the key in the Dimensional Cornerstone's stead."

"I can be both the compass and key...?"

I was bewildered by the sudden information, but there was certainty in Harrison's voice. That was how much he believed in Gerd, and that was how little else he had to rely on.

"Does that ring any bells?" he asked.

"That's not much to go on..."

Nothing immediately came to mind, but that was when someone unexpected raised their voice.

"Ah. Now that I think of it," Lily said, tugging on my sleeve. "Master, back when we first arrived in the imperial capital, you sensed some kinda magic tool, remember?"

"Did I?"

"Sure did. You even brought it up."

Now that she mentioned it, I vaguely remembered talking about something like that with her.

"What's wrong, Master?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about how the presence of mana here is amazing."

"Aah, that. It really is. It's a little surprising, but I guess that's the Holy Church for you, huh? They've got magic tools all over the place."

When we first arrived in the capital with the Fairy Ring, while being shown around and looking down at the cathedral from a spire, my mind had gotten caught on the presence of mana. At the time, I'd figured it was a reaction to the many magic tools used by the church in their rituals and hadn't paid it much thought.

"You're the only one who reacted to it, Master."

"So..."

She had a point. In terms of simply detecting mana, my companions had far

sharper senses than me. The Dimension Door was apparently stored underneath the cathedral. So what if I'd sensed its existence at that time? It was entirely possible. It was worth testing, at least.

"Salvia."

"Yes, my dear?" Salvia answered, appearing in the air in a cloud of mist.

"Will you lend me your strength?" I asked.

"Of course."

At the time, we'd been much closer to the cathedral. Salvia's assistance was essential for me to sense something so far away. I closed my eyes and Salvia wrapped her arms around me from behind. My heightened perception came from my contract with the Misty Lodge. We had terrific affinity when using her magic, allowing us to share sensations and even augment each other's senses. I heard Nakajima let out a sigh of admiration as I sharpened my perception. It didn't take all that long.

"That way," I said, pointing my finger just as I found it.

"That's the same direction Jinguuji Tomoya flew off to," Harrison said with a small sigh of relief. "Looks like it'll be possible to find him."

"Majima," Nakajima said, walking up to me and holding out a hand. "We're planning to chase Jinguuji to protect the world. To that end, we'd like you to participate in the operation."

"If you can't bring yourself to forgive me," Harrison added, "I'm ready to offer you my head."

He was serious. Harrison was devoted to protecting the world, even at the cost of his own life. The threat we faced was enough to justify a sacrifice, in his mind.

"I don't need your head," I said, scowling. "Let's call a temporary truce. It's not the time to be fighting when the world is in danger of ending."

Now that the exploration team's leader was involved, Harrison was far less dangerous than before. The troops he could move behind the scenes had been annihilated, so the only fear we'd really had was whether they could

manipulate the exploration team to be against us. Now that Nakajima knew what he did, that was pretty much impossible. Harrison dying and throwing the world into further chaos would be far more inconvenient for us than the danger of him being around.

Also, while it was possible for us to denounce Harrison right now, seeing that he was defenseless, that wouldn't accomplish anything beyond satisfying our own egos. After all, Harrison was aware that what he'd done to us had been utterly cruel. He'd understood this so well, but had turned against us because there was something he absolutely had to protect.

Above all else, it hadn't been his own failures that had driven him to such lengths. The real cause had been the overwhelming influx of visitors and the many problems they'd inflicted on him, especially when considering the precarious reality of the world. In a sense, he was a victim.

Naturally, from the biggest victim's perspective, the story was entirely different. Mikihiko had told me that if he saw the man, he would immediately slug him, so he wasn't even participating in this talk. Mikihiko understood how serious the situation was and had made sure not to be here in case his emotions got the better of him and messed up any negotiations. I couldn't let his consideration go to waste.

"So forget about that and let's get moving quickly," I said, taking Nakajima's hand.

Even now, Jinguuji's group was getting closer and closer to the Dimensional Cornerstones.

"It's decided then," Nakajima said, smiling brightly like he was looking at an equal. "Let's save the world, Majima."

Chapter 7: Preparing for Battle

We prepared to get going in a flurry. We started by going to the capital and having a short meeting. This operation relied on speed, so it was decided that Lily, Shiran, Lobivia, Ayame, and Berta would be accompanying me to chase Jinguuji.

That said, they were at most there to help with the chase and escort me. It was the exploration team's job to actually fight. Nakajima had selected around forty people. None of them had been informed of the Dimensional Cornerstones, though. He'd only told them that "Jinguuji is deranged and going after an extremely dangerous magic tool." I thought some of them would pester him for more details, but Nakajima had a good grip on their reins. He hadn't spent nearly a year leading a group of egoistic cheaters for nothing.

Jinguuji's group was made up of five visitors, including him, so with so many visitors on our side, things would work out once we caught up with him. Actually catching up to him was a different matter, though. Jinguuji could fly through the skies, making pursuit very difficult. With this in mind, we'd decided to have everyone ride the dragons of Draconia.

"I'll pray for your safety, Ella."

"Thank you, Prince Philip. I'll be back."

Aker's second prince, Philip Kendall, saw off Draconia's eldest sister, Ella. The dragons of Draconia had an extremely bad impression of the exploration team because one of their members, the Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma, had been part of the attack on their settlement. At the same time, they also understood that that had been Okazaki's personal responsibility. There were parts of this they couldn't come to grips with, but Jinguuji, the culprit responsible for bringing down the settlement's defenses, was trying to usurp a dangerous magic tool. This took precedence for them.

Accompanied by Ella and the other dragons, we moved to the rendezvous point. We were to depart from a plaza close to the grand cathedral. By the time

we arrived, over half of the participants were already here. Including all those who'd gathered to get things ready, there were over a hundred people making a lot of noise. There was still a little time until everyone arrived, so I spoke to those who were going to stay behind.

"Please be careful, Senpai," Katou said, embracing me.

Because speed was so important in this case, she was going to be staying behind in the capital. Just in case, Rose and Gerbera were going to remain too.

"I'll pray for your success," Rose said.

"Be careful. Make sure to come back," Gerbera added.

I shared a light hug with them too.

"Of course," I said. "We've got plenty of fighters with us this time."

"True," Gerbera said. "Now that they're allies, I can't think of anyone more reliable."

"The exploration team's leader definitely assesses our master highly, after all," Rose added.

Even as we talked, I sensed people staring at us. Nakajima had warned his comrades about us so that the operation would go smoothly. I didn't feel any animosity from them. The exploration team leader's influence was tremendous.

"Senpai. I don't fully trust the Holy Church," Katou declared clearly. Harrison was within earshot, but she didn't care. This was actually a warning for him. She then giggled. "That's why there's a point to me staying behind. After all, I'm barely able to maintain a human form thanks to you. In a sense, I'm like a bomb with a remote detonator. If anything happens to you, I'm sure the Abomination will immediately trample its way through the capital."

"Even without your warning, I plan to return Majima Takahiro to you safely," Harrison said, his expression stiff as he remained seated in his wheelchair.

He sensed true danger in her words. I hadn't actually seen the Abomination go on a rampage, but even the aftermath had sent a shudder down my spine. Anyone who'd seen what had caused it would feel even more dread at the thought.

“I can’t participate in the chase,” Harrison said to the boy standing next to him. “I’m entrusting it to you.”

“Understood,” Kouzu Asahi responded.

He was the one who’d messed up big-time in the eastern Empire, losing his friends and nearly causing the destruction of a village, becoming the source of the fake savior rumors. His mind had been broken and I’d been told that he was being sheltered in the capital. It seemed he’d recovered.

In the recent battle, he’d been an enemy on Harrison’s side, but this time we were working together as part of the same pursuit force. Three other visitors who shared his circumstances were participating in the operation. Adding to that, five students who’d left the exploration team and come to the capital on their own were joining too. The eight of them weren’t considered part of the exploration team and were instead participating as saviors under the Holy Church’s umbrella.

“Majima!”

Someone called out to me. I turned to see Iino walking my way. However, her gallant black hair wasn’t trailing behind her like usual. She dragged her leg awkwardly across the ground. During the battle with Jinguuji Tomoya, she’d suffered a severe wound to her leg. The blade had been coated in a nasty poison, so it would take time for her to recover even with the use of healing magic. As she limped toward me, she noticed Kouzu was here too.

“Ah, Kouzu...”

“I’ll excuse myself here,” Kouzu said, bowing to Harrison.

He then approached Iino. An awkward silence hung over them. They’d been comrades in the exploration team, but had crossed swords in that labyrinth. Iino tried to say something, but couldn’t find the right words.

“Sorry about the other day, Iino,” Kouzu said clearly. He’d long made his resolve. “However, my path has been decided.”

This was a farewell. Kouzu then left so that he could accomplish the duty that’d been entrusted to him. Iino remained stock-still. This was a great shock to her. Maybe she’d been questioning whether that fight against him had to

have been some kind of mistake. However, Kouzu admitted to what he'd done and displayed that his action had been backed by clear intent.

Iino felt a strong fellowship with the other exploration team members. Kouzu, on the other hand, had found his place in the church. I was surprised to see that Iino was on the verge of tears, but she held them back at the last second and turned to me.

"I have something to discuss with you, Majima."

"If this is about you coming along, I won't hear it," I warned before she even suggested it.

Iino gulped. I figured that was the case. Still, judging by her awkward expression, she understood that she was being unreasonable.

"How could we bring someone with an injured leg on a chase?" I asked.

"Th-That's true, but I..." Iino understood. Nevertheless, she couldn't suppress her emotions. "I..."

Her impatience was evident on her face.



Even though I knew I couldn't bring her along, I hesitated a little. Jinguuji had been the one to injure lino's leg. He was a comrade in arms to her, and she'd even met him after he'd left the exploration team. What's more, Jinguuji was trying to find a way for everyone to go back to our world, and had even invited her to join him. She must've trusted him immensely.

That was exactly why lino felt partially liable for this. In all likelihood, she believed she could've put an end to this violence. This suited her well. She had a tremendous sense of responsibility. As she was now, unless she was properly convinced, she was likely to follow us regardless. I had no idea how to convince her, though. Unable to find the right words, someone else spoke to her from the side.

"Leave it at that."

"Leader..."

It was Nakajima. He was apparently here to throw me a lifeline.

"Leave him to me," Nakajima said. "Or am I not trustworthy enough?"

"No... You're plenty trustworthy," lino said after a moment's silence. "I can leave him to you."

"That's good to hear."

Nakajima gave her a refreshing smile. He'd so easily changed her opinion. I definitely wouldn't have been able to pull that off.

"Very well," lino said despondently after bowing to him. "It's just as you say. Sorry, Majima. I can't be getting in the way here, so I'll excuse myself."

"Right," I said.

"Please take care of Jinguuji," she added before painfully limping away.

I grimaced a little as I watched her leave. This did in fact bring an end to her insistence, but that had at most been done by relying entirely on trust to change her opinion. lino wasn't actually convinced. She was still uneasy.

"I know," Nakajima said, shrugging as I turned to him. "Using my position like that feels wrong, but this is an emergency."

“That’s true...”

He had a point. I hadn’t intended to criticize him to begin with, but seeing as he was lino’s comrade, I couldn’t really say anything back to that.

“You sure are kind, Majima,” Nakajima said with a friendly smile. “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. We just have to stop Jinguuji. We do that, and you’ll have as many chances to patch things up with her as you want.”

He was right again. So long as Jinguuji was stopped, lino didn’t have to feel any guiltier about this. If he wasn’t stopped, the world would end. We wouldn’t even be able to worry about lino’s emotional state.

“I’m expecting great things from you, Majima,” Nakajima said, slapping my shoulder. “We’ll save the world.”

He gave me a pleasant smile as if he was looking at an equal.

At that point, we were informed that everyone participating in the operation had gathered. We mounted the dragons and began our pursuit of Jinguuji.

Chapter 8: Conversation with a Wolf

Our chase through the skies had started. I rode the lead dragon and gave directions when necessary. That said, I didn't need to redirect us very often, so I spent most of my time on standby.

Around two hours passed like this. After going over the prairies, the scenery beneath us changed to that of a forest. We still had some distance between us and the Dimension Door. This seemed like it was going to take a while.

"It sure is shaky up here..." I muttered, somewhat disconcerted.

This was my second time riding a dragon through the skies. That didn't mean I'd gotten accustomed to it, though. This was different from riding an airplane; there were no seats on a dragon's back. We were directly exposed to the wind and our view was so high up that I could easily picture falling to my death. What's more, each flap of the dragon's wing shook us up and down with a nauseating amount of force. Maybe this was even worse than last time. Once in a while, it felt like I was falling several meters through the air. Each time, the blood drained from my face. Considering that my last ride had been atop Thaddeus, I thought maybe he was used to having people ride him after his travels with Fukatsu Aketora.

"Your face is so stiff, Master."

"This is one thing I can't get used to..."

Lily had a firm hold on me from behind to make sure I didn't fall off. She leaned forward and peeked at my face, a slightly pleasant sensation pressing against my back.

"Are you feeling sick? If you need a break then say so, okay?" she said.

"I'm fine."

We'd already gotten complaints about motion sickness and fatigue from the exploration team, who weren't used to flying either, and had taken a break for them. There was no use being reckless, but I had to endure to a certain extent.

Having read my thoughts, Lily didn't push the topic and turned to the side.

"How about you, Berta?"

"Of course I'm fine," a tremendously stiff voice replied. It was hard to read a wolf's expression, but she clearly lacked energy.

"Looks like Berta's in the same boat as you, Master."

"That's not true," Berta protested.

"You're tucking your tail," Lily said, pointing out something that was far easier to read than a person's face.

"Animals who run on the ground have poor affinity with the sky," Berta said, averting her eyes.

"Ayame looks like she's having fun, though," Lily retorted.

"She's...an exception. She enjoys everything," Berta said.

Without anything else to do at that moment, Shiran was looking after Ayame. Held against Shiran's chest, the little fox narrowed her eyes against the wind. Once in a while, she wriggled out to try and climb on Shiran's head but was warned about it. She didn't seem the least bit scared.

"In that sense, she's unrivaled," Berta said, sighing. There was a bit of a smile behind her voice. Perhaps the conversation was distracting her from the flight. "Now that I think of it, it's been bothering me somewhat. Why is Jinguuji Tomoya trying to destroy the Dimensional Cornerstones?"

We hadn't had much time before departing, so we hadn't discussed Jinguuji's baffling behavior at length.

"Frankly, I find it hard to understand," Berta groaned. "It's not like he can return to his world by destroying them. His actions are illogical."

Berta's ears fell flat against her head. I understood how she felt.

"You have a point there," I said. "But that might not be true."

"What do you mean?" Berta asked.

"I had a short talk with Katou," I answered. "Someone might be tricking Jinguuji."

Katou hadn't finished putting it all together herself, but she'd told me her thoughts before we left.

"According to what Gerd passed on, someone out there informed Jinguuji about the Dimensional Cornerstones' storage vault. They're probably the same one who suggested he destroy them."

Katou was more worried about this point than Jinguuji himself.

"Hang on," Berta interjected. "The person who told him probably knows the truth about the Dimensional Cornerstones too. In that case, they should've told Jinguuji about that too. Why was there a need to lie about that one thing in particular?"

"You have it backward," I said.

"How so?"

"When telling a lie, the most effective way is to mix in a little truth."

Berta thought it over for a few seconds before her fur stood on end.

"Their goal was to mix in a horrible lie by telling the actual preposterous truth about the world?"

"That's the gist of it," I answered.

"Humans think of dreadful things..." she muttered deeply.

As usual, her sensibilities seemed so detached from being the Demon King's servant. I smiled at how innocent she was, but quickly pulled back my expression.

"I can tell by instinct that the Dimensional Cornerstone really created this world," I added. "But the same doesn't go for Jinguuji. He must've thought the whole story about the Dimensional Cornerstones was nonsense. But now he knows they really exist. So..."

"The part about being able to return to his world must also be true?" Berta finished for me.

"It's hard to say he isn't following that line of reasoning."

The reason why Jinguuji was acting so recklessly wasn't worthy of our

attention. The one who'd provided him with that information and their intentions in doing so was far more important. That was Katou's opinion. That also led to the most significant point of uncertainty.

"But Takahiro," Lobivia said, arriving at the same conclusion. "Why'd the guy who gave him that info do that? If the Dimensional Cornerstones are destroyed, the world will end. Doesn't that make it totally meaningless?"

"Yeah..." I was thinking the same thing. "There's nothing to gain and everything to lose. It's definitely baffling. But..."

"But?" Lobivia blinked and looked at me with her big eyes.

"I have an idea who would do such a thing," I said, grimacing.

"You do?"

"Someone providing information to visitors..." Berta said, her eyes opening wide. "Such disgusting and underhanded methods... You can't mean..." Her tail straightened to a point. "Heaven's Voice?"

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

Heaven's Voice was the visitor behind the attack on Fort Tilia. Their identity was a mystery. The only thing we knew about them was that they possessed an inherent ability to communicate via telepathy over long distances.

"But even if the methodology is similar, it doesn't explain why they would do such a thing," I said, scowling. "If the world ends, they won't get away from it either. Even if Heaven's Voice seems like someone who delights in watching people suffer because of them, going so far as harming themselves is a little..."

"Aah, that might not be right," Berta cut in, her eyes colored by anxiety. "I just remembered something my king once told me."

"Kudou...?" I said. "Oh, now that you mention it, Kudou had dealings with Heaven's Voice too."

Kudou had been the one to first inform us about Heaven's Voice, back at Fort Tilia. It wasn't strange for him to possess information on them.

"Heaven's Voice kept in regular contact with my king," Berta explained. "Although it was pretty one-sided. My king was wary of being manipulated with

information as bait, so he dealt with them noncommittally. On very rare occasions, he collected evidence on the information to act on it or to disturb what was going on. One example of successfully extracting information from Heaven's Voice was finding out that the fake savior incident was caused by the failures of real visitors."

"Meaning Heaven's Voice has been moving around a lot behind the scenes," I concluded.

Kudou had been fighting an information war without my knowing about it.

"Just maybe, a portion of the visitors who caused the fake savior incidents were instigated by Heaven's Voice as well," Berta continued. "My king calls them the snake of temptation, as well as a mad criminal who delights in ruin."

"A mad criminal who delights in ruin..." I repeated, the words bitter in my throat.

In both Fort Tilia and Takaya Jun's case, Heaven's Voice had in fact seemed like someone who delighted in watching their crimes unfold. At the very least, it didn't seem like they had anything else to gain. What's more, having interacted with them directly, Kudou had sensed something destructive in their tendencies.

"In this case, that includes damage done to themselves," Berta said, narrowing her eyes as she recalled her conversation with her king. "In the sense of plunging toward their own ruin, they're similar to my king. However, their stances differ greatly. Heaven's Voice has no objective, making their plans fundamentally meaningless. They're simply done in poor taste, with no purpose aside from ruin."

"I see."

To bring about the world's destruction—a man who tormented himself over the loss of a lover being made to dance to that tune, and the criminal provoking him...

"Now that you mention it, it really is in poor taste, ultimately meaningless, and nothing but destructive," I said. "It wouldn't be weird for Heaven's Voice to be behind it..."

I doubted there were multiple people out there malicious enough to do anything of the sort who also happened to be involved with visitors. It was only natural to suspect they were working behind the scenes here too. I'd gone through hell twice already because of Heaven's Voice, both at Fort Tilia and with Takaya Jun's case. Thinking back on it, that vicious tendency was also present here.

"Majima Takahiro, your fate seems tied to Heaven's Voice too, if I remember," Berta said.

"Yeah. Twice now... Well, if they're behind Jinguuji too, it'll be three times."

Jinguuji had attacked Draconia and had secretly stolen their Dimensional Cornerstone. He'd joined forces with the Holy Church against me and had chosen the perfect time to betray them. If Heaven's Voice was behind all that, it made sense.

"Three times without any direct contact," Berta said, her tentacles squirming restlessly. "That's a horrible coincidence."

"I wonder if it's really a coincidence..." Lily suddenly muttered.

"Lily? What do you mean?" I asked, turning around to face her. "If it's not a coincidence, then that means Heaven's Voice has been intentionally messing with me?"

"After Takaya Jun's case, I figured it might be the case," she said.

"Well... Still, at the very least, I don't remember doing anything to provoke them into going out of their way to mess with me."

"Mm. Maybe I'm overthinking it," Lily said, smiling sadly.

"Slime. I understand how you feel, but there's no point giving that scum too much thought," Berta said. She knew of Heaven's Voice's meaningless viciousness from simply watching her king be in contact with them. "All we need to think about is how to crush their plan and protect Majima Takahiro to the end."

"Right," Lily agreed, nodding and squeezing her arms around me tighter.



I spent the entire time on standby impatiently, but managed to hear something unexpected. I never would've known about Kudou's opinion of Heaven's Voice if not for Berta. Even if we had no positive proof they were involved, it was better to consider the possibility. Coming to that conclusion, I turned to Berta once more.

"At any rate, I have to apologize to you, Berta," I said.

"What about?"

"Getting you involved in our situation."

She said she would protect me, but Berta was different from my servants. That said, faced with my apology, Berta simply wagged her tail lightly.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I told you before. My king has commanded me to protect you, and I wish to do so myself." Berta let out a quiet huff. Somehow or other, she seemed happy. "Thinking back on it, I've gotten rather accustomed to being here."

"True. At first, you were sooo cold," Lily joined in.

Ayame also gave us a "kuuu." Now that she mentioned it, even Ayame, who got along great with Berta, had been extremely wary of her at first. Berta really fit in now.

"I thought my king had abandoned me at first, so I was at a complete loss..." she said sadly, then suddenly stopped.

"Berta? What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing... I simply remembered something," she said bitterly. "I had a talk with lino Yuna once."

"With lino?"

"Yes, right before being sent to that labyrinth."

"Oh yeah, I heard you were with her before that whole incident."

It wasn't that unexpected. It sounded weird for a principal member of the exploration team to be hanging out with the Demon King's strongest monster, but Berta had a secret. The upper body of her true form was exactly identical to

Iino's best friend, Todoroki Miya. I didn't know whether that factored in, but the two were apparently close enough to chat.

"Did Iino tell you something?" I asked.

"Yes. During our time in the capital, we couldn't let the Demon King's subordinate come in contact with the exploration team, so I was made out to be your servant, remember? Iino Yuna said that was a good thing and smiled. She said my king was unsuitable for me. It surprised me a little. I always thought the opposite."

It chilled me somewhat. Even if Iino didn't know, Berta's loyalty to Kudou remained as strong as ever. Saying that to her was like stepping on a tiger's tail. It hadn't angered Berta, though. She spoke of it calmly.

"I never told you this," Berta continued. "My king names his promising servants in order. It's something called a phonetic code from his world. They go A, B, C, D, and so on."

"That's the first I've heard of it," I said. "Meaning you're number two?"

"That's how it is. However, to my king, despite his giving me a name, I am far too flawed. He only has a need for disposable pawns. My perceived imperfections are from my inborn nature. Thus, I always thought I was a failure unsuitable for my king. However, after talking to Iino Yuna, I started to think maybe that's wrong."

Berta's tail slowly wagged about.

"No, I suppose I faintly realized it while traveling with you," she corrected. "Who is unsuitable for whom? My sensibilities are similar to all of yours. Being a failure is a matter of perspective."

Berta was honest and good at looking after others, and genuinely wished for the happiness of those dear to her. From a general perspective, she was full of virtues. She simply hadn't been blessed by her environment. During her time with Kudou, she hadn't even been able to realize this. Being her king's servant was everything to her, after all. But now things were different. Oddly enough, by distancing herself from her king, she'd been able to notice this.

"That's why I'm grateful to all of you," she said.

“Huh?” I muttered, bewildered by her sudden gratitude.

“My king is plunging toward his own destruction, toward a hopeless demise. I want him to at least find salvation before that. There’s little I can do, however. My king is absolute, and I’m an unsuitable failure as a pawn. Nothing can be done about that. That’s what I believed. But I was wrong.”

Berta wagged the end of her tail shyly yet happily.

“My king and I live differently,” she continued. “He’s not absolute. Maybe it was impossible for him to choose my way of life for me. That’s what I think now. And then, in truth, he even accepted my true form.”

“Berta...”

Now that I thought of it, during the battle against Edgar, Berta had revealed her true form as a scylla. Kudou had banned her use of that form. I’d even witnessed him punishing her harshly for using it without permission. Taking that into consideration, fighting in that form while Kudou was there was symbolic. I suddenly remembered a certain conversation I’d had with Kudou in that labyrinth.

“So it’s been thinking of such things...?”

“Good grief. That one really is a failure.”

I’d informed Kudou that Berta wished for his happiness. Having heard his servant’s feelings for the first time, Kudou’s words had seemed cruel, but unexpectedly, his expression hadn’t been heartless. He’d sounded stumped. In all likelihood, that hadn’t been intentional. It had been a defenseless moment.

I didn’t know what Kudou was thinking. Still, his reaction at the time was a little different from the impression I’d had of his relationship with Berta. Did Kudou really hate Berta as a failure? There had to be some kind of circumstance behind his behavior.

When I thought of it like that, Berta’s true form came to mind. She was the spitting image of the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya, who’d gone missing when the Colony fell and hadn’t been seen since. Perhaps that girl had something to do with the bond between Kudou and Berta. Why did Berta have that form to begin with? Perhaps Berta’s “inborn nature” had something to do

with that.

“Berta, are you...?”

I didn’t want to force her to say something she didn’t intend to tell me. Still, I couldn’t remain detached enough to turn a blind eye to the wolf before me and the sad Demon King she obeyed. I wasn’t able to ask my question, though. The situation began moving before I could.

“Master!” I noticed right as a voice called out to me. Mist spread around me, scattered by the headwind, and Salvia revealed herself. “The Dimension Door is close!”

Chapter 9: The Army Arrives

Using the same senses as Salvia, I was able to perceive the Dimension Door's presence. Until now, I'd only had a vague sense of direction to go by, but we were finally close enough for me to grasp how far away it was.

"Please lower our altitude!" I yelled to the dragon I was riding.

We flew lower, and the dragons behind us followed suit. We knew how far away it was, but we couldn't actually see it yet. Still, the exploration team members had been getting tired of sitting idly on their flight through the skies, so the excitement was palpable now that the goal was in sight.

Lily supported me as I leaned hard to look over the dragon's back. The scenery beneath us was nothing but forest, yet I could feel its presence.

"Misty Lodge."

I deployed the one and only magic I was capable of. If Gerd's last words were correct, this was the only compass and key left in the world to find the Dimension Door. Mist burst outward, trailing behind us like vapor. By thinning the fog, I was able to perceive a wider area. And just as expected, our net caught something.

"Found it!"

My eyes focused on one section of the forest beneath us. It was impossible to see with the naked eye from here, but it was definitely there. It was a door, frame and all. The magic tool Jinguuji had stolen had been left behind in a corner of the forest.

We considered the possibility that he'd left a lookout behind, but it seemed that wasn't the case. He'd placed the door deep in a forest where no human could enter and had flown through the air to make it impossible to track him. He'd likely judged that a lookout would be unnecessary. This hadn't been a careless decision. On the contrary, the fact that Jinguuji had gone so far with the door demonstrated his judicious planning.

However, his plan had failed. The departed archbishop's tenacity and the enmity of the dragons whose home he'd destroyed had come back to haunt him. That said, there wasn't much point to simply finding the door.

"From here, it's our job."

We needed to jam the key in and force it open. This was something only we could do.

"Salvia!"

"Yes. Let's do it, my dear!"

Salvia embraced me from behind. Our senses overlapped and enhanced each other's. Acting as my sense of touch, the mist brushed against the door. It slipped through the cracks. I stretched my imaginary fingers deep inside it.

"Got it!"

I felt the Misty Lodge reach the world beyond the Dimension Door. Even at the eleventh hour, I'd been a little worried whether this would work, but it turned out just fine. At the same time, I felt some resistance. It was like my fingers were being pushed back by a wall.

Harrison had informed me of this beforehand, so it was hardly a surprise. This was something like a defense mechanism. Even if we had a Dimensional Cornerstone, it was made so that it wouldn't open unless the proper procedures were followed. If we wanted to disregard these procedures, we had to force our way in. I didn't even have the proper key, so we'd predicted some resistance.

"Huh...?"

The unexpected thing here was that I broke through the defenses far more easily than I'd anticipated. It was like punching through a piece of styrofoam. That didn't mean the defenses were weak. I'd met a similar level of resistance during the battle against Harrison to control the fabricated world. What had changed since then was me.

"How surprising. Your power to interfere with another world is remarkably different from before," Salvia said.

Her bewilderment made sense. I couldn't hide my confusion either.

“Why...?”

I definitely had more power, but I had no idea what had caused my rapid ascent. Had anything changed since then? I couldn't think of anything which could explain my sudden growth, certainly not between now and the fight against Harrison.

At most, I'd formed a connection over the mental path to Katou. For the first time, I'd manifested my ability in its original form, allowing me to connect to a human. That had been a major step forward for me. That said, it was hard to link that to the drastic improvement in my use of the Misty Lodge. The ability to link hearts was mine, whereas the ability to interfere with other worlds came from Salvia. Maybe there was some other reason...

“Whatever. We need to focus on what's in front of us first.”

Unfortunately, we didn't really have the time to sit back and think. We did, in fact, have to hurry after Jinguuji, but there was a more direct threat to handle first.

“Takahiro! Here they come!”

The first to detect the anomaly was Shiran. In some ways, her spirits' ability to detect danger surpassed the Misty Lodge's. A part of the forest was changing. A semitransparent black sphere swelled in size as if to swallow the woods. The sphere quickly surpassed the height of the trees until it was like a small mountain. It was centered exactly where I'd detected the door. This was no coincidence, of course.

“That's the Dimension Door!”

By all rights, if the door were opened properly using a Dimensional Cornerstone, the door itself would vanish and a black wall would appear leading to the other world. This time, however, we were breaking in, so there would be consequences.

Back during the Grand Calamity, a similar phenomenon had been witnessed when elves made contact with a Dimensional Cornerstone. The Holy Church's opinion was that this was a result of the restraints malfunctioning due to a

forceful entry. Still, even if it looked different from intended, its nature remained the same.

If we dived into the sphere, we would find ourselves in another world. Seeing how large it was, it would be entirely possible for us to fly in while riding the dragons. However, we'd decided beforehand to dismount before entering. We expected it to be dangerous, after all.

"There they are..." I muttered as the scenery unfolded exactly as had been described to me.

Something bubbled up from the black sphere's surface.

"Guardian giants!"

They were inorganic giants with a black luster to them. Their bodies were around three meters taller than the trees around them. They didn't have anything resembling human heads. A rough simulacrum of an eye was carved into each of them. They looked somewhat similar to the spirits that elves employed. Not that they had any of a spirit's charms. They looked like crude and dangerous weapons.

That stood to reason; this was the defense mechanism left behind by the first savior, meant to eliminate those who would try to illegally enter the world leading to the Dimensional Cornerstones. It was a little different from what Harrison had told me, but this was definitely what he'd been referring to. They were extremely dangerous. Records stated that back when an elite force of a hundred elves had tried to break into that world, over half of them had died in the battle with the guardian giants. Maybe the giants somewhat resembling spirits was an effect of the elves having rewritten the World View.

Guardian giants surfaced from every point of the black sphere. If we didn't defeat them, we wouldn't be able to step into the other world.

"Thank you. You can back away now," I said to the dragon.

We landed on the ground, crushing trees and shrubbery on the way, then dismounted. Following us, the exploration team members got off their rides too.

"To me!" Nakajima roared.

Everyone rushed to Nakajima's side within moments.

"Oh, they're really here. Thanks for the hard work," Nakajima said to me with a smile.

"Yeah. The rest is up to you," I replied.

We couldn't see beyond the trees, but the guardian giants had noticed us too, and were coming our way. These guardians had once defeated elves, but every exploration team member had the power of a savior. When they were all being coordinated by a solid leader, this wasn't much of a foe for them. Everything up to this point had gone to plan. However, just as that thought came to mind...

"What...?"

We suddenly heard many dragons crying into the sky. It was the dragons of Draconia who'd brought us here. We'd told them to back off, so their voices resounded from far away. It was as if they'd discovered something and were screaming in shock and sorrow. We all looked up on instinct, and through the canopy of trees, we saw the source of their anguished cries.

"No way..." Lobivia muttered.

An enormous dragon, over fifty meters tall, was flying through the sky—a corpse, spurred on by some unseen force. Its sturdy carapace was a shattered mess, the meat beneath rotting. There were places where we could even see its bones. The reason it was capable of flight in such a state was because its body was being stirred into motion not by the warmth of life, but by pure hatred.

There was no way we could mistake its magnificence for anything else. This was the elder of Draconia, the carapace wyrm Malvina—or what was left of her. To Lobivia and all the dragons of Draconia, she was a great mother. The shock this dealt them was unfathomable. The zombie dragon was plunging toward the sphere from the opposite side. Taking a closer look, it appeared that what could only be called an army of monsters was riding on its back.

"It can't be... My king...?!"

I heard Berta yelling in astonishment. The zombie dragon was too far away for us to spot that slender boy, but there was no doubt that this army was under Kudou's control.

“Why is Kudou all the way out here...?” I said, before feeling a shiver run down my spine. That was because I remembered Kudou’s wish.

“The world that made me go through this hell is better off destroyed. That’s what I prayed for.”

Wasn’t this situation the perfect opportunity to fulfill that wish? Kudou had learned of the truth behind this world yesterday through Berta. At that point, it hadn’t been much of a problem. The situation was different now because of Jinguuji’s actions. The storage vault for the Dimensional Cornerstones—the very pillars of this world—had been revealed as a result of the Dimension Door being stolen. There was now a clear path to the world’s end. Was that why Kudou was making a move? Now that the door was open, he began his invasion, all to fulfill his life’s desire.

In the next instant, a resentful roar struck my ears and chilled my spine. With the Demon King’s army on her back, the dead dragon roared. The cry of the dragon who’d been driven mad by anger and hatred shook me to the core. There were things that could be conveyed without putting them into words.

“Unforgivable. Unforgivable. I’ll never forgive them. Make up for my children’s deaths. Know of my fury.”

Vengeance cried out, fueled by a maddening bloodlust for the one responsible. Her violent emotions spurred her body to move faster, and the zombie dragon plunged toward the Dimension Door. Countless heat rays shot out to intercept her.

The guardian giants had directed their “eyes” upward, firing intense heat at the zombie dragon. This was the reason we’d chosen not to charge in while riding the dragons. Every ray had the power of grade 3 magic. If we’d moved in recklessly, we would’ve suffered major casualties.

However, the situation had changed since the Dimension Door’s manifestation. Many guardian giants had already moved to intercept us. This meant there were fewer giants to deal with the zombie dragon on the opposite side. What’s more, Malvina’s tremendous body and the broken carapace covering her provided overwhelming defense. Having lost her sense of pain in death, she charged without any hesitation.

“It broke through...!”

Someone shouted just as the giant dragon slammed into the Dimension Door. A fair number of the guardian giants were crushed under the weight of the impact. The zombie dragon kept up its momentum and vanished into the black sphere.



The spectacle unfolding before my eyes rendered me speechless. The zombie dragon had broken into the other world, taking an entire army of monsters on its back. The Demon King had succeeded in crossing the Dimension Door.

“He beat us to the punch,” someone muttered, bringing me back to my senses. It was Nakajima, a daring smile on his face. “I don’t know what he’s planning, but I guess the Lord of Darkness is making a move. We can’t go falling behind now.”

He sounded vexed, but there was no bitterness behind his words. On the contrary, he seemed excited.

“We have one more person to stop! Everyone, give it your all!”

He would overcome any obstacle. He would overturn any unreasonable event. If he was on the verge of defeat, he would turn the tide. He marched forward with an indomitable will and unfathomable power. This was the leader of the exploration team, Nakajima Kojirou.

Frozen by the unexpected development, the exploration team members quickly regained their energy. In contrast, I was spurred into action for an entirely different reason. Nakajima Kojirou was the leader of the exploration team, not mine. I had the responsibility to lead my own group. I had something I had to do first.

“Lobivia! We’re going after them!” I yelled, grabbing Lobivia by the shoulders and staring into her eyes.

“T-Takahiro...” she responded in a daze.

“We already knew Malvina had turned into an undead monster,” I said. “We didn’t expect her to become Kudou’s servant, but that doesn’t change what has

to be done. We have to grant her a peaceful sleep. Am I wrong?"

It was a shock for her to appear so suddenly. Just imagining what must have gone through the little dragon's mind when she saw the tragic state of her mother's corpse made me want to hug her. But I knew how strong Lobivia was. Despite her age, she had the strength of heart to fight for what was dear to her. Also, even though Malvina had died with their relationship still in a rocky state, Lobivia loved her mother. There was no way she was going to remain frozen here. Remembering what her duty was, a powerful will flared within her eyes.

"Kudou's destination is the same as ours," I said, letting go of her shoulders. "We're going after him."

"Yeah... We'll definitely catch up," Lobivia responded with a nod.

I looked around me. There was one more person I had to talk to.

"Majima Takahiro..." Berta looked at me, her tail sadly dangling to the ground.

"There's no need to feel guilty," I said. "You aren't responsible for his deeds."

"But..."

"Remember what you said? You want Kudou to choose his own path. So, you don't have time to despair."

For better or worse, Kudou's existence was the only thing that roused Berta into action. She was such an honest soul. She remained indecisive for a moment, but ultimately nodded.

"Thank you. And sorry," Berta said.

The latter half was directed at Lobivia, but the little dragon flapped her wings and huffed as if to tell her not to worry about it. It looked like these two were fine now. Once I confirmed this, I noticed that Nakajima was smiling at me.

"Looks like you're fine now," he said.

"Yes. Thanks for waiting. Let's go."

"Right. Leave your safety on the way there up to me. Until we break into the other world, we'll go with me and Majima at the front just as planned. Everyone

else protect the sides and rear. Kouzu, can I leave supporting the rear to you guys?”

“Understood,” Kouzu answered.

His group was considered separate from the exploration team. This was a joint operation between the exploration team, the group of visitors affiliated with the church, and my group. It was important for all of us to play our roles to prevent the end of the world.

“Let’s go!” Nakajima roared.

The exploration team charged forward with terrifying speed. They were probably holding back so that they could keep it up for a long-distance run, but they were still nearly as fast as I could go at full speed. If I tried to keep up on my own, I’d run out of breath quickly. I’d closed the gap between us considerably compared to when I first came to this world, but I still couldn’t hold a candle to any of them in terms of individual strength.

That didn’t really matter here, of course. It wasn’t my job to fight this time. I straddled Berta’s back alongside Lobivia and Ayame. Seeing how we were working with the exploration team, Berta kept her true form hidden, so she wasn’t exhibiting her full strength. The idea was to have Lobivia and Ayame make up for that.

What’s more, Lily and Shiran, who were both contestants for being my strongest servant, reinforced our flanks. Even if several members of the exploration team attacked us, we wouldn’t go down easily.

Having formed up perfectly, we charged through the forest toward the Dimension Door. Dozens of guardian giants blocked our path. These were no normal monsters. Every single one of them possessed the strength of a rare monster, or maybe even more. The greatest threat was those heat rays used in unison. We were capable of close-quarters combat, so the idea had come up to drag things into a melee to prevent them from using their heat rays out of concern for friendly fire, but it turned out they couldn’t damage each other like that, so a melee would actually be more dangerous for us.

It was a boon to have received such information from the Holy Church beforehand, but dealing with that many giants at the same time was still a

difficult proposition. In a head-on fight, even the cheaters of the exploration team would end up being stalled, but nobody slowed their charge. There was no need to.

“Majima finished his job splendidly. Now it’s time to do ours!” Nakajima smiled ferociously and raised his hand. A terrifying amount of mana gushed out of his palm, turning into a glowing sword in the blink of an eye. “Take one shortsword. Go to hell.”

Nakajima Kojirou’s Sword of Light was the ability to quite literally create swords made of light. However, these swords didn’t all possess the same power. Their strength was equivalent to the amount of time he’d used to charge them with mana. Given no preparation, a dagger. One day’s worth, a shortsword. Ten days, a greatsword. Naturally, the swords got stronger and stronger with size. They had plenty of destructive potential when wielded like blades, but their full potential could be unleashed all at once.

“Haaaah!”

Nakajima yelled with spirit and undid the bonds of his shortsword, transforming it into a blinding torrent of light. This was the strike of a savior. By the time the light vanished, a path of ground rubble and wood chips was now open, leading to the Dimension Door.

“That many with one strike...”

I’d been informed of this beforehand, but witnessing it for myself was a shock.

“I’ve gotta show my good side,” Nakajima said, turning an affable smile my way. “Well, with this, I’ve used *one* up, though.”

He didn’t have unlimited use of the Sword of Light. Wielding them like normal swords expended them little by little, and unleashing one like he had expended it entirely. According to how it’d been explained to me, it was possible to stockpile swords. At most, he could store thirty shortswords or five greatswords. In other words, he had thirty shots maximum. What’s more, he was refraining from attacking with the more powerful greatswords, which he had far fewer of.

I already knew this and didn't give it much thought normally, but I was just a little jealous. If I had that much power, I'd be able to protect the others no matter what happened. I shook off such thoughts as a momentary lapse of judgment and focused on the black sphere ahead of me.

Our three groups charged into the other world.

Chapter 10: Putting the Clues Together

Katou Mana immediately started to make a move after seeing Majima Takahiro off and returning to her room. Her fellow travelers—Aker's delegation, the Alliance Knights, the residents of Draconia who'd stayed behind, Kaneki Mikihiro, and Shimazu Yui—hadn't come to the capital. The only others inside the room were Rose, Gerbera, and Iino Yuna.

"Are you listening, Gerbera? Be careful not to break anything," Rose said, attaching some kind of magic bag to Gerbera's waist.

"You don't need to tell me that."

Rose stared up at Gerbera's beautiful face. Rose wasn't actually using her eyes to see, so this would normally be an unnecessary gesture. As she was now, her movements were indistinguishable from a human's.

"Oh, Gerbera, you're looking a little pale," Rose said.

"Hrm? No, I don't think I..." Gerbera started, then furrowed her brow. "Hrm? Hmmm? Now that you mention it, my body feels a little strange. I don't really get it."

"How do you not understand?" Rose asked. "Actually, how did you not notice until I mentioned it?"

"I've never been in poor health," Gerbera said. "Hmm. Thinking back on it, I found it a little hard to move during the battle in that labyrinth too. What can it be? I don't believe I have some manner of disease."

"A lot has happened lately," Rose said. "I doubt you've gotten sick, but you may be more exhausted than you think. Unlike me, you do have an organic body. You should be more careful with your health."

It was charming to watch Gerbera obliviously endure Rose's gentle, considerate admonishment. Nevertheless, now wasn't the time for that.

"Can I say something?"

“What’s the matter, Mana?” Rose asked, straightening herself back up and turning to face Katou Mana.

“I think it’s about time to start making a move,” Mana said.

“A move...you say?” Rose repeated, cocking her head curiously. “I believe the plan was to remain as a group like this until the others return, right?”

“Of course, that part hasn’t changed,” Mana confirmed. Even though they judged that they weren’t in any particular danger here, they weren’t going to go out of their way to show any enemies an opening. “I want all of us to move together. We should be doing what we can instead of just waiting for the others. I need to ask everyone to come along, though.”

“I see,” Rose said. “I don’t mind.”

“Neither do I,” Iino Yuna agreed. “I’m your guard, after all.”

She was still doing her duty while keeping pressure on her wounded leg. This could be interpreted as a facet of her serious personality, but she also seemed fretful to do anything of use. Katou Mana was grateful either way. Even without her greatest weapon, Iino Yuna still possessed the strength to match a warrior. The title of strongest hand-to-hand combatant in the exploration team wasn’t just for show.

“Mm. I don’t mind either,” Gerbera said, her lips curving into a smile. “So what are you scheming this time, Katou?”

“Don’t make it sound like I’m the bad guy. What kind of person do you think I am?” Mana complained, narrowing her eyes before answering the question. “I’m thinking of visiting Harrison. There’s something I want to ask him.”

The three others looked at her in shock.

“I didn’t expect to hear his name,” Gerbera commented. “But isn’t he bedridden?”

This was a state of emergency that involved the potential end of the world, so he’d gone out to give directions to the pursuit force. However, by all rights, he was on his deathbed. He wasn’t in a state to receive guests.

“Is there any reason for me to care about Harrison’s condition?” Mana asked,

smiling.

“R-Right...” Gerrea said, her expression shifting uneasily at how pretty Katou Mana’s smile was.

“I have a proper reason for visiting,” Mana added. “There’s something I want to ask. Some time has passed since everyone left on the chase, so he should be done giving orders to the knights by now. I’m sure he’s left everything else to Sir Gordon and is getting some rest. If he’s not accepting guests, nobody will get in the way, so this might actually be convenient.”

“O-Oh. That’s good. So you’re not just harassing him,” Gerbera muttered.

“Of course not. I just don’t feel the need to be considerate,” Mana reiterated. “Well, I won’t deny that I’m still angry at him.”

Katou Mana sighed to expel the heat of the emotions building up within her. Seeing her like that, Rose smiled. She knew her best friend well. It was clear that Katou Mana’s compassion was deep, unexpectedly so from the point of view of those who feared her. That said, at the same time, she was prepared to cut loose all emotions and reason if it was necessary. That was precisely why she shut her feelings deep down inside and was considering visiting Harrison.

“If you say so, Mana, then it must be necessary,” Rose said. “Then shall we get moving right away?”

There was no time like the present. Just as Rose made that suggestion, Gerbera’s brow twitched. Her red eyes turned to the door. A few seconds later, a knock came from it. They had a guest, an unexpected one at that.

“Aoi?”

“H-Hi, Mana.”

With an awkward expression, the exploration team’s Stalwart Snow White, Mitarai Aoi, stepped into the room with unreliable steps. Nobody was accompanying her. Katou Mana could tell by her behavior that Mitarai Aoi was here to visit her.

Katou Mana hadn’t expected this development. She got her thoughts moving to try and figure out what this was about. The last time she’d seen this girl was

during the meeting with the exploration team. At the time, Mitarai Aoi had criticized Majima Takahiro for having relationships with the women around him and had used that as a reason to object to his joining the exploration team. This wasn't just to annoy him, of course. She'd done it purely out of consideration for her friend.

However, that same friend hadn't wanted that at all. To protect her loved one's position, she'd had no choice but to take on an attitude that had practically severed all relations with this girl. She was aware that this had been merciless of her and was something she'd never displayed back in their own world. Mitarai Aoi had been quite clearly shocked at the time. That was why it was unexpected for her to come to see her like this.

"U-Um... I'm here...to apologize..."

Mitarai Aoi timidly cut to the chase. There was clear fear in her voice. She was terrified that her friend hated her now. No matter how strong her muscles were now thanks to her power as a visitor, this was one thing she couldn't do anything about. The one here wasn't the savior known as the Stalwart Snow White. She was just a girl who'd mustered the courage to come here. Katou Mana felt that courage should be acknowledged, even if her perception of this situation was a little skewed.

"Mana, you don't really see Majima-senpai that way, right?" Aoi said. "And yet, I jumped to conclusions and made a huge fuss..."

Katou Mana was speechless.

"I-I heard you got caught in some kinda incident," Aoi continued. "It happened right after we fought, so I really regretted it. I kept asking myself why I did such a thing. But I'm so glad you're okay."

There really was something off about what she was saying, but at the very least, she was being sincere. During the battle the other day, she'd participated in the Alliance Knights' rescue alongside Shiran and Kei. This had been for the sake of lending Katou Mana a hand. Even back when she'd criticized Majima Takahiro, it had been out of genuine concern for her friend. As for why she would do such things, it was extremely natural when going by the sensibilities of their old world.

The cause of this disconnect—the one who’d changed—was in fact Katou Mana. She knew this too. That was why she hesitated to coldly turn this girl away on the spot. She couldn’t deny that their old friendship played a part in this.

Before she knew it, Katou Mana’s eyes had naturally drifted elsewhere. She looked past Iino Yuna and right at Rose, who was watching how things progressed attentively. Rose smiled humbly, her expression so gentle one would never think it was a fabrication, then nodded. The reason she wasn’t saying anything was because she was leaving everything to Katou Mana. Understanding that, Mana felt her expression loosen up. Having received courage from her best friend, she turned once more to the girl who’d once been her friend.

“Sorry, Mana, I...”

“No, it’s fine, Aoi,” Mana said, shaking her head. “I mean, I made it all up, so there’s no need for you to apologize to me.”

“Huh...?”

“I mean, what I said back then was all a lie.”

“Wuh...?”

Mitarai Aoi’s eyes turned to saucers.

“About me not being in love with Majima-senpai,” Mana explained clearly.

She figured she should talk about her feelings for that boy, and about who she was now.

“Please hear me out, Aoi,” Mana continued. “There’s a big gap in understanding between us. I doubt you’ve noticed, though.”

Mitarai Aoi’s behavior was definitely skewed, but she wasn’t aware of it. That was why it was important to correct that point first, even if it meant resetting their relationship to zero.

“Teleporting to this world with everyone from school and having lived that way ever since, I believe you see this as an extension of your school life,” Mana started. “But that isn’t the case for me. Because of the Colony’s destruction,

everything I had was set back to nothing.”

“Mana...”

“So, I’m sorry. To me, that world is no more than the past now.”

After a short while, realizing what she meant, Mitarai Aoi bit her lip. “By the past...you mean me too?”

“Yes.”

This should’ve been made clear from the very beginning. Her failure to do so had been an error in judgment, as well as a sign of weakness. That said, their relationship was now back to the starting line. It was all over... Not that it would really end that way.

“That’s why I was happy to get along with you again,” Mana said. “It’s pretty selfish of me to say so, though.”

Being a thing of the past didn’t mean she thought of it as inconsequential. This girl had been such a dear friend that Katou Mana had made such an uncharacteristic mistake, after all.

“Huh? Wuh? Mana? What does that mean?”

“You don’t necessarily have to get along with an old friend, right?” Mana elaborated. “I’m with Majima-senpai, and you’re part of the exploration team. Naturally, if you acknowledge me as I am now and still want to be friends, then that’s another thing entirely.”

If she thought of her as the same friend she’d been before, it would only get more complicated. For example, if somebody met a friend from ten years ago, their environment and circumstances could be completely different, and their sense of values could have changed. Nevertheless, it was possible for them to rekindle that friendship.

“How about it?” Mana said, holding out her hand.

Mitarai Aoi didn’t seem to really understand. Still, she knew what this gesture meant.

“S-Sorry, Mana,” she said. “I’m dumb. Can I still consider us friends?”

“No,” Mana answered, shaking her head. “I’m saying we can become friends once more. If you wish to be friends with who I am now, that is.”

After explaining it as simply as she could, it seemed Mitarai Aoi finally began to catch on. Her expression regained its usual cheeriness. It was true, she wasn’t very smart, but she wasn’t a hopeless idiot either. She made mistakes, spun her wheels, and caused trouble. But she also apologized honestly, repented, and gave things proper thought when they were explained to her. That was exactly why Katou Mana had once been close to her.

“Aaah, I kinda get it,” Aoi muttered. “Mana, a whole lot has happened to you since then, huh? That’s what you mean by going back to nothing. But you came this far...with Majima-senpai. You found something precious by doing so. I can’t possibly become your friend if I refuse to acknowledge that.”

She should’ve done this from the very beginning. Mitarai Aoi timidly took her hand, and once she saw that Katou Mana wasn’t going to shake her off, she clung to her with both hands.

“Mana, I’m so sorry,” she said with a weak and pitiful smile.

“I’m sorry too,” Katou Mana replied, returning a smile of her own.

It was just like those long-gone days. Their circumstances were so different now, but they were able to smile at each other just like they had before.



Rose and Gerbera watched the heartwarming scene play out.

“That settles things, then,” Gerbera said.

“Yes, it does,” Rose agreed.

By overcoming this break in relations, Rose’s best friend had regained what had once been dear to her. Rose was happy for them from the bottom of her heart. She’d been sure that things would go well. She knew Katou Mana better than anyone, after all. And she knew what came next too.

“All that’s left is to take clear responsibility,” Rose added.

“What did you say?” Gerbera said, when...

“Ah.” Katou Mana raised her voice as if suddenly remembering something.

Mitarai Aoi made a curious look, wondering what it was, when Katou Mana suddenly squeezed both her hands. That squeezing quickly turned to a firm grip. It was as if she was making sure Mitarai Aoi couldn't get away.

“I forgot to mention one thing,” Mana said, her beautiful smile implying something entirely different now.

“Hwuh?”

“It's fine and all that you apologized to me, but do make sure to apologize properly to Majima-senpai too, okay?”



This was this. That was that. Watching it from the sidelines, Gerbera shrieked in fear. One had to take clear responsibility for what they'd done. This was Katou Mana's nature, and it was amplified whenever it came to the boy she loved.

"You're seriously, *seriously* pissed?!" Mitarai Aoi screamed fearfully as all the color drained from her face.



Immediately after reconciling with Mitarai Aoi, Katou Mana went on the move.

"Huh? Mana, you're gonna go see Sir Harrison? You'll be glad to have an escort on the way? Mm, I'll go too. Leave it to me."

And just like that, she had one more traveling companion. Mitarai Aoi was exceedingly reassuring to have along. Despite her recent behavior, she was the Stalwart Snow White, one of the foremost combatants in the exploration team.

"Hee hee, I'll do my best to make up for Yuna-senpai being injured too!"

"Yes... Right. I'll be relying on you," Iino Yuna said, having far less energy by contrast.

"What's up, Yuna-senpai?" Aoi asked.

"It's nothing. I was just thinking about how I couldn't do anything earlier."

"You don't gotta worry about that," Aoi said. "That was my problem and all."

"*Our* problem, Aoi," Mana corrected. "I'll also be relying on you."

"Relax," Aoi said with a tremendous smile. "Even if Jinguuji-senpai comes at you, I'll beat him to a pulp."

Jinguuji Tomoya had traveled to another world, so there was no way he would show up, but there was no point in saying that when she was so motivated. The girls left the room and made their way toward Harrison.

"Waaah?! Mana, you confessed to Majima-senpai? Huh? Really? B-But you seem to really get along with Rose and Gerbera too?"

"I don't see why that should bother us?" Gerbera chimed in.

“I mean, I’ve been supporting Rose’s love this whole time,” Mana said.

“I’ve also been rooting for Mana’s love,” Rose added.

“Huh? Wah? What does that mean?”

Because of her animosity toward their master, Mitarai Aoi hadn’t had many interactions with his servants. However, perhaps due to a change in perception, she was eager to talk with them while on the move.

“Now that I think of it, Ishida isn’t around,” Mana commented. “How rare. He’s usually always with you, Aoi.”

“Aah, Tetsuo went after those Dimensional Cornerstone things.”

Ishida Tetsuo was a nicknamed cheater of the exploration team and Mitarai Aoi’s childhood friend. They spent enough time together that his absence seemed an aberration.

“He’s the Indomitable Will and all,” Aoi continued. “I didn’t go along because of this thing with you.”

“All we’ve been talking about is me and Senpai, but what about your side of things?” Mana asked.

“With Tetsuo? Ha ha. Nothing at all. We’re like siblings. I’ve gotta look out for him as his big sis, though.”

“Is that so...? Poor Ishida...”

“Hm? What’s that mean?”

So they kept chatting as they made their way to Harrison’s room.

“Oh yeah, Mana,” Aoi said. “When we left the room, you asked the knight there to let Sir Harrison know that we were on the way. What’d you mean by ‘If you won’t allow it, I’ll go wild’ at the end there?”

“Insurance in case of the unlikely,” Mana answered. “That said, it was just a bit of a joke. Don’t worry about it.”

It hadn’t come across as a joke at all, but they’d gotten permission. Upon arriving at their destination, the knight guarding the way let them through.

“Okay, take care!”

Mitarai Aoi hadn't been informed about the truth of this world, so she couldn't participate in these talks. Katou Mana felt bad for making her wait and had told her that she could leave, but Mitarai Aoi insisted on being a proper escort and waited outside the room. She puffed herself up and stood next to the door, getting a bewildered look from the knight who was also standing guard. She seemed satisfied with this role, so Katou Mana let her be. The peaceful atmosphere only lasted until they entered the room, though. Hazel eyes stared at them as they came through the door.

"What did you want to talk about?" Harrison asked.

He was covered in bandages and lying down in bed. He'd forced himself to get things ready for the operation to chase down Jinguuji, and his exertions had drained all the color from his features. His eyes were sunken and he looked practically on the verge of death. Nevertheless, his sense of duty had driven him to accept this meeting.

"Regarding the Dimensional Cornerstones, of course," Mana said. Despite the heavy atmosphere, she didn't falter. "There's something I want to ask you. You're going to answer me."

"If it has to do with a threat to this world, then I won't refuse."

"Then let me go straight to the point. I want to know how the storage vault's location was identified. Do you have any ideas?"

"Like I thought..." Harrison sighed. He'd apparently somewhat expected such an inquiry. "I've been asking the same question."

"Meaning, at the very least, that situation wasn't one where it could've been identified."

"Of course," Harrison declared. He was certain of it. "The only ones who knew the whole truth about the Dimensional Cornerstones were Lord Gerd and I. Naturally, the same went for the storage vault's location."

"What about the knights who guard it?"

"They only knew that the Dimensional Cornerstones possess the power to create other worlds. They weren't told about the storage vault. It was also impossible for them to identify its existence on their own. The path to that

world only opens when a Dimensional Cornerstone is used on the Dimension Door. If you go through that door without knowing anything, it leads to a plain room with nothing in it.”

“Meaning it was kept strictly confidential.”

“Exactly. That’s why I find this inexplicable too. How did such sensitive information get leaked...?”

“Isn’t it possible that nothing leaked at all?” Katou Mana asked.

“What...?” Harrison gave her a dubious look.

“It’s easier to consider the possibility that someone discovered it without hearing a secret that nobody knew. In truth, Majima-senpai was capable of sensing it, right? Naturally, that’s something he can only do because of his contract with the Misty Lodge Salvia, a being capable of creating worlds.”

“You’re implying another being like the Misty Lodge exists?”

“Not necessarily. Salvia really is an exception among exceptions. However...I want to know if there are other ways of finding out about the truth of this world.” Katou Mana’s tone remained sincere. “Majima-senpai is with the exploration team chasing Jinguuji Tomoya. I’m sure he’ll succeed and stop him. So, we must identify who instigated Jinguuji Tomoya. If we don’t...the fundamental problem will remain unresolved.”

“To protect the world, you mean...” Harrison closed his eyes.

“Does the Holy Church possess any knowledge about that kind of being?”

“As far as I know, it doesn’t...” After thinking it over for a while, Harrison opened his eyes. “But the same might not apply to Lord Gerd.”

“Archbishop Gerd?”

“Yes. He was the one to tell me about the truth of this world. He only taught me what I needed to know to fulfill my duty, but Lord Gerd was privy to secrets that he never shared with me.”

“ ... ”

Archbishop Gerd was dead, meaning his knowledge was lost.

“No.” Reading her intent, Harrison shook his head. “It’s not entirely gone. Lord Gerd left behind his knowledge just in case the worst came to be.”

“Meaning there’s something in writing?”

“Of course. We couldn’t allow all those who knew the truth to vanish due to some unforeseen accident, after all.” Harrison nodded. “The reason the Holy Church didn’t know about the truth until the Grand Calamity was that knowledge inherited from the first savior had been lost over the ages. In all likelihood, during the dawn of the church before it had any real power, monster attacks or the like wiped out such knowledge. The knowledge we now possess regarding the truth of this world has been reconstructed over the last eight hundred years. We couldn’t allow the same mistake to be repeated.”

“Meaning Gerd has some kind of insurance?”

“Yes. He left behind a will in case anything happened to him. There should be a safe in his mansion that contains all documents related to the truth of this world. I’ve been entrusted with the key. The safe has been passed down in the Kruger family for generations, so it’s made to be impossible to open so long as Lord Gerd is alive. There might be some kind of clue inside.”

Harrison came to a quick decision.

“Let’s go to Lord Gerd’s mansion,” he said. “I have connections with the Kruger family. They should have been given detailed instructions in case this happened. If we show his will, we shouldn’t have any problems getting through.”

“You’ll go personally?” Mana asked.

“Of course,” Harrison answered. Despite being deathly pale, there was clear determination in his eyes. “There’s no way I’ll let Lord Gerd’s sacrifice go to waste.”

Chapter 11: Clearing a World

The exploration team let out a war cry as we charged into the black sphere. On the other side of the Dimension Door was a rocky mountain. Looking up, a cloudy sky hung over us, while whitish pebbles scattered about beneath our feet.

“You’re kidding me...” a boy muttered not too far away from me.

It was Kubota Yousuke, nicknamed the Multiplex. I’d met him during that meeting in the capital. He looked dumbfounded by the scenery. I felt the same way. We had been transported to somewhere strange, unfamiliar. That said, we hadn’t experienced the unique sensation of teleportation. The door had simply led to a different place—a different world.

This was a fabricated world. I was surprised by how different it was from the one we’d been teleported to the other day, but it looked like this was definitely where our target had gone. The exploration team was shocked by the sight too—and in the next instant, they all raised their voices in excitement.

“Oooh! It’s my first time feeling like I’m in another world in a good while!”

“We’ve gotten used to magic and all, so this is really refreshing.”

“This really hypes me up!”

It was like there was no tension among them. They looked as though they could easily handle anything while still seeming unreliable. Either way, the one leading the group was extremely capable. No matter how easily carried away they were, there was no problem so long as he properly led them. Even though there was curiosity in his eyes when faced with this unknown world, Nakajima retained his composure.

“Things are going smoothly so far,” he said to me. “Think you can grasp this world?”

“I’ll try,” I said.

Still mounted on Berta, I focused my senses on the Misty Lodge. As expected, connecting my senses to this world went very well. My ability to encroach on, interfere with, and take control of other worlds had definitely improved.

“I can feel and understand it,” I said. “I’m fairly certain I can guide us.”

“Sounds good.”

Nakajima gave me a ferocious smile. Even after coming to this inexplicable world, he possessed the strength to remain unwavering.

“Hm? What’s up?” he asked as I stared at him.

“It’s nothing serious...”

“That just makes me more curious.”

“I just thought it’d be nice if I could become a leader like you.”

To always have composure, to not need to worry about anything, to be capable of solving any problems, and have the power to save everyone in sight. In a sense, that type of leader was an ideal. I’d aspired to such heights before too. But his next words caught me off guard.

“Is that so? I’m the one who’s jealous of you, though.”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t I tell you before? I’m your fan.” Nakajima looked sincere. “Besides, you say that, but you’re not actually jealous, right? Well, I’m sure you envy me, but you’re also fine with who you are. Am I wrong?”

“That’s...”

He did have a point. I didn’t have the strength or charisma to protect everyone on my own. Still, I had companions who accepted me for who I was. That was more than enough for me to be satisfied. That said, if I were as strong as Nakajima, I’d be able to protect my companions no matter what, so it was still true that I envied him.

“Leader,” Kubota said. “Leave the chitchat at that.”

“Fine, fine. So, Majima? How dangerous does it look? What should we be keeping an eye out for?”

I also changed gears. Naturally, even during our conversation, I'd been obtaining a greater comprehension of the fabricated world.

"It looks like there's another Dimension Door inside this world," I said. "Once we make it through three of them, we'll be at our destination. Normally, you'd use a Dimensional Cornerstone to find the trail to the door...but I already have an idea of the layout here. We'll take the shortest route. I've also neutralized the traps."

Nakajima gave me a serious look, then burst into laughter.

"Ha ha! Oh man, and you said *you're* jealous of *me*, but here you are practically clearing this world solo!"

In the sense of removing the majority of obstacles, he was largely correct. I hadn't removed them all, though.

"I can't neutralize the guardian giants," I added. "They're not part of the world itself. Sorry."

"You don't gotta apologize," Kubota said. "We can't just sit on our asses and have you do all the work."

"Speed is of the utmost importance," I said. "Please take care of any battles on the way. First, we'll follow this path. I'll let you know which way to go whenever we reach a fork."

"Got it." Nakajima nodded, then turned to the other members of the exploration team. "Okay then, we're charging with Majima at the center of our formation. Yousuke, you guard Majima. You're the best at protecting people. Tetsuo, you're in the front with me. It's gonna be a long run, so bear with it, okay? The rest of you, I'll leave it to your own judgment. Asahi, you guys handle the rear just as you have been."

Some nodded, some yelled, and some raised a hand to answer. They all agreed with his plan. Even as that went on, the guardian giants scattered throughout this world began converging on us. Watching this unfold, Nakajima raised his voice.

"Let's break through!"



The world bared its fangs at any who entered improperly. Of course, it would be a problem to make it completely impossible to get through. If the proper means to enter this world was ever lost, nobody would be able to access the Dimensional Cornerstones. That would cause trouble of its own. Thus, the first savior had likely adjusted the difficulty of getting through here very intentionally. To be specific, it was set up so that a savior accompanied by many knights would be able to fight their way through. It wasn't impossible, just an imposing challenge. It could be done so long as a visitor cooperated with local forces. However, the first savior hadn't predicted this situation.

"Ha ha! Eat this!"

"Erk! You stole mine!"

"Heh heh! That's three! Aren't I in the lead now?"

"Our leader's got that spot."

"He doesn't count. Hup, that's three for me too."

Trails zigged and zagged through the rocky mountains. The path wasn't all that wide and there were boulders blocking our sight all over the place. The guardian giants protecting this world made use of the geography to get in our way, suddenly appearing from the shadows to attack us. Normally, anyone coming through there would have to do so very carefully. However, this group didn't care about that at all. They routed the giants attacking us one after the other. Protected in the center of the formation, I couldn't help but gulp at the extent of their strength.

Warriors all possessed the same enhanced strength and preternatural physical aptitude. They lacked versatility and diversity in their skill set. However, in contrast, when it came to combat, their ability was extremely applicable. For example, they could use any weapon without training. They couldn't reach the level of a true master—there weren't many who would bother with tough training when they were capable of fighting without putting in the effort—but in this situation, that strength was put on full display.

To defeat the guardian giants, the Holy Church had provided us with large

heavy weapons capable of breaking through their tough bodies efficiently. Almost nobody here had used such weapons before, but as warriors, they were all capable of using them without any particular problems. Greatswords howled through the air, warhammers crashed down, and giant axes mowed all in their paths. This wasn't really much of a fight. They were just trampling everything in view. The group remained on the move without stopping, maintaining a fixed speed the whole time.

"We sure don't have anything to do."

"Seems so."

Lily and Shiran exchanged a short quip. Hearing that, Kubota, the one who'd been entrusted with guarding us, let out a hearty laugh.

"Ha ha! Of course not! You've got us with you!"

Strangely enough, there were two of him. If my eyes weren't playing tricks on me, this wasn't a twin or anything. One person had really become two. Kubota Yousuke's nickname was the Multiplex. Judging by the phenomenon I was witnessing, he had the ability to create a shadow or fake, but that wasn't quite right. There really were two Kubotas.

In his words, his "collision hitbox is halved and everything is rounded down." To put it very simply, if both of him weren't injured at the same time, he couldn't suffer damage. That made it seem like it'd be a problem on the offense, but also according to him, his "collision hurtbox is halved and everything is rounded up." What's more, there were only two of him now, but he could create up to five.

It made sense why he was a nicknamed cheater of the exploration team. That ability was total nonsense. It did come with the drawback of being unable to go too far away from his other selves, but in the sense of being difficult to hurt, let alone kill, the Multiplex excelled. He was strong when it came to a fight, but when it came to protecting others without having to worry about any damage to himself, he was as reassuring as an escort could get.

"Just kick back and relax. I'm not gonna let anything lay a single finger on you two."

Kubota clenched his fist tight in a show for Lily and Shiran. He didn't seem to have any ulterior motives, but he did seem to be the type to want to act cool in front of girls. His approach was a little wrong in this case, though.

"No, you don't really have to bother with us," Lily said.

"Please be sure to protect Takahiro," Shiran added.

"R-Right..."

Lily and Shiran were both capable of fighting a warrior by themselves. They didn't need guards. The one being protected here was, at most, me. In this respect, declaring he would properly accomplish his job would've gotten him more points with them.

"Yeah, I'll protect Majima," he said in a fluster, perhaps realizing this.

"Thank you," I said.

There was no point in dealing a blow to his pride. It seemed like it would be best to change the topic while we were at it. Fortunately, we had the leisure to chat.

"Anyway, they really are amazing," I commented. "Especially those two."

Everyone in the exploration team was strong, but two people in particular stood out at the very front—Nakajima and Ishida.

"Hmph!"

Ishida swung a huge hammer and sent a giant flying away. The giant appeared to shatter in midair; if it was lucky, all its limbs had broken and it was out of the fight. Setting aside his hearty offense, he didn't look like he specialized in defending himself. He took hits every now and then. I'd mistakenly thought that he was bad at defense, but that wasn't the case. He simply had no need to defend himself.

"Mrgh..."

Ishida showed no signs of blocking or dodging as a giant's arm slammed into his face. Even a cheater's sturdy body couldn't get away from such an attack unscathed. Blood spurted out while flesh and muscle tore open. It wouldn't be strange for his skull to be cracked. Regardless, Ishida ignored it entirely and

swung his hammer.

“Ooooooh!”

Struck by the counterattack, the giant flew off high into the sky. Ishida then continued forward as if nothing had happened. With each step, his wounds vanished, and after crudely wiping away the blood, there were no traces that any damage had been dealt. It was a bizarre sight. This was the Indomitable Will’s power. It gave him durability in a completely different way from Kubota’s Multiplex.

Ishida’s body was sturdy while also possessing regenerative abilities that surpassed those of monsters. I’d heard he could even regrow a limb if one was torn off. That didn’t mean he felt no pain, though. The willpower and nerve to maintain his composure after taking an attack head-on was natural to him.

“Ha ha! This is nowhere near enough to stop me!”

Nakajima was also terrifying. Carrying his namesake Sword of Light in one hand in the form of a shortsword, he cut down the giants standing in his path one after the other. Even without the tremendous destructive power of unleashing his swords, he was among the best of the best in hand-to-hand combat too. Unlike the warriors, this was because he’d acquired the proper skills for this. I’d heard he’d served as the president of the kendo club back in our world, but as a spectator, it looked entirely different. Even when faced with the particularly difficult-to-handle heat rays the guardian giants used, Nakajima had a practically perfect read on them.

“They’re overwhelming, aren’t they?” I commented.

“Ha ha, sure are,” Kubota happily agreed as if he was being praised too. “Ishida’s pretty crazy in his own way, but our leader’s on a totally different level. He’s just, like, different from us.”

“Different how?” I asked.

“Like he lived in a different world,” he answered without hesitation.

“Even the exploration team sees him that way?” I asked, finding myself staring at Kubota.

Kubota was a nicknamed cheater, much like Nakajima. It felt like this shouldn't have applied to him, but he still spoke without hesitation.

"Oh yeah, totally different. There ain't no point comparing us. I mean, that guy was different before we even came to this world. Grades, sports, whatever, he could do anything. I mean, school stuff is way too small to measure the full extent of what he can do. It's like he lives in an entirely different world. You get me?"

As a fellow third year, this was something he could say having observed Nakajima from nearby.

"Ever since coming here," Kubota continued, "after getting that crazy power that's way stronger than anyone else's, nobody questioned it for a second. If that guy doesn't get power, then who the hell else will? That's what we all thought. He was pretty amazing back then too."

"Back then?"

"Right after teleporting to this world, I mean. Those fucking monsters surged out of the woodwork to kill us. The home team never saw it, so I guess you don't got a feel for what it was like. It was seriously scary. Having the strength to fight and actually fighting are different, yeah? Like hell did anyone actually have fighting experience, so when we were faced with an army of monsters where fighting was a matter of life and death, everyone was shitting their pants. Aah, well, Iino and Todoroki managed just fine, but they're weird exceptions in their own way."

I didn't know about Todoroki Miya, but in Iino's case, this somewhat made sense. That girl would've suppressed her fear in her first battle, using her sense of justice to stand her ground and fight.

"Seeing the two of them steel themselves like that, I managed to fight too," Kubota continued. "Some other guys did too. I won't deny that I had cold feet, though. It's pathetic, but I was seriously scared. I thought it was the end. And right before I gave up...our leader appeared."

Kubota made a face like he was remembering something very important.

"The situation flipped on its head in a flash," he said. "It really was like

something out of a dream. I thought to myself: that's a hero."

"A hero...?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It sounds corny. But it's true, so whatever. Anyone who saw him would think the same. I'm sure we all felt that way. At the very least, all of the initial exploration team members who were there did. That's why the ones still following him are mostly the guys who were there for it."

It was very clear from Kubota's tone that he was being serious. Despite being embarrassed, he felt no shame admitting it. That was how important those events were to him. And that same event had also had a great influence on the formation of the exploration team. Thinking back on it, the fact that the exploration team had come together at all was pretty much a miracle.

After all, many of the exploration team members were very egoistic. Pretty much all of them had acquired power based on the conviction that they had to be special because they'd been sent to another world. Simply gathering a bunch of them together using charisma would have things falling apart in no time. The fact that they'd stayed together somehow or other was because, despite considering themselves the main character, they'd found more value in being beneath someone else. Nakajima proving that he had the qualities to fulfill that role in that initial ordeal had worked wonders in that regard.

"No matter what happens, I'm gonna follow that guy. I've already decided," Kubota muttered as he stared at Nakajima opening a path for the group at the front. He then turned to me. "That's why, seeing as he's recognized you, I'm sure you've gotta be an impressive guy yourself."

I didn't know what to say.

"I mean, you have in fact pretty much cleared this world solo," Kubota added. Seeing that I was too embarrassed to say anything back, he smiled. "Relax. It's our leader's command. I guarantee I'll keep you safe. Seriously." He then looked a little embarrassed but proud as he added, "By the name our leader gave me, the Multiplex, I swear it."

Around this time, a cave on the other side of the mountains came into sight. This was the door that continued to the next world.



Charging into the cave that served as a door, we found ourselves deep inside a forest. Judging by the mana in here, this was the Woodlands.

“No way, you’re kidding me,” Kubota said, repeating what he’d said when we entered the last world. He seemed awfully gloomy this time, though. “I got sick of this place after the Colony and the expedition.”

The same seemed to go for the other exploration team members. Many were grimacing. I understood how they felt. Actually, I’d spent the longest time in the Woodlands among us. I’d lived there after escaping the Colony, and Aker’s reclamation villages were also inside the Woodlands. The reason I didn’t feel dispirited by the sight was because I’d gotten past being fed up with it. It actually felt more like a part of my everyday life.

“Majima,” Nakajima said, coming back from the vanguard. He looked up at me, seeing how I was still seated atop Berta. “Think we’ll catch up with Tomoya’s group soon? If you can tell, then please let me know.”

“Jinguuji’s current location, you mean,” I replied. “Please wait a moment. We passed through the door, so I should be able to grasp the layout of this world too. I’ll take a look and find a path while I’m at it.”

“Got it. We’ll take a short breather, then.”

Given the time to act, I shifted my focus to connecting to this world. The resistance here was stronger than that of the last world. It took a bit to accomplish, but I succeeded in getting the information I needed. There were no paths through this forest. This wasn’t much of a problem considering the exploration team’s physical capabilities. I confirmed the optimal route to use and located all the traps on the way, neutralizing every last one. And as my consciousness approached the faraway door to the third world...

“Found him.”

For the first time on our chase, I found another human ahead of us. It was Jinguuji and his friends. I didn’t know what they looked like, but there was nobody else it could be. Above all else, they were with a dragon. That had to be the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya.

They were pretty close to the door to the next world, so we couldn't slow down. Still, we'd finally caught up to the point that our targets could be confirmed. Conveniently for us, Jinguuji and his friends had gotten torn apart by the traps and giants in here. They were scattered in small groups. At this rate, it'd be possible for us to catch up before they got to the next world.

"Huh...?"

After figuring all that out, I made a slight noise. I'd found someone else on the move aside from them.

"Kudou?"

Hearing me mutter, the wolf beneath me stiffened.

Chapter 12: Intruder in the Free-for-All

“Tomoya! Fuck! What the hell is going on?!”

One of the boys who’d infiltrated this world with Jinguuji Tomoya was cursing aloud while panting for breath. The group was in disarray. They’d somehow made it through the first world, and after crossing into the second, found themselves in a place similar to the Woodlands they’d once traversed as members of the expeditionary force. However, the danger in this forest was on a different level.

Due to poor visibility, they were frequently ambushed, so they weren’t permitted to relax their focus for a second. The guardian giants who surged at them one after the other were stronger and more numerous than normal monsters. What’s more, there were nasty traps hidden all over the place. In truth, while Nakajima Kojirou’s opening a path at the fore with his outstanding power played a part in the pursuit force rapidly closing in on their targets, Majima Takahiro’s using the Misty Lodge to neutralize all the traps played an even bigger one.

In contrast, Jinguuji Tomoya’s group was largely made up of warriors, who weren’t really the most cautious of people. As they made their way forward, they’d gotten wounded and fatigued. What hurt them above all else was the fact that Jinguuji Tomoya had exhausted himself before even opening the Dimension Door.

Normally, he was the type to treat his friends dearly, stand at the front in battle, encourage his allies, and keep a keen eye out for danger while proceeding carefully. During his time in the exploration team, he’d risen no further than being a member of the upper brass because of Nakajima Kojirou’s preeminent charisma. But by all rights, he’d had the qualities to become the exploration team’s leader.

However, now he remained transformed as a dragon, losing the majority of his conscious thoughts, wasting away in both mind and body. This was a result

of being forced to exhaust himself in the very last moment when faced with Archbishop Gerd Kruger's tenacity.

Nevertheless, their group had gotten far enough to see the fortress that served as the door to the third world. This made apparent the power of their solidarity to achieve their goal.

"We're all going back to our world."

"We're going back without losing one more life."

This group didn't have many members, but they all sympathized with Jinguuji Tomoya's ideals. They also shared his sense of loss. Every last one of them had left someone important behind in the Colony. The moment they'd learned of a failure they could never take back, the majority had fallen to despair. The one who'd gone around calling out to them was Jinguuji Tomoya.

"Let's all go back to our world together."

"Let's do anything we have to to pull that off."

"Let's do it so that no one else has to go through what we did. Lend me your strength."

Jinguuji Tomoya refused to see any value in anything in this world. He begrudged the world for stealing his lover from him. Human emotions contained many facets, though. On one hand, he refused to see value in this world. On the other, his care for his companions came from the heart. That was why those who shared his circumstances had answered his call.

"Tomoya! You go ahead!"

The boy cried as he wiped away the blood streaming down his face. Just a few minutes back, they'd gotten caught in a huge trap. The ground had split beneath them and a large number of guardian giants had swarmed out. This had split the group up. Jinguuji Tomoya and three of his friends were on one side of an army of giants, closer to the door to the next world. The boy and the three remaining others were on the opposite side of the giants.

"We'll catch up right away!"

"But...!"

“We’re all going back to our world together, right?! Go!”

The boy dared to launch an attack on the giants to prevent them from chasing Jinguuji Tomoya. He’d made sure to preserve his stamina and mana up to this point, but now he was going all out. The two others followed suit. Jinguuji Tomoya clenched his teeth, his dragon fangs creaking as his tail swept around. He headed for the next world.

“You guys are stuck with us!”

The three boys went wild so that the giants stayed where they were. They were surrounded by enemies, though. No matter how preposterous their strength was, there were too many to fight in an honest battle. If only they coordinated properly, but these boys hadn’t received such training. They were only capable of fighting as individuals. There was no way they could fend off attacks from all sides like that.

Nevertheless, for a short time, they stood firm and fought. If, for example, these were the visitors who’d caused the fake savior incidents, they would’ve been routed long ago and been crushed by the sheer number of enemies.

“Okay! That’s enough! Let’s run!”

After holding out for a few minutes, judging that these giants could no longer catch up to their friends, the boys decided to retreat. They were a little late, though. By this point, they were all far too exhausted.

“Gah?! ”

Having attacked the giant in front of him before making his retreat, the boy left himself open and was attacked by yet another giant. A blow from an enormous arm closed in next. He couldn’t get away from it.

“Aaaaaah?! ”

The boy screamed...and watched the giant get diagonally bisected.

“Huh...?”

He watched in astonishment as the giant’s body slid apart. Standing behind it was the fourth person who’d stayed behind.

“You okay?”

It was a man wearing a mask. He had a bizarre sword in one hand dangling by his side. That blade was what had cut the giant's sturdy body as if it were tofu.

"Y-You saved me..."

"Not really."

His reply was curt. The boy smiled wryly at this. This masked man was the one exception in the group. He hadn't lost something like the others. He was at most helping out. He safeguarded his identity, so he was treated as an outsider. That said, his role in this was no different from the others'.

"Hmph!"

The masked man didn't move as fast or with as much strength as the warriors. His sword was powerful, though—far too powerful. It was apparently a magic weapon that could cut through anything it touched. It possessed attributes similar to one of the exploration team's nicknamed cheaters, the Absolute Blade.

Due to the affinity of their abilities, Hibiya Kouji had yielded the seat of the strongest hand-to-hand fighter to the Skanda, but against monsters, he was in no way inferior. The ability to nullify an opponent's defense was just that much of an advantage. So long as his sword hit his opponent anywhere, he was guaranteed to deal huge damage. He didn't even need to put any strength behind his strikes, so it left him with very few openings. All these advantages also applied to the masked man.

It was difficult to cut through the sturdy bodies of the guardian giants with a normal sword. Even a warrior found it hard to deal a telling blow by putting all their strength behind a heavy weapon. But this sword went through them smoothly like a hot knife through butter. If he hadn't been helping, it would definitely have taken the group a lot more effort just to get this far.

Before coming to help the boy, he'd apparently been helping the two others. They'd already retreated away from the giants. Even now, with each swing of the masked man's sword, things got easier and easier for the boy.

"Now I can...!"

Get away, so he wanted to say. If he were only facing this world's defense

mechanism, he probably would've managed. However, in the next instant, he swallowed his words and turned around. Beyond the turmoil of battle, through the dense trees, he sensed something approaching.

“What...the...?!”

The boy was speechless. An enormous swarm of monsters leaped out of the trees. They weren't guardian giants. They were a mishmash of all kinds of monsters. The truly terrifying part was the density of them. They were more of a river or a flood than a swarm. The boy held up his sword on the spur of the moment, but this was a meaningless act. It was impossible to handle this many monsters without grade 5 magic—which required time to prepare—or some other explosive attack that covered a wide area. Unable to do anything, the boy, his two friends, the masked man, and even the guardian giants were swallowed by the tide.

Watching this unfold was a slender boy sitting atop a wolf. His lips curved into an inhuman smile.

“I finally found you...”

The Lord of Darkness, Kudou Riku, leading an army of over a thousand monsters, had caught up to Jinguuji Tomoya's group before the pursuit force could.



“Ugh...”

By good or bad luck, the boy had survived. He had no idea how many times monster fangs and claws had torn through his flesh. He'd only managed any form of resistance in the first instant. After that, he'd lost track of what had happened, and before he knew it, he found himself on the ground. He didn't know what happened to his friends. It'd taken him everything to focus on himself. He was surrounded by monsters. There were no allies in sight.

“Oh? You're still alive.”

Looking at Kudou Riku approach atop a wolf, the boy staggered to his feet. He grasped his sword with trembling hands.

“Who are you...?”

“So you still wish to fight,” Kudou said, narrowing his eyes. “I see, you’re one of the ones Heaven’s Voice mentioned—one of those loss-stricken souls that Jinguuji leads. You’re a little different from the riffraff I met during the fake savior incidents.”

“What’re you getting at...? And did you just say Heaven’s Voice?”

The boy’s bewilderment was clear. This wasn’t because the name made no sense to him. It was the opposite. Jinguuji Tomoya’s group was a gathering of those who’d suffered from loss and had sworn to stake their lives on getting everyone back home. However, it wasn’t like they’d known about their shared circumstances at first. So how did people who’d been scattered across the world find out about their commonalities and gather together? The answer to that was that they’d had help.

“Go save your pitiful friends, Jinguuji.”

“That’s the wish she made as she called out your name in her final, cruel moments, isn’t it?”

Jinguuji Tomoya had received information from Heaven’s Voice. He’d used this information to find his friends. He’d been the only one to interact directly with Heaven’s Voice, but he’d told the others about them.

“Is it strange that Heaven’s Voice provided me, the Demon King, with information about you?” Looking at the boy’s expression, Kudou Riku smiled faintly. “Aah. I’m sure it is strange to you. From your perspective, they were a helper who had nothing to hide. You’ve made it this far thanks to all the information you’ve received from Heaven’s Voice. In truth, they never betrayed your trust once. Am I right?”

There was a reason he could see through the boy so easily. The same thing had happened at Fort Tilia. Back then, Juumonji Tatsuya and Sakagami Gouta had both trusted Heaven’s Voice for bringing them together. It was partly because of how utterly dense the two had been, but Heaven’s Voice’s outwardly sincere behavior had played a large part too.

However, behind the scenes, Heaven’s Voice had made a connection to

Kudou Riku and had told Sakagami Gouta a tremendous lie, tricking him into thinking he was a monster tamer. The boys accompanying Jinguuji shared many of that case's circumstances. They trusted Heaven's Voice, since they had provided useful information to them. Only Jinguuji Tomoya hadn't trusted them fully, but thanks to being told the truth surrounding the Dimensional Cornerstones, he'd finally come to the conclusion that Heaven's Voice wasn't lying.

Or maybe he'd had no choice but to believe. After all, despite looking for information all over the world, he hadn't found the slightest clue about how to return to their world. Heaven's Voice had grasped his weakness and had accumulated trust only to betray him at the worst possible time. The moment he lent them an ear, he was doomed to perish.

"Heaven's Voice is more like the snake of temptation...the same as always."

Watching the Demon King mutter to himself, the boy steeled himself to start negotiating.

"You're...Kudou Riku?" he asked. "You have the power to manipulate so many monsters. You're the guy they call the Lord of Darkness, yeah?"

"Yes. That's right. What of it?"

"Thought so!" The boy smiled as if he'd found an oasis in the desert. "I know about it. You wanna destroy the world, right? That's why you're here. In that case, you should be able to work with us. We might have different objectives, but we're doing the same thing."

A Demon King bent on destroying the world, and those who were prepared to destroy the world just to get back home. Their interests were in alignment, so there was no need to fight. He was right in that sense.

"We might've had a bit of a misunderstanding, but it's not too late. Let's work together."

Here in this moment, Jinguuji Tomoya's group had acquired the possibility of getting a wild card in the form of the Demon King.

"True... I do believe my objective is somewhere inside here."

Kudou Riku nodded quietly, and the boy smiled back at him.

Chapter 13: The Demon King's Intentions

The pursuit force picked up their speed. Running among them, Berta felt thoroughly bitter. The visitors around her all had stiff expressions. Their apparent discomfort was born of Berta's master, Kudou Riku, having made contact with Jinguuji Tomoya's group.

Until this point, the two groups had been aiming for the Dimensional Cornerstones separately. However, if they were now working together, it was questionable whether they had the upper hand in battle even with the power of the pursuit force on their side. With such apprehensions in mind, tension ran through the air.

That said, there were some who had reacted a little differently. Berta turned one of her heads back to check on Majima Takahiro. His features were no less troubled. She could tell right away what he was thinking. Majima Takahiro had been intent on persuading Kudou Riku. Having somehow formed a cooperative relationship, and considering the way those two boys saw each other, it definitely hadn't been a poor bet to make. However, if Kudou Riku was joining hands with Jinguuji Tomoya, persuading him would be far more difficult. Majima Takahiro was brooding over that.

"Got a second, Berta?" he asked, suddenly returning her gaze and throwing off her stride a little.

"What?"

"I want to hear your opinion," he said, his tone sincere to the end. "What do you think Kudou is planning?"

"That's..." The reason she hesitated to speak was because she hadn't expected to be asked this. "Are you sure? My opinion isn't worth much."

"You mean, since you're the Demon King's servant, you might feed us bad information on purpose to help him?"

Berta nodded, and Majima Takahiro's stiff expression loosened somewhat. He

smiled at her warmly.

“You’re not the type to say such irresponsible things,” he said. “For Kudou’s sake, and for ours, you just aren’t. I understand that much... What’s wrong?”

Realizing she was being a little slow to respond, Berta simply said, “Nothing.”

In truth, it was nothing serious. She was simply marveling at how naturally he treated her as a companion. As she was now, she was capable of accepting that fact. Maybe that was why a thought naturally came to mind.

“That’s a relief. I didn’t think you fit in as the Demon King’s servant.”

When Berta was under the impression that she was a complete failure, that was what Iino Yuna had told her.

“I mean, Kudou Riku isn’t suitable to be your master.”

“Majima’s a hateful guy, but he treats his companions dearly. I think this is a suitable place for you. I’m sure you’ll be able to find happiness with them.”

Who was unsuitable for whom? It was all a matter of perspective. That was what she’d come to realize at the time. It wasn’t an absolute fact. Thus, she wanted her king to choose his own path—even if just a little. Just maybe, that could lead to his salvation. Something had happened to give her hope in that regard too.

“Fight at full strength, Berta.”

“From here on out, shed that false form and bring out everything you have.”

This was what he’d told her during the fight against Edgar. Back then, Kudou Riku had approved of the form he’d forbidden her from using. It made her think that something had changed.

But had it, really? She was losing confidence. In truth, he was still keeping her at a distance. The signs she’d sensed at the time felt so far away now. Maybe her king really didn’t understand her feelings. Her hopes had been so fleeting.

Could the warmth she felt here truly exist with her liege? After all, he was the Demon King, sworn to destroy the world. That said, whether he had any shared interests with Jinguuji Tomoya’s group, who were also trying to destroy the world, was an entirely different matter.

“You asked what my king’s intentions are,” Berta said, sighing as she answered Majima Takahiro’s question. “In my opinion, he...”



“True... I do believe my objective is somewhere inside here.”

The boy smiled at the answer. There was hope. That was what he believed.

“Oooh! Then...!”

“However,” Kudou Riku said, making the boy swallow his words. “While I am here as the Demon King who will destroy the world, my understanding of such an end is quite apart from your own.”

“Huh...?”

The boy’s expression froze. A shadow fell over his faint hopes—a shadow of endless despair.

“Think about it carefully,” Kudou said, a chilling smile on his lips. “How can the world possibly be destroyed?”

“Wha?!” The boy’s eyes shot open. “Wh-What’re you saying?! This place can —”

“Oh, no. I understand. The world is unexpectedly fragile. It’s possible to break if you try. I don’t doubt that.”

The boy’s mouth flapped open and shut, unable to comprehend.

“But that’s only now that things have reached this stage, right? I’m talking about before this. Normally, you would never consider it. Physically destroying the world, I mean.”

The boy was speechless.

“So when I say I’ll destroy the world, isn’t it obviously in a different sense from when you say it?”

At the very least, during the time Kudou Riku had marched forward as the Demon King, he hadn’t known that the world itself could be destroyed. Given this, his objective couldn’t possibly have been to physically destroy it. This meant that, as a matter of course, his interests weren’t in alignment with

Jinguuji's group. What they believed would be their wild card was in fact no more than a dagger to their throats.

"A-Aaah..."

Sensing that his death was near, the boy turned pale and staggered backward. There was nowhere to run, though. He was surrounded by monsters.

"Aaah..."

He was going to be killed. He was dead. It was over. The moment before his spirit broke, his bloodshot eyes noticed something.

"Ha ha!"

The boy burst into laughter. He jumped backward and threw his sword at Kudou Riku.

"Futile resistance!" Dora yelled, knocking the sword out of the air with her shadowy blade arms.

Now the boy had no weapon, but that didn't matter. Using the small amount of time he'd bought himself, the boy picked up a certain something from the ground. It was a large sword with a bizarre blade.

"As long as I have this...!"

The magic sword was capable of cutting anything and everything. It was what the masked man had been using. He'd probably dropped it when Kudou Riku's monsters had trampled through the area. Having lost the ultimate class of close-quarters weapon, its owner was probably dead, but this had given the boy a chance to survive. In terms of pure combat abilities, he possessed the strength of a warrior, making him far stronger than the masked man. Naturally, when using the same weapon, the results would be different.

So long as he had this, he could survive. With that conviction in mind, the boy clenched the sword's grip. His next foe came lunging at him—the Mad Beast.

"Graoooooh!"

"Like hell I'm gonna die!"

Facing the howling abomination, the boy poured his mana into the sword and

swung. The strongest of beasts, once known as Takaya Jun, was covered in fur that warded away blades. With the sturdiest of muscles serving as its armor, any normal sword would bounce right off its body. However, that wouldn't be the slightest of problems for this sword. Having reversed his fortunes from being on the verge of death, the boy felt exaltation as he prepared the ultimate strike.

“Graoooooh!”

The mindless beast lunged at him, scattering drool all over. Feeling pity for the ignorant beast, the boy's lips curved into a smile. He swung his sword to meet the incoming fist. First, he would cut off that arm, then turn the sword to cut off its head. Killing the vanguard would definitely leave an opening. Using that chance, he would kill Kudou Riku too.

“You dumbass!”

He put as little strength behind his strike as he could. Normally, this would cause the blade to be repelled with ease, but this slash was an exception. The bizarre blade sent the beast's sturdy arm flying. At least, that's what the boy had expected.

“Huh?”

His blade had been easily repelled. Right to the very end, the boy had no idea what had happened. The Mad Beast's fist didn't slow down at all after colliding with the sword, caving in the boy's cranium. He hadn't even been given the time to scream. His lifeless body collapsed backward.

“How foolish,” Dora sighed, having stayed by her king's side just in case.

It was rather anticlimactic after that display of resistance. However, Dora quickly grimaced. Her king's slender face remained full of fighting spirit despite having already won.

“Be careful. It isn't over yet,” he said.

“Huh?”

In the next instant, something strange happened to the monsters surrounding the area.

“Scatter!” Kudou immediately commanded.

“Wha...?!”

Dora was speechless. It all happened in an instant. A figure falling from the trees swung a sword. The moment she perceived the descending shadow, the monsters in the immediate vicinity were reduced to mincemeat. The swordsmanship on display was hardly that of a master. It didn’t look like much more than a person recklessly swinging a stick around. And yet, the blade cut through flesh and bone as if there was no resistance.

It was a masked man. He stared at Kudou Riku carefully through the slits in his mask. It was a bizarre situation. After all, he wasn’t wielding the same sword as before. What he had wasn’t even magical in nature. It was just a sword. And yet, his slashes had dealt unimaginable damage. Above all else, the amount of mana Dora sensed coming from him was enough to chill her spine. He was unmistakably a cheater of the strongest class.

“I thought that might be the case,” Kudou Riku muttered. There was surprise in his voice, but no confusion. He knew this man’s identity, after all. His lips formed a smile so wide it seemed to split his face. “So this is where you’ve been hiding—Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji!”





The Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji—one of the two nicknamed cheaters who’d gone missing during the chaos of the Colony’s fall. There was no better proof of his identity than his ability, so there was no point in further subterfuge. The man took off his mask, revealing a moody-looking boy, bearing the face of someone who was really hard to get along with, regardless of whether he was fighting or not. He stared right at the boy facing him. Maybe that was a matter of course. Kudou Riku wasn’t acting like normal.

“My...king?”

It was a manifestation of violent fury that was enough to make Dora falter. The calm and cold smile he always wore as a mask had crumbled away.

“Finally... I finally found you!”

The rage he’d been hiding behind that smile all this time was now on full display. Until this point, Kudou Riku had done a great job suppressing his anger and hatred. He’d turned it into fuel for his grudge against the world. On very rare occasions, this grudge came to the surface. But that wasn’t quite right. This wasn’t the hatred of the Demon King who begrudged the world. This was the smile of vengeance of a boy who’d found his sworn enemy.

“Kill him!”

At his command, the demon army bared its fangs.

Chapter 14: The Day the Demon King Was Born

Deep within Kudou's mind, there was a memory of his true nadir, the depths of his weakness. It was the day the Demon King was born. Inside the dark forest, the boy was in a stupor. There was a girl in front of him. She'd collapsed on the ground and was horribly wounded. The cut in her waist was fatal, her innards spilling from it. Her blood had long dried up and changed color. There was no point trying to put pressure on the wound.

Even if that weren't the case, the boy couldn't do anything. There was nothing at all. But the girl was different. Even on the verge of death, she'd made it all the way here through the forest and had even thrown herself into battle. Here, she finally ran out of strength.

As a result, the boy survived, and she was dying. Despite being alive, the boy was sure to die not too long after. Having been trampled underfoot, he no longer had the will to live. Her death was meaningless. That thought hurt the boy more than anything else.

"Why...am I...?"

Just then, the girl groaned. It must've been painful. It must've been heartbreaking. She must've felt such burning hatred.

"This world...should just be destroyed."

The girl cursed the world, and the boy listened. This was how the Demon King was born. They had met before, one fateful day.



To the girl, it was probably a day like any other. However, to the boy, this meeting changed his fate.

"What are you doing?"

The moment a gentle voice struck his ear, he thought he was having a dream. He tasted dirt in his mouth. His tired, weakened limbs felt the pain of having

taken a beating. Some time had passed since being teleported to another world. The Colony was steadily taking shape. Despite being in a state of emergency after being torn away from a familiar world—or perhaps precisely because of that—there were those who vented their resentment and anxieties against the weak. Unfortunately, this boy had been singled out by one such group.

The true misfortune was that this group included one of the warriors of the exploration team. Many in the exploration team had a strong sense of justice, but there were those who didn't. For those people, the only thing they had to be careful of when venting their resentment against the weak was keeping their sadistic amusements hidden from the rest of the exploration team. Even if the powerless were to come across what was happening by coincidence, it was difficult for them to warn against such behavior. Events that could sometimes happen in the closed system of a school, combined with the abnormality of the current situation, had driven the boy to the end of his rope.

The world was steeped in darkness. He'd given up. Resisting was absurd. Nobody would ever save him. He crawled his way through miserable and painful days. That was when the girl appeared like a miracle.

"Let me ask again. What are you doing?"

The girl looked older than the boy. She stood there with a cheerful smile. Her expression was one that seemed fitting for someone who was chatting about sweets among girls. However, she used that smile while facing the group of five who were tormenting the boy. That made her gentle expression seem all the more bizarre.

"N-Nothing."

The only exploration team member among them answered her with a trembling voice. One reason he was panicking was because he'd been discovered despite having done his best to avoid any crowds. Another reason was that he knew very well who this girl was.

"Is that so? Hmm, that's fine, then."

The girl slowly cocked her head. Her hand stroked the dog sitting next to her. It had the shape of a German Shepherd, but one glance was all it took to tell

that it was no normal animal. Its entire body was pitch-black, as if it was made of solidified darkness.

The beast growled, and everyone except the girl started. The boy was no exception. He was so helplessly weak at the time. He even feared the person who was trying to save him.

“Sorry, but I have business with him,” the girl said flatly. “So can the rest of you leave?”

This was obviously a complete lie. Everyone knew that. However, she had enough power that nobody would question her. The group ran away, leaving the boy and girl alone.

The boy remained in a daze for a while. The ones who’d been beating him just moments ago had been so easily driven away from her. She was so gallant. It lacked a sense of reality. The boy was captivated by the girl as if he were dreaming.

“Ah...”

After a good ten seconds, the boy came back to his senses. He staggered to his feet in a fluster. He tried to thank the girl for saving him, but the dirt in his mouth got in the way. He pathetically coughed to clear it out, nearly making him miss what she said.

“How stupid...”

Her voice was so cold. It was as if the cheerful atmosphere around her had all been a lie. The boy raised his head, thinking he’d misheard, but was met with her emotionless profile. Was this a display of anger and indignation at fools who wielded violence against the weak? Or was there another reason for it? The boy couldn’t tell, but if there was one thing he was certain of, it was that the gaze she directed at their victim was just as cold. He started once more, then somehow managed to speak up.

“U-Um... Senpai. Thank you...very much...”

“I don’t need your thanks. I’m just acting as Yu’s replacement.”

Only when she spoke the name Yu did her expression soften. After that, the

girl's cheerful expression returned. At the time, the boy still didn't know who Yu was. He was sure this person was important to the girl, though. Now that the tension in the air was gone, he lowered his head in relief.

"Still, you saved me. Thank you. You're really strong, huh?"

"Am I?" The girl cocked her head and stared back at the boy. "And you're rather weak, huh?"

Was she the type to say things without thinking? She was unexpectedly direct as she spoke in a gentle tone. This didn't irritate the boy. There was no malice in her tone. The boy was in fact weak, so she was simply stating the truth. He'd given up on that already. He had no value. Having that pointed out to him wasn't going to frustrate him at this point. However, the girl continued.

"But are you fine with that?"

"Huh...?"

"Are you fine with being weak?"

The girl was nonchalant about it. She was so casual when she spoke words that could change the boy's future.

This was how these two—Kudou Riku and Todoroki Miya—met. To the girl, it must've been no different from any other day. But to the boy, it was special. He'd been saved. He'd been acknowledged. And he'd been questioned.

In a sense, that was all there was to it, but that was more than enough for him. Before he knew it, he found himself looking for the girl every now and then.

Whenever they met, he greeted her. She did at least remember him. Sometimes they even chatted a little. Naturally, as a nicknamed cheater of the exploration team, she probably saw him as no more than one among a large crowd. But that was fine.

He owed this girl his life. He looked up to her. She truly was strong, after all. Precisely because he saw no worth in himself, he saw true value in this girl. Oddly enough, these emotions within him changed the boy's fate the day the Colony fell.



“Haaah... Haaah...”

On that day, Kudou Riku ran aimlessly through the burning Colony with no idea of what was going on. People were screaming all over and the hot wind from explosions blew against his face. The Colony everyone had built together was falling apart. Violence gave birth to panic, and panic gave birth to more violence. This horrible cycle put everything to waste.

All Kudou Riku could do was run away desperately. Before he knew it, he found himself deep inside the forest. He’d gotten away alive simply because of good luck. That said, he’d kept that luck firmly in his grasp.

The tragic events of the Colony’s fall should’ve been enough to break his spirit. If he’d given up on running away for even an instant, he would definitely be dead. The fact that he’d made it out was because he’d remembered something.

“But are you fine with that?”

“Are you fine with being weak?”

He’d clenched his teeth when she’d first asked him this. Walking through the Woodlands without any powers was a terrifying experience. He couldn’t get anywhere without walking, but walking meant potentially encountering monsters. It was like having a pistol with one bullet in it continuously pointed at his head with his finger on the trigger.

This forest was dark even at noon. Everything in sight looked like it could be hiding a monster. If he encountered one, it would be over. With every step he took, his brain conjured flickers of his own corpse lying on the ground. Those who could withstand such fear were those with significant willpower or the optimistic type who lacked imagination. Kudou Riku was neither.

He didn’t know why he was trying so hard. The image of that girl in his mind was the only certain thing to him. Maybe he could get a step closer to what he looked up to. Or perhaps he was spurred by feelings he himself wasn’t aware of. He didn’t know the answer. He didn’t have the time to scrutinize his emotions. He simply walked on desperately.

Just a little more. Just a little farther. He could still keep going. The sun set and the next morning came. The boy was alive. He wasn't particularly injured either and had gotten quite far away. He hadn't encountered any monsters.

However, he hadn't reached any human settlements either. At this rate, he would die in the not-too-distant future. He could feel it. He was so terrified, but there was nothing he could do. Still, he felt satisfied in a way too.

He'd always been oppressed. He'd never had worth. But he'd made it this far without giving up. Even if it was meaningless, he'd changed thanks to that girl's words. The boy felt like he had the slightest amount of worth now.

Even if he ran out of strength, he could die satisfied. Or maybe he would be able to reach a human settlement before then, leading to a story filled with hope. But that wasn't to be. His luck was far too poor. The world was far too cruel.

"To think we'd meet out here."

"Ah... Aaah..."

What he encountered was neither a monster nor a local. It was the group who'd oppressed him.



The boy had somehow walked this far, but was now dragged to the ground. There was no way he could resist. What came next was the same as always. No, it was far worse. After experiencing the Colony's fall, they'd been released from the shackles of those who'd surrounded them. This especially applied to the one warrior from the exploration team.

He oppressed the weak by nature, but hadn't gone so far off the beaten path that he would try to murder anyone. However, his clothes were now filthy with the blood of others. His eyes had lost all sense of reason and a deep, crimson hunger for violence swirled within them. No matter how much power he possessed, he was so weak.

People like this wasted the efforts of others. The faint hope that had sprouted in the boy's heart was trampled into pitiful pieces. Heels dug into him. Spit rained down on him. He thought he'd changed, but it was no good. From this

point onward, he would surely never harbor hope again.

He was thrown to the ground like a worn rag. Having only been used to drag out their sadistic joy, he'd avoided a fatal wound. That said, if this violence continued for a few more minutes, it was clear he would die. His consciousness was fading. He was emotionally dead already.

That was why he wasn't sure what happened next. He heard a dog crying. He felt like he heard howling too. Blood splattered, shrieks echoed in the air, and violence ran rampant. He only realized what had happened after it was all over.

The five people who'd hurt him had been torn apart by a beast and were all dead. The one who'd done it was lying on the ground at death's door. The one he'd looked up to so much was covered in blood and mud, her entrails spilling out.

"A-Aaaaaah..."

It couldn't have happened. This was one thing that couldn't be allowed. It just couldn't. His admiration had crashed to the earth. His hopes were crushed. Everything that he found value in had been trampled into the ground. The boy's hopeless shriek shook the forest.



"After that, my king inspected her corpse."

Berta told the story while keeping her voice low enough that the rushing exploration team members around them couldn't hear her.

"She'd suffered her injuries a fair bit earlier. She'd probably taken them during the Colony's fall and had escaped from the culprit while bearing serious wounds. There was just one thing to identify the culprit. Several of her personal effects had been bisected with strangely smooth cross sections. The same applied to her wound."

"That means, Kudou..."

"Yes." Berta nodded. "Even now, I believe my king is out for revenge."

Chapter 15: Evil

The dreadful swarm of monsters bared their fangs. If manipulated well, even a group of regular warriors would be crushed under the pure violence of numbers. In fact, three such people had died moments ago in just that fashion.

However, despite his monstrous power, Kudou Riku's attacks were foiled. He gulped and groaned at the sight.

"A nicknamed cheater of the exploration team... To think he's this strong."

"Hey. Don't lump us all together."

Hibiya Kouji complained in dissatisfaction as he swung his sword. With each strike, he scattered death all around him. During the days of the Colony within the Depths of the woodlands, this boy had been seen as an equal to Iino Yuna as the strongest in close-quarters combat when faced with monsters. The Skanda boasted of a speed that nobody could catch up to, whereas the Absolute Blade boasted of an attack that nobody could block. Everything his sword touched was cut apart without exception. Solidity and toughness meant nothing to him.

What's more, Hibiya Kouji was accustomed to fighting. He had the basic combat abilities of a visitor, but he also had skill that surpassed that. Despite fighting so many opponents, he never let himself get surrounded. Sometimes he hid behind one enemy to escape the attack of another. He steadily made his way through the horde.

He wasn't the type to rely on the combat abilities he'd gained as a visitor. He fought with a technical skill he'd acquired himself. Others like him were the Sword of Light Nakajima Kojirou and the Skanda Iino Yuna, who'd learned martial arts in their old world, or Majima Takahiro and Kaneki Mikihiko, who'd trained after coming to this one.

However, Hibiya Kouji's movements didn't come from studying martial arts or swordsmanship or anything of the like. It was more accurate to say he was used

to brawling. His agility was like that of a wild beast. It was impossible to describe as polished. In truth, his swordsmanship could be called sloppy nonsense. But that was enough for him. Anything he hit died. That was the terrifying thing about the Absolute Blade.

“Ugh...”

Kudou Riku stifled his breath in pain as the wolf he was riding took evasive action. This was because Hibiya Kouji had launched an attack on him while handling all the swarming monsters. Normal monsters couldn't stop the Absolute Blade. Not even Dora and the Mad Beast could face him head-on without taking extreme risks. Whenever the leader, Kudou Riku, was attacked, he used monsters to shield himself and had Dora and the Mad Beast hold Hibiya Kouji at bay, somehow managing to stop the cheater in his tracks.

During that time, the wolf Kudou Riku was riding evaded, but each time, his command over the other monsters faltered for a moment. Taking advantage of that, Hibiya Kouji dealt further damage to the demon army.

Kudou Riku's ability was genuinely suited for battle. With the proper conditions, defeating the Absolute Blade was entirely possible. However, he hadn't been given the time to create those conditions. Hibiya Kouji even had the time for conversation while taking on so many monsters.

“I heard from Heaven's Voice,” he said curtly. “Something about getting revenge for Todoroki? You been living to pay me back for that? How worthless.”

Hearing this, Kudou Riku's eyes flared with rage.

“Guh! Kill him!”

Using the collars of the Lord of Darkness, he spurred several monsters into action. The army's fangs couldn't reach their target, though. In an impressive display, they were cut down one after the other.

“Seriously, how pathetic. That's why you're weak.”

“Ugh!”

Watching his monsters tumble dead to the ground, Kudou Riku's expression twisted in frustration. Things were even for now, but if this went on, his forces

would be whittled away. He couldn't refute being called weak.

"So you really did kill Todoroki-senpai," he managed to squeeze out.

"By the sounds of it, you were pretty convinced from the very beginning, huh?"

Hibiya Kouji didn't deny it. He didn't give a proper answer either. In other words, he had no intention of having a proper conversation, nor did he have a need to.

"Why did you kill her?" Kudou Riku asked, grinding his teeth hard.

"Because she plotted to overthrow the Colony."

His response was immediate, his voice completely disinterested. Emotions could be used to bring out explosive power, but if manipulated well, could also make it hard for one to display their true strength. On that point, Hibiya Kouji was careful. He kept his opponent irritated while remaining calm. Maybe he was bothering to talk with Kudou Riku in a calculated decision to restore his stamina in case of the unexpected. Kudou Riku's analytical mind had abandoned him, however, and he was engulfed in the moment.

"She conspired with Heaven's Voice to pull the trigger on destroying the Colony. I was entrusted with its protection, so I couldn't turn a blind eye."

Hibiya Kouji spoke calmly, whereas Kudou Riku hung his head with trembling fists. With this, the Demon King was done for...if he'd truly lost himself, that is. His expression suddenly changed. His eyes hid endless wisdom and sharpened like knives. This was the face of the Demon King.

"You're lying."

His words caught Hibiya Kouji off guard like a blade to his throat. He fell silent at the unexpected turn of events. Kudou Riku wasn't one to let such an opportunity pass.

"If that was the case, why have you been hiding all this time? If someone from the exploration team found out about you and questioned you thoroughly about what happened, was there anything troublesome for you to report?"

Hibiya Kouji said nothing.

“You’re the one who plotted to overthrow the Colony.”

Sometimes a reaction spoke more eloquently than words. Hibiya Kouji’s expression turned grim, indicating that this was in fact the truth. In contrast, Kudou Riku had regained his composure. No. Appearing to have lost it in the first place had been part of his strategy.

“Why did you destroy the Colony? What’s your relationship to Heaven’s Voice? What are you planning by slipping into Jinguuji Tomoya’s group?”

“You...”

“Heh heh. How unfortunate. It seems extracting any more information from you will prove difficult.”

The boy was calm. Anger remained in his heart, of course. The fury he’d given a glimpse of was unmistakably the real thing—he simply had a proper rein over his emotions.

“You asked if I’ve lived to this day for the sake of revenge. Yes. I won’t deny it. However, my fury isn’t directed only at the likes of you.”

The flames of vengeance still burned within him. He hadn’t once forgotten that anger and grudge. It was therefore impossible for him to lose his composure over them. He’d tapered his violent emotions to a point, turning them into a weapon. That was how he was here as the Demon King today.

“In the Colony, I witnessed with my own eyes how hideous human weakness is. Once thrown into an emergency, that weakness drives them to hysterical acts of cruelty, putting to waste everything of value in this world.”

A dangerous light glimmered within the boy’s eyes. The loss of one such valuable treasure had been burned into his mind.

“Cheaters are the very symbol of that. Simply weak humans are one thing, but by possessing strength beyond their means while still remaining so weak, they easily bring about atrocity after atrocity.”

In truth, they’d been the ones to destroy the Colony. Judging by the ongoing conversation, it seemed Heaven’s Voice had plotted behind the scenes with Hibiya Kouji, but they’d only been the trigger. This didn’t erase the sins of those

who'd actually dirtied their hands.

Even back then, there'd been those with good sense who'd tried to put a stop to it. However, precisely because they'd had good sense, they hadn't been able to acquire immense power with as much ease as the warriors. It was tremendously difficult for a normal person to gain power through an intense wish or conviction like the nicknamed cheaters. Given this, their remonstrations had fallen on deaf ears and they'd all been killed.

This didn't only apply to the Colony either. Even after that, similar damage had been inflicted over and over. The fake savior incidents were the greatest example of such catastrophes. It didn't need to be said that the daily lives of the locals that had been so desperately established in this dangerous environment were of value. However, that had all been put to waste by foolish weakness.

People like Kouzu Asahi, who'd tried to repent for his foolishness by fighting to protect the village he'd endangered to begin with, could almost be considered on the better side of things. However, those who'd shifted the blame, refusing to acknowledge their own weakness as they headed for the next village without learning their lesson, were in the majority.

"I understand, of course. So long as they haven't done anything, they can't be questioned for their sins. Even if they are going to destroy something valuable one day, it's only right to watch helplessly until something is lost. That's how the world works. That's the right thing to do. However..."

A violent fury burned in his eyes.

"I can't forgive such a world."

Yes. He couldn't forgive it. Anger toward the hideous weakness that trampled over everything of value was what spurred Kudou Riku into action. This wasn't born of justice. At the very least, Kudou Riku didn't see it that way. He saw it as simple, worthless revenge. Precisely because he knew what true value was like, he'd concluded that his actions were worthless.

Nevertheless, he couldn't forgive, and he couldn't stop—not until he completely destroyed all such weakness and repulsiveness, the calamities they would one day bring, and those who would use them for evil.

“That’s why I’m evil—the Demon King.”

“No way...!”

By the time Hibiya Kouji noticed, it was too late. The time spent on this conversation wasn’t to allow his opponent to regain stamina. It was to prepare one of the Demon King’s greatest attacks—the ultimate army, which couldn’t be cut down by the Absolute Blade.

“Engulf him, Gustav!”

In the next instant, an absurd number of fish swimming over the ground burst into action. What Kudou Riku had named Gustav wasn’t an individual monster. Tripdrill were migratory monsters that resembled marlins. By manipulating a few dozen out of a swarm that could number in the tens of thousands, it was possible to guide hundreds of them away. That was Gustav.

Kudou Riku could manipulate around a thousand monsters at most, but by doing this, he was capable of adding hundreds of monsters to his forces while only controlling a few of them. That said, he didn’t have fine control over a majority of the swarm. He’d had no choice but to separate them from his main force while traversing this fabricated world, which was why he’d needed time to call them over.

“Kudou...!”

Yelling in panic and anger, Hibiya Kouji vanished. In the blink of an eye, the frenzied swarm of tripdrills blanketed the entire area.



Every monster in the army aside from Gustav had been divided into groups to clear this fabricated world. To that end, only a portion of the army had slammed into Jinguuji’s group. However, Gustav’s numbers were on a different level. The entire army numbered around a thousand, whereas Gustav numbered around seven hundred. All seven hundred tripdrills had surged into this area at once.

Kudou Riku left just enough subordinates behind to stall Hibiya Kouji, then quickly retreated. The majority of the tripdrills that made up Gustav weren’t under his control, so they naturally attacked his other monsters too. Kudou Riku

dominated any who got close to him to create a safe zone, but it was impossible for him to do the same for all his forces in the area, who numbered over a hundred. To avoid friendly fire, he had to withdraw for now.

After the terrifying violence of numbers passed, Kudou Riku returned. The forest was scarred by the stampede. Tripdrill corpses with strangely smooth cross sections lay on the ground. Looking up at the large eagle monster flying overhead, Kudou Riku ordered the wolf he was riding to head to the landing point. There was a large pool of blood in front of the eagle. The wolf sniffed, then howled.

“My king, it seems that man has suffered a serious wound,” Dora said.

Kudou Riku nodded. “Seems so. I don’t see a corpse, though...” He narrowed his eyes. “We failed to kill him. Well, whatever.”

Judging by the amount of blood, he wasn’t in a state to move around much. This wasn’t something he could recover from after some rest, so it would be impossible for him to get out of this world filled with traps and guardian giants. Considering the danger in this world, it was highly likely he would die if left alone. Even if he didn’t, if he had no way out of here, Kudou Riku could just come back to kill him later. Disconnecting himself from his fury with calculated logic, he quickly made his decision.

“First, let’s chase Jinguuji. We can take our time to finish the Absolute Blade af—”

“M-My king?!”

Kudou Riku hunched over in the middle of speaking, nearly falling off the wolf. Dora ran over and supported him in a fluster.

“It seems I pushed myself a little too far...”

He couldn’t put any strength into his body. Much like his already-dead arm, other parts of his body were reaching their limit. Kudou Riku’s power came from his despair at his lack of power. Because of that, his strength as the Demon King actually weakened him.

Before coming here, he’d anticipated this would be the decisive battle and had acquired even more subordinates. Thanks to that, despite expending some

of his forces making his way through these fabricated worlds, he still had plenty left. In exchange for surpassing his limits, he'd damaged his own body enough that the end was near. His gaze suddenly shifted to the Mad Beast. Even this powerful monster couldn't get away unscathed in a battle against the Absolute Blade. It was bleeding all over.

"You did well."

The beast remained silent.

"But we don't have much time. The end may be near. I don't know what shape it'll take, though..."

There was obviously no reply. He should've known that, but the boy stared deep into the mindless beast's eyes as if there was something there.

"You give it some thought too. Before time runs out, that is."

"My king...?" Dora raised her voice in confusion.

"It's nothing," the boy said, shrugging. "Now then, shall we?"

He was reaching his physical limit, but that was no reason to stop. His journey had been a one-day trip to ruin from the very beginning. The Army of Darkness obeyed his command and began marching deeper into the fabricated world.

Chapter 16: Memory of the Beginning

Using the senses of the Misty Lodge, I discovered Hibiya Kouji's presence. When I relayed this to the pursuit force, the exploration team members were shocked. From their perspective, he was a comrade who'd gone missing during the Colony's fall, as well as a nicknamed cheater of the upper brass. They'd probably never expected him to be among those they were chasing. That said, it was best to prevent that shock from turning into dismay.

"Well, once we catch him, we'll hear his story."

It was none other than their leader, Nakajima, who casually brushed aside the conversation. Seeing how he wasn't perturbed in the least, the exploration team members regained their composure. Thanks to their leader's example, even as we encountered guardian giants every now and then, they calmly dealt with the attacks. They were getting used to the presence of constant danger. I didn't even need to warn them by using the Misty Lodge to watch our surroundings. I could focus entirely on guiding them.

Personally, I'd been worried that Hibiya Kouji would pose a considerable threat, but that fear had proved to be unwarranted: Kudou's army had defeated him. Also, Jinguuji and Kudou hadn't ended up joining forces, so that was a relief. Berta had predicted such an outcome, so we hadn't wasted any unnecessary time coming up with countermeasures. The wolf was brooding, troubled by lingering thoughts of her king.

"I see. That's what happened between Kudou and Hibiya," I commented.

"Yes. I doubt my king has forgotten Todoroki Miya's death."

It seemed fate had played a major role in the battle between Kudou and Hibiya. I'd been focused on guiding the group through this fabricated world while watching for ambushes and neutralizing traps, so I'd only heard their conversation in fragments. It seemed Todoroki had died during the Colony's fall and Hibiya had been responsible for it. Berta's story also supported this.

This information bothered me. After all, the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya and the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji had stayed behind to protect the Colony during the expedition force's absence. However, according to Fukatsu Aketora, the boy accompanying Thaddeus of Draconia, the majority of the emergency response force those two had been a part of had been killed in the early stages of the chaos. It had been best to assume some trouble had occurred, but with this new information, it was now clear that Hibiya Kouji had murdered them. What's more, he'd vanished since then and had reappeared here of all places.

Maybe the Colony hadn't simply fallen apart. What had really happened that day? It was highly likely Hibiya was the key to getting answers about the last days of the Colony. It wasn't quite what Nakajima had alluded to, but if we caught him, it could be possible for us to learn the truth.

However, this had to be handled with care. If they knew that two of their upper brass had tried to kill each other during the Colony's fall, the exploration team members would be shaken to their core. Fortunately, such details had no direct relation to this operation, so there was no need to go out of my way to tell them. I could find the right time to consult Nakajima and leave the decision to him.

"At any rate, thanks for the information," I told Berta.

"It's nothing. I'm doing it for my king's sake, after all," she said with what appeared to be a smile.

Jinguuji's group, Kudou's army, the exploration team, and the church's forces—each one was driven by different motives, making the situation rather complicated. The exploration team and the church were acting to stop Jinguuji from destroying the Dimensional Cornerstones. Kudou was hostile to Jinguuji, so his interests were aligned with the exploration team in stopping Jinguuji's apocalyptic quest. However, Kudou's methods were bound to be drastic. This was especially the case against Hibiya. The exploration team felt camaraderie with Jinguuji and Hibiya on an emotional level, so it was possible they would be hostile toward Kudou.

The complicated mix of interests and sentimentality meant there was no room for guesswork here. We needed to understand the situation so that we

could handle anything that happened. That was why Berta had told us her story. However, after listening to her, one point didn't make sense.

"Hey Berta? Can I ask something?" I said.

"What?"

"How do you...know about Todoroki Miya's death?"

I wasn't doubting her or anything. I just found it strange. Berta knew about how Todoroki Miya had died. If her death was the main driving force behind Kudou's ambitions, I doubted he would've told someone he only saw as a pawn about it.

"It's simple," Berta replied calmly, perhaps expecting this question. "I was there. So I know. That's all."

"You were there...?"

I needed a second to figure that out. Once I did, I gulped. Her admission carried grave implications.

"So, Kudou awakened to being the Demon King because of Todoroki's death, and you became his servant right then? In other words, you're Kudou's first servant?"

It was surprising, but now that I thought about it, it wasn't impossible. Kudou should've awakened to his power after the Colony's fall, right around the time of Todoroki Miya's death. If Berta had been his servant at the time, it wouldn't be strange for her to know about the details between Kudou and Todoroki. Everything was consistent. However, there was one thing that didn't make sense.

"But Berta... You were the second to be given a name, weren't you?"

By the phonetic code being used, Berta was the second name. She was the first, but the second. This sounded like a contradiction to me, but not to Berta.

"It isn't all that complicated," she said. "My king doesn't generally give his subordinates names. You know the condition that has to be met before he does, right?"

That was when I figured it out too.

“Having enough power to be given a name...”

“Exactly.”

“So you...”

“Yes. At the time, I had no potential. That was why I wasn’t given a name.”

The way Kudou treated his servants differed completely from the way I treated mine. In Kudou’s case, it was only natural that his first servant wasn’t the first to be given a name. What had made things complicated was that he’d ended up giving her a name later.

“Though I was his first servant, I wasn’t given a name at the time due to my weakness,” Berta continued. “I dedicated myself to gaining enough strength to serve him properly. By then, Anton had already surpassed me and earned our king’s favor. That’s why I was given the name Berta.” Her tone dropped a level. “I couldn’t become Anton... To me, the name Berta is proof of my powerlessness and worthlessness.”

Her words were filled with regret. I could easily infer that this wasn’t simply because she hadn’t been the first to be given a name. This regret definitely had something to do with her clumsy and innocent nature.

“Majima Takahiro,” she said, still running as we talked. “Earlier, you said I became his servant when he awakened as the Demon King and I was his first servant. That’s only half right.”

“Only half?”

“The latter half is correct, but the former isn’t.”

I was confused for a moment. The two sounded like the same thing. Berta’s next words surpassed my imagination.

“I came under my king’s command before he was the Demon King.”

“What?”

“He didn’t gain power when he decided to walk down the path of the Demon King. Having escaped the Colony, he refused to give up. He struggled to survive in the Woodlands. That was when I became his servant.”

I fell silent for a few seconds. I couldn't process what she was telling me. It was far too different from what I'd heard before.

"Wait. Isn't that weird?" I said. "That's inconsistent with what Kudou told me."

Kudou had told me about his origins during the attack on Fort Tilia. He'd despaired at how weak and hideous humanity was, had wished to destroy the world, and had obtained the power to dominate monsters as the Demon King. It was strange for Berta to have become his servant before then. What was going on?

"It's because I wasn't strong enough," Berta answered lightly. I could sense the same remorse as when she lamented her perceived inadequacy. "Back then, when he struggled through the forest on his own, he sought me. His meeting with Todoroki Miya had apparently changed his life. He was still small and weak, but he clawed tooth and nail to try and change himself. When I sensed him, I felt joy in my heart. His existence was so precious to me. Attracted by that still-unreliable connection, I hurried to his side."

As she spoke of her memories, her tone suddenly shifted to a bitter one.

"However, I didn't make it in time. Right before I found him, he encountered other visitors. By the time I ran to his side, they'd already tormented him thoroughly."

In the corner of my vision, I saw Lily turning to me. She had terrific ears, so she'd likely overheard us. She looked extremely surprised. The same went for me.

Hurt and damaged, begging for salvation—and someone answered.

My first meeting with Lily very closely resembled Berta's beginnings with Kudou. However, only the results differed—to a cruel degree. Lily had saved me, but Berta hadn't been able to save Kudou.

"I bared my fangs to try and protect him, but it wasn't to be. I was quickly struck down in a single blow."

She'd faced a warrior. Judging by the fact that she hadn't been given a name, Berta had been nowhere near her current strength, likely not all that different

from the average monster. There was no way she could've won.

"I was weak, so I couldn't save him... I turned him into the Demon King."

A remorse she could never rid herself of—this was a wound Berta had carried from the very beginning. If only those two had met before encountering those visitors, the situation would likely be different. Had she foreseen their approach with her sharp sense of smell, it would've been possible to get away before being discovered. By doing so, by avoiding that one encounter, perhaps a better future would have been possible for them.

Thinking of it that way, maybe it was natural that Berta was the only one among Kudou's servants whose sensibilities resembled ours. After all, before becoming the Demon King, Kudou hadn't wished for a pawn with which to destroy the world. He'd wished for someone to help him change and walk by his side toward the future. However, that future wasn't to be. It'd been crushed to pieces and hopelessly twisted.

That was why this bothered Berta so much. She hadn't been able to become Anton. In other words, if she'd had the strength to be given the name Anton at the time, she could've protected what was dear to her. During our journey together, she'd gone out night after night hunting monsters to get stronger. The reason she coveted such strength was likely because of these remorseful memories of being unable to protect Kudou before he became the Demon King.

"Does Kudou know about this?" I asked.

"He didn't notice. By the time I was able to move again and serve my king for the first time, everything was already over. He was already unconscious from the pain when I ran over to help, after all. He didn't see me lose, and because Todoroki Miya appeared immediately afterward, creating a Beast of Darkness to fight in battle. Even if he did hear anything, he likely assumed my earlier intrusion to be no more than a part of that."

"You never told him yourself?"

"What would I get by doing so?" Berta asked self-derisively. "By the time I finally gained power, a proper ego, and a name, he was already walking down the path of the Demon King. It was far too late by then."

Kudou didn't require anyone to lean against on his path forward as the Demon King. What could've been priceless to him before was now no more than a failure of a pawn. Nevertheless, she'd cared for him, the regret at being unable to do anything and that precious feeling she'd had upon discovering him in her heart all the while.

"That's how I met my king," Berta said, returning to her usual tone as if to mark the end of the discussion. "I told you this much, so I might as well add one more thing. At the time, I ate Todoroki Miya's remains. That was what she wished for on the verge of death."

"Todoroki did? Why?"

"I wonder. She said she didn't want to sadden her best friend, so she wanted to hide her death. Maybe she simply didn't want to leave a corpse behind... But I do wonder. Honestly, I don't really understand. Why did she save my king? Why did she even want to save him?"

There was no way of finding out now. Todoroki Miya was dead. It was impossible to find out anything more about the girl who'd cursed the world with her dying breaths. This did clarify one thing, though.

"Is that why you look like Todoroki Miya in your true form?" I asked.

"Probably. Not that I ever expected such an outcome myself."

Her form as a scylla looked so much like Todoroki Miya because she'd been there to witness the girl's death. That said, much like Berta mentioned, she didn't have Lily's ability for mimicry or anything, so such an outcome had to have been unexpected. Perhaps the kudoku poison jar trials had had an influence on the changes happening to her body.

"Thanks for telling me," I said.

Now that I knew everything, Berta's circumstances seemed so unfortunate. She'd met misfortune beyond her control and had been set up in a way that she would never be rewarded for it. It was far too cruel. If not for the coincidence of going on a journey with us, who shared her sense of values, that misfortune might have gone unnoticed forever.

"Wait... Hang on," I muttered, suddenly caught on a certain detail.

Berta had been set up in a way to never be rewarded. However, now she was traveling with us, a party embodying that lost camaraderie and connection. This was a coincidence due to circumstances beyond our control. That was what I believed.

But was that really true? Berta was here by Kudou's command. She was one of the strongest elements of Kudou's forces, so if only considering her usefulness in battle, it would've been the correct decision to keep her close by. Kudou hadn't done so because he'd called Berta a failure. But was that really true? Now that I'd heard Berta's story, I was starting to doubt it.

Todoroki Miya's death had been a big-enough event to make him the Demon King he was today. It was something he never wanted others to touch upon. And yet, he didn't keep Berta, who'd inherited her form, close to him. There was far too much risk in that. In truth, Berta had exposed her true form to us. It was precisely because Kudou knew that her sensibilities were close to ours that he'd dispatched her as a guard, knowing we wouldn't feel antipathy toward her. He should've been able to predict that she would become attached over time and eventually reveal her secret. He couldn't have been that careless. It was enough for me to question whether there had been some kind of hidden intention behind it.

"Majima Takahiro? What's wrong?"

I looked down at Berta from her back as a certain thought crossed my mind. Maybe—just maybe—had Kudou already realized her circumstances? Naturally, just as Berta said, he likely hadn't realized on the spot. At the very least, during the attack on Fort Tilia, Kudou had truly been under the impression that his power was meant for no more than being the Demon King.

But Kudou knew about me now. During the attack on Fort Tilia, he must've realized that Berta was too honest to participate in any scheming and was therefore different from his other pawns. By combining that knowledge with the fact that she was his first servant, it was entirely possible that he'd reached the truth.

If he knew about the truth behind Berta...then the meaning behind her existence must've changed greatly to him. After all, the reason Kudou had tried

to change himself before things had reached a decisive point had been none other than Todoroki Miya's influence.

As a result of trying to change himself thanks to Todoroki Miya, Kudou had gained the power to make allies of monsters before becoming the Demon King. Berta was the one and only servant he'd recruited during that period. Berta's existence would have been impossible without Todoroki Miya. In a sense, she was a memento of Todoroki Miya.

What did Kudou think about her, then? Would he treat her as a precious companion like she was meant to be in the first place? That was unlikely. What Berta had said earlier could be applied to Kudou too. It was already too late. Kudou had already started down the path of the Demon King. Even if he noticed, he wouldn't go back to a path that'd been lost to him. He was sure to continue running full speed toward his own end, one filled with despair and agony.

In that case, what was Kudou thinking? What had gone through his mind and what decision had he made to place Berta here? Right as I was about to reach the answer, the exploration team cheered. We'd arrived at the door to the third world.

Chapter 17: The Hero and the Dragon

“Oooh! That’s amazing!”

Nakajima cheered and was followed up by the exultant voices of the pursuit force. After getting through the Woodlands, we found an enormous tree. Its trunk was thick enough that hundreds of people linking hands wouldn’t be able to form a circle around it. Its branches reached far and wide as if forming a lid over the sky. It was a divine sight, as well as our destination.

“That’s the entrance to the next world!” I yelled from Berta’s back.

“Okay! Let’s push our way through!” Nakajima shouted, nodding reassuringly.

There were naturally many giants around the tree, but they weren’t much of an enemy to visitors who were already used to dealing with them. There were broken giants surrounding the base of the tree before Nakajima and his comrades even began swinging their weapons. These were the ones Jinguuji’s group and Kudou’s army had defeated on their way through here.

Still, we’d caught up significantly. Jinguuji’s group—or more accurately, the half who’d survived—had been here only about an hour ago. We were closing in steadily.

“H-Hey, where do we go in from?!”

The pursuit force raised their voices in confusion. The building-sized tree had countless burrows in it large enough for a human to enter easily. These were all doors to the third world. However, where they sent us depended on the door. Picking poorly could lose us a lot of time. Conversely, picking correctly could shorten the time we needed to catch up significantly.

“It’s okay! I know the way!” I called out back to them.

Jinguuji’s group had a Dimensional Cornerstone, so they’d sensed that this tree was the entrance to the next world, but I had even more information thanks to connecting to the world itself. I’d already located the entrance that would take us as deep into the next world as possible.

“Circle around clockwise a bit more!”

“Follow Majima’s directions! Let’s clean up the guardians in the area!”

Nakajima gave orders to everyone as I gave directions. The whole group moved clockwise around the tree. The exploration team mowed down the giants in the way, Berta stomped over the fallen giants to leap through the air, and Lily and Shiran guarded us while skillfully using magic to provide support.

“There it is! The grotto above that root!”

“Okay! Let’s jump in!”

“Right on!”

Nakajima and Ishida took the lead as the entire pursuit force jumped through the hole. With that, we made it through the second world and into the third. What unfolded before me was scenery altogether different from the forest we’d been in.

“This is the third world?” Lobivia muttered in my arms.

“A castle...? Looks pretty old.”

We found ourselves in what appeared to be a castle corridor. The sense of scale was off, though. The corridor was vast and the ceiling was high enough that I had to strain my eyes just to see it. It was a castle for giants. What’s more, it wasn’t a fortress like Fort Tilia. It had the appearance of an extravagant palace. However, the ornamentation was extremely old and had weathered considerably. It looked just like an abandoned castle.

“Master.”

“I know.”

At Salvia’s urging, I immediately deployed the Misty Lodge and tried connecting to this world.

“This is getting pretty rough...” I muttered. The deeper we went, the stronger the defenses were.

“How’s it looking, Majima?” Nakajima asked.

“The defenses are tight,” I answered. “I don’t think I can get information on

the place right away. I can at least neutralize the nearby traps, but it'll be hard to grasp a wide area like I have been. I do know about the location of the last door, at least. The one we took was quite the shortcut, so it's one floor above us."

"I see. Well, that's more than enough." Nakajima twirled the radiant sword in his hand, then smiled daringly. "The floor above us? Normally, we'd start by looking for a staircase..." He then pointed the sword at the ceiling. "But there's no need for that. We can just break the ceiling and make a direct passage."

The ceiling above us seemed sturdy. Considering the scale of this giant's castle, the ceiling had to be thick too. It wouldn't be so easily broken. However, possessing the greatest power among the exploration team, it wouldn't be impossible for him. The exploration team members started talking about what to do next as if it were perfectly obvious.

"The ceiling's awfully high. I'm more suited to magic, so I don't think I can jump up."

"A meathead fighter could totally climb their way up. All we need is a rope or something to pull us up."

"Who you callin' a meathead? Usin' magic don't got nothin' to do with bein' smart. I ain't pullin' no one up if you keep that up."

"At worst, we can use wind magic to just blow everyone up there."

"Ugh. I definitely don't wanna. Do it yourself."

Even as Nakajima readied his sword, the others cracked jokes to one another. They had maintained their composure, given the situation. It was reassuring.

However, they'd all forgotten something. In short, any other nicknamed cheater could have come up with such a simple solution and pulled off the same thing.

"What the...?"

As Nakajima was about to unleash his sword at the ceiling, he suddenly grimaced. I sensed it at the same time. It was difficult for me to use the senses of the Misty Lodge, so I'd only noticed last second. Something beneath us was...

“Get away from here!” I yelled.

Lily and Shiran reacted immediately. Berta followed shortly after, having spent so much time with us. However, the exploration team’s bewilderment took precedence.

“Evade!”

Having no connection to the world, Nakajima’s order was a beat too late. The confused exploration team members’ expressions changed—and an instant later, the floor exploded.

“Waaah?!”

A torrent of mana burst through the floor from below. Whoever it was had likely aimed for Nakajima. The dreadful mana he’d been unleashing had definitely made the perfect target. The floor collapsed where the exploration team had been gathered. No matter how strong they were, there wasn’t much that could be done about that. Losing their foothold, they screamed and fell through the hole. In their stead, a huge dragon appeared and spread its wings.



Having somehow gotten out of the way, we were left speechless. The large majority of the exploration team members had fallen down the hole. The only ones left were me, my servants, and one other.

“He really got us,” Nakajima muttered. “Looks like they fell a few floors down.”

In a terrifying display, despite being the target, he’d evaded the attack. From what I could tell, the only ones with the reflexes and judgment to react on the spot had been the three nicknamed cheaters—the Sword of Light, the Multiplex, and the Indomitable Will. However, because Kubota had been close to me, he’d hesitated whether to listen to my instruction and had then been too late to react to Nakajima’s order. Ishida had reacted, but as a clear slugger, he wasn’t particularly dexterous, so he hadn’t gotten out of the way in time.

As a result, everyone except for Nakajima had fallen down. All of them were stronger than the average warrior, so it wasn’t likely anyone had died, but some were probably buried under rubble and it would be difficult for them to get

back up here. Even if this was only temporary, our forces were reduced drastically, and the ferocious dragon responsible for this was right before my eyes.

“Ugh...”

There was no mistaking it. This was the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya. I could feel how abnormal his power was. I’d already known he was strong, being a nicknamed cheater and all, but this felt like there was more to it. I couldn’t really put it into words, but it was like he was off the beaten track even for someone with an inherent ability.

What naturally came to mind was the Mad Beast that Takaya Jun had turned into. I felt a danger from him that was characteristic of those who’d strayed from the path and gotten others involved in their self-destructive behavior. I held my breath as this sense of danger overwhelmed me. But then someone stepped forward.

“No need to be so tense, Majima.” Holding his namesake sword in one hand, he marched forward without a hint of bravado. “You’ve done your job, so the rest is mine.”

Even now, Nakajima acted casually. His confident behavior had me captivated. He was overflowing with confidence, making him seem far larger than he was.

“Just leave it to me,” he said.

He definitely wasn’t all talk. He had tremendous talent and unshakable willpower. This was surely why even the Skanda Iino Yuna placed such unfathomable trust in him as her leader. I wasn’t a resident of this world, I wasn’t even part of the exploration team, but one word still came to mind when I looked at him—hero.

“It’s been a while, Jinguuji.”

As Nakajima called out to it, the tremendously powerful dragon seemed to falter.

“Leader...”

His somewhat hollow voice showed he was clearly shaken. Jinguuji hadn't known that he was being chased. He probably hadn't even imagined that it would be the leader of his former team. That only lasted a moment, though.

"Against you...I guess I can't go holding back."

Although pained and somewhat hazy, there was clear determination in his voice. As a former exploration team member, he knew of the Sword of Light Nakajima Kojiro's power. What's more, judging by his voice, he was extremely exhausted. Ever since breaking through Archbishop Gerd Kruger's desperate last stand, he hadn't had any proper rest and had been forced to search these fabricated worlds. Even a nicknamed cheater had to have been worn down by that. He knew he had no chance against the Sword of Light as he was now.

Nevertheless, he didn't back down. Or maybe he couldn't. Taking a look around, I didn't see the companions he should've had with him. Much like in the second world, they'd likely acted as decoys to allow Jinguuji to get this far.

"I'm...getting everyone home... To that end, I'll..."

Above all else, if an unbeatable opponent was all it took to get him to give up, he would never have set himself on this reckless path to begin with. His resolve to see all the visitors who'd come to this world with him back home was the real thing—maddeningly so. That was why he gave himself to the transformation freely.

"Oooh!"

The dragon roared, its eyes bloodred. Using the Misty Lodge to gather information on my surroundings, I knew what Jinguuji's condition was.

"He's...?!"

His weakened mana amplified right before our eyes. With that transformation, all sense of reason had vanished. He really was the same as the Mad Beast. He'd given up his sanity, yielding everything to his maddening wish. He could no longer communicate. There was no point trying to convince him that he was being tricked.

"Grrr..."

Jinguuji had transformed into the Evil Dragon, intent only on destroying the world. The power he had far surpassed what the average visitor could obtain. The strength of his wish and the will in his heart was simply on a different level. Everything he existed only for his wish and nothing else.

“Grooooooh!”

The Evil Dragon moved. A torrent of mana surged from its mouth. The strike looked strong enough to flatten a mountain—and here it was being aimed at a single person. However, the young man in its path kept his cool.

“So that’s your choice.”

He faced it with a single sword. This was no simple steel blade, however. It was a shortsword created by the Sword of Light, the strongest member of the exploration team. He brandished it and unleashed all its power at once.

“Haaaaaah!”

The dragon’s breath collided with the hero’s strike. My eyes shot open. The Evil Dragon was being pushed back. The torrent of mana was forced aside, the waves from the collision creating cracks along the wall. Having taken a hit from the earlier blast from below, the ceiling started crumbling. If we weren’t behind Nakajima, we would likely have been blown away.

“Graaah?!”

In the next instant, the Evil Dragon screamed. The glowing radiance pierced through the torrent of mana and sent the dragon’s enormous body flying backward.

“No way...”

The Evil Dragon slammed into the castle wall with a thunderous boom. Its scales were tough, so it hadn’t suffered a deep wound, but burning smoke rose from its body. It didn’t seem real. The young man casually relaxed his stance once more.

“Jinguuji. I won’t deny your will.”

He created a new sword in his palm and spoke with all the majesty of a true hero. I recalled that Iino had once told me that he always respected the will of

others. Even when people had left the exploration team, he'd left the decision up to them. His stance was no different here.

"It was your choice. This is the path you decided to go down. If you can force your way through me, then prove it."

"Graaaah...!"

The Evil Dragon's answer was simple. It flapped its wings and spat out another torrent of mana.

"Like that'll work."

Naturally, just as before, the attack didn't reach Nakajima. He intercepted it with his newly created sword. However, the Evil Dragon's goal wasn't to crush its enemy.

"You've got it wrong! Nakajima, Jinguuji is—"

"Oh!"

Nakajima also seemed to notice, but it was too late. Using the time Nakajima spent intercepting the attack, the Evil Dragon's massive body flew up into the hole above us. Nakajima immediately stretched his sword out far and swung, but he only clipped off the end of the dragon's tail.

The Evil Dragon vanished into the hole above us. It was making its way to destroy the Dimensional Cornerstones. Jinguuji's ego seemed to be gone, but his objective remained within that dragon. Rather, that was the only thing left, which was why it had prioritized that over fighting. That said, the Sword of Light wasn't one to take this lying down.

"You won't get away!"

Nakajima crouched down and jumped up like a spring, making it all the way to the next floor. The two vanished from my sight in no time.

Chapter 18: Misfortune

After the short and intense fight, we were left behind on our own.

“Master!” Lily shouted, her eyes pleading for a command.

“After them!” I said after a moment’s thought.

We would be safer waiting here for the exploration team or Kouzu’s group to return. However, it was possible the Evil Dragon would reach the Dimensional Cornerstones before then. Nakajima definitely possessed tremendous power, but unfortunately, he lacked my internal compass. If he lost sight of the Evil Dragon, it would be over. Freed from pursuit, the creature would effortlessly destroy the Dimensional Cornerstones. We couldn’t count on anyone else to be able to stop it.

“Mm! Got it!”

Everyone reacted to my orders quickly. Lily leaped high into the air, turned her hand into a feeler, and managed to land in the hole high up in the ceiling.

“Shiran!”

“Right away!”

Shiran responded to her call and used the feeler as a rope to climb up. During that time, Berta jumped toward the wall with the rest of us on her back, then kicked off to jump even higher, using her tentacles to grip the hole’s edge. Berta made her way through just as Lily finished pulling Shiran up. We all came out into the hallway on the upper floor.

“Where did that bastard go?” Lobivia muttered menacingly, glancing around for her prey.

Jinguuji was the bitter enemy who’d destroyed her home. Unlike when we’d met Okazaki, there was no need for her to hold it in. It was reasonable for her emotions to run hot. Regardless, she didn’t charge off and instead focused on guarding me. She had more than enough restraint.

“That way,” I said, stroking her head.

Relying on my connection to this world, I had a grasp of Nakajima and Jinguuji’s location. Even without that, it was easy to glean their general direction from the traces of destruction. They were apparently having an intense battle while on the move. It would be a simple matter to follow them.

“Shall we?” Berta asked, thinking the same thing.

“Hang on a sec,” I said.

“What is it?”

“We might be able to cut them off.”

Having transformed into the Evil Dragon, Jinguuji was headed straight toward his destination. That wasn’t equivalent to using the optimal route, though. He had a Dimensional Cornerstone, so he knew which way to go, but seeing that we were indoors, heading there in a straight line could lead him down inconvenient detours.

This was where we had the advantage. Some time had passed, so the Misty Lodge was slowly encroaching on this world. At this point, I could identify the shortest route to the end. Not having the exploration team was a problem, but we had no choice but to take the risk.

“Please go down the path I point out,” I said.

“Understood. Let’s go,” Berta replied, and just as she was about to start running...

“Wait up!”

Someone climbed up from the lower floor and ran over to us.

“Kubota. That was fast,” I said.

“The guys down there can handle themselves,” Kubota replied, grinning.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m your guard. Our leader commanded me. I gotta do my job right.”

There was no hesitation in his voice. I could feel how tremendous an influence Nakajima had on the exploration team members. Recalling his heroic

mannerisms from earlier, that only made sense. In all likelihood, the only ones left in the exploration team were those who worshipped Nakajima. Thinking back on it, Iino and Shimazu were relatively composed despite the immense trust they placed in him. Kubota immediately pulled back his smile and turned a serious look my way.

“So? Where’d our leader go?” he asked.

“He’s chasing Jinguuji. I’m thinking of taking the shortest route to cut them off.”

“I see...” Kubota sank into thought for a moment. “In that case, it sounds like I should go with you guys.”

“I couldn’t ask for more.”

I’d figured he might go after Nakajima on his own, so this was a little unexpected. Naturally, I was grateful to have the support of a nicknamed cheater.

“Right on, it’s decided then,” Kubota said.

“Let’s hurry.”

Now joined by Kubota, we started making our way through the third world.



Unlike the outdoor regions of the first and second worlds, the third went through the interior of an ancient castle. Regardless, guardian giants were all over. We didn’t have time to waste, so I’d given orders to bulldoze our way through. Our encounter rate with them was pretty low, however, as there didn’t seem to be many guardians in this world.

Kubota took on the role of our vanguard, so we got through the occasional battles without any problems. His ability was the Multiplex. He could create five of himself at most. Simply having that many fighters at the level of a warrior was a huge boon. Whatever he couldn’t handle on his own, Lily and Shiran more than made up for.

I focused on grasping the layout of the world using the Misty Lodge. As a result, I discovered that this place was something like a castle in the sky. There

was nothing around it. It was possible this enormous castle was floating in the middle of a great void with nothing beneath it. It looked like a flat disc on the outside, but that was merely an illusion of scale. The castle's spires and ramparts reached toward the skies with ample ambition. If I had to guess, in terms of surface area, it was around the size of the imperial capital. Despite covering so much land, the castle itself was around thirty stories high. We were on the sixteenth floor and our destination was near the center of the whole castle. The Evil Dragon and Nakajima were having a fierce battle as they steadily made their way there.

"What's wrong, Takahiro?" Lobivia asked, clinging to Berta's back much like I was.

"Nothing serious... I'm just wondering if Nakajima is all right."

"Mm. That Jinguuji guy was no joke."

Her voice remained dark, but Lobivia evaluated her enemy clearly and with no presumption. I had the same opinion. That was why there was something I had to say.

"Sorry, Kubota," I told the instance of him he was keeping close to me to protect me. "For letting Nakajima run off on his own, I mean."

"Hm?" He turned to me wide-eyed. "Aaah. That been bothering you? Ha ha. Don't worry about it."

"But Jinguuji has thrown away all caution. Knowing that he's facing Nakajima, I believe he's squeezed out more than his full power."

I didn't want to make him uneasy, but it was best to share what information we had. That was what I thought, but Kubota's reaction remained carefree.

"Even so, ain't no way our leader's losing."

"But Kubota, you didn't see the Evil Dragon, right?"

"Nope. But what about it?" he said with a daring smile. "I can say it without a doubt. Our leader ain't losing."

"But I'm telling you..."

"He ain't losing. It's impossible. You're the one who knows nothing about

Nakajima Kojirou.”

His tone bore an unexpected steel. Seeing me at a loss for words, Kubota gave me a cheeky smile.

“Well, I get how you feel,” he added. “Still, it’s pointless to worry about that guy.”

There was clear conviction in his voice. I did of course know that he had unfathomable trust in Nakajima. I’d had the chance to speak with him in these fabricated worlds, after all.

“Our leader’s on a totally different level. He’s just, like, different from us.

“It’s like he lives in an entirely different world.

“No matter what happens, I’m gonna follow that guy. I’ve already decided.”

That was what he’d said. The situation hadn’t been this bad, though. Now, Nakajima was all alone in this dangerous world fighting against the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya—a man who’d thrown away everything he was to turn into the Evil Dragon.

“You said he was amazing even back in our world, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Kubota answered proudly. “He was amazing. There was nothing he couldn’t do. Some guys were even saying that it’s ’cause of him that the rest of us got mixed up in being teleported to this world. They were half joking, of course.”

“We got mixed up in it?”

“Yeah. Oh right, guess you never really talked about that stuff. Anyway, you’ve at least seen it in some movies, manga, or anime, yeah? The kind where a legendary hero appears in another world and saves it. In stories like that, sometimes the protag has special qualities. It’s pretty common, yeah?”

“Right...”

Now that he mentioned it, I might’ve seen something of the like. Maybe it was common. Mikihiko would be more familiar with recent trends and might have a different opinion, though. I felt like he’d mentioned something like that when we’d once talked about cheaters, but I didn’t really remember. Either

way, we were faced with reality right now. Kubota had to understand that much. Did that mean there were those who saw Nakajima as so special that they could make jokes like that? Looking back at what I'd witnessed with my own eyes, it did make sense.

"You really trust him. I guess you have since our school days?" I asked.

"Not as much as I do now. He did feel pretty distant and all... He had that kinda personality, so I just felt that way. After coming here, I joined the exploration team's upper brass, so he suddenly seemed a lot closer."

Kubota seemed like the unreserved type, so this was a little unexpected. Or maybe I had it the wrong way around. It was more appropriate to say that Nakajima was so far beyond the norm that even Kubota felt a sense of distance between them. The exploration team's leader was transcendental among a transcendental group. Faced with the potential end of the world, having him on our side was the greatest blessing. We couldn't rely entirely on him, though. We had to prepare ourselves to handle any situation.

"It's the critical moment..."

The operation was almost over. And just like that, we finally reached our target.



Our destination was a vast bowl-shaped room. Four human-sized crystals floated within, revolving slowly around the center.

"What's that?" Kubota asked. "I sense mana in them."

"Seems those stones are keeping the castle floating," I answered, using the knowledge transmitted from the Misty Lodge.

"Seems like an awfully important place. They dangerous? I'd rather not go splat the moment we go in."

"The defensive systems seem to be functioning, but nothing will happen as long as we leave the crystals alone."

"Okay. Then let's hurry ahead."

We went down one of the four long staircases that stretched down to the

center of the room from each side. Right in the center was a small stone shrine.

“This is our target, right?” Lily asked, coming to a stop at the door.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

This was the storage vault for the Dimensional Cornerstones that managed and maintained the whole world. This time, we’d had to force our way through fabricated worlds using the Misty Lodge, but when going through the proper procedures, it was apparently possible to teleport straight into this shrine.

“Seems Nakajima and Jinguuji aren’t here yet,” I muttered quietly. “We barely made it.”

In the next instant, the Evil Dragon flew into the room using a different entrance. An explosive amount of mana suddenly flooded the vast space. Immediately following that, an intense light shone behind the Evil Dragon.

“You think you’ll get away?!”

“Gaaaaah?!”

The Sword of Light came down and slammed into the Evil Dragon’s back. The exploration team’s leader had made it here too. How much destructive force did that elongated blade have concentrated within it? The Evil Dragon’s enormous body crashed into the ground, rumbling the entire room as it screamed.

“Amazing...”

I unintentionally raised my voice. The Evil Dragon was covered in wounds. What were supposed to be extremely sturdy scales were burned and torn off all over. Its right arm had been lopped off at the shoulder, and its tail was missing. The earlier attack had also cut off half of one of its wings. It was probably impossible for it to fly now. Perhaps having taken a vicious strike to the face, it was missing its right eye too.

In contrast, Nakajima wasn’t really hurt. His equipment was just a little frayed. It seemed the evil dragon hadn’t landed a clean hit with its breath, fangs, or claws. The sight of him jumping into this room swinging his sword down heartily was truly majestic. I knew how amazing the Evil Dragon was, so this totally one-

sided outcome was a shock. Did that mean Kubota was right?

“Graaaah!”

Regardless, the Evil Dragon didn’t give up. Ignoring its wounds, it immediately kicked off the ground, charging toward the center of the room—to the shrine where we were standing. I’d predicted this, though. I immediately gave my orders.

“Fire!”

“Hyaaaah!”

Lily held up her black spear. At the same time, both she and Shiran deployed glyphs. Both were using wind magic. Lily prioritized amplifying the power of her throw, while Shiran controlled its wild trajectory. The shrill sound of metal tearing through the air was followed by half of the Evil Dragon’s neck being torn away. All that power had been focused on the tip of the spear. These two had the strength to fight a visitor individually, so when they combined forces, a single spear transformed into a terrifying bullet. And that wasn’t all.

“All right! I’m joining in!”

It was Kubota. Having multiplied into three, he deployed three glyphs. They were all grade 4 magic. Having predicted the Evil Dragon’s arrival, he’d had enough time to prepare a triplex of blazes, burning the Evil Dragon’s body horribly. It lost its momentum and crashed into the ground with a tremendous thud.

“Right on! We won!”

Kubota pumped his fist as he watched the Evil Dragon crash. I also breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t going to be able to move around much after that. Even if it forced itself to get up, we could probably strike it right back down. Our pursuit operation had come to a safe end. All that was left was to decide what to do with the Evil Dragon. We did manage to capture it alive, so it was best to leave the decision to Nakajima. And just as that thought crossed my mind...

“G-Gaaah...”

I heard a bloodcurdling cry. Despite being wounded beyond recovery, the Evil

Dragon hadn't given up. Perhaps it was better to say it no longer possessed the capability to. In contrast, we weren't being the least bit careless. If it spat out a torrent of mana, we could dodge it. Lily and Shiran could probably even block it. A second later, Nakajima would strike it down with his Sword of Light. That would end things.

I'd made a miscalculation, though. The wounded dragon was no longer thinking properly. Had it retained its sanity, it definitely wouldn't have done something so foolish.

"Graaaaah!"

"Wha?!"

Driven by some unknowable madness, the Evil Dragon did the unimaginable: it spat out a torrent of mana at the ceiling. There was no way such a meaningless attack would achieve anything. By all rights, that should have been the case. However, by sheer coincidence, the attack pierced one of the crystals floating above us. Fortune seemed dead set on depriving us of our victory. The crystals weren't inherently dangerous. So long as we didn't touch them, the castle would continue floating. Conversely, if we attacked them...

"Dammit!"

I felt goose bumps as the defense mechanism kicked in. The traps up to this point were meant to expel those who didn't have the right qualifications. This one was meant to slaughter those who would bring harm to this world. It had far more lethal force behind it. I'd neutralized all the traps beforehand, but I hadn't touched any traps that shouldn't have been activated. I couldn't interfere with the world fast enough to stop it.

"Master!"

"Takahiro!"

My companions screamed as they desperately tried to defend me in their own ways. And then, the tables turned utterly and completely.

Chapter 19: Gerd's Legacy

Getting out of the carriage in front of a historic-looking mansion, Katou Mana took a look around. Archbishop Gerd Kruger's home was located fairly close to the grand cathedral. There didn't seem to be anybody in the area. Harrison's arrival had been announced beforehand and all people in the area had been cleared out. Gerd had apparently instructed his family to do this in the case of his death. It was likely a means of keeping the truth about the world from being carelessly exposed. Seeing that Gerbera was accompanying the group, this was convenient.

"Okay then, Mana. I'll wait out here."

"Yes, please do."

Mitarai Aoi had followed the group here and was once more made to wait outside. Katou Mana felt guilty about this, but the girl seemed to be firing herself up with a sense of duty.

"Let's do our best as guards!"

She slammed her fist into her palm and spoke to the knight who'd come along with them. She seemed to be having fun, so Katou Mana decided not to put a damper on her spirits.

Everyone else entered the mansion. Gordon was the one pushing Harrison's wheelchair. He'd taken command during the marshal's absence, but had rushed over once he'd heard Harrison would be visiting Gerd's mansion. Having come here a few times before, Harrison guided the group to Gerd's private room. This wasn't where their objective was, though.

"This is a magic tool that Lord Gerd entrusted to me," Harrison said, pulling out a key. "In the case that he passed away from an unfortunate accident or disease, he left it to me so that his knowledge wasn't lost. This is the key. As insurance to prevent anyone from coming to steal it, it was set to be impossible to use while Lord Gerd was alive."

Harrison closed his eyes in grief for a brief moment, then poured his mana into the key.

“Hmm...” Gerbera muttered in admiration. A staircase had suddenly appeared in the floor leading down to the basement. “I see, I see. How impressive. This isn’t simply an illusion hiding a staircase, is it?”

“You can tell?” Harrison said. “Exactly. This magic tool creates the space itself.”

“Is that different from creating another world?” Gerbera asked, narrowing her eyes.

“The fundamental theory is probably the same, but it has nothing to do with the Dimensional Cornerstones. This is a relic of salvation that one of the saviors of the past created. It has extremely limited power, but it’s more than enough to hide top secret documents.”

Just like he said, the staircase was short and led to a tiny room, not some vast world. Turning on the lamp, many books could be seen lining the walls.

“Are these all secret documents?” Rose asked, taking a look around. “If so, it’ll take quite some time to investigate them.”

“It would if we had to read them all,” Harrison said as he directed Gordon to start searching the bookshelves. “But that probably isn’t necessary. Lord Gerd mentioned that the records gathered in this room are compilations of the truth. There should be one that sums up everything for a successor to go through.”

After a short search, Gordon pulled out a book.

“That’s it,” Harrison said, flipping through the pages as he nodded. “This is Lord Gerd’s handwriting. He must’ve been in the middle of it. It looks about eighty percent full.”

Just maybe, Gerd had intended to let Harrison read this once it was done.

“I suppose I’ll have to fill in the rest with my knowledge... For now, let’s check its contents.”

Harrison started reading through the book in his lap. It was relatively thick. Even if he was skimming things he already knew, it would take some time to get

through. With that in mind, Katou Mana took a casual look around, then suddenly cocked her head. This was because Rose had suddenly turned to look at the door they'd come through.

"Rose? What's wrong?" Mana asked.

"Just now..."

Rose had a hand to her heart. Seeing her like that, Katou Mana had an idea why. These two girls had spent so much time together ever since the days Rose had been no more than a featureless mannequin. Now that they were connected by the mental path, it was simple for them to know what the other was thinking.

"Did you sense something?" Mana asked. "Something to do with Majima-senpai?"

Having only recently formed a connection with the mental path, much like Gerbera, Katou Mana wasn't very good at parsing information from its source. In that regard, Rose had a relatively high affinity with the mental path. Still, considering the extreme distance and the fact that he was in an entirely different world, it was unrealistic that she'd sensed something through it.

"No... It must be my imagination," Rose said.

"Is that so?"

Katou Mana was a little bothered by this. Rose was extremely dedicated to protecting her master, so it wouldn't be strange for her to be sensitive to his being in danger. Katou Mana was anxious that something had happened to him.

Using the communication device she had, it was entirely possible to check on his safety. That said, it was possible she would get in the way of their operation, so they'd decided that she would only contact him in an emergency. She contemplated what to do, but didn't get to act.

"What...?"

She heard a deep groan and looked up. Harrison was frozen, staring at the book in his lap.

"I can't believe it... But I suppose it's possible?"

He was mumbling to himself. His eyes scanned over the same page multiple times.

“There’s a *precedent*. There’s no guarantee *he* was the only one. I can see that. It also explains my doubts. But if that’s the case, it’s far too...”

“Hey, what’s wrong? Harrison, talk to us,” Gerbera said, irritated by his incomprehensible mumbling.

Harrison finally came back to his senses. He looked up from the book, his expression horribly stiff. His dry lips slowly parted and said one word.

“Conduit.”

“What...?”

“This text speaks of a being named as such.”

His voice was hoarse and had an ominous tone to it. Conduit—this being had a man of Harrison’s caliber trembling.

“It was only ever proposed as a theory,” he continued as everyone looked at him. “The first savior found out about the truth of the world and intervened. He established the world’s current state, so in a sense, you can say he created our world. That is why he is an object of great faith. However, speaking of a Conduit is considered a horrible blasphemy.”

To the people of this world, the first savior was beyond special. It was perfectly natural to deify him. Even those who knew about the truth of the world typically viewed him as special. They’d witnessed the grand enterprise he’d gone through to create the foundation that continued to support the world to this day. Such a way of thinking sometimes narrowed one’s viewpoint, though. Despite possessing peerless ability and having accomplished such a grand endeavor, the first savior had still been no more than a visitor who’d been granted an inherent ability. The one who’d proposed this theory had likely observed the world with utter composure. And thus, they’d come to realize a certain danger.

“Not only did the first savior find out the truth behind this world, he had the power to interfere with it. Rather, it was precisely because he possessed such power that he found the truth. Those who possess such abilities are called

Conduits.”

Harrison’s finger slid across the page of the book.

“So, if the first savior is perceived as no more than another visitor—this isn’t necessarily a privilege only he possesses.”

“Meaning there are others who possess the same power?” Katou Mana asked, finding this unbelievable.

Thinking about it carefully, it was certainly possible. Excluding warriors, no two visitors possessed the same ability. However, they could possess very similar ones. For example, in strict terms, Malvina’s husband and the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya had different abilities; however, they both transformed into dragons. In the same way, it wouldn’t be strange for someone to possess an ability much like the first savior’s that could form a connection to the world itself. If so...

“No way...” Katou Mana gulped. “You mean someone with the disposition to be a Conduit is among the many visitors who’ve appeared in this age?”

Harrison’s story pointed to the possibility. It sounded unlikely, but Katou Mana hadn’t forgotten why they were here in the first place.

“Is that how the person who gave Jinguuji Tomoya information knows about the truth of the world? Is that also why they know where the Dimensional Cornerstones are...?”

They’d come to this secret room to find clues as to how Jinguuji Tomoya had gained information related to the truth of the world. This was the answer. If the one who’d informed Jinguuji Tomoya was a Conduit, it wouldn’t have mattered how well Harrison and Gerd had hidden the truth. After all, they would’ve been able to reach the truth on their own, much like the first savior had. No amount of concealment would’ve made a difference.

Thinking of it like that, the biggest question lingering around this incident could be solved. It could, but... In that case, this was the worst-case scenario. Even Harrison, who possessed power beyond the majority of saviors, had problems manipulating a Dimensional Cornerstone. But if a Conduit possessed the same power as the first savior, it was highly likely they would have full

mastery of one. That same Conduit had given Jinguuji Tomoya information about the Dimensional Cornerstones and had sent him into those fabricated worlds. If that hadn't been a crime committed just to take delight in watching it unfold, this was really, really bad.

“Let's call Majima-senpai.”

Jinguuji Tomoya and the Conduit were linked. If so, it was possible this Conduit was making their way to the Dimension Door. No—worst case, they were hiding among Jinguuji's friends. If so, Majima Takahiro had to be informed immediately. With that in mind, Katou Mana didn't hesitate to pull out the communication device.



Katou Mana's apprehensions that this was the worst-case scenario were perfectly reasonable. For example, the Lord of Darkness Kudou Riku had succeeded in infiltrating the fabricated world by matching his timing with Majima Takahiro's entry. There was also the fact that the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji had slipped in among Jinguuji's friends. It was more than possible that a Conduit had infiltrated those worlds too. That said, jumping straight to the conclusion, that wasn't what had happened. It wasn't what had happened at all. If only that were the case...

After all, that wouldn't have been the *worst*-case scenario.

The *real* worst-case scenario was happening right now. Having made their way through three worlds, they'd reached their destination. Right after thinking they'd cornered the Evil Dragon...

“Huh...?”

Who was it who raised their voice in shock? It'd happened just a few seconds ago. The Evil Dragon's unbelievable attack had coincidentally pierced one of the crystals that was keeping this castle floating, causing the defense mechanisms to activate. It was a horrible coincidence. That was what everyone in Majima Takahiro's group believed. However, they'd misunderstood one thing.

Normally, there was no good or bad inherent in coincidence. People simply labeled these instances arbitrarily. It was therefore possible to reverse that

label in hindsight. For Majima Takahiro's group, this was a good coincidence—even if it opened the worst door possible.

“It stopped...?”

The defense mechanism wasn't moving; nobody was hurt. However, it hadn't been immobile this whole time. It had started up in an attempt to slaughter everyone in the room and then come to an immediate stop.

“Why...?”

Majima Takahiro muttered in astonishment. Being the only one capable of interfering with the mechanisms of this world, he knew exactly what had happened. Something had interfered with this world's defense mechanism. Interference from the outside had neutralized the activation of the terrifying and indiscriminate attack.

However, despite being the only one capable of that, Majima Takahiro hadn't been responsible. His power wouldn't have stopped it in such a short time. What had interfered was a power tens, or even hundreds, of times more powerful than his. Fear of such an absurd being paralyzed his mind with shock. He spoke the name of the one responsible for this with trembling lips.

“Nakajima...?”

The boy who'd silenced the defense mechanism of this fabricated world looked back down at him with cold eyes.



Majima Takahiro's entire group was completely frozen as they stared up at the boy standing far in the distance. They couldn't put their thoughts together properly. That only made sense. After all, if what they were thinking was true—everyone here was going to die.

“Senpai...? Senpai? What's wrong, Senpai?!”

As that went on, Katou Mana's voice played over the long-distance communication device Majima Takahiro was carrying. She'd come upon a certain possibility while acting independently of the group. She'd discovered that a Conduit—a visitor who had the power to interfere with the world itself—

was pulling the strings behind this entire incident.

Nobody had the leisure to respond, though. Without even being given the chance to respond, the signal cut out. It had been forced to. Majima Takahiro had once interfered with Kaneki Mikihiro's Aerial Knights inside a fabricated world. This had been accomplished far more naturally. The boy who'd done it pushed back his bangs.

"How can this be...?"

Within the perfect silence, his murmur reached everyone's ears with strange clarity.

"This is the worst."

There was clear grief in his voice. For some reason, just listening to him had shivers running down everyone's spines.

"How could the curtain get pulled back in such a boring way?"

Nobody knew what he was grieving over. On the contrary, nobody could figure out what he was even thinking. Why had he instigated Jinguuji? And why had he gotten in Jinguuji's way? Was his friendly behavior all fake? What was true and what was a lie? Nothing made sense. But that wasn't the problem right now. Nakajima Kojirou didn't deny it. That was the important part.

"You're the mastermind...!"

In that instant, the tables turned utterly and completely.

The hero turned into a calamity.

Hope turned into despair.

Life turned into death.

Everyone tried to do something, but it was useless.

"Haaah... How boring..."

He held up his Sword of Light.

"It's over. It's all over."

The inversion of their valiant leader into a conniving villain did nothing to

diminish the truth of his power. This was the world's strongest strike.
Everything in sight was engulfed in light.



Chapter 20: A Chance Meeting in the Abyss

With that, everything was over.

The path Majima Takahiro had walked all this time...

The unbroken history of this world...

It was all burned away by an overwhelming light.

The current circumstances were a mystery.

Everything came to a sudden end while still cloaked in shadows.

He must have found this unreasonable. Maybe he even felt anger. But that was how the world worked. This was reality. Ever since setting out in this world, ever since stumbling into that cave in a miserable state, he should've been well aware of this eventuality.

"Yes. That's why. If you have something you want to protect—you'll have to change the world."

"If you have the resolve for that, then awaken."

"Save your friends. Save the world."



"Master!"

"Ah?!"

I jolted upright.

"Wh-What...?"

I didn't know what was going on. I looked around in a daze as someone suddenly embraced me.

"Aaah. Thank goodness. You opened your eyes."

"Salvia...?"

Just as I straightened myself up, she squeezed me tight from the side. Salvia seemed to be crying. I accepted her embrace as I remained in a daze.

“Is this...my inner world?”

The world of light, or perhaps the mental path itself—my inner world, which had been reduced to no more than the school grounds.

“What happened...?”

I felt helpless and confused as I stood in the middle of the schoolyard. I had no idea why I was here or what had just happened.

Right... What had just happened? The hero of the exploration team, the Sword of Light Nakajima Kojirou, was the mastermind behind everything. I honestly couldn't believe it. Even thinking back on it now, it didn't make sense. He'd been so serious about this pursuit operation. I'd sensed true devotion and trust toward him from his comrades in the exploration team. He'd even faced me, someone accompanied by monsters, with an amicable attitude. I'd never once felt like any of that was a lie. And yet...

The truth was the truth.

“I have to accept it... We need to move on.”

I focused on my breathing and got my thoughts moving. For now, I decided to set aside questions of motives and such. First, I needed a grasp of the situation. I didn't know why, but Nakajima Kojirou was an enemy. When I'd unveiled his identity, he'd attacked me. It seemed I'd lost consciousness from that and had come to my own world.

“Wait, hang on... What happened while I was out?”

“Master?”

I felt like I'd heard something after passing out and before waking up in this world.

“Save your friends. Save the world.”

That was it. I was sure. Had it just been my imagination?

“Sorry, Salvia. Can you let me go?”

I had a premonition. I straightened myself up and had Salvia back away. About ten seconds had passed since I woke up. I immediately recovered from the bewilderment of suddenly being attacked and waking up somewhere else entirely. It was nothing to be proud of, but this came from experience. This wasn't my first time being on the verge of death.

"Masss—ter!"

"Yeah, I know."

I nodded back to Asarina and turned around. The mysterious young man with dark brown hair was standing there, the one I'd seen in this world twice before. However, I could tell right away that something was different. After all, he returned my gaze. This was the first time he recognized my presence. Maybe now we could finally come to a mutual understanding.

"Hi there," the man said. "We've finally connected. It seems you somehow made it in time."



"First, you may rest at ease," the man said. "There's no need to worry about the passage of time in here. Your companions aren't yet dead. Even if we talk in here, it'll be fine for a while longer."

Something was chilling about his voice. Before this had inspired wariness, but things were different this time. I felt a deep dread, as if I were peeking into a bottomless abyss, yet still knew he bore me no animosity.

The difference was likely because the awkward incapability of understanding him I'd felt before was gone. The penetrating cold wasn't from malice or animosity. It seemed this was a property of his very existence. Now, I was capable of observing him properly without an obscuring veil. I even felt sincerity in his attitude toward me.

He didn't seem to be lying about the passage of time either. I felt he was interfering with this world in some way. He wasn't an enemy. I still didn't know what was going on, but at the very least, it was worth talking to him. I exchanged looks with Salvia as she nestled against me, then spoke to the man.

"You're rather talkative today," I said. "You're awfully different from last

time.”

It seemed natural for me to point this out, but the man shook his head.

“No, I haven’t changed at all. You’re the one who’s changed.”

“I have...?” I said, not quite sure what he was implying. “How have I changed?”

“To put it simply...I suppose your existence has reached the next stage. You’ve approached the core of the world. That’s why you’re capable of speaking with me now.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying at all.”

“No, you should be able to,” he declared. I fell silent. There was a strange alluring quality to his words. “Even if your mind doesn’t understand, your soul should know. You should know that this world, which can be said to be your very self, has been continuously sinking into the depths.”

I could tell that Salvia gasped right next to me. I couldn’t say anything to deny him. Every time I came here, I always felt like I was sinking deeper and deeper. Also, the world itself gradually sank each time my ability evolved.

“So, have you ever thought about what awaits at the bottom?”

This very question felt like it was inviting us into the abyss. I’d never thought about it before, but he did have a point. If this world was truly sinking, then it only made sense that it would eventually reach the bottom. And at the bottom—in other words, the final destination of my ability—was none other than...

“The Sea of Unconsciousness. It is the vast ocean where all human consciousness mixes together. In your world, it is also called the collective unconscious.”

“Collective unconscious...?”

“Human consciousness is connected inside the depths of unconsciousness. That stratum is called the collective unconscious. Come on, as you are now, you should be able to tell.”

At his urging, I directed my gaze and consciousness beyond this world. I focused on where this world was sinking toward each time my ability evolved. I

focused on what was still so far away. And what I sensed in the deep abyss...

“Ugh... Ah...?!”

A fear I had never experienced before assaulted my entire being. It felt like my skull melted and my brain spilled out. It felt so real. I was aware that my very existence was on the verge of coming apart. Sensing chills from a primordial danger to my being, my consciousness was blown away.

“Master?!”

“Sttter?!”

I heard shocked and panicking voices. Before I knew it, I was on my knees. Still in a daze, I slammed my hands on the ground to barely keep myself from fainting. It felt like the whole world was swaying. It’d only lasted an instant, but the shock still affected me.

“Ugh...”

Even the simple act of trying to remember it had me breaking out in a cold sweat. There was no other way of describing that than the Sea of Unconsciousness. Within that vast ocean, a single human’s mind was no more than a droplet. There was no good or evil. My sense of self felt like it would dissolve in an instant and vanish. I somehow managed to maintain my consciousness as Salvia held my shoulder and raised a brow.

“What did you do?!” she roared at the man.

She was seething. It was a rare sight from her. Still, the man didn’t look particularly bothered.

“Be at ease,” he said. “I’m sure it was nothing. Just looking isn’t particularly dangerous.” There was affection in his eyes as he returned her gaze. “Any ordinary person could be crippled by the experience, though.”

“How dare—”

“Calm down. It’s fine. At least, he will be. If not, he wouldn’t have reached this far down to be able to speak with me. Well, by the looks of it, it was a little early, but he definitely has the qualifications. At his level, he’ll be fine.”

“What...?” I bit back the fear that had threatened my existence and faced the

friendly man. “What are you?”

Someone I couldn’t even speak to unless I reached the core of the world—the Sea of Unconsciousness—couldn’t possibly be normal.

“Aah. It’s about time I answered that question,” he said. “I am the first savior. I currently serve as the world’s custodian.”



“The first savior...?”

I couldn’t hide the shock I felt at his unexpected identity. The first savior—the man who’d discovered the truth behind this world and had actualized a mechanism to maintain it to the present day. He was a legend from thousands of years ago.

“H-Hang on a sec,” I said, unable to digest this information. “How is the first savior still alive?”

“I know how to change the way of the world,” the man replied cheerfully. “I’m a Conduit. Still, I simply didn’t have enough talent or time. When I made the connection, I became a captive of the Sea of Unconsciousness.”

He smoothly spoke of how the first savior had met his end, something that wasn’t mentioned in any of the legends.

“Thanks to that, my plan was foiled. I meant to have the management of the world through the Dimensional Cornerstones be flexible to match the ages. Before I could finish setting that system up, I became a captive of the world, and so was only able to leave behind fragmentary knowledge. On the contrary, due to the world’s military forces weakening because of my sudden absence, the required knowledge was lost amid intense fighting. I prepared several backup plans, but because of unforeseen accidents, they weren’t quite ready and largely failed to accomplish anything.”

The mechanisms of this world were relatively stable, but not unshakable. That was why Harrison and the Holy Church had to work so desperately to stabilize it. However, those mechanisms were apparently not what their creator had envisioned.

“Still, getting caught in the Sea of Unconsciousness isn’t all bad things. I took the empty seat of the world’s custodian by chance and am even able to come in contact with you like this, after all.”

“With me...?”

“That’s right.” The first savior nodded. “The world is facing an unprecedented crisis.”

“You mean Nakajima Kojirou...? You called it being a Conduit, right? He’s one too?”

“That’s right. Depending on the circumstances, a Conduit can become a dreadful calamity. At this point, he should be called the Calamitous King.”

“Calamitous King...”

Having been the first Conduit who’d created the mechanism to stabilize this world, he understood the truth behind this threat.

“A Conduit is much like an independent Dimensional Cornerstone,” he continued gravely. “To be more precise, a Dimensional Cornerstone is a magic tool with the same power as a Conduit. He can’t do whatever he wants right now because of the Dimensional Cornerstones and the laws I imposed within them, but if the Dimensional Cornerstones fall into Nakajima Kojirou’s hands and he destroys them, the entire world will degrade to being the Calamitous King’s toy.”

“His toy... That can’t...”

“I’m not exaggerating. That man possesses that much power.”

The words of the one who’d decided the way of the world were heavy.

“Shall I put it in simpler terms?” he added. “The Calamitous King will become the world’s god. There is nothing a perfect Conduit cannot do, after all. That is, of course, only a problem if he doesn’t care about the world’s balance and the harm inflicted on its people.”

“He’ll become a god...?”

I felt a chill run down my spine. There was still so much I didn’t know, but considering the probability that Heaven’s Voice had been manipulating Jinguuji,

it was entirely possible that the Conduit and Heaven's Voice were the same person, or at least working together. It was bad enough for Kudou to claim that Heaven's Voice simply delighted in watching their crimes unfold and sought ruin. If someone like that could do whatever they wanted with the world, there was no telling what could happen. At the very least, it was hard to imagine someone like that caring about the balance of the world or harm done to its people.

"Can anything be done?" I asked.

Nakajima Kojirou had to be stopped. For the sake of the world and in order to live in it with my companions, he just had to be stopped. But who could possibly stop someone who could be likened to a god?

"As another Conduit, can't you do something about him?" I said, clinging to the only hope I could think of.

"Unfortunately, I can't." The first savior shook his head. "After all, I'm no more than the man who became the world's custodian by accident. I can't say I even had enough power in life, and I have to use my strength to maintain my ego while stuck in the Sea of Unconsciousness. There's very little I can do."

"No way..."

It was hopeless. However, the first savior kept speaking.

"Still, there is someone who can oppose the Calamitous King."

"Really?! Please tell me. I'll do anything." I would go to any lengths to escape a future where my companions were toyed with and met their end. There wasn't a hint of falsehood in my words. "Who could possibly...?"

"You don't know?"

I fell silent. That was because the first savior looked straight at me—and only at me.

"Yes. It's you. After all, you are, in truth, another Conduit."

Chapter 21: Conduit

“I’m...a Conduit?”

I couldn’t digest what he told me. However, the first savior continued as if he was stating the obvious.

“Is it really that surprising? Nakajima Kojirou interfered with that world’s defense mechanism successfully, but you should’ve been capable of the same. The power to interfere with the world. Even if on a different scale, its nature is the same. That is precisely what makes a Conduit.”

“But...that’s not my power.”

“You mean to say it’s her power as one capable of creating worlds?”

The first savior pointed to Salvia, and I nodded back to him. The power to interfere with other worlds was at most Salvia’s, not mine.

“You’re mistaken, my fellow Conduit,” he said, denying me. “Simply forming a contract with her isn’t enough to have the power to interfere with a world. Even if you could, it would take an extremely long time. The same goes for using a Dimensional Cornerstone.”

I recalled Harrison’s use of a Dimensional Cornerstone. Even a man of his tremendous strength had had to brute force his approach to manipulating another world. That wasn’t the case with me, though.

“You should’ve felt it each time you used that magic mist,” the first savior continued. “‘We must have great affinity,’ I mean. That’s only natural. You possess the same ability, after all. You’ve had the power to interfere with the world itself from the very beginning.”

It was true. Salvia and I had great affinity. Thanks to that, I’d learned how to use the Misty Lodge quickly. I was completely incapable of using other magic—but this one magic I’d learned abnormally fast.

“Naturally, the presence of the Misty Lodge likely served as training wheels.

However, this power was originally yours.”

He was making sense. That said, it was difficult to accept.

“Say you’re right... Why do I have that kind of power?” I asked. “My power should be to form a connection with another’s heart.”

“A good question, so allow me to put it like this. It’s *exactly* because you possess the power to connect to another’s heart.”

It was starting to sound philosophical, but it didn’t seem like he was joking or trying to confuse me.

“Let’s start from the beginning. Conduits can be generally classified into two types,” he said, holding up two fingers. “First, those who have the power to manipulate the world itself to their heart’s content. However, by all rights, those end up becoming what you call warriors. With such unfocused power, even if they have a considerable disposition for it, they’re unable to exhibit any influence on anything beyond their own selves. To become a Conduit this way, one must possess an unparalleled disposition for it, ambitions which surpass the bounds of the human mind, and a tremendous ego.”

The first savior sighed.

“Such a thing is impossible. It’s supposed to be impossible. But one has appeared.”

“And that’s Nakajima Kojirou?” I asked.

“Yes. The Calamitous King. An unexpected irregularity that occurred due to a teleportation event on an unprecedented scale. Considering that, on average, two visitors appearing within a century is considered a lot, it should’ve taken fifty thousand years to see a thousand visitors. That said, I doubt another such being will appear in the next fifty thousand years. He is a rarity, nearly an impossibility.”

That made sense. That was why he was a calamity that nobody could’ve predicted.

“However, there is one other type of Conduit,” he continued. “The type who is rooted in the mechanisms of the world. Just as you know, this world arises

from the unconscious cognition of all who live in it. The shared cognition that the world must exist makes it a reality. The shared unconscious of all humanity—in other words, the Sea of Unconsciousness, makes it so.”

“The Sea of Unconsciousness...”

I’d only heard the term moments ago. It was also a place I’d nearly dissolved into. This was the unconscious domain shared by all of humanity. In our world, it was apparently called the collective unconscious.

“The Sea of Unconsciousness establishes the world...? Wait, hang on. That means...”

I’d nearly dissolved into that ocean. In other words, I’d touched the Sea of Unconsciousness? The implications of such an act plunged me into a deep unease.

“That’s right,” the first savior confirmed. “One with the power to connect to another’s heart can of course form a connection to the dimension where the heart resides and meddle with it. One day, they can even form a connection to the Sea of Unconsciousness deep inside this abyss. Then, through that connection, they can change the world itself.”

It was a phenomenon particular to this world. Human cognition made up the world itself, so the power to interfere with that cognition could affect the world. I knew of an example of this too. It was none other than the woman standing right next to me, Salvia. The greatest illusion magic could fool the world itself—to borrow the first savior’s words, it could cast a glamor over the Sea of Unconsciousness. That was the Misty Lodge. Likewise, I was capable of touching the Sea of Unconsciousness. If so, it wouldn’t be strange if I could modify the world.

“But I can’t do anything like rewriting the world,” I said, raising a brow.

“You’re right. I’m sure you can’t,” the first savior agreed immediately. “It is probably extremely difficult to reach such a stage. I spent thirty years trying and ended up becoming a captive here. You seem to specialize in forming connections to the heart rather than battle, but it’s questionable if you’ll reach that stage either. Just maybe, it’s beyond humanity’s reach.”

“Then...there’s no hope.”

Whether it was impossible or would take thirty years, I doubted Nakajima Kojirou would wait for us.

“What we need is a power that can be used right here and now,” I said.

“Indeed. I’m not asking you to obtain the power to freely manipulate the world. What’s needed is, at most, to obstruct the Calamitous King.”

“Do you have a plan?”

He nodded. “It’s simple. You may just use the Dimensional Cornerstones I left behind. By doing so, your power to interfere with the world will be amplified.”

“I see...”

I wasn’t capable of it on my own. The Dimensional Cornerstones the first savior had left behind weren’t enough on their own either. So, we just had to combine the two.

“There is no other way,” the first savior added. “That’s why this was truly a close call. You did well to make it this far. I thought you wouldn’t make it in time.”

Now that I thought of it, he’d said the same thing earlier.

“Hi there. We’ve finally connected. It seems you somehow made it in time.”

Had he said that precisely because my reaching this level was the one and only way to oppose the Calamitous King? Thinking back on it, there’d been signs of this. It was still fresh in my memory how shocked I’d been at my increased ability to interfere with other worlds during this pursuit operation. That had likely been a manifestation of my growth as a Conduit. I could also now understand why I’d grown too.

At the time, I’d questioned why my power to interfere with other worlds had grown stronger. I’d thought nothing new had happened beyond my forming a connection with Katou using the mental path. But that was the answer. My power as a Conduit depended on my power to connect to hearts, so by forming a connection with Katou—by forming a connection with a human—I’d grown substantially.

“You don’t want to see humanity’s unconscious destroyed, and the laws I’ve drilled into the world are still working,” the first savior said. “All of existence should side with you. With that, even if only temporarily, you should be able to barely oppose the Calamitous King’s grasp on the world.”

“Even after all that, it’s still *temporarily* and *barely*?”

It was a grim outlook. That was simply how dreadful Nakajima Kojirou—the Calamitous King—was. That said, the possibility still existed.

“Even if it’s only temporarily and barely, you can resist,” the first savior said. “You need to somehow escape and prepare yourself.”

Because of the surprise attack during the pursuit operation, I didn’t really have any forces on my side. Even my servants weren’t all together. My enemy was abnormally powerful, so it was questionable whether gathering my allies would be enough to win, but at the very least, winning here and now was impossible. The first savior was right.

“Wait a moment,” Salvia cut in stiffly. “Be it simple obstruction or whatnot, it doesn’t change the fact that my master must touch the world’s core, the Sea of Unconsciousness, yes?”

She had a grip on my sleeve and stepped forward as if to cover me. I’d never seen such hostility and anger in her eyes.

“What’ll happen to him if he does that?!” She glared at the man who’d become a captive in the Sea of Unconsciousness. “He’s already reached his limit.”

“It is of course dangerous. Extremely so, in fact,” the first savior admitted. “But there’s no other way. He’s the only one who can do it. The Calamitous King’s existence was practically impossible, but a single person with the disposition to form a connection to the Sea of Unconsciousness was more than enough of a miracle of its own. Even in the huge teleportation event this time around, only three possessed the potential.”

With that, the first savior turned my way.

“There’s no hope in one of the other two,” he continued. “That one doesn’t have the strength to approach the Sea of Unconsciousness. That said, it’s

probably better that way.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Because it’s the one you call Heaven’s Voice, the one who’s also aiding the Calamitous King.”

“Aah...”

Now that he mentioned it, if everyone with an ability to affect the heart was qualified to become a Conduit, then Heaven’s Voice met those requirements too. In that case, it was out of the question. Salvia knew this too.

“And the other?” she asked, desperation clear in her voice.

Her fingers grasped my sleeve tightly. She didn’t even realize how desperate she was. She was worried about me like a sister would be for her little brother. Or maybe...

After looking at her curiously, the first savior was about to answer, but Asarina’s head perked up before he could.

“Ssster?”

I noticed the same thing just as I was about to ask her what it was. A presence was taking shape in the center of the schoolyard.

“What...?”

While we remained cautious, the first savior was perfectly calm. In all likelihood, he knew what was happening. What appeared was entirely unexpected for me, though.

“It can’t be... Kudou?”

It had to be some kind of mistake, but it wasn’t. The one standing there was a familiar boy. It was an unexpected reunion with the boy I’d been chasing through those fabricated worlds.



“S-Senpai...?”

He noticed me too. Something was clearly wrong, though. His eyes were vacant and he seemed to be in intense pain.

“Ugh...”

His slender body swayed as he fell to his knees.

“Kudou!”

I immediately went over to him and tried to support him, but was startled when my hand went right through him.

“Huh...?”

“Unfortunately, he’s not actually here,” the first savior said. “His form is simply being projected. I made it so those who have even the slightest potential can be contacted.”

“What do you mean...?” I asked.

“I’m telling you he’s the third one with potential,” he answered casually.

“Kudou is?” I said stiffly.

It was unexpected. I’d been under the impression that the power to manipulate his servants as pawns and the ability to form a connection to others’ hearts were mutually exclusive, but then I remembered my conversation with Berta.

“He didn’t gain power when he decided to walk down the path of the Demon King. Having escaped the Colony, he refused to give up. He struggled to survive in the Woodlands. That was when I became his servant.”

That said, that potential had already been lost before it could bloom. It had been a possibility, but now, it was nothing more than the remnants of a trampled future that would never be.

“Just as I’d expect of you, Senpai,” Kudou said, agony clear in his voice. “Even in a place like this, you remain calm.”

The first savior had drawn him here. By all rights, he shouldn’t be able to reach this place.

“I only heard the last bit, but it seems I won’t be able to help.” He looked up at me, a self-deriding smile on his lips. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I told him. “Just sending Berta to us was more than

enough.”

“Is that so...? Has she been doing well?”

Perhaps because he was so weakened, Kudou was more defenseless than normal. Unlike his usual emotionless expression, he smiled broadly. I could see clear resolve in his eyes. What was it? When I saw him like this, I felt an indescribable anxiety in my heart.

“Kudou...”

I’d chased him through those worlds, and now we finally met. There was so much I wanted to tell him. There was so much I wanted to ask him. I’d heard a lot of new information from Berta. She’d been keeping the fact that she’d become his servant before he became the Demon King a secret. But she was so bad at lying. She had an innocent nature that made it impossible for her. A doubt came to mind.

Did Kudou really not know?

Why had he sent Berta to me?

What was he thinking? What did he hope for?

If we had the time, I wanted to talk. But we didn’t. Before we could speak, another voice called out to me.

“Is that enough? This is the limit to the time I can make for us.”

Time was up. Kudou’s figure vanished immediately. The first savior was no longer able to interfere with this world. I could feel his threads of control coming apart. I stood up and turned around.

“Are you prepared?” he asked calmly. “You must escape the Calamitous King’s grasp.”

“You make it sound so easy...”

It was unreasonable. My opponent was the exploration team’s hero, the Sword of Light. He’d unveiled his true nature as the Calamitous King too. It would be hard enough just to run away, but I had to snatch the Dimensional Cornerstones too. Honestly, even if I staked my life on it, the probability of pulling it off was pretty much zero. This was far too reckless. Nevertheless, if I

didn't do it, everyone would die.

"One last thing," I said. "There's something that's been bothering me."

"What's that?"

"Why did Nakajima Kojirou do this?" I asked. It simply didn't make any sense. "If he's a Conduit, there was no need to chase the Dragon and go through those worlds with me, right?"

Anything I could do in those fabricated worlds he should've been able to accomplish with ease.

"I don't know either," the first savior said, shaking his head. "However, it may have nothing to do with necessity."

"What?"

"I mean to say we may not be able to understand by applying logic to his actions. Keep that in mind. The one you'll be facing is abnormal—abnormal enough to threaten the world in the truest sense."

What came to mind was the radiant figure of a boy who was a hero among heroes. He had every member of the exploration team in his heart. It truly looked like he was cheering them on with all sincerity. He was endlessly amiable to us as well. If none of that was just for show, then that actually made him...

"The world is in your hands."

Nevertheless, I had to defy him. With those last words from the first savior, I surfaced from my inner world.

Chapter 22: Doing the Best They Can

My consciousness returned to my body. I was lying face up on the ground. My entire body was dull with pain and it was covered in burns and bruises. I'd likely been hit by the Sword of Light's second stage, a shortsword, being fully unleashed, though luckily it hadn't proved fatal. About a quarter of the bowl-shaped room had been reduced to a mountain of rubble. The strike had had enough force to easily blow away a small town. I'd known this beforehand, but it still had me shuddering. I was more surprised at how I'd gotten off with such light wounds. As I pondered that, I noticed a little body straddled over me.

"You okay, Takahiro?"

"Lobivia...?"

It seemed she'd covered me. Lobivia's right arm was horribly burned. Right next to her, Berta and Ayame were sprawled on the ground. They were all injured, but considering the power of the Sword of Light, it wasn't that serious. They'd likely avoided a direct hit. In other words, someone else had taken the brunt of the attack.

"Lily... Shiran..."

The two of them were unmoving on the ground, smoke rising from their bodies. They'd poured all their strength into defending the rest of us. Thanks to that, we'd gotten off with light damage.

However, that had accomplished no more than blocking a single attack. Nakajima Kojirou was already looking down at us with a new Sword of Light in his hand. He clearly only stayed his hand because there was no need for any kind of urgency. We were no threat to him.

The difference in strength here was clear. We'd suffered major damage. The only uncertain element here, the Evil Dragon, was silent. Kubota still didn't have a grasp of what was going on and had fallen to his rear. It was unlikely any reinforcements would come. I'd known this already, but I was once again made

to realize how hopeless this was.

Looking at the injured Lily and Shiran, I clenched my teeth hard. I didn't want to place more of a burden on them. If I could take their place, I would. However, for everyone to survive, I had no choice but to have them do their best.

"Please stall him!"

I had no time to explain. I gave my orders, hating myself for it all the while, and made my move. I turned my back to Nakajima Kojirou and ran toward the shrine that housed the Dimensional Cornerstones.

"Running away...?" I could hear Nakajima Kojirou's mumbling because of the Misty Lodge hanging over the area. "Using your companions as sacrificial pawns?"

He sounded so bored and almost sad. I didn't care what he said. It was convenient if he didn't know what was going on. It was fine so long as my intent got through to those that mattered.

The fact that I wasn't running away out of fear and that there was still hope was conveyed to everyone else. My companions, who'd been unsure of what to do in the face of this sudden crisis, all moved to accomplish a single goal. The first to jump into action was Shiran.

In a long-distance battle, we were at an overwhelming disadvantage. If we took another hit like that, it would be over. The only choice, then, was to force things into a close-quarters fight. It took time for Shiran to boost her abilities with her spirits. Instead of her qualities as a knight, her qualities as a half-ghoul were more appropriate for this battle.

"Gaaaaah!"

The earlier attack from the Sword of Light had melted her armor and carbonized a portion of her limbs, but none of that mattered. In exchange for exhausting a tremendous amount of mana, she put her nonsensical self-restoration on display. With her body rejuvenating at an alarming rate, she dashed forward with enough speed that she was liable to break her newly repaired legs. At this rate, she would close the distance in under two seconds.

However, that was more than enough time for the Sword of Light to intercept her. He raised his weapon high—then suddenly held up his empty hand.

“Hyaaaah!”

Lily threw her black spear. She didn’t have time to enhance it with magic, but using all the strength in her body, it had enough power to pierce an iron plate. And yet, the spear was swatted aside with ease. Still, she’d succeeded in buying the time it took to casually wave a hand to the side. That wasn’t enough for Shiran to reach her target, but next, Lobivia, Ayame, and Berta spat fire and ice at him.

“Hmph...”

This didn’t reach him either. Nakajima Kojirou scoffed as he lightly swung his extended Sword of Light, easily dispersing the barrage of fire and ice. But that was enough. In the next instant, breaking through the veil of thinning flames, Shiran charged in.

“Gaaah!”

She unleashed a barrage of violent but skilled slashes. Even someone with significant mastery of the sword would be helplessly cut down by such an attack, but...

“Not bad.”

In a terrifying display, Nakajima Kojirou warded off every strike. Taking into consideration that Shiran had intentionally let herself go on an undead rampage to enhance her physical abilities, even without her spirits boosting her, she was about as strong as a warrior. Nakajima Kojirou seemed to be slightly stronger, but the difference was within the bounds that could be overcome with technique. The fact that they were still equal meant that, against all odds, Nakajima Kojirou’s skill with a sword rivaled even Shiran’s.

“I see,” he muttered as he continued crossing swords with Shiran. “Meaning you have some sort of plan?”

“Guh?!”

Nakajima Kojirou’s eyes weren’t directed at Shiran, who was in the middle of

fighting him, but at me, as I hurried toward the shrine. There was no longer any disappointment in his expression. He even seemed happy. It made me doubt if he was truly an enemy.

“Hup.”

“No way?!”

Lily screamed. Despite crossing swords with Shiran, Nakajima Kojirou used his free hand to create a dagger and unleashed it toward me. The girls were unable to deal with this unexpected attack. A beam of light plowed through the ground, covering a vast range as it made its way toward my back. This attack had more than enough power to annihilate one person. Fortunately, it was still far away. I had enough room to dodge. If I diverted my path to take a big detour...I would lose a ton of time. That was no good. Everyone was risking their lives to buy time. I couldn't waste a single second.

“Oooh!”

“Ssster!”

I leaped into the air as Asarina slammed against the ground, sending me springing upward.

“Guh...”

The torrent of light passed right beneath me by a hair's breadth. The attack I evaded went on to pulverize the entrance to the shrine. Had I taken that hit, I would likely be in the same state. Debris crashed to the floor, but I had no time for hesitation.

“Oooh!”

Without slowing down at all, I plunged right toward the entrance. I tumbled across the ground like a thrown rock. I ignored the pain of rubble of all sizes slamming against me, got up, and continued running.

“Right there!”

I was in a temple. There was an altar in front of me, and rows of jewels lined one of the walls. There were over a hundred in total. There was no mistaking it: these were all Dimensional Cornerstones. I roughly wiped the blood dripping

down my brow and ran to the wall. About ten seconds had passed since I'd started my mad dash. These felt like the longest ten seconds of my life. I reached the wall, and an instant later, a figure slammed right into the wall next to me with terrifying force.

"Gyaaah?!"

"Lily?!"

Lily bounced off the wall and tumbled across the floor. Several Dimensional Cornerstones fell from the broken wall. I reflexively turned around and saw a boy jumping at me.

"Caught you."

I turned pale. In such a short time, not only had he defeated Shiran, but he'd even struck down Lily and caught up to me. Even if they were exhausted from taking that initial hit, this was far too fast. Having rushed past Lobivia and the others, I sensed them chasing after him, but Nakajima Kojirou would attack far before they could get here. Even still, it was enough. They'd done more than could be expected.

The rest was my job. Horrified by the sight of my enemy raising his sword, I shifted my focus to what was in my hand. I was holding a jewel that I'd ripped from the wall. Thanks to the girls' desperate struggle, I'd reached a Dimensional Cornerstone. I already had an image of it due to my chance meeting with the first savior. I formed a connection with the dark chaos of the Sea of Unconsciousness.

"Ugh..."

My entire body was assaulted by tremendous fatigue and dizziness. It was bad enough that I felt like I was going to die. I had the support of a Dimensional Cornerstone, but I still felt chills like my consciousness was being torn apart. Even with proper forewarning, the excruciating onslaught threatened to pull me away from our confrontation. The entire world around me shook as I clenched my teeth to prevent myself from fainting.

"Huh...?"

However, that sensation passed in an instant. Everything was back to normal.

I hadn't expected this. The burden was far lighter than what I'd steeled myself for. At this rate, it would be no big deal. It'd been intense enough that I thought I was going to die, but this was all there was to it. Now wasn't the time to be pondering about that, though. Using the Dimensional Cornerstone, I wielded my full influence on this fabricated world.

"Get the hell out of here!"

I recalled the last moments of the battle against Harrison. By unmaking the fabricated world, he'd ejected everyone from it. In this small instant, I had complete control over this world. In that case, I had to be able to accomplish the same thing.

"This is... I see."

Nakajima Kojirou expressed understanding. Possessing the same ability to manipulate worlds—to a far higher degree than I ever could—it was simple for him to figure it out. With this, we were going to get through this safely. The moment I thought that, I saw something unexpected.

"So this was your goal!"

Words of admiration came from Nakajima Kojirou's mouth. There wasn't a hint of irritation at being outwitted. It was terrifying. All I saw was frank and pure delight.

"Magnificent!"

There was nothing but praise in his voice. The hero looked at me with envy. His recognition, which once would have made my heart soar, only made me shudder in revulsion. The one who was showering me with praise was the same person who was trying to kill me for no good reason. For the first time, I felt like I'd touched on the abnormality of the supposedly perfect Nakajima Kojirou.

"Tch! Get back!"

I told myself not to get overwhelmed by his behavior, barely managing to keep my concentration from breaking. The fabricated world came apart. Until that very last instant, I saw him staring at me with delight and interest.



I didn't have time, so my manipulation of the world was rather reckless. I couldn't pick my targets. I expelled everyone at once. I was no exception. We were all forcefully ejected from the fabricated world and teleported into the forest where the Dimension Door had been left behind.

"H-Huh? We're...outside?"

Lily had been expelled while still lying on the ground. Upon noticing the change in the situation, she got up, but I had no time to answer her.

"Master?"

My breaths were ragged. My heart pounded in my chest. Despite this, my sweat was cold and it felt like I'd swallowed a lump of ice deep into my stomach. In that last instant, the gaze Nakajima Kojirou had directed at me and the emotions hidden within it had chills running through my entire body.

"What the hell was that...?"

Astonishment, joy, a pure expression without a hint of falsehood—that made it all the more terrifying. The favor Nakajima Kojirou directed at me hadn't changed at all after having his identity exposed. It was abnormal. I couldn't understand. It was terrifying.

There was no point getting trapped in such thoughts now, though. I forcefully shook away the image that'd been burned into my mind. At any rate, we'd accomplished our goal. I could feel the hardness of the Dimensional Cornerstone in my hand. So long as I had this, even if only for a short time, the world could escape the clutches of the Calamitous King.

"Master?"

"Aaah, sorry, Lily. I'd love to explain, but we need to link up with the others first."

Our first priority was getting everyone back together. We then had to contact the nearby dragons of Draconia and return to the imperial capital as soon as possible. Fortunately, using the senses of my magic mist, I knew there were no enemies nearby. I could feel my companions gathering together by tugging on the mental path. The moment I'd expelled them from that world, I'd made sure that they'd ended up as close to me as I could manage.

“Looks like everyone’s here.”

“Takahiro! Aaah, thank goodness. You’re unharmed!”

“Takahiro! Takahiro!”

“Kuuu!”

“Majima Takahiro, what’s going on...?”

Lily, Shiran, Lobivia, Ayame, and Berta—they’d all suffered wounds of different sizes. However, we were all together now. I let out a sigh of relief. It’d been close, but we’d gotten through. It was thanks to everyone doing the best they could. If anyone hadn’t been there to help, we wouldn’t have gotten away.

Yes, we’d done the best we could. Which meant this was hopeless. Once he became our enemy, no matter how much we struggled, this had already been the predetermined outcome.

“Wah?!”

I heard a thunderous roar. By the time I sensed the abnormality, it was already too late. The world shattered around us. That was the only way I could describe it.

“Oooh?!”

Trees were uprooted and sent flying away and the ground was gouged out. A torrent of light that couldn’t be mistaken for anything else mowed down everything in its path as it closed in.

This was impossible.

Even if I was exhausted, the Misty Lodge was still in effect. I should’ve been able to sense anything within two hundred meters. That meant the attack had come from beyond that range. It was a long-distance, wide-area attack. There was no running away from it, and there was no time to try. I watched hopelessly as it destroyed everything in sight.

“No!”

Even so, my two strongest servants reacted. Lily’s arms turned into giant tortoise shells with an iron luster to them as she jumped in front of everyone

else. Shiran used every last drop of her mana to intercept the light with magic from all four of her spirits.

And then everything was engulfed in that far-too-powerful light. Even their do-or-die devotion was no match for it.

Nothing made sense anymore. I simply couldn't understand.

Chapter 23: At the End of a Wish

It was practically a miracle that I was still conscious. I thought I'd been pulverized into atoms, but my limbs were still attached. This was the fruit of Lily and Shiran's desperate last stand. That said, this was our limit.

"Ah... Guh..."

The Rosette Dagger was burning in my breast pocket with a heat I'd never felt before. This magic tool that Rose had gifted me reacted to danger and limited damage done to me, though feebly. The heat I felt from it was like an expression of wanting to protect its master, while also pleading with me to run away. Either way, my body wouldn't listen to me anymore.

That was when I heard dreadful footsteps approaching me.

"Found you, Majima."

The one treading across the obliterated soil was none other than Nakajima Kojirou.

"How...?"

I couldn't believe it. I was sure I'd sent him as far away as possible when I'd expelled him from that world. How had he found us? Besides, my Misty Lodge was supposed to be keeping a watch of our surroundings.

No, maybe... The sudden thought gave me chills. Nakajima Kojirou was a Conduit too. Therefore, it wouldn't be strange if he had the same perception abilities as the Misty Lodge. He could likely detect things over a much wider range too. That was exactly how he'd found and attacked us.

The boy, wearing a mask of deceptive sweetness, stood some distance away from us. At this range, our attacks wouldn't reach him. At this range, the Sword of Light would kill us with absolute certainty. That said, he wasn't one to come to a stop for such petty reasons. He looked so much like a hero that I was sure of this. His radiant figure didn't harbor any darkness. There was nothing shady about him. Something about him attracted others. He stood at ease as he spoke

to me.

“I never thought you’d get away from me like that. What’s more, I can’t make a *connection*. Ha ha. This is your doing, yeah?”

He had a Dimensional Cornerstone in his hand. He must have snatched one before being expelled from that world. By all rights, everything should’ve been over the moment he took one. Now, I was functioning as a stopper using my power as a Conduit and the will of the first savior. The world wasn’t yet in the hands of the Calamitous King. Just for now...

But so what? This was the worst-case scenario. Once I was gone, there would be nobody left to obstruct him. It was all over. We were done for. The world was done for. It was because I believed this...

“Just as I’d expect of you, Majima.”

That I couldn’t understand this man.

“You really are great. You’re the best.”

There was a hint of excitement in his voice. He was definitely our enemy and he had my life in his hands. And yet, in this last moment, there was clear friendliness in his eyes.

“Honestly, this was a complete failure. I had no intention of fighting you when you didn’t have all your forces gathered. In this instance, I would’ve been fine so long as I could fight Jinguuji—the Dragon—at his full might, after throwing away everything he was to break his limit.”

I just didn’t understand.

“The Dragon was on the right track, but I guess not enough to be satisfying. Well, that’s fine too. It was within my expectations. The horrible part was being exposed by such a worthless coincidence. The defense mechanism going wild, I mean. I would’ve been able to survive on my own, but the moment I thought you were gonna die, I protected you. It’s such a drag that I had to expose my identity like that. What a boring outcome. It’s utterly disappointing.”

I really didn’t understand.

“But you made it through. Man, it’s just as I thought. You’re the real thing.”

“Why...?” I finally managed to interject. “Why do this? With that much power, you should be able to do anything.”

I found it utterly baffling. He always had a surplus of composure, had nothing to worry about, and could solve any problem. He was a leader who could save everything within his sight. This was an ideal I’d once looked up to. No matter how I thought about it, there was no reason for him to put that all to waste except for pure malice. It was precisely because I sensed no such malice that I couldn’t understand him whatsoever.

If I could understand him, maybe it would be possible to do something about this situation. At the very least, we were having a conversation. Now that we were pushed into such a corner, our only choice was to find some hope in this. I swallowed my blood-flavored saliva and cut to the chase.

“Did you want to become God? No. In that case...even without doing anything like this, you could’ve become anything you wanted without any difficulties.”

Nakajima Kojirou simply possessed that much potential. With the unimaginable power he’d obtained by coming to this world, he could’ve conquered the entire world without difficulty as a hero. With the charisma he’d used to control the exploration team and his astounding leadership to prevent those still under his command from causing any problems, it would’ve been entirely possible for him to gradually seize stewardship of this world from the Holy Church. Even if he didn’t resort to such forceful means, he could’ve done things far more covertly. I truly believed that. That was exactly why...

“I mean, isn’t that totally boring?”

His answer far exceeded the bounds of my imagination.

“Boring...?”

Even though he answered my question, I couldn’t understand. I just didn’t get it. Nothing made sense. What the hell was going on? I couldn’t see the man in front of me as anything other than a monster wearing human skin. This was probably not a misunderstanding either.

“Hey, Majima. You just said I can do anything, right? Yeah, I won’t deny it. I can do anything I put my mind to. It’s been like that since I first opened my

eyes.”

Thinking back on it, this was the first time I’d heard this from the man himself. Kubota, who knew him well, had once said that Nakajima Kojirou lived in a different world. He’d wondered if everyone had simply gotten caught up in Nakajima Kojirou’s being teleported to this world.

Also, the first savior had called him an anomaly beyond expectations. He was a product of fifty thousand years’ worth of trial and error that wasn’t likely to be replicated in the next fifty thousand years. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve called this an exaggeration. I would’ve called it ridiculous. But I knew better. This was no more than the plain and simple truth.

However, until this point, I didn’t know how the person in question saw this. Thinking back on it now, that had been worth a little more consideration. After all, living in a different world while occupying the same world as us...was no different from being born in the wrong world.

“It’s so boring. It doesn’t feel like living,” he said, the words coming from his mouth chillingly dry. “You know what? There’s one thing I always questioned. To those who know the truth about this place, the world is unstable. You can even say it’s incomplete and faulty. But can you say that the world we came from is any different?”

“What...?”

“Why did we come to this world? Just maybe, it’s because our world is also a failure. Without an organization like the Holy Church to struggle against ruin, we fell out of the failing world and into this one. Isn’t that entirely possible? If so...that world is even more of a failure than this one. Isn’t that why someone like me was born?”

The reason we’d come to this world was still a mystery. It was unlikely we would ever find out. There had been many opinions up to this point. For example, “There’s a summoner in this world,” or, “The world itself called us for salvation.” However, this was my first time hearing, “There’s a problem with the world we came from.”

Maybe that was why. I came across a truly terrifying thought. An extraordinary genius, an omnipotent hero—everyone saw Nakajima Kojirou

that way. However, just maybe, the boy in front of me was far beyond such labels.

There was something repulsive within him. It was a bug that had been born within him in our old world. If that was the true nature of the monster named Nakajima Kojirou...

I didn't know enough to deny it. I didn't have anything to affirm it either. All I knew was that the monster before my eyes made me believe this was the case.

"That's why I wanted to live in another world," he said.

"Another...world?"

"A fantasy. That said, nothing with easy cheats for visitors, you get me? I mean, isn't that way too boring? Hurdles that are impossible to find in reality, monsters blocking your path, putting in huge effort, gritting your teeth, and finally obtaining something worth having."

Precisely because he could do anything, he yearned for something he could acquire by truly overcoming a great crisis.

"Aaah, no. I mean, I knew that's impossible in reality. But I wished for it. I wished, and wished, and wished. And then, a miracle happened. Impossibility became reality. I came to another world."

To the rest of us, teleporting to another world had been a disaster. As a result, I'd met Lily and the others, but that wasn't the point here. The teleportation itself had been nothing short of a disaster. However, that wasn't the case for the man in front of me. It was the opposite. It had been an unexpected stroke of luck. Or maybe, another possibility came to mind...

I was under the impression that our world wasn't driven by a law where wishes come true as they did in this one, but just as he said, there was no guarantee that wasn't the case. If so, just maybe, this monster's wish to go to another world had triggered the mass teleportation. It had all been to make his impossible dream a reality.

"Yes. I came to another world. My adventure was going to begin. That's what I believed."

What had he gained as a result? Had his lifelong desire been fulfilled? Had he gained hope? No, not at all. After all, he'd come to a world where the strength of one's wish granted power.

"Ha ha. Isn't it laughable? The situation got worse. I ended up becoming a Conduit. Even though I didn't need this power. So long as I could exert myself to the fullest to overcome hardship, I would've been fine with it."

He was far too extraordinary by nature. Compounded with the enormous wish he'd continuously prayed for, it had ironically made him so omnipotent in this world that anyone and everyone was hopeless before him.

I understood him now, but I couldn't sympathize. How could I? I was an ordinary person who was incapable of so many things. However, wishing for something from the bottom of one's heart and having it all go to waste, finding only despair... That was one thing I could sympathize with. That said, such feelings weren't necessary for the man before me. He was the hero who could overturn any situation no matter how hopeless it was. He lived up to that title—for both good and bad.

"That's why I turned things around and thought of it like this instead. I can't do anything about myself. I have no hope. But if there's no hope, I can just create it. It's simple."

"Huh...?"

I went pale. I had a horrible premonition. I didn't want to hear this, but he was going to tell me anyway.

"They all call me special, but I believe in everyone else. I'm not special. They'll all reach this stage one day. Even if they show no potential, I won't abandon that hope. Anyone can do it. I'm cheering them on. Find a goal, think about it seriously, make decisions, and move decisively. By doing so, anyone will reach this point one day. Anyone can do it. I believe it."

He was saying something nice. He was supposed to be. And yet, it sounded so cruel.

"Naturally, living aimlessly isn't good enough. To reach the summit, you have to climb the appropriate steps. The more severe it is, the more terrifying it is,

the crueler it is, the higher those who overcome such hardships rise. That's why I did it."

His smile had nothing but goodwill and expectations of others. That was what made it all the more ominous.

"Those poor seven hundred students who didn't manifest an ability. If I brought them all down to hell, one was sure to crawl back out and shine, right?"

Here was the mastermind behind everything.

"In truth, you overcame so many hardships. Majima, don't you remember? I'm your fan. I've been watching you all this time. Every last second."

"Y-You're..."

My mind blanked out. My heart pounded, sending blood to my brain as my head seethed with anger. The memories of that tragedy came back like a surging wave, forcing up those images of a hell where humans were reduced to being less than human.

"You're behind the Colony's destruction!" I roared.



Now I knew. I finally understood. Nakajima Kojirou had always treated us favorably. It'd seemed like he believed in others. That definitely wasn't a lie. However, his values were so different from mine that it was beyond imagination.

There was one other thing I was forced to understand too. It would be impossible to persuade this man through conversation. He would never let us go simply because he liked us. It was precisely because he liked us that he would oppose us with everything he had. And then, after crushing us, he would lament. He would grieve that he'd simply wanted to bring out his full strength to crush us, not *actually* crush us.

"I'm glad you understand me."

I finally had a grasp of the situation. However, I was also forced to understand that things were hopeless. I couldn't just give up, but what could I do? A voice interrupted my thoughts of despair.

"I guess...that's it." Someone stood up, dragging themselves upright. "Thanks, Master... You bought us...enough time."

"It was worth listening...to that worthless crap."

Lily and Lobivia were on their feet. They'd somehow managed to start moving again while I was talking. That said, Lily wasn't able to maintain her form as a girl anymore. Her body was half-slime, clearly indicating that she was no longer able to perform mimicry. There was no way she could fight like that.

Lobivia was better off, having protected me from the rear, but it was a scant difference at this point. Blood dribbled from her head and her eyes weren't focused. All the others, including me, were incapable of moving or unconscious. Nevertheless, they didn't give up.

"I'll...hold him back... Lobivia, you..."

"Yeah..."

Lily dragged her spear behind her, then kicked off the ground, ready to die. Lobivia's head swayed unsteadily as she lowered herself to grab our fallen companions and run away.

“Wait, Lily! Not yet!”

I tried gathering what little mana I could to create a magic mist as a smoke screen to allow us to get away. I wouldn't give up to the very end. How could I give up? But even in our tenacity, there was no hope.

Faced with our desperate resistance, Nakajima Kojirou looked ridiculously happy. It was like he was telling us not to lose heart. On one hand, he cheered us on. On the other, he held up the Sword of Light that would surely kill us. Without a hint of guilt, without holding back whatsoever, he smiled at us, telling us to survive.

In the next moment, Lily was sure to be blown away by a torrent of light that would continue on to wipe us all out. All our feelings were to be trampled into the ground. Our determination would be rendered down to nothingness. Our earnest desire would meet its end. That was reality. That was the cruelty of this world.

That was precisely why...the Demon King who'd sworn to destroy this world wasn't going to sit back and watch.

“I won't let you.”

I heard a quiet muttering. I would never forget what happened here for the rest of my life.

Chapter 24: True Wish

On that day, the boy had become the Demon King. The only path that had been before him was one of despair great enough to tear apart his soul. He hadn't possessed the qualities to withstand such an onslaught. He'd been so, so very weak.

This self-assessment hadn't ever changed. Perhaps the possibility of change had existed at some point. However, that future had been cruelly cut off, leaving him with no path but the one of the Demon King.

So long as he lacked the strength to withstand the overwhelming sea of despair, he had to make up for it by expending his existence. If he didn't have enough fuel, he would use his own body as kindling to keep going. His final destination guaranteed his fall to ruin.

However, if he had one wish...

"If possible, when I die, I would've liked it to be by Senpai's hands."

The boy laughed inappropriately as he muttered to himself. That was wrong. That end didn't suit him. There was no hope of it being granted. He would die with nothing but despair in his grasp. That was a death appropriate for one who'd acted with such malice, apathetic to the sacrifices along the way.

His resolve had never been stronger. He had no regrets. Well, he'd had one thing that might've become a regret, but that was probably fine too. He'd left it to *him*, so it was fine for now. Hence, it was time to go. It was time to meet his end with no hope for salvation.



And so, the Demon King joined the fray. Fortunately, having been dragged to the domain close to the Sea of Unconsciousness by the first savior, he had a grasp of the situation. Also, having been expelled from the fabricated world, the geographical hindrances preventing him from gathering his army were gone.

The Army of Darkness charged. Naturally, the one leading the army as the

Demon King's speartip was the most devoted of his servants, the shadowy girl Dora. However, she wasn't the first to act. In her stead, three of his servants had burst into action before he could give the command.

Let us make it in time. Let us make it in time. Let us make it in time. With such thoughts in mind, they'd torn off the Demon King's collars. And without those collars, Kudou Riku had no way of stopping them. He had no intention to, anyway.

"The contract must be fulfilled, after all."

Kudou Riku had been driven to become the Demon King because of humanity's weakness and repulsiveness. Thus, he had no mercy for them. He detested the visitors who possessed such immense power yet were so weak at heart. However, he viewed those with a deep inner strength as worthy.

In truth, there were several people he hadn't laid a hand on. This was because he'd acknowledged them. Majima Takahiro was one easy-to-see example. So, the same applied here. Even if they'd been mistaken, even if they'd failed to protect what they'd wanted to protect, if they could remember that wish and had the strength to bet everything on it...

"The time has come. Fulfill your true desire."

Thus, everything began moving to meet a certain end.



The instant after unleashing the attack that would reduce Majima Takahiro's group to cinders...

"What?!"

Raising his voice in shock, Nakajima Kojirou leaped backward. A figure had come out of the shadow at his feet and attacked him with bladed arms.

"You're..."

"My king commands it! Be still and die!"

This was the shadowy girl, the fourth servant to have been given a name by the Demon King, Dora. The ability to traverse shadow to shadow to launch a surprise attack was her trump card. Even the Sword of Light had been at a

disadvantage against an ambush timed to match the moment he unleashed his attack.

“Ha ha! So you had that kind of power too? What a surprise!” Nakajima Kojirou laughed in delight even as he was thrown off-balance.

Refusing to let this once-in-a-lifetime chance pass her by, Dora’s shadowy blades came in from every angle. The faster monsters like wolves and bears came rushing in one after the other. That said, it was still uncertain if this was enough to defeat him. So *he* judged, not by logic, but by instinct.

On the contrary, the prospect of victory was quite low. However, this had bought *him* more than enough time. *He* had to fulfill his duty while he could. With that, the first to have ripped off the Demon King’s collar—the Mad Beast—looked down at the girl before him.

“No way...” the girl muttered.

She was in a horrible state. Her mimicry had been undone, her body half liquid and unable to properly maintain its human form. Even through such torment, she had survived. Nakajima Kojirou had unleashed his Sword of Light, but she hadn’t been reduced to cinders. The instant before that torrent of light could engulf her, the Mad Beast had shielded her with his body.

The Mad Beast had been the fastest to take action, moving before Dora could even launch her surprise attack. There was no way he was fine, of course.

“Ah... Gah...”

Blood and saliva spilled from his jaws in vast quantities, splashing to the ground. The strike from the Sword of Light had been terrifyingly powerful. However, the Mad Beast’s armor of swelling muscles had just barely held back the destructive force. In exchange, his muscles were torn, his innards were burned, and his bones were exposed through his back. Still, the attack hadn’t made it past him. This hadn’t been a command from his master. This had been his own will.

“Why...?” the girl asked him, astonishment clear in her voice.

The Mad Beast didn’t possess the intellect to reply. However, one thing remained in his mind—the promise he’d exchanged with the master of his

collar.

"I promise you. If you become mine and work for me, I'll grant your wish one day."

Today was that day. Using his one remaining muscular arm, the Mad Beast grabbed the girl. She was unable to resist his strength. It was hard to believe he was on the verge of death. The Mad Beast was free to do whatever he wanted to her. Having regained the faintest bit of reason in this tiny instant, he thus questioned himself. What exactly was his wish? He remembered the contract he'd made with the master of his collar.

"My king, what are you thinking...?"

"You claim the second king is not your enemy, but then you promise to grant this mad beast's wish. Which statement is true?"

Anton had asked this question. She'd had a point. Before becoming the Mad Beast, he'd gone on a rampage out of a desire for Mizushima Miho. So, was it his wish to "obtain" the girl before his eyes now?

No. That wasn't right. The moment he'd leaped out to shield her from death, he'd become sure of it.

"You give it some thought too."

Inside that fabricated world, the master of his collar had told him this. As he was now, he understood the true meaning behind those words. After all, even the intense pain that was soon to kill him was nothing compared to the relief he felt at seeing the girl before him safe and sound.

"The time has come. Fulfill your true desire."

What was the true desire that he'd lost sight of after being shaken by fear and falling to madness? The boy who'd once been known as Takaya Jun had tried to protect his first love, Mizushima Miho. However, this had been a false love. He'd unconsciously deceived himself to protect himself from the anxieties of being in another world.

People were capable of putting in effort so long as they had a reason to, but he'd created a reason to spur himself onward. He'd convinced himself that he'd

gained power to protect his first love. He hadn't tried to protect his childhood friend because he was in love with her. He'd needed a reason to protect something and had thus fallen in love. His first love was a lie. That was an undeniable truth.

However, that didn't mean that everything about his caring for her was a lie. After all, Takaya Jun hadn't been that strong. That one false emotion hadn't been enough for him to chase the expeditionary force for help, starving and enduring his fear on a journey through the Woodlands all on his own. Before needing his first love as an excuse, before being crushed by anxiety, before falling to madness, he'd had a childhood friend who was like a big sister to him.

"I'll protect Miho."

He remembered those words. This one emotion was no lie. Because he knew this, this was farewell.

"Ooooooh!"

He let out a bloody roar. Using the last of his life, the beast threw the girl—he threw her toward the companions who treated her so dearly.

"Jun..."

He heard a nostalgic voice. The girl was reaching out her hand in tears. Her fingertips were getting farther and farther away. But that was fine. This time, he managed to protect her.

The last of his strength was vanishing. He was satisfied that his childhood friend would still shed tears at his death. Hearing a dragon's roar immediately following that, he felt relief that he could leave the rest to someone else. Having regained what was dear to him in the very end, the beast collapsed.



The dragon's roar shook the whole forest.

"That's...!"

Even as he cut down the swarm of monsters with tremendous vigor, Nakajima Kojirou's eyes shot open. He looked up as an enormous figure, one large enough to blot out the sky, descended.

“AAaaaaah...!” Lobivia screamed with a trembling voice.

Her red hair blew back from the wind generated by the enormous figure’s flapping wings. She looked up right at it. This was the zombie dragon Ida. In life, she’d been known as the carapace wyrm Malvina. She was the great dragon who’d once been the spouse of a savior.

However, all she was now was an undead monster who was out for revenge against those who’d killed her children and destroyed her home. She existed only to wreak havoc, fueled by anger and resentment. This was only amplified by the presence of a visitor, a kindred to those who’d destroyed her home, wielding his power before her eyes. However, contrary to expectation, immediately upon landing, the zombie dragon withdrew immediately. Its goal was obvious. It used its enormous hand to scoop up the earth beneath Majima Takahiro’s entire group.

“Ha ha! Trying to get Majima away from here?!”

Witnessing this, Nakajima Kojirou’s expression was filled with joy. This was a manifestation of an all-too-pure, and hence dreadful, delight. He’d been moments from killing his prey, but now they were getting away. He was ecstatic.

In contrast, he had no intention whatsoever of letting Majima Takahiro get away. He was so endlessly happy to wield his full power to kill them. So, the terrifying Calamitous King put everything he had into killing the zombie dragon.

“Gah...?!”

Immediately following that decision, he kicked Dora in the jaw. She’d already lost the advantage of her surprise attack, and the many monsters who’d joined her were already dead. They didn’t have the numbers to keep Nakajima Kojirou pinned here.

“Oh no!”

By the time Dora got back to her feet, a hand to her jaw, it was already too late. The moment Nakajima Kojirou was free to move, he swung his sword.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

He roared heartily, sending a pillar of light shooting up toward the heavens to engulf the zombie dragon. However, Nakajima Kojirou witnessed another enormous figure jumping into his firing line.

“What?!”

It was the headless zombie dragon Heinrich. In life, he’d been known as Draconia’s guardian, Rex. His body was completely and thoroughly obliterated. In exchange, the Sword of Light had gone no farther.

“Aah...”

Holding back the dizziness from being kicked in the head, Dora looked up and groaned at the sight. For some reason, she felt a sharp pain in her chest. Under normal circumstances, such a sacrifice of one of her kin would be no more than a necessary measure taken by her king. However, she couldn’t see it that way. In her eyes, the supposedly mindless undead monster had thrown itself into the line of fire to protect those who were trying to get away. The only one who knew the truth was the headless dragon, but it’d been burned to ashes and was no longer able to provide any answers. Either way, the remaining zombie dragon could now get away.

“It’s still not over!”

The moment that thought crossed Dora’s mind, the calamity in human form surpassed her expectations as if it was perfectly natural to do so. He was supposed to be limited to a single Sword of Light at a time. After withstanding one strike, there was supposed to be a small interval before another attack. However, the boy was already wielding a new sword in his hand.

“It can’t be!”

Dora opened her eyes in shock. Had he lied about being unable to bring out two at once? No. That wasn’t it. After all, he wasn’t wielding a Sword of Light.

“What *is* that?!”

What he wielded was the complete opposite of his namesake—or perhaps what could be called the counterpart to the Sword of Light. It was a jet-black sword—in other words, a Sword of Darkness that swallowed all light. The paired swords of light and darkness was the true form of the combat skill Nakajima

Kojirou had prepared for himself as a Conduit. He'd decided to wield his full strength, so he was going to use everything at his disposal against the zombie dragon.

“Haaaaaah!”

He once more unleashed the sword in his hand. This time, there was no shield to block him. The zombie dragon's enormous fifty-meter-long body was pushed upward by the pressure from behind.



“Ooooooh?!”

Majima Takahiro's group screamed from the dragon's palm. Having taken a direct hit, the zombie dragon had it far worse. It was as if darkness was devouring the dragon's enormous form.

“A-Aaah...”

After what seemed like an eternity, the torrent of darkness passed, and what was supposed to be a body covered by the sturdiest carapace was now missing its entire lower half. This of course affected the remaining upper half. What was left of the carapace cracked and broke apart, and meat tore free and dribbled from the sky. It was a lethal blow.

“A-Aaaah...”

The zombie dragon groaned. It was breaking and falling apart. Its existence couldn't endure. Naturally, this *should* have led to it crashing to the earth.

“No way...”

Nakajima Kojirou looked up in astonishment. The zombie dragon wasn't falling. It continued escaping into the sky. This was one thing he could never have predicted.

“AAaaaaaah...”

Even though it was crumbling apart, even though it was questionable that its entire body hadn't been destroyed, something supported its broken frame from the inside. That said, the situation was very different from the Mad Beast.

The zombie dragon was no longer Malvina. Her soul had long passed and none of her will remained. The only thing moving this undead monster's body was a curse of hatred toward those who'd destroyed Draconia. However, from another perspective, one could also say that the only things that remained inside this corpse were the vestiges of Malvina's emotions.

Those were largely the raging negative emotions of anger and resentment. However, deep inside, another powerful emotion had been dormant. No matter what else had been lost, this was one thing that remained. After all, this one emotion had stirred her for her entire life.

The same had applied that day visitors had attacked Draconia. She'd thrown away her sanity, yielding herself to wrath and madness, to go on a rampage. That had been so that even one more of her children could get away. What she'd truly wished for wasn't to slaughter her abominable enemy. Her wish had been to protect her children. And here in this place, one of those children was present. It was her last daughter, one she'd been unable to reconcile with for so long.

"If you leave the settlement, then you are no more than a stranger to us, Lobivia."

"Like hell I wanna see your stupid face again!"

Those were the last words they'd exchanged. Malvina had pushed Lobivia away, believing that her future wasn't in Draconia. She'd gone as far as getting her daughter to hate her to force her to leave. Nevertheless, she'd wished that one day in the future, they would be able to reconcile. She'd wished for the day to come when she could convey her love to her daughter. However, death had ripped this mother and daughter apart, leaving that wish unfulfilled. Nevertheless, something of that desire remained.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!"

The zombie dragon roared. This wasn't a groan of hatred or a growl of resentment. This was the howl of maternal love directed at a child.

"Mother...!"

For the first time in her life, Malvina's youngest daughter screamed that

word.

So, having escaped the torrent of darkness, the remains of a mother broke away from the battlefield.



Chapter 25: The Demon King’s Battle

“So he got away...”

Nakajima Kojirou watched as the partly destroyed dragon vanished into the distance. He felt a desire to give chase, but...

“Oh well.”

He suddenly sighed.

“This is fine. No. This is for the best. I’m looking forward to when we next meet...”

He muttered to himself so that nobody could hear him. He had conviction. The Calamitous King Nakajima Kojirou possessed absolute power. Opposing him was a fellow Conduit, Majima Takahiro, who’d gained the cooperation of the first savior’s will and a Dimensional Cornerstone. Considering the difference in power between them, he had no objections to admitting this was Majima Takahiro’s victory.

That said, this struggle for supremacy wouldn’t last long. Considering the absolute gulf in power between them, the balance would soon break. When that time came, Majima Takahiro would have no choice but to stand and fight. If this world vanished, those he loved would die, after all. He couldn’t make any other choice. He would wield every last ounce of power he had to resist. Nakajima Kojirou was sure of this.

“So, I’ll focus on what’s before me first.”

He stopped looking up at the sky. The area around him had been reduced to a wasteland by the intensity of their battle. And there before him was a boy straddling a monster wolf.

“Show me a good time, Demon King.”



Kudou Riku stared at Nakajima Kojirou, his expression stiff. The battle had

come to a temporary halt. This was because the first wave he'd sent in had been practically annihilated. However, around half of those losses hadn't been at Nakajima Kojiro's hands. Others were trying to break into the area to protect him.

"My king!"

Dora had also fallen back due to the danger. The trespassers were all unleashing a terrifying amount of mana. They were visitors. These appeared to be the exploration team members who'd entered those fabricated worlds to catch Jinguuji Tomoya. However, in that case, they would've been somewhat confused after witnessing Majima Takahiro escape from Nakajima Kojiro. The ones here showed no hesitation. That only made sense. After all, these weren't members of the pursuit force.

"I see, that's what's going on..." Kudou Riku muttered indifferently. "You had other collaborators aside from Hibiya Kouji."

Nakajima Kojiro had intentionally brought about the Colony's destruction. In that case, it was natural to assume that he'd been the one to order the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji to murder the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya, dealing a fatal blow to the Colony in the process. In other words, Nakajima Kojiro and Hibiya Kouji had been working together closely.

To prepare for the Colony's destruction, Nakajima Kojiro had likely carefully selected the members who'd stayed behind. However, just waiting for it to be destroyed wouldn't have guaranteed the outcome. They had to have created enough chaos to pull a surefire trigger to end the Colony. As one of the few members of the upper brass who'd stayed behind, Hibiya Kouji had dealt a fatal blow, but having several others causing intentional havoc would've guaranteed the outcome. Those were the ones who were joining the battle now.

From Kudou Riku's perspective, reinforcements were coming to the aid of an opponent he was already hopelessly outmatched against. Still, he remained calm.

"I see you're not panicking," Nakajima Kojiro said, curious about his behavior.

"It's far too late for that." Kudou Riku shrugged. He'd come here knowing he

was going to die. He had nothing to fear. This surely wasn't what Nakajima Kojiro wanted.

"Are you giving up?" he asked in disappointment. He wanted a desperate struggle from Kudou Riku.

"Give up? Of course not," Kudou Riku replied, laughing scornfully. "How could I?"

This man didn't understand anything. The mastermind behind everything stood right before Kudou Riku. The dark fire burning away in Kudou Riku's heart wasn't going to allow him to give up. He cursed this man. He couldn't forgive him. Even though he knew he had no chance, even if he was going to be killed by his sworn enemy, even if the humiliation and hatred he felt wouldn't vanish with this act, he couldn't stop. He simply couldn't. Kudou Riku had been broken ever since that day. He'd broken and had degraded into something else entirely.

"I'm the Demon King. I won't stop. Not until I meet my end in the pits of despair."

"Ha ha! Is that so? You're not half bad."

In contrast, Nakajima Kojiro looked like he was having the time of his life. On that day, Kudou Riku had been such a tiny being who should've died in that chaos. As if to congratulate him on his growth, Nakajima Kojiro gave him a friendly—and hence evil—smile. Seeing this, Kudou Riku felt relieved in a corner of his heart.

In essence, Nakajima Kojiro was a hedonist. Despite what he'd said, given the slightest opening, it was entirely possible he would leave this place to the others and chase Majima Takahiro. However, his attention was now focused on Kudou Riku. Kudou Riku no longer needed to worry about that possibility.

With that thought in mind, Kudou Riku prepared himself. This was a fight to the death. He had to confirm his forces before they started. His army was definitely on the decline. Among his named servants, the Mad Beast was dead, one zombie dragon had been annihilated, and the other had withdrawn from the battlefield. Of the pawns in his army, including the losses in the fabricated worlds, around two hundred were dead. Nevertheless, he still had the strength to consign the average visitor to oblivion.

“Dora, Caesar, Friedrich.”

In response to his call, the shadowy girl readied her blades, inorganic wings deployed from the Demon King’s back, and green mud floated in the air as a defensive wall.

“Gustav.”

What he summoned next was a separate force that rivaled his main army. The swarm of land-based fish was deemed a natural disaster in this world. It was a wave of violence that, once unleashed, couldn’t even be controlled by the Demon King.

“Anton.”

What’s more, the queen of shadows joined the battle at the head of the army. To avoid friendly fire from the uncontrollable Gustav, she was ready to charge while leaving a gap between herself and the swarm of fish. The Demon King’s army was all here and numbered nearly two thousand monsters. He wasn’t holding anything back.

“Go!”

At his command, the army charged.



The terrifying swarm of monsters shook the earth. This was a view capable of rendering anyone pale. Kudou Riku’s Army of Darkness grew stronger the more time he spent reinforcing their numbers. With his current army, in a onetime battle, he could even rival the exploration team. However, that was only if the Sword of Light wasn’t taken into consideration.

“Magnificent,” Nakajima Kojirou muttered as he raised his hand.

A tremendous amount of mana gathered in his palm—enough to have one’s hair standing on end. It was so far beyond even the standards of visitors.

“So this is my gift to you.”

“That’s...”

Taking his time, he created the largest Sword of Light anyone had ever seen.

This was a greatsword, which he could only use five times. What took this monster ten days to create could be likened to a true calamity.

This was far beyond the firepower one person should be in possession of. That was why he never really used it. It took some time to activate and it wasn't very adaptable. He was capable of defeating his enemies without resorting to this, anyway.

He would only use his trump card against a worthy opponent. In a sense, he acknowledged Kudou Riku. Naturally, there was nothing more terrifying than that in this world. The strongest Sword of Light was fully unleashed, aimed directly at Gustav.

In the next instant, a section of the forest was annihilated. The intense heat produced by the Sword of Light was enough to give the impression a new sun had been created. Not a trace of the forest was left behind, let alone anything occupying it.

"He's *this* strong...?"

Kudou Riku groaned. About seventy percent of Gustav had been annihilated. Over half of the survivors were heavily wounded. Because Kudou Riku only had control of the few tripdrills at the head of the swarm, he hadn't been able to disperse them to minimize damage. That was probably why Nakajima Kojirou had targeted Gustav.

"M-My king..."

Dora's expression contorted. A single strike was all it had taken to wipe out a force that rivaled their main army. Even this fanatic girl couldn't help but feel terror. However, fear wasn't enough to dull the boy's judgment.

"Do not falter. Disperse and charge."

Upon giving that order, he had Dora carry him, leaping from shadow to shadow. In that first exchange of blows, one thing had become clear. They were nothing against the Sword of Light in a long-distance battle. Their only choice was to charge and bring things into a close-quarters battle.

His judgment was correct. However, being correct didn't necessarily mean it would be an effective tactic. It would be challenging to reach this enemy to

begin with. With every swing of the Sword of Light and each barrage of magic from the surrounding visitors, his monsters were blown away like dust in the wind.

What's more, even if they reached the enemy, the visitors were hardening their defenses. One or two monsters attacking in tandem would be killed instantly. Naturally, Nakajima Kojirou and his comrades weren't going to just wait quietly for the attack either. Magic projectiles and slashes from the Sword of Light came flying directly at Kudou Riku. He endured by jumping from shadow to shadow using Dora, intercepting with Friedrich's magic, and using Caesar's wall to defend himself. That couldn't last forever, though.

Even making the correct decisions, he was no match. Kudou Riku was at his limit. This was a one-sided massacre. Understanding this, those surrounding Nakajima Kojirou silently fired high-level magic as if performing a chore, killing the Army of Darkness.

Kudou Riku could hear the unpleasant footsteps of ruin approaching him.

Chapter 26: Fate

Berta came to right as the zombie dragon escaped the battlefield. She shook her head, still dizzy from suffering a concussion, and groaned. She'd apparently passed out. Even if she'd been keeping her true form hidden while working with the exploration team, she'd been negligent in allowing that to happen.

"What...?"

She didn't understand what was going on. She wasn't asking anyone in particular, but someone turned to her.

"Berta..."

It was Majima Takahiro, the leader of the group she was accompanying. He was covered in wounds to the point where it was likely taking him everything he had just to sit up. All his other companions were also in a horrible state.

Lily had taken so much damage that she wasn't able to hide her true nature as a slime. Lobivia's face was a mess from the blood pouring from her brow combined with the flood of tears from her eyes. Shiran remained lying down like a corpse, her consciousness still gone. Ayame lay weakly on her belly with what looked like a broken leg.

Something horrible had to have happened. However, Berta wasn't able to remember what had gone on right before she'd passed out.

"Where...?"

Just as she raised her voice, she realized the group was in the palm of a zombie dragon—a monster who was supposed to be her king's pawn. What exactly had happened while she was unconscious? She was just getting more and more confused.

"Right after we escaped the fabricated world, Nakajima Kojiro attacked us," Majima Takahiro explained.

"Attacked...?"

Berta searched her memories. She couldn't remember anything beyond being released from that world and gathering in one place. However, in that instant, she vaguely recalled seeing an intense light. That had likely been an attack from the Sword of Light. That was how she'd lost consciousness and how the others had suffered such severe wounds in the battle that had followed.

But how did that explain getting away like this? How had they ended up riding the zombie dragon? The moment that thought came to mind, Majima Takahiro answered her, his face pale.

"Kudou forced his way into the battle."

"What...?"

"He's staying behind in our stead."

"You mean...my king is fighting the Sword of Light?"

The moment she understood this, her hazy consciousness became clear. Indescribable chills ran down her spine. No matter how powerful her king's army was, he was too poorly matched against the Sword of Light.

"My king...!"

His life was in danger. The instant she thought this, Berta unveiled the true form she'd been ordered to keep hidden. The figure of a human girl grew out of the wolf's waist. This rendered her defenseless for a moment, so she hadn't been able to use this form on the spot during the battle. Now, there were no enemies nearby. When she thought of how this was because her king was fighting, her heartbeat became a fevered gallop.

"W-Wait... Berta!"

It was evident that she was about to jump off. Majima Takahiro called out to her while she was in the middle of transforming.

"Don't stop me!"

"Even if you go, you'll just die! At the very least, let us go with—"

In the middle of speaking, he bent forward and his knees buckled. Losing his balance, he used both hands to stop himself from falling. Lily tried to run over to him in a fluster, but her movements were dull from having to drag her body

along. None of them were in any shape to move about.

“Berta...”

Nevertheless, he looked up at Berta desperately. As she was now, Berta understood that these were the eyes of someone looking at a cherished companion. That was why he couldn’t stand back and watch a friend run off to her death.

“Majima Takahiro...”

Berta hesitated. This was proof that she also saw them as companions. That said, it wasn’t enough to stop her. Berta’s king was far too great an existence to her. However, just then...

“Wait,” a third voice said, coldly bringing Berta to a complete stop. After all, this voice was the mouthpiece of the only being that was capable of stopping her. “You aren’t permitted to go to our king’s side. That is our king’s command.”

The one to speak was a boy with an inorganic expression that didn’t match his virile face. To be precise, it was an imitation of said boy.

“Anton?!”

It was one of Anton’s spawns, copying the form of Juumonji Tatsuya.

“When did you get here...?” Majima Takahiro asked.

“I’ve been here from the beginning,” Anton answered.

As servants of the same king, it would’ve been a simple matter for her to have placed a spawn atop the zombie dragon beforehand. Either way, there was something more important to discuss.

“O-Our king’s command?!” Berta exclaimed, clearly shaken. Shackled by a collar, this was one thing she couldn’t ignore. “That can’t be...! He’s in danger of dying! Have him withdraw that command immediately!”

“It’s useless. He’ll never withdraw it.”

Anton’s expression didn’t change even when faced with Berta’s desperate pleading. In truth, the Lord of Darkness’s immaterial collar conveyed this to her too. She couldn’t understand. She knew her king was keeping her at a distance

and sometimes gave irrational directives, but now wasn't the time for that. His life was in danger.

Even if she'd learned so much by accompanying Majima Takahiro, that didn't mean her king had lost any value in her eyes. Her king was heading toward his demise in the pits of despair. At the very least, she wished for him to find salvation in the end. And yet, she hadn't been able to get that across to him. He wouldn't understand.

Even though she'd started to feel like he was coming to accept her, now it all felt so far away. At this rate, he would end up eternally beyond her reach. That in itself was so hard for her to endure, and yet, Anton kept speaking.

"Our king does not wish for you to come to him."

There was no emotion in her voice. She was like a talking machine. This was the perfect servant that their king wished for. This was what Berta had wished to become, but couldn't. However, it was precisely because she was made to realize this that she clenched her teeth.

"Nevertheless, I'm going."

"Berta..."

"I have to go."

She was a failure. She hadn't been able to become a perfect pawn. So, there was no way she was going to obediently back down here. The compelling force of her collar was already inflicting pain on her. It was as if it was reinforcing the fact that she was a failure as her king's pawn. But even so...

"Anton!" Berta pleaded.

Anton and Berta—the Demon King's oldest servants stared at each other. There was no emotion in Anton's eyes. It was impossible to convince her. That was supposed to be the case.

"So it has come to this," Anton said, suddenly closing her eyes. "How foolish. I simply can't understand."

From the perspective of a loyal and emotionless pawn, her opinion was only a matter of course. But Berta remained bewildered. She sensed that there was

more to Anton's words.

"Yes. I simply cannot understand. But there is one thing I know," she said, opening her robotic eyes once more. "Berta. You should stay here."

"Anton...?"

Berta wasn't so thickheaded that she would miss the change in nuance. Being told she wasn't permitted to go and saying she should stay were different things.

"It's about time you realized it already," Anton continued dispassionately. "No. I'm sure you've already realized. From the very beginning, you were simply in the wrong place. Being by our king's side isn't suitable for you."

Her words were cruel. This was a complete denial of her existence as her king's servant. She should've been angered by this. And yet, Berta couldn't refute her words. Anton was right, after all.

She had realized this. Was she unsuitable for her king, or was he unsuitable for her? It was all a matter of perspective. And if her king was the one who was unsuitable for her...it would mean she'd been in the wrong place this whole time. Anton plainly spoke the truth she didn't want to accept.

"You made a mistake. But that also means there's somewhere else you truly belong," Anton said, directing her gaze to Majima Takahiro's group. "You should be with those who accept you. You should be with suitable companions in a different place from us. Surely, with them..." Anton stopped for a moment as if looking for the right words. "With them, you'll find happiness."



Find happiness in a different place with suitable companions—Berta had never thought about that option. She was speechless. Her thoughts froze. It was true. As she was now, she saw them as companions. As for how they thought of her...

"[Berta.]"

Berta turned around as someone called her name. Unable to stand from her wounds, Ayame raised her head and stared at Berta.

“[You can’t go, Berta.]”

She yelped sadly.

“[You can’t. You can’t. Stay with us.]”

Her pleas affirmed Anton’s words. Berta recalled the warmth she’d felt when she and Ayame had curled up under the sun. It had been so gentle and calm. She would be lying if she claimed hunting monsters night after night in search of power agreed with her better than living like that.

Precisely because she’d experienced those days, she felt the weight behind Anton’s claim. This was no delusion. It was a future she could grasp if she simply reached out for it. And long, long ago, the one who could stop her from doing so had lost his ability to do so.

“I...”

Berta focused on the immaterial collar around her neck and the chains coiling her entire body. The power of the Lord of Darkness to inflict irresistible pain on his servants to punish them and force them to submit wasn’t strong enough to keep Berta down. Ironically, the power she’d yearned for so that she could serve her king had made it possible to break away from him. The only thing maintaining those chains was Berta’s insistence on serving him. That was why, just like she was doing now, baring her fangs was all it took to shatter them.

“So you’ve made your decision, Berta.”

She heard an auditory hallucination of her shattered chain sliding off her body. As the servant to the same king, Anton sensed it too.

“With this, you’re free.”

“Yes...”

It had been so much easier than she’d imagined. She’d simply had to put her mind to it. Berta turned to Majima Takahiro once more.

“Berta...”

“You have my thanks, Majima Takahiro.”

Those words contained a flood of emotions. She was truly grateful. He and his

companions had been the ones to grant her this choice. The value of caring for others, the importance of not giving up on her dreams, the warmth of that sunlight—these were all things she'd learned by accompanying them. Because of that, she was capable of making this choice.

“Goodbye.”

“Huh...?”

Catching them off guard with those last words, she gave them no opportunity to stop her. No. Nobody would be able to stop her regardless. Nobody here was capable of holding back Berta's full strength. The only thing that could have had been her king's command, but those chains had already been shattered. She threw herself off the dragon's palm.

“Berta!”

Only voices chased her. She could hear the sorrowful whine of a tiny fox. That, too, shortly vanished into the distance. Knowing that they could no longer hear her, she said, “Thank you,” one more time. This was her choice.



The crumbling zombie dragon didn't have the strength left to fly high up into the sky. Jumping from its palm, Berta used trees as footholds to get down to the ground, then immediately began running. The zombie dragon wasn't going that fast, so they weren't all that far away. At her full speed, she could get back to where they'd been right away.

The abnormal wolf's feet stomped into the dirt, accelerating her to terrifying speeds. In an instant, the zombie dragon was already far in the distance. That warmth was so far away now. That felt sad, but she had no regrets. This was also thanks to them.

When the choice had been presented to her, she'd seen a gentle and happy future. However, her king wasn't there with her. That was why. That was all it had taken.

Berta had decided to run to her king. She'd decided to throw away that gentle and happy future to be by his side. In the end, that was her truth.

Precisely because she'd been given the choice, she had conviction in her heart. Perhaps it was ironic that her conviction had come from shattering the absolute bonds of her king and ignoring his commands.

Naturally, Berta understood. She knew how meaningless it was for her to run to her king's side. The man known as the Sword of Light simply existed in a different dimension. Her king was going to die. He would die in vain, faced with the one he'd sworn to get revenge on. He was facing his end in the pits of despair. It had always been the end he expected.

Berta had prayed that her king could at least find a peaceful end. But that was also over. She was incapable of doing anything about this situation. By running to him, all she would accomplish was adding one corpse to the body count. She knew this. Regardless, she didn't stop running. If she threw away her feelings here, it would be the same as discarding her wish. It would mean abandoning the boy she'd hurt. That was one thing she couldn't do. She would stay by his side. No matter the situation, no matter what happened, she would stay by him.

Berta continued running with all her might. She'd decided to stick to these feelings until her very last breath. Even if her life should end, the flames of these emotions would continue burning. By doing so, would a miracle happen?

No. That was impossible.

"Hgh?!"

Reality was endlessly cruel. That was something she'd known when she first met that boy. And here again, reality bared its fangs at her in the form of a drawn blade that could cut apart anything and everything.



Had she dodged an instant later, she would've been bisected. Running at full speed, Berta had just barely managed to evade the slash. Several of the tentacles at her waist were sent flying away. By all rights, those sturdy tentacles couldn't be severed so easily. This was the work of an unnatural blade.

"Now this is a surprise..." a man said. "What's going on? Never thought I'd see a dead girl here."

“You’re...” Berta had come across someone who was tied to her by a dreadful fate. “The Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji...!”

He’d also been expelled from the fabricated world. However, he hadn’t gone to assist Nakajima Kojiro in the battle against Kudou Riku. Others had gone, so he hadn’t seen the need. He’d also suffered severe wounds in the earlier battle against Kudou Riku. As a result, he’d ended up bumping into Berta.

There were two other visitors with him. They hadn’t gone to support Nakajima Kojiro and were instead treating Hibiya Kouji with healing magic. Even if he was far from being in perfect shape, having received treatment from the moment he’d been expelled, Hibiya Kouji had recovered enough to pose more than enough of a threat.

In truth, the perfectly plain-looking sword in his hand was emitting an endlessly dangerous aura. The man who’d had the greatest effect on Berta’s life now stood to block her way.

“I doubt you’ll even put up a fight against Nakajima if I let you through...but I don’t got a reason to let you go either.” Hibiya Kouji casually readied his sword. “Never thought I’d kill the same girl twice.”

Pressured by his cold bloodlust, Berta felt like all her blood had frozen. Death was standing right before her.

“I guess this is fate,” he continued. “This time, I’ll finish you properly so there’s no room for debate.”

Berta recalled a pain in her waist. That was where Hibiya Kouji had once dealt a lethal blow to Todoroki Miya. Having eaten her corpse at the time, Berta’s partially human form closely resembled her. She could be said to be an exact replica. That was why she felt like this was an unavoidable twist of fate.

“Don’t make me laugh...” Berta said, clenching her fangs and growling, shattering that sensation. “I’m not Todoroki Miya.”

The pain in her waist was a hallucination. It wasn’t her own experience. This wasn’t fate. The man before her wasn’t her death. After all...

“I am Berta! The second servant to be given a name by my king!”

This was a symbol of her worthlessness—a name she'd thought was a curse. However, it was precisely because she was who she was that she'd made it this far. She hadn't simply obeyed. She'd agonized, worried, met people, and ultimately made her decision. That was how she was here now. Even if she was to find no recompense, there was worth in that. She believed it. That was why she didn't hesitate to bare her fangs.

“Out of my way! I have to go to my king's side!”



Chapter 27: Outstretched Hand

The massacre continued. The Army of Darkness dispersed as they closed in on Nakajima Kojirou in an attempt to avoid the Swords of Light and Darkness. The greatsword was the primary threat. One wrong move could see the entire army annihilated.

However, the scattered monsters were instead dispatched by the far more adaptable dagger. It possessed less power over a wide range, but still bore sheer force enough to blow away the pockets of monsters that were moving as groups, dealing plenty of damage to the army. Naturally, the magic the other visitors were firing was nothing to scoff at either.

Even as they intercepted the swarm of monsters, they threw out attacks against Kudou Riku, who was moving about the battlefield at high speed in Dora's arms. He was a decoy. Just by having attacks aimed at him, he could reduce the damage to his army. It was an extremely dangerous tactic, though. Dora was a powerful combatant who was capable of teleporting from shadow to shadow, making her ideal for this job, but she had her limits.

"Ugh..."

"My king?! Are you all right?!"

Despite dodging a direct hit, a rock that had been sent flying by the shock wave coincidentally gouged a scar across his brow. Kudou Riku's body was that of a fragile civilian. Blood poured down his face.

"Don't mind me. Focus on the enemy."

"Ah! As you will!"

Even as the chaos continued unabated, he maintained his control over the army. The moment he stopped controlling them, it would all be over. Still, what change would come from his resilience? His army's attacks couldn't reach their enemies. The sporadic magic unleashed by Friedrich was unfortunately being blocked. As he continued acting as a decoy, Kudou Riku was gradually getting

injured. He was at an overwhelming disadvantage here, something anyone could see. The Demon King had thrown himself into a hopeless battle.

In contrast, the visitors had strength to spare. Regardless, they weren't being careless. They simply saw this as a one-sided massacre. They handled it with disinterest as if it were just busywork. It was only natural for them to see things this way. At least, under normal circumstances, it would be. In this case, perhaps they hadn't thought it through enough.

Or perhaps they were simply normal. If there was one exception to this laissez-faire attitude, it would be Nakajima Kojirou, swinging his Sword of Light from the back. His onslaught against the approaching army demonstrated amusement rather than mere obligation.

"Ah...?"

It started with a slight sense of unease. By the time this escalated into realization, it was already too late to ignore it.

"Hey. Are we...?"

Gradually, and certainly, the monsters getting in range of them were multiplying. The reason for this was simple.

"W-We can't keep up?!"

It was just a matter of volume. The Sword of Light blew away small packs of monsters. The visitors were also using high-level magic to inflict massive casualties. But what of it? The Lord of Darkness single-mindedly piled up a mountain of blood, meat, and corpses. He did so until his enemy couldn't keep it up anymore. The price for this was great, of course. The losses his army suffered could no longer be disregarded. Only sixty percent remained. Faced with these enemies, who all possessed extraordinary individual power, the only thing Kudou Riku had to rely on was numbers. As the one manipulating these numbers, it could be said that what remained of his army was what remained of his life.

Even a candle posed a threat when burning fiercely. However, this act shortened his own life. If he were to consider the consequences, there was no way he would act so recklessly. And yet, he showed no hesitation to do exactly

that.

“H-Hey! N-No way!”

Pushing through the long-distance attacks, more and more monsters got their own attacks in. In the beginning, one or two getting through had been instantly killed. A few moments ago, one had gotten two attacks in before being killed. Now, an attacking monster survived.

It was getting harder and harder to deal with the monsters. By using one of the shortwords he had in reserve, Nakajima Kojirou was able to rally his group at fixed intervals. From another perspective, he was being forced to use his shortwords, which weren't cost-effective against dispersed enemies. By all rights, Kudou Riku was far too fragile to stand on the battlefield. However, by serving as a decoy and wearing himself to tatters, he was slowly cornering the group of heroes who'd been given tremendous power. It was an impossibility. It couldn't be happening.

“Aren't you frightened?”

It was simply abnormal. Those who realized this lost their composure. They even felt fear. That was natural. No normal person could understand him. Kudou Riku was broken. He couldn't stop. He couldn't be stopped. So, he kept going. He would keep going until his entire army was gone. Kudou Riku didn't show the slightest hesitation to shave away everything he'd built up, everything he was.

The visitors opposing him were forced to realize this. The Lord of Darkness's inherent ability was of course fiendish, but the way this boy wielded it was the most terrifying part about him. And by the time they realized this, it was already too late.

“One down.”

“A-Aaah! Help...!”

One of the visitors finally failed to block an attack and was engulfed by the charging army of monsters. His figure vanished under a tide of beasts in the blink of an eye. The others turned pale. They started to hear the dreadful footsteps of ruin approaching them. This was what had tormented Kudou Riku

ever since the Colony's destruction. Now, he was dragging the visitors who'd been responsible for it down to the pits of hell.

"That's two."

"Y-You should've died back then... You should've died... Aaaaaah?!"

Another boy was engulfed by monsters as he wailed in terror.

"Should've died...? I have been dying. I'm already dead."

Kudou Riku discarded the statement with chillingly resentful eyes. He should've died that day. He'd heard the footsteps of ruin approaching him ever since. His doom was closer to him than ever before. It was already within reach. Only forty percent of his army remained. But it wasn't over yet. He wasn't going to die until he killed all the ringleaders. It was precisely because he believed that...

"Nice, Kudou. You're great."

That the mastermind behind everything seemed so hatefully far away as he smiled at Kudou in delight.

"Three..."

"M-My king!"

Dora raised her voice in a fluster as she continued running about from shadow to shadow with Kudou Riku in her arms. He was steadily killing them, but even now, only Nakajima Kojirou remained perfectly composed. He continued mowing down the incoming army while still taking precise shots at Kudou Riku.

He unleashed a shadowy shortsword, obliterating several monsters a good distance away. A bear monster charged in to match the attack, and was decapitated by the radiant dagger in his other hand. Without pausing, he grasped Kudou Riku's location and unleashed a beam of light at him.

"Ugh...!"

Because of the losses to his army, he hadn't evaded or blocked in time. Failing to intercept the strike, half of Friedrich's right wings were smashed to bits, and a majority of Caesar's body was scorched.

Kudou Riku had wounds of all sizes all over his body. The casualties they were suffering were severe, but because they were supported by the absolute pillar called Nakajima Kojirou, the other visitors weren't routed. If only he weren't here, the Army of Darkness would've already engulfed the visitors and won.

Kudou Riku didn't have an inexhaustible supply of monsters. It was apparent from the number of monster corpses that not all that many of them remained. He was down to twenty percent. At this pace, he would be out in a few more minutes.

"It was fun, but...you've reached your limit, Demon King."

"Ugh."

After coming so far, Kudou Riku's frozen expression twisted bitterly. Nakajima Kojirou really was far too strong. Kudou Riku had been at a disadvantage from the very beginning. Having overpowered the visitors for a short period could be considered abnormal. At this point, his only choice was to dive into the depths of ruin. It was only a matter of time until he fell prey to the Sword of Light.

"Not yet...!"

Nevertheless, giving up was one thing he refused to do. He was never going to accept going down without a fight when the mastermind behind everything was in sight.

"Not yet!"

Ten percent left. Anton had been left in command of the army and had finally been forced to take to the front. From the very moment he chose to stay here in Majima Takahiro's stead to allow him to escape, Kudou Riku couldn't run away himself. However, with his army depleted to such an extent, retreating would be meaningless either way.

"Dora! Forward!"

So, he chose to advance. He gave the command to link up with the remaining army to close the distance. At this point, he could do nothing more than delay the inevitable. Thus, he chose to charge forth to bare his fangs in hatred and resentment. It didn't matter how defenseless that left him.

“Nakajima Kojirou, you’re the one person I’ll...!”

He couldn’t die yet. He had to get revenge. He couldn’t die until he plunged Nakajima Kojirou into the depths of despair to match all those the man had tossed into the pits of hell. As if inspired by her master’s tenacity, Dora charged with terrifying vigor. She dodged, intercepted, and defended against magic from the visitors, forcing her way forward. Watching her ghastly figure, the personification of calamity laughed.

“Wonderful!”

His expression was one of pure joy, yet a shadow of envy lay over it. With devilish timing, he unleashed a Sword of Darkness.

“Ah...”

There was no escaping it.

“My king!”

“Guh?!”

Darkness engulfed one of Kidou Riku’s arms. He’d gotten off lightly because Dora had covered him. In exchange, she’d practically taken a direct hit.

“My king... Forgive...me...”

Having taken a fatal blow, her apology vanished into the air. Having lost his means of teleportation, Kudou Riku pitifully tumbled to the ground.

“It’s over.”

“Ugh!”

Nakajima Kojirou already had the Sword of Light in his other hand at the ready. There was nothing Kudou Riku could do. He knew this, but still stretched his hand out toward his sworn enemy.

“Aaaaaah!”

Naturally, his hand didn’t reach. The end finally came for him, with no hope of salvation. A vast ray of light swallowed everything in sight.



The last monster screamed in agony as it died. Silence returned to the battlefield. The stench of blood filled the air, making that silence all the more ominous.

“Is it...over?” one of the visitors muttered timidly.

The Army of Darkness had been annihilated. The Demon King Had been blown away by the Sword of Light. This was supposed to be a victory, but the visitors didn’t rejoice over it. They only felt the slightest relief at having survived.

In addition to the Sword of Light, who possessed power that stood out even within the exploration team, there’d been ten other visitors. With so much power, they should’ve been able to massacre any foe. And yet, faced with a single visitor, three of them had died. What’s more, a good portion of Nakajima Kojirou’s stock of Swords of Light had been exhausted. Could this really be called a victory? Still, they felt relief that they at least had the leisure to consider such things.

“Huh?!”

In the next instant, every one of them felt chills run across their skin. A tremendous amount of mana had suddenly built up behind them.

“Nakajima?!”

They turned around to see Nakajima Kojirou holding a Sword of Light at the ready.

“Get down.”

“Eep!”

The visitors threw themselves to the ground in a panic, and the unleashed weapon burned the air. A section of the forest vanished with a thunderous roar. The visitors looked on in shock, finding no meaning in Nakajima Kojirou’s destructive act.

“Unbelievable...” he muttered a while later. “That was definitely a lethal blow.”

The corners of his lips curved upward. His face expressed humiliation, along with unmistakable admiration and delight. He was the only one who knew what

had happened when he'd unleashed the finishing blow against Kudou Riku.

"He got away."



"Didn't think she'd get past me..." Hibiya Kouji mumbled to himself.

He had a blood-soaked sword in his hand. Just moments ago, he'd been in a fierce battle against Berta. But Berta was nowhere in sight now. He'd failed to stop her. The impossible had happened.

Berta had exhibited amazing power when she'd tried to make her way to her master's side. She probably could've defeated a warrior. However, she'd been poorly matched against multiple cheaters, including the Absolute Blade. Hibiya Kouji had sent tentacles flying, had cut open the wolf's belly, and had delivered one last blow, severing the girl's torso from the wolf.

He'd been under the impression that he'd killed her. However, using that opportunity, Berta had slipped by him. If she'd attacked him then and there, she could've dealt significant damage to Hibiya Kouji. She might even have taken him down with her.

However, her objective hadn't been to kill the enemy who'd blocked her path. She'd taken that once-in-a-lifetime chance to get away. She had simply run toward her master, even after suffering a fatal wound. The tenacious will burning in her breast could not be extinguished so easily.

Nevertheless, if Hibiya Kouji had turned to swing his sword, he could've cut her down. But he hadn't been able to. He looked down at what had prevented him from doing so. There on the ground was the severed torso of the girl.

"What the hell was that...?"

In that instant, the severed torso had attacked him as if it had been an independent being. The unexpected assault had frozen Hibiya Kouji's thoughts. It had been as if Todoroki Miya had come back from the dead. Even after cutting the torso down on reflex, he'd kept his sword pointed at it, unable to understand the situation. The girl's body hadn't moved again after that, but Hibiya Kouji had let Berta get away.

“Whatever...”

The inexplicable phenomenon had been creepy, but there was no point thinking about it. At this point, he really didn't care. He hadn't been able to kill the wolf. She'd gone off to her master. However, that act was meaningless. After all, having cut her himself, Hibiya Kouji was sure of it.

“She don't got long, anyway.”

Chapter 28: At the End of the Road

Berta made her way through the forest on unsteady feet. Her consciousness was a haze. Her agonized breaths smelled of rusty iron, and her body felt like lead. She wanted to rest. She wanted to sleep. Her body pleaded with her, but her sense of duty forced it to move.

After breaking past Hibiya Kouji, she'd made it to her king's side just in time and had immediately retreated. She'd somehow managed to get away from the enemy's follow-up attack. Considering she'd been against the Sword of Light and the Absolute Blade, it was no exaggeration to say this was a momentous feat. That said, the price had been tremendous.

With each step, her blood-soaked feet made wet noises. Her belly was split open from a cut by the Absolute Blade. Several of her vital organs had been destroyed, and some of her entrails had fallen out. She'd lost her human torso, and a portion of her back had been carbonized by the Sword of Light's last attack when she'd failed to dodge it completely.

Not even the highest grade of healing magic could do anything about her wounds. It wouldn't have been strange for her breathing to cease and her heart to stop at any moment. Nevertheless, Berta continued moving. Willpower alone kept her body in motion.

She'd made it a fair distance away without anyone trailing her. The moment she came to that conclusion, she tripped, having long surpassed her limit. Using the last of her strength, Berta placed her "burden" against the base of a tree, then collapsed on her side. In her current state, she knew that she would never be able to stand up again once she fell.

Deep inside the forest, she suddenly recalled her meeting with the boy who had become her master. Her final destination seemed somehow similar to where it had all begun. On that day, Berta had failed to protect him. After that, she'd watched him flounder down the path to becoming the Demon King with deep regret and despair in her heart. She'd prayed that he would at least find

salvation in his last moments.

She'd continued walking with such a prayer close to her heart. But this was where it was going to end. All that was left was for her to lose consciousness and enter her eternal slumber. She didn't because someone spoke to her.

"Why did you return...?"

The precious "burden" Berta had risked her life to retrieve and carry here—Kudou Riku—spoke to her. He remained seated, leaning against the tree without making the slightest movement. He no longer had the strength to do so.

"What a waste."

Blood poured from his lips as he spoke. The shadow of death hung over him. His weakened body, a secondary effect of his inherent ability, was far more fragile than even a normal human's. He would've evaporated had the Sword of Light hit him. Even though he'd evaded that fate, the shock wave from the attack had been fatal for him. Berta had staked her life on getting her king away from the battlefield, but hadn't been able to save his life.

"Why did you do such a thing? Is there any purpose?"

Berta found this unusual. Her king had only ever thrust her away and had rarely ever asked for her personal opinion like this. That was when she suddenly realized something. This was her very first chance to convey her feelings. Once she realized this, her mouth opened.

"There was no purpose," she said.

Even this simple act required significant willpower. The pain was gradually fading. Instead, she felt so cold. Perhaps, having lost too much blood, she couldn't really see properly either. She wanted to just go to sleep, but she somehow maintained her consciousness. She couldn't even imagine letting her first and last chance pass.

"There was no meaning at all, my king. But even so, I didn't give up."

She was well aware that this served no purpose. That didn't only apply to this situation either. She'd known from the beginning that her wish would go

unfulfilled, that she'd die in vain. Nevertheless, she hadn't been able to stop herself from wishing. So, she'd done exactly as she always had.

"I couldn't help but do as my heart wished. It doesn't matter if it's meaningless."

She conveyed her feelings without a hint of falsehood, and silence hung over them. Berta was no longer able to see what kind of expression her king was making. He probably didn't understand and was making an exasperated look. Or perhaps he was coldly indifferent. In truth, it was neither of those.

"A wish, is it...?" the boy muttered. "How foolish. There is no salvation for me."

"Why...are you so certain?" Berta asked, her shock clear.

The words her king spoke were none other than her wish. She'd never told him about it, though. This surprised her, but she figured it out quickly.

"Did Majima Takahiro...?"

Her assumption was correct. Kudou Riku had heard it from him during their joint struggle in the labyrinth. Berta assumed that was likely the case. So, what she found unexpected was that her king spoke of it even though he knew.

"How truly foolish," he said, unable to hide his disappointment. "You could've torn off the collar around your neck whenever you wanted."

That was when Berta realized one more thing. This was also the first time her king had allowed her to know his feelings.

"You should've just torn yourself free of those chains. You should've gone anywhere you wanted. You wouldn't have met with misfortune."

His voice dripped with disappointment, even regret. However, Berta had no idea what thoughts had led him to make such statements. Things would be different were Majima Takahiro here, for example. He was the only one who'd figured out the truth Kudou Riku had been keeping to himself all this time.

Majima Takahiro questioned whether Kudou Riku knew that Berta, who'd been his servant before he'd started on his path as the Demon King, was something like a memento of the girl who'd saved his life, Todoroki Miya. If so,

having already started on his path to ruin, there'd been no way for him to accept her. If that was the case, then what was he supposed to do? What had he done?

Kudou Riku had always kept Berta at a distance. He'd dispatched her to guard Majima Takahiro and hadn't called her back even when his life had been in danger. He'd kept her away from his march to ruin and had instead entrusted her to people with whom one could say she belonged. All that had been left was for her to tear off her chains and go wherever she wanted.

She should've just taken her freedom and gained happiness. That was the one thing he'd wished for, not as the Demon King, but as himself. He'd never wished to see her dying in despair in front of him like this. He'd never wanted to see that again...

"You shouldn't have wished for my salvation. If you didn't, you could've found happiness."

All he had in his heart now was disappointment. In the end, he hadn't been able to carry out the revenge he'd sworn to accomplish as the Demon King, nor had the one wish he'd harbored as a boy been granted. Perhaps that was only natural.

"I can't do anything."

That perception was something like a curse within Kudou Riku's core. Dying in despair one day had been his destiny. That outcome had been an inevitability, so he'd had no other path before him. That was why, if anyone was capable of overturning that fate, it had to be someone who'd continuously wished for the opposite with the same fervor.

"My king. You've got it wrong."

Berta adamantly denied his words.



At this time, Berta didn't have an accurate grasp of her king's feelings. Far too much had been hidden from her for her to figure it out. However, that wasn't much of a problem right now because none of that mattered.

After all, she was at least capable of asserting that her king's statement was mistaken. She could tell he was misunderstanding. She believed she had to properly convey her feelings. She didn't hesitate at all to do so.

"I don't believe it would've been better for me not to wish so," she said clearly. "I regret that my wish couldn't be fulfilled. However, I don't regret wishing for it. I didn't want happiness. I wanted to somehow save what I once failed to protect."

She'd chosen to come here, going as far as knowingly throwing away her own path to happiness. Nobody had decided that for her. It'd been her choice. How could she possibly regret it?

"But..."

Kudou Riku was trying to say something, but his next words wouldn't come out. Berta's statement had been so unwavering. This had been Kudou Riku's greatest miscalculation. Having been sent to Majima Takahiro, Berta hadn't simply spent her time aimlessly. She'd learned many things and had grown. She'd grown enough to surpass this boy's expectations.

"Besides, you're misunderstanding, my king."

She had nothing to be scared of anymore. She simply had to convey what she had to.

"Please don't say that I would've been better off tearing away my chains."

Her voice was calm and gentle.

"They were what connected me to you, after all."

Being pushed away was far more painful than meeting her end. So, she didn't feel the slightest bit of despair in this situation. What's more, Berta believed this wasn't all that bad. At the very least, reaching this spot on the verge of death, she'd been able to convey her feelings.

To some, enduring so much agony only to achieve so little seemed like far too meager a reward. However, to her, this was more than enough. It didn't matter what anyone else said. That was why she could speak with conviction.

"I wasn't dragged down into despair. I came here with hope in my eyes, and I

reached this place.”



Kudou Riku was speechless for a while. He couldn't peel his eyes away from the wolf who was dying before his eyes. This was the one fragment of hope he'd obtained before becoming the Demon King, but by the time he'd realized this, it'd been too late.

He'd gone out of his way to let her go, and yet she'd come back. Now, he truly understood. He'd thought that by pushing her away and keeping her at a distance, letting her spend time where she truly belonged, she'd find her own freedom. However, that had been a tremendous misunderstanding. No matter what he did, Berta would never leave him. Her confession had been more than enough to convince him of this.

“Ha ha... What's with that?”

The boy laughed quietly. It was as if he was resigning himself before her unbreakable heart.

“What can I possibly do about that?”

In a sense, it was a declaration of defeat. His attempts to push Berta away had utterly failed. In the end, he hadn't been able to do anything. She'd forced him to realize this. There was a curse at the core of Kudou Riku's being. He was weak and couldn't do anything. To be made to realize this in the very, very end was far too cruel. But...

“Good grief, you truly are...”

There wasn't the slightest shadow hanging over his words. In that instant, he realized something. It was precisely because he acknowledged that nothing could be done anymore—that there was just one thing that he could still do.

So, he put strength into his burned arm. It was as if he was shaking off the curse that bound him. He couldn't move it properly, but held it up and reached out. There was no more reason to push her away.



“Very well.”

“My king?”

Berta raised her voice curiously. She hadn't truly come to understand her king's thoughts. However, she still recognized that she'd acted against his will. She'd figured this would offend him. She was prepared for him to curse and reject her. However, his voice didn't seem to imply that. It was so far away from such concepts.

“It's my loss. Let's grant your wish.”

“Huh...?”

Berta felt a nostalgic sensation return to her body. It was the Demon King's power of subordination—the collar that connected her to him. Naturally, at this point, there was no value in the power of subordination itself. She'd torn it off once already, and above all else, its compelling force was totally meaningless when she was moments away from dying. So, right here, it did nothing but connect them.

“You may stay by my side for as long as you wish.”

She needed a moment to understand that he was accepting her. The moment she did, a tremendous impulse shook her heart.

“Ah...”

She was speechless. Just having the opportunity to convey her feelings had been enough for her. She hadn't even imagined that he would accept her.

“My king...?”

Was this some kind of misunderstanding? Was she seeing a convenient dream on the verge of her death? As if to deny such misgivings, his outstretched hand touched her head. With extremely awkward movements, he gently brushed her down to her neck. This in itself had long been a dear fantasy. However, precisely because she could feel it was real—it gave her conviction that she'd been rewarded for everything.

“Aaah...”

She felt warmth spread through her cold, dying body. Something warm enough filled her to the point that she felt like she would melt. She was sure of

it. This was happiness. Had the two of them never met tragedy, had they been able to live in this world, they could've obtained this. This was the possibility they'd lost the day they'd met. This was the future they could've had. Even if only for the shortest time in the very end, they'd retaken it.

That sensation made her endlessly happy. No. This wasn't the end. He'd told her she could stay by his side for as long as she wished, after all. Even if death tried to tear them apart, even if they plummeted into the depths of hell, she wouldn't leave his side.

"I'll be by your side forever..."

She didn't even know if her own muttering was audible. She no longer had the strength to speak. But her feelings had been conveyed. In this instant, something definitely connected them. Berta huffed in satisfaction as she pushed her head against the hand that touched her. She basked in the warmth she felt in her heart. Her tail wagged feebly and slowly. Breathing her last, she fell into a warm slumber that she would never wake up from again.

Chapter 29: The Scar Left by the Demon King

Hibiya Kouji walked while kicking the dirt roughly. His expression was grim. He seemed to be flustered, which was rare for this normally unapproachable and overbearing boy. As he continued walking quickly, a graceful young man looking up at the sky came into view.

“Nakajima...”

“Ooh, Kouji. You’re here.”

Nakajima Kojiro turned to him with an affable smile. Hibiya Kouji clicked his tongue, irritated that this man was acting the same as always.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Hibiya asked.

“Hm? What’re you talking about?”

“Quit playing dumb. What’s with things going to hell even though you were around? I heard three guys died fighting just one person.”

He was referring to Nakajima Kojiro’s confidants who’d died against Kudou Riku’s Army of Darkness. It was a small mercy that none of the survivors were badly wounded, but not all damage was physical.

“The rest of the guys lost their spirit. We can’t trust them anymore if they’re like that.”

Of the confidants, excluding the two who’d been with Hibiya Kouji, there were eight survivors. By escaping the fear of death and the Demon King’s madness, they’d all been reduced to feeling nothing but relief. Their hearts were broken. If they got some rest and calmed down, they would be able to fight again while looking outwardly fine. However, if they were once more thrown into a serious predicament, they no longer had the willpower to stand their ground.

In other words, the confidants had practically been annihilated—all against one single cheater. What’s more, Nakajima Kojiro had expended several

greatswords, his combat-use ability's trump cards. He had two remaining greatswords of light and four of darkness. By unveiling the Sword of Darkness he'd been keeping hidden, he'd doubled his stock, but this was still far too large a loss.

"You better not have held back," Hibiya said, glaring at him.

Having supported his schemes, Hibiya Kouji knew Nakajima Kojirou's nature very well. If Nakajima Kojirou was holding back, he had a reason to be bothered by it. Hibiya Kouji's motive was to return to his old world. However, his circumstances were different from those of Juumonji Tatsuya, who'd wished to go back out of anxiety and fear, and Jinguuji Tomoya, who'd wanted to get all his fellow students home.

Hibiya Kouji's mother had left his home with another man when he was still a child. Ever since, his father had raised him alone. His father was an unappealing man, but even when his son had been in his rebellious phase, he'd stayed by his side like a good parent. That same father had collapsed from sickness just two weeks before the teleportation event. Hibiya Kouji had considered quitting school to get a job, but he hadn't had the time to convince his father or get the formalities done. It had been a huge mistake. He should've just quit school. By doing so, he wouldn't have gotten sent to this ridiculous world.

Now, his father was alone on his sickbed. Hibiya Kouji regretted this every day. That was why he wasn't going to be picky about how he got back. He would even join hands with a being who was more trouble than a devil.

"You wound me," Nakajima Kojirou said, shrugging. "You really think I held back? Kudou was just that strong."

"Even though he nearly kicked the bucket in the Colony?"

"People grow, Kouji. I didn't think he'd change so dramatically, though." Nakajima Kojirou didn't seem to be lying. "Even if someone possessed the same ability as him, I doubt they could've honed it to such an extent or inflicted this much damage. He had a terrific way of life and admirable resolve."

This man, who stood at the summit of all visitors past, present, and likely future, sang Kudou Riku's praise. The boy who had once despaired at his own weakness had continuously clawed his way forward through the mud, driven by

hatred and resentment. The strength he'd gained was undeniable.

"Wouldn't things have gone differently if you'd just reduced the area to a wasteland?" Hibiya Kouji asked, scowling in discontent.

"I won't deny it, but don't be unreasonable. I would've blown away my allies if I did. It also would've exhausted me more."

"That'd be putting your priorities backwards, huh?"

"Right?" Nakajima Kojirou shrugged. "Well, to tell the truth...it would've been different had you been here, Kouji."

Among Nakajima Kojirou's shadowy confidants, the Absolute Blade was on a different level. Due to his specialization in close-quarters combat, he was at a disadvantage against the Sword of Light, who boasted of being the strongest even at long range, the Sturm und Drang, who was like a magic artillery battery of grade 5 magic, and the Almighty Vessel, who could imitate the latter. About the only other person who could take him head-on was the Skanda.

What's more, those long-distance specialists had already been taken care of. The Sturm und Drang Yuzukisono Rui had gone missing after leaving the exploration team. The Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma had been slaughtered inside that labyrinth. Both had died at Hibiya Kouji's hands. He had something he had to accomplish, so he fought to achieve it. He absolutely couldn't afford to die, so he coldly chose the most reliable methods. In other words, he'd killed them before they'd seen him as an enemy.

It had been particularly convenient that Okazaki Takuma's corpse had coincidentally been considered the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya's victim. In truth, Jinguuji Tomoya, whose goal was to get every visitor back home, would never have killed Okazaki Takuma.

About the only threat to Hibiya Kouji now was the Sword of Light Nakajima Kojirou, but he was essential to getting back to his own world, so even the thought of antagonizing him was meaningless. At this point, Hibiya Kouji's power was prominent even among all the visitors. He stood far enough apart that it was like comparing people with and without powers.

The reason he hadn't participated in Nakajima Kojirou's battle against Kudou

Riku was that he'd been forced to fight the Army of Darkness on his own beforehand and had suffered serious wounds. What's more, even though he could've gone to check once he'd recovered, he'd taken an unexpected amount of time finishing Berta.

So, everyone had no choice but to acknowledge it. True, Kudou Riku hadn't fulfilled his revenge when faced with the mastermind behind everything. However, he'd dealt a serious blow to Nakajima Kojirou's camp all on his own.

"What's the plan?" Hibiya Kouji asked, reining in his emotions.

Nakajima Kojirou smiled back at him. "Nothing at all."

"Again with this crap..."

"There's no need to glare like that," Nakajima Kojirou said, his composure unyielding. "Let me ask you this instead. Is there a problem? I'm here, safe and sound. So, there's nothing wrong."

"You...have a point there."

The Sword of Light was pivotal to his goal. So long as this Conduit was around, nothing else mattered. The others were practically only here to reduce Nakajima Kojirou's fatigue. Even if a lot more damage had been done than expected, it didn't ultimately matter.

"Besides, we've added to our forces too," Nakajima Kojirou said, shifting his gaze away from the silent Hibiya Kouji.

"Leader..."

He was now looking at the Multiplex Kubota Yousuke, who'd gotten separated from them during the battle in the fabricated world and had brought the other members of the pursuit force here.

"I'm here to ask if what you said is true," Kubota said, seemingly tormenting himself over something. This was because of what he'd been informed of earlier. "Is it true we're being used as convenient cogs for this world?"

"Yeah, that's right," Nakajima Kojirou answered, nodding while maintaining the appearance of their reliable leader. "If not for us, this world's existence can't be maintained. It's a pitfall of a world where wishes come true. That's why

we were abducted from our world.”

Kubota Yousuke had been informed of the truth of this world. However, a portion of that truth had been altered.

“Yousuke. We’re victims who were abducted from our familiar everyday lives,” Nakajima Kojiro continued. “The people of this world tricked us. In a sense, they’re the perpetrators. Is there any reason for us to show such people any consideration?”

“There...isn’t.”

“Naturally, the majority of humanity is unaware of this. Perhaps it’s unfair to blame them. Still, we can’t say they’re completely free of responsibility. Am I wrong?”

“You aren’t.”

“We have a right to go back to our world. Or do you not want to go back, Yousuke?”

“No. I wanna go back too. Of course I do.”

“There’s a way. By using the Dimensional Cornerstones, by changing the way of this world, we can go back. The world will be affected a little by the change, but unlike with Jinguuji, who was trying to destroy the Dimensional Cornerstones, it won’t be a fatal one. A slight effect is just reaping what they sowed. We’re just making them take responsibility.”

“Yeah... Everything is as you say.”

A lie woven into a truth had that much more persuasive power. Above all else, it was coming from someone in whom Kubota Yousuke had invested a great deal of trust. This verged on brainwashing. Nakajima Kojiro had laid the groundwork for this exact situation.

“I’m obviously gonna follow you.”

With that, Kubota Yousuke turned on his heel. He decided to see this world as his enemy. It wasn’t just him either. The exploration team members, the ones who’d stuck together all the way to the imperial capital, all idolized Nakajima Kojiro. He’d handpicked from that group to form the pursuit force. It wouldn’t

take long to convince the large majority of them.

They had more than enough strength gathered. To those opposing them, this was a hopeless situation. However, Majima Takahiro was sure to persist. He would gather as many allies as possible and stand against the threat to this world. To protect what was dear to him, he would never shrink back no matter what difficulties faced him. Nakajima Kojirou believed this with absolute certainty. He believed it from the bottom of his heart. So, the man behind everything let out a feverish sigh as he thought of the decisive battle to come.

“Aaah, this is gonna be fun.”

Extra Story: A Certain Heretical Wish *Todoroki*

Miya's POV

Lying down on the wet ground, I continuously let out shallow breaths. I was losing all sensation in my body. I couldn't feel coldness or warmth. The sensation of the ground beneath me was gone. I couldn't even tell what was up or down. It was frightening.

Still, my current state had to be a blessing. After all, my intestines were spilling out of the wound in my abdomen, and due to the passage of time, they were decomposing. Feeling nothing meant I felt no pain or agony.

I thought back over the path that had taken me—Todoroki Miya—to this point. Even at a time like this, my heart remained cold, my thoughts drifting idly as though it were somebody else's crisis.



"The composition of the expeditionary force is decided, then. I'm sure it'll be hard for you all, but let's remain hopeful."

With the words of our leader, Nakajima Kojirou, the long meeting came to an end. This was an assembly made up only of the exploration team's upper brass. As a nicknamed cheater, I'd participated too.

About half a month had passed since the unimaginable disaster of being teleported to another world. Having established a primitive community known as the Colony, the exploration team was finally sending out what was being called the first expeditionary force.

"Things are proceeding steadily. I'll have to focus."

Around the time we left the hut, Yu—Iino Yuna—spoke to me in an all-too-serious tone. I liked this aspect of her and replied with my usual lighthearted smile.

"Ahah, that's so like you."

“Jeez. Stop acting like this has nothing to do with you, Todo. You can’t be acting carelessly, okay?”

She rebuked me, but her expression was one of immense consideration.

“I think it’ll be fine since we’re leaving a good number of people in the Colony, but there are no absolutes. I won’t be with you, got it?”

“Kaaay.”

We were going our separate ways for this operation. Yu was participating in the expeditionary force, while I was staying behind in the Colony. We’d been a tag team ever since coming to this world, so this was going to be our first time away from each other.

“I’m pretty worried. I’d be a lot more at ease if you were just a bit more reliable, Todo.”

“Waah. I’m more worried about you, Yu.”

“Oh? I’m pretty sure I’m the more reliable one.”

It was a childish conversation between friends. We wouldn’t be able to talk like this again for a good while. According to the plan, if they didn’t find anything, the expeditionary force would return in over one month at the earliest. If only we could communicate by smartphone, but that wasn’t possible in this world.

As our conversation went on, my reluctance to part ways carefully guarded, someone called out to us from behind.

“You two look like you’re having fun. What’re you talking about?”

It was the exploration team’s leader, Nakajima Kojirou. Okazaki had detained him after the meeting, but we were taking our time talking as we walked, so he ended up catching up to us. He was the one who had, in essence, gathered more than three hundred people who possessed powers beyond the means of humanity and unified the Colony, yet his demeanor was very sociable. Regardless, his mannerisms were full of confidence and pride, balancing everything out. He was the definition of a leader. Everyone said so.

“Ah, Leader, perfect timing,” Yu said to him. “Can I stay behind after all? Or

maybe Todo can come with us too?”

“Sorry, I can’t allow it. The group composition has already been decided. We can’t mess with it now.”

Nakajima remained considerate, but was clear and to the point. He was affable, but possessed tremendous decisiveness and had the strength to persuade others. Those who wielded superhuman abilities—who’d been recently named cheaters for a reason I didn’t understand—were easily driven by emotions. Perhaps his persuasiveness was the greatest factor that allowed him to lead them. He was idolized by practically everyone, including Yu. When he spoke like this, she had no choice but to back down.

“Understood. Sorry for being selfish, Leader.”

“Don’t be. There’s no need to apologize. Thank you for understanding.”

Nakajima Kojirou nodded in satisfaction and turned my way with a warm gaze. I peered into his eyes and saw something deep within.

“Do you understand too, Todoroki?”

“Yes,” I answered a beat later, acting like I always did. “I’ll do my best.”

I was pretty sure I was acting the same as usual. I didn’t feel all that confident about it, though.

“Right. I’m relying on you two.”

He nodded back to me innocently with an open smile. However, the expression hidden beneath that smile was nowhere near that gentle. Everyone said that Nakajima Kojirou was a suitable leader. Practically everyone idolized him. That was the truth. That wasn’t my opinion, though. I wasn’t part of “practically everyone.”

My eyes saw him as *something* that wasn’t human. I saw him as terrifying and dreadful. The friendship and affection he had for his comrades felt like different emotions from what humans used those words for. It was like a human looking down at tiny ants, or a giant ant looking down at tiny humans. It was creepy and frightening.

He was an alien existence. I was sure of it. But I never mentioned it. How

could I? After all, I was also an alien existence—in a different sense from the terrifying being before me. That was how I'd noticed it, and that was why I couldn't say anything. Just maybe, had I told someone about this, everything after this point would've gone differently.



Ever since childhood, I'd been incapable of sympathizing with others. I didn't think of others as fellow humans. I felt like I was alone among aliens. I couldn't understand them, so I couldn't sympathize with them.

I didn't know why. There probably wasn't a reason at all. I was simply born like that. My soul was shaped that way. Still, that didn't mean I showed contempt for others. I didn't understand it myself, but I knew there was merit to that. Still, I just couldn't categorize myself among them. So, what I'd felt was a sense of alienation. I had a complex about my inability to find any value in anything.

The only exceptions that I found myself obsessed with were the beloved dogs my family had raised. They were honestly dear to me and so very adorable. It might sound strange when I couldn't think of any humans as dear to me, but from my perspective, people who could were the inexplicable ones. Hence, it went both ways.

Man's best friend was what had barely connected me to humanity. Despite not being human, they seemed to understand humans and had taught me their value. It was enough for me to want to be reborn as a dog. I wanted to be one of them. That was probably why my superpower had manifested as the Beast of Darkness.

No, I didn't understand humans. However, by observing them, I could outwardly mimic their behavior. That was how I'd lived to this day. In this one aspect, Nakajima Kojirou and I were similar. He was also an alien, but he wasn't the same as me. In all likelihood, he couldn't sympathize with others for an entirely different reason. That lack of sympathy was the only thing we shared. That was why I was capable of noticing it. I was probably the only one in the Colony who knew how alien he was.

Conversely, I wasn't sure whether he realized the same about me. Even if we

were both aliens, it didn't mean we understood each other's thoughts. Much like how I didn't understand humanity, I didn't understand Nakajima Kojiro. I had no idea why he was so alien. I simply felt like I was staring into a terrifying abyss every time I came across him.

His mere presence elicited a deep dread. And if he knew that I knew...that thought sent a chill down my spine. I shuddered and turned pale. I felt like I couldn't endure keeping this to myself. Just then, a hand slapped against my shoulder, startling me.

"What's wrong, Todo?"

"Yu..."

Yu peeked at me with a worried look. Her warm gaze expelled the cold from my heart and body. That was why I was able to reply without hesitation.

"Nope. It's nothing. It's nothing at all, Yu."



Yu was special to me. She could be summarized plainly as "a woman of justice." Everyone probably had the same impression of her. She was always perfectly honest and trying to do the right thing. She was a shining example of how one should be.

However, Yu's righteousness was a little too much for a human. Because of that, she was a little disconnected from others. To be frank, she wasn't normal. Perhaps alien was the right word for her too. Don't misunderstand, though. Unlike me, Yu was properly human. In fact, she was a surprisingly normal girl. She was strong at heart, sensitive, very caring, and secretly a scaredy-cat. That was why it was weird.

Take the fight against the huge army of monsters that'd attacked us upon arriving in this world. During that battle, Yu had stood her ground even as she trembled in her shoes. She hadn't forgotten her fear like the cocky warriors, nor were her sensibilities dead like mine. She'd swallowed her fear, had steeled herself, and had bravely fought against the surging wave of monsters. I could declare with certainty that no normal girl would be able to act like a veteran of war the way she had.

She was so strong, and radiant—and hence unreliable. Even if she was stronger than most, if the path she ran down was several times harsher than a normal life, she was liable to break. I'd been aware of this facet of her even before teleporting to this world. Rather, it was precisely because I'd been attracted to her unbalanced strength and unreliability that we had become best friends.

So, if I opened up to her about everything, she would probably lend me her strength. However, I never told her about the anxieties in my heart. Even now, I smiled to hide them, then parted ways with her.

After that, I walked to the edge of the Colony. Reaching a spot with nobody else around, I pushed down the anxieties welling up inside me. Upon spotting something, I suddenly scowled. Several boys were standing threateningly over another skinny boy. This was the type of thing Yu hated seeing the most. On edge due to the feelings in my heart, I found it disgusting. So, I questioned them in a gentle voice.

“What are you doing?”



When I thought back on what happened, I could feel the blood rush to my face.

“Are you fine with being weak?”

If it hadn't happened at such a time, I would never have asked such a question. After all, I wasn't particularly strong myself. The truly powerful were people like Yu. They were strong and radiant, and had value. They were different from me.

I was far more mean-spirited than I'd intended, but the boy didn't really pay it any mind. On the contrary, he came to talk to me several times after that.

He was a strange boy. There was something in his eyes that really left an impression on me. I had no idea what went through his mind. I couldn't understand humans, so that only made sense, but this felt a little different.

I grew the slightest bit interested in him. This was pretty unusual for me. As a result of keeping the anxieties in my heart from Yu, something had taken shape

between me and another human. Fate truly was a mystery. Perhaps, given a little more time, there could've been some kind of development.

In the end, even when the expeditionary force left, I didn't open up to Yu. It wasn't that I didn't trust her. On the contrary, I trusted that she would try to help me more than anyone else. That was precisely why I couldn't get her involved. Even if the Beast of Darkness and the Skanda stood their ground with all their might, I doubted we could stand a chance against that monster.

This was probably the right choice. I became sure of this when the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji caught me by surprise and split open my belly. Hibiya Kouji was a nicknamed cheater who'd stayed behind in the Colony with me. He was talented and meticulous—both in the good way and the bad.

After cutting down his most troublesome enemy, he went on to kill the remaining core members who'd stayed in the Colony before they could recover from the shock. He was disgustingly efficient. However, he messed up in one small way. He failed to kill me on the spot.

Despite taking a surprise attack, I just barely survived. Perhaps "still not dead" was a better way of describing it, though. At any rate, I couldn't move my body, so I created a hound using the Beast of Darkness and rode it to get away.

Hibiya Kouji had carelessly informed the dying exploration team members that Nakajima Kojirou was the culprit behind everything. Well, this had been a mental attack against them, and he'd killed everyone who heard it, so it hadn't really been that careless. Still, my getting away on the verge of death had to be unexpected. It was a major problem that I knew who the culprit was. He chased me relentlessly.

Unfortunately, due to the scheming of the people working with him, the Colony had been thrown into chaos. I had nowhere to go for help. I escaped into the forest as Hibiya Kouji gave chase. Our deadly game of tag went on for nearly half a day. From another perspective, it meant half a day's worth of people hadn't been killed by the Absolute Blade. Yu had left the Colony to me, so it would be nice if this lived up to her expectations somewhat. I did my best. I really did my best.

"Anyway, to think he'd do such a thing..."

I'd been under the impression that Nakajima hadn't taken me along because I was a nuisance for having discovered his identity. If so, it was fine to remain at a distance. I'd never thought he'd destroy the Colony and have me killed while he was at it. He truly was terrifying. It was a good thing I hadn't gotten Yu involved. If she'd sided with me, even if my survival chances could've been slightly better, it would've been far more likely that she would have died. I couldn't let that happen.

Still, even if I hadn't gotten Yu involved, this wasn't the end. I had no idea what Nakajima was up to, but Yu would definitely be in danger one day. I could only pray that someone who could oppose him appeared while Yu was still alive. I couldn't do anything about it myself anymore, after all.

"Ugh..."

Before I knew it, Hibiya Kouji was nowhere in sight. That said, I hadn't escaped death. My wound was far too deep. Some of my organs had spilled out from being jostled around. The strength granted to me by this world was simply keeping me from dying immediately. No healing magic could do anything about this. In that sense, the supernatural vitality I'd obtained was like a tool to torture me.

"Guh... Hrk..."

Agony and pain ran through the entire meat sack that was my body. Each time I vomited, it felt like my broken intestines would come out my mouth. My hands trembled violently, and my consciousness faded over and over.

"Ah..."

And then, my ability vanished like a snapping thread. The hound I'd created disappeared, throwing me to the ground. Pain tore my body apart and my consciousness turned hazy. Everything was rapidly fading away. All sensation vanished from my body, and all I could do was let out faint breaths. I viewed these events soberly.

I had no worth. My life had no worth. I met my end without being rewarded in any way. What a fitting end for a nonhuman. The moment that thought crossed my mind, I suddenly felt like letting go. However, just then, I heard a dog's desperate howl. It was then followed by a scream. This changed my fate—

and that of many others.

“What...?”

Despite my current state, I opened my eyes without thinking about it. Beyond some greenery, a boy was being tormented by several others. Next to him, an enormous dog was convulsing on the ground. This was apparently the dog—no, wolf—who’d screamed. It’d been the scream of a monster who’d been sent flying with a kick. I then realized that the boy on the ground was someone I knew. It was the boy I’d recently become acquainted with.

“No way...”

Honestly, I was shocked. I’d never thought I would see him all the way out here. We were a fair distance from the Colony. To get here, he had to have gone through this forest that was rampant with monsters. He had to have walked while fighting the fear of death. There was no way he should’ve gotten this far. He was so weak, after all. It had been enough for me to have asked him that question.

“Are you fine with being weak?”

“Ah...”

I remembered my own words. The sight before my eyes now was his answer. It was a little too late to realize, but I finally understood why he’d talked to me several times since meeting me. I remembered the eyes he’d directed at me. I’d always wondered how he’d perceived me.

I was different from Yu. She was strong and radiant, and had value. I was an alien, harbored darkness, and had no worth. But it was different for him. That was precisely why the question I’d thrown him had surely had some value that I didn’t even know about.

“How...troublesome...”

It really was a bother. I mean, if he’d pushed himself this far because of that—then I had to take responsibility for speaking those words.

“U-Ugh...”

I clenched my teeth hard, regaining my fading consciousness. The pain came

back in an instant. It felt like a hammer was clanging in my brain as sensation returned to my body. My disgustingly sturdy body still moved, even though my heart had practically come to a complete stop. Finding this a little strange, I smiled. Standing up for someone else—it was as if I were human.

“I guess...I’ll hang in there...just a little longer.”



So, using the power of the Beast of Darkness, I slaughtered all the fools. There was a warrior among them, but that didn’t matter. The huge number of beasts I created with the last of my strength tore him apart mercilessly. If anyone found their bodies afterward, they would probably misinterpret this as an enormous monster strong enough to kill a cheater coming through here and leaving when the deed was done. My monsters didn’t leave, though—they simply vanished when I undid my power.

With this, the imminent threat was gone. Leaving things like this would be unfair, though. The boy’s heart had been trampled into pieces. My death would be the straw that broke the camel’s back. At this rate, he would lose the willpower to keep living. There was only one way. Hope wouldn’t keep him alive. So, the signpost at the end of despair had to do the job.

I forcefully retained my consciousness as I tried to escape from the pain and suffering. Taking this agony upon myself was hell. However, I had something I had to leave behind.

“Why...am I...?”

What I spat out next was a curse. Or perhaps, it was a bloody blessing that granted this boy a path when he was supposed to meet his end here.

“This world should...just be destroyed.”

I didn’t know whether he would walk down this path. I didn’t know how far he could go. I simply gave him a motive. The rest was up to him. The boy rose to his feet in silence. The wolf I saw earlier walked up to him. After saying one last self-indulgent thing, I breathed my last.



My painful life came to an end. It was over. That was what I believed. However, against all expectations, my very being took a place in what came next. I knew the reason for this: it was my last self-indulgent request—for the wolf to eat my body when I died. I didn't know how it worked. Perhaps my long-standing desire to be reborn as a dog had something to do with it.

Without anyone knowing, I secretly accompanied her. At first, she didn't even have a name. Then, she was the second to receive one. I hid in a corner as her story began. She was, of course, not me. However, we shared the same perspective. I was always watching. I shared her thoughts of him. I shared her feelings. Ironically, by no longer being human, I managed to learn the human emotions I'd been so incapable of understanding.

So, in that instant, I threw away my life without hesitation. At the end of that battle against Hibiya Kouji, she tried to run off to that boy's side. When her human half had been cleanly detached from her, my ego had separated too, living entirely within the severed torso.

I was like a parasitic plant. Without my host, I wouldn't last long. Using just this upper torso, I threw myself at Hibiya Kouji. Then, I was tragically cut down. But that didn't matter. Using that opening, she broke away and ran toward that boy.

Making sure of this, I fell to the ground. This time, it was over. Much like that day so long ago, everything was fading away. However, unlike that time, my heart was filled with warmth. I felt like I'd been rewarded for all that suffering and effort. The path that wolf and I had walked had that much value.

I had regrets, of course. My host had been concerned about my best friend's future too. However, I'd done everything I could. All I had to do now was believe and leave it to him. I thought of the two boys I'd come to know through my host.

One of them, Majima Takahiro, would never give up. He was what I'd hoped for. He was the one and only person who could oppose that terrifying being. The other boy was Kudou Riku. The feelings of my host were sure to reach him. She was definitely going to pull it off. With that conviction in my heart, I closed my eyes.

Extra Story: Together Forever *Kudou Riku's POV*

At the end of the Demon King's path, one that had all started with a certain girl's resentful wish, I watched as the one who'd thought of me to the very end breathed her last, then smiled bitterly to myself.

"Good grief, I suppose I have no choice."

My hoarse and bloody voice couldn't hide the agony I felt. Still, I wasn't going to stop petting the gallant wolf who'd passed before me. This would only go on for a few more minutes at most. My journey was over. There was nothing that could be done about it now. Still, there was one thing I had to confirm before that.

"That's enough, Anton. You must be at your limit too."

I spoke to the other servant who was here with me.

"My king."

As I did, a dark torso slithered from my shadow. This was the doppelqueen Anton's true body. However, what used to be large enough to have to look up at was now no bigger than a baby and somewhat transparent. When the Army of Darkness was annihilated, she'd also lost a majority of her body to the Sword of Light. She too could no longer escape extinction.

"Has Berta passed?" she asked, her voice dry and containing no emotion.

"Yes."

"How incomprehensible. She squandered her life meaninglessly."

Her words were short and to the point. She wasn't being cruel. This was who Anton was—the perfect pawn I'd hoped for as the Demon King. She stated what was appropriate for that role. It was simple for her to say such things, but...

"The same goes for you, doesn't it?" I said. There was something I had to point out to her as their king. "I didn't think you'd keep me alive like that."

Looking down, beneath my broken clothes, about half of my body seemed to

be dyed black. To be precise, my body hadn't been stained. This blackness was making up for what had been lost. Anton's body was substituting for my own. Berta had been the one to prevent me from being annihilated by the Sword of Light, while Anton had been the one to keep me alive this long.

I hadn't ordered her to do this, though. Anton had done it on her own. Naturally, this only prolonged my life a little. It served no purpose—at least not in the way she used the word. She seemed aware of this too.

“Indeed. It's as you say, my king.”

“Then why?”

A short silence followed. This was the time needed for her to draw her conclusion.

“By prolonging your life, nothing at all changes about our complete annihilation. At most, I suppose it allowed you to speak with Berta. There was no purpose.”

Her words were mechanical. As the Demon King's pawn, she was capable of nothing else.

“Yes. It was meaningless. What I did served no purpose whatsoever.”

To the very end, she presented her conclusion logically like a machine.

“So, perhaps I simply wanted to allow Berta to speak with you. Yes. It makes no sense. None at all. Seriously. What a meaningless action.”

Her indifferent tone was the same as ever, but she seemed somehow satisfied. Anton then melted away and lost her shape. Having lived her life as the pawn I'd desired, she met her end somewhat like a human.

“Thank you for your hard work, Anton...”

She was the first servant to be named by the Demon King. Excluding me, Anton had known Berta the longest and had always raised her doubts about the wolf. Thinking back on it now, Anton had always shown signs of realizing why I'd really kept Berta at a distance. I didn't have a grasp of every conversation the two had had, so maybe she'd made a move out of my sight. That was exactly why, when she'd seen Berta running to my side, she'd created this last moment

for us.

In other words, what I'd believed to be the Demon King's perfect pawn had also possessed the qualities that Berta had without anyone noticing it. If so, this last act had been a reflection of the humanity that'd developed inside her.

"I suppose in the end, I didn't manage to devote myself to being the Demon King."

I smiled bitterly as I came to terms with that fact. Living with resentment and anger in my heart, I met my last moments like this. What's more, I died at the hands of the mastermind behind everything. I'd failed to be the Demon King to the end, and the one and only girl I didn't want to get involved in this had followed me. How regretful, pathetic, incompetent, and lazy. So, it was truly fitting for the final destination in the pits of despair that I'd resolved myself for. This was my comeuppance for walking a path of atrocities.

However, something I'd never expected existed here. It was something Berta had wished for. My path had started with resentment, but I'd gotten here by surviving back then and continuing down it.

"That's enough. Do as you like."

With those last words, the remaining shadows that maintained my flesh came apart. My body ceased functioning. My breathing stopped. My heart halted. The hand I'd kept moving to the last moment could no longer move. My consciousness faded. Everything turned so, so white...

Then, I opened my eyes. Within an endlessly white world, I saw a wolf wagging her tail standing next to a girl. There were other curious figures around them too. I smiled, then walked toward them.













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by Minto Higure

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