

NOVEL
4

story by
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The cover features a blonde knight in a white and gold armor with a purple visor, looking down with a somber expression. Behind her, a girl with long blonde hair and purple eyes holds a small orange cat. They are in a golden field with a large purple dome in the background. The title 'ROLL OVER AND DIE' is written in large, bold letters, with 'DIE' in red and splattered with blood.

ROLL OVER AND DIE

*I Will Fight
for an Ordinary Life
with My Love
and Cursed Sword!*

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Looking up, she spotted a young girl dressed in attire similar to her own. She, too, had her hood pulled down low, revealing only glimpses of white hair and pale skin. She was holding a doll coated in a light layer of grime.

There was something about the girl that seemed to stand out in the dark alley. Cyrill could tell she'd lived a hard life.

The figure slowly approached Cyrill and pointed to where she was sitting.

“This...
is my spot.”



“Nice to have you
back, Flum!”

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught
sight of Cyrill coming up beside her.
She had tears in her eyes.

They were still about as high as the tallest
of the cathedral’s pillars, but Cyrill could
easily jump to such heights when her Brave
ability was active. But even knowing that,
she still was taken aback to see her there.

Cyrill gathered Flum in her arms and
landed gently on the ground before
carrying her, like a newly rescued
princess, to reunite with the rest
of the group as they caught up.

“Good to be
back, Cyrill.”



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for an Ordinary Life

with My Love

and Cursed Sword!

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ILLUSTRATED BY

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Seven Seas Entertainment

ROLL OVER AND DIE: I WILL FIGHT FOR AN ORDINARY LIFE
WITH MY LOVE AND CURSED SWORD! VOL. 4

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Illustrations by kinta

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Afterword



**The Roaming Hero,
the Fragile Champion,
and the Broken
Birthday**



Intermission:

Spiral Mazes Have No Exit

SARA AND NEIGASS were locked in battle with two massive spider monsters deep in the bowels of a research laboratory in the northwest limits of the capital.

“Neigass, you’ve got one closing in on your right flank!”

“I’m on it!”

The spider in question had the head of a horse with a bouquet of tentacles growing out of its mouth. The room they were in was vast, almost as if it were purpose-built for raising such creatures.

Neigass flipped gracefully through the air out of the way of the whipping tendrils, grabbed a hold of Sara, and threw out her hand as she cast a spell. “Tornado Illegal Formula!!”

Her use of “illegal formula” further extended the power of her spell, creating an immense tornado that formed a protective barrier around the two of them. The whirlwind grew larger and larger, until it began to paint the walls with the creature’s blood and gobbets of its flesh.

“Gyiiiii!! Gyii! Giiiyiiiiiii!” The spider threw itself blindly into the tornado, possibly because it was too stupid to know any better. Its tentacles lashed out after its prey even as its body took further damage.

Alas, it still couldn’t penetrate Neigass’s barrier.

“Gyagyiiiiiii!” A dark ichor flew from the monster’s mouth as it screamed in agony before it was finally ripped apart at the waist.

“You’re still coming?!”

Yet the upper body still persisted, crawling forward on its tentacles.

Neigass felt a twinge of fear at the creature’s refusal to die, though she managed to maintain her composure.

“Melting Darkness!!”

A black orb slightly larger than her fist shot from the palm of her hand, aimed squarely at its face. The moment the orb made contact, it swelled to envelop its head; every soft tissue within the orb's bounds dissolved, leaving only bare bones.

The monster fell still and slumped to the ground.

Neigass let out a sigh. With each new crèche she'd raided, the monsters waiting there always proved more powerful than the last batch, animated by a further-refined set of Origin cores. Though she was still dispatching them with ease, she was beginning to suspect that it wouldn't be long before this active research facility pitted them against a foe she couldn't handle.

"Neigass, your hand. It's hurt."

Neigass's serious expression softened the moment she felt Sara's warm touch. Sara rolled her eyes but continued with her healing spell.

"Your healing magic is in a league of its own, Sara."

"It's really no different from anyone else's. Listen, you can't let your confidence get the best of you, okay? They're only getting stronger."

"I guess getting hurt is a small price to pay if it gets you to fret over me like this."

"You better cut it out, or I'll just leave you like this." With that, Sara walked out of the room. Neigass hurried after her.

"Hey, hey, I was just joking! Wait up, Sara!!"

Once she finally caught up, Neigass was all business once again. "Ya know, I wasn't sure melting its head like that was gonna cut it. I'm not used to these things dying the same way proper animals do."

"At least it gave in easily. But that thing was real nasty-looking."

"I guess that's what the Chimera program is all about—using the Origin cores to combine different kinds of monsters into a powerful biological weapon. Real nasty stuff they've been thinking up."

"And we're just cleaning out their old work, too. I hate to imagine what they've got now." Sara shuddered as images of even more disturbing creatures

passed through her head, and she stuck out her lip in disgust.

Neigass looked over at the young girl and smiled. “Well, it’s thanks to you that I even learned about this lab in the first place. I owe you one.”

Sara’s information had proven invaluable in Neigass’s hunt for various research laboratories. Then again, even Sara had never anticipated that the church documents she had stumbled across picking over that first run-down facility in search of Leitch’s medicinal herbs would contain the names of other labs.

“And where’d that come from all of a sudden?” said Sara. “Trying to win me over or something?”

“Is that the kind of treatment I get for saying something nice?”

“Ya reap what ya sow.”

Neigass had no response to this. She wasn’t wrong.

“Couldn’t you just send a blast of wind down here and map everything out without needing to come down?”

“There are so many possible leads, I can’t possibly tell where to start. Besides, this may have nothing to do with the vestiges of the battle with Origin.”

“The battle...with Origin?”

Neigass’s face instantly tensed up in a scowl. She’d said too much.

“The kingdom fought with Origin?”

“No, well, I mean...it was kind of a figure of speech, and...”

“Top secret, huh? That’s fine. You don’t tell me anything anyway.” Sara puffed out her cheeks and glared at Neigass, causing the demon woman to tense up. “You know, I really assumed we’d grown close on this journey. Maybe that was just wishful thinking on my part?”

Her words were like a sucker punch to Neigass’s gut. Neigass’s face screwed up, like she’d just sucked a lemon dry.

Sara pressed on, letting out a long sigh. “I was even thinking about finally joining you for a bath tonight, too. You keep talking about it, ya know, so I

figured maybe I'd finally give in...but I can't really do that with you keeping secrets from me like this."

"Nnng...!" Neigass was struggling to maintain her composure.

She wanted nothing more than to take Sara into the bath with her—so much so that she'd even considered begging. But could she really betray her sacred oath and spill the demons' secrets to fulfill her own desires?

No. She knew she shouldn't. But on the other hand, her dream would never come to fruition if she didn't bend the rules a little. Besides, it seemed unfair to Sara to keep her in the dark, despite dragging her along.

"Nnngg...fine! I'll tell you as much as I can. I can't let a stupid thing like a secret get in the way. So please, please join me in the bath!" Neigass, an all-powerful demon feared by humans throughout the land, knelt before her and bowed so low that her forehead touched the floor. Sara could only stare on in astonishment.

Neigass and Sara booked a room at an inn in the neighboring town of Noweis. From the moment they entered, Neigass sang a little bath-time ditty to herself like a small child unable to control their excitement. Sara, on the other hand, was starting to worry that she'd given in a little too early. She let the towel slide away from her body before slipping under the water and sitting on Neigass' lap.

Sure, Neigass had hugged and cuddled with her many times in the past, but feeling their skin touch was something else entirely. Sara's face turned pink amid the faint wisps of steam that rose from the water. Neigass merely giggled maniacally to herself. She looked like she couldn't be happier.

"Listen, could you at least stop laughing like some creepy old man?"

"Huh? I don't know if I could if I wanted to. I mean, I finally have you here in the bath with me."

"Did you forget your promise? You're supposed to be telling me about Origin, remember?"

"Don't worry, I haven't forgotten. Oh, where to start..."

“I want to hear about the kingdom’s war with Origin.”

“Well, it was the humans’ *and* the demons’ war, technically speaking. You can still see traces of the damage once you cross into our territory.”

“You mean humans worked together with demons?”

“Of course. I mean, no matter how resistant you might be, humans never stood a chance at winning, distorted species that you are.”

“R-resistant?”

“Right. You see, humankind was almost completely wiped out by Origin before they finally came back into their own a long, long time later. But once they did, they got off to a rapid start. Your affinities and abilities to use magic are part of that rebound, as is the creation of us demons.”

“I...I have questions, but I don’t even know where to start. That’s a pretty convenient path of evolution, isn’t it?”

“Some say that it was the planet’s will. Its desire to ensure its continued survival. By creating such a variety of life, it could ensure that at least one would live on even when others failed.”

The scale of the conversation had expanded so drastically that Sara was having a hard time keeping up.

“I guess this is a bit hard to follow,” Neigass said. “Probably best to make sure you understand what Origin is.”

“That’s what I really want to know.”

“What do you think would end all war and strife in this world?”

Sara brought a finger to her lower lip in thought.

Neigass’s heart raced at the adorable gesture.



“Ensure everyone has a proper moral grounding...I guess?”

“That’s a more pragmatic answer than I expected. But the person who created Origin had another idea.” Neigass brought her lips close to Sara’s delicate earlobe and whispered. “Connect the minds of all species together and make them one.”

Sara felt a chill run up her spine. She shuddered, blood running cold at Neigass’s voice and the message behind her words. “Y-you don’t need to get so close, do you?”

“C’mon, building atmosphere is one of the first principles of storytelling.”

Sara stuck out her lip in annoyance. “Well, I’m not interested in that. I want you to give me all the details.” If Neigass would just stop overstepping her boundaries, she would be a wonderful, sisterly figure. “What did you mean by connecting minds together?”

“Exactly like how it sounds. If there’s no longer any ‘other’ people, then there’s no one to fight with.”

“So, Origin was created to put an end to conflicts?”

“Well, the goal was originally to create a form of life that improved human consciousness...or so I hear. But it strayed from this goal at some point, taking the form of a new, distorted ideal that brought the world to ruin.”

And that was why Origin would not stop: it was fed by the energy it generated itself, creating an endless feedback loop.

“That’s...really kind of sad.” Sara gazed down at the water lapping back and forth in the tub. “I guess it’s true that there would be no more conflict if only one person remained. But you couldn’t fall in love either.”

A droplet of water dripped off Sara’s chin. If she didn’t know better, Neigass could easily mistake it for a tear shed in sadness. Overcome with emotion, she hugged the girl tightly in her arms.

“Is that a roundabout way of you confessing your feelings toward me?”

“You really know how to ruin a moment.” With that, Sara stood up and exited the tub.

“Hey, wait! I didn’t mean it like that!!” Neigass managed to get a hold of Sara’s ankle, but her hand was too wet to find purchase. All she could do was watch Sara walk away as her long-anticipated bath time came to a close.

After leaving the bath, Sara made her way back to the room and sat in front of the full-length mirror. Neigass stepped up behind the girl and conjured up a warm, stiff breeze to blow-dry Sara’s hair as she ran a brush gently through her locks.

“But...I just don’t get it. Why are human and demon relations so bad now?”

“Right? You and I get along so well, too.”

“I have to wonder how many out there are like you, Neigass.”

“I have no idea why you have such a scathing tongue, you know.”

“Well, you bring it on yourself.”

Even Neigass had to admit that Sara’s biting comments were almost always her own fault.

“Jokes aside, the reason why we drifted apart is because humans wanted it that way.”

“Why would they want that?”

“They’re creatures of many wants and desires. It was inevitable that they would someday seek to release the seal placed on Origin to contain its power. Knowing that, the ‘first hero’—the one who locked Origin away in the first place—asked demonkind to distance itself from humanity, in order to prevent future humans from stealing Origin’s power.”

“This story gets more and more intriguing. I guess that means that Origin is in the Demon Lord’s castle? And now that I think about it, that hero was someone other than Cyrill?”

“...Yes, you’re right. Origin is sealed away in the lowest depths of the Demon Lord’s castle...or more accurately, the castle was built atop Origin. As for the hero, there’s a new one every few hundred years or so.”

When Origin lay dormant, such a hero would simply be a powerful adventurer. To realize their true power, Origin would have to be restored. Or...

“Does that mean...Origin was the one to summon Cyrill to the Demon Lord’s castle?”

“The hero was the one to seal Origin away, and it would take a hero to undo it.”

“That’s pretty crafty. All under the guise of undertaking a journey to slay the Demon Lord, too.”

“Breaking the bonds between humans and demons was also a part of its cunning plan.”

“The way you talk about it, it seems like there was never much cause for bad blood between us.”

“Around fifty years ago, the humans violated our long-standing armistice. They even began to disseminate books and stories decrying the awful acts purportedly committed by demons. Not like we’d ever done anything of the sort.”

“And that’s where we humans got the idea we were enemies, huh? And it only took twenty years of living like that to convince us it was a good idea to start a war...”

Neigass let up on her wind magic and ran a hand through Sara’s freshly dried hair.

Sara smiled at Neigass’s reflection in the mirror. “Thanks.”

“Now, why they’d spend the past fifty years creating the right conditions to release the seal, I have no idea. Religious fervor is beyond my understanding.”

“Considering they got the royal family involved too, I don’t think you can chalk it up entirely to religious fervor.” Sara ruminated for a moment. “Hey, you mentioned earlier that humans and demons are resistant to Origin’s power. But if that’s the case, then why are they affected by these cores?”

She turned away from the mirror and made her way to the bed before sitting down. Neigass glided past her and slipped under the covers.

“The way I see it, the most likely explanation’s that someone willingly joined themselves with Origin, which gave it the power to nullify our resistance.”

“So someone is helping Origin? Even while it’s sealed away? I hate to say it, but that means it’d probably have to be a demon...”

The only ones who could get close enough to Origin and cover their tracks were the Demon Chiefs or the Demon Lord herself.

“I’ll tell you right now that that’s completely out of the question. None of them would ever consider turning on our people. Besides, the cores your people use now aren’t necessarily drawing on power granted by the same Origin that is sealed away underneath the Demon Lord’s castle.”

“So you think there might be more than one Origin?”

Neigass narrowed her gaze and stared up at the ceiling. “That’s our current theory. That’s why tracking down these labs where they’re embedding the cores is our number-one priority.”

Sara never paid much attention to Neigass’s face—by her reckoning, she was too facetious to pay the meaning of her expressions much thought—but Neigass was incredibly pretty. When she was finally quiet like this, she had a nonchalant kind of beauty. Sara started to feel her heart race. She shook her head, hoping to bring herself back to her senses.

“What’re you doing?”

“N-nothing!”

“Feeling lonely? You can sleep with me, you know...” Neigass lifted up the covers in an open invitation.

“No thanks!” Sara quickly yanked her own blanket over her head.

“I just can’t win...” Neigass smirked and reached up to flick off the light, bathing the room in darkness.

“Nighty night.”

Elune had always drilled into Sara that she must always mind her manners and someone’s good wishes, no matter the circumstances.

“...G’night.”

The two lay there, their eyes closed, thinking about where they would pick up their search before falling into a fitful sleep.

The library within the Demon Lord’s castle was replete with books detailing the history of demonkind.

Everyone had long since retired to their rooms by this point—except for Sheitoom, who was buried deep in the archives. Alas, nothing she found contained any information on weakening Origin’s seal.

A hand reached over her shoulder and set a cup of fragrant tea in front of the Demon Lord.

“Tsy...?”

She looked back over her shoulder and was surprised to see a man with a monocle and dressed in a tailcoat—Dhiza—standing there behind her.

He laughed gently at this.

“Unfortunately, it’s only me. Shall I call Tsyon for you?”

“I, uh, no! That won’t be necessary!” Sheitoom glared down at the table, her face flushed.

“It’s rather late, you know. You’ll make yourself sick if you don’t take care of yourself.”

“We’re in desperate times, you know? I don’t think we can worry about that right now.”

“You’ve grown into a respectable young woman. That little crybaby of years past seems like nothing but a dream,” Dhiza said. Sheitoom had spent much of her childhood hiding behind Tsyon, letting him face her fears for her.

“Do we need to talk about my childhood? I mean, everyone has embarrassing stories they’d rather forget about.”

“Really? I have no such reservations. In the many, many years since your ancestors brought me to live here, I can’t recall anything that I would describe

as embarrassing.”

Dhiza had been taken in as an orphan and raised from infancy. In return, he took it upon himself to support the Demon Lords in any way he could.

“If I may be so presumptuous, I’d go so far as to say I was a source of pride for the Demon Lords who cared for me.”

“And yet you bring up how I was such a crybaby! You trying to make fun of me, Dhiza?”

“You have so little faith in me, madam.”

“I mean, you do it all the time... Look, you’re even smirking! You were making fun of me, weren’t you? You’re such a meanie, Dhiza!”

Dhiza smiled as the young girl puffed out her cheeks in annoyance. After a moment, he cleared his throat in an attempt to change the subject.

“Well, I suppose there’s little I can do about how you feel about me, my beloved Demon Lord. But please take care. Not just for yourself, but Tsyon as well.” With that, Dhiza left the room.

Sheitoom turned her attention back to the books in front of her. “Gah...why’d you have to bring him into this? Listen, I know...but it’s not that simple.”

If she only had some sort of diary or record left by her ancestors...she might have a clear place to start. But she couldn’t find her mother’s diary anywhere in the castle, and that fact ate at her like nothing else. With nothing to go by, she’d just have to do it herself. Even if that meant going page by page for hours on end, until she collapsed from exhaustion.

Chapter 1:

Decay

RHETORICAL QUESTIONS ran rampant through Jean's mind: *Why do I, of all people, have to waste my time buying flowers for someone?*

Why should someone as great as myself have to change into a new robe purely for someone else's benefit?

Why does a genius like me have to get my hair done?

"Apprehension...heh. What a stupid emotion." He calmly readied himself as he paced back and forth around his room.

He pulled a book on magic theory from the shelf and considered flipping through it, staring at the cover for a moment and then returned it to its proper place. He picked a pen up from his desk and stared at it for a long stretch before setting it down as well.

"Gah, this is stupid."

It had no special meaning to him. As for what that "it" was, all he could really say was "everything."

Jean tensed up when he heard a knock at the door. He swallowed hard and spoke up in a strained voice. "C-come in."

His pitch raised slightly at the end. He coughed in an attempt to regain his composure and set his face in his usual scowl as he turned to greet his guest.

Jean was taken aback to see not Cyrill but Linus. "Ah, Linus. Listen, I have a busy schedule right now. Could you come back at another... gyauck!"

Linus's fist connected before he was able to finish speaking. The full force of the blow rippled across Jean's face. Spit flew from his mouth, his neck twisted, and his body tumbled into his desk before collapsing to the ground.

Jean glowered up at his attacker. "What the hell was that?!"

"Don't play innocent!" Linus grabbed Jean by the collar and yanked him to his

feet until they were face-to-face. Sheer hatred radiated from his eyes.

“What did you do to Flum, you slimy prick?!”

Jean snorted. “Oh, is that all this is about?”

“What did you say?!”

“What’s there to get so worked up over? All that worthless piece of trash managed to do was act friendly and ingratiate herself with Cyrill, the legendary hero. She should die a thousand times over for that alone! All I did was put her somewhere far more suitable for someone like her. You should be *commending* me.”

“Selling a teen into slavery is a crime, you know!”

“Heh, so be it. I care more for what’s right than what the law may say.”

It was clear from his expression that he felt no guilt whatsoever. Jean was absolutely convinced he’d done the right thing. At the end of the day, he would do whatever was right for him, without regard for how others might feel. Maybe that was part of his supposed genius.

“Shut your mouth! Do you have any idea how much of a struggle it would be for a weak girl like Flum to survive as a slave?!”

“Oh, but I do. She’d been living a charmed life under the protection of others until now.”

“That’s a lot coming from you! People have been cleaning up after your messes from day one!”

Jean’s eyebrows twitched at this. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Linus had experienced firsthand the work involved in dealing with Jean’s shortcomings. Were it not for Linus’s constant effort to smooth things over ever since he joined the party on their great journey, Jean would have been pummeled many times over by the multitudes they’d encountered along the way.

“When? Where?? I’ve never once needed anyone’s help!”

“Everyone does! You just don’t realize just how much you hurt people along

the way! Sure, maybe you're good with magic, and *maybe* you're smart, to boot, but you have weaknesses, too." Linus pounded his fist against his chest for emphasis. "You have no respect for others!"

That was the source of all of Jean's problems. He simply couldn't understand people...nor did he even want to. If he could overcome his refusal to grasp the substance of other people's experience, he truly would be the genius he fancied himself to be.

Anyone could see that Linus spoke nothing but the irrefutable truth. Anyone but Jean.

"Ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

"What's so funny?!"

"I'm a genius, you know. There's no one smarter. Tens of thousands of men cower at my sheer intellect! So why should I expend this precious gift that only I possess to serve the pathetic weaklings of this world? It's a waste, a tragedy! The only obligation I have is to the one person with the vision to apply this perfect rationality of mine to its maximal utility—myself! Don't you get it??"

"Like hell I do! You're the only person who could understand such an insane argument."

It was clear they'd reached an impasse. Jean would never admit to any wrongdoing, and Linus's anger would never let up until he did.

Cyrill looked at the note she found wedged in her door as she made her way to Jean's room.

"Please come to my room today. I'll be waiting." She could feel her insides tense as she read it over again.

There was something about Jean that Cyrill really didn't like. Of course, she'd come to him on multiple occasions for advice when the immense pressure of her role weighed heavily on her. As long as she followed what he said and didn't think too hard, it helped alleviate that load.

But it led to her losing Flum. Ever since then, she couldn't even stand the sight

of him.

Yet she couldn't help but feel that she was also responsible for what happened. She'd let someone else take the lead for her, and she paid for it immediately—even if she didn't notice until it was too late to undo the damage. Flum had been an invaluable friend. Cyrill probably would have quit long ago without her companionship, and she'd repaid Flum with a dagger in the back.

"I'm so sorry, Flum..."

She'd said the words so often that they'd lost their meaning. She couldn't stand the thought of how selfish she'd been.

Cyrill clenched her fist around Jean's note as she felt the anger rising up within her. "Grr..."

She had no idea what Jean wanted to talk with her about, but she hoped to get it over with quickly so she could retire to her room and be alone again.

"And what're you doing dressed up like that?!"

Cyrill paused for a moment as she heard shouting coming from the other side of the door.

"I'm meeting with Cyrill. It only fits for me to be properly dressed!"

"You know, I've been thinking about this for a while now. Are you really infatuated with Cyrill?"

"I can't say if infatuated is the right word, but I certainly chose her!"

"You make me sick! How the hell can you say that after you ripped Flum away from her?! Are those *flowers*? Don't tell me you plan on confessing your love for her!"

"A-as a matter of fact, I do. In fact, I even asked her to come see me!"

"There's no way she'd go for that, you self-obsessed man-child!"

"Heh, it's simply a matter that there's no other woman out there suitable for me. Gahaha!"

Even Jean was surprised by the sound of his own voice at that. It was much rougher and higher-pitched than he'd expected.

“And like you’re one to talk? Just look at that festering freak Maria! I can’t believe you’d be interested in that.”

“What?!”

“You’ve got no eye for women. She’s a cunning creature, always devising new schemes while everyone’s disarmed by her ‘sweet nun’ act. The old badger even has the gall to look down on me, of all people!”

“You think I didn’t know all that?”

“Don’t tell me you knew and still fell for that thing??”

“What’s wrong with that? In fact, that only makes me love her more! Unlike you, I’m not going to just throw someone to the slavers just because they’re not perfect! Like you did with Flum!”

Cyrill’s mind went completely blank. She even forgot to breathe. It was all she could do to just stand there on her own two feet.

Jean’s crumpled-up note fell down to the carpet.

Everything she heard from the other side of the door was shocking enough, but one phrase stuck with her.

Flum’s... a slave?

This whole time she assumed it was all her fault that Flum decided to go home. That alone was enough to make Cyrill want to strangle herself. If she’d known that Flum hadn’t returned home and was sold off as a slave...

She felt the blood drain from her body, and she fell to her knees.

“It’s...it’s all my fault. Oh, Flum...” Her teeth ground audibly as she clenched her jaw, and her vision filled with tears. “Flum... Oh, God, Flum...”

If she couldn’t express her sadness in words somehow, she’d have no choice but to let her hands speak for her. She suspected that if that happened, she’d take her own life before anyone else’s. Perhaps she should.

“Gaaah...it’s all my fault!!”

So loud were her anguished cries that Linus and Jean heard them over their scuffle. The two men stopped instantly and looked toward the door.

“Hey, you called Cyrill here, didn’t you? You don’t think that’s...that’s her, do you?”

“I certainly did.”

Linus let go of Jean and peeked through the door he left ajar, spotting Cyrill sobbing on her knees.

“H-hey, Cyrill, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

Cyrill looked up at Linus, terror in her eyes, and began to scramble backward.

“That conversation back there, it was all...well...”

“A...a lie?”

“No. But...”

“So I really *did* get Flum sold into slavery.”

“No, no. Don’t blame yourself. It’s all...”

“What...what right do I have to...”

“Please, Cyrill, just listen to me!” Linus tried to keep calm, but the desperation was clear in his voice. But no matter how he tried to frame it, there was no coming back from this for Cyrill as long as she put herself at the center of Flum’s cruel fate.

She let out another loud, agonizing cry and started to crawl away from him before finally forcing herself to her feet. She took off running, screaming all the while. There was no way that Linus could catch up to her with the lead she had. All he could do was hold his head in despair.

Jean took a place beside him, arms crossed and an arrogant look on his face. “What was she crying about?”

He was back to his usual self.

Linus clenched his hand into a fist and spun toward Jean as his anger flared again. “Just look at what you’ve done!!”

“Me? I don’t get it. Why would she be sad at the loss of someone as useless as Flum? She’s so powerful and talented; why should that little wretch affect her at all?”

Linus let out a heavy sigh. It was clear that his anger would mean nothing to Jean. He might be a genius, but in exchange for that gift, he'd lost all ability to empathize with other humans.

He turned his back to him and started to walk away. "Whatever. It's a waste talking with you."

Seeing how despondent Linus was, Jean was finally struck with a realization. "Wait, are you saying that I...I did something wrong? That can't be right. I don't make errors like that. If anyone is mistaken, it's Cyrill."

No one was around to hear him.

Left with nowhere else to go, Cyrill ran through the halls of the castle until she arrived at her room, where she slammed the door shut behind her, dove under the covers, and closed her eyes as tightly as she could. "I... It was all my fault. I... I did it... It was all me...!"

Despite her efforts to shut out the world, her guilt still managed to penetrate deep. She sobbed and howled until she heard a familiar voice call out to her.

"There's a way to alleviate your pain, you know."

Cyrill poked her head out from under her covers to find Maria standing there with a gentle smile on her face. Apparently, she'd forgotten to lock her door in her haste.

"Where is the core I gave you the other day?"

"Core? Ah...you mean that black crystal? It's in the desk drawer."

"What a waste. If you had its power, you wouldn't have anything to worry about, Cyrill." Maria opened the drawer and retrieved the core before inspecting the black spiral within. "You saw how Jean and I fought in that last battle, didn't you? That was all thanks to the core."

"I...I see."

"If you were to just accept its power, your worries...would be nothing...but a distant...dream." Maria approached Cyrill with the core held firmly in her hand. "It's...a...an impressive power...you see. You...should...use it...too...and..."

“Maria?” Cyrill gave her companion a concerned look.

“H-huh? What’s going...on? This...should...shouldn’t be...happening...to...”

“Are you okay? Should I summon a healer?” Cyrill slid off her bed and stepped close to help steady her.

Ploosh.

She heard a wet sloshing noise she couldn’t place.

“N-no...why...why would...this happen...to me...”

“I’m going to call for help, just wait here!” She sat Maria on her bed and turned to leave.

Ploosh. Splosh.

She heard the strange, wet sound coming again, this time from behind her. When she turned to look back, she saw blood pooling on the floor. Following the trail with her eyes, it was clear that Maria vomited it up.

Cyrill’s face went pale. It was worse than she’d thought.

Ploosh. Splosh. Ploosh. Splosh.

No human should have been able to vomit up that much blood.

“Maria?” Slowly, hesitantly, Cyrill leaned in to get a closer look at Maria’s face. Much to her horror, she caught a glimpse of raw, slick flesh—in the colors of everything inside a human body that ought to *stay* inside—peeking out from between Maria’s fingers.

“...Maria?”

Blood poured out from between Maria’s fingers and down the collar of her robe. Behind Maria’s hands, Cyrill could see the fleshy mass twist and undulate.

“M-Maria...what...what kind of monster have you become?!”

Cyrill was already mentally drained. This new development only served to fill her with such dread that it nearly threw her into shock. She felt like a balloon filled far past the point of bursting.



“No...I can’t...no...nooooooooooooooooooo!!”

Cyrill’s screams filled the castle halls. A moment later, she dashed from her room in search of the castle’s exit. She didn’t dare look any direction but straight ahead.

Maria sat on the bed, motionless.

“My, my, my...what a pity.” The clack of a pair of high-heeled shoes was muffled slightly by the carpet as a female figure dressed in a doctor’s coat approached the room.

Echidna, leader of the Chimera research team, looked down at Maria and smirked. “How pitiful for a woman of the cloth to meet such an awful fate. Whatever shall we do?”

“Echid...na. What...did you...do to...me?!”

“Our Chimera cores are produced with the greatest of care and allow you to draw upon the limit of Origin’s powers. Side effects like this are certainly uncommon.” Echidna leaned in close to the pulsating spiral of flesh. “My best guess? Maybe we made a mistake and gave you a core that was meant for monsters. That would explain why your body couldn’t handle it.”

“Nng...you...planned this...all along!!”

Echidna let out a sinister cackle before spinning in place. Her doctor’s coat fluttered in the air as she walked away. “Chosen ones, heroes, Demon Lords, revenge...it’s all so passé. Simple concepts from a bygone era.”

“What...do you mean?”

“There’s a better, more ingenious way of reaching the same goal.”

“But that’s...not what Origin...wants...! This plan was...so long in the making...!”

Nearly fifty years ago, Origin had conveyed its will to those in power at the time. The current king and pope had spent their entire lives receiving these truths. It was only a matter of course that they would serve Origin to the best of their abilities.

“There’s no way some so-called god rotting in a basement knows more than we do,” Echidna said. “Tokyo awaits the coming of me and my Chimera, you see.”

“No way...you can’t be hoping to...!”

Echidna chuckled. “You’re only a passing annoyance to me now, Maria. All this time, you’ve acted in your own interest, but now your role has come to an end, both tactically and symbolically. I think it’s only right for the head of the guard to put you out of your misery, no?”

Unlike the king and even the pope himself, Maria’s sole reason for devoting herself to Origin was out of hatred. The church no longer had any use for someone with such base drives.

“So you’re just going...to get rid of me?! After all I did...to destroy the demons?!”

“And that’s why you need to just up and die. For the sake of the church and my beloved Chimera.”

With a snap of her fingers, a monster resembling a monkey appeared from behind Echidna. It had an ogre’s thick muscular legs, wings growing out of its back, and the face of a human.

“This is a prototype Chimera—one of our werewolf-class specimens. It’s a little weaker than usual since we used a man’s head, but improved cognition is worth the trade. Of course, it’s wicked powerful. And a real cutie, too.”

“Agooo!” The tiny Chimera clasped Maria’s hands in its own before tugging insistently toward the exit.

“Nnng... I...I’m still...!” The agony was clear in Maria’s voice as blood continued to spatter from her face. The core seemed like it couldn’t quite sync with her body, causing her to thrash about.

Echidna simply cackled in amusement as she watched the agonizing scene unfold before her.

From that day, Cyrill and Maria were both considered missing in action. Linus

became a rare sight around the castle. Jean was still around, but he rarely left his room. It was clear that they were in no position to continue the great journey to topple the Demon Lord.

The party of heroes, so carefully chosen by Origin, the Divine Creator, was in ruins.

Chapter 2: The Conflict

“AAAH...”

Ink opened her mouth wide while Eterna scooped up a spoonful of boiled beans and deposited them on the young girl's tongue. She beamed as she chewed without a hint of embarrassment. After all, this was hardly an uncommon occurrence for them. What was different, though, was how Milkit was sitting there watching them, her own spoon held motionless in the air.

“What are you staring at, Milkit? Jealous?”

“Hm? Oh, no...it's not that. I was just thinking about how fun that seemed.”

“I'm not doing this for fun, you know.”

“I know! I just...well, that's how it looked, I guess.” Cheeks flushed, Milkit quickly returned to eating.

Fun? Flum had no idea what could be fun about that, but now the thought intrigued her. She reached over to grab a piece of bread and offer it up to Milkit. Her head tilted to the side in confusion, her bandages drooping with the movement. Flum held her gaze until, slowly but surely, Milkit registered what she was doing. The moment that it clicked was easy to spot by the furious blush that took over her cheeks.

Milkit locked eyes with Flum for an instant, her gaze seeming to confirm Flum's wishes, though Flum made no movement to affirm or deny. Timidly, Milkit leaned forward and pressed her lips against the bread, nibbling away like a little bird.

“Hmm...I guess it is kind of fun.” Once the bread was gone, Flum nodded to herself.

“It's a little embarrassing, though,” said Milkit.

She didn't really intend it that way, but Flum got the sense that this was something best not done with others around. Eterna simply balked at the

scene; Flum ignored her and pressed on, grabbing another piece of bread.

Ink's voice broke the silence. "Flum, you've got mail."

Her unnaturally sensitive ears picked up the rustle of paper outside.

"Thanks, Ink. I'll check it once we're done."

A look of concern washed over Ink's face. "There's something weird about this one. Whoever dropped it off made a break for it right after."

With the battle against the Necromancy group still fresh in their minds, they never really came down from high alert. Flum hurried out of the house and spied a white envelope sticking out of the simple, unadorned wooden box. It practically shone in the sunlight.

"What could that be?" Flum snagged it and took it back to her three companions waiting inside.

"Welcome back, Master. What did you find?"

"Looks like a normal letter to me."

Flum unfolded the paper and set it on the table. Milkit and Eterna stared down at it in silence.

"What does it say?" The sense of unease was palpable in the blind girl's voice.

Eterna was the first to respond. "'Four days remain...' That's all it says."

Three simple words written in red ink. Nothing more. Considering the enemies they'd made, they were in no position to write this off as a simple prank. The earlier peaceful atmosphere that had filled the dining room was replaced with a much darker mood.

"You think the church is planning something?" said Ink.

"Even if they were, why would they go out of their way to tell us?"

"Eterna's right," said Flum, "this doesn't read like a threat. Why would they give us a countdown to something?"

"If they're going to tell us how many days are left," said Milkit, "it'd be nice if they'd at least say what we were counting down to."

Without any further details or even a name to pin this back on, there was simply too little information to say anything for certain. All the letter served to do was ruin the atmosphere they'd worked to rebuild since their last struggle.

"Why don't you let me look into it further? I'm kind of curious why we didn't hear any footsteps earlier anyhow."

"Thanks, Eterna. I already meant to stop by the guild today; I'll talk to Gadhio while I'm there." Flum stood up from her chair, leaving her lunch half-eaten, and began to get ready to leave.

"You had a pretty rough training session with Gadhio earlier, so please take it easy!"

Flum gently stroked Milkit's hair. "Got it...don't you worry."

And with that, she was gone.

As she approached the guild, Flum caught the eye of a blond man sweeping the building's entrance.

"Ah, nice to see you, Flum."

The man's name was Slowe Uradnehs, one of the guild's employees and Y'lla's coworker. Though he was timid at heart, he spoke with a degree of sophistication that made him seem out of place at the West District guild. Flum gave him a quick greeting and walked past, making her way straight to the reception desk.

"Hey, Y'lla, when did Slowe start working here anyway? I feel like he was already here when I first joined the guild."

"A few months back, I think. He's only eighteen, but apparently, he really wanted to work at this dump. Weird kid, but there's something charming about him." The usually harsh Y'lla spoke with a certain affection toward Slowe, even referring to him as a kid.

She certainly had a way of laying on her feminine charm in the presence of a man she fancied. Slowe was definitely an attractive guy—he even looked to be Y'lla's type—but the difference in age was a problem.

“Even during all that drama with Dein going on, he still hung in there,” said Flum. “He’s got some steel.”

“He’s just indecisive is all. He kept waffling back and forth about quitting, but having the guild master here finally convinced him to stay. Heh, he’s certainly made my job a lot easier at least.”

Up until recently, the adventurers’ guild in the West District had no master to oversee it, which had given Dein free rein and saddled Y’lla with all of the actual *work*.

“Oh, right, Linus came by this morning.”

“Linus??”

“I mean, wow, he’s even more impressive in person than the stories led me to believe. Anyway, he took off as soon as I mentioned you. A shame, really.” Y’lla smiled as she recalled Linus’s face.

“Huh. I guess the message got to him, then.”

Flum figured the moment would come eventually, but she’d never imagined it would be so soon. She was happy to hear that Linus had been worried enough to come all the way out here to look for her. Cyrill may also have heard about her whereabouts then.

“I wonder what’s going on with Cyrill.”

She wanted Cyrill to be saddened by the news. That was her dearest wish.

“Ya know, I never really asked before, but how did the legendary Flum Apricot end up with a slave mark? Did one of your cohorts really hate you that much?”

“Bingo. This guy named Jean.”

“Jean... You mean the renowned sage, Jean Inteige? I feel like I’ve gotten a peek behind the curtain of the hero party.”

“Pretty much. They’re all human, I guess. Anyway...” Flum quickly changed the subject. She’d mostly made peace with what happened, but she didn’t want to dwell on it. Sure, she wouldn’t have met Milkit otherwise, but she could still feel the awful pain of the mark being burned into her skin if she thought about it.

“Hey, is Gadhio here?”

“He’s out right now, but I figure he should be back soon. Why don’t you wait in reception?”

To be fair, she was still a bit early. Just as she was about to head to the reception, she heard a scream come from outside.

“Hngaaaaaugh?!”

Y’lla stood up immediately. “Slowe?!”

Flum sensed that there were others outside with Slowe, and they didn’t seem friendly. She practically dove out the front door to go investigate.

“I’ve no particular business with you, but I don’t mind killing you if it’ll help us reach our goals!”

The figure was holding up a massive axe, the head alone nearly the size of a grown man. It was wielded by a young woman, no older than Flum, outfitted in gleaming silver armor.

“Not a chance!” Flum placed herself between Slowe and the girl before summoning forth the Souleater and holding her sword at the ready. Her opponent didn’t miss a beat and heaved the impressive axe in a skull-splitting arc.

THWUNG!

Flum felt the sheer force of the blow run through her body and down into the ground. She sank slightly as the paved road beneath her feet cracked and gave way.

Obviously, she wasn’t strong enough to take the full force of the blow single-handedly; she had to resort to summoning up her prana and channeling it into both of her arms. That, combined with the power of the blade and her gauntlet, left her just barely able to withstand the blow.

The young woman’s dark orange hair whipped about in the breeze. “Heh, good one, Flum Apricot!”

“Ng...that’s the armor of the church knights!”

“Correct. I’m Rischel Hyle, lieutenant commander of the church knights!”

“Then what’re you doing here at the guild?!”

“Would it make things easier if I said I was here to kill you?”

It was hardly a surprise that the church would come for her eventually after laying waste to the Necromancy project. But judging by what she just said and how Slowe was going to be her first victim, Flum sensed there was more afoot than just that.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. Let’s go! Justice A...!”

“You’re done.”

The tip of a black blade rested against Rischel’s neck.

“Oh, you’re back? And I was too absorbed in the battle to notice you getting in so close. Huh.”

Even with Gadhio’s overt threat to her life, Rischel didn’t seem concerned. She let the Epic-tier axe fade away before raising both of her hands in surrender. Gadhio narrowed his eyes at this, but he still lowered his sword.

With the immediate threat gone, Rischel bounded off of the ground and landed gracefully atop the roof of the guild. “I can’t believe it. All I did was get into a little spat and run away. The commander’s really gonna chew me out over this.”

“What do you want, anyway?!”

“I already told you that I’m here to kill you, Flum, but you don’t seem to like that answer. So I’m just going to leave it at that. I guess I’ll let you live for now. See you on the other side!”

With that, she bounded from rooftop to rooftop like a rabbit before disappearing into the distance. Flum tried to take off after her, but Gadhio put a hand on her shoulder.

“Let her go for now. Fighting the Children and church knights at the same time isn’t a wise move.”

“The Children? You mean you’ve found something out??”

“Let’s talk inside. Slowe, you too. I’d hate to see you get attacked again.”

“I, uh...of...of course.” Slowe’s face was completely drained of blood as he hurried into the guild, followed shortly thereafter by Flum and Gadhio.

Y’lla hurried over from where she was waiting near the entrance and took Slowe’s hand. “Are you okay? Did you get hurt??”

“Y-yes, I’m fine.”

Flum rolled her eyes at this sugary-sweet Y’lla and walked to her seat in the reception room. Gadhio sat down across from her, a grave expression on his face.

“I heard from an adventurer that they’ve turned up something ominous down in the sewers,” he said. “There were a few details that matched up with the documents I took from Sheol, so I decided to check it out.”

“This is all recent, I’m guessing. Did you really find something so soon?”

“If the lab were in use, I doubt it would have ended so peacefully. But the place was abandoned long ago. Fortunately, that gave me an opportunity to pick over the documents and equipment left behind. All in all, I think it was a fruitful search.”

“Do you think that was...?”

“Right, I suspect it was the Children team’s facility until recently. Judging by the condition I found it in, they were attacked and had to abandon ship.”

“But...why? You mean someone other than us is fighting the church?”

“That’s certainly a positive take on the situation. Listen, things are changing fast here in the capital. I’m not sure I’d *quite* describe it as a coup d’état at this point, but we’re close.”

The news that the royal army was folded into the church knights had already spread throughout the capital. The sheer folly of the king’s de facto transfer of power threw the capital into chaos.

“Does this all have something to do with that Rischel girl?”

“Even the soldiers who patrolled the streets have been replaced with church

knights. They have the run of the town now and treat the citizens however they please.”

Flum bit her lip. The girl she’d encountered earlier was incredibly strong. She may have left of her own volition this time, but it would be a brutal fight if they ever came to blows again.

“The top brass of the church knights all use something known as the Justice Arts, a sword technique similar in nature to the Cavalier and Genocide Arts. If you do wind up getting attacked in town, you should be sure to check who you’re up against. Many of their techniques are far more powerful than our own.”

“Justice Arts... Seems out of place for someone purportedly fighting for justice to attack common citizens.”

Gadhio’s voice took on a sarcastic tone. “Their only concept of justice is the one that maintains the values of the church of Origin.”

“So I get that there’s been a shake-up in the church. I guess given everything that’s happened to the other groups, the Chimera team’s the only one left standing.”

“If they’ve decided to go with the Chimera team, then there’s no need for what’s left of the others.”

“So they were the ones who attacked the Children team??”

“By my reckoning, it was either the church knights or a Chimera.”

Flum clenched her fists as she felt a wave of sadness wash over her. “And I’d finally had a chance to get through to Nekt, too! I can’t believe they’d just wipe them out like that!”

“What’s more worrisome to me is what happened to the Children after they escaped. Who knows what they’ll do with their backs up against the wall.”

“I know Nekt would talk to us at least.”

“I agree. But the bigger problem is...”

“...Mother.”

Flum had only met the man known as Mother once before, but he struck her as a strange man with a peculiar outlook on life.

“Hey, Gadhio...this letter showed up at my house earlier today.” She handed the paper over.

Gadhio’s eyebrows narrowed and his face constricted into a scowl as his eyes scanned the page. “Four days remain? What does that even mean?”

“Beats me. But between this, the lab, and that church knight, I’d say something big is going on.”

“Looks like we won’t have any time to cool our heels. Flum, I think you and I should spend more time training.”

“Let’s put that aside for now until things calm down a bit. I don’t want to be caught on the back foot.”

“Then I guess looking for Nekt is probably our first plan of action. Hopefully, she’s still in the capital, at least.”

Just as Gadhio began to stand up, Flum clapped her hands together as she suddenly remembered something. “Oh, right, Y’lla mentioned that Linus had stopped by looking for you earlier this morning.”

“Linus? Ah... I see. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Linus was an excellent tracker. It would be a whole lot easier if they could get him on board with finding Nekt. The two left the guild and split up to begin their search.

“Oh, shucks, you missed!”

“Gya! Connection!!” Nekt teleported out of the way, narrowly escaping Rischel’s axe.

GWAFWOOM!

A loud crash erupted throughout the darkened streets of the West District as her axe blade smashed into the street.

“What a pity—you almost found them, too! But I guess it’s lucky for me that

you didn't!"

Rischel's encounter with Nekt was a complete accident. Nekt was sticking to the shadows and hanging out near the guild to see what was going on when they happened to cross paths.

"Shut up, lady! I wasn't even there to meet with Flum anyway!"

Nekt clenched her fist and focused her power. Within moments, the exterior walls of the houses on either side of Rischel began to cave in on her, though she batted the debris away with ease as she swung her immense axe through the air at unbelievable speeds.

"You're a stubborn one, aren't ya? But I think that makes you charming!"

The dull silver axe head came swinging down toward Nekt once again.

Just as Nekt began to prepare for her next attack...

"Wait, this isn't where I meant to teleport! What's going on here??"

Nekt found herself blocked by a wall she hadn't seen before that cut her escape short.

Looking closer, it wasn't so much a wall but a giant of a man, holding a shield.

"Justice Arts, Iron Maiden!"

"Not bad for a new lieutenant commander, old man!"

"That's Bart Calon to you! And I'm no old man either, so why don't you try treating your superiors with a little more respect?"

"So what, you can create barriers with the power of an Origin core? You soldiers are really getting on my nerves!"

With Nekt unable to teleport away, Rischel's next attack would be fatal.

"Sorry, sweetie, but we don't need naughty little kids like you anymore. The commander ordered me to send you on to the next life."

"Nng... Connection!!" Nekt sent all the rubble filling the street flying toward Rischel.

"Now you're just wasting my time!" Rischel held out her axe and performed a

pirouette, showering Nekt with chunks of stone and wood as she smashed through the hurtling debris.

“You’re doooone!”

Nekt clenched her eyes shut, prepared for the inevitable end. But the axe blade stopped short, only grazing the top of her head.

“Nnnngg...ouch! What the hell are you doing? I was just getting to the exciting part!”

The Genocide Arts technique Blood Anguis had found its mark in Rischel’s arm, stopping her attack dead in its tracks.

“There’s no better time to intervene than when things are just about to get exciting, no?”

Ottilie readjusted her military uniform before hopping down from the roof to land at Nekt’s side.

“Why would a member of the royal army help me?”

“Don’t worry about that. Now’s your chance to escape.”

“Connection!” Nekt quickly teleported her and Ottilie away, leaving Rischel standing alone in the open street.

“Gah...” She stuck out her lower lip in annoyance as Bart stomped over toward her, shield in hand. Each heavy footfall caused the young girl’s body to tremble slightly.

“I guess we’ll have to report our failure to Commander Huyghe. You don’t think he’ll kill us, do you?”

“No prob, no prob. We just happened to run across her anyway, and besides, the commander is good about distinguishing between these types of things.”

“So, no punishment?”

“We still need you, old man. If anything, some of your subordinates might take the rap instead. You’ve nothing to worry about.” Rischel cackled as she watched Bart go pale.

Nekt and Ottilie teleported several times until they ended up alone in a storehouse. The young girl cut straight to the chase.

“So why did you help me?”

Ottilie was equally frank in her response. “My boss ordered me to pick you up.”

“Don’t you think a couple of days is a little quick for you to go from military officer to mercenary?”

“Big talk for someone who agreed to join forces with Flum just a few days ago.”

Nekt scowled like a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar. “Hmph, you got me there. So who’s your boss then?”

“Satuhkie.”

Nekt perked up instantly.

“Wait, wait...you mean Satuhkie, like from-the-church Satuhkie?? There’s no way I can go visit a cardinal like this! I’m sorry, lady, but *hard pass*.”

“Just hold on, okay? He’s an informant trying to destroy the organization from the inside out.”

“Anyone who makes it to the cardinal class has to be baptized by our Father. There’s no way any normal person could withstand that! Satuhkie is one of Origin’s puppets, like all the others!

“And what if I told you there was a way to overcome the baptism?”

“There’s no way that...”

Ottilie pulled a white jewel out of her pocket. The moment Nekt saw it, she could instantly tell that it was imbued with Origin’s power.

“A...reversed Origin core? No, not quite. That jewel has a reversed affinity.”

Ottilie smirked.

“It’s a reversion core—a jewel with anti-spiral attributes. Courtesy of Doctor Chatani, who made it and entrusted it to me.”

Nekt could feel a cold sweat form on the back of her neck as she let out a soft sigh in amazement.

Chapter 3:

Disarray

LINUS STOOD ATOP the tallest tower in the West District and cast his gaze across the town below.

Even from this high a vantage point, so keen was his vision that he could make out every individual characteristic of the rough and tumble crowd of the West District, the distinguished merchants in the East District, and the commoners who milled about the Central District.

“Where did Cyrill get off to?”

According to the guards, she was last seen fleeing the castle in a state of shock. When he went to Maria’s room to see if she had any idea where the young girl might be, he was surprised to find it empty as well.

“Something’s just not right here. I can feel it in my bones.”

A cool, damp breeze blew past his cheek as the clouds above took on an ominous shade of gray. It wasn’t just the wind that disquieted him. He caught a familiar, worrisome scent on the breeze.

“Blood, but not a human’s. Smells like it came from a monster.”

Judging by the strength of the scent, the source was a fairly large group, But no matter how hard he looked, he couldn’t spot anything out of the ordinary. Somewhere out of sight, a great deal of blood was being shed.

The omens the wind brought were only the most recent signs. Unexplained deaths in the capital had spiked in recent days, and a rumor trickled to Linus that Satuhkie and his clique were up to strange business.

Linus hopped down from the tower, landing silently in the street below.
“Honestly, I’d love to just focus my energies on Maria.”

He pressed on undeterred into the darkest, most secluded corners of the city, following the copper tang of blood.

“Hey, didja hear? Apparently the lieutenant commander let one of the Children get away.”

“We were in a pretty tight spot back there for a bit. If we hadn’t found these things, the commander would’ve killed us for sure!”

Two church knights stood over the body of a woman.

“The hell are you doing?”

The scene reeked of blood, though not the kind Linus was in search of. This must have been yet another of the church knights’ unchecked murders.

“Wait, is that...??”

“...Linus Radiants?! No way. What’s a hero like him doing here??”

The soldiers quickly drew their swords, though Linus had already unslung his bow, drawn, and got off a shot before they found the initiative to move. Moving with a speed befitting one of the legendary heroes, his arrows found their marks in the soldiers’ arms, eliciting agonizing screams from both.

“Get the hell out of here. If you’re not gone in three seconds, it’ll be your life.”

Being in no place to question his intent, they took off running.

Linus lowered his bow and knelt down next to the groaning woman.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” He spoke in a soft, gentle tone and reached a hand out toward her. The figure was dressed in feminine attire and had a large protruding stomach. However...

She’s pretty big...and looking at her bone structure and scent, I’m not sure she’s even a woman. The closer he got, the more he began to question himself.

“Oh, thank you so much. I’ll be fine. I think I can walk myself home.”

There was something unnatural about the strange woman’s voice.

He thought for a moment that maybe there was a cloth or something else stuffed under her clothes around her stomach, but as far as he could tell, it looked real.

I guess it’s pretty rude to judge someone by their voice and appearance, the

gentlemanly side of Linus told him reproachfully. Best to just leave it be.

The woman stood up, leaning on the wall for support, and began to walk in the opposite direction of the soldiers. After he'd convinced himself she was walking all right, Linus turned his back on her. In that moment, he heard that strange voice call out to him from behind.

"I suspect you'll find what you seek in the castle's dungeon."

"What I seek..." Linus scowled and spun around, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. Glancing up, he caught a glimpse of her leaping into the air holding a weak-looking green-haired boy.

"Hey, wait up! Just who are you?!"

Linus jumped in the air after them, but he couldn't see which way they'd gone. He let out a heavy sigh as he landed. "What in the hell was that all about? Maybe I should've stayed out of that whole encounter and left her alone..."

Not that he could have done that, of course. He couldn't turn his back on a woman in danger, no matter the circumstances.

"There was something weird about her, no doubt about it, but I guess it can't hurt to go check out the dungeon. Come to think of it, does the castle even have a dungeon?"

He decided for the moment to trust what the woman told him and turned in the direction of the castle.

Meanwhile, Cyrill roamed the city aimlessly, her hood pulled low over her face as she traversed mostly empty streets.

It's all my fault, what happened to Flum. I've no right to carry the title of hero anymore. Then there's Jean...and what happened to Maria... I don't really have a party to go back to. I guess I could try to help Flum out of the spot I put her in, but...I wonder how she'd respond to me? Besides, didn't Linus mention that she was doing all right for herself? I guess she doesn't even need my help. Maybe I should just go home? But no, I can't. I'd be betraying all the hopes and wishes they put into me if I return a failed hero.

She couldn't think of any place where she would be welcome. The only place where she felt she could be at ease for the moment was tucked into one of the back streets' dark alcoves.

It was dank, and it did little to ease the worries that racked her soul, but she found solace in the fact that she was finally away from other humans. She sat down, closed her eyes, and pulled her knees close to her chest.

She was consumed with this question of where she belonged, hoping the answer would cut her loose from the guilt she felt for her inaction. It was all she could do to turn her back on her woes and try to keep her mind a blank slate.

Her exhaustion quickly took over, and she started to doze, but at the urging of the instincts beaten into her by her time as humankind's hero, the familiar clack of footsteps shook her back to instant battle-ready alertness. Looking up, she spotted a young girl dressed in attire similar to her own. She, too, had her hood pulled down low, revealing only glimpses of white hair and pale skin. She was holding a doll coated in a light layer of grime.

There was something about the girl that seemed to stand out in the dark alley. Cyrill could tell she'd lived a hard life.

The figure slowly approached Cyrill and pointed to where she was sitting. "This...is my spot."

"You're...using this place?"

She nodded.

"And you can't sit next to me?"

The girl's cheeks puffed up at this, and she started to look as if she were about to lose her temper, so Cyrill hurriedly stepped aside for her. She plopped down on the ground, pulled her knees close to her chest, and smiled in relief.

Must be nice to have a place to call your own, Cyrill thought.

She was certainly a strange girl, but Cyrill didn't get the sense that she was following her, nor did she bear any ill will. She just sat there silently as she clutched her doll and stared at the ground.

Cyrill thought about trying to talk to her, but she couldn't find the right words

to say.

After a long moment of heavy silence, the girl spoke up. "...You." She cut straight to the point. "Why...are you here? Are you...homeless?"

"What makes you think that?" Slightly embarrassed at such a young girl being able to see straight through her, Cyrill lowered her voice slightly in an attempt to sound more mature than she was.

"You're...like me."

"You're homeless, too?"

The girl nodded.

"I guess you and I have something in common for choosing to hide away from prying eyes."

Cyrill felt a sense of relief at finding a companion, though the girl was quick to shake her head and reject this explanation.

"No, I'm not here to hide."

"Then why are you here?"

One look at the girl's eyes told Cyrill that this was where they differed: The young girl's gaze betrayed an immense inner strength. A desire to live. She felt like she could be sucked into the girl's beautiful, powerful gaze.

"I have...to repay Mother. I'm not going to just...disappear. I'm...leaving my mark here."

Cyrill took the girl's words to mean that she was trying to show some form of filial piety to her mother. It was hard to reconcile the fact that this little girl could sit here and be so positive about the future with the fact that Cyrill, a so-called hero, was hiding out in the darkness with her face buried in her knees. She wasn't trying to repay anyone's generosity or even atone for her sins. All she could think about was running away.

The more she thought about it, the worse she felt, and the harder it became to escape the pull of her grimmest notions.

Despite her desperate attempts to remove the negative feelings from the

forefront of her mind, they were only replaced with memories of Maria as she transformed into the awful creature.

She felt sweat run down her palms. Her breath quickened.

The little girl's decision to press on was nothing short of amazing, even praiseworthy. It was what Cyrill ought to have done.

Alas, she just couldn't find it within her to force herself back to the castle. She wanted to keep running until she found a place where there would be no more pain. More than anything else, she wanted to disappear. Then she wouldn't risk bothering anyone again, and she'd have nothing left to worry about.

"Do you have...anything?"

The question caught Cyrill off guard. She bit down on her lip. The girl tilted her head to the side and looked at Cyrill with great curiosity, then followed up with another question.

"You must. Humans can't...live alone. Honor, despair, revenge...you must feel a desire for *one* of these."

"I do, but...well, I'm the one who was wrong. That's why I don't know what to do."

"You'll just end up...tired...if you chastise yourself all the time. It's a waste. You'd better...spend that effort on someone important."

She knew that much already. Whether she could pull it off was another problem entirely.

"Cyrill Sweechka."

Cyrill's heart skipped a beat as the girl spoke her name. How did she know?

"If you...disappear, there will be many happy people...and just as many will find themselves lost."

"How did you know my name?"

"You're a hero. Famous. Why wouldn't I?"

"I...I guess you're right."

It struck her that if a little kid like her knew who she was, there was no hope

that Cyrill would be able to hide out in the capital.

“I want...to show people how valuable I really am...and...” The girl’s voice dropped to a mere whisper, making it hard for Cyrill to follow. It sounded like she was speaking more to herself than anyone else.

Finally, she let out a small sigh. “Did you want to see it?”

Before Cyrill could ask what she meant, the girl slowly stood up and focused her intense gaze on her. “Proof that we...are alive. Our...mark.”

Cyrill got the impression that the girl wanted her to follow. But why would she want to take a complete stranger like herself somewhere? She didn’t know, but she also didn’t care what she did anymore if it gave her some kind of purpose. Cyrill clenched her jaw hard and nodded. The young girl smiled back.

“I’m...Mute.”

“Ah, that’s...a name? Well, nice to meet you, Mute.”

“Our time may be brief, but I’m pleased to meet you, Cyrill.”

She reached out and took Cyrill’s hand into her own to shake on it. Mute’s palm was so cold that Cyrill tensed up without thinking. For a moment, she almost thought she sensed a mysterious power coursing through the young girl.

In the end, she wrote it off as her imagination, choosing to follow Mute out into the main street.

The kingdom was dotted with countless long-since-retired laboratories, and one of these forgotten facilities deep under the capital had recently been occupied by a new interloper.

It was more of a dungeon than a lab, lined with cells as it was. A peculiar scene was playing out in one in particular.

“How long do we need to keep standing watch?”

“Until Echidna calls for us, I’d guess.”

These cells were used when either the country or church felt the need to hold a person whose presence was inconvenient, even if no particular laws were

broken.

The two guards armed with spears held their positions as they commiserated.

“Haah...we really should just stop wasting time and do something about the nun.”

“What’re you talking about? They’re still gonna use her, aren’t they? I mean, this is Echidna we’re talking about.”

“How the hell could you use her, with a face like that?”

The two guards glanced past the iron bars at Maria. She was lying on the ground, racked by powerful convulsions.

Her face was completely transformed into that of an unsettling creature, consisting of a mound of bright-red gyrating muscles that spat blood.

“Eww...”

“Just getting grossed out by it now? It’s not the first time you’ve looked at her.”

“I know, but...she used to be so pretty, ya know? The difference blows my mind. Does she really need someone to stand guard?”

The men had been sent to capture Maria and bring her to this cell once she was caught in Echidna’s trap. The Chimera core that had been used on her wasn’t meant for human subjects, leaving her little more than a sack of blood, meat, and bones that could hardly move under her own power. She was likely slated to be fodder for one of Echidna’s upcoming experiments, in which she would undoubtedly die.

But I’m...still...

But she wasn’t like the others.

She wasn’t like the pope and the king, who had been brainwashed since childhood with stories about being called on by Origin. Nor was she implanted with a core and fed the line that she was one of the chosen. And yet, Origin had still chosen her as one of his followers, one of a rare few. Obviously, they weren’t going to let her go easily.

Looks...like I've been betrayed...by my fellow man...once again. Aaaugh...fool me once...

Though it might have looked like she'd lost consciousness to the casual observer, that was all an act.

It had taken a while for the core meant for monsters to bond with her body and complete its transformation. But now, Origin's power flowed through her, animating her flesh.

I refuse to die until I snuff out all these miserable lives.

Maria and Origin's hatred fed off each other. The world didn't need any of these animals living on it. Humans, demons...regardless of the form they took, they would only betray you in the end. There was no point in keeping them around.

Origin... Ah, yes. For my next step... Right... I agree.

Once Maria received her orders, she went to work immediately.

Mindful to avoid the guards' notice, she ever so slowly got to her feet and summoned up a spiral of light in the palm of her hand. All she had to do was release the particles of light from the spiral, and she would be able to blast through the cell, the opposing wall, and the two soldiers standing in between.

However...

"What're you doing here?!"

"Stay back! You're not allowed to...ngyaaaugh!!"

Before Maria had a chance to attack, she saw the two guards fall to the ground. She stood there, stunned by this new development, when suddenly the man she'd longed to see appeared before her cell.

"The gallant prince arrives on the scene, and the lovely Maria swoons at the sight!" Linus snapped his fingers and smiled broadly.

"Linus...but...how—why? Aaugh. N-nooooooooooooo!" Maria suddenly remembered the shape her face was in and rushed to cover it up. Linus was the last person she wanted to see her like this.

“Hmm, I guess there was no swooning to be had. Anyway, I’ll get this open in a jiffy. Just hang on.” He pulled several metal pins from his pocket and stuck them into the lock.

“Just stop, please! You saw me, didn’t you? My gruesome face? I can’t return back to my original self, you know. Why would you want to help me??”

“A little bird told me I could find something interesting if I checked out the dungeon. Well, hey, there goes the lock.” Ignoring her questions, Linus stepped into the open cell. “See? You can escape now. I’ve gotta say, a dank, musty cell like this is no place for a beauty like you.”

He looked at her, entirely unfazed by the pulsating mass of muscles taking up her face, and casually offered a hand. Maria crouched back in her cell and groaned, so Linus put his hand on her shoulder instead.

“Aw, don’t cry. Now show me that pretty little face of yours.”

“No...absolutely not...”

“Listen, no matter what happens, I still love you, Maria. And I can promise you that a little something like this will never change that.”

Though she was happy to hear these words, she still refused to move her hands as blood poured out from between her fingers. Linus was the last person in the world she wanted to see her like this. Still, even she knew she couldn’t hide her face forever. Figuring this was the end and resigned to her fate, Maria slowly dropped her hands and let Linus get a good, close look at her.

“Just look at how awful it is. Can you really say with a straight face that you love me, even like this?”

Even though she’d offered her life up to Origin, renouncing all worldly desires...when she was with Linus, she felt like a normal girl again. Perhaps this was what love felt like. The harder she tried to resist it, the stronger it came back. It made it all the more painful for her to accept the fact that she would never be her original self again. This would be the breaking point; undoubtedly, Linus would lose his interest. When he did, Maria decided that she would run away for good. She would give up on being a human and live the rest of her life as a follower of Origin.

So the plan went, but things didn't play out as she'd expected.

He reached out and stroked the flesh where her cheek had once been, coating his hand in thick mucus in the process.

"...Huh?" Maria stared at Linus's rueful smile in shock.

"Ah, sorry about that. Did it hurt?"

Why wasn't he afraid? Why didn't he mock her? She...she was a disgusting creature now.

"I mean, there's all that blood. And the exposed flesh." He talked to her like this was a completely normal development.

"But...I mean...but why?"

"'Why' what?"

"Stop pretending. Just look at your hand where you touched my face; it's filthy."

His smile was unwavering. "Heh, what're you talking about? Is there anything more important in this world than being able to feel your touch?"

His response betrayed all her assumptions and turned her world upside down. Maria's resolve began to crumble.

"Sorry to disappoint, but this is hardly enough to make me hate you."

"You're...just trying to get used to it."

"Maybe I am. But I love you so much that I'm willing to do it, and it's all because of how you treated me during our time together on the journey. So you can't say it's all my fault."

Linus's shy shrug elicited a laugh from Maria.

"But what will we do? It's hardly like we can walk around outside together with a face like this."

"Well...I guess this would kind of draw attention. Listen, when things calm down, maybe we could go hide out in a small village."

"Hmph, but then you'd be throwing everything away, Linus! Your fame, your

reputation...”

“So what? I could live out the rest of my days with the money I’ve saved. Maybe we could buy a farm, supplement our food with hunting, and live out a relatively peaceful life. Though I guess that might be pretty boring for you.”

It wasn’t his ideal, but Linus wasn’t lying. He was ready to do it should she choose to. No matter the occasion, he was always quick with a plan in a pinch. It would take time to get used to all the little inconveniences of small-town life, but as long as they were together, he knew that he could learn to enjoy it. Of that much he was certain.

“That all, it sounds...well... I just don’t know if I can allow myself to dream...”

“Dream? I’m overjoyed to hear you describe it that way. So much so that I want to do everything in my power to make it come true. Anyway, it looks like we’re of the same mind, so that pretty much settles it. Don’t worry too much; I promise that I’ll make you happy.”

Deep in her heart, Maria began to wonder if she could still bear a child with her body like this.

...But no, she couldn’t do that. That hope was ruined.

“There’s just one big hurdle to sort out.”

“And what’s that?”

Linus ran a hand through his hair and gave an embarrassed laugh. “Well, uh... where should I kiss you?”

“I...well, I guess I don’t know either.” Maria’s face would have been burning bright red out of embarrassment, if she had a face to blush with.

Even without the visual cue to go by, Linus seemed to catch on. After a moment of hesitation, he took Maria’s hand into his own and kissed it to seal their promise. “Well, then, shall we get going, my princess?”

In spite of the trite line, Maria felt her heart race and her head go light as the once-foreign sensation of love began to spread throughout her body.

She clasped his warm hand and let herself dream again.

Chapter 4:

The Show Begins

SATUHKIE HEARD a knock at his door and paused where he sat amid the clutter of paper that covered his desk. He spun in his chair and gave permission to enter. A moment later, Ottilie and Nekt walked into the room.

“Master Satuhkie, I have returned with Nekt, just as you requested.”

Nekt kept her hands shoved deep into her pockets and huffed in annoyance.

“I don’t think we’ve met before,” said Satuhkie, “but I remember that I came to talk to Mother a few times.”

“I guess so. As far as us members of the Children project are concerned, you’re still one of our enemies.”

“I don’t see why. Unlike the other cardinals, I’ve had no involvement with the church’s research. I’m too new an addition to trust with such matters.”

“So a newbie like you can just build a secret base right underneath the cathedral, huh? Sure, the entrance is a ways from the cathedral itself, but it’s still impressive that no one’s found it yet. I guess the base of a lighthouse is one of the darkest places at night.”

“Power is the great lubricant; with it, you encounter far less friction in doing as you please. Particularly when you’re a member of an organization as powerful as the church.”

The place they found themselves in was solely owned and operated by Satuhkie, though it was hard to deny that he pulled strings using his church connections.

“I’d best be going,” said Ottilie. “I have many other things to attend to.”

“Thank you for your help. I’ll add this to your payment later.”

“We can wait until this is all over. I’m just fighting for my sister, anyway.”
With that, Ottilie left the room.

“A mercenary who has no interest in money is a difficult asset to manage.”

“You were the ones to kick her out of the military, you know.”

Nekt dropped heavily onto the sofa and arrogantly placed her feet up on the older man’s desk. She made no effort to hide her hostility toward Satuhkie, a fact that he could only grin wryly at.

“Ah, but we did no such thing. Right before the military was to be disbanded, Henriette sent Ottilie away. Once she had no one to report back to, I simply scooped her up for myself. Henriette had already guessed this was how things would play out; it’s the only reason she let Ottilie go in the first place.”

“The church knights wouldn’t just look the other way. Letting a soldier slip past the official phases of the purge just because her sister saw it coming would defeat the purpose. I guess that’s where you came in, to protect her? You’ve distracted me—let’s just accept the subject surrounding Ottilie for what it is. What I really want to know is why you had her bring me here and what this reversion core is all about.”

“Of course. In fact, that’s why I called you here.”

Satuhkie stood from his desk, grabbed a paper, and sat down directly in front of Nekt. She reached out and took the paper, giving it a quick skim.

“A core containing the inverse of Origin’s energy...a trump card against the Chimeras...huh? And I guess this is also the core that helped you resist the baptism when you became a cardinal? I suppose that’s why you don’t sound like a crazed zealot.”

“I’m relieved to see that you’ve caught on so quickly. You’ve got wits enough for me to skip beating around the bush with you. I want to use you and your siblings as test subjects for the reversion cores.”

Nekt snorted at his suggestion. “No thanks. There’s nothing in it for me.”

“I’ll make it worth your while, of course. If the test is a success, then I promise that we’ll turn you back into normal humans.”

“Well, you see...”

“Flum Apricot’s promised the same, yes? But she doesn’t have the time for

such things right now, or possibly ever. We do. I doubt you'll find a similar deal with better terms."

Nekt clenched her jaw, anguish clear on her face. After seeing the joy Ink now knew, living the life of a normal child, she couldn't help but covet the same for herself.

It was almost enough to quiet her suspicions about the cardinal's actual intentions...

"I don't know where the other Children are."

"I'm well aware. Would your opinion of my offer change any if I said that searching for your siblings and bringing them to me was part of the deal?"

"I'm going to search for them in either case. The church knights prowling around town don't make that any easier, though."

It would be fair to assume Nekt had staked out the guild this long in faint hope that Flum would help if she asked. Not that she was convinced Flum could be trusted.

"Even if I do find them, I can't say for sure if they even want to be normal humans. Without the church, they don't have a home to go back to. They might be pretty desperate. I just don't know."

Satuhkie had clawed his way to one of the highest ranks within the church of Origin's dark empire. He could never be trusted—but he did have access to the resources Nekt needed.

"You're not going to make me look for the other Children all on my own, are you?"

"Of course not. I'm fully prepared to provide you with whatever resources you need, whether it's Ottilie, soldiers, or something else."

"Well, I remember Ottilie said she was busy...but sure. In that case, I'm in. I can't guarantee the other Children can be convinced to take part in the experiment. Deal?"

"I have no intention of pressuring them. I accept your terms. Doctor Chatani!" Satuhkie leaned toward one of the walls and called out.

Nekt looked in the same direction and cocked her head to the side in confusion.

When Ottilie had first broached the reversion core to her a short while ago, she'd mentioned they were made by someone named Doctor Chatani. What kind of person was this doctor?

(Considering the unique properties of the core, Flum could very well be involved...but why's he talking to a wall?)

Just as Nekt began to ponder over the question, the semi-translucent head of a man slid through the wall as if in response.

"A g-g-ghost?!"

Much to Nekt's surprise, a scruffy-bearded man with black hair slowly climbed out of the wall, slid his hands into his lab coat, and made his way to Satuhkie's side.

"I believe introductions are in order. This here is Doctor Chatani. He is a duplicate of the man known as Chatani, who lived in the days prior to the downfall of the old civilization."

"Greetings. I am the ancient known as Chatani, from the year 2198. Pleased to meet you."

Nekt unconsciously brought her hands to her head as she tried to understand what was being explained to her.

The church knights were housed in barracks right directly behind the cathedral. In Commander Huyghe's quarters, two decapitated heads lay discarded in the corner—a result of the recent purge conducted after receiving the report that his men failed to capture Nekt and Mother.

Rischel cackled at the all-too-familiar sight as Bart quaked in his boots.

"I'm telling ya, Gramps, there's no reason to get so worked up. Besides, these two were ex-royal army anyway."

Huyghe casually slid his sword back into his sheath.

“You’re not wrong, Rischel, but I can’t let anyone else get off scot-free either. Next time, it’ll be one of our own.” He spoke in a calm, measured tone. His position necessitated a certain basic callousness. “I guess there isn’t much that you could do about it if you were interrupted by Henriette’s loyal mutt and the hero. Anyway, preparations for the floating city are progressing well. We will be focusing our efforts on that from now on.”

“And just let the Children run free?? Who knows how many citizens of the capital may end up dead at their hands!”

“And what’s the problem?”

Huyghe cocked his head to the side and fixed Bart with a firm, unwavering stare. Though it was clear that he was neither hostile nor angry, Bart still felt a cold chill run through his body and found himself immediately at a loss for words.

“We are the soldiers of Origin, not the people’s army. We live and die for Origin. In fact, perhaps we should be happy for those citizens lucky enough to lose their lives for our cause; wittingly or not, they serve as we do. What do you think, Bart?”

“I, uh, I mean...well, I-I-I agree, sir!”

Huyghe’s gaze refused to waver, though it was otherwise impossible to gauge his reaction. The fact that he didn’t kill Bart, however, was a satisfying enough answer for him.

“Hey, Commander, what’re we going to do about the other ones?” said Rischel. “They seemed totally fine after the baptism. Didn’t even flinch when we put down their subordinates. I guess they’re completely broken now, huh?”

“Henriette and Herrmann? Leave those husks be. I’ll find a use for them in due time.”

“Gotcha. And Werner, too? I think Echidna brought him back.”

“He’s always been Echidna’s little pet. Just leave him be. We need only focus our efforts on killing the demons and releasing Origin. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Huyghe stood up from his chair and stepped out of the room, followed shortly thereafter by Rischel. Bart stood alone in the room with the two severed heads, blood still oozing from the fresh wounds.

He dropped to his knees, overcome with worry. “What happened to our beloved country? I didn’t become a lieutenant commander for this!”

He was too afraid to put his own life on the line by defying Huyghe, even if he knew by now that the entire organization was run by madmen.

Flum and Gadhio’s first day of searching for the Children yielded nothing. They found several places around the capital where fighting had recently broken out but no hints as to where the combatants may have gone. If a young child in the capital wanted to disappear into a crowd, they tended to *stay* disappeared.

As night fell on the city, they returned to the West District guild to exchange information before parting ways. The next morning, Flum and Milkit roused and left the house earlier than usual. When they opened the postbox, Flum found another letter waiting for her.

“Two days in a row. This is beginning to seem a lot less like a simple prank.” She unfolded the paper and found a familiar message: “Three days remain.”

Unlike last time, however, there was more.

“‘We hold fast as we march toward our goal, chopping away branches without worry.’ ...?”

“What the heck’s that about?” A man called out from right behind Flum, a curious grin plastered to his face.

“Waugh!!” Flum stumbled forward in surprise, sending the letter flying out of her hand and falling to the ground.

The man picked up the paper and quickly skimmed the message.

“Linus!”

“Sorry for scaring you like that, Flum. I just was really curious about what caught your attention.”

“Nice to see you again, Linus. But what brings you here so early?”

“I just wanted to make sure this was really where you were living, is all. I wasn’t figuring I’d happen to run into you. Between the fancy house and the threatening letters, I’d say a lot’s happened since we last spoke. Mind sharing?”

“Let’s head inside at least. No sense standing around catching up like this.” Flum gestured toward the house’s entrance.

“Far be it from me to turn down the offer. But...one thing first.” Linus stopped where he stood and slowly knelt down on the ground before leaning forward to press his hands and then his forehead on the paving stones below.

“Wh-whoa, what are you doing all of a sudden??”

“I’m so, so sorry!” Linus poured all the embarrassment and regret he felt for his foolishness into the apology.

“If you’re apologizing for me being sold off as a slave, you really had nothing to do with that.”

“I can’t let all the blame fall to Jean. I...I was rather cold to you too, Flum. I even self-righteously told myself that it was for the better, for your benefit even, that you return home.”

It was a shock to hear him say that to her face, but Flum couldn’t deny the fact that she’d been little more than deadweight back when all her stats were stuck at zero, before she’d discovered the usefulness of cursed equipment.

“I’m sure my thoughts showed in how I treated you, no? That’s why I kept putting pressure on you. It’s pretty pathetic that I could have done all that without even noticing it. Anyway, that’s why I had to apologize before I could accept your offer to join you in your home.”

Flum never really considered whether or not to forgive Linus. Jean, of course, she hated from the depths of her soul, but that was because he went out of his way to make her suffer.

“Well,” she said, “I never really knew anyone around your age back in my hometown.”

“Huh? Um...oh. I see...”

“It was easier for me to maintain my distance with much older people like Gadhio, but for young and distinguished people like you and Jean, well...”

“No need to gift him with such formal stuff. ‘Scum-sucker’ would work just as well.”

“It was a lot harder to communicate with the scum-sucker because of the age gap between us.”

Flum surprised even herself by how easily she reverted to such language. Putting that aside, however, she’d pretty much just summed up the majority of her difficulties in dealing with Linus.

“I mean, you were a man, tall, older... It was all just kind of...different. So I don’t think it’s necessary for you to apologize, or for me to forgive you. You say that you were cold to me, but honestly, I never noticed.”

“Well, I guess the apology is just to make myself feel better then. Sorry for the hassle.”

“No, no, not at all. I’m happy that you’d go out of your way for me. But anyway, let’s head inside.”

Flum called everyone in the house to gather in the living room. Milkit was already awake when she heard Flum call her name, though Eterna and Ink were still dressed in their pajamas and rubbing the sleep from their eyes as they stumbled downstairs.

“W-well, hey, it’s been awhile.” Linus gave Eterna a hesitant greeting as he saw her stumble into the room.

“Yeah, it has.” Her voice was locked into a distant monotone.

However, it wasn’t just the sight of Eterna that caught Linus off guard. The sheer variety in Flum’s housemates—the maid with the bandaged face, the little girl with her eyes sewn shut—astonished him.

“Hey, uh, Flum. Who are all these people?”

The question came out of Linus’s mouth before his brain had a chance to catch up. Flum herself wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Well, Milkit here is my partner. We met when I was sold.”

Milkit bowed her head from her seat next to Flum.

“So she’s a slave too, then? I guess it’s best to not ask what’s under those bandages.”

“My face was deformed by an old master’s poison. I have Master to thank for my recovery.”

“Huh? Then why leave the bandages on?”

“Only Master, the one who saved me, is allowed to see my face.” Milkit’s tone was a mixture of embarrassment and pride.

Linus smiled and turned to Flum. “So, uh...what exactly is the relationship between you two?”

“We live together and help keep each other going, really. I don’t see a problem with that, do you?”

“Not a problem, no. I guess you’re like...teammates?” He still didn’t quite understand but figured it best to not think too hard about it. “And that little one over there?”

Eterna responded before Flum had a chance. “This is Ink, my patient...and friend. That’s why she lives here with me.”

Ink, clearly still tired, swayed back and forth in her chair as if she were on a boat bobbing in the ocean.

“I guess it’s fair to say you guys have been pretty busy, too.”

“That sounds like a roundabout way of saying the same about yourself.”

“That’s what brings me here. Cyrill’s missing.”

“Wait, really? Cyrill? It can’t be...”

Flum was obviously taken by surprise at this revelation, but it didn’t take long until she reached the obvious conclusion.

“Did...did someone tell Cyrill about what happened to me?”

It had been rough going for a while, but now Flum felt she could understand

the grief Cyrill had to be experiencing. After all, the time they'd spend together had proved to her that Cyrill was just a sixteen-year-old girl. The power of a hero, the expectations of her comrades, and her own sense of duty weighed on her heart.

And as she slowly began to bow under the pressure, in came Jean to offer his own sinister thoughts. Borrowing some of his sense of superiority probably did help alleviate a few of Cyrill's anxieties at the time.

But alas, powerful medicines came with side effects of their own.

Once Flum had left the party, Cyrill was racked with a sense of guilt. Learning Flum's real fate was her inevitable breaking point.

"I really should have been more careful. I figured we'd have to tell her someday, but I didn't think she'd overhear me arguing with Jean. I'm so, so sorry Flum. This is all my fault."

"Jean's the real bad actor here. There's nothing for you to feel bad about, Linus. But what was this argument you..."

"Oh, that narcissist's never going to repent for his actions. If heaven and earth overturned themselves to prove him wrong, he wouldn't be convinced. He may be smart, but he's little more than a child in a man's body."

"If he were only a little more self-aware, perhaps none of this would have even happened to Master."

"Exactly. Though there's no way you'd ever be able to drag an apology out of him."

"I wasn't exactly expecting one, so that's not a problem. Cyrill's my real concern. There's a lot going on in the capital right now, and she could get swept up in it if somebody doesn't help her."

A look of sadness washed over Flum's face at the thought of Cyrill suffering out there alone. She wanted to be Cyrill's rock, as Cyrill was for her once. Cyrill was still an immensely important person to her.

"A lot going on, yeah? If you don't mind, could you tell me *what*? I've dug around, but I can't help but feel like I'm missing something huge."

Flum could hardly hope for a greater ally in their battle against the church. She was more than happy to summarize what came to pass in his absence.

“Wow, Flum...I’ve missed out on a lot more than I thought.” Linus sounded impressed. “I’m amazed you went through all that and came out alive.”

Flum laughed wryly.

“So the very same church that’s been pulling the old party’s strings assimilated the kingdom in all but name. Now hardly seems like the time to concern ourselves with slaying the Demon Lord.”

“The Demon Lord may actually be an ally.”

“Neigass even saved our friend Sara,” said Milkit.

“Neigass? You mean the Demon Chief? Helping a human in need? So does that mean that all of our fighting was for nothing?”

“Not as the church sees it.”

“Gah, I feel like the world’s biggest sap. What a bunch of scoundrels those church types are.” Linus slouched a little in his seat, soaking in the revelation for a moment before he snapped back to attention, newly animated as the pieces of Flum’s account slotted into place with his own. “I think I ran across one of those Children yesterday.”

“Where??

Flum instantly latched on to this new information. Her reaction was so strong that it caught Linus completely off guard.

“Uh, right here in the West District, actually. There was this really big woman...I think...who had been attacked by some church knights. I ran ’em off, and this chunky little kid with green hair showed up out of nowhere.”

“Chunky...that must be Fwiss.”

Ink nodded in agreement with Flum’s assessment.

“Master, do you think that large woman may have been Mother?”

“Does she have something to do with the church?”

“Yes, Mother was the head of the Children project. And is actually a man, by

the way.”

“What? No way. I would have stopped him if I knew.”

Though Linus may have felt bad about it, in his defense, he didn’t even know about Origin cores at that time.

“It’s good enough just knowing that they’re still here. Thanks, Linus.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But now that I know that the church knights have free rein of the capital and will kill anyone they please, I’m going to have a hard time turning a blind eye to that kind of abuse.”

Linus’s gaze was filled with determination. He may look like a flippant and glib young man, but nothing could be further from the truth.

“Listen, Flum, I want to join the fight against the Children and the spiral creatures. It’d be pretty tacky for me to stretch out on the lush grass of the castle grounds while a little girl like yourself keeps putting her life on the line.”

Flum beamed. “I’d be honored to have you by my side!”

But though Linus’s tone was positive and cheerful, the same couldn’t be said for his expression. And that was because of the spiral creatures.

When he first heard mention of these creatures with the gyrating muscles covering their face, Maria instantly came to mind.

The day before, Linus slipped free of the castle, draping a nearby robe over Maria and taking her with him. He had already disabled the majority of the guards on his way in; leaving had presented little challenge. They also knew it would only be a matter of time until the church knights came after them, so Linus decided to take Maria to one of the safe houses he had set up around the capital.

“Sorry about the dank smell.”

“I’m impressed. How many places like this do you have?” She tried to keep her face as covered up as she could while she scanned the room curiously.

The walls were festooned with blades and Linus’s best bow; the shelves were

filled with food, quivers, and explosives.

“I share it with some friends now and again. I’ve been slowly moving away from life as an adventurer, so I haven’t had as much of a chance to use it. So, anyway, where did...I put...that...aha!”

He fished around in a basket, pulling something out and holding it high up in the air.

“A mask?”

“Well, I figured it would give you a way to cover your face. Not keen on the design?”

“No, no. I appreciate it. But why did you have a mask here in the first place?” Maria took the mask and affixed it to her face.

“I’ve got a lot of friends from *complicated* backgrounds. Some do jobs they don’t want their names and faces attached to.”

“And you as well?”

“I don’t, no. I could hardly work in the gray sector the way I get paraded around these days.”

Maria giggled. “I guess you’re just so cool you can’t help being seen.”

“Whoa, hey. I’m just going to tell you now, I’m weak to flattery. I’m liable to ham it up.”

“Then ham away. I enjoy seeing you like that.”

“Ooooff! You’ve done me in, Maria!” Linus dropped to his knees and rolled to his side on the floor.

Maria laughed at the sight. It was a true, honest laugh, straight from the heart. The two spent the night together before Linus left through the front door in the morning, leaving Maria waiting for his return.

Linus enjoyed their time together; their gentle, mutual teasing eased the darkness surrounding them both. But Maria never once brought up the Origin core or the church with him.

I guess she still isn't ready to talk about it with me.

From what he could tell, she never *lied* to him. His best guess was that she was doing all she could to avoid confronting the reality of her situation.

But with Flum and the others facing off against the church like this, it'll only be a matter of time. What'll we do about Maria then? I mean, I just can't...

Eterna suddenly interrupted Linus's silence. "I'd like you to tell us what you know about the church."

"I'm sorry, I don't know anything at the moment."

"At the moment?"

"What I mean is that if I think about it some more, I might come up with something about how they work."

Flum interrupted, her voice a mere whisper. "...Linus?"

He may have come up with a reasonable-enough excuse, but she had picked up on the uncertainty in his gaze. She felt like he was hiding something, but whatever it was, it wasn't with malicious intent. He would probably tell them in due time. She wouldn't have minded if she had longer.

She tried to figure out what connection Linus would have to the church.

"What's going on with Maria?"

"Maria? Hard to say. She's gone off somewhere."

"And you didn't go see her?"

"I was too busy searching for Cyrill. From what you told me, I'm getting a little bit worried about her, so I might need to change tack, maybe see if I can turn her up. Is there anything you'd like me to ask?"

Recognizing Flum's angle, Linus chose not to lie. There was nothing in his behavior or in the movement of his eyes to suggest that he was nervous, just like Maria, it wasn't like he'd told Flum anything *untrue*. His tone, however, let slip that he was confident he could see her any time.

"To be honest, Linus, I have serious suspicions about Maria."

The corner of Linus's eye twitched. It was a nearly imperceptible movement,

but it was clear to Flum that she'd stumbled across something important.

"I mean," he said, "that's only natural, considering that she was the only member of the church on our journey."

"If we have to fight the church, then the time may come when we need to fight Maria."

"That won't happen."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because I want to believe in her. Or, hell, that's not right; I *do* believe in her, no matter what may be thrown our way. She hasn't lied to me yet—of that much I'm sure."

"That's no proof. What if she were some kind of evil witch—then what?"

"Maybe she is, Eterna. But I have faith in my ability to see into a woman's heart, and I can say with confidence that she's no witch."

In short, he had no incontrovertible evidence.

Listening to his conviction in the face of uncertainty, Milkit finally broke her silence to speak up. "...So you're in love then?"

Flum and Eterna tensed up in surprise. Linus just puffed out his chest. He didn't miss a beat.

"Yes, I love her."

"I see..." Milkit nodded once and looked down at the ground, as if lost in thought about her and Flum's relationship.

There was something about Linus's answer that concerned Flum.

"Hmm..."

"Still not convinced, Flum?"

"I've seen too many people die in the worst ways in Origin's name. Maybe you'll be fine, but I'm still worried that Maria might be killed."

"That won't happen. Not with me watching out for her."

"Listen, Flum," said Eterna, "I don't think continuing this line of discussion will

get us anywhere. Linus has made up his mind.”

She was right. Flum had little choice but to let the issue drop.

“Besides, it’s not like we can see Maria anyway.”

“That’s true. Listen, Linus, if you happen to go to the cathedral to see her, please keep your wits about you. Even if Maria is still on our side, we can’t say the same for other members of the church.”

“I appreciate your concern. Fortunately, I’m good at running away, so if anyone does come after me, I’m confident I can make it out of there alive. Anyway, I think it’s about time for me to be on my way. Sorry for the early visit.” Linus stood from his chair and left.

It was only after his footsteps could no longer be heard that Ink finally spoke up. “That Linus person sure is confident.”

“Love makes you blind...though I hope that’s not the case here. We don’t have a lot of extra time or resources to expend, so we’ll just have to leave Maria up to him while we look for Cyrill and the Children.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Not only were the Children running free throughout the capital but so were the church knights, Cyrill, Linus, and Maria. There were so many fires to put out all at once. They were standing in a minefield; it was no wonder Flum felt anxious.

“I want to start looking right away. Eterna, please keep an eye on Milkit and Ink for me.”

She felt like she’d be crushed by her unease if she didn’t start moving. Flum ruffled Milkit’s hair, said her goodbyes, and left the room. At least she could feel secure knowing that Eterna would keep things safe back at home.

Flum ran into Gadhio shortly after leaving the house. His black coat flapped in the wind as he ran straight toward her.

“Oh, Gadhio! Did you see Linus?”

“Looks like I just missed him. I was hoping to catch up, but now’s hardly the time for that. A ‘contorted body’ was discovered in the East District.”

“Do you think it’s...??”

“The work of the Spiral Children. They’ve started moving again, apparently.”

This was the first explosion she’d been worrying about, though it wasn’t a full-blown fire yet.

Flum and Gadhio made their way toward the East District.

They finally arrived at a small, derelict backstreet in the East District.

A small crowd was still gathered around to gawk at the scene, even though the church knights already disposed of the better part of the remains. The copious blood coating the walls and floor, however, hinted at how hideous the scene had been.

“What should we do? The guards moved on this a lot faster than I thought they would.”

“I’ll talk with the crowd and the owners of the neighboring houses. You go and talk to some of the people passing by, okay?”

Flum nodded firmly and left Gadhio behind, making her way to the main street. Unfortunately, the grisly scene had attracted everyone that it was going to; everyone else was eager to be somewhere else. With few other options, Flum chose to scope out a nearby park for witnesses.

The East District was home to many of the capital’s wealthiest citizens, so it was little surprise that the park was filled with spectacular play equipment, well-maintained flowerbeds, and fountains. Even the woman sitting on a park bench, watching her child play, looked regal. Flum was a bit nervous to speak to someone from such a different world, but it had to be done.

“Umm...d-do you have a moment to speak?”

No reply.

The motherly grin stayed plastered to her face as she watched her child play,

completely ignoring Flum's presence.

"Excuse me, c-can I talk with you?"

To go to such lengths to ignore her...it was likely the woman wouldn't stoop so low as to speak to a slave. Figuring it was useless to press on, Flum decided to find someone else to question.

Just as she started to walk, she heard a squishing sound coming from behind her.

"Huh?"

Flum turned around only to find that the woman had ripped open her own arm and was losing large quantities of blood right before her eyes. She didn't appear to be in pain. She continued to peacefully watch the child play, occasionally reaching back down to tear chunks off her arm.

As her body drained itself of its blood, the woman took on a pale, waxy look. Her movements began to slow, and finally, she slumped over on the bench and died. The smile never left her face.

"Wh-what was that..."

The child watched on from the swings as his mother died, making no move to interrupt his play. Upon reaching the top of his swing, he let go of the chains and flew through the air before smashing head first into the ground and breaking his neck.

As Flum cast her eyes around the park, she witnessed multiple people in the act of committing suicide through a variety of means. Another child grabbed the sides of his head and managed to snap his own neck. An onlooker pressed his thumbs against his temples and began to twist back and forth as he applied pressure.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaugh!!"

He drove his thumbs through his skull, pulpy gray matter trickling through the gaps.

Flum stood by, watching helplessly as a wave of senseless suicides rolled past her in every direction. There was no doubt in her mind that the Spiral Children

were behind this, but that certainty was poor comfort. There was nothing she could do to stop the tragic display. She was at a complete loss for words.

Chapter 5:

Intersection

WHEN A PERSON is at their absolute lowest, there's no relief in sleep. Cyrill's nightmares were tame things—they were fed on so little real horror—but they came uninterrupted and in force.

"Congrats!" "You're the pride of the village." "Chosen by Origin, huh? That's great, Cyrill."

She pretended to be happy about it, but for whose benefit? Maybe it would have been best not to get their hopes up. Even if she was objectively stronger than others, she'd still fall short in their eyes if she couldn't meet their expectations.

Several years ago, she started learning how to grow potatoes from her parents. They gave Cyrill her own corner of the field, and she worked at it until she finally had a crop worth selling at market. One day, she cooked the potatoes she'd grown herself into some tasty treats for her parents. They ruffled her hair and commented on how good it tasted.

That...that was happiness.

"Now don't you worry about the harvest. You have your own role to fill in this world."

Her father beamed, and her mother nodded.

Not wanting to disappoint her parents, Cyrill forced a grin and assured them she would. How would things have turned out if she'd broken down crying and confessed that she didn't want to do it?

But even when she did, nothing changed. Such was the curse of her nightmares.

She woke from a nightmare into an equally terrible reality.

Cyrill opened her eyes where she slept on the cold, hard earth. She was behind a shop on the east side of the Central District. She and Mute came here

in search of a place where no one would stumble across them. As she stared blankly into the distance, a gray scene unfolding in front of her caught her attention: it was a swarm of insects squirming along in search of food. She felt almost envious as she watched.

“You awake?” Mute had woken up before her; she was sitting on the ground with her back against a wall.

“Yeah.”

They’d talked a fair bit since meeting the night before.

Mute spoke up. “Humans...think of themselves. Others...their dreams...they can’t understand.”

In other words, it was impossible to meet everyone’s expectations. And yet, Cyrill still feared more than anything else the look of disappointment when you let someone down.

“Kindness...justice...anger...hatred. They’re all...different words. But the same...meanings. All...about yourself.”

The world existed for everyone to use to satisfy their desires. If someone who gave and someone who took happened through sheer happenstance to cross paths, then that was called kindness. Nothing more, nothing less.

“If you live...for others...someday...you die.”

Righting wrongs, blaming yourself—these acts were also done only for your own sake. Neither could heal the wounds of the person who’d hurt. So ultimately you were obliged to follow your own heart...or at least, so Mute kept emphasizing.

But Cyrill couldn’t change just like that. She was wrapped in a leaden chain of depression and regret. She couldn’t rise from her depths with that burden on her.

“It’s about to start. Come.” Mute stood up and began to walk away.

Cyrill rubbed the sleep from her eyes and slowly stumbled after the small figure.

She tried asking Mute what was about to begin. Her questions were met with silence.

They pulled down the hoods of their dingy robes to keep people from recognizing them and walked on into the East District, where the houses quickly grew bigger and more prestigious. This only made the two of them stand out more.

Cyrill sensed someone watching them and began to look around, only to find Mute bearing down on a man in his twenties.

"Mute?" She hesitantly called after the young girl, but Mute kept going until she reached the man and grabbed his shoulder. The man glared down at her; Mute seemed unfazed as she cast her spell.

"Sympathy."

Cyrill watched as the man's eyes immediately went blank. She heard a wet squishing noise. Mute took her hand off the man and, her job complete, began to walk off again. They ended up in a park where Mute ran from person to person, whispering "Sympathy," as she made contact with them.

"What are you doing, Mute?"

Once again, no response. But the way people stopped moving the moment that Mute touched them made Cyrill begin to feel a sense of dread well up within her.

She had no real idea who Mute was or what kind of power she possessed.

They made one lap around the park, then left through a different gate. Mute led them to a spot where they could stand by and observe what would happen in the park.

"Everything's ready...to start."

The collar of her robe was stained a deep red.

"Ready? What does that mean?"

"Sympathy. Connected thoughts. Unified. Consciousness in disarray. Loss... self. Full...of Origin. I...control."

“Unified? Origin? Control? I’m sorry, but I just don’t get it...”

“Watch. Then you’ll see.”

Cyrill turned her attention to the park as instructed. A moment later, a man walking through the park slowly raised his fist to his mouth and began to eat it, tearing his lips in the process as he forced it into his mouth and down his throat, all the way to the elbow.

“...Huh?”

Cyrill couldn’t wrap her mind around what she was witnessing.

The man flapped around on the ground in agony like a fish out of water for a time before finally dying of asphyxiation.

“Is he...dead?”

She’d never actually seen someone die before. And now here it was, happening right in front of her. It was all so surreal that Cyrill was oddly calm about the situation.

A woman near the dead man began to smash her head into the paving stones until her forehead split, blood pouring from the wound like the contents of an upended bowl. She could hear a wet squelching sound with each blow, and yet the woman didn’t stop. Even when her arms grew too weak to continue, she used the last of her strength to scrape her head against the ground until she stopped moving entirely.

“Aaaaaaaaum...”

A little boy nearby was feasting on his arm like he would a sweet pastry.

“S-s-something’s h-h-h-happening!”

The boy’s mother reached up and tore out her own eyeballs with her bare hands before throwing them aside. She stuck her hands into the cavities, tearing away at her brain.

“Mute...are you making them do that?”

She responded without hesitation. “Yes. It’s me.”

This disturbing sight was what she had brought Cyrill out to see.

“Live...as you please. Who cares...about others. This pain is proof...that I lived.”

“N-no, you can’t do this! It’s wrong!” Cyrill’s voice was shrill as she glared at Mute. She couldn’t get a good look at Mute’s expression; her hood hung too low.

“Nothing...is strange. Nothing...is right. I...am me. And doing...as I wish.”

“People are dying! You can’t just do that to other people!”

“I’ve...no interest in other people. There’s nothing...wrong with...selfish. I have...no reason...to stop.”

This was all true. She’d said that there was no point in living for others and that you should see your dreams through. Yet Cyrill refused to believe that it was okay for people to die in order to fulfill those ends.

“Cyrill...wants to stop me. In that case...kill me.”

“I...well, I...”

“I...cannot beat a hero. Cyrill...can kill me. If I live...I won’t stop.”

Mute was right. All Cyrill had to do was draw her blade. She could put an end to the suffering of those strangers down below and spare the living.

That’s what a hero would do.

But she couldn’t bear to take on the burden of killing Mute. Putting an end to this soulless killer would only lead to an even heavier burden on Cyrill’s soul, one that would never change—one she could never be saved from. It would be worse than what she was dealing with, even now.

“Nnnnngaaaaaaah!” She let out a powerful cry and tensed up her right arm, and yet she still couldn’t draw her sword.

If she didn’t kill Mute, then these deaths would weigh on her. Yet if she did, then so would Mute’s. All roads led to hell. While she vacillated, Mute’s victims only increased in number. She could hear the faint sounds of flesh tearing and bones breaking echoing from the park.

“I just can’t kill...but...but...what should I do??”

She dropped to her knees and shouted. She felt as if she were sinking into a swamp she could never climb out from.

“You...choose. Everything is...for your own benefit.”

“But...but...I don’t know what I want!”

She felt as if she were whining like a child as she turned her gaze to look up at Mute.

From this angle, she was finally able to catch a glimpse of the face hidden by the hood: the uncannily mature face she’d expected to see was nowhere to be found. In its place was a pulsating swirl of raw muscle. The muscle twitched in time with her heartbeat, slowly gyrating in a clockwise motion as blood came out in splashes.

“Haah...” A breathless, almost silent gasp was the best Cyrill could muster.

She looked just like Maria did when Cyrill last saw her. Just what was this girl, and what were she and Maria up to? More importantly, how did she get herself drawn into all this?

“Aaah...” Her voice had returned, though the swamp of fear, confusion, and despair wouldn’t let her focus enough to form words. The bizarre creature known as Mute stared at Cyrill in silence as the muscles on her face continued to convulse.

Cyrill let out a long, pained groan. She knew she was obliged to stop this girl. Even in her traumatized state, her need for justice was still firmly entrenched in her...at least on some level.

But in the face of such immense fear, that desire amounted to little.

Cyrill shook her head to the side, then back and forth, before finally clasp it firmly in both hands and letting out a furious scream as all the emotions whirling around within her tried to escape at once.

“Aah!!” She screamed as long as she could before it was suddenly cut short, and she dropped to the ground, unconscious.

Flum stood there in a trance as the violent scene played out. She was jolted

back to reality by a loud scream, prompting her to take off in its direction. Her heart tensed up slightly every time she ran across the body of yet another victim of such a cruel, painful death. She tried to wave off the thought as she finally broke out of the park. Ahead, a figure lay passed out on the ground, and a young girl clutching a doll stood next to her.

The young girl had white hair and a familiar red and black spiral where her face should be.

“Mute, is that you?” Flum summoned up her prana and sent the energy into her legs to help her close the distance. Her fingers tensed, anticipating the moment she would have to draw the Souleater.

Mute might be a child, and Nekt had already asked for her assistance in finding her siblings...but there was just no coming back from the tragedy the young girl had unleashed.

No...the more she thought about it, a quick death on the end of a sword would be almost too kind.

There was a brief gust of wind, and Flum caught sight of the figure lying at Mute’s feet, causing her face to immediately cloud over.

She shouted out to her without even thinking.

“Cyrill?!”

Why was Cyrill, who was supposed to be missing, out here with Mute? Flum was desperate to learn how this had happened, but action was more important than thought for the moment.

“I...won’t lose...to a weakling like...Flum.” Mute took on a fighting stance as the spiral on her face began to gyrate faster.

Fixing a steely glare on her target, Flum called up her sword and dashed behind Mute, slashing at her back with all her might. Her reversal magic collided with a field of distortion, resulting in an immense spark of energy.

“Oh my...your reversal power...is impressive.”

Looking back, she spied the green-haired figure who had cast the distortion blast. “Fwiss!”

“You’re not gonna get Mute on my watch. Distortion!” A continuous swirl of energy appeared in the palm of his outstretched hand before forming into a ball and blasting off in Flum’s direction.

“Reversion!” Flum focused all her reversal magic into her blade, cleaving through his projectile.

“Heh, I’d been saving up my power for that one, too.”

“Just because the church abandoned you doesn’t mean that you can just kill indiscriminately! Nekt would never approve of this kind of behavior!”

“I don’t need you to preach to me! And who cares about Nekt, anyway! What a coward, running off like that...!”

“We...will kill...everyone in...the capital.”

“Mute’s right. We’re going to be the great equalizers.”

“Is this for Mother?”

“No. We have...other reasons.”

“Of course, Mother is still first and foremost on our minds. But at the end of the day, we were created to be biological weapons, just like Chimera. We were born and raised to kill. We have no other choice but to prove that we aren’t the dead ends that people say we are.”

“I’m going to kill you,” said Flum.

“Right, just like that. We’re going to slaughter anyone we can—without prejudice, without forethought—and leave our mark on the world, one way or another.”

Flum clenched her teeth as she felt red-hot anger run through her veins. More than anything, she was furious at Mother, the one who had left these two young children with no choice other than to live this way.

“Ink, your friend, she’s leading a completely normal life now! With us!”

“First and second...generation...are different. How we’re made. Power. We are different creatures.”

“It’s your obsession with generations and dragging other people into your

problems that makes you the inferior of the two!”

“Shut up with your awful lies!”

“First...was a failure. But first...lives on.”

“It’s funny, in a way. She was a failure as a weapon, but as a living creature, I guess she’s done better than us.” Fwiss let out a cold, mirthless laugh.

Just one look at their expressions gave Flum a sense of how they could kill so easily: they saw no value in their own lives. If your life means nothing, then the same applies to everyone else by extension—a fact that makes it remarkably easy to kill without regret.

“I think that’s enough talking for now,” said Fwiss. “We’d best get out of here before another hero shows up.”

“You think I’m just going to let you get away?? I’m not letting you take Cyrill!”

Flum lunged the moment she saw Mute try to seize Cyrill. Fwiss stepped between them and threw out his hand, summoning up more distortion energy.

“Even your reversal won’t be able to stop this, you know.”

“You think I give a damn?!”

She threw a gauntleted fist at Fwiss, the blow connecting with his stomach with a meaty thud. The young boy flew backward as Flum hefted her Souleater up into the air.

“Haaaaaaah!!” She threw all her energy into a Prana Shaker.

Escape was out of the question for Fwiss. He threw his arms in front of his body and concentrated all of his energy into another distortion field. Alas, Flum’s attack drew deep from her god-defying affinity; it cut through Fwiss’s defense as if it were empty air.

“Owww...”

Her Prana Shaker lost much of its energy by the time it reached its mark, only managing to leave a gash in Fwiss’s arm.

“I’ll admit it, I was a little scared back there. Only a little while ago, you were just another weakling. It’s bad enough that you won’t run away when you ought

to, but now you won't even die." Fwiss smirked at Flum before taking off at full tilt.

Just as Flum was about to give chase, the sound of someone groaning caused her to stop.

"Nng...gah! I don't get it! What do the Children want with Cyrill??" Flum ran her hands through her hair. She turned back toward the park in search of the owner of the voice. As she cast her gaze across the park, she caught sight of Gadhio running toward her.

"You okay, Flum??"

"I'm fine. But I can hear someone nearby who's still alive. Can you help me look?"

The two split up and searched the park until they found their survivor. They brought the figure back over to one of the park benches and laid them down to begin triage. Gadhio ripped off pieces of his torn coat to make impromptu bandages.

"Gadhio, your coat... Were you in a fight?"

"I was attacked by this kid—Luke, was it?—who used this strange Rotation power."

"So it looks like *all* the Children were out here in the East District. They had Cyrill, too."

"Why would the Children have Cyrill?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that they don't plan to stop here."

The wind filled the park with the coppery scent of blood. Flum clenched her jaw, steadying herself as her tunnel vision eased off and the full horror of the scene set in.

"So they just plan on killing indiscriminately? If they're going to pop up at random like this to start their killing sprees, it's going to be hard to stop them."

Now done with his patient, Gadhio examined the park, casting Scan liberally as he went.

“Their names and stats are all the same.”

“That’s just like...”

“Just like what you ran across with Dein’s men.”

Flum had been confronted by around twenty or so men when she was in the middle of trying to save Ink. That desperately conceived crew had had the same name and exactly the same stats down to the last, even though they each looked different. They’d also lost any sense of individual will in the process.

“Luke has Rotation, Fwiss has Distortion,” said Flum. “I guess this is Mute’s ability.”

“That’s going to be a real problem. If there’s no limit to how many people she can do this to, the whole capital could be in danger.”

So far, she’d only used her power to direct large groups of people out in public to hurt themselves. But in the worst-case scenario, there was nothing stopping her from turning her victims into an impromptu army, outfitted with any sharp or bludgeoning objects you could find in the streets.

“I think I’m going to talk to Leitch and see if he’s picked up any new information,” said Flum.

“Got it. If you’re going to stay in the East District, then I’ll continue the search in the Central District. We can deal with the West District later, since that’s farthest out.”

“Should we just leave the bodies like this here in the park?” She wished that she could at least offer up some sort of memorial for them.

“The church knights will be here to take care of them shortly. If we aren’t careful, someone might come across us preparing the bodies and arrest us on sight.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“There’s nothing for you to feel bad about. If you let something like this bother you, then you’ll never be able to move on.”

“Hmm...”

Though Gadhio initially sounded cold-hearted, his words came from a place of caring. Rather than spending her time wallowing in her sadness, she was better off focusing her energies on stopping the Spiral Children.

Flum couldn't argue with that.

Not long after arriving at Leitch's manor, Flum was escorted to a reception room. In spite of the fact that she hadn't made an appointment, he dropped what he was doing to come and see her.

Leitch sat down on his sofa and cut to the chase. "What happened back there at the park?"

Somehow, he knew Flum would have insight into the situation. Before she even had a chance to answer, he went on to explain.

"One of my servants hasn't returned, and we suspect they were caught up in all this. We've asked the guards, but they've been of no help. Not like I expect them to know much, anyway."

She was impressed at how quickly he was able to catch up. The events in the park had only just occurred.

"One of the Children took control over the people in the park and made them commit suicide," she said.

"They...what? But why now, after having worked in the dark for so long??"

"The church's written them off. They have nowhere else to go, and they're taking it out on as many people as they can."

"Written them off? Where did you hear that??"

Flum told him about how Gadhio had learned of the Children's base and what he found there.

Leitch steepled his fingers. A dark look came over his face. "I can't believe that the church would pull off such an audacious move. They must have a great deal of faith in the Chimera project then."

That was certainly one way of looking at things. Taking advantage of this lull in

the conversation, Flum pulled out a piece of paper and showed it to Leitch.

“And this is?”

“I’ve been getting these since yesterday. Any idea what they might mean?”

Leitch studied the message closely: “Four days remain.”

“Today I got another one, this time with ‘Three days remain’ written on it.”

“The ink and paper are both of a high quality. You rarely see anything like this outside the cathedral or the castle. What’s more, I don’t really get the impression of anything sinister from the message itself, and there’s nothing to be made of the penmanship.”

“The cathedral or the castle, huh? The only allies we had in the royal army are out of action right now, and... Hmm, I can’t really think of anyone else, but...”
Flum searched the depths of her memories and murmured to herself.

In the furthest reaches of her memory, finally a face came to mind. They weren’t an ally *per se*, but they also didn’t seem to hold any ill will toward her.

“Ah, wait, Satuhkie.”

“The cardinal? Isn’t he one of the central figures of the church?”

“Right, but he had strong connections with the royal army. Henriette seemed to trust him.”

“I guess there’s something there. He’s younger than the other cardinals and more of a realist than the rest of his cohort. But if he was cultivating some kind of relationship with the royal army, despite the situation with the church knights, it could mean he was trying to change things from within? Although... wait. No, this looks as if it were written in a woman’s hand.”

“Woman? Maybe Satuhkie’s...no, I don’t have any proof of that.”

“Regardless of whether this is a warning or a threat, what’s clear is that the clock’s ticking.”

“So I guess something bad is going to happen in three days’ time.” Flum slumped down and let her forehead rest on the table with a *thud*. “I’ve already got my hands full with this Children problem. And now something bigger is on

the horizon?”

“Or perhaps this is a warning about the Children.”

“Hmm...in either case, I guess I have to take care of them in the next three days.” Flum lifted her head from the table and looked up at the ceiling. She sighed heavily.

“They say this herbal tea eases a weary soul.”

“I appreciate it.” Flum sipped at the tea and let her body relax.

“All right! Thanks for everything, Leitch. I feel a little better now that I know who’s behind these letters.”

She stood up and gave a polite bow. Leitch stood up and modestly waved it off.

“I’m sure Welcy will be looking into this matter shortly, so I’ll let her know that she should provide you with any assistance she can. Please don’t hesitate to ask for her help. Obviously, I’m also happy to help out if I can.”

“Thank you; I just may need to call on you.”

With that, Flum left Leitch’s manor.

She couldn’t get her mind off the sad expression he’d worn when she left. He was probably hurting from the loss of a beloved servant, someone who he had once shared his home with. If he looked that sad on the outside, she could only imagine the turmoil within.

On the far side of the gate, she looked up at the darkening sky and let out a deep breath. She wasn’t going to wait out the rest of the countdown. She knew that the Children would continue their killing spree.

She had to keep moving if she hoped to stop them.

Flum continued to roam the East District in search of the Children and Cyril.

At that same moment, Gadhio wandered down a main thoroughfare in the Central District. This was where the majority of the citizens of the capital lived and, by extension, a prime target for anyone wishing to commit mass murder.

He followed the road toward the capital's southern gate. Right around the halfway point...

“Aaaaaaugh!!”

He heard a scream echo through the streets and began to shove through the crowd.

That was when he caught sight of a caravan careening down the street, heedless of the pedestrians. There were no horses drawing it. Those unlucky enough to get hit were torn into chunks and tossed aside by the wheels. A fountain of blood splashed out from behind the cart.

The road was packed full of people who were now in a panic to escape, stumbling over one another and toppling like dominos in the process.

“This stops now!” Gadhio used his magic to pull the ground up beneath him before lunging up into the air and landing on the cart. He drew his immense sword and smashed one of the spinning wheels with a loud *THWACK*. The wheel was severely deformed by the blow, wobbling back and forth for a few moments before tumbling off. The cart lost much of its balance and began to wobble, snaking down the street.

Shreds of flesh and splashes of blood stained Gadhio's clothes as the cart continued its murderous spree. It was like a scene straight from hell, but he kept his wits about him and smashed the remaining three wheels. The cart smashed to the ground with a loud, ear-piercing screech and a shower of sparks until it finally came to a stop.

Gadhio looked back over his shoulder and witnessed the trail of carnage left in its tracks. He bit his lip and turned his attention to finding who was responsible for this.

But only a moment later, he heard yet another scream coming from a different direction, followed shortly thereafter by the sounds of a cart tearing through the street. This time he saw several smaller carts racing down the street toward unsuspecting victims.

Looking closer, he also noticed a young boy wearing a robe with the hood pulled low over his face.

“There he is...”

He figured it was likely Luke, using his gift of Rotation. This was only the second time they’d crossed paths; Gadhio wanted nothing more than to give chase, but he also couldn’t just leave the carts running rampant like this.

Gadhio leaped high up into the air toward the speeding carts and brought down his blade in several quick slashes. By the time he landed, each cart was reduced to harmless pieces scattered in all directions.

He started to scan the streets for Luke, but a crowd surrounded him to thank their newfound hero, causing him to lose track of the boy. Now he was stuck.

“Dammit!”

His anguished cry was quickly lost in the cheers of the crowd.

Chapter 6:

Younglings

“HHEY, MARIA, I’m home.” Linus stepped into the small room where Maria was hiding out, his arms full of supplies.

Even with the mask covering her face, she still avoided looking at him directly.

“Welcome back.”

Linus chuckled to himself at the gentle sound of her voice and dropped the supplies in front of her.

“So I met up with Flum today.”

He began to set their lunch out on the table.

“Oh...really? So I guess you heard about what happened to me? And...my face.”

“The Origin core? Would never have guessed the church would be researching things like that...”

“I used it of my own free will, you know. I don’t intend to make any excuses. I was one of them, after all. I’m sure Flum has already told you all about me.”

“Aah, yeah. I guess Flum didn’t exactly have the best impression of you.”

Maria didn’t seem particularly bothered.

“Listen, Linus, why don’t we just run away? I know you said you wanted to wait until things calmed down, but I don’t see why we can’t go now.” The anxiousness was clear in her voice.

Linus scooted closer to Maria. “You know we can’t do that.”

“Why not? If we leave now, no one will ever know, and we can get far, far away, where no one will bother...”

“And how long do you think we could live like that?”

He had no idea how fixated the church was on finding Maria, but it was

undeniable that they had gone out of their way to transform her body and lock her away. They would almost certainly come after them. All that aside, he had no way of knowing what would happen to her body if they just left the Origin core be.

“Two months...maybe one. But even that would be fine with me. At the very least, we could spend even a brief time together, as two young people in love.”

“Maria, I want to live with you forever. I don’t know if you’re just so afraid of what the future holds that a single month sounds tempting, or if you know something that leads you to believe that’s all the time you have left. But as far as I’m concerned, I finally managed to convince you to fall in love with me, and there’s no way I could be satisfied with only a month together. I hope you can see where I’m coming from.”

“You’re set on this?”

“Absolutely. Even if we would be happy, I don’t want my life with you to have some awful deadline hanging over it.”

The fact that Linus’s affection remained unshaken even after what happened to her body was reason enough to doubt her previous choice. She understood where he was coming from.

Linus is so strong. A far cry from me. I’m so jealous...but I guess that’s why I love him. And that’s why...

If he wasn’t going to concede, then Maria only had one choice left.

“All right. But will you at least stay with me for the rest of the day?”

“Maria...”

“Go ahead, call me a coward if you’d like. But if we ever go outside together, I’m not confident that I could even hold your hand again. There’s just such a sinister air about this city.”

“I understand.”

Linus could concede this point at least.

He placed his hand atop hers and gazed straight into her face. “I’ll be here with you for the rest of the day, thinking about nothing but you. How does that

sound?”

“I’d...I’d like that.”

Though overcome with emotion, she no longer had eyes to cry with. Instead, blood spurted from the seams of the spiral in her face, dripping down her neck.

Flum wandered the entirety of the East District but came up empty-handed. There was no sign of the Children. She made her way through the Central District on her way home when something bid her to stop in front of the church.

“This whole place is practically deserted. Even the church looks empty.”

Even walking on a side road like she was at the moment, it was rare to ever find the place so devoid of people.

“The Central District church... I wonder how Sara’s doing with the demons.”

Sara spent so much of her life blaming demonkind for the hometown she lost; Flum reckoned that being on the lam with one would be uncomfortable at best. At the very least, Neigass seemed to have taken an immediate liking to her. Sara would be safe with her—or so Flum hoped.

Flum and the rest of her colleagues were the only ones who really knew what happened to Sara. The people of the Central District church, those who had raised Sara since she was a child, were probably still praying for her safety.

“...But still, it’s really weird for the church to be deserted like this.”

The more she watched the building, the stranger the silence seemed. The nuns would never leave en masse unless a small war zone’s worth of people needed aid.

Were the Children wreaking havoc somewhere that Flum missed? In that case, the main thoroughfare was the most likely location. Right as she turned in that direction, she saw a familiar face running toward her.

“Huff...huff...haaah. Finally, someone I know.”

It was Slowe, the young staff member from the West District Guild. His shoulders heaved, and sweat dripped from his forehead.

“Slowe! Are you here alone?”

“I brought an adventurer with me for protection, but we lost track of each other in the ruckus on the main street. It seemed pretty dangerous back there, so I bailed. This was the least-crowded route.”

“A ruckus on the thoroughfare? What happened?”

Slowe gave a grave account of Gadhio’s encounter with the runaway carts.

“Carts running loose...sounds like Luke.”

Flum witnessed the spiky-haired boy’s Rotation power firsthand when she fought him after Ink’s abduction. It wasn’t a stretch to imagine that he could drive a fleet of carts without horses to pull them.

“Do you know him? I guess it takes a hero to fight someone that powerful.”

“I’m no hero. Amazing people like Gadhio and Linus, they’re heroes. By the way, do you figure the church is empty so that they can take care of all the injured?”

“Hmm. That sounds possible. I saw a lot of nuns out in the streets. Now that all the shops are closed, I guess I’m not going to be able to finish that errand for Y’lla...”

Only a villain like Y’lla would send him out to run an errand in a situation like this. Then again, she’d probably set him up with that adventurer to be his bodyguard; maybe she wasn’t all bad.

“Listen, I’ll deal with Y’lla if she says anything about it,” Flum said.

“Really? I appreciate it! So does that mean that you’re heading back to the guild?”

“Yeah. I doubt I can fight the people behind this amid all the clamor.”

She was worried about sending Slowe back to the guild all on his own. He wasn’t a target, but Rischel of the church knights nearly killed him once already.

Flum sensed imminent peril coming from behind and threw Slowe aside.

“Watch out!”

“Waaaugh?!”

FWIP!

A small stone flew past through the space where he'd stood moments before.

"Heh, so close. Just a moment sooner and I would've smashed his skull wide open." The lone figure rolled several small stones around in their hand, making an audible clack—interrupted only by the sloshing sound of blood splattering out of the spiral in their face.

Judging by the spiky hair, it was evidently Luke. He had put a powerful spin on the rock to send it hurtling through the air at deadly speed.

"Eyaugh!! What's that...that...thing?!"

"But you're not getting away this time. You two aren't long for this world!" Luke tossed all his rocks into the air. "Rotation! Endless Shot!"

The stones hung in the air for a moment before beginning to spin. The friction from the air slowly ground them down until they took on a conical shape and shot right at Flum.

"Looks like you weren't just playing around!" Flum jerked Slowe back up to his feet with one hand, summoning her Souleater with the other. She drew a large cross in the air with two vicious swipes, leaving behind glowing arcs of prana energy. Stabbing through the point where the lines intersected, they spread and opened like an umbrella, forming a faintly transparent shield.

"A thin shield like that is no match for me!"

"It's a lot stronger than you think! I made sure of that!"

The stones slammed into the shield, disappearing with a loud crack and a bright flash of light.

"Aaaaaaaaagh!!!"

Slowe, the innocent bystander to all this carnage, curled up into a ball and refused to move. But Flum's shield held, keeping him from harm.

"Heh, so you managed to survive that one. I guess you got a lot stronger since we last met. Till next time, then!"

"Slowe, get out of here. I'm going to take care of him myself!"

“O-okay!”

Luke turned his attention back to the escaping Slowe and pointed a fist toward his back. “Rotation! Air Shot!!”

Flum immediately stepped in the way and used her Souleater to soak the invisible blast.

The noise was tremendous as the wind battered her blade. It was all she could do to keep her arms outstretched. The attack was practically identical to the one the ogres she’d fought before had used.

After letting it die down a bit, she channeled her reversal power through her blade to finally dissipate the blast.

While she was doing that, Slowe escaped into the church.

“Damn, looks like he got away. Keep your nose out of other people’s business, yeah?!” Luke glared angrily at Flum for interfering with his attempt on Slowe’s life.

“Why are you trying to kill him?”

“I swore that from here on out, if I see it, I kill it. No exceptions. And that applies to you, too! Rotation!”

It wasn’t the answer she was looking for, but at the very least, it seemed like he wasn’t specifically targeting Slowe. Flum held her sword at the ready, preparing for the next round of shots.

But this time, the air concentrated at his feet. The air spun with such immense force that she could hear it cracking as it formed into two crude wheels, launching Luke straight toward her.

“Whoa, how’d you get so fast?!”

He moved faster than she could have anticipated. Right before he made contact, two huge spirals formed around both of his arms, whirling at a speed that could bore through flesh and bone effortlessly. He stretched his right arm out toward her.

Flum made a panicked riposte. It felt like she had struck a stone. His attacks were far more intimidating now that he was close.

Sensing that her guard was down, Luke launched into a left hook that found its mark in her gut.

“Gyaaaaaugh!!”

She heard a disgusting tearing sound as part of her side and intestines were torn to shreds. The spiral surrounding Luke’s left arm took on a red hue as it filled with blood and flesh.

He followed up his strike with a right hook to her face.

“Not gonna...!”

Flum screamed through the pain, managing to parry the blow in the nick of time.

Luke made for another face jab, this time with his left fist. She could only guess that he was intentionally aiming at her head because he knew that her regenerative abilities would only help as long as her brain and heart were intact. She wouldn’t survive a blow like that.

Fortunately for her, he was falling into an easy-to-read pattern.

She dropped the sword, twisting and weaving around his punches.

“How are you doing that?!”

“Your strategy is way too simple, kid!”

Flum moved into Luke’s spin and let the force carry her forward to throw a punch of her own straight at his face in retaliation for what he did to her stomach. Her reversal magic reacted with the power of Origin, filling his body and sending him flying backward.

Now that they weren’t in close quarters anymore, she recalled her Souleater to her hands. Letting the force of her blow carry her forward, she flipped through the air and swept the black blade straight at Luke’s skull. He was already off-balance and out of time to dodge. Not by normal means at least.

“Rotation!” Without a moment to spare, Luke summoned up his energy and created a gust of wind at his feet, sending him clear of the blow.

But Flum wasn’t done yet.

“You’re not getting away!” She summoned up her prana and slashed another cross into the air.

Luke took one look at her windup and, realizing that escape by any normal means would be all but impossible, leaped into the air.

He should have started to return to the earth the moment he hit the apex, but gravity had no hold on him. Flum spotted a whirlwind surrounding his feet and holding him aloft.

“So what do you think of Papa’s power, huh? Humans like you could never do this!” He let out a triumphant laugh before throwing several more punches, barraging Flum with enough spiral blasts that it felt to her like she was trying to dodge rain. A veil of dust and scattered, broken stones surrounded her.

“Funny how you sound so assured of your victory, and yet you resort to such cheap tactics!”

Right as she may have been, Flum also couldn’t pull off a counterattack while she was preoccupied with not dying.

However, she wasn’t merely trying to escape—she was also carefully analyzing Luke’s abilities.

Luke’s first attack put a spin on those small pebbles to make them pierce targets. They’re almost certainly more powerful than the air bursts he switched to later, even though they couldn’t pierce my prana shield.

This was a surprise to Flum. No matter how good her barrier of prana and reversal magic may have been, she still expected to sustain at least a few injuries.

Luke isn’t weaker than the other Children. Does it have to do with how our powers interact? His power involves clockwise rotation, while mine reverses everything. In fact, now that I look at the wind...

Flum stopped in place and waited for one of Luke’s blasts. Just before it struck, she met it head-on with her blade.

“Reversion!” She poured a great deal of her magic into her blade right as it made contact. Just as Flum suspected, the spiral faded away.

“Wh-what?!” Luke stared in shock but didn’t let up. He let off another burst, and—

“Dissipate and revert!” This time, Flum didn’t even bother with her sword. She countered the attack with her bare hand.

“How did you learn how to nullify my attacks like that?? Heh, no matter—I still have the high ground!”

No sooner had he said this than Flum reversed gravity and rose into the air.

“How in the hell did you get up here?!”

“Sorry to ruin your advantage, kid.”

“Don’t make fun of meeeee!!” He prepared another spiral blast, but he was already too late.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

Flum swung her sword right toward his neck, fully intent on killing him.

Much like Mute and Fwiss, she figured that he was also well past saving. At the very least, she could make his death quick and painless, before he had a chance to build on his sins.

“Uaaaaaaaaagh!!”

But Luke had the desperation of a cornered animal. Just as the black blade was about to make contact with his flesh, he opened the floodgates of his energy and threw his right arm out to protect his head.

The Souleater slashed right through his flesh, severing his arm.

“Ga...auuuuugh!” Luke felt like he was on fire as he watched his arm disappear from the elbow down.

The wound began to twist shut, though it did nothing for the pain. He wobbled in the air, slowly dropping as his concentration wavered.

Flum let up on her gravity reversal and returned to the ground.

“What in the holy hell was that?! Hey, wipe that arrogant look off your face!” Luke held his injured arm and screamed in rage. “Are you trying to feign sympathy now? You and I, we’re here to kill each other. Now cut it out!!”

“Nekt wanted to save you, you know.”

“Heh, that jerk? Here I thought she’d stay out of this, but no, she was out seeing you.”

“Nekt meant to use me for her own purposes at first, but she opened her heart to us in time. We promised to help. She’s going to become a normal child again.”

“What, and become like Ink? We’re not like her! We take pride in our power, our bodies, in the fact that we’re Mother’s children! That’s why we need to leave our mark on the world—to prove that we were here and that we were more than human!”

“Is this really what you want to do, or have you just given up on finding another way?”

“That just makes it more important! Death. Murder. We’ll keep killing because it’s all we have!”

Flum hoped once that the Children would come to her for help, but it was clear that Mother’s influence was too strong for such a simple solution. It looked like there were no avenues left open to her. The idea that she would offer him aid, they would come to a mutual understanding, and this whole problem would just go away was a lost cause.

Flum raised her blade and pressed the tip against his chest.

“So you think you know where the Origin core is?” Luke shoved his hand into his pocket and ran his fingertips across the item Mother had given him.

“The one in your body? Pretty much. It should be right about...” Flum squeezed the hilt and drove forward.

“Waaaaaaaugh!!”

She was interrupted by what sounded like Slowe screaming from inside the church. In that briefest of moments when Flum’s attention was elsewhere, Luke managed to break away and put some distance between them.

Before she had a chance to close in on him again, he spoke up.

“You sure you want to do that? He’s all alone with the third generation, you

know.”

“Grrr...”

Flum stole a glance back at the church. Sure, he could be playing her, but she already sensed some ominous, inhuman presence lurking in the church.

She took off toward the church, leaving Luke to make his escape.

“Gah, how do you even run like that?? Next time we meet, you’re doomed!”

Luke clenched his fist as he yelled, the bitterness evident in his voice.

Several minutes earlier, Slowe had slumped down in a long pew after managing to escape into the church. He could still hear the battle between Flum and Luke raging outside.

“I hope Flum’s okay.”

It felt a bit pathetic to rely on a young girl to protect him. Not only was he a grown man, but he had even trained plenty by himself to improve his mastery over wind magic. He’d thought this might be his chance to use it, but he was way outclassed.

“But that...thing, it was coming for me in particular. Just like that church knight a little while ago. Why? I was born to a completely ordinary mother! I’m a completely ordinary staff member at a run-of-the-mill guild!”

He couldn’t think of anything notable about his life, except that he couldn’t recall his father’s face. And it wasn’t like that was terribly unique for a West District boy.

“Gaaaaa...grrroouuu...fraooo...”

Somewhere deep within the church, Slowe heard a faint voice...if you could call it a voice at all. He shot up to his feet, his eyes fixed on the door at the chapel’s far end.

“Is there someone there?”

As the battle outside intensified, it’d be no huge surprise if someone came to check it out.

“I’m coming in, okay?” Slowe grabbed the doorknob and stepped inside into a part of the church usually reserved for the clergy themselves—something akin to the “staff only” door in a restaurant. He felt a faint pang of guilt.

“Yes...good boy...I...hahahaha...”

“Is that laughter?”

As he moved down the hallway, he began to hear the sound of a woman laughing. Ominous, given the circumstances. Slowe was shaking by the time he reached the door separating him from the voice. He pressed his ear to the door.

“Yes, my child... Mine, all mine, my cute little child. Why are you so cute, I wonder?”

It sounded like a mother fawning over her child. It made sense for a mother with a newborn child to be at the church. Having identified the source of the voice, Slowe turned and began to make his way back to the chapel.

“Hm...what do...? Mama, I...ng?”

As he walked back down the hallway, he heard a loud thump, followed by the creak of floorboards under an unfamiliar weight.

“No...still...huh? You...kill...at all.”

The sound grew ever closer before it suddenly stopped.

BWAFOOM!

The door he’d put his ear to moments before shattered.

Slowe’s whole body trembled as he slowly turned to look behind him.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

He was greeted by the sight of an infant’s head. But this was no ordinary infant—its head was at least a meter across.

A hoarse cry erupted from its half-open mouth as a thick tendril of drool poured out the side.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Overcome by fear, Slowe dropped to the ground and screamed.

Chapter 7:

Feint

THE BABY WRIGGLED back and forth as it tried to force its way out of the room, but it couldn't get its shoulders past the door frame. The building creaked under the stress until the wall finally gave way.

The abomination took up nearly the entire hall. It looked up and down the length of the hall with great interest before sitting down. It fixed its attention on Slowe, who had by this time lost control of his bladder.

"Aaauh...!! No, stay back! Stay baaaack!" His voice quavered in fear.

This only seemed to draw more attention from the baby, and it started to crawl toward him.

"Aaugoo?" It brought its face close to Slowe's and seized his leg in its stubby fingers. "Ahyuu...goo..."

It gazed at him with pure curiosity, as if this was the first man it had ever seen in its life. It seemed like it wanted to play with him, but it soon grew tired of just holding him. The baby started to bring him toward its mouth, head first.

Deep in its throat, Slowe caught sight of the same fleshy red spiral that he'd seen earlier where Luke's face should have been.

"No, no...please, noooooo!!"

Slowe's body refused to obey his commands. He was done for. Just as he was about to give up—

"Slowe, duck!!"

Flum's Prana Sting shot straight toward the space between the baby's eyes—and was deflected by some invisible force. Fortunately, the impact of the blow itself still made itself felt.

"Waaaaaaaah!" The baby let out a low, throaty cry in annoyance and turned its attention to Flum.

The murderous look in its eyes sent a clear message: stay out of this. The creature seemed to have a mind of its own, but it wasn't human. Just as with the Necromancy program, Origin had bonded with its host, using it to play the part of a child.

Flum dashed over to Slowe, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, and dragged him back toward the chapel.

"Ow, owww!!"

"Deal with it; we don't have time!"

"O-okay! But what was that thing?? What's it doing here?!"

"That's what I'd like to know! Luke referred to it as the third generation, I think."

All the other Children until this point were similar; this thing started out monstrous and only drifted further from humanity with each passing moment.

"Oh, did you make some friends? I'm hardly surprised. You're my baby after all."

The nun who walked out of the room seemed oblivious to the horrific scene. She merely brought a hand to her cheek and smiled. It was clear there was something wrong with her and that she was only semi-lucid.

Between the spiral in the Child's mouth and the force field protecting its body, it was safe to assume an Origin core was involved.

The core's got to be located where its heart would be; I'd be grateful for such a large target if its giant head wasn't in the way!

It was almost like Origin meant to use its head as a shield from the jump.

"In that case, I'll just have to start there!" Flum let out a battle cry, ducked low, and dashed toward the creature. The baby was still enraged by the previous blow and rushed to meet Flum.

This time, Flum imbued her sword with reversal magic to ensure that she wouldn't be deflected again, sweeping her blade across the baby's eyes.

"Hyaaaaah!" She felt Origin's power resist the blade for the briefest of

moments before her blade broke through the barrier and struck flesh.

The top half of the creature's head, including its eyeballs, flew off into the air.

"Uaaaagh..."

The room filled with blood stench as chunks of its brain and eyeballs splattered against the floor. Slowe threw his hands over his mouth to hold back his vomit.

The baby's insides were, for all intents and purposes, identical to a normal human's. Its open wound began to twist into a spiral, firming up and starting to turn.

Flum raised her blade. She had to smash the core before its body could harden enough that her sword could no longer pierce through to its target.

Just then, a massive blast of air shot out from around the baby and threw Flum backward.

"Aaack!" The spiral blast hit her head-on, throwing her all the way down the hall and back into the chapel, where she smashed straight through a pew. Wasting no time, she pushed herself back up.

"Aaaaaah...waaaaaaaaaugh... Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" The baby let out a low roar. It almost sounded like it was crying.

The whole building shook as if it, too, were trembling with terror. Slowe fled, only stopping once he was at Flum's side. "It...it looks like something weird's going on!"

"Yeah, it looks mad. And I bet it has more up its sleeve than just that wind blast."

The swirling pattern atop the baby's head twitched for a moment before something started to peek out of it.

"Is that its...its head?! I think I'm going to be sick..."

Another head, nearly identical to the one she'd chopped through mere moments ago, grew out of the wound. It was slick with blood and stopped at the neck.

“Waaaaaaaaaugh!”

The new head slammed to the floor and roared as it rolled toward Flum. It was a terrifying, disgusting sight that felt blasphemous to the core.

Flum reflexively drew her sword, charged it again, and hacked away at her mark. The Souleater easily split the head in two, but in a matter of moments, spirals began to form on the discarded halves. She was willing to bet they’d be spawning heads of their own in moments, leaving her up against three of these things.

“Eyauuuugh! Th-they’re multiplying?!”

“Multiplying...spawning...this is just like Ink. In that case, that could only mean...!”

Obviously, the creature’s power wasn’t just about sending heads leisurely rolling after people. What’s more, there was something about the protective spiral that reminded Flum of her battle with Luke. Could that mean that this third generation could use all of the powers of the first-and second-generation Children?

“Flum, something’s moving farther down the hall!”

Slowe was looking at the scalp that Flum had lopped off earlier. It crawled like a slug along the ground, up the baby’s body, and then finally came to rest atop its head.

The two open wounds squelched as they came together.

“Aaugoo!”

The baby cooed excitedly and swung its head from side to side, satisfied that its scalp was now in one piece again.

“Connection...that’s Nekt’s ability.”

“It can even heal itself?? We’re doomed! There’s no way we can beat that thing!!”

But Flum wasn’t quite so easily cowed. “There’s no need to be so negative.”

Unlike the second-generation Children who, though young, were still able to

act and make decisions of their own free will, the third-generation subject attacked without any forethought or planning. More importantly, its powers were inferior to those of the second-generation Children, who had each specialized in the use of their own abilities.

Flum took a deep breath, filling her lungs with oxygen, and slowly let it out as she focused on her muscles.

She lowered her hips and launched toward one of the incoming rolling heads, practically gliding across the ground. She slashed through the new head with blinding speed before continuing on, choosing to ignore the new heads forming out of the wounds of the last.

She pushed through the growing swarm of heads, recklessly mowing them down until she reached her target.

“Aaaaauooooo!”

The baby was well infuriated by the sight of her by now.

GAGOOON!

There was a loud crash. Suddenly, Flum found herself standing at an angle.

It wasn't just her—from where Slowe stood in the chapel, it looked as if the entire building had twisted to the side, like some sort of optical illusion.

“So I guess you had one more ability up your sleeve, huh?”

No matter what it did to the walls and floor, she could overcome it easily by getting airborne. The baby opened its mouth as it witnessed Flum charging through the air at it. She watched as air began to whip around inside its mouth, preparing to shoot.

“You're not even as good as Luke!” Flum batted the attack away with her left hand and thrust her sword into its forehead with her right.

“Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeee!!”

This time, she split its head down the middle, though it only took an instant for the spirals to form across the wounds and spawn new heads.

“It's no good, Flum! It just keeps making more!”

“Then I’ll just have to kill it before it can get us!” Flum made no effort to retreat. Rather, she dove straight into the injury in search of the Origin core that should have been further inside, right past the neck.

She grasped the Souleater’s hilt in both hands and charged right in, managing to get shoulder-deep into the baby’s body, angling for the core with the tip of her sword. Try though she might, she couldn’t turn up the core. She spun and twisted the hilt in her hand to widen her search.

“Flum, we’re running out of time! You gotta get out of there!”

Just as the words left Slowe’s mouth, Flum felt the *clink* of her sword hitting something hard. A smile came to her lips as she cast her spell.

“Reversion!”

The sound of the black crystal shattering was followed by the baby’s eyes growing glassy. Its limbs fell limp, and its massive body dropped to the ground with a loud *thud* before splaying out lifelessly on the ground. Even the newly spawned heads stopped moving. Satisfied that it was dead, Flum withdrew her sword and gave it a good shake to get the blood off. She gave a soft smile and willed her sword away, the mark on the back of her hand glowing faintly.

“D-did you kill it? Amazing!”

“Once its power source is destroyed, it can’t regenerate anymore.”

“Power source? Don’t you mean its heart?”

“That’s just the kind of creature it is. I guess it’d be better to call it a weapon. The church made it.”

While they were talking, the now-childless nun collapsed to the floor at the end of the hall. Slowe tried to run for her, but Flum grabbed his shoulder and shook her head.

“We have to help her! She was in the same room as that baby and acting strange!”

“Hmm, they were together? It’s too late then.”

“No, it isn’t. Look, her eyes are opening!”

Even if Slowe couldn't comprehend what was going on, Flum knew what happened to the nun as soon as she saw her eyes.

"Her body is alive, but her heart is another story."

Flum figured that the baby used a power similar to Mute's to alter the woman's mind.

She seemed not to even notice Flum and Slowe, merely staring off into space as drool poured from her slack mouth.

"That's awful," said Slowe. "I'm sure she never would have imagined that she would die today at the hands of such a creature."

People lived each day as if tomorrow and the day after were bound to come. But the truth was that death found everyone in the end, and it cared little for whether they were prepared or not. Origin just happened to be crueler and more malicious about it than most.

If you died in an accident, you could write it off as bad luck. But Flum could never allow Origin the same latitude. Cruel as it was and arbitrary as it appeared, it was a willful menace to humanity—and more importantly, one that could be hurt in kind.

Now that the battle was over, Flum and Slowe stopped outside the church to rest. Flum wanted to return to the guild immediately, but the consecutive battles had taken a lot out of her, and she felt bad leaving such an ugly scene behind without bothering to explain to anyone what had happened.

Truth be told, she also wanted to do something about her torn clothes and Slowe's stained pants before they returned to the guild.

"Haaaaah..." Slowe slumped to the ground and leaned his back against the church. Flum stood beside him and rested against the wall, politely keeping her gaze skyward to avoid looking at his pants.

Between witnessing the mass suicides, letting Mute and Fwiss get away, battling it out with Luke after her chance encounter with Slowe, and then having to fight a giant baby creature right after, it'd been a chaotic day.

However, Slowe seemed to be pretty excited about what he'd witnessed of Flum's fight.

"Hey, Flum, I saw you chopping through that enemy back there without even touching it. Was that magic, too?"

His tone was uncannily eager.

"That's a sword technique called Cavalier Arts."

"So you mean if I work at it, I might be able to do it, too?"

"Did you want to be an adventurer, Slowe?"

"Maybe if I had the knack for it. But I'd hate to worry my mother."

"So that's why you came to work at the guild, huh? Good for you. Being an adventurer isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"But look at you, Flum. You're not just an adventurer—you were part of the great journey to slay the Demon Lord."

"I didn't exactly choose to do either of those things." Flum absentmindedly ran her hand across her cheek. It was easy to forget that she was still marked as a slave, surrounded as she was by such kind and caring people. Fortunately, Slowe didn't seem to care either.

"And yet you can throw yourself into combat like that, even if you didn't choose this life for yourself."

He mumbled on about how great and amazing it was until the nuns finally started filtering back into the compound from the large road out front. Flum spotted Elune, one of the nuns who had been particularly worried about Sara.

A look of concern washed over her face as she caught sight of Flum and made her way over. "Flum? What happened to you? Your clothes are in tatters."

"It's been a while, Elune. I heard something awful happened out on the thoroughfare."

"Yes, it's quieted down a fair bit now that most of the injured have been cared for, but...never mind that. I'm more worried about you. You don't look injured, but my goodness, you're covered in blood. And your friend—"

Slowe looked away and pretended not to notice what she was referring to.

“Before I answer your question, I have one of my own.” Flum’s voice took on a grave tone. She expected news of a regenerating baby would be a bit of a shock to the nuns around her. “Just a little while ago, we were attacked by a massive baby. It’s dead now, so we were just taking a brief rest.”

“A giant...baby? What are you talking about?”

“In one of the rooms past the chapel, we found a nun and a child. Do you have any idea who that might have been?”

Elune and the other nuns were clearly shocked by the news.

“Sister Nalei was taking care of a baby left in our care yesterday, but she started acting strangely and wouldn’t let us in her room this morning.”

“So you just left her here?”

“That’s correct. But what do you mean that you were attacked?”

“It’s exactly as I said.”

She was attacked, she fought back, she killed. Nothing more, nothing less.

“You say that a child was left in your care yesterday morning,” Flum went on. “What happened?”

“The child was abandoned at the gate, so the church took charge of the child’s care until the parents could be found. Nalei was the first to hold the child. It took a liking to her.”

So naturally, the job of caring for the child fell to Nalei. In fact, her transformation may have taken place the moment she first held the child.

“Now that I answered your question, please answer mine. Just what happened here?”

“Let’s go inside; I’ll explain there. But please realize that it’s a pretty shocking scene, so you may want to prepare yourselves.”

With that, Flum led the party of nuns into the chapel. It was only a matter of moments until the group began screaming at the sight that awaited them.

The chapel was in shambles, strewn with colossal heads, and a mammoth

infant with its head cleaved open lay on the floor. The brain-dead Nalei was right where Flum and Slowe left her. Even though she'd warned them, the sight was still too much for several of the sisters; they passed out, sparing them from contemplating the sight any further.

"What should we do? Maybe we should summon the church knights and leave the cleanup to them."

While Elune fretted, Flum offered her own advice. "They'll just cover it up."

Elune swallowed hard. Sara, Ed, Jonny... She'd already lost these three who she'd thought of as children to the church. Her growing distrust for the church had reached its limits.

"I think you could ask the guild...and Shoppe Mancathy for assistance. They're not on the church's leash. You can count on them."

Though it would be tantamount to turning her back on the church, they had already betrayed the sisters at this point. Elune quickly agreed to Flum's proposal.

Obviously, the church knights would realize that something was up if a group of adventurers were suddenly dispatched to the Central District church. Bringing in a bunch of brash newbie adventurers to create a human wall, on the other hand, could temporarily keep the knights from getting in. While that was going on outside, they began preparing the remains of the third-generation creature for disposal.

"Yuck, this is nasty. We have to carry this thing?"

"Hey, I hear Shoppe Mancathy is paying up."

"But what if I get sick from touching this thing? There's gotta be a better way to move it than by hand."

The adventurers encircled a large chunk of head and scowled down at it.

A man holding a rope walked over, his black hair swaying in the breeze as he moved.

"In that case, I'll use my magic to lift it. Don't worry, I don't plan on keeping

all of the money for myself.”

“Yeah! I knew we could count on you, Croswell! You’re awesome!!”

This was the first time Flum had ever seen the man, but she figured he was a well-known S-Rank adventurer.

“Hey, Leitch, where are you taking this mess?” she asked.

As far as Flum was concerned, they could have just ground it into hamburger and thrown it all away.

Leitch looked back at her and offered up a weak smile. “We’re bringing it to one of Shoppe Mancathy’s warehouses for further research. If we can find some sort of weakness, it may even the odds in your future fights.”

Gadhio crossed his arms and looked over from where he leaned against the wall. “You must have a pretty big place then. I guess it’s no surprise coming from one of the biggest businesses in the country.”

Welcy popped up from behind her brother and started poking and prodding his cheek. “Stop blowing things out of proportion. You’re just going to send this to the product research lab, aren’t you?”

“Cut that out, Welcy. And you wonder why people always treat you like a child. Anyway, I trust your work is done?”

Welcy puffed out her chest in pride. “Mind your own business, bro. I got one of the newbies to mop up. Besides, the editor does stuff like this all the time. So ha!”

Leitch could only sigh in response. It seemed more likely that she finished the parts of the interview process that interested her before passing the buck on to someone else. She had just finished using her power of “burn projection” to create images of the horrific scene before interviewing some of the nuns, adventurers, and even the church knights.

Flum laughed. “Well, you’ve certainly got a lot of energy, Welcy!”

“She’s been like this since she was a child. Quite a hassle to have a sister like this, really.”

“You’re too much of a homebody, Leitch. I have to be active enough for the

both of us!”

Leitch sighed once again, though as far as Flum could tell, this was the sort of ribbing that was inevitable when siblings spent long enough in the same room.

The sound of a cart could be heard outside. Flum didn’t pay it much heed, since adventurers and Shoppe Mancathy staff had been coming and going all day, but the doors to the chapel flew open and a figure ran full tilt at her, nearly bowling her over in a tight embrace.

“Hnnnggff!” She looked down at the delicate silver hair and caught a whiff of something sweet. “Milkit?! What’re you doing here?”

Milkit looked up, tears forming at the edges of her eyes.

“I heard that a lot of people died in the capital, and we just couldn’t find you, so...”

“I see... So you were worried about me. I appreciate it, Milkit.”

Flum gently brushed her hand across Milkit’s cheek to wipe away her tears. Milkit smiled at the warm touch and buried her head into Flum’s chest.

This moment of sheer bliss instantly made Flum forget about all the torment and anguish that had filled her head.

Slowe—now in a fresh pair of pants—watched Flum and Milkit with great curiosity. Y’lla, who came along with the adventurers for reasons she didn’t elaborate on, stood at his side with a similar expression on her face.

“What are those two to each other?”

“Don’t think too hard about it. It’s a waste of time.”

She said it with such finality that Slowe could only cock his head to the side in confusion and let the subject drop. Another figure stood close by with an annoyed expression planted firmly on her face as Flum and Milkit were lost in their own little world. Despite how close they were, the two girls seemed completely oblivious to Eterna’s stern gaze.

“And would anyone like to thank me for bringing her here?”

“Huh?? Oh, thank you, Eterna! That’s right—Milkit couldn’t make it here on

her own!”

“I’m here, too!” Ink chimed in, Eterna’s hand held firmly in her own.

“Heh, I guess this is nothing new for the two of you,” said Flum.

“It’s kinda what we’re known for, I guess,” said Ink.

“Eterna, Ink, would you please let me interview you? I’d love to hear more about this.”

“Eterna and Ink aren’t like that!!”

Eterna and Ink both turned to Flum, confused at her sudden outburst. Even if she lacked the self-awareness of her own actions, she certainly took issue with the insinuation about Eterna and Ink.

“Master, your clothes are all torn up. Were you attacked?” Milkit slid her finger through one of the holes near Flum’s heart, eliciting a deep blush from her at the ticklish sensation.

“Uh, yeah, with Luke and then a monstrous baby. What about you, Gadhio? It seems like you got caught up in whatever that chaos was back in the Central District.”

“Ah, right. I stopped a few runaway carts. I caught sight of Luke there, but he got away.”

“It sounds like you ran into him while he was on his way to me.”

“Maybe so, though I doubt that he was looking for *you*. He must have been heading to the church to check on that third-generation thing.”

“Third generation?” said Ink. “From what I’ve heard, it sounds completely different from me and the second-generation Children.”

“From what I could tell,” Flum said, “this thing was meant to be a weapon. Given that Luke came to check in on it, I get the sense that it was still missing some essential parts.”

“I don’t imagine Mother can continue his research after the church knights took the lab. This must have been the state it was in when we were at the Necromancy lab.”

Which explained why Mother lost interest in Nekt and the other second-generation Children. And yet, Mute, Fwiss, and Luke were all still fiercely loyal to Mother.

“If they’d had just a few more days...”

“Man, look at this place. You did a real number on this church...”

“Yeah, I know. Hey, wait! Is that...?!” Flum spun in place.

“Heya, Flum.”

“Nekt?!” Flum spun around. “Why do you always pop up out of the blue like this??”

The young boy—er, girl, as Flum reminded herself—shot Flum a snarky grin. Despite her surprise, Flum was happy to see her.

“Nekt...so this is one of the Children??”

Leitch’s shout immediately drew the attention of all the adventurers nearby, who quickly prepared for a fight. They’d already received a general explanation of what went on in the church—including that the Children were involved.

“Wait a second! She’s one of the Children, yes, but she’s on our side!”

“I can also assure you that she’s no enemy,” said Gadhio. “Not right now, at least.”

The adventurers had no choice but to listen to their guild master. They stowed their weapons, grumbling with reluctance.

“Apologies for causing such a commotion.” Leitch bowed his head.

“You gotta get a handle on yourself, Leitch.” Welcy teasingly kicked at his shin several times to drive the point home.

“Sorry to surprise you like that,” said Nekt, “but ya know, I can’t exactly come in through the front door with all the church knights outside. Let it go this once, yeah?”

“I don’t really care either way, but I think Milkit deserves an apology.”

Milkit was still visibly shaking as she spoke up from behind Flum. “Ah, n-no, it’s fine. Really.”

Even if she understood logically that Nekt could be trusted, her body couldn't forget the trauma she'd endured.

"Aah, yeah, listen...I'm really sorry about that."

"It seems that you and Master have come to an agreement, so I'll do my best to get over it."

"Now that I think about it, I don't remember the last time I heard you give a sincere apology, Nekt." Ink snickered before she went on. "You've really changed, huh?"

"I don't need to take that from you. I'm not here for idle chitchat." Nekt grew serious once again, but Gadhio interrupted before she had a chance to speak.

"I saw you and Otilie through all the chaos back at the thoroughfare a while ago," he told Nekt.

"Otilie??" said Flum.

"Heh, so you saw me? I thought I did a good job covering my face."

"I know your mannerisms too well. What were you doing there?"

"I was just trying to stop Luke, but it was too late by the time I caught wind of the situation." The sadness was clear in Nekt's voice.

Ink let out a sad sigh, and Eterna ran a comforting hand through her hair.

"Hold up," said Flum. "What were you doing out together with Otilie? I'm sure she..."

"She was released from the army just before the church knights absorbed them," said Gadhio. "After that, a church resistance group picked her up. I imagine you're a part of that as well?"

"Bingo, old man."

Nekt was impressed by Gadhio's response, though he looked none too pleased at being called an old man.

"Whoa, a secret society??" Welcy was immediately enthused by the revelation. "Now that's the kind of news that gets a muckraker going! Who's in charge? C'mon, I need to know! If you don't tell me, then I'll just follow you

until I find out!”

Though Leitch was usually quick to put an end to his sister’s antics, he simply put a hand to his chin and looked at Nekt.

“Cardinal Satuhkie, I presume?”

Nekt chuckled.

“I can’t tell you that. It wouldn’t be a secret then, would it?”

Judging by her response, it was pretty clear that he had guessed right, and she wasn’t terribly interested in keeping the secret.

“Anyway, back to the subject at hand. I was hoping you could let me keep a piece of this creature’s body.”

Eterna replied immediately. “Not a chance.”

Nekt’s shoulders slumped at this. “You’ve always been a tough one to work with, you shriveled-up ol’ bat.”

“You can go straight to hell, kid! Cross...”

“Whoa, whoa, calm down, Eterna! And you too, Nekt. Don’t be so brash!”

Nekt laughed. “Sorry, I just knew I’d get a fun rise out of her. Listen, I won’t do anything bad with it, and we’re all in this to fight the church, aren’t we? You know that Ottilie and I are working together, so you must realize that we’re on your side.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that we can’t trust Cardinal Satuhkie,” said Gadhio.

“I agree with you, old man. But I can tell that he’s committed to putting a stop to the Children’s rampage.”

Flum agreed with Eterna and Gadhio that Satuhkie could not be trusted. Something about his presence gave her an uncanny migraine. A peculiar feeling shot across the palm of her hand just hearing his name. On the other hand, she wanted to trust Nekt.

She squeezed Milkit a little tighter and made her decision. “...All right, you can take a piece with you.”

“Are you serious??”

“Yes, Eterna, I am. There’s no one in a better position to analyze this thing than Satuhkie, after all.”

“I mean, that’s true, but...”

“Thanks, Flum. In that case, I’ll take a part of the spiral and pieces of the core then.”

After collecting only what she absolutely needed, Nekt prepared to use her Connection ability to teleport away. Before she left, Flum called out to her.

“Hey, Nekt, do you know Slowe over there?”

Nekt was about to say that she knew nothing about the guy when, upon taking a closer look at his face, she let out a small yelp.

“You know, I’d been told that someone was always keeping watch on him.”

“Huh?”

“If anything really dangerous would happen, someone would step in to help out. I figure he was left alone this time since you were there to watch out for him, but I’m sure they’ll be back sooner or later. They have to, ya know. Well, see ya!”

“Wait! What does that even mean??”

“Can’t answer that yet.”

“Fine. But what about the Children?”

“...What about them?”

“What are your plans? Even if they did become normal humans after committing such atrocities, I don’t know if...”

Nekt’s voice and face emptied themselves of all feeling. “I’ll save them, no matter what.”

“But that...!”

“Connection!”

“Wait, Nekt!!”

Nekt quickly disappeared, almost as if she were desperate to escape Flum and

the conversation.

Flum stared at the ground and then shook her head free of the grim feeling that hung on her. She turned her attention to Slowe.

“So, Luke really was after you from the very beginning.”

“And that church knight Rischel was trying to kill him, not attack the guild,” said Gadhio.

“Slowe, just who are you?” Y’lla asked.

Alas, Slowe couldn’t answer Y’lla’s question—he didn’t even *know* the answer. All he could do was slowly shake his head as eyes fell on him in light of this growing riddle.

Ultimately, Welcy agreed to look into Slowe’s past while the rest of the group returned to Flum’s house. Gadhio agreed to escort them on their trip through the West District.

“Cyrill’s still kidnapped.”

Flum’s heart was heavy as she gazed up at the setting sun.

“I heard about that. I’m so sorry, Master. But I’m sure you can save her next time.”

“I don’t even know why the Children would want to abduct Cyrill in the first place. Any ideas, Ink?”

“Nope, not a clue. We really had nothing to do with the heroes.”

Gadhio sighed. “All I can think of is that they mean to use her as a hostage or for research.”

This only darkened Flum’s mood.

Milkit eagerly squeezed her master’s hand. “I hope I have a chance to meet her someday. Speaking of Cyrill, Linus didn’t show up today either.”

“There are just too many people working in the shadows here in the capital,” said Gadhio. “Now we have Satuhkie’s group to add to it.”

“Right. You never have a chance to let down your guard,” said Flum. “I wonder what Cyrill’s doing right now?”

Milkit watched Flum with great concern as her master fretted over Cyrill’s fate.

The group eventually broke up in front of Flum’s house, where she would finally have a chance to relax.

Gadhio agreed to take Y’lla home and then escort Slowe back to his abode, where they would pick up his mother before going back to Gadhio’s to spend the night. Y’lla’s eyes lit up as soon as she heard. Flum had no idea what sort of audacious request she made, but at this point, she no longer cared. She just wanted to kick back.

Dinner was made up of whatever they had lying around the house. Everyone pitched in to prepare the dishes, and they made quick work of the meal. They all took baths and then went to bed early to wake prepared for the day to come.

“I’m going to turn the light off.”

“That’s fine.”

Lying under the comforter together, Flum and Milkit each found comfort in the warmth of the other’s body. Even through her closed eyelids, Flum could sense someone watching her in the dark. She slowly opened her eyes to find Milkit staring at her.

Their eyes met, and Milkit stumbled over her words. “Umm...”

“What is it?” Flum offered up a warm grin, like a mother speaking to a young child.

“Cyrill, is she...well...Master’s... What is she?” After a great deal of struggle, she finally managed to force into words the dark feeling that had taken hold over her. She was hesitant to even ask the question and felt even worse about having the feeling in the first place. But even so, she couldn’t ignore it.

Flum, on the other hand, simply laughed it off. “She’s a friend.”

She couldn't think of a better word to describe her and Cyril's relationship.

"A friend..."

Milkit repeated back the word like a parrot.

"We both came from similar upbringings in small towns and were thrown into being a hero out of nowhere. And, y'know, we both had a bit of a sweet tooth. Made it easy to bond."

"Do you still feel that way?"

"Of course. I don't bear any ill will toward her, and I'd love to go out for cake again sometime."

The smile on Flum's face was almost too much for Milkit to bear. Flum held no grudge, even in spite of the fact that her friend had done her wrong in the past, and yet here Milkit felt this way just from listening to Flum's honest feelings. She hated herself at that moment. Why did she have to be born? Even if she knew that what she was feeling was wrong, that did little to stop the feeling.

"I'm...not your friend, right?"

"Hmm, I'd say you're something different."

"What is that something different?"

Just being on the receiving end of Flum's affections was more than enough to make Milkit happy. It seemed presumptuous to ask such a question, but it was the warmth and affection that Flum had shown her—and that Milkit had become addicted to—that compelled her to seek the answer.

Flum, for her part, couldn't fathom where this question was coming from beyond a simple interest in her best friend. But there was something about the way Milkit was asking that suggested it was less to do with her and Cyril's relationship than the difference between how she treated Milkit and Cyril. In other words, something about that difference had her worried or unhappy.

She pondered how best to answer to ease Milkit's worries.

"Well, for example, Cyril and I never shared a bed. We never held each other, and we didn't hold hands like this when we walked together." Flum clasped Milkit's hand in her own under the covers.

These had all become completely natural for Milkit, but Flum knew that this was far from normal. She'd never felt the need to embrace Cyrill—or anyone, for that matter—like she did with Milkit.

“You mean...I'm the only one?”

“Right. You're the only one I've been this physically close to. So I guess...hmm. I don't really want to rank people, but I suppose in terms of who I'm closest to, you're number one.”

Milkit's finger twitched at this. Flum realized that it was in response to her saying she was number one.

Could Milkit be jealous of Cyrill?

Flum felt a strange sensation grip at her chest as she came to the realization.

She must really be enamored with me if she'd get so jealous over the mere mention of someone else. But I have to admit, she really is cute like this. Gah!

The more she thought about it, the more her composure threatened to fracture.

“I'm just...scared. You're such a fascinating and strong person, Master, that I think many people must be enamored with you.”

She could tell Milkit was dead serious. Slaves were forbidden from even considering such emotions, even though they were completely normal for the rest of the world.

“Of course, I realize that you treat me differently from everyone else, and I believe everything you say. But...while you are constantly surrounded by so many different people, I only have you, Master.”

“Hmm...that is a problem. What can I do to help get rid of your anxiety then?”

“I'm sorry for causing you problems like this.”

“Ah, no, no...not at all. I guess it's that you're focused on me while my attention is taken up by many other people and things. So...hmm...” Flum looked up and hummed quietly to herself as she rolled her head from side to side like a metronome. After several trips back and forth, she finally stopped with her head stuck to one side. She turned to Milkit, her mind made up.

“I like you.”

Flum’s words struck deep in Milkit’s heart. Even in the dark, she could see her eyes go wide.

“I can’t think of any better words to explain it, so I guess I’ll just have to show you instead.”

“N-no, that’s fine. It’s more than fine. I understand. Sorry for the strange conversation, Master.”

“Not at all. I’m actually glad that you’ve grown confident enough to ask me.”

Flum let go of her hand for a moment to intertwine their fingers.

Milkit’s heart raced so fast, she felt it might explode. Master was so calm and collected, even when she came to her with absurd worries like this. She turned to gaze at Flum.

“Ng...”

Their eyes met. Flum’s cheeks were burning red, but she looked aside, trying to play it off. Milkit tended to think of Flum as a calm, cool person, but in truth, Flum was also reaching past her comfort zone in order to alleviate Milkit’s concerns.

Milkit felt her embarrassment evaporate away and averted her gaze.

The girls looked off in opposite directions but never let go of the other’s hand, not even for a second.

Eterna kept a dim light near at hand so she could read while Ink lay on her bed.

“Hey, Eterna.”

“Oh, you’re still awake?” Eterna tensed up for a moment and glanced quickly at the bed. She’d thought that Ink was asleep this whole time.

Ink lay face up toward the ceiling as she spoke. “Just what is Flum and Milkit’s relationship, anyway?”

Apparently, she’d heard the goings-on in their bedroom.

Eterna smiled softly before letting out an exasperated sigh and turning her attention back to her book. “Who can tell, really?”

With that, the room fell into silence again.

Chapter 8:

The Fool

NEKT BROUGHT the parts of the third-generation subject to Satuhkie's men and left it with them.

She then spent the next few hours watching with great interest as the researchers began to dissect and analyze the remains of her "sibling."

Ottilie strolled into her room, her work for the day complete, and called out to Nekt.

"Looks like you've formed an attachment, huh?"

"Welcome back. It's not quite what you think. I've just been thinking about how this thing was born to be what we spent our lives wanting to become...and yet here it is. A creature with no will of its own. Just meat. Our desire for Mother to show us love and affection was probably a complete waste of time. That's all, really."

Even still, children naturally longed for their parents' affection. Humans were, after all, just like any other social animal in that they needed to form relationships with each other. It was both a blessing and a curse.

"Love isn't something you can ask to be given back in return," said Ottilie. "On the other hand, there's nothing more tragic in this world than unrequited love."

"Sounds like you know what you're talking about."

"But my love is returned, which is why I can truly understand the sadness that must bring."

"Does Henriette love you?"

"Would I be here if she didn't?"

Nekt felt a wave of jealousy wash over her at the sight of Ottilie and her blind devotion to Henriette.

"If I could believe the same about Mother as you do about her, I can only

imagine how much easier my life would have been.”

“Who can say? People who constantly put their lives on the line are a lot stronger mentally than you’d think.”

An unshaven man stuck his head out through the wall right next to Nekt.

“Whoa, Chatani?! You really need to stop popping out of walls around me!”

“You’re one to talk. As I recall, you’re always teleporting around and spooking people.”

“Why not just walk around like normal people?”

“Why should I act out a role in this staged program when traveling through walls is so convenient?”

“Staged program? I just don’t get you...but there’s nothing new there.”

“Aah, it’s no use. You’ve no idea what programs are. Everyone here understands Japanese just fine, so I keep forgetting how different things are. I still don’t get how the once-great Japan could become a fantasy world like this.” Chatani stood at Nekt’s side, drew a cigarette out of his pocket, and bit down lightly on the end.

Obviously, this was all for show, since he didn’t have a physical body to smoke with.

“Like I said,” said Nekt, “I have a hard time believing it, too.”

“I wonder if it’s because the learning materials were left behind that the language lived on? Or was some kind of AI personality put in the box? That would help you pick up a language, too. I wonder if such things could exist... I often used those learning materials during my compulsory education. Sato used to say that the religions that preceded Origin now exist only at the bottom of the sea.”

They had wiped the concept of the written word off of the face of the planet in the hopes of converting more people into believers in their god, all while insisting that their actions were their god’s will. And yet that religion, too, had been lost to the sands of time over the course of wars waged between humans.

“It *was* made from the same material as Origin and I. The ‘metal that stops

time.’ It’s a lot stronger than most things, since it was meant to be used in schools. Were we to salvage it from the ocean’s depths, I’m sure it would work without a hitch.”

Ottilie and Nekt had already heard this story, but they still didn’t understand a word of it. All they knew was that Chatani’s presence was proof of the existence of things beyond their comprehension, which left them no choice but to believe what he said.

“Apparently, we’re going to get started with Sato’s salvage plan once the fighting is finally over with,” he said.

“I still don’t get why you insist on using the name Sato.”

Chatani countered Ottilie’s offhand comment with a teasing smile. “I’m telling you, I’m sure that’s where the name Satuhkie comes from. That was the most common family name in Japan, you know.”

“I have no idea what this Japan you refer to is, but I’m impressed that Satuhkie manages to keep his cool around you.”

“I can’t really say for sure, but he seems to be thankful to have me around. Maybe that’s why he lets me get away with so much.”

Chatani really should have been the grateful one, considering Satuhkie had excavated him from the ruins. He looked over and noticed the researchers on the other side of the glass waving him down.

“Ah, sorry, looks like the research team is calling me.” He walked straight through the wall and into the lab on the other side.

“To be honest,” said Ottilie, “I don’t trust Satuhkie or any of the others here.”

“There’s still so much I just don’t understand,” Nekt muttered, staring at Chatani’s back. “And besides, I already said that I just wanted to focus on the Children.”

“Even if you ordered me to,” Ottilie replied, “there’s just no way that I can trust a shady group like this. That whole thing about his real body, that metal box—what did they call it, an ‘organic computer’? It was buried outside Flum’s hometown. That’s just too much of a coincidence.”

“Exactly. I don’t think there’s anything coincidental about it at all.”

Nekt cast her gaze to the ground as she recalled the item Satuhkie had shown her.

Satuhkie looked like a schoolboy talking about his grand dreams as he spoke.

“This reversion core was born of a young girl’s noble sacrifice.”

The “appreciation” he had for Chatani was due in part to how he’d helped return these memories to Satuhkie.

“I want to rip the world away from Origin’s control and put it back in humanity’s hands. I’m sure the ancients in the time before magic and those of us reborn into this world all hold the same dream in our hearts. It’s all quite a romantic notion, don’t you think?”

Nekt was only half-paying attention. She was more focused on the body suspended in the glass case.

“She, too, wanted it so badly that she willed herself to have the power to reverse. That’s right: Origin’s counterpoint, the one who gained the power to create the energy of reversion, gave up her life.”

Satuhkie smiled proudly in front of the case as he revealed her name.

“The hero who gave her life to save the world was called Flum.”

Nekt gazed up at the ceiling and sighed. Otilie looked over at the young girl and quickly guessed what she was thinking about.

“He really thinks that body is Flum’s,” she said, “doesn’t he?”

“I think there’s a connection. Looking at Flum, I want to believe people can make miracles happen through desire and tenacity alone. What a pain. Life would be so much easier without dreams.”

All the Children, except for Nekt, had already committed atrocities of their own. And yet, she still couldn’t give up on them. It was a feeling that had been entirely foreign to her until she met Flum.

Nekt laughed in spite of herself and sighed again just as the door opened.

“Ah, there you are, Ottilie. I was looking for you.” Satuhkie handed her a piece of paper. “It’s your next job. I’d like you to pick up Foiey Mancathy.”

“Leitch Mancathy’s wife? I don’t think she has anything to do with this, though.”

Ottilie’s face grew dark as she skimmed the paper. None of this seemed to have anything to do with Nekt, so she left the room to let them talk it out and made her way back to her own quarters.

As the darkness lifted and the sun began to peek over the horizon, Flum was surprised to find that her daily letter hadn’t arrived. She waited next to the door for some time in the hopes of capturing the culprit.

Flum let out a loud yawn, probably still exhausted from the previous day’s fights. She gently massaged her eyes through closed eyelids in the hopes of staving off the exhaustion that threatened to take over.

“Looks like a long night.” Eterna inspected Flum’s face.

“Huh, you’re up early,” said Flum.

Eterna took the first shift to watch the door just around midnight, and it’d only been two hours or so since she’d gone to bed.

“I couldn’t really get to sleep. Besides, you’re exhausted and I’m still pretty fresh, so I’m taking over.”

Eterna originally planned to stand watch all on her own, but Flum insisted. She still felt responsible for the fact that she couldn’t save Cyrill.

Letting Flum take a two-hour shift was Eterna’s way of compromising. She’d already decided that she was going to take over no matter what, even if Flum resisted and she had to resort to force.

“It wouldn’t be right for me to rest. Besides, Gadhio’s staying up all night to watch over Slowe.”

“That guy’s practically not even human. You shouldn’t compare yourself

against him. Besides, you're our ace in the hole, so we need you to be fresh and ready."

Flum was exhausted, and she knew it. Even if she went to bed now, she knew that she still wouldn't be fully rested by morning.

"What is it?" said Eterna. "You can't sleep?"

"There's that, too. I saw so much death today. No matter how much I think I'm used to it, it's still tough to see."

"Maybe you're just not taking enough time to get your mind off things."

"I don't have time like that, not now. Who knows when we'll be attacked next."

"Then I guess you just have to make the most of what little time you have."

"What should I do?"

Eterna shrugged as she felt a wave of annoyance wash over her. Wasn't she the one who brought this up in the first place? She clearly wasn't thinking this through.

"Hmm...get closer to Milkit?"

That was the best she could come up with.

Flum's shoulders slumped at Eterna's response, though a wry smile came to her lips as she looked back at the older woman.

"That'll happen naturally on its own, you know. That's just how she and I are." Her voice oozed confidence.

It was Eterna's turn to express her exasperation. "Heh, you sure sound confident. But I wouldn't be so sure. You definitely don't seem like lovers to me."

Flum chuckled. "We're both girls, you know. Though I still want to be together forever, for what it's worth."

"Hmph."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

“I was just wondering if it really was okay for you to just neglect your relationship like that.”

Eterna figured it best to just stand by and watch as their relationship progressed.

“Anyway, you should get to bed and think about how you can refresh yourself later. I’m taking over; now go.”

“I... You’re right. I’ll leave it to you then.”

Eterna shot a thumbs-up in her direction before Flum headed upstairs and returned to her room, letting out a sigh of exhaustion. Truth be told, she felt a certain excitement at the thought that she could finally go back to sleep. Flum approached the bed and gazed down at Milkit’s face. She looked so soft and adorable when she was sleeping, her face so perfectly composed that she looked like a doll. It was hard to resist the desire to just crawl into the bed with her right then and there.

Looking down at Milkit, Flum reaffirmed what she already knew: she was going to make Milkit happy no matter what.

She reached down and softly brushed some hair away from her cheek. “I really don’t deserve her.”

Her skin felt as soft as silk. She could just go on touching it forever.

“Hn...?” Milkit’s eyes fluttered open, and she tilted her head to the side before focusing her gaze on Flum.

“Ah, sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“No, not at all. I’m a light sleeper anyway. I guess I just can’t sleep when you’re not around, Master.” Milkit smiled faintly and tugged on the hem of Flum’s pajamas.

She looked only half-awake, but even that looked adorable to Flum. She wanted to shout from the rooftops about what a beautiful partner she had at her side.

“Well, I guess I’ll climb on in then.” Flum slid in next to Milkit. The bed was already warm from the heat of the girl’s body.

Milkit took hold of her master's arm and intertwined her legs with Flum's.
"Aah, Master..."

She rested her head on Flum's shoulder like a pampered kitten and fell back to sleep.

Milkit hadn't exactly woken up so much as she'd crested from the depths of a dream.

"I guess you'll forget all about this tomorrow morning," said Flum. "Too bad. I love seeing you when you're embarrassed."

Eterna's words came back to her. Even these simple interactions were enough to clear her mind of all the awful memories. Not even five minutes would pass before the exhaustion took over, drawing Flum into a deep sleep.



The sun rose over the capital, bathing the city below in its brilliant rays. The night passed without incident, and no letter had arrived.

Perhaps the deliverer realized that someone was standing watch and decided to stay away. Or at least Eterna began to think so, until she heard footsteps approaching outside. Their footfalls were light, suggesting a small person. As soon as she heard the sound of the postbox opening, something being dropped in, and the figure turning to leave, Eterna sprang into action.

The young boy froze in his tracks, clearly not anticipating that someone might catch him.

“I’ve got a few questions for you.” Eterna clasped her hand tightly around the boy’s shoulder and was met with a look of sheer terror.

“Wh-what? I didn’t do nuthin’.”

“Did you write the letter you just put in our postbox?”

“No! A girl asked me to do it yesterday. She just told me to drop it off, and that would be it.” Tears welled up at the corners of his eyes.

Just to be sure, Eterna cast Scan on the boy, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. He was just a normal kid on the street.

“All right, I believe you. Now get out of here.”

The boy took off running the moment her hand came off his shoulder.

“Girl, huh. It’s not hard to imagine that the church would use a child, but then...” Eterna opened up the letter and looked it over. *“Two days remain. Three seeds were planted and the rest bloom magnificently, but we cannot let ourselves be distracted by them. What we truly seek is still buried deep in the earth.”* Gah, it reads just like a sappy poem.”

She shoved the letter back in its envelope and walked back inside.

Shortly after waking, Flum, Milkit, Ink, and Eterna made their way to the guild. Considering the state of the capital, they figured that the guild was probably the

safest place to be, given all the adventurers camped out there.

So a girl gave him the letter...huh...

Flum mulled over Eterna's story as she walked. Assuming the author was the person Flum suspected it was, that would make things even more complicated.

Fwiss and Mute said that they were out to murder the residents of the capital. But is that really all they're after? Putting a stop to them is obviously important, but assuming that murder was only one of their goals, then that could turn everything on its head. The Children are more than just weapons; they're humans, too. Humans who know sadness and suffering like the rest of us.

"Good morning." She greeted Y'lla with a wave as she led the party into the guild.

"Morning." The receptionist was resting her chin in her hands, looking exceptionally bored as she offered up a simple greeting in return.

Milkit and the others gave only a quick wave; Y'lla was a stranger to them.

"Where's Slowe?"

"He's in back, doing the books."

"Huh, I see. Did he stay at Gadhio's place last night?"

"Yeah, he and his mom did, apparently."

"Aah, I guess that makes sense. Hahaha...good to know."

"What do you mean, 'good to know'?? I had no interest in staying with them, I'll have you know!!"

"Seems like you're protesting a bit much, no? I mean, you'd feel a lot safer being with Gadhio, I'm sure."

"Hmph. You're up to something, I know it. I'll have my revenge for whatever it is." Y'lla chewed on her thumb in frustration.

Once things settled down between the two of them, Eterna finally interjected from where she stood reviewing the job board. "There's a lot of adventurers here for how early it is."

Flum took a look around. There were about ten sitting there, all suited up in

their armor. The youngest had to be in his teens, while the oldest looked to be in his forties. She hadn't seen the guild this active in the morning since Dein was around.

"The master called them here for protection, in case the guild gets attacked," said Y'lla. "Obviously, the guild's paying their fees."

"I'm impressed that Gadhio was able to make all those arrangements in-between his busy schedule," said Flum.

With this many people on standby, Slowe had a decent shot at escaping any threat that came their way, should the worst come to pass.

"Speaking of which, where's Gadhio?"

"Out on errands again. Apparently another body turned up. I'm sure he'll be back soon."

Things looked relatively calm when it was dark out and there were few people roaming the streets, but once the sun came up, new troubles started rolling in.

"Well, speak of the devil," said Y'lla.

Gadhio walked in with a posse in tow. His face softened the moment he saw Flum run to his side.

"Good morning, Gadhio. So how was it?"

He shook his head. To a man, the adventurers with him looked deathly pale.

"It was a bloodbath. Not enough left in one piece to count casualties."

"They must be pretty dumb to be out and about after what happened yesterday," Y'lla replied.

An insensitive thing to say, but Flum and the others were thinking exactly the same thing.

"There's an old royal army barracks nearby. It's the church knights' now. I imagine the victims figured they would come to protect them. In reality, though, no one had even bothered to clean up the mess."

"Why won't they do anything if they're always marching around the city on patrol?"

Y'lla answered Milkit's question in her usual disinterested manner. "Probably because they just don't want to."

"That's likely the case," said Gadhio. "I don't believe the church knights are here to serve in defense of the kingdom."

"But if we try to protect the capital, they're on top of us in seconds." Flum clenched her fist and scowled as she felt a rush of anger rise up inside her.

It was no different for the adventurers Gadhio had brought together. Several of the men didn't even belong to the West District guild, but they too were enraged at how the church knights used the capital as their private playground.

"If only we could flush out one of the Children," said Flum. "Not that I have any idea *how*."

"Right now, the best way to do that would be to assemble a large enough crowd to get their attention."

"But Eterna, that would mean..."

"I know. It's too great a risk to take with the guild members we've got."

If their hypothetical mob of adventurers ended up baiting Mute, it would be a trivial matter for her to turn them into a mindless death squad with the stats of the strongest among them.

A heavy silence hung over the room for a few tense moments before the door flew open like a breath of fresh air.

"Gooooood morning, you beautiful people! Hey, I see you're all here." Welcy gave a cheerful wave and practically skipped inside.

She looked over the scene, including the adventurers standing by, and tilted her head to the side. "Huh, are you trying to keep the news from getting out there?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The government identified the four culprits behind yesterday's incident and posted sketches in the town square. They've put a king's ransom on their heads; every fool with a working sword hand's out there trying to sniff them out," Welcy explained to her shell-shocked audience. "Okay, so judging by how

you're looking at me, I'm gonna guess that you've kept the guild out of the loop."

Even Welcy was suspicious at the West District's dearth of adventurers on the street. Usually, matters like this drew them in by the dozen.

Gadhio, Flum, and Eterna left the guild without a word.

As soon as they stepped outside, objects the size of a human head began to rain down all around them.

They weren't only the *size* of human heads, though. They were, in fact, real severed human heads.

"Huh?!"

Its job now complete, the creature standing atop the rooftop across from the street took off running.

"Scan!" Though she hesitated just a bit too long, Flum was still able to get their adversary's information before it disappeared.

Chimera Werewolf

Affinity: Earth

Strength: 6,519

Magic: 6,163

Endurance: 6,121

Agility: 6,784

Perception: 6,511

The werewolf was a patchwork creature with the head of a bird and arms of a bear—yet another of the church’s weapons.

“That’s one of the completed Chimeras!” A chill ran up Flum’s spine as she looked over its stats.

Gadhio leaned over and frowned as he examined the three heads.

“Gadhio,” said Flum, “did you know...”

“These were old friends of mine. Talented adventurers. I asked them to do some fact-finding for me.”

The look of terror was still etched in their faces. Were they still alive, the news from the town square would have reached the guild much sooner.

“That damn Chimera. I’m gonna...!” Gadhio clenched his fist so hard that blood began to drip from his hand.

“Should we go after it?”

“No...we’d best take our business to the town square.”

Following the Chimera would play right into the church’s hand. The party gritted their teeth, tamped down their rage, made arrangements with the guild to take care of the bodies, and took off. Gadhio led the way, running full tilt, not once looking back to see if his companions could keep up. Flum managed to keep just behind him, while Eterna summoned up a magical canine mount and matched pace with him.

It wasn't long before they started to hear the loud thunderclaps of explosions echoing down the city streets. The calm before the storm had finally broken. Something had started, and it was going to be bad.

Flum glared ahead at the ominous plumes of smoke rising in the north.

Chapter 9: Outbreak

CYRILL PRESSED HER FACE tight against her knees and sobbed. She was all alone. There was nowhere in this world that she could call her own. The sound of approaching footsteps broke her from her fugue, and she slowly turned to look in their direction. Would it be a friend or foe?

She already knew the answer to that question, of course, but this figure, whom she was obliged to consider an enemy, never treated her as such. After she lost consciousness the day before, Cyrill awakened to find herself in this secluded cabin. She wasn't restrained; Mute was sitting by her side. Realizing the fear in Cyrill's eyes, Mute went on to explain in her usual arrested fashion. She told her about the Children. About Origin. About what they really were.

It wasn't long before Cyrill realized that her journey wasn't really about slaying the Demon Lord at all. She had been manipulated by Origin into carrying out his will the whole time.

Now that she knew what that spiral of muscle and flesh on Mute's face really was, her fear diminished slightly. It did little for how she felt about Mute's mass murder spree. Mute knew this, but it didn't change her attitude toward Cyrill.

Night approached.

"This one...is our biggest...job. I'll be back."

With that, she left the cabin.

Cyrill wanted to ask what she meant, but she was too afraid to. She was caught in a moment of change. A moment in which she couldn't give anything her all, in which she was always hurting but would never break. She longed for the strength to push herself in one direction or another—to choose to either give up or recover.

She would do neither yet.

What she feared most was not abominations or strange powers, but how Mute could distance herself from everything and follow her own path with such

righteous conviction.

“But...why did Mute help me?”

Did Origin order her to? It didn't seem like it. Mute and the other Children acted on their own. Did she want something from Cyrill? Was she expecting something from her?

The questions ran through her mind unanswered until Mute finally returned.

“Cyrill, we must go.” She reached her hand out for Cyrill's.

A look of hesitation crossed Cyrill's face for a moment, but she pushed those feelings aside and grasped the outstretched hand. Even if she had refused, she got the sense that Mute would have waited for her until she came along anyway.

She didn't comprehend why, but she was strangely, baselessly confident.

She stood up, and the two hurried out of the cabin together.

“Where are we going?”

Though she received no reply in return, a look of sadness washed over Mute's face as she pressed forward.

Cyrill could hear screams and shouts of anger coming from the town square at the foot of the castle.

“How long will we keep running?” Cyrill raised her voice this time as fear took hold.

Still no answer. The clamor she'd heard earlier dwindled until she could barely make it out. Maybe so many people died that there weren't that many left to scream.

Mute finally stopped, and Cyrill tried asking for a third time. “Why did we stop here?”

“...Cyrill.” Mute refused to face Cyrill as she spoke.

“Do you...know why I...brought you...with me?”

“I don't know anything anymore. You're angry that you were betrayed, and now you have nowhere left to call home, so you're trying to leave some proof

that you exist. I understand that much. I don't get why you have to kill people."

Though their values were worlds apart, Mute still seemed satisfied with this answer, replying with a firm nod.

"Yes. That's why."

"That's why?"

"I will...die. Die...for Mother. Die...to leave my mark. But...the creature inside me...will live. The human me...will go away. I want someone...to remember me. I don't want...to be a monster. I want...human feelings."

"I really don't want to get involved in all this."

"Sorry. But you...won't run. Nice. Strong. I'm glad...it's you."

The only reason she didn't run was because she had nowhere to run *to*. It was hard to feel proud when your cowardice was praised as kindness. But whatever Cyrill was thinking was of little consequence to Mute. Ultimately, she would be there at Mute's side until the end to offer her the "salvation" she sought.

"I have...nothing to give. I'm...an empty...shell. But I...want to...give you something. That's why...I showed you."

Cyrill gritted her teeth as the young girl worked her way through her words. It turned her stomach to be made to watch senseless slaughter just for the sake of proving someone had lived.

"You're just trying to excuse what you've done!"

"That's...all we can do. We aren't human. We were born to kill. That's all."

"Even so...!"

"I'm thankful...to Mother. For giving...us power. Listening...to us. But this world...is far too small."

The Spiral Children had spent their entire lives living in a walled garden. The five children lived in a contained world, set on predetermined paths from which they couldn't stray.

However, Mute found the inhuman power lurking within her as a source of pride. That was why she couldn't see Ink as a sister. She was, after all, a failed

experiment from the first generation. Since Ink was able to live a normal human life, that made her something different.

These Children had great power within them. This same fact also meant that they couldn't, and wouldn't, back down. The second generation had their own shortcomings; their replacement by the third generation was an inevitability. Once they had Mother's interest in full, the second generation would be slated for disposal. The church already saw them as a vestigial thing meant to be pared away.

Unlike Ink, they would never find a place to land.

The way they saw it, it was their time to play out their role in the script and die. As children of Origin, a swift and easy death seemed fitting.

But Mute still clung to her identity as a human. She wanted to repay Mother for raising them all these years. One way or another, she shared her siblings' desire to be remembered—but in her case, it was not as a weapon or as a human, but as both.

“Cyrill...is different. You can...do many things. Help...and save others. So much more.”

“You expect too much from me. I'm no hero. I can't even do anything that...”

Mute clasped her hands around Cyrill's and brought it to her chest. She smiled at the touch. “You're alive. You have a heart. It beats. As long as you have that... you have potential.”

Mute had no such heartbeat. No sign of life.

For the first time since they'd first met, Cyrill looked deeply into Mute's face. Finally, she understood.

She'd thought this whole time that their outlooks diverged purely because one was a monster and the other a human. It was natural they wouldn't see eye to eye. And yet, they were racked by the same concerns. In reality, their only difference was...

“But then...why...don't I...do what...I want?”

One had a future, while the other did not.

“I’m...finished. But Cyrill...you’re different.”

The words struck deep. Mute was stuck wandering down a dead-end street, but Cyrill still had the ability to choose her own path. It was a luxury she never realized she had. She was swept up in the chaos around her, failed to be the hero people wanted, and took that as reason enough to abandon her duties and flee. This eight-year-old girl standing in front of her didn’t even have that option.

“I...”

Of course, the suffering of one didn’t automatically inspire others. Someone choosing to take the easy path in life didn’t necessarily deserve to be criticized for it.

But there was just one answer that she could give.

However...

“Watch out!” Cyrill sensed something with murderous intent closing in on them fast and knocked Mute to the ground before an arrow whistled right over their heads.

“Cyrill, what was...”

“Linus. Run!!”

“No. I’ll...fight.”

“Wait!”

“I know. There was so much...commotion. I...can’t run. So...this is my stand.”

“Wait, you planned this all along??”

With the mess she’d made, there was no way anyone would ever forget Mute now. She already told Cyrill everything she meant to say. That meant that there was nothing to fear and nothing left to do but die. Mute slid her hand into her pocket and ran her fingers over the cold, round jewel inside.

“Get outta here, Cyrill!!” Linus closed in on them and launched another volley.

Cyrill wrapped her arms tightly around Mute and dove out of the way of the incoming arrows. “Cyrill...let me go. You...can’t do this. I’m a...murderer.

Creature. Monster. I'll just...hold you back."

"Maybe so, but I... I...!"

She knew what Mute was and how stupid it was to protect her from Linus just because of a sudden bout of indecision. Stupid, sure, but now that she finally felt something again, she couldn't turn her back on Mute, regardless of whether she wanted help or not.

"Maybe you're a monster; maybe there is no other path for you to take. But I can't just stand by and let you throw your life away!"

"Cyrill! What're you doing protecting her?!"

Linus gave chase in spite of his confusion. He and Cyrill might have both been heroes in their own right, but speed was on his side; he closed in on Cyrill as they ran through the narrow streets. The buildings were so tightly packed that there was nowhere else to run.

Cyrill debated whether she should draw her sword or not when Mute finally spoke again.

She squeezed Cyrill's hand tightly in hers and pleaded with her to stop. "It's fine. Done. I'm...okay."

There was something in Cyrill's moral code that wouldn't let her give up on this girl.

"Judgment...!"

A massive sword of light bore down on them from up ahead. Its light illuminated the darkened street. Cyrill swerved; the blow hit her square-on, but she managed to only suffer a light burn to her shoulder.

She lost her grip for a moment, which Mute took advantage of to push back into Cyrill, sending them both crashing into the ground.

A masked woman stood in their path. She ran her hands together and summoned a spear of light out of thin air.

"Sacred Lance!" Bringing her arms down, the spear of light shot straight at where Mute lay prone on the ground.

“Mute!”

“Aah...gaauh!”

The magical spear hit her leg, lighting the flesh ablaze. The wound twisted and churned until it sealed into a spiral.

“Be careful, Maria! We don’t want to drag Cyrill into this!”

“Hmm, but we probably won’t be able to stop the Child if we don’t.”

“You’re probably right...”

All Maria asked for was one day alone with Linus. Now that Linus made good on his promise, they’d moved on to searching for Cyrill and the Children.

Just as they noticed the crowd gathering in the town square, Linus and Maria picked up on something strange: There was a young girl dressed in a robe walking through the crowd, touching the adventurers and other commoners in the crowd. Moments later, each person the robed figure touched began to act strangely.

Linus had shot his first arrow at Mute after he determined that she was the likely culprit for what was going on in the town square.

“Maria, you’re...!”

Knowing what already happened to Maria, Cyrill wasted no time drawing her sword. She fixed her with a steely glare.

Seeing Cyrill show such hostility threw Linus into a state of shock. “Whoa, hold up, Cyrill! We’re not your enemies!”

“She tried to give me a core and use me like some kind of puppet!”

“What the hell are you talking about?! Did Mute mess with your mind??”

“No, Linus...” Maria looked surprisingly calm. “It’s true. I tried to turn Cyrill into a creature like me in pursuit of my own dreams.”

“No way...that can’t be. Why didn’t you tell me something like that?!”

“I...I figured that you’d hate me if you saw my darker side.”

Linus let out an anguished yell. Here he had thought that Maria trusted him

implicitly.

What the hell does love even mean, then? She still hasn't opened her heart to me!

He came to Maria's side, hoping against hope that she would finally trust him. Somehow, he knew that what she needed right now was warmth and kindness.

"And not just Cyrill, either. I gave a core to Jean."

"So that's why Jean acted that way..."

Linus recalled the tirade Jean went on about Maria. So even he had a reason for his outburst.

"Now just wait a second. Even if you did do that, that doesn't explain why Cyrill's protecting that girl!"

Of course, Cyrill already knew that. Mute had committed so many atrocities that her death was assured. She was even prepared to face it.

"But..."

Did Maria really have the right to judge Mute?

"You...you can't be trusted! Hyaaaaah!" Cyrill launched toward Maria.

It was impossible to gauge Maria's reaction through her mask, but she seemed calm as she summoned up a thicket of luminous daggers, ready to launch them at Cyrill. She was fully prepared to kill her former comrade.

She'd already steeled herself for this eventuality.

"Cyrill..." Mute bit down hard on her lip.

A bright flash of light erupted as the two young women crossed blades in a shower of sparks. Mute ducked past them and started to run.

"What in the hell is going on here?! Hey, wait!!"

Maria, Cyrill, Mute... Linus just couldn't wrap his mind around any of this. But there was one thing that was clear: Mute could not be allowed to escape. After a brief, agonizing moment of indecision, he took off after her.

"You two better tell me what's going on when I get back!"

His voice was only barely audible above the clashing of steel and magic.

A hellish scene was waiting in the town square for Flum, Gadhio, and Eterna. There was nowhere left to stand; the flagstones were choked with ruined bodies and bodies creating ruin. The scent of blood was so thick that it made Flum gag.

Standing among the corpses were the handful that were still intact enough to kill. They were men and women of all ages, dressed for every walk of life the capital knew, brutalizing the living and the dead with adventurers' arms, naked fists, bared teeth. What they did have in common were their blank, expressionless faces.

"Oh, my..."

Flum and Eterna scowled at the horrific scene.

"It looks like a mix of adventurers and normal people, but..."

Flum quickly cast Scan.

Ogis Ciarde

Affinity: Light

Strength: 4,871

Magic: 4,219

Endurance: 5,783

Agility: 5,236

Perception: 4,091

One down.

Ogis Ciarde

Affinity: Light

The second one.

And a third...

The fourth, fifth, and sixth person all had the same name, same affinity, and same stats.

“We’re too late. Mute already got to them!” Which went without saying, but Flum couldn’t stop herself from snarling in annoyance.

There were at least several dozen people in the town square, and all of them were S-Rank adventurer class. If even a single S-Rank individual was present in the mix, then it would boost all of the people to the same level once connected. If an adventurer with a high strength stat was combined with another with a high magic stat, this would result in a new person who had both stats boosted.

Adventurers, commoners, young, old, man, woman...none of it mattered. They were all on the level of an S-Rank now.

“Looks like the church knights aren’t here.” Gadhio glanced around the scene. The only clergy people he noticed were low-ranking nuns and priests. The higher-ups were probably sitting in their ivory towers and sipping wine while the citizenry killed each other down below.

“Looks like they’ve noticed us, Flum.”

“Yeah, I’m aware...painfully so.” She might have been brave, but watching the sea of people all bearing the same murderous intent looming ever closer caused her chest to tighten and a cold chill to run up her spine.

Flum could feel the Souleater slip in her sweat-drenched palm. She was far outclassed by each and every one of them. She was more concerned about whether she’d make it home alive than whether she could eke out a win. Her mouth was dry, and her breathing grew ragged. She was terrified by these odds.

“There are still some survivors. We need to buy them time.” Gadhio drew his blade from the sheath on his back and leaped straight into the fray.

Flum couldn’t help noticing that he said nothing about winning.

Eterna focused her thoughts and began to cast a spell. The look of nervousness on her face was plain.

Flum was thinking about Milkit. The only way she could overcome her fear was to focus on the place that she planned to go home to. She clenched her hand tightly around the Souleater.

“Hyaaaaah!” Her voice shook, betraying her fear, but she still managed to summon up all of her courage and take a momentous step forward.

Chapter 10:

Selfless

MUTE'S POWER was known as "Sympathy." No matter the person—big, small, male, female, old, young—she could meld their personalities and stats together. That was why Flum and the others now found themselves face-to-face with a large group of people all sporting the abilities and skills of S-Rank adventurers.

A detachment broke off from the Sympathized horde, turned toward Flum, and raised their hands high into the air in unison to cast a spell. So many swords of light filled her vision that the world went white. It was the same Judgment attack that Maria used so often.

Her opponents moved as one, hurling their blades of light.

"Icicle Blade!!"

"Ng...Reversion!"

"Oooooouughh!"

There was no time to worry about protecting anyone but yourself at that moment.

Eterna conjured five blades of ice roughly the same size as the incoming attack to meet them head-on. Flum, for her part, was fixated on using her magic to deflect it away for her.

Gadhio, on the other hand, pressed his attack, weaving between swords as he closed in.

Eterna's ice blades collided with the enemy's spell, canceling each other out in a blast of steam, veiling the square in a faint mist. Meanwhile, the daggers of light deflected away from Flum and embedded themselves into their casters; a bouquet of flames wreathed the crowd. Those that missed hit the ground, sending up plumes of rocks and dirt.

"Hah!" Gadhio made a mighty overhead chop, but his target, a thirty-year-old

woman dressed in an apron, neatly sidestepped the attack. He was caught off guard by how swiftly she moved before he took up the offensive again.

Two more—a middle-aged man with long hair and a young girl in a pink skirt—ambushed him on his flanks.

“Gah!!” He managed to dodge the man’s fist by only the tightest of margins. Even then, the sheer force of the wind running off his fist left a cut in Gadhio’s cheek.

He caught the young girl’s attack with the broad side of his sword.

KWONG!!

In spite of the massive size difference between the two, the sheer power of the blow forced him to stumble back. He managed to regain his balance just as yet another man struck at him from behind.

“Did you just get shoved by a little girl, Gadhio??” Flum was taken aback by the sight.

“Flum, that way!”

“Got it!” Flum looked ahead to find an adventurer in light armor rushing her, swinging his short swords wildly.

She spun clear and reached for his wrist, but the man jerked his arm away and launched into his next attack. He was coming in too fast for her to parry in time; she caught the next series of blows with her gauntlet.

“Hng...gah...hah...aa!”

She could hold him off for the moment, but she knew that her opponent was the one setting the pace at this distance. Flum misjudged one of his strikes and took a dagger in her side. Her face tensed up in agony as dull pain washed over her.

However, the man was also a lot slower for the moment, with his knife stuck in her side. She kicked him square in the stomach with the ball of her foot and redrew her Souleater as he stumbled backward. Flum raised her sword high into the air with one hand and...felt the force of a powerful blow to the small of her back. She had been run through.

“Aaaauugh!” She felt herself fly into a rage as the smell of singed flesh reached her nostrils. Apparently, one of the attackers made their way around her to shoot a light blade at her back.

Though she was lucky to take that hit in the left arm, the force of the blow still sent her tumbling forward—putting her face in range of the first man’s knee.

“Hnnngff!”

Blood sprayed from her nose as she watched a blade swipe at her neck.

Unable to change direction, she chose to ride the force of the previous blow into a backflip. The silver blade barely missed Flum’s neck and whiffed harmlessly over her chest. She landed on both hands, getting two handfuls of blood-soaked body parts in the process. The wound in her shoulder complained at the sudden weight on it. The old woman who’d attacked her with the light blade moments before closed in fast.

“Hyaaaaaaaaah! Reversion!” Flum screamed as she put all the strength she could into her arm and reversed gravity. Within moments, she floated slowly into the air.

The old woman threw a punch where Flum was just moments before, catching nothing but air. Flum flew over the woman’s head and landed behind her.

“Sorry, lady!” She drew her sword and swiped at the otherwise innocent woman’s neck. The woman dove backward too late to fully avoid the attack. Judging by the amount of blood gushing out of her neck, Flum figured she’d hit an artery. The woman would bleed out soon.

Flum turned her attention back to the man with the daggers, only to catch a flash of light out of the corner of her eye. The old woman had her hand over her neck, mending her wound.

“They can use healing magic?!”

Now that she thought about it, they did have the light affinity. That meant that nothing short of a lethal blow would reduce their numbers.

The old woman and the man with the daggers resumed their attack.

Elsewhere, Eterna resorted to fighting from atop her ice construct, Fenrir, trying to stay clear of the horde's reach and bombard them from a distance.

"Aqua Pressure!" A two-meter-wide ball of water formed around her hand and then shot out, slamming through everything along its path.

"Aqua Golem, GO!!"

A five-meter-tall giant made of ice appeared at her side. The golem was the most durable ice construct she could field—her best shot at occupying the horde's attention for long enough to get the survivors clear.

At the sight of it, the detachment surrounding her stopped, turned their attention to the golem, and let loose a massive volley of light spheres, reducing it to steam.

"This is really starting to annoy me!" Even as she voiced her frustrations, Eterna continued to evade her opponents.

Out of nowhere, a woman leaped into Eterna's field of view, delivering a vicious uppercut into Fenrir. Its body bent under the force of the blow, throwing Eterna high into the air like a rebounding seesaw. Fenrir shattered and enveloped the woman, freezing her mouth and nose shut in the process and blocking off her airways.

"Well, that's one down." Confirming that the woman suffocated, Eterna allowed herself a brief grin.

The moment came to a swift end as a blade of light slashed past her bicep.

"Hng!"

Her bodysuit began to stain with blood. A torrent of lightning bolts came crashing after her from another direction, pinning her in place in midair.

"Fairy on Ice!"

Eterna waved her hand through the air, summoning a meter-wide rail of ice. Blades formed at the bottoms of her feet, allowing her to gracefully skate away. Whenever a piece of the rail would break, she would conjure a new one and continue on her path. She threw in the occasional spin as she glided past, toying with the enemy below between volleys of water spears. She did look like a fairy,

dancing through the air.

Unfortunately, the combatants below weren't satisfied by watching a woman of indeterminate age dance gracefully above the hellscape they'd created. They began to attack in earnest.

"Sorry, performers only!" With a snap of her fingers, the rail shattered into hundreds of ice shards that shot straight toward the crowd. They hurried to cast barriers, but the "Immortal Witch" wouldn't be stopped that easily. The ice fragments shot straight through the shields, though it wasn't all smooth sailing. Several shards also found their way into Eterna's body, and she collapsed to the ground.

"Good luck...you two..." Eterna smiled weakly, ready for her death.

The horde reached up from the ground and summoned balls of light that rained down and gathered around Eterna, healing her wounds.

"You have a pretty cruel sense of humor." Eterna stood back up as if nothing had happened and summoned Fenrir once again, riding it straight toward a group of five that was surrounding Gadhio.

"Titan Blaaaaaaaaaade!!!" The air itself trembled as Gadhio screamed.

He summoned up all the prana he could muster and heaved a stone-sheathed blade so massive that it towered over the neighboring buildings. Anything it touched was torn to shreds. Three of his attackers leaped clear; the remaining two were sent flying.

One of the three survivors hefted a great axe and tried to hew Gadhio from stem to stern.

Though Mute's Sympathy ability brought everyone to the level of an S-Rank adventurer, the weaker the individual was at the start, the quicker their efforts shattered their untrained bodies. Many lacked weapons, fighting only with their bare fists.

Of course, there were still a number of battle-hardened adventurers in the group that Mute drew together. From the potent equipment and their practiced footwork, the dagger-wielding man facing Flum and the man bringing his axe to bear against Gadhio were both natural S-Ranks. They were clearly a

step above the rest, judging by how they moved, though that might also have been their stat-boosting equipment. If they could take these men out, it would be the equivalent of removing at least three fighters from the battlefield.

Gadhio clasped his hand tightly around the hilt of his sword and braced the broad side of the blade against his wrist as he turned to meet the incoming axe. Despite the difference in their strength, there was no way he could fully absorb the blow with the man putting all his weight behind it. His sabatons screeched along the ground, throwing sparks as the man's follow-through pushed Gadhio back inch by inch.

Though he blocked the attack, he left himself open for the other attackers to press in. Their spells hit squarely, but they failed to pierce his Legendary-tier black armor. It was simply too strong for the magic attacks to penetrate.

"Hangh!" He focused his prana into his arms and pushed back, knocking the axeman off balance and giving Gadhio the opening he needed.

He slammed the ground with the tip of his blade, sending a powerful blast of wind flying out in a fan-like pattern. His opponent anticipated Gadhio's move and dove to the side, narrowly avoiding the blast and lunging back in.

"Well, aren't *you* a speedy bastard!"

The man must have specialized in sheer brute strength in his earlier days, given his command of such a massive axe. Now that he'd been joined together via Sympathy, he had the agility of the other S-Rank as well. Even with all the raw physical power Gadhio could bring to bear, it was still no easy feat to land the lethal blow he needed.

Whenever he blocked the axe, the others would press in and attack his flanks. They worked seamlessly, like puppets strung to the same master, ever so slowly wearing him down.

Flum and the others continued to pick off adventurers one by one. With each defeated opponent, their chances of success grew ever brighter.

"Ang... Ha...haaah!"

Things were quickly getting more dire for Flum, who now found herself facing off against three enemies at once. Her body was covered with gashes, and her

shirt was torn to shreds. However, as long as no one landed a mortal blow, she knew she'd survive, so she bided her time.

However, she was quickly reaching her limits.

"Hng... Ngah!

Spittle sprayed from her mouth as an old woman slugged her square in the gut. The blow lifted Flum off the ground. Another man leaped skyward and landed a chain of jabs into her stomach while she was still suspended in the air.

"Gyafooo!" Flum hit the ground hard, bouncing once before coming to rest.

Most of her internal organs were smashed to pieces; she spewed bright, fresh blood. They quickly began to heal themselves, but that did little to help her recover from the brain fog from when her skull hit the pavement. She could just barely make out the shape of the countless shards of light created by the figures surrounding her.

"Aaaannng..." She made her best attempt to get away, curling up into a ball like a cowering child.

Pulling together the will to move, she caught a glimpse of a little girl in the very same position, trembling with terror, hidden among the corpses.

"Aahhhnng..."

She couldn't just leave the girl behind. Flum forced herself to her feet, turning to face the incoming shower of death. There was no way that she could block it all, but she had no time to worry about that.

She drew her sword and cut a cross through the air to set up another prana shield. "Hyaaaaaaaugh!"

It held through the first volley but began to buckle under the second, allowing a dagger to pass through and slash open Flum's cheek.

Knowing that she didn't have enough time to create a new shield, Flum threw her body over the girl to protect her.

"Gyaauh...gaaaaaaaah!"

The luminous daggers poured down relentlessly, each one setting her ablaze

as it pierced her flesh. She lost track of how many she'd taken as her organs burned. Without her gear sapping her pain, she was sure she would have already lost consciousness.

"Aaaaauugh...hyaaaah...kyaaa...hyaaaa!" A new wave of agony rolled in with every breath. She bit down on her lip until it drew blood. The girl in Flum's arms stared up at her, wide-eyed.

Finally, there was a brief lull in the rain of death.

"Run!!" She let the girl go, watching as she took off.

Flum turned on a heel to face her tormentors. She was too weak to bring the fight to them, her legs fighting to keep her upright. She stabbed the Souleater into the ground and leaned on it like a crutch.

Unless she thought of something, she would find her head, heart, or both smashed to bits in the next exchange of blows. She closed her eyes.

Right as the fists and daggers were about to strike their mark, she tapped the toe of her boot against the ground.

"...Reversion!"

GWOOMF!

The ground beneath them shuddered, tossing her attackers to the side. She had created a hole five meters wide and two meters deep directly in front of her with her magic.

The earth within the hole was completely overturned. Two attackers on the outside of their formation barely got clear when they heard the roar and felt the ground move, but the dagger-wielding man at the center didn't stand a chance. The earth shot up and upended itself before sucking him back down into the ground with a squelch. He died immediately, compacted by the soil.

"Well...that's...one...down...!" Flum drew her sword from the ground. Sweat beaded across her forehead, and her shoulders trembled as she heaved for breath.

Another three attackers came to join the remaining two.

"I've got this!" Flum gave a rallying cry to boost her confidence before

throwing herself once again into the fray.

Mute ran through the city streets.

“Haah...haah...haah...”

Her escape wouldn't last long. Linus already anticipated which way she would head and shot a single arrow through her calf. The young girl let out a cry, stumbled, and fell.

A spiral formed over the wound, pushing the arrow out of her body. It eased her pain enough to let her stand up and run again.

Linus pressed his pursuit. He put away his bow and switched to his short sword. Hopping down from a rooftop, he landed right in front of her. “I think we're done playing tag.”

“I can't...die yet.”

“I would have been more than happy to honor that if you hadn't killed so many.”

Linus stepped closer.



Mute reached out toward him in an attempt to use her Sympathy ability, but he flipped over her and rammed his sword into the base of her neck.

“Auuck...”

Arterial spray shot out, and she threw her hands over the wound, scooting backward in an attempt to escape.

“That body of yours sure is making this difficult.”

Her wound was already healing.

“Looks like I can’t just stab you in the neck. There goes giving you an easy, painless death.”

“No... I don’t want...to die!”

“If you’re going to be mad at anyone, be mad at Mother for giving you that body in the first place. Or yourself, even. You’re the one who killed all those people.”

“No... I must...must repay...Mother.”

“Sorry, I forgot about that. You’ve been together your whole life, haven’t you? You’re invested in that relationship.”

Despite the circumstances, Linus acknowledged that Mute had some degree of humanity. He’d heard all about the Children from Flum and how they were victims in their own right. Be that as it may, he wasn’t about to let her live.

“I guess I’m going to just have to pierce your core this time. Don’t hate me, okay?”

“I... I...”

Linus held his blade at the ready.

Mute reached into her pocket and pulled out a black crystal.

“Is that an Origin core? And what do you plan on doing with that?”

“I don’t...want to die... I want...to live...but...” Mute held it to her chest and paused. “This...will make...my dreams...come true...”

She made up her mind. Mute pressed the crystal tightly against her chest. A

moment later, it began to push its way through her skin. Her body convulsed as a transformation began within.

“Aah...aaaghaa...gaaaa!” Her back arched, her eyes went wide, and drool welled out the side of her mouth. Blood poured from her eyes like tears, and her face flushed a dark red.

“Wh-whoa there!”

“Good...bye...everyone...”

One by one, her nails began to fall off. Her skin peeled away, and blood gushed out of her body as it twisted and contorted.

The very fibers that held her muscles together tore away as Mute’s transformation continued.

“What in the hell is going on here?!”

“Mother... Fwiss... Luke... Nekt... In...k...”

Sensing the danger he was in, Linus drew his bow and loosed a wind-infused arrow. “Gale Shot!”

A loud whoosh accompanied the arrow as it stirred up a massive tornado on its way to its target.

Mute caught it in one hand.

“How did you stop that so easily?!”

The accompanying wind blade should have severed her arm, but she didn’t suffer so much as a scratch.

The all-consuming spiral crept up her body until it finally reached her head.

“Cyri...ll...” Tears ran down Mute’s cheeks as she thought of the girl who she nearly befriended for the last time before she lost her sense of self.

The flesh tore away from her face, revealing the same bright red muscle and sinew, like the rest of her body.

Her transformation now complete, any semblance of humanity was now gone. In exchange, she had gained an immense power that would let her leave an unforgettable mark on the capital.

“Raaaaaaoooooooooooooor!!”

The figure once known as Mute let loose an unearthly roar, despite no longer having a mouth or voice box. The high-pitched yell marked the birth of this brand-new creature.

Chapter 11:

Screams

AS THE BIZARRE CREATURE howled, Linus's vision suddenly began to twist and blur.

"Connect." "As one." "You are me. I am you." "Do not resist." "Your sin is that you have lived."

"Sacrifice." "Sacrifice." "Sacrifice."

"Where you belong..."

In his moment of half-consciousness, Linus heard voices running through his head.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

He screamed in agony and dropped to his knees, holding his head tightly.

(Damn... What is this?? I'm... I'm being taken away!)

He felt like a third-party observer, watching his body be dragged along. This had to be the work of the creature's sonic blast.

Resist. He tried to tell himself to resist and fight back, but he was no match for the creature's sheer force of will.

"Maria...!"

He thought of the woman he loved with all his heart and soul. The memory of her gave him the strength to dampen the noise that threatened to bury his mind and wipe away his consciousness.

"Gya...uaaaagh!" Linus drew his blade from his waist, aiming it at Mute. The closer she got to him, the more powerful the energy emanating from her became, though the memory of Maria was enough to help him hang on to his sense of self.

"Oooooooooaaaaah!" He grew more ferocious in his attempts to defend his own existence, stabbing her.

Clink. The blade stopped at the surface of the raw, twisted muscles covering her body.

He was armed with a Legendary-tier short sword of the finest material. Combined with his fine-honed swordsmanship, he could dismember any monster with the ease of a knife through butter. And yet, Mute's skin stopped his blow with ease. Judging by the pressure on his blade, it felt as if he hit something soft, but still, it didn't yield.

However, the moment his strike landed, Mute's screaming and the assault on his brain ceased. What had once been her face turned toward Linus.

"Ooou?" She cocked her head to the side in a gesture that seemed to imply it was the first time she'd ever seen him before. She waved her hand and the street was cast in shadow, like something had blocked out the sun.

Linus noticed the massive boulder hovering above them.

"Whoa, hey, now, calm down for a moment. We're still in the middle of the city, ya know!" He turned on a heel and started to run for all he was worth. "You've completely lost your mind! No one can stop that!"

"Ooooooooouu..."

Yet another strange, ominous cry.

A tornado whipped up in the space between Linus and Mute. It grew faster and faster until Linus felt it drawing him in.

He threw his arms over his head and held his ground. The tornado tore its way toward him as the floating boulder began its rapid descent.

"You can do all that and air magic all at the same time? Don't tell me you have a rare affinity! Dammit... In that case...Sonic Raid!!" A protective barrier of wind surrounded Linus as he took off.

As the name implied, the raid spell usually allowed its user to move at incredibly high speeds and close the gap with distant opponents. It felt like an insult to its power to use it to run away, but Linus had few options left.

GWAFWOOOOOMF!

The boulder crashed into the street, leveling houses on both sides of the road.

Even though he got out from under it, he still had to contend with the cloud of shrapnel rolling off the impact. Each piece was large enough to deliver a fatal blow.

Linus leaped into the air, landing effortlessly on a rooftop. Looking back, he surveyed the destruction. “That’s...awful.”

It seemed hard to believe that Mute could have escaped such devastation. Obviously, he doubted that she meant it as a suicide move, but he also couldn’t see any sign of her. He focused all his senses but still came up empty.

“Ou...”

There.

Goosebumps sprang up all over his skin as he heard a faint voice flitter across his eardrums. It was close. Turning his head ever so slightly, he caught sight of a red spiral.

“Hyaaaaaagh!” He lunged straight toward it, his sword at the ready.

Even the most gifted S-Rank adventurers would struggle to sneak up on Linus, and yet this creature completely obscured its presence.

“...Aah?”

Despite having thrown everything he had into his strike, Mute batted it away like it was nothing.

No—more precisely, he just happened to hit her hand as it moved, and she had no real concern about the attack in the first place. He didn’t get the impression she’d actually been trying to defend herself.

Even knowing that it was all for naught, Linus drew his second short sword and launched into a frenzied attack.

“Fah...hyaah!”

Boasting strength and agility stats in excess of 3,000 and 8,000 respectively, Linus could put up a fast and furious offensive that would cut any normal person—nay, even the most powerful of monsters—to ribbons. It didn’t hold true for the creature standing before him. Linus slowly let up his assault as he came to that depressing realization. Once he did, Mute reached out and placed

her hand on his chest, giving him a light push.

“Gyahauu!”

It felt like he was hit head on by a charging bull; it threw him back at such speed that he worried his body might fly apart. Even his wind magic failed to slow him as he continued along his path until he crashed through the wall of a nearby building and out its far side, finally coming to a stop on the opposite street.

The only thing that saved his life was the fact that he fought his way through his fading consciousness to cast an air cushion around himself. Even that wasn't enough to prevent the pain from erupting in his chest and radiating through the rest of his body. He figured he'd broken at least a few ribs.

He could breathe, so his lungs weren't punctured. The pain was still so extreme that just moving was a challenge.

“How in the hell...”

In all his years of pitched combat, Linus had never experienced anything quite like that. Muttering curses to himself was about all he could do. He pushed himself to his knees and then back into a standing position. His legs wobbled uneasily beneath him.

And then, he noticed something peculiar.

“The people, they're all dead... Wait, no. Are they just unconscious?”

Dozens of people lay around with their eyes wide open. Their chests rose and fell with each breath, suggesting that all of the people out there on the street had passed out in unison.

“What is this? What's going on here?!”

Linus clenched his hands tightly around his blades as he screamed and searched frantically for Mute.

Fwoooo.

He felt a cold breeze brush past his legs.

Linus bounded off the ground and dove away, watching as the place he was

mere moments ago froze over. He clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Landing, he let out another sigh. But he wasn't quite out of the woods yet.

Zwoooooomf!

Hundreds of flaming rocks rained down unannounced. He only managed to escape by using his sword to bat rocks out of the way and diving to the side. Several fireballs landed on the people collapsed in the streets, turning them into living pyres. None of them reacted in the slightest. It was like they were already dead.

Once Linus got back to his feet, he took off again. He had no idea where Mute was, but her attacks were all landing right on the mark. She had to be watching him from somewhere. The ground beneath his feet began to freeze over, so he took to the air to avoid it again. When he landed, he saw the ground flex under his weight. His feet sank into a thick, black, tar-like substance.

“She can use magic with the darkness affinity, too?!”

It seared his skin. Linus conjured up a gale to carry him free. The reprieve didn't last long; he looked up to witness a boulder as wide as he was tall bearing down on him.

“Gwaugh!” He crossed his swords, sparing himself the full force of the blow, but the shock still sent him flying backward...right toward a cluster of rocky spikes jutting from the ground. Unless he did something fast, this would spell the end for him.

“Hnnnnggaaaaa!” Linus twisted in the air and hurled one of his swords. Once it hit its mark, it released all of the wind magic he'd stored in it as a powerful blast of air. Repeating the same with this second sword, the spikes were reduced to rubble. Almost immediately after landing, he was met with a barrage of flaming spears. Linus jumped back to evade the new threat, only to find blades of light waiting for him.

As if that weren't enough, another massive boulder appeared overhead, and countless black tendrils wrapped around his feet.

“Mastery over all six affinities?! I've never known anyone but Jean who could do that...!”

He just knew Jean would fly into a rage if he'd heard about this. Truth be told, Mute already outclassed him. Jean could only utilize four affinities.

Did she gain this power through the second core, or was there something else going on here? Linus didn't have the luxury of contemplating it. He was blocked on either side by buildings, while magic attacks loomed in from above, below, behind, and directly ahead.

But just as it all began to look hopeless, a relaxed grin came to his lips.

"You really underestimated just how stubborn I am, kid."

No, "relaxed" wasn't the right word. An unyielding strength would be a more apt description.

"Sonic Raaaaaaaaaaid!!"

He eyeballed the incoming flaming spears and took off in their direction.

The barrier of wind surrounding his body made quick work of the black tendrils at his feet as he pushed ahead at inhuman speeds. He wasn't so much running at this point but shooting through the air like a human arrow. His newfound speed let him slide between the spears.

Switchk!

Something slashed at his leg, but he was too focused on the task at hand to even register pain. Making it through to the other side, Linus landed atop a nearby building and bounded from rooftop to rooftop in an attempt to shake off the blades of light.

The sound of the boulder's impact rang in his ears, but he was long gone. Just as he figured, yet more magical attacks began to pour down on him.

"Hail?!" Linus drew his bow and fired a volley of arrows into the falling chunks of ice, leaving puffs of snow with each interception.

He finally felt his spirits begin to rise. "Haah...haah...so you thought...this was enough to stop me?!"

Mute appeared some twenty meters ahead.

Linus came to a stop and nocked an arrow. Mute simply raised her hands in

the air.

“Okay, I got it, that was a pretty impressive display of overpowered magical abilities all at once. But you must be running low on magic at this rate. Once that happens, this battle can only go in my favor. You know that, right?”

Continued use of overpowered magical abilities drained one’s reserves at alarming speeds. As long as he could continue to avoid her attacks until she ran out of magic, he would then be able to kill her at his leisure.

Linus had pushed himself on in anticipation of that moment.

“Ooooooooouuuu...”

Mute ignored his warning and began to cast her next spell. An enormous sphere of water formed in the air, followed a moment later by giant balls of stone and fire in the same orbit. Next came a whirlwind of air, a ball of light, and an immense darkness—all conjured with the sole purpose of killing him.

“...You’ve got to be kidding.” Linus was stunned into silence at the sight.

She brought the full force of her magical might to bear, flaunting every rule he’d ever known. Mute slowly, deliberately moved her hand through the air and pointed at Linus.

The six spheres shot off like comets, all in unison.

“Now listen here, I am *not* gonna die today!!” Linus drew back on his bowstring. Even in the face of such unstoppable might, he refused to stand down, no matter how fruitless it might have been.

Cyrill’s sword clashed with Maria’s blade of light in a gout of sparks. The young girl glared at Maria’s rigid mask as they locked swords.

“Do you really want to fight me?” asked Maria.

“You’re my enemy.”

“That’s true. But countless more will be lost if Mute isn’t stopped. As a hero...”

“That has nothing to do with this!” Cyrill shoved Maria back and brought

down her blade.

Maria clenched her hand tightly around her conjured sword and met the strike head-on. Even with the power of the Origin core supporting her, however, she was still a mediocre duelist. Cyrill knocked Maria's blade aside and landed a blow to Maria's chest with her second slash. Maria threw her hand over the wound and cast a healing spell as she stumbled back. She hopped out of the way of Cyrill's strikes, her white robes flapping in the wind as she stayed only a hair's breadth out of range.

Finally, she brought her hands together and summoned up a bright burst of light, blinding Cyrill. With the younger woman forced to fall back, it was Maria's turn to drive forward with her light sword.

Ultimately, though, Maria had no desire to kill her opponent. She tried her best to avoid inflicting any mortal wounds and was conscious of where she aimed, though none of her spells could pierce Cyrill's Epic-tier armor—the most powerful in the country. Given to her in preparation for slaying the Demon Lord, the armor could easily resist most attacks without its wearer suffering so much as a scratch.

"You say none of that matters, yet here you are using everything given to you to better play the hero."

"Enough wordplay. You're the one who tried to give me that core. You *knew* it'd turn me into a monster!"

The battleground expanded as Maria fell back on her magic to avoid getting pulled into another close-quarters exchange—a situation that would prove disadvantageous to her—as Cyrill closed in.

"Of course I did. I wanted to make you the same as me."

"What in the hell for?!"

Maria ducked Cyrill's enraged strike. She wore a bright, confident smirk on her face.

"To join Origin in killing every living being that inhabits this world," Maria said.

"B-but why would you..." Cyrill didn't know how to respond. Her swings went

wide and Maria's barrage started to push her back. "No...more importantly, how do you plan to pull that off?!"

"I suppose there's no harm in telling you. You'll learn soon enough anyway."

Maria spoke with the certainty of one who knew the future. The arrogance rubbed Cyrill the wrong way, but she decided to listen to what Maria had to say.

"Origin is sealed away under the Demon Lord's castle."

"A god...is sealed away?"

"Origin wants to bring peace by wiping the world clean of everyone but itself. With no one to fight with, only peace will remain. For this, the ancients decided it had to be contained."

"The ancients" was an oversimplification, but it got the point across. In reality, it had been the humans and demons created by the planet to resist Origin, but it would be a waste of time to try to explain all that right now.

"So you mean that I was called upon to be a hero to release that seal?"

"That's correct."

Cyrill felt disappointment wash over her at Maria's curt response. Why did she have to suffer so much? Why had she carried such a burden? She had never once asked for the immense pressure that came with the title of "hero" that had been thrust upon her.

All she ever wanted was to live out a tranquil life in her village—that was enough. And now she knew she was called upon not to save the world but to assist in its destruction.

"There's...there's no way...!"

"And yet some idiot decided to kick Flum out, dooming the party and bringing the grand design to a grinding halt." Maria let out a sigh of annoyance.

She was clearly referring to Jean.

"So you planned on giving me that core to force me to break the seal?"

"How insightful."

Maria had planned to see Origin's original plan through at the time. She was

confident that even a smaller party could topple the Demon Lord, as long as they had the cores. Unfortunately, things didn't go nearly as well as she'd planned. Cyrill refused to use the core, Maria discovered she'd been betrayed by Echidna, Linus came to find her, and now here she was with her plan in shambles.

"Why would you do that??" Cyrill demanded.

Maria was astonished by this reaction. "We'll all end up that way eventually."

Since she planned to see to the destruction of all life forms other than Origin, she no longer needed a reason for anything else. That was the extent of Maria's logic. Origin had shared nothing more with her, in spite of its plan to kill them all. Of course, Cyrill and the other people who'd been unwillingly dragged into this plan weren't as willing to accept this lack of answers.

What little reasoning Origin *did* provide would hardly convince anyone with real attachments to the world. Perhaps Maria even knew that, which is why she made no attempt to discuss the matter unless she was asked.

"My hometown was wiped out by a demon attack."

She still remembered the day the blue-skinned creatures fell upon her village and began to kill everyone in sight. Up until that day, the world was happy and the future was bright. From her family to her friends and even the other villagers, she was surrounded by kind people and had not a care in the world.

"My family was wiped out. The demons used their magic to choke, melt, or even crush them with falling rocks. I watched them all be reduced to nothing more than torn chunks of flesh and muscle."

No one could question why she hated demons.

"As if by a miracle, I was left alive. The church found me. They took care of me, realized my potential, and raised me as a nun."

Maria had been the only survivor by the time help had finally arrived. This just added to the mystique that surrounded her, making her even more valuable to the church.

"Okay, then, maybe I can understand why you hate demons, but there's no

reason to kill us humans!”

“That’s right. I’m eternally grateful to the church for saving my life and, through their teachings, have learned to love my fellow man from the bottom of my heart.” Her voice filled with gentle affection and then suddenly drained of all emotion. “Until two years ago.”

Cyrill felt a chill run up her spine at the sudden change.

“That was when I learned that the church and the demons were connected. In fact, the very church that had cared for me was the one who ordered the demons to assault my village.”

A dark flame smoldered in her heart as she spoke. The anger at being robbed of her family...the hatred for the church’s deception...the sadness of betrayal. A throng of grudges coursing through her came together to block out the light and engulf her in darkness. Bloody tears seeped through her mask, a physical manifestation of what was happening in her heart.

Cyrill could sense the sheer power that stoked her fury and backed up a few steps.

“The church taught the people to hate demons, wiped out all other religions, took every child with potential for themselves, and abducted humans for use as test subjects. They had too much to gain to even consider anything else.”

The destruction of Sara’s hometown was carried out for exactly the same reason.

“The people who saved me, the people who raised me, and the pope who was so kind to me...they all know. They killed my family and then tried to take their place.”

The moment Maria learned this truth, all her warm and happy memories of the church were suddenly rendered meaningless. It set her on the path to becoming the Maria who stood here now, covered in dark, oozing blood.

“Aah, it looks like I’m leaking again. How disgusting... I hate this, hate it all, I hate everything! I refuse to let such awful creatures walk the earth any longer!”

“Maria...”

“I won’t allow it. The demons, the humans, those who raised me...they all must be wiped out!”

The memories of kindness she’d once known, the life she lived as a nun, and even the future she’d once dreamed of—they were all tainted now. It was as if the ground crumbled away beneath her, leaving her to sink into a deep, dark, bottomless swamp. She was now well beyond saving.

“So that’s why you want to destroy everything?”

Maria chuckled. “Have you finally come around, Cyrill? You know, looking at it from the right angle, you and I really aren’t all that different.”

“You may be right...” Cyrill looked as if she’d swallowed something foul.

“But there’s one thing I want to make crystal clear.” Maria’s voice was completely devoid of emotion. “I hate everything about you.”

It sounded out of character for Maria, but it was clearly what she truly felt.

“Jean may have been the instigator, but it appalled me that you could turn your back on Flum and hurt her like that.”

As someone who had also been betrayed by those she loved dearly, it was hard to watch it happen to Flum. She thought about saving Flum so many times, but her position didn’t allow her to do so.

“I...I know.”

“I can tell you’re already aware and suffering for it. But that doesn’t change the fact that you did nothing. Here you are, running away from your problems and acting like a victim, all the while making no attempt to go and find Flum, wherever she’s been cast off to in her life as a slave!”

“I know that, all right?!” Cyrill let her anger take over and struck, knocking the blade from Maria’s hand. As soon as it dissipated, however, Maria quickly generated a new one.

Pointing out where someone had erred was the most direct way to make them aware of their own sins. But all it served to do was cause Cyrill yet another wave of grief. She was growing tired of it.

“So what? What do you want me to say?! That has nothing to do with this!!”

She let the burning rage take over.

“First off, you’re the one acting like a victim here! Look, I get it—you were betrayed, it hurt, and you’re angry! But you have no right to drag everyone else into your desire to murder all humans and demons. If you want revenge, then go put your own life on the line! Leave other people out of it.”

“Big talk from the person who hurt Flum and then protected a serial killer!”

“My own failures don’t disqualify me from calling out *your* wrongdoings! Besides, if you’re out to remove the seal and kill all humans, then why are you traveling with Linus, huh?! You can’t even commit to your own plan, and yet you talk so easily of murder!”

Maria was at a loss for words. “That’s...”

Cyrill took advantage of her hesitation and cleaved deep into her shoulder. Maria growled in pain and began to heal her wound, but Cyrill pressed the attack.

“If only I met him earlier, things would be different!”

“Like I said, you can’t even commit!”

Their roles reversed, it was now Maria who was forced to contend with a painful truth she’d rather not confront. There was simply no way that she could unseal Origin and also be together with Linus.

Cyrill’s words struck deep, and they filled Maria with resentment. Unable to deny anything Cyrill said, she was left with no other option than to return fire.

“After all the running away you’ve done, you’re hardly in a position to talk to me about making up my mind!!”

This emotional argument wasn’t about to convince either of them. It was clear to Cyrill that Maria was her enemy at the present moment, and she saw no end to this conversation outside of one of them falling in the course of combat.

BWOOMF!

An explosion shook the capital. Both women stopped, looking toward a bright flash of light.

“Linus?!” Maria ducked past Cyrill and charged in the light’s direction.

“Ngaah!” Cyrill took off after her, but Maria already had a lead. She could probably keep up if she wanted to, but what she saw ahead of her was not the demon hellbent on revenge but a woman in love. She couldn’t work up the will to stop her.

She stopped her pursuit and looked at the palm of her hand.

“Mute...”

Cyrill knew what Mute had done. Maybe she *should* use her abilities to join the fight. But could she really bring herself to fight by Maria’s side and hurt Mute?

She felt helpless. All she could do was stand there, alone, staring into the distance.

Chapter 12:

Atonement

GADHIO, ETERNA, AND FLUM stood back to back in the middle of the town square, anguish writ large on their faces. The survivors had all escaped. Now only the three of them remained to fight against the Sympathized mob surrounding them.

There were only a handful of fighters left. The three were at the limits of their endurance, but they'd slowly whittled down the enemy's numbers. Now that the survivors were gone and they could fight side by side, their odds of survival had increased exponentially.

KA-BOOOOOOOOM!

The ground shook.

"Do you think...that was Linus?" asked Flum.

"I certainly hope so," said Gadhio.

Assuming the other Children were just as powerful as Nekt, Linus had a shot at an easy win. Of that much he was certain.

"It seems like a fierce fight," said Flum.

"I thought that she was just able to connect people together and control them," said Eterna. "What was that explosion?"

Whatever it was, it was far more powerful than the foe they were occupied with. Unfortunately, they were in no position to go help him at the moment.

"Get ready. Incoming!"

The loose circle of enemies raised their hands for another round of light projectiles. There were so many that they practically filled the sky before they fell.

"Flum, let's go!"

"Right!"

Eterna put her hand over the Souleater. A layer of ice formed over the blade, thickening by the second, until Flum had to use her prana just to support the weapon with both hands.

Gadhio used his earth magic to encase his own sword in a layer of stone.

“Titan...”

“Jötunn...”

The two fighters hoisted their blades, worthy of their namesake giants, high into the air. They held the pose and waited for the balls of light to close in.

“Grand Shakeeeeeeeeer!!!” A low bass and high shriek sounded in unison.

Gwooooooooooooozzzzzaaad!

The immense amount of prana their strikes released created a tempest in the middle of the square. Flum and Gadhio’s attacks caused the balls of light to detonate in midair.

The storm drew every loose body, broken flagstone, and shard of ice and rock, throwing it all straight back at the enemy.

Gadhio allowed himself a brief sigh of relief. Flum felt like her arms might drop off from the massive burden she’d put on them.

“Guuuuugh...”

“You okay?”

“I...I’m still good to go!”

Even if her muscles were ripped up, she knew that they would heal with time. As long as she put her heart and mind to it, defeat was still a long ways off.

That attack they just performed, however, was about the most powerful thing she could unleash. If she were to ever run into anything that would withstand that, well...

The chaotic scene finally began to clear, and Flum searched frantically to see if their opponents were still standing.

A man burst from the dust cloud, his fist on a flight path to Flum’s skull. It was all so sudden that her only option was to throw her hands in front of her face.

“Ice Shield!” Eterna called out right before the blow struck home, and a barrier of ice formed in front of Flum to take the blow. But the man moved with such speed that his fist smashed clean through the shield. “Aww, now he’s making me feel bad.”

She wasn’t pleased to see her magic defeated so easily, but at least she’d fulfilled her goal of protecting Flum.

Gadhio shot a Prana Sting over Flum’s shoulder at the incoming enemy as he charged through the remains of the shield. The pinpoint attack closed in on the attacker’s heart, but he threw his fist up in time to soak the blow. Though it pulped his arm, he still had another to fall back on. Another opponent broke from the haze and cast a healing spell on his comrade to return his arm to normal.

“Not on my watch!” Before his arm could fully heal, Flum forced her still-recovering body to whip forward, thrusting her Souleater into the man’s heart.

She yanked the sword out and watched him drop to the floor. At almost exactly the same moment, she felt a blast of light hit her shoulder, the flame forming a blossom where it struck. It registered to her as little more than a mild burn. Looking back through the cloud, though, she saw several other attackers with spells lined up.

“Is there just no end to you guys? Seriously!” Flum clenched her teeth and laughed bitterly, when suddenly the sky filled with a blinding light, followed moments later by an ear-shattering thunderclap.

“That was the direction Mute went, wasn’t it?!”

This was nothing like the explosions they’d heard before. No matter how good Linus might have been, there was just no way he could stand up against something like that. Eterna and Gadhio exchanged glances and nodded.

She re-summoned Fenrir, ordering it to pick Flum up and throw her onto its back.

“Hwaugh?!”

The attackers let loose with their volley.

“Ice Shield!!”

Barriers flanked her, absorbing the blasts.

The ice was so smooth that it had a mirror finish, dispersing or even reflecting the spells back at their casters.

With their opponents distracted, Eterna sent Flum on her way. “Linus is in trouble. Go help him!”

“But...but...Eterna, Gadhio!”

Flum reached out to her friends as the wolf dashed off. They grew smaller and smaller by the second.

“Don’t worry about us. All you need to do is kill Mute.”

Killing Mute would stop the people unified by her Sympathy ability... At least, Eterna suspected as much. In any case, it looked unlikely that they could clear out the town square through any normal means.

Flum bit her lip and looked ahead. “Just hang on, guys. I’ll take care of this!”

Linus somehow managed to crawl out from under the rubble, only to be stunned by the sight awaiting him: a vast crater, a hundred meters across, in the very heart of the kingdom’s prized capital city. No sign remained of the houses and buildings that were there moments before. He felt disgusted at the thought of the hundreds of lives lost. The fact that he’d survived such an unimaginably powerful attack could only be described as pure luck. He could barely remember what happened, beyond the fact that he never ran away from anything so desperately before. Somehow, it had saved him. And even then, only barely.

Linus flexed his hand and tried to conjure a gust. “Well, my body seems okay. I have a few broken bones, but I should still be able to move and fight.”

The real problem was how he would actually fight a creature like that if it came down to it. He was drawing a blank there.

“Ooou...ooo...ooooou...”

He heard Mute crying out from somewhere in the distance. The cries were still some distance away, but he decided it was best to run in the opposite direction. Since his short swords proved to be of little use, that left his bow if he wanted to fight her. He would have to forego his normal fighting style and put everything he had into one shot.

Once he was far enough away that he could no longer hear her voice, Linus bounded up to the top of the tallest tower left in reach and nocked three arrows. He scanned the scene below for Mute and drew back on the bowstring, blood vessels straining from the effort.

Fwooo!

His magic enveloped his arrows in wind.

“C’mon...c’mon...!” Linus whispered a prayer under his breath.

A moment later, he saw a familiar shape appear from behind the ruins of a house.

“Now!” He let go of the bowstring, sending the three arrows on their way. They flew as one, toward Mute.

“Oou...” Midway along their path, Mute finally took notice of the attack. She threw her hand forward, conjuring a blade of light as if she intended to take the attack head on.

Linus heard the crackle of electricity from where he stood as his arrows collided with Mute’s magic. He raised his bow again and launched another two arrows in desperation.

“Fah!”

“Oooouuu...” Mute simply stared up at him, unmoving.

He watched the second set of arrows hit her blade with a loud crack, both attacks dissipating. He noticed something strange: he was actually gaining the upper hand.

“I’ve got more where that came from!” He fired a fifth and then a sixth. They shattered the light attacks she threw to intercept and landed squarely between her eyes.

He was turning the battle around.

“You got it!! Go!!” He yelled as loud as he could, willing his arrows to have an effect on her.

Mute grabbed the arrows that shook violently in her forehead. The sheer power imbued in them caused her arm to shake as well. One by one, they shattered in her hand, but it wasn't a complete loss. He heard a snapping sound and watched as several of the muscles and ligaments on her exposed body tore away. His attacks were finally hurting her.

“Oou...ooo...” Her voice, devoid of any emotion, sounded more confused than anything else.

The snapping continued as more of the muscles in her arm tore away. Finally, the last one gave out, and her hand fell from her body.

“Oooooouuu!!”

He hadn't made it through her skull, but he had finally done some real damage.

Blood gushed from Mute's wrist, and she thrashed around, letting out a shrill scream.

“Yeah! Didja see that? See what I can do??” Linus threw his fist in the air, momentarily overcome with joy.

“Oooooooooou...oooouuuuuu!!!”

To Linus's dismay, it would only be a matter of moments before Mute's wound healed. Her exposed muscles twisted and pumped as her body grew a brighter shade of red. He immediately figured out what was happening.

“You're...mad, huh?” The words barely made it out of his mouth when he felt the ground shake beneath him as Mute bounded into the air faster than even his arrows could match.

In the blink of an eye she was upon him, her fist coming down like lightning from the heavens. “Oooooooouuu!!”

“Gyah!!” Linus leaped off the tower just in time. Mute's fist struck the spot where he stood, pulverizing it. Terror gripped him as he fell.

She moved with such speed that she was already waiting at the exact spot where he was supposed to land. Before his feet could even touch the ground, she swung the back of her hand toward his right arm.

“Haaah!”

It all happened so fast that he didn’t even see her move. There was just no way he could dodge that.

Pwomp!

His arm was nearly obliterated by the force of the blow, while his body was hurled straight into the ground. Unable to move to soften the blow, Linus hit the ground at full speed, bouncing several times before he rolled to a stop.

Pain shot through every part of his body; he worried for a moment that he’d been torn limb from limb. His right leg had taken the full force of the fall and was now twisted at an odd angle.

“Aaaauughh...” The world grew hazy, and he started to mumble incoherent syllables.

I have to run... I need to run...run...

Despite Linus’s efforts to urge himself on, his body refused to move.

I’m... I guess...I’m gonna die?

Whether at the hands of Mute or just left as is, his fate was basically sealed. If someone showed up and saved him, Mute would kill them anyway.

I...I really tried to become as strong as I could. Who’d have thought there are creatures this powerful out there?

No matter how high you aimed, there was always someone better. Whether it came down to ability, your own barriers, or a lack of effort or time, it was an immutable truth. He had more than enough reason to give up. Linus found solace in this and stopped fighting for consciousness.

“Linus, I’m on my way...! Full Recover!” Light shot from Maria’s hand and enveloped his own.

Once his bleeding stopped, the magic focused on the time-consuming process

of regenerating his arm and leg.

As the pain let up, Linus felt the world slowly come back into focus. “M-Maria...?”

“Good, you’re still conscious.”

“N-no, g-get out of...”

“Huh?”

That’s when he saw it: Mute was walking up from behind Maria.
“Ooooooooouu!”

Maria turned to face the high-pitched shriek. She threw her hand in the air to let loose a spell, but she was too late. At this rate, both she and Linus were going to be killed.

Just as Linus was about to cast a wind spell, preparing to throw himself in the way to save Maria, he heard a familiar voice echoing in the distance.

“Jötunn Grand Disasteeeeeeeeer!!” The ice wolf under Flum transformed, wrapping itself around her sword before she slammed it into the ground, sending a flurry of ice shards and a prana-powered air blast at Mute. It wasn’t enough to harm her, but it did force her to pause.

“Ooooooooouuu!!” She let out a shrill cry in annoyance and turned to face her newest opponent.

“Well, I gave it a shot. Was that Mute? And I guess that’s you in the mask, Maria? Just what’s going on here??” Flum was still trying to process what was going on as she took in the city in ruins around them.

Looking closer at the bloody tears dripping out of Maria’s mask and the way it bobbed involuntarily, something about it all struck Flum as oddly familiar.

“I’ve no intention of fighting you.” Maria picked up on Flum’s gaze and answered her unspoken question.

“...Fair enough.”

Now was hardly the time anyway. As long as Maria wasn’t interested in fighting her, Flum saw no problem with joining forces against Mute.

“Ooooooooouuu!!!” Mute charged straight at Flum, her heavy footfalls leaving a trail of broken road behind her. Flum held the Souleater at the ready and crouched down as her opponent closed in.

“...Huh?” When she looked up, Mute was nowhere to be seen.

“Behind you!”

She dove forward the moment Maria’s words registered.

“Ngaaah!” She still caught a glancing blow to her spine, followed by a powerful burst of wind that threw Flum face-first into the ground.

“Sacred Lance Spiral!” Maria fired a lance of light at Mute. The power of Origin flowing within her spun it like a drill.

“Oouu...” It was the first time that Mute actually made an attempt to evade an attack.

Turning her attention toward Maria, Mute leaned in, eager to strip Maria of her reach advantage.

Flum, now recovered from the previous attack, let loose with her Cavalier Arts. “Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

She was already at the limits of her endurance. She opted to fire off a Prana Shaker, since that could be supplemented with magic. Perhaps, with a little luck, her reversal magic would do some damage.

Mute, seemingly realizing that there was no hope to avoid the attack, took the prana blade head-on; it bit deep into her chest.

“Ooo...ou?” Mute cocked her head to the side as blood cascaded from the wound.

“Did...did it work?” said Flum.

“Her body’s mostly taken over by Origin now.”

“I sense two cores in her body. I guess my reversal magic works even better than usual?”

“It looks like we’ve a chance at victory, Flum. We can do this!”

“All right!” Flum raised her sword high, while Maria prepared to provide

covering fire.

“Ooou...ooooouuuu!!!” Mute hesitated momentarily before anger took over, driving her to conjure an immense fireball above her head.

“Looks like my magic’s still having an effect. That can only mean one thing!”

“Don’t get in over your head, Flum!” Maria looked on with worry as Flum faced off against the incoming fireball.

Just as the burning sphere nearly reached them, she brought down her blade. “Bounce back! Reversion!” The crimson sphere contorted where the black blade slammed into it.

BRACK!

The fireball reversed direction and shot back toward Mute, this time with Flum’s energy added to it. Caught off guard at the unbelievable sight of her own attack coming back at her, Mute took the full force of the strike head-on.

BWOOOOOSH!

Through the massive explosion and dark clouds of smoke, Flum observed Mute’s body engulfed in flames.

“Looks like your reversal abilities have really grown.” Though she knew equipment played a part, Maria was still amazed to see how far Flum had come.

The battle, however, was far from over. This wasn’t enough to stop Mute’s rampage.

“Ooou... Oooooooooou!!!” Mute charged out of the flames straight at Flum.

“Wait, how did she come out unharmed?!”

Apparently only a direct reversal-powered attack would be able to harm her.

Flum raised her sword to block Mute’s fist with the broad side of her blade. Even Linus wasn’t able to take one of her strikes head-on, so Flum stood little chance at her strength level.

“Gyaaaaaa!!” She flew backward.

“Oomph...gauh...bweh...” The inertia made her bounce a few times once she hit the ground.

“Gah...hyah...haah...”

She only stopped when she collided with a wall. Her head hit the concrete with such force that it took a moment for her to get her wits about her, and even then, she still struggled to stand.

Mute wasn't about to let up, conjuring fresh spears of stone and ice.

“Not on my watch! Judgment!” Maria called up spears of her own, shooting Mute's creations out of the air.

“Oooou!!” The annoyance was evident in Mute's voice.

“Sacred Chain!”

A white-hot chain of light wrapped around Mute.

“Judgment!” Maria followed up with blades of light that encircled Mute like an iron maiden. Her paths of escape were closed.

“Sacred Lance Spiral!” Now that she was stuck in place, Maria was ready to deliver her finishing blow.

“Oooooooooouuuu!!!” Mute fought her restraints, screaming at the sky as darkness began to spread out from her body. It ate away at Maria's containment spell until it faded to nothing.

Free from her restraints, Mute bounded straight toward and aimed her fist right at Maria's face.

“Not gonna happen!” His arm restored, Linus shot an arrow at Maria's feet. It exploded in a powerful burst of wind as it hit the ground and threw Maria clear.

Mute's fist cut through the air with amazing speed, the shock wave alone so powerful that it blasted a crater into the ground. Had it made contact with Maria, she likely wouldn't have survived.

“Nng, L-Linus? Was that you?” Maria got to her feet just in time to see Mute coming in for another attack.

This time the tables were turned; Mute brandished a chain of light, ready to bind Maria.

“I guess it's my turn...aaaaaaaaaah!!” Flum was finally back on her feet. She

let off another reversal-powered Prana Sting, piercing Mute's barrier and finding its mark in her fist.

Though weakened, Mute followed through with her punch, cuffing Maria plain across the face.

"Aaaaaaugh!" Maria flew through the air until she slammed into a far-off wall.

"Maria!" Flum cried out.

Mute leaped, practically landing on top of Maria. There was nowhere for her to escape to. She punched the ground with such force that it opened up a gaping hole, sending up a whirlwind of rocks and debris.

Flum held her Souleater in front of her to guard her vitals from the shrapnel. Every part of her body left uncovered was so shredded by the barrage that she could no longer stand, collapsing to her knees.

Mute wasted no time in casting her next spell, summoning crystal spindles of each element: fire, water, wind, earth, light, and darkness. They were so sharp that Flum doubted even Cyrill's impressive armor could withstand the blow.

"Oou...ooo...oooou!"

Mute looked immensely pleased with herself. She waved her hand through the air, and the spindles launched at Flum; all she had time to do was look up to see them inbound. She had no more cards to play.

"Braaaaaaaaaaaaaave!"

It was the voice of her friend. Her magic was unique in that it could only be used by a hero—the hero—and only when their heart was full of courage.

The Brave-enhanced figure dove in front of Flum to protect her from the onslaught.

"Anngggguu!"

It took several tries, but Mute's magic managed to pierce Cyrill's armor. A translucent blue crystal made from water affinity rammed into her stomach.

Even as blood poured from her wounds, Cyrill was still smiling.

"Looks...like I...made it."

She'd thrown herself into the fray the moment she saw what was happening. The sad sight of her friends trying to kill each other was too much to bear.

Despite the pain, she couldn't stop the smile that came naturally to her face. It was the happy smile of one who'd finally achieved that which she should have done long ago.

"C-Cyrill?" Flum stared ahead in shock as her friend continued to cough up blood.

"Oou... Ooooouuu... Ooooooooooooooooouuuu!!"

There was a sense of sadness and confusion in Mute's wail this time.



Chapter 13:

Salvation

MARIA TOOK OFF in search of Linus, leaving Cyrill all alone. Abandoned, she felt herself begin to spiral into a pit of eternal darkness.

Off in the distance, she could hear the sounds of combat, intermingled with cries of pain and shouts of anguish. Whatever was happening, people were dying.

Cyrill was scared.

She was scared of the thought of people dying. Of getting injured herself.

The fear that clenched her heart was a perfectly normal reaction, the kind anyone in her position might have. Cyrill wasn't special. Slaying the Demon Lord, saving the world... She wasn't here because she was driven by a desire to fulfill her sworn duty. She was just a normal girl whom humanity had chosen to bear the weight of their greatest dreams and their fiercest weapons.

"What can I do, really?"

It was easy to tell herself that she could do nothing. It was a convenient excuse, and so, that was what she'd chosen to do. She could do nothing and thus *would* do nothing. It was just the way the world worked.

And so it continued. She was scared, after all. She'd loved her simple life of raising crops in her little village. Everything outside that tranquil life was terrifying.

"I..."

She couldn't do more than any normal person could. Even protecting those around her was a challenge, to say nothing of saving the world.

But if she just stood there doing nothing, she wouldn't even be able to protect those she loved.

"I need...to do something about Mute."

Linus and Maria were right to try to stop her. Even she knew that. But she really didn't want Mute to die.

There had to be another way, right? To make up for it? But maybe there wasn't.

No...no, there definitely wasn't.

Be that as it may...she couldn't just let this feeling of uncertainty take hold.

Cyrill moved toward the sounds of the fighting.

As she drew closer, the tremor beneath her feet grew stronger, and the wreckage of the city harder to imagine as anything but rubble. She felt a pit forming in her stomach. Cyrill's hastened, a tense expression forming on her face.

And then she saw it.

There, up ahead, was a creature stripped of all its flesh, facing off against Flum. Her friend stood in the midst of a massive pile of rubble, wielding a large sword as long as she was tall.

"Flum..."

What was she doing? This girl who had been sold off as a slave and was incapable of fighting... Why? How?

Cyrill stood there gobsmacked until she finally realized who Flum's opponent was. A chill ran up her spine. Linus and Maria were collapsed on the ground. The city around her was in ruins. And Mute was nowhere to be seen.

"That...that creature..."

Its scarlet fist slammed into the ground, sending a wave of debris straight into Flum. She fell to her knees.

The creature—no, Mute—conjured a host of flying daggers to end Flum then and there.

"I... I...!"

Cyrill took off in a mad dash. There was no time to think about the bigger issues. About what happened, about journeys, about right or wrong—none of

it. The journey to slay the Demon Lord was all a farce. The church was corrupt. Flum was alive. She had no idea what was true anymore, no idea what should give her hope and what should make her despair.

Maybe trying to think things through had been a mistake all along. Only action could lead to answers.

Cyrill was nothing special. What she needed to do—what she *wanted* to do—was not to save the world. No, she just wanted to protect her friends. The people who meant the most to her.

That was it. The answer was simple.

I'm not gonna make it. Unless...!

Being too late or too weak to stop them...it seemed so wrong. She couldn't bear to watch her friends kill each other. Her motivations were all so selfish. Hardly those of a hero. But a hero's power didn't come from a sense of duty. It came from the will to see your desires fulfilled through...bravery.

"Braaaaaaaaaaaaaave!" A shock wave blasted out from her body, scattering the wreckage around her.

Until now, she'd lacked the confidence and courage she needed to use the ability to its fullest extent. But now, she was in full control.

She was acting not for the world, but to save her friends.

Cyrill Sweechka

Affinity: Hero

Strength: 15,760

Magic: 16,512

Endurance: 16,924

Agility: 18,263

Perception: 13,092

Brave boosted Cyrill's stats in accordance with her mental state. At full power, she could see her stats triple.

This was truly the work of a hero.

Cyrill watched Mute's attacks close in on Flum. It was like everything moved in slow motion. She threw herself between the attack and Flum, protecting her friend with her own body.

DOOSH!

She felt a dull thud as the first strike slammed into her back, sending a shock wave through her organs. A moment later, the tip of another crystal ran her through. It was a mortal wound, and she knew it. The pain shooting through her body was nearly unbearable. She felt like she was being burned alive. Blood filled her throat with every breath, sending her into a coughing fit.

Yet...she managed to save Flum. She felt a sense of relief wash over her.

"Looks...like I...made it."

"C-Cyrill?" Flum's voice trembled.

Was she sad that Cyrill was hurt? Did she still consider Cyrill her friend?

"Oou... Ooooouuu... Ooooooooooooooooouuu!!" There was a sense of sadness and confusion in Mute's wail.

The moment Cyrill heard her voice, she knew Mute was still somewhere in there. And yet, she knew she had to end Mute's life.

Her body was impaled in multiple places. She felt like she might collapse at any moment, only her will keeping her upright. She planted her feet firmly and summoned her sword.

There's no sense in worrying about whether I can pull this off.

If she considered it her way of repaying Mute for her kindness, it would make everything simple. There'd be no need to drag the battle out.

All I can do is give it my best. No matter what happens, it's better than living knowing I did nothing.

Her blade caught the light of the sinking sun, the flawless metal scattering its pitiless rays.

I'm sure Mute wants this, too. Now it's up to me!

Cyrill spun, her blade following the path of her body.

"Blaaaaaaaaaaaaaade!!" She screamed for all she was worth, spitting blood.

An arc of light shot through the air.

"Oou..."

A moment later, a broad, deep wound blossomed across Mute's body. Even the power of the Origin cores and the nearly impenetrable muscles they had bestowed upon her were no match for the full power of the hero.

Zashuuu!

The monster swayed to one side, blood pumping from the gash.

There was so much that Flum wanted to ask Cyrill and tell her about, but she would have to put that off a while. Right now, all that mattered was destroying the black crystals shining through Mute's open wound.

"Ooooooooouuu!"

Flum rushed forward, spurred on by the desire to finally stop Mute's rampage. She swung her massive blade toward the core as the spiral began to close the wound around it.

"Oooooooooooooooooo..."

Mute deflected Flum's blow with her arm, but Flum did manage to lop Mute's arm off as a result. Flum pressed the attack and thrust her blade once more toward the core.

Mute fended off a direct hit, using what remained of her left hand to strike at Flum's face. Flum momentarily dismissed her sword, ducking out of its path. The wave of pressure rolling off Mute's attack sent Flum stumbling backward.

Mute moved in closer, her arm still swinging.

It would have been simple to dodge, but Flum held fast. Just as Mute had moments before, Flum sacrificed her own arm to soak the blow. She heard a *snap* as muscles tore and bones broke, leaving her arm bent in an unnatural position.

"Ffnngg...!" She gritted her teeth. If it was just pain that she had to deal with, then there was nothing to worry about.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaah!!" Flum clenched her right hand around the Souleater and rammed the tip of the blade straight into the closing wound. She heard a *clink* as the sword made contact with a core.

Now she just needed to use her magic.

"Reversion!" Her magic coursed through her blade and, a moment later, one of the cores shattered.

She still had to take care of the other one before Mute would die, though.

"Ooooooooooooooooouuuuuuu! Oooooouu!" Mute threw her remaining arm to her face as if in terrible pain and cried out so loudly that her whole body shook.

The muscles running all over her body twitched and writhed as if they had a will of their own. It made sense that losing the equivalent of half a heart would be a painful experience.

Flum struck again. This one would be the death blow.

"Wait!!" Cyrill worked up what little strength she had to call out to her friend.

"Please be still, Cyrill!" Maria ran to her side, preparing to mend the sucking wound in her torso. It slowly began to close, but it would take some time until her ruptured organs were fully healed.

However, Cyrill still forced herself to her feet and stumbled toward Flum, even as blood poured freely from her mouth.

“Cyrill...why...?”

“We were together, she and I. That was all it was, but... Mute... I... We had no place to go, and...ngggf...”

She clutched her chest in pain. Flum hurried to her side to hold her up.

“She killed...so many people...and now she’s turned into this. I guess...maybe she deserves it...but...I can’t help but think...there’s another way.”

“Oh, Cyrill...it’s better if she doesn’t have to live like this.”

“I know. I guess I’m...just selfish. But it’s so sad...to lose her this way. I wanted to...”

Suddenly, Mute’s wailing stopped.

“Mute?” The concern was apparent in Cyrill’s voice.

“Cy...rill...” Mute’s voice was quiet, but the word was clear. Her hand came away, revealing a face half-turned to its human state.

“I’m...I’m so happy...that you’re back.” A gentle smile came to Cyrill’s lips as tears streaked her cheeks.

Flum was racked by indecision. Unable to bring herself to interrupt the moment, she chose to continue supporting her friend’s weight.

Mute dropped to her knees and fell to her side.

“Mute...you knew that I could have stopped you, didn’t you?” Cyrill gazed down at her.

Flum had failed to stop Mute. Were the positions reversed, she would’ve done so without a second thought.

“No...that’s not quite right. You wanted to be killed, didn’t you? But I...”

“...a...ay...”

“Huh?”

“Get...a...way...” Light enveloped her hand. The heat within was so hot that

her flesh began to smolder.

What remained of Origin's will that ran freely through Mute's body was focused on Cyril.

"Cyril!!!"

It was Flum's turn to protect her friend, though she knew full well that taking the brunt of the blast would likely spell the end for her. And yet, she didn't hesitate to step in the way just as she felt an immense blast of light against her back.

"Connection!"

Mute's arm slammed into the ground, throwing off her aim and sending the blast skyward, where it faded into the distance.

"Haah...thanks, Nekt," said Flum, grateful for the assist at such a climactic moment.

"Nah, actually I'm too late, really. It's a shame that I could only get here when the battle is nearly finished considering what's happened to Mute. This an absolute tragedy, ya know."

She ran a hand dejectedly through her blue hair.

Flum couldn't help but notice the rips in Nekt's clothes. Had *she* taken the impact of the blast instead? Now that she looked closer at Nekt's face...

"N...e...kt..."

Mute tried to fix her hazy gaze on Nekt. She looked happy to have her family with her.

"S-sorry..."

"I can't believe you did that. What were you thinking, using a power that you can't control?"

Mute's voice was growing stronger now, with Origin's power spent for a time.

"Cyril...I'm...I'm sorry."

"It's all Origin's fault. There's nothing for you to apologize for."

“I’m...the one...that chose to...do it. Please...quickly...just...kill me...”

“Is that why you decided to spend time with me?”

Mute nodded.

She was a bundle of contradictions. She was proud to wield power that no human could ever hope to achieve, even as it isolated her from the world. Even if she felt no resentment for her fate, she had to have wondered where life might have taken her under different circumstances.

In the end, she’d chosen to commit the murders she had, not only to prove the value of her existence, but also because she hoped that someone would stop her.

“No way. I want to help my friends, not kill them.”

“I’m...your friend?”

“Yes, Mute. I consider you a friend. And that’s why I’ll stop you, but I won’t kill you.”

No matter how horrible her actions may have been, Cyrill wouldn’t betray her beliefs.

Mute was unsure how to respond. Should she be happy? Sad? She’d hoped Cyrill would ultimately come to the conclusion that she needed to die, and yet, deep inside, she was happy to hear that Cyrill considered her a friend in spite of everything she did.

“You get it, don’t you? The world is full of nice people. Far more than you’d ever believe.” Nekt smirked and crouched down next to Mute just in time to see a smile form on her sister’s face. “There is a place out there for you, Mute. And you can get the help you need.”

“Nekt...no...it’s fine. I...don’t need...that. This is...the end...for me.” Mute still seemed uncertain, though Cyrill felt renewed hope upon hearing Nekt’s words.

“There’s a way to help Mute?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Is that true, Nekt??” said Flum. “Even after what the cores did to her body?”

“Listen, I already know all that, Flum. But there’s still a way for her to get help.”

Mute slowly shook her head.

“No...I...should die.”

“Well, I won’t let you.”

“You must. I...don’t deserve...to live...after what...I did.”

Her plan had been an elaborate suicide from the start. She’d made sure there could be no undoing the damage she caused. That was why Flum was so willing to end her life...and why Nekt wanted to spare it.

“Now...just kill me...while I’m still...myself.” She closed her eyes and opened what was left of her arms. “I hope...you’ll be witnesses...to my death. Flum Apricot, I leave it...to you. It would be...”

“There’s nothing good about any of that!” Nekt shouted out in anger before she could get the next words out.

She refused to allow it.

As a second-generation child herself, she knew that this was not true happiness.

“Ink lives a charmed life with Flum and her friends. She’s happy. She lives just like any normal girl! We...we deserve to be happy like that, too!”

Everyone deserved a world that made room for their happiness, even if one misstep or poor turn of fortune could turn that right into little more than a fleeting dream.

Cyrill spoke next to try to change Mute’s mind.

“I want you to live, Mute,” she said. “I know that you’re not committed to this death. You’ve just driven yourself into such a deep hole that you can’t see another way out. As long as you stay alive, I know that you’ll discover what it is that you really want from life.”

Nekt picked up where Cyrill left off.

“How stupid do you have to be to think that making people watch you die will

make you happy? No one's going to be satisfied with that! Maybe you'll be okay with it, but what's that gonna do to everyone else, huh??"

"I..."

Nekt knelt down and leaned close to Mute. She had tears in her eyes.

"Well, I don't want that to happen. I refuse to believe that you'll be happy in death. You can still be saved. Isn't it even worse if you don't let that happen? You... I... We both have a future. So stop thinking of this as just your own problem!"

Mute had to understand that there were people who would mourn her loss. And yet, she, Luke, and Fwiss had all decided to commit these atrocities while preparing for their own deaths—or would have, if they hadn't *told everyone about it ahead of time*.

Mute hesitated.

She knew that she shouldn't, but her heart couldn't help but be moved by this display of emotion.

"It's too early to give up, Mute. There are a lot of people worried about you."

"Please, just take my hand. I've found a way for us to live out our own lives just the way we want to. But it's all pointless if I'm the only one who survives!"

Nekt's tone turned weak, desperate—*vulnerable*, in a way it hardly ever did before; a rare glimpse into her heart. At a loss, Mute looked to Flum for help.

Nekt had to understand that even if they did survive, there was a long, hard road ahead. The people who wanted to save her and the people who wanted to end her life were separated by one crucial factor: the nature of their relationship with her. Family—or a complete stranger. Sure, Flum had made a promise with Nekt, but she had a job to do here. In fact, she had barely spoken to Mute.

She could no longer hear the sounds of battle rising from the central square, suggesting that Mute's Sympathy powers had worn off. As long as the battle was over, Flum's mission was complete. Whether Mute lived or died didn't change that.

In that case, she would leave the decision to Nekt and Cyrill.

Flum let her sword fade away and shook her head. With that simple act, the option for killing Mute was off the table.

“Still...I...”

Mute still couldn't give up on dying.

Nekt sighed in annoyance, grabbed her hand, and tugged. “Nng...then I'm just gonna have to drag you with me. I've already decided!

She clasped Mute's hand tightly in her own, glanced back at Flum and Cyrill, and then used her Connection ability to teleport away.

“Huh, they left. But Mute's still...huh?”

Now that the moment of crisis had passed, Cyrill wavered from side to side, collapsing into Flum's arms.

“Thanks, Flum. Sorry, I just got a little hazy there...”

“You lost a lot of blood.”

“I guess you're right. Anyway, you...you're really going to help her, right?”

The dark expression on Flum's face remained, even as Cyrill pressed the issue. Maria and Linus chose to stay out of it, watching their exchange in silence. They were all too aware of the conflicts of interest involved.

“Origin corrupts every part of a person's being and destroys whatever dignity they had.”

Flum had seen just how badly Origin cores could twist people more times than she could count at this point. The ogres, the church's research staff, Ink, Dein's men, even Dein himself... The list of victims went on and on.

“You can't promise salvation to someone who's already damned.”

Such was the fate that met Dafydd, along with all the dead he brought back to life. Making matters worse, the Children were still being pursued by Origin and those who longed to use their powers.

“Sorry, Cyrill, but I can't commit either way. I don't know what Nekt plans on doing, but there's only one way I know of to save a person who's been so

thoroughly infected by Origin...”

She didn’t want to consider it, but there was no other option available.

“So you’re saying there’s a chance. Even if it requires nothing short of a miracle, I... Flum...” Cyrill’s gaze grew more and more distant as Flum spoke. “Please...don’t...be angry...”

That was all she really hoped for. Her eyes slipped closed, and she fell still in Flum’s arms.

“C-Cyrill?”

No response. She seemed to have passed out from exhaustion.

Maria spoke up and explained.

“Healing magic alone can’t restore all the strength she lost after taking a blow like that.”

Linus hobbled his way over on unsteady legs. Though his arm and leg were mostly recovered, he was still in much the same boat as Cyrill.

“Huh?”

Flum was also quickly reaching the limits of her endurance. She’d drained her reserves dry in the battle with Mute: lost limbs multiple times, suffered injuries to her organs, and used many powerful Cavalier Arts techniques during the battle in the town square. On top of all that, she’d even used up all her magic. She was simply exhausted at this point.

“...Ha...” Flum felt the last dregs of strength leave her body in an instant, and she toppled to the ground with Cyrill. Maria and Linus ran to her side, calling her name, but there was no response.

The people under her control in the town square stopped moving the moment that Mute lost.

Gadhio walked casually to Eterna’s side. While he looked like he could keep going, she felt as if she only barely managed to hang on this long. Gadhio shedded his gauntlet, stretched out his hand, and exchanged a quick high five

with her. The crisp sound it made echoing through the silent square was oddly satisfying.

The battle was over for now. The war was still far from over, but they had bought themselves a moment of rest.

Chapter 14:

Separation

NEKT LET OUT a loud, despondent sigh as she walked out of the operating room.

“Looks like you failed at convincing her.” Satuhkie had been waiting for her in front of the room.

“I mean, I did have to drag her here.”

“This is exactly as you said, you know. You said you would let them decide whether or not to undergo the operation.”

“I know that! But I’m not going to let her die like this.”

Mute’s body was quickly deteriorating, the consequence of having used two Origin cores at once. The reversion core had returned her to her usual appearance, at least, but they would need to remove the core and transplant it with a human heart if she wanted to live.

“I’m going to give it another try.”

Satuhkie called out to Nekt before he could return to the operating room. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to try my hand at talking to her.”

Nekt snorted. “Heh. How do you plan on changing her mind? She’s never even met you before.”

“Perhaps the strength of your connection is what keeps her from seeing reason.”

“That’s not...impossible, I suppose.”

Mute was clearly still angry with Nekt for dragging her away before she could die properly. Nekt was open to the idea of letting someone else try. Whether Satuhkie was the right person for the job was another question entirely, but Ottilie was out on a job at the moment, and there was no one else to ask.

“All right, I’ll give you one shot. That doesn’t mean I trust you, all right?”

“Understood. Wait here...and try to not get your hopes up.”

Nekt plopped herself down in a chair and watched the old man disappear through the doorway. She continued to sit there and stare at the door impatiently until he finally walked back out five minutes later. There was something about the grin plastered to his face that she found even more annoying than usual.

“Well, she’s...”

He paused for a little longer than necessary and beamed.

“...convinced.”

“Wha...”

Nekt was dumbfounded. She’d spent all that time talking to Mute to no avail, and yet he could achieve results in a matter of minutes. Her words from earlier echoed in her mind: “...Doesn’t mean I trust you.”

She immediately rushed past Satuhkie and hurried to Mute’s side.

Mute looked tranquil as she turned to greet Nekt.

“Why did you change your mind all of a sudden? What’d Satuhkie say to you??”

“I...made the decision...by myself. I decided...I want to live.”

There was something different about the look in her eyes. It looked...almost like hope.

Nekt hurried out of the room, leaving Mute to undergo the surgery she so badly needed. The moment she was through the door, however, she immediately walked up to Satuhkie and grabbed him by the collar.

“Just what in the hell did you say to her?”

“I just explained to her about the value of life, is all.”

“Ngraw!

“I don’t get why you’re so frustrated. Isn’t this exactly what you wanted? If the surgery is successful, she’ll be a normal girl again.”

“That’s true, but...”

He was right. Nekt should be grateful, but deep down, she still didn’t trust him.

“I pray that we can give those of you who were robbed of your humanity a second chance at a happy life.” Satuhkie readjusted his collar and made his way down the hall.

Moments later, the red lamp above the door to the operating theater flicked on. A great sense of unease washed over Nekt as she sat down, stared up at the light, and began to pray.

“Nnnn...” Flum’s eyelids twitched several times before she finally opened her eyes.

“Master!”

More than anything in the world, hers was the face that Flum wanted to see at that moment. Or at any moment, really.

“Milkit? Where are...?”

“The guild’s first aid room. Linus brought you and Cyrill here.”

“Linus? Oh...that’s right... I...” The memories all came flooding back. She’d finished her battle with Mute and then blacked out. “Are Eterna and Gadhio okay?”

“They are, but they’re talking to some other people right now.”

Flum’s whole body relaxed.

“Haah, I’m so, so very glad that you woke up, Master.” Milkit hugged Flum’s waist tightly, burying her face in her side.

The warmth of her skin finally convinced Flum that she was still alive.

“I was just so worried. I didn’t know what I’d do if you never woke up again!”

“Sorry, Milkit. I always seem to make you worry.” Flum placed her hand on Milkit’s cheek and gently toyed with her soft, delicate hair.

A lamp's weak glow illuminated the room. From the view outside, the capital was submerged in full darkness; Flum reasoned that she was knocked out for quite a while. Milkit must have spent that whole time at her side, holding her hand tightly and waiting for her to wake.

"Thanks, Milkit."

"There's no need to thank me. I hardly did anything...really..."

"Still...thank you."

Milkit's heart always clenched, her body heating up fit to catch fire, when she thought about how kindly Flum treated her. Her words alone were almost more than her heart could handle, but then there were her warm embraces, her delightful scent... It just went on and on. Her thoughts were so entirely consumed by Flum that she felt as if she were in a constant state of euphoria. All she wanted was for them to be together, never apart, and that desire grew stronger with each passing day.

"Oh, right," said Flum. "How's Cyril?"

The warm sensation suffusing Milkit's body vanished. She knew this was no time to bask in her master's kindness. There were still details in need of discussing.

"She's sleeping on the other side of that curtain. Apparently, she lost consciousness due to a mix of the exhaustion from the battle and her body's response to the...Brave, was it? Some sort of magic. Her injuries have all healed, though, so she should wake up soon."

"That's good to hear."

Flum was relieved to hear that, even if none of them had made it out entirely unscathed. Waking up and talking to Milkit made all her concerns melt away. Things were okay. In time, everything would all be back to normal.

But the fighting wasn't done yet. Luke, Fwiss, and Mother were still out there. Flum felt like she was made of lead, but she also knew that she couldn't just stay in bed forever. She started to slide out of bed, and Milkit took her hand to help support her. Gadhio, Eterna, Ink, Y'lla, and Slowe were waiting in the guild with the usual collection of adventurers.

Y'lla was the first to speak. "I see someone finally woke up. I was starting to worry you were gonna die on me."

Miraculously, she wasn't being facetious. Judging by the look on her face, she *had* been worried about Flum.

"I'm surprised to hear that." The words were already out of Flum's mouth before she had a chance to stop herself.

"Huh? Here I am, showing a little compassion for once, and that's how you treat me? How rude!" True to form, Y'lla flew off the handle at once. Flum found a sort of comfort in it but didn't dare say so.

"Sorry, sorry... It's just that I'm not used to you looking so concerned. Thanks, Y'lla."

The other woman merely crossed her arms and turned away with a *harumph*. Once that exchange died down, Eterna and Gadhio spoke up.

"Morning, Flum."

"I didn't think you'd be awake so soon."

"Really? I feel like I slept for ages."

"With all the energy you used up, you must've been absolutely exhausted."

"You can't compare yourself to this crusty old pack mule, ya know."

Gadhio put his hand to his chin at Eterna's verbal jab. "Mule...?"

Flum looked Gadhio over, realizing just how energized and refreshed he looked. She felt a small pang of disappointment in herself, reminded anew of how far she had to go before she was strong enough to fight Origin.

She turned her attention to Ink. "Listen, Ink, about Mute..."

"All I can say is that I hope she survives. Maybe it's not appropriate, but I have to say it."

"No, she's family. I understand how you feel." The choice she'd made to leave Mute in Nekt's hands was starting to look like it had been the right one. "Hey, where's Linus?"

Flum looked around the guild, but he was nowhere to be seen...until she looked over to the reception area and found him sitting sullenly in the corner.

“Maria left a note and disappeared,” Eterna explained.

“Oh, wow. I guess that explains why he looks like that.”

Maria disappeared shortly after she brought Linus and Flum back to the guild and ensured they were properly healed. She hadn’t said a single word to Linus; she left only a note behind, thanking him for helping and believing in her. She’d thought a lot about what Flum said and realized that she, too, was in a position she could never return from.

Linus lifted his head and looked at Flum. “Honestly, I kind of knew that it would come to this.”

They bonded for sure, but she never really opened her heart up entirely to him. There was a wall there that kept them apart.

“She never really talked about the things that really mattered. Maybe I should have just put her first and taken her out of the capital. I’m a worthless coward.”

Linus was fully prepared to accept all the blame on himself—but less prepared to accept the sense of comfort she had given him.

“That’s all quite interesting,” said Eterna, “but none of us really understand why Maria left like that.”

“Linus...have you still not told Eterna and Gadhio what happened?”

“Not yet. Tell them if you want. I won’t stop you.”

“All right, then.”

It was probably best coming from Flum anyway, and Linus realized as much. Even so, Flum found her heart growing tight, and she struggled to find the right words. No matter how she tried to cobble together an explanation, the tangents and supporting details weighed it down intolerably.

“Maria’s got an Origin core embedded in her.”

“Maria...?”

“She was wearing a mask to cover up how her face transformed.”

She'd never actually seen what was under the mask, but she was fairly certain, based on all the creatures she'd fought. Gadhio didn't look terribly surprised; he nodded thoughtfully. It looked like Flum answered some of his lingering questions.

"I guess it only makes sense, if you think about it," he said. "She was a trusted member of the clergy. Perhaps she was sent along on the great journey to keep an eye on Cyrill and Flum."

"So did that battle with Mute have something to do with the church, too?" said Eterna.

"I can't really say for sure, to be honest," said Linus. "But considering that I found Maria in a dungeon under the city, I think it's safe to say she's burned bridges with the church. She *did* give cores to Cyrill and Jean in an attempt to bring them into the fold. Once Cyrill saw what happened to Maria, she ran away before she had a chance to use the core."

"And that's why Cyrill turned up wandering the capital," said Eterna.

Milkit listened patiently to the conversation until it led her to recall something. "So that means that Maria never expected that to happen to her face?"

"Seems that way," said Linus.

"She must have been confident that the cores she was handing out were properly suppressed if she was willing to use one on herself," said Eterna. "Did someone betray her?"

"Our journey was at a standstill; the church no longer had any use for Maria," said Gadhio. "They probably meant to cut her loose like they did with the Children."

Linus looked worried. He clenched his fists, praying for Maria's safety. "Maria was still in the wrong—there's no doubt about that. I didn't pick up on it, and that's on me. But...I still want to help her in any way I can."

Everyone in the room stayed quiet. They all knew how terrifying the cores could be and that nearly all those who used them were beyond help. On the other hand, they also understood how Linus felt. Everyone in the party knew

that he was head over heels for Maria.

Gadhio finally broke the oppressive silence. "Right now, our enemy is the Children, not Maria. The day may very well come where we must fight, as long as she's still affiliated with the church, but you still have some time."

"...Thanks." Linus's voice nearly cracked. He bit down on his lip and groaned.

They had no choice but to leave the Maria issue to him. Flum knew that she and the others had too many problems of their own to deal with.

"Well, good evening, folks! I, Welcy Mancathy, have safely returned!"

Welcy threw the door open and waltzed into the guild with much the same flair as she had earlier that morning. The cheerful lilt to her voice blew away the dark mood that hung over the room.

"Let me tell you, it was quite a trip getting here. Everyone's in such a hurry to get out of the capital."

"Welcy!"

"Oh, Flum! You're awake?"

"Well, I can't just keep on sleeping forever. Anyway, what did you mean about everyone leaving?"

"Right after that huge battle started, it was a mad dash to get out of the capital and pandemonium at the gates. Things got even worse when the church knights started to close everything off."

"Are they *trying* to kill everyone in the capital?"

"As it turns out, that was about the limit for some folks on the force; they mutinied. Wiped out the church knights who were keeping the gates shut. It took all of the lieutenant commanders and Commander Huyghe himself to put the rebellion down, but the gates stayed open."

It had to have been quite a commotion to get all the top brass involved.

"All that happened while I was asleep?"

"I have my own network of informants, of course. I'm sure most of this hasn't reached the masses."

“Who turned on the church knights?”

Welcy shot Milkit an award-winning smile and chuckled. She grabbed a nearby sheet of paper and used her burn projection ability to burn two faces into it.

“Is that...”

“Henriette Bachsenheim and Herrmann Zavenyu.”

“They were from the royal army!” It was rare for Gadhio to sound so excited.

“I heard earlier that they were tortured and left disabled by the church knights. I guess that was all just a ruse. They waited for just the right moment to fulfill their duties as members of the royal army.

They’d probably had no option but to surrender the gates when faced with the church knights’ onslaught.

“Otilie looked so happy she could cry.”

“Knowing her,” said Gadhio, “crying seems like an understatement.”

“True.”

Flum recalled the image of Otilie sniffing Henriette’s unwashed sheets. It wasn’t hard to imagine her so overcome with emotion that she grew damp all over and nearly passed out at the news.

“It still worries me,” she said, “thinking about what they’ve got coming to them now.”

“They must have known what to expect,” said Gadhio.

“More people got to escape thanks to them,” said Eterna. “That’s great.”

Ink nodded approvingly from where she sat, her legs swinging back and forth.

“Oh, right. I still managed to gather all the information I needed, even amid the chaos.”

“You found out who Slowe’s father is?”

“Well, I put together a couple of reasons the church would be after him and followed up by checking through my company’s archives. I got lucky, happened

across an article from the 'do not print on pain of death' pile." Welcy held up an old newspaper and waved it back and forth through the air.

"So who is my father?" said Slowe.

Welcy answered plainly. "Vacias Carole."

"Um, but th-that's..."

Even Flum was taken aback at the name of such a ubiquitous public figure.

"Th-th-the previous king?!" Slowe's hands shook as he raised his voice, despite himself.

Neither Gadhio nor Linus looked terribly surprised. They spent long enough working the capital's seedy side to soak up the folklore.

"The ex-king lived a rather unassuming life after passing the throne on to his son," said Gadhio, "though it was an open secret that he loved a good time. They say he made a habit of sneaking away to bars to flirt with young women."

"I heard about that. He took more than a few to bed, from what I heard."

Flum blushed a bit at Linus's comment.

"Can he really do that?" she said. "I mean, as a member of the royal family?"

"I figure he was careful to make sure he didn't have any kids," said Linus, "but...hey, accidents happen."

"So you're saying I'm an accident?"

"A pretty big one, too."

Slowe slumped visibly as Welcy mercilessly doubled down on the pregnancy being a mistake.

"I asked a veteran reporter, and he said that the evidence was solid," she said.

"Why wasn't it published?"

"I mean, there was some heavy pushback."

"So does that mean I'm...a member of the royal family?"

"Well, as an illegitimate child who was never officially recognized, it'd be hard to prove. But I'm sure your mother got some money out of it at least, yeah?"

“Money? Oh, my... Could that old man have been...?”

“Old man?”

Slowe thought back on his childhood and explained.

“There was this old man who used to always send me presents when I was little. I only saw him once, but I never caught a glimpse of his face. He was wearing a coat and a hat pulled down low, but something about him just struck me as really cool.”

“He was almost certainly connected to the royal family.”

Hush money, or perhaps a concession to his conscience. The old king was dead now, so there was no way of knowing for sure.

“But even an illegitimate heir still has a claim to the throne. I suppose that’s why they’d want to wipe out anyone else in the capital who could interfere.”

“But why would the Children be after him, Gadhio?”

“As we saw today, the church is content to have us and the Children battle it out among ourselves.”

“We’re interfering with their plans, so they’re cooking up a scheme to get us to destroy each other.”

“Meaning...that the Children were fed some false information? But why would the church care so much about Slowe, anyway? It’s not like anyone would just up and make him king.”

True though it may have been, the whole conversation was doing a number on Slowe’s self-esteem.

“I’ve been wondering about that as well,” said Gadhio. “Why put their lives on the line for something like this? But if Nekt can be believed, Satuhkie sees Slowe as an asset.”

“Maybe he’s just a matter of convenience, since he also knows us, the supposed heroes.”

“What do you mean, Eterna?”

“Disaster befalls the capital. A ray of hope appears in the form of the heroes

when they slay the Children before ripping the country back from the church, with their new king at their side. The citizenry rally behind them. The end.” She looked mildly annoyed at the prospect as she spoke.

“That all assumes that we work with Satuhkie,” said Gadhio.

“He’s already got Nekt firmly in his grasp. We might end up with no other choice.”

“Hmm... I’m not totally sure I’m sold on some of these theories, but at the very least it looks like we have a powerful ally.” said Flum. “But you’d think he’d want to keep Slowe with him rather than leave him with us.”

Satuhkie had been incredibly cooperative thus far, but the more they dug into his actions, the more mysterious his motives became. She simply had too many questions.

“Unless he wanted to lure out Luke and Fwiss.”

“Wait, you want me to be bait?”

“No, Slowe, it’s not like that. I just mean...well...actually, that would make sense...”

“Wait, what?!”

In a way, he really could be useful in the search for the Children. But if that was really what Satuhkie was thinking, they couldn’t entirely trust him.

“I have no idea what their next move will be, but in any case, it’s safe to say that the city is about to get a whole lot more dangerous.”

“I mean,” Welcy interjected, “everyone *did* just abandon their homes to flee the capital. That pretty much leaves us with reporters, adventurers, and people with a death wish.”

Even the most ordinary citizens, who knew nothing of the church’s corruption, could tell at a glance that it was time to leave. They could try to muster every fighter within reach of the guild, but even that might not be enough to ensure their safety.

“We were discussing this before you woke up,” said Gadhio, “but I think it would be best to send Milkit, Ink, Kleyna, and Hallom out of the city.”

“What? Milkit...?”

The reasoning was obviously sound, but Flum still hesitated. The idea that they would be together, side by side, was so ingrained in her that she'd never even considered the thought of sending Milkit away. But if the church took her hostage, it would take Flum completely out of the fight. The whole party's chances looked better with her safely away from the capital.

She understood it all logically, but she still felt an immense sadness settle over her.

She shot an uneasy glance toward Milkit, who responded by placing her hand on Flum's and smiling softly. So, she was sad about it, too. But even she had come to terms with the fact that they really had no other choice.

But still...Flum wanted so badly to be together. She had to fight back the urge to tell Milkit as much.

“I know it's all rather sudden,” Gadhio went on, “but we're doing it tonight. As Welcy brought up, the gates are open for the moment, but we've got no assurances about tomorrow.”

“Hopefully the church won't realize something's up,” said Ink.

“Lots of people are leaving the capital as we speak,” said Eterna. “As long as they blend in with the crowd, they should be able to get out without raising any suspicion...”

“I've already asked my brother to make the arrangements, so we're done on that end.” Welcy smiled triumphantly.

“If Leitch is taking care of things, then I'm sure it's fine,” said Milkit.

Everything was ready. There was nothing Flum could say to stop it at this point.

A cart arrived at the guild a short time later. Flum stepped outside to make sure she could see Milkit off. She watched as Leitch climbed down from the cart he'd arranged for their escape.

Gadhio bowed his head down low to the older man. “Apologies for the

sudden request.”

“No, no, it was nothing at all. No need to apologize to me. I’m no use to you in all your battles; this is the least I can do to support you.”

Though Leitch smiled brightly as he spoke, Flum felt that there was something off about his expression.

“Hey, um, Leitch.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“You look pale. Are you okay?”

“I...well, you’re certainly not wrong. I’m not used to seeing bodies lying around.”

“Aah...I see.”

The city was full of corpses, many of them buried in the wreckage of Mute’s rampage. Leitch being his normal, cheerful self would be even more out of place.

Flum sighed and watched as Milkit got ready to leave. She handed her bag to the driver and then climbed into the bed of the cart. She turned to lock eyes with Flum. Milkit jumped out of the cart and ran to her master’s side, wrapping her hands around Flum’s. They would only be apart for a matter of days, but the thought was just too hard to bear, and she couldn’t let go.

Meanwhile, Ink and Eterna stood side by side, wearing forlorn expressions as they spoke.

“Is everything really going to be okay?”

Ink couldn’t keep count of her worries anymore, though the thought of leaving the capital without Eterna was prime among them. Would Eterna be able to weather the battles to come?

Additionally...here she was, leaving, while Nekt, Luke, and Fwiss remained in the city.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Ink. I’m not going to die, and the Children... well, we’ll take care of them.” Eterna had an unusually serious look on her face

as she caressed Ink's head.

"I believe in you, Eterna."

"Good. I'm glad someone believes in me. But even more than that..." She couldn't stay serious for long. The corners of her lips turned ever so slightly upward. Her voice took on a teasing tone. "I'm happy that you're going to be lonely without me...and that I'm loved."

Ink waved her arms around in search of Eterna's face, giving her cheek a pinch the moment she found her mark.

"Ouch!"

"It's your fault, really. You should try being a little more refined."

"Listen, I'm just not good at gravitas, okay? It's better than getting all sentimental and saying goodbye."

"We could just laugh and say our goodbyes. Honestly, I was hoping you'd be a little sad too, Eterna."

Eterna was momentarily taken aback at Ink's frankness. She could tell the girl was putting up a tough front, obviously saddened by Eterna's words.

Eterna had lived alone for a very long time. Ink was the first person she'd really grown close to in a while, and before she even realized what was happening, she'd found it transforming her into a more positive, cheerful person.

"I guess I have no right to judge Flum and Milkit," she whispered under her breath before she turned and smiled down at Ink. "All right, all right. I'm sad, too."

"What do you mean, all right? *Hmph*. That's what I was talking about."

"No, I'm serious. I'm going to do whatever it takes so that we can be together again soon."

The force behind her words struck a chord in Ink's heart, and her anger melted away. Suddenly, she was meek and quiet again. She'd been caught completely off guard and wasn't sure how to reply.

“I wouldn’t lie at a time like this. At least not to you.”

“...Right.” It took all Ink had to nod without breaking down.

Eterna took her hand, led her to the cart, and helped her in. Gadhio was standing off to the side, talking to Kleyna and Hallom, who had already found their seats.

“Gadhio...”

“There’s nothing to worry about. I don’t plan on dying yet.”

This only made Kleyna worry more. If he really didn’t plan on dying, he wouldn’t say “yet.”

“Daddy...” Hallom was anxious as well. This was the first time she’d ever traveled, in fact.

Gadhio, perhaps realizing her emotional state, didn’t say anything about being called “Daddy” for once. Instead, he offered up a charming, fatherly smile and placed his large hand atop her head.

Hallom beamed, and her worries melted away.

“Hey,” said Kleyna, “can I see you over here for a moment?”

“What is it?” Gadhio leaned in close.

She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him in until their lips touched.

“Naa...”

“You say you’re not going to die, but I just can’t help worrying when I look at you. Now that you stole a kiss from me, I’m not going to let you go easily, got it?”

“I was kind of forced into it.”

“Stop nitpicking!” Kleyna’s face burned a furious red before the two parted, still smiling at each other. Hallom’s cheeks were flushed pink as she watched the interaction with great interest.

It was almost time to leave. Flum pulled Milkit into a tight hug.

“With you as my master, I know that I’ll see you again, no matter how long it

takes.”

“Aww, I’m kinda sad to see you take it in stride like that.”

“Better than being a burden to you, no?”

Flum already told her time and again that she wasn’t a burden. In fact, it was her very desire to protect Milkit that kept her fighting. But this time would be different: There were no safe places left in the capital. There was no way that she could keep Milkit in such a dangerous place out of her own selfishness.

“Looks like everyone’s ready.”

“Aww, but I haven’t had enough time with you.”

“I...I haven’t had enough time with you, Master. Not at all. But it’s not the time for that.”

The two reluctantly stepped away from each other until their hands finally broke free. The residual warmth in their palms only deepened the sting of parting. Milkit turned away and began walking toward the cart. She put her foot on the step...

“Master!” She hopped down and ran to Flum’s side, pulling her into a tight embrace and pressing her lips against Flum’s cheek.

“Aah...”

It was all so sudden that Flum’s brain didn’t get a chance to catch up.



Milkit's cheeks burned bright red as she turned away and ran back to the cart.

"C-close the door, please!"

The driver did as she asked. Milkit wondered why she decided to do that, but she had no answer. She knew what it implied, but...why did she do it with Flum?

Flum's brain slowly caught up to her, and her cheeks began to tinge pink. They hugged and even slept in the same bed together countless times before, but this felt different, somehow.

The cart took off with its four passengers inside. Flum and the others watched it shrink into the distance until it disappeared.

Flum took several deep breaths upon returning to the guild.

Calm down, Flum. She just meant to say thanks. You can ask her all about it when she comes back.

Slowly, she managed to calm her racing thoughts and collect herself. Flum got straight down to business before Eterna had a chance to tease her.

"Gadhio, was it really the best idea not to send Slowe with them?"

"You think Satuhkie would allow that?"

"You mean I'm...I'm going to be a king?!"

Y'lla, who had also stayed behind, smirked.

"Slowe a king, huh? If we got married, that'd make me..."

No one made a point of it, but they weren't sure why she chose to stay.

"The advent of a new king and queen, huh? In that case, I'd like to secure an exclusive interview with the two of you."

"Welcy, you too??"

"No journalist in the world would leave when there's a shot at such a massive scoop. Besides, my brother and sister-in-law have already left, so there's no one left to stop me!"

If Welcy could be believed, many of her company's reporters also stayed

behind. A fair number of adventurers refused to leave, in the interest of protecting the capital.

“Foiey made it out, too,” Welcy went on. “My brother’s overprotective, ya know. He took off with all of his staff and helpers without saying a word.”

“That was a wise decision. If you value your life, you should have left, too.”

Welcy laughed. “You’re probably right, Eterna. But hey, I’m good at running away when I need to.”

It sounded as if she planned on escaping if—and only if—it came down to it. The problem was if she would be in any position to escape once she needed to.

“There’s no sense in worrying about those who stayed behind,” said Gadzio. “We should start talking strategy tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow... You know, according to those letters, that will be the last day. Speaking of which, I wonder if one came today.”

“Eterna mentioned it earlier while you were asleep,” said Linus. “There was something about three seeds, right?”

Flum assumed the three seeds were a reference to the Children. But there was something strangely out of place about the idea of planting seeds. If the letters had been written by the person she thought they had, then that made the phrasing even stranger.

“Seeds...plants...taking the meaning a little further, it could mean to grow...”

“What about that giant baby you fought, Flum?”

“Now that you mention it, it was just a small baby earlier that morning. Just like a seed!”

“Ultimately, all this research was for the benefit of the church. So Mother must have been looking into mass production.”

“Three seeds... Does that mean that there are three of the third-generation creatures embedded throughout the capital? Or...wait. Considering how it was written, and that you’ve already taken one down, maybe it’s best to assume there were three in total.”

“Whoa, no way! Two more of those things??”

Slowe was one of the few to actually see the first specimen. He was absolutely petrified at the thought of there being more. Deep inside, Flum shared the feeling. Additionally, given how long it had been since that battle, the creatures were likely even larger at this point.

“But that’s all assuming that you can trust what the writer is saying. Can we really trust them?”

“I...I think we can.”

“Which means that you think you know who wrote it, then?”

“When I showed one of the letters to Leitch, he said that the paper and ink were fine enough that they could only have come from the church or the castle. And that the handwriting looked like a woman’s.”

“Echidna and Henriette are the only ones who come to mind,” said Gadhio.

“Henriette is under close supervision by the church knights,” said Welcy, “so I doubt she could get a letter out.”

“Actually, I think the letters were penned by...Mute.”

Eterna’s eyes went wide at this. “Why would the person causing all this trouble do that?”

“That’s right, Flum,” said Gadhio. “She has nothing to gain from telling us.”

“As a weapon, sure. But they aren’t just weapons with Origin cores inside—they’re kids. They want to prove their loyalty to Mother, sure, but deep down inside, they must realize that what they’re doing is wrong.”

At least that was the impression she got from Nekt, who had grown up in the same environment.

“So Mute *wanted* us to stop her?”

“Maybe a part of her did. Then there was the whole incident with Cyrill. We thought this whole time that she abducted Cyrill, but the truth is more that Cyrill went with her in hopes of stopping her, maybe even helping her.”

At some point, Cyrill and Mute had formed a bond. If Mute really was a

creature with no human heart, that should have been impossible.

“That’s just how humans are, no? We’re complicated. Every person is different, but we all have good and evil within us. Once they were looking death in the face, the Children began to show their true colors as they pursued their dream of leaving their mark on the world.”

“And so...that’s why you think the letters are trustworthy?” said Gadhio.

Flum bit her lip and nodded.

“Eh, to be completely honest, I really don’t know much about Origin or these Children. But if Flum says that we can trust these letters, then I say we work from the assumption that they’re true.”

Eterna nodded in agreement with Linus, and the group began making plans for the next day.

They needed to kill five people: Luke, Fwiss, the two third-generation babies, and Mother. And they had four people to do this: Flum, Eterna, Gadhio, and Linus. Setting Mother aside, this meant they would be going one-on-one.

“If Luke and Fwiss are also using two cores,” said Linus, “they’ll be tough to fight alone.” The battle against Mute had taken a tremendous amount out of them.

“What about the third-generation ones? Do you think we could take them on our own?”

“I could, since I can destroy their cores...but I would say that they’re less powerful and intelligent than the second generation. It seems like it’d be a lot easier to lure them into a trap.”

“Then Linus and I should take them,” said Eterna.

“Sounds about right,” said Linus. “We’ll go hunt ’em down, wipe ’em out.” He seemed oddly pleased with his assigned task.

“That leaves Flum and me,” said Gadhio, “though one of us should stay behind at the guild.”

“I’ll stay here then.”

“You know the Children are likely to come here looking for Slowe.”

“And that’s exactly why it should be me. I fought Luke before I had to take on that third-generation creature, remember? I managed to drive him back, but he looked pretty upset before he escaped.”

She still remembered the angry glare he shot at her back as she ran into the church. He said something, though she didn’t fully catch it. ‘...Wish...human... regret’?

“Right, and I think Luke will be coming after me again to make good on his threat.”

“Which is why you want to stay here in the guild, where he’s most likely to strike. Got it. In that case, I’ll focus everything I have on finding Fwiss and Mother.”

Now that the assignments had been doled out, there wasn’t much left to do but rest up and wait for the enemy to make their move.

“I dunno,” said Linus, “I feel a little let down to be working this hard and not get paid. Think the guild can spare a little something?”

“If that’s what you’re after,” said Gadhio, “perhaps you should join the knights and devote yourself to the king.”

“What, and work with Satuhkie? Don’t make me laugh.”

Linus and Gadhio made their way to a table in the reception area to eat.

Eterna sat nearby, beginning to put together a plan. “Now where would they leave one of these third-generation things? Thinking about the Children’s role... Hmm...”

Flum thought about joining a group for a moment, but she still felt like she was dragging lead weights everywhere she went. She’d already slept quite a bit, but apparently, it still wasn’t enough to fully heal her.

“Well, I guess resting’s important too.”

With that, Flum returned to the first aid room and laid down for a nap.

There were three beds, and Cyrill was in one of them.

Flum pulled back the curtain and smiled when she saw that her friend was sleeping. It would be a while before she woke, what with how much Brave took out of her.

“Night, Cyrill.”

Met only with silence, Flum crawled into the neighboring bed. She and Milkit shared a bed so often that it seemed like forever since she last slept alone. The bed felt wide, cold, and more importantly, lonely. Had Milkit arrived in a neighboring village yet? Was she sleeping, too? Was Milkit looking up at the same night sky that Flum was watching through her window?

“G’night, Milkit.” She chuckled to herself at her own sappiness.

From the moment she’d been sold as a slave, her commitment to protecting Milkit had been a constant refrain in her mind. Without her, Flum would have been just an ordinary girl who likely would have never survived this long.

This fundamental weakness was one she shared with Cyrill, actually. People’s lives were clearly defined by who they met along the way and who they chose to travel alongside. Without Milkit around, Flum worried that she might find herself easily disheartened. She needed to find a new reason to fight for tomorrow, and so she told herself that the sooner the battle was won, the sooner she would be reunited with Milkit. This would serve as her source of motivation, to keep her heart from breaking under the pressure.

Hmph... I dunno. I’m starting to wonder if maybe I’m just a little too fond of Milkit. But then again, she... Well...she kissed...my cheek...and...

Her cheeks instantly flushed red as she recalled the sensation before quickly burying her face into her pillow out of sheer embarrassment.

Mmmmmmmph! What’s going on with me?? My heart’s pounding in my chest just from the thought of it!

She kicked her legs, tossing and turning all alone in the dark before remembering that Cyrill was resting next to her. She forced herself to stop.

Chill out, Flum. This is no time to get yourself all worked up. I can just ask

Milkit why she kissed me later. And I'll have my own feelings sorted out by then. But that means that I first need to fight, win, and survive. I got this!

Even with that pep talk, her heart continued to pound. However, it was time for her to try to rest up to recover some of her endurance, so she finally turned toward the ceiling and closed her eyes.

A short time later, the cart carrying Milkit and the other passengers successfully made it through the gate and out of the capital. Tens of thousands of people were attempting to leave the city at the same time, resulting in incredibly long lines at the gates. Even once they were outside the city limits, the roads were still packed with carts and people heading for neighboring towns and villages.

It wasn't long at all before the cart abandoned the main road, ostensibly to avoid all the hustle and bustle.

"Whoooooa...now it's really shaking!"

The wheel hit a pothole and bounced so hard that Ink came up off her seat for a moment. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

"Mommy..." Hallom looked worried and held fast to her mother's clothes.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, honey," said Kleyna. "Mr. Leitch here is going to take us all somewhere safe, isn't that right?"

Leitch looked back from where he sat with the driver. "Of course. In fact, we're just about to meet up with an acquaintance of mine."

Milkit cast a suspicious glance at Leitch's back. She wasn't the only one who was beginning to have doubts.

Kleyna leaned in close to Milkit and whispered in her ear. "I wonder if everything's on the up and up with him. I've heard that this Mancathy guy is trustworthy, but there's just something really strange about how he's acting."

"I was thinking the same thing. Why would they choose a place like this to rendezvous?"

The cart began to shake even more violently, until they went so far afield that

they no longer crossed paths with other refugees. Just as Milkit's anxiety was reaching its peak, the driver stopped the horses with a crack of his whip.

Leitch turned to face them, wearing a joyless smile. "Could you please get out? We've arrived at our destination."

The expression on his face was one full of regret. Between that and the sound of his voice, no one wanted to listen to his instructions. However, now that they were here, they had no other choice left: soldiers in gleaming armor appeared just over his shoulder.

"You betrayed us?!"

"Why would you do such a thing, Leitch?"

"I had no choice. I was told that they would kill my beloved Foiey if I didn't listen!"

Leitch's wife, Foiey Mancathy, had been taken several days prior. He had done everything in his power to avoid just that happening but was helpless in the face of the church's sheer numbers and its military and political might. Leitch loved his wife so dearly that he would commit any crime to save her, even abandon his pride and carry out dirty, underhanded tasks if that was what it took.

"So that's why you sounded so sad all this time."

"Mommy, I don't like this. Those people are scaring me..."

Kleyna pulled her daughter close to her chest.

"Please get out. I've been told that they won't kill you."

Milkit's eyes wavered as she turned to look at Kleyna. They had no choice but to obey. Kleyna nodded. Milkit stood up and helped escort Ink off the cart.

The only light came from a lamp hanging from the cart; it reflected harshly off the soldiers' gleaming armor. A man with a long, black ponytail, dressed in a baggy tunic with a sash tied tightly around his waist, stood at the center of the group, stroking his beard. A thin, curved sword hung from his hip.

"Great Buddha, Jesus, Allah... I believe that's what the ancient ones used to say at times like this." He approached them. "Then again, I believe there are still

those who use such archaic phrases. Countless words and phrases of the kind have existed throughout history, evolving as they go. It's all so intriguing, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not interested in your little charade. If you're going to take us hostage, then just do it."

"Gyahaha! Kleyna Yandoura. You were an A-Rank adventurer in your prior life, no? I see you're still as vibrant as ever."

"Heh, I know you. Jack Murray, lieutenant general of the church knights, right?"

"In the flesh." Jack flashed a toothy smile, pleased that Kleyna recognized him. "I'm not actually interested in taking you hostage. I find this whole affair craven and pathetic. I feel nauseated, really. But alas, this is what Huyghe has ordered. They keep saying it's for Origin and all, but I bet that's just an excuse. Who am I to judge someone's hobbies, though?"

"I don't really care how you feel about it if it's not going to change the outcome," said Kleyna.

"You're right. I'm not really interested in rocking the boat. I'd really appreciate it if you'd all give up now and listen to my commands. Come on over."

Kleyna walked over as instructed—and then suddenly pulled out a dagger hidden in her shirt, preparing to dive toward him.

Jack responded almost instantaneously. He drew his sword and stabbed it straight into the ground.

"Justice Arts... Stone Torture!"

"Hyaugh?!" Kleyna felt an invisible force press down on her, locking her feet in place.

"Ka...hyaaaa...!"

The same weight was also being applied to Hallom behind her. The impact it had on the young girl was exponentially greater, and it wasn't long before she collapsed to the ground, her eyes blank.

“Uwaaaugh...so...heavy...hnnng...!”

“What kind...of magic...is this...?”

Milkit, Ink, Leitch, and even the horses were caught in Jack’s assault. One by one, they all collapsed, their faces clenched in agony.

“Ha...llom...!” said Kleyna. “You...bastaaaaaaaaaard!!”

“Hm. So this is the strength of an A-Rank adventurer. Even in the face of my Justice Arts, you still don’t give up.”

The church knights behind Jack succumbed to the same fate, frothing at the mouth as they fell.

“But you know, I would have ensured your safety had you listened to what I said.”

“As if...we could trust...the likes of...you!” Kleyna forced herself forward, one heavy footfall after the next, on unsteady legs.

Jack chuckled to himself, stroking his beard at the sight. “You know, I really like strong women like you. Even knowing that it’s all for naught, you still force yourself forward, toward whatever ideal you’ve hung everything on. I’m tempted to break your spirit and make you mine.”

“I’d sooner bite off my own tongue and choke to death!”

“That makes me want to try it all the more!”

“Gaah, are you church knights all like this? Such a disgusting lot.”

“Jack...” A woman with two red pigtails stepped out from behind a hedge, gazing at him with a look of pure astonishment.

“O-Ottilie?” A gentle smile graced Milkit’s lips, though she could only barely choke out the name.

“Hmm...so that’s how it is. I guess I needn’t concern myself with the commander’s silly little hobbies then.” Jack withdrew his sword from the ground and slid it back into its sheath. Everyone gathered in the area felt the oppressive weight of the Stone Torture technique dissipate instantly.

Kleyna immediately ran toward her daughter, who’d been hit far harder by

the attack, and held her in her arms. “Hallow, are you okay? Hallow!!”

“Mo...mmy?”

Tears sprang to Kleya's eyes.

Ottie watched as Milkit and Ink stood up slowly, leaning against one another for support. “You gave up pretty easily, Jack Murray.”

“The commander is in quite a funk, you know. He was worried about an information leak. Now that we know where it's coming from, I think there's a certain value to operating in the dark like roaches. Wouldn't you agree?”

“No, I wouldn't. He's already seen through you and the way you do business, anyway.”

“Can you really blame me, with how Cardinal Satukie betrayed us? Or finally showed his true colors, rather? Hmm, I'm guessing the fact that you're here means that you released the woman, then?”

“Yes, I already helped Madam Foiey Mancathy escape,” Ottie replied.

“My Foiey...she's safe?”

Leitch leaned heavily against the cart as he struggled to catch his breath. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“I'm so glad. Once she'd been taken by the church, I thought I'd never see her again.”

Ottie sighed.

“We'll never have our happy ending without a few sacrifices,” said Jack. “I'm not terribly interested in fouling these plans up either.”

“From the way you talk,” said Ottie, “it almost sounds like you think you can beat me.”

“Ah, but I could. You'd present little challenge.” He raised his eyebrows and shot Ottie a hard, unblinking stare.

Ottie gritted her teeth in annoyance.

“Alas, I will have to bid you adieu just this once. I'm sure you have no complaints with me making my exit now, no?” There was a playful, challenging

tone in his voice, almost as if he were inviting her to attack him from behind.

Our stats are pretty much the same, but with the way he's acting, I almost wonder if he has an Origin core on hand. Even worse, I don't know how powerful his Justice Arts are. Even if I'd love to give this jerk a taste of what he deserves, I have to let him go.

Ottilie's job, after all, was to ensure the hostages' safe return. As long as she got that done, she could consider the day a victory.

Jack, accompanied by his unsteady group of soldiers, made his way off into a hedge. Before he was completely out of sight, he turned around and shot a glance back at Ottilie.

"I'm surprised you're going to just let me go like this. Perhaps no one has told you of the awful fate to befall your dear Henriette?"

"Of course I know. She's my sister, after all. I know her better than anyone else in this world ever could. It's my duty to know everything about her."

"Then why didn't you try to kill me?"

Ottilie clenched the handle of her sword.

"Because that's not the role that my sister wishes me to fulfill. But if the time comes for me to end your life..."

Her eyes went red as blood began to pump throughout her body, readying for a fight. "I will stab you, slice you open, run you through, rip out your insides, spear you, and cut you open again and again and again and again until you're field dressed like the animal you are! For your part in committing the most unforgivable sin of harming my beloved sister, I will ensure that you experience the greatest pain imaginable. Of course, even that would be too good for the likes of you, so I will ensure you find your way to the most magnificent execution before long. So please, I beg of you, please look forward to your impending fate, and tell your cohorts about what's to come."

Her impassioned rant finished, Ottilie shot Jack a grin that only seemed to excite him further.

"Ah, that I will. I truly look forward to the time when we can cross blades and

trade blood in combat.” Having said his piece, Jack disappeared into the woods with his men.



Ottilie visibly relaxed the moment Jack was out of sight. “Gah, I’m getting really tired of having to fight with those psychotic miscreants. Once this is all over, I swear, I will never work with Satuhkie again for as long as I live.”

“Thank you, Ottilie,” said Milkit. “I truly appreciate you coming.”

“I’m just glad that I got here in time. Does anyone have any broken bones?”

“No problems here!” said Ink. “I’m a little sore, though.”

“I’m fine, too,” said Milkit. “Kleyna? How are you and Hallom?”

“Hallom just passed out, is all. She doesn’t seem to have any injuries.” Kleyna looked upset about the whole ordeal.

“And Leitch Mancathy?”

He remained silent.

“Well, you don’t seem to have any injuries. Your horses will probably regain consciousness shortly, and when they do, you can escape to the village where your servants are waiting for you. You’ll find your wife has already been taken there.”

“Thank you, truly.” Leitch refused to lift his gaze. “I can’t thank you enough for saving my darling. Thank you!!”

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he repeated the words over and over.

“Before you go off thanking me, I think apologizing to your companions here takes priority, to be honest.”

“You’re...you’re right. I should have done that right away. Not that I deserve to be forgiven, apology or not, after what I’ve done. Milkit, Ink, Kleyna, Hallom... I’m incredibly sorry for what I’ve done to you! I was an idiot, a buffoon, a poor excuse for a human!” He knelt down and bowed until his forehead touched the ground.

Milkit thought about stopping him and saying that it was nothing, but remained silent. Leitch understood the gravity of his sins greater than anyone else. It had come down to choosing between his wife’s life and doing what was right, and his wife had won.

It was hard to blame him. At the same time, it was equally hard to forgive him.

“Well, I think we’re about done here. Everyone, follow me. We’ll be taking a slightly safer route back into the capital. All right, let’s go!” Otilie began walking in the opposite direction from Jack and his party.

Though they were no longer hostages, there was no way that Otilie could bring Leitch with them to the facility after his betrayal. He held his head to the ground even as Milkit and the others followed after Otilie.

Chapter 15:

Colony

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, before the sun had risen over the capital, Linus ducked out of the guild before anyone had a chance to notice. It was likely that no one would have tried to stop him if he explained what was going on, but he felt guilty about having motives of his own beyond stopping the Children.

“I’m going to find you, Maria!” He clenched the letter she left behind tightly in his hand.

No matter how much she might refuse his help, he still refused to give up on her.

The church knights were nowhere to be seen, though he still saw the occasional resident out in the open, too attached to the city to abandon it or too resigned to dying there. He couldn’t hold it against them: the more people who died off, the easier it would be to find Maria.

Linus let his finely tuned senses take over as he walked the derelict streets. He let his hand drag along a wall as he walked through the rough-and-tumble West District. After a few moments, he felt a warm, wet sensation on his fingertips.

“Yuck, what is this?”

It was an incredibly sticky substance that looked like blood. He ran his gaze along the wall until he spotted the shape of a small human-shaped figure stuck to the surface. A moment later, he realized that he was looking at a baby about the size of an outstretched hand.

“Someone really needs to find better hobbies. The city goes to shit, and suddenly it’s pageant season for the most loathsome creatures to walk the earth? Gah...!”

Linus surrendered to his anger and punched the wall before drawing his bow and dashing ahead. If a third-generation horror were to rear its ugly head, he had the resolve to put it down now.

Stepping into a main road, he ran into a middle-aged man. He was no church knight, just another person who chose to stay with their home in the capital.

“Huh, a human,” said Linus. “Listen, sir, you really should get out of here. There’s a creature lurking nearby.”

“I know, I know. I’ve been meaning to...!”

Linus noticed that the man was pale and drenched with sweat. His breathing was shallow, and he scratched at his neck with blood-stained hands. He didn’t seem to be injured, suggesting that the blood wasn’t his own.

“But, I mean... Dammit, I worked so hard! I did everything I could, so why...??”

“Calm down, calm down. Were you the one who smashed that tiny creature farther down the road?”

“Yessir! Before I knew it, they were in my home, and my wife and son... I mean, I wanted to help them! But it was too late by the time I noticed, so I ran and...gaaah! Worthless, it was all worthless!!”

“You still have your life. I’m sorry for your wife and child, but at least...”

“It’s too late...uga...plup...glog, glog...ngyah...hyua...ouh...gooooooooaaar!”

“Wh-whoa there! You okay?!”

The man hunched over on the ground, his hand clasped tightly over his mouth. A thick, transparent fluid poured from between his fingers. Linus considered running to his side but stopped himself. Looking closer, he could make out the twitching heads, arms, and legs of countless tiny creatures trying to crawl free.

“Kyii, kyiiii, kyii!” the disgusting creatures cried out as they poured from the man’s mouth like insects, falling to the ground with a wet squelch.

“What in the... What were those things doing in your body??”

“G-get...ngyauh...kill...me...hnaugh!”

The torrent refused to let up, beginning to flow out through his nose and ears. His eyes began to bulge until the pressure burst them, providing yet another exit, and then finally, his skin relented and tore open. All it had taken to

transform him into a giant egg sac was for one of the things to get inside him.

It was disgusting. The smell was nearly unbearable.

Linus was no stranger to death, but this was beyond his limits. He choked back a tide of bile.

“Hyack... I’d heard something about a giant baby, but nothing about there being so many of them!”

Linus had found one of the third-generation Children. The swarm surrounded him in such multitudes that he couldn’t imagine how one man’s body could ever have contained them. What’s more, there probably were more victims out there as well, and now they were all closing in on him. More and more tiny babies crawled up out of gutters, out of homes, from the rooftops, and between the gaps in paving stones.

The scene was reminiscent of all the eyeballs that poured out of Ink’s body—her multiplication ability.

“I doubt all you little guys have cores of your own. All I have to do is find the main body and kill it!” With his decision made, Linus immediately drew back on his bow and let loose with a rapid barrage of arrows.

By the time Flum woke up, Linus was already gone. No one was terribly alarmed, figuring he was likely off searching for Maria.

“His absence doesn’t change anything.”

“He’s not the type to neglect his duties, anyway. Just leave him be.”

They had built up a lot of trust for one another on their journey, after all.

Flum wasn’t too worried about whether he’d carry out the task assigned to him either, though she *was* concerned about the possibility of him running into multiple enemies on his own.

“Why such a long face this early in the morning? Here, eat up.”

“Th-thanks, Y’lla.”

Y’lla handed over some bread from the guild provisions to the party. Though

it was a rather dry, flavorless baguette, it still provided Flum with a modest pick-me-up. She was busily gnawing on the bread when Gadhio slid an envelope over to her.

“I found today’s letter placed neatly in front of the entrance.”

Flum looked down at the envelope inquisitively. “But Mute’s gone...”

She began to worry that she’d been wrong the whole time as she tore the envelope open. Unfolding the letter, her concerns washed away.

“Wow...”

“How can anyone even read that?”

“The handwriting is awful.”

And it was. But there wasn’t much they could do but puzzle it out. Flum decided to give it her best shot.

“One day remains. The seeds are grown and have blossomed. Mother will see to it that these succeed. And I will also put an end to you. I hope you’re ready.

“They really tried hard to mimic the other letters with all this talk of seeds and flowers, but it looks like they gave up halfway through,” said Gadhio.

“I didn’t sense anyone’s presence last night,” said Eterna. “They must’ve delivered the letter magically.”

“I think Luke’s the author, especially considering the line about putting an end to me. I guess he picked up the task now that Mute’s gone. But wow, that handwriting...” Flum traced the barely legible letters with her finger.

“Strange that there’d be such a difference, seeing as they grew up in the same place,” said Eterna. “But I’d say you’re overthinking it.”

“I’d say it’s in line for an eight-year-old.”

Considering Gadhio had spent so long watching Hallow grow up, Flum felt inclined to defer to his judgment. But what if Mother had, for some reason, intentionally done something that led to the difference in handwriting? She couldn’t put aside that possibility.

I can’t get sentimental about someone I’m about to fight to the death—not

now. It'll just make things harder.

She knew that logically, at least, but she still couldn't shake the feeling. Of course, Nekt might very likely show up and try to put an end to their fight, but she still had to prepare herself to kill if the opportunity presented itself. If she wasn't ready to do that, then she'd be the one to die.

"If Luke is the author, then that adds further credence to the idea that he's after you."

"Right. I'll stay behind like we planned."

Gadhio and Eterna were just about to leave the guild to head for the Central and East districts, respectively, when they heard a massive explosion that shook the building.

DASHOOOM!

"I guess that's Linus then."

"We need to stay on our toes."

Eterna thought for a moment about reworking the plan to have everyone team up together on a single monster, but one look to the east changed her mind: there was a massive pillar of smoke in that direction, too.

She summoned Fenrir, hopped on, and set off east while Gadhio ran toward his own objective.

Alone in the guild, Flum took several deep breaths, summoned her Souleater, and waited.

"I wonder when Luke'll show..."

Chapter 16:

Rotation

F LUM GREW MORE AND MORE impatient with every explosion she heard off in the distance. However, it was her job to ensure the safety of Slowe and Y'lla. She was basically stuck.

"To be honest, I was surprised to hear that Origin is actually real. I mean, a legendary god? Aren't those usually just tall tales made up by humans? *And* it wants to wipe out all of humanity, too?"

"If you think about it," said Slowe, "pretty much all the gods of legends kill humans left and right."

A layer of sweat formed between Flum's palm and the Souleater as she grew even more nervous. Mute was able to use a second core to gain the power to transform and take over others. How would that same second core power up Luke's Rotation?

"I think the bigger issue is the fact that you're a member of the royal family, Slowe. What do you think about all this? If things stay on this course, you might be king."

"Honestly, it doesn't feel real, for starters. But it'd be great to finally be rich!"

Y'lla giggled. "That's for sure. I heard the castle's filled to the brim with precious metals and gems."

"That would be interesting to see for sure. I could finally make sure my mother was treated right. Heh."

Flum could tell that she'd grown stronger. Not just because of her equipment either, but in her ability to control her Cavalier Arts. While she felt that it still wasn't quite enough, she also feared that the road to getting even stronger would lead her down the same path as the Children. Useful though her regenerative abilities may be, she couldn't help but feel that she was losing a bit of her humanity every time she used them.

“Since you brought her up, where’s your mother now?”

“I took her home yesterday; she and a friend escaped the city. She’s probably worried about me, since she doesn’t know where I am right now.”

“Well, I guess it’s fine, since you’re the one with the royal blood.”

“Yeah, I’m just hoping that the church doesn’t find some sort of reason to attack her. I mean, I don’t want them to attack me either, really...”

Flum dreaded the idea that she might carve out the peaceful future she wanted at the cost of her ability to appreciate it.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about. Flum’ll keep you safe, even if it means sacrificing herself in the process.”

“I’m here, you know.”

She couldn’t sit by and watch anymore. Flum smiled and turned to face her wards.

“What’s with the dumb look, Flum?”

“Is the enemy coming?!”

“No, it’s not that. I was just hoping you could wait inside.”

Flum was growing concerned. For some incomprehensible reason, Y’lla and Slowe had chosen to sit down on the steps right in front of the entrance to the guild to chat.

“Aren’t you worried about what could happen if you’re outside while we’re still inside?” said Y’lla.

“Exactly. I mean, what if the enemy just shows up indoors all of a sudden?”

“That’s exactly why we have all the adventurers waiting inside the guild. So would you mind finding someplace safe to wait this out?”

Of course, she understood the fear of being attacked from within. But since Luke was fixated on killing Flum, she also knew that he would likely be attacking her head-on. Assuming she was correct, they would be much safer indoors.

“I don’t like it. If that Luke kid shows up inside the guild and the adventurers protect me...people will probably die, won’t they?”

“Well...yes.”

“I can’t stand the idea of people dying just for me. That’s why I would prefer to stay here with you, Flum. I feel safer that way.”

“I don’t see the problem, really. He’s in danger no matter where he is.”

“That’s true too, but...”

Flum cradled her head. They’d turned the tables on her.

“Besides, how would we even know that the battle was over if you win? I mean, you’re fighting to protect us, after all. We should know.”

“...I get what you’re saying. But listen, it’s going to get really dangerous, okay?”

The longer they spoke, the more Flum felt her tension ease—which was not a good thing at this point. From the sounds of it, Linus’s and Eterna’s battles were only getting fiercer.

The wind carried with it the awful stench of human—or at least something similar to human—remains.

Flum took several deep breaths to refocus herself and turned back to Y’lla and Slowe with her final decision.

“Both of you, inside. Now. I’m serious.”

Her voice was different, more forceful this time. They had little choice but to agree and hurry inside. It was only a matter of seconds before a young blond boy jumped off the roof of a building directly across from Flum. He shoved his hand in his pocket and approached calmly.

Once he got close enough, Luke casually waved his hand and greeted her.

“Did you read my letter challenging you to a duel?”

“Oh, is that what that was? The handwriting was so awful, I could hardly read it.”

“Hnph. That’s exactly what Fwiss said. But who can blame me? Unlike Mute, I’ve never written a letter before! In fact, you should probably be praising me for doing such a good job, considering it was my first time!”

“Why would I praise you? Besides, why bother sending a letter if you were going to show up this soon anyway?”

“I couldn’t just do that.” There was a tinge of sadness in Luke’s gaze now. “That was Mute’s way of leaving behind proof of her life, so I had to pick up where she left off.”

“She’s not dead, you know.”

“So I hear. Mute finally found a great place to die, and then Nekt had to come along and mess all that up. But anyway...what do you think, Flum? Do you think there really is a way to turn us back into humans?”

“As you are right now, yes. Why don’t you just stay like that, and we can wait for Nekt?”

“Hmm... Nah, not interested.”

Luke retrieved a black crystal from his pocket and showed it to Flum.

“There’s no going back for me. Nekt is just overly optimistic. Do you really think that we could just live on like normal? And then what? We’re nothing but killing machines that happen to look like humans. What would we even do with normal lives, huh?? A grand death is far more fitting for us Children!”

Fitting? The wording stank of bad faith. She had a hunch that they were doing what they were told. But just who would they have to talk to, and what would that person have to say to convince them to stop?

Assuming it was no longer possible to battle to the death, this whole conversation might just be Luke’s attempt to reconcile himself to what little remained of his attachment to the world. Maybe he was hoping that Flum would show him kindness? But why would she harbor any sort of kindness toward them after they killed so many in preparation for their eventual deaths? They were little more than monsters spawned by their Origin cores.

It made no sense. It was like talking to a wild animal.

Nekt, Mute, Fwiss, Luke—Gadhio, Eterna, and even Milkit probably all felt the same about them. They were each caught between the colder, more indifferent sides of their hearts, which felt compelled to kill the Children, and the more

idealistic sides, which didn't want them to die.

If they're going to die, at least let them die with their humanity.

But Nekt would want them to live, so I should do whatever I can to keep them alive.

She was torn, unable to choose. There was probably no answer that would satisfy everyone. But even so, Flum still wanted to find an answer that at least *she* could be satisfied with.

"It's time for me to get going, then! I hope you at least give me a good send off!"

"Wait."

Luke visibly slumped at having his dramatic moment interrupted. "What'd ya do that for? I had a cool setup and everything!"

Which was exactly why she had to stop him before he got any further. There was still something that Flum had to say to him, even if her heart wasn't entirely in it.

"I just want to let you know that we got Ink out of the capital."

"I really don't care about..."

"But you still worry about her, don't you? You lived together for eight years."

"She's just a broken reject who can't even hear Papa's voice. She's nothing like us."

"That's how you feel as a member of the Children project, but how do you feel as a person?"

"...You're something else, ya know that? We're about to try to kill each other." He looked completely exasperated.

"I guess we are enemies, huh." Flum had to laugh in spite of herself at the strange topic she'd brought up.

"Heh, well, I guess I'm relieved to hear that you got Ink out."

Since he was going to die anyway, Luke didn't need to keep up the act.

“Honestly, I was kinda worried that she might get caught up in this mess. I could imagine, once I really lost myself, that it’d be me who kills her. And you’re right, even with all her flaws, we did live together for eight whole years as siblings. I care about her! I don’t want to kill her! But since she’s not here, I have nothing to worry about! I can completely let myself go and smash up whatever I want!”

Luke seemed to brighten...right before he placed the Origin core against his chest. It traveled through his clothes before slowly sinking into his body.

“Origin Core Double Drive!”

It was pretty clear that he made up the name on the fly.

“O...ooough...nnggh...gaaaah! Gu...gyaaaaaaa!”

The two Origin cores began to resonate with each other, granting him with exponentially more power.

“Agaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauh! Oooooooooooooooooough!!” Luke’s face contorted in agony and veins bulged in his neck as his face turned an unnatural shade of red.

His fingertips twisted and warped as his flesh began to peel away, exposing the raw muscle beneath.

Spirals traveled up his hands, elbows, shoulders, and then across his whole body as his transformation took him further and further away from being human.

“Gwaaaaaoooooooooor!”

It was like an infant letting out its first cry. And a terrifying one at that.

The energy resonating from Luke was so powerful that even the wind skirted around him. Finally, his head began to twist and contort as well, until the insides of his skull were also revealed for all to see. They didn’t look human in the least. Bright red muscle fibers twitched and bulged until they reformed into the shape of something like a head.

Luke had completely lost his humanity.

“Ooou...” A voice resonated from deep within the mouthless head. There was something about hearing the high-pitched, clear voice that shook Flum to her

very core, as if it were steadily chipping away at her sanity.

“Oooooooooouuuuuu!!”

The monster that was Luke moments ago spoke up. “Coming...”

Flum stood her ground as she felt the power of the spirals build.

“Eaugh!!”

Suddenly she felt an intense pain in her right leg. No one had touched her, and Luke hadn’t attacked yet, but her leg twisted out from under her. She bounded off with her left leg just as her left arm began to corkscrew as well. The twisting grew faster and faster until her arm was torn into a bloody mess; chunks shot off in all directions.

She leaped again on her good leg. Once she was clear, the twisting finally let up. Moments later, she heard a loud tearing sound reverberating within her head.

“No...no way!”

The scene around her began to move, even though she held her head still. Luke wasn’t moving at all. It was the top half of Flum’s head that was turning, approaching its limit.

Chapter 17:

Loss

“HNNNGAAAAAAAW!” Flum howled in pain and kicked hard off the ground, sending herself flying backward.

While the pain was an issue, she was more driven by the fear of what would happen if her head split open. However, she was rapidly reaching the limits of how far her left leg could carry her. Flum lost her balance and tumbled to the ground, but fortunately, she had managed to safely move out of range and stop the rotational forces on her head.

It was looking like Luke’s power couldn’t be directed on an object in particular but only on specific locations. As long as she kept moving, she could avoid the complete loss of a limb like what happened with her arm and leg. Her limbs were already regenerating, but she didn’t dare

think about what would happen if her brain suffered any direct damage.

Still lying on her side, Flum spit out the vomit that had built up in her mouth and cleared her throat. She hoped to never go through something like that ever again. But she also knew that Luke wasn’t about to back off any time soon.

Luke wailed, his voice slightly deeper than Mute’s. He cocked his head to the side and walked slowly toward her, not yet showing any signs of attacking. A small burst of energy shot up every time his heels touched the ground.

Flum heard the sound of something cracking and scraping together—it was coming from the pavement where she lay. It peeled up before tearing away and reforming into blades that started to whirl, making an awful racket as they tore through the sand.

With her arm finally regenerated, Flum shoved herself back to her feet and started to stumble away. But just as she got out of range...

“Auunngh?!” Flum’s waist twisted with an awful *snap*. She felt her organs crush instantly, forcing blood up her esophagus and out of her mouth.

All she could do was crawl away as she wondered just how Luke could pull off such extraordinary attacks without so much as a hint at what he was doing.

Luke belted out another roar. Though devoid of emotion, he seemed pleased with himself.

Every muscle in his body throbbed as bright red blood pulsed between the fibers.

“He...predicted...my next move...and set...a trap?!”

Even with his mind completely consumed by Origin, he was still quite intelligent.

Flum tumbled along as she tried to weave between the invisible traps he’d set, while her body slowly regenerated and the feeling returned to her briefly paralyzed legs. She didn’t have the luxury of waiting until she fully recovered, so she continued to drag herself away from Luke as fast as she could.

Alas, she couldn’t put any distance between them with him still moving on two feet. Flum once again heard that tearing sound deep within her skull as her head began to distort.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!” She cried out in agony, brought her right hand to her head, and called up her reversal magic. There was an explosive *crack* as it made contact with Luke’s attack deep within her body.

“Aaaugh...gyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!” Flum wrenched backward, writhing in pain. She felt like she was being dismantled from the inside out.

She lost all vision in her right eye as it tore away and the entire right side of her face began to deform, barely held together by sweeping, misshapen scars. Parts of her skull began to show through, though she managed to avoid taking damage to her brain.

“Aaaauugh!!” In spite of the immense pain, Flum forced herself forward, reaching ahead with her right hand, now badly burned and covered with a cloudy liquid.

She grabbed on to the ground and yanked her body forward. Next, she threw her left hand forward, still caked with blood, and gripped the gap between

paving stones.

Ggggggggggggrruuuuuuu!

The ground began to churn, this time directly beneath her stomach. Fortunately, it was still moving slowly enough that her clothes got caught up in the blades, preventing it from digging any deeper.

Luke let out another triumphant roar.

Flum focused her reversal magic on the spot where her stomach touched the ground.

“Rever...sal!”

CRACK!

The two powers combined to form an incredible explosion so bright that Flum was momentarily blinded, her torso blown up and away from the rest of her body. She continued to scramble out of the whirlpool of sand even as her innards and shattered ribs were blown everywhere. As long as her heart survived, she’d be okay.

Even with the pain reduction granted to her thanks to the enchantment, her mind nearly went blank at the sheer magnitude of the injury. It felt as if a fork had been stabbed into her stomach and was whisking her insides.

Through all that, she summoned the Souleater to her hand. This, the first sign of her intent to go on the offensive, finally evoked a response from Luke.

After throwing his fist up into the air, a tornado spiraled around his arm for a moment before he shot it directly at Flum.

“Tsuaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

No words were needed to get his point across. He seemed to be screaming only to focus his mind and body as he attacked.

Flum jabbed the Souleater straight into the oncoming spiral.

She heard a crackle of electricity as the two met. Last time they’d fought, Flum easily countered Luke’s Rotation with her reversion, but with a second core, he was more than a match for her in terms of raw power.

She imagined that Luke would laugh if he were still self-aware enough to notice that their powers ran so counter to each other that he had to throw his life away to be Flum's equal. Alas, he had no mouth to do even that.

"Oooooooooouuu!!"

What he did instead, though, was let out another roar before powering up another air blast and shooting it at Flum.

"Nnng...trying...to start a shoving contest? Eyaaaaugh!" Flum quickly lost in the battle of sheer strength and was hurled backward.

Luke created swirls of air at his feet and shot through to Flum's side, where he pressed the attack.

A smile came to Flum's lips as he veered into her line of sight.

"Reversaaaaaaaaa!!"

Flum reversed direction in an instant and shot straight toward Luke at high speed. Her body cracked like a whip at the sudden change in direction and she heard a loud snap in her spine, but the pain was nothing compared to what she'd experienced so far.

"Ha!"

Right as the two combatants flew past each other, Flum swung her sword, severing Luke's right arm.

"Oooooooooou!"

His pained scream echoed in the empty streets, though it was only a matter of moments before his injury twisted closed and the bleeding stopped. Now thoroughly enraged, Luke focused his anger on creating another trap directly where Flum landed.

"Aaaah...gyauh!"

Just as she was about to retreat, she felt a sharp pain in her chest; Luke was trying to crush her heart. Flum forced herself forward to safety, though Luke refused to let up, alternating his attacks between her head and chest. Flum wasn't making it easy for him, always staying a few steps ahead of each trap's epicenter. This was a double-edged sword, however: the longer she ran from

Luke, the farther it took her away from the guild where Y'lla, Slowe, and Cyrill were waiting.

After she got herself a safe enough distance, Flum turned a corner and hid in the shadow of a building. Between setting his traps and only attacking along a clear line of sight, it was clear that Luke was fighting cautiously. There was no way he was going to search for her blind.

Luke raised both hands to the sky and let out an inhuman, almost musical roar.

Flum looked down at her blood-stained clothes, shoulders heaving as she panted, and smiled wryly to herself. The battle had only just started, and she already looked terrible. She steadied her breath, mind, and racing heart. Even though the pain was mostly gone, she still felt a soul-deep nausea from the aftereffects of having her internal organs crushed.

"It's gotten awful quiet all of a sudden. He was rampaging around just a few moments ago."

No sooner had the words come out of Flum's mouth than she heard a bone-rattling crash. She looked over in time to see the building to her right disappear in a shower of splinters. Or, rather, get smashed up into pieces.

"What was..."

A massive boulder, which had been shaped into a cone, had just flown past her, its spin allowing it to pick up and maintain its speed until it smashed straight into the corner of the building.

BASHOOM!

Another building fell, this time to her left. The next one would have to come right down the center, directly behind her.

"Aaack!"

She took off at the first sound of its approach, but, realizing it was too late to get clear, threw herself to the ground.

BASHOOM!

The building she had been hiding behind moments earlier, along with all the

other buildings in the way, was reduced to a deep rut carved into the earth.

Looking back, she had an unobstructed view of Luke, his exposed muscles bright red. He was standing atop a pile of rubble and had his hand on the wall of a nearby stone house. He poured rotational energy into the building, and it ripped free of its foundation, spinning faster and faster until it transformed into a stone drill around four meters across.

The tip of the drill angled itself toward Flum, where she lay collapsed in the street.

“Oooooooooouu!!”

It shot at her with tremendous force, smashing its way through what scraps remained in its path. Flum got to her feet and ran for a few moments before diving face-first to the ground again, throwing her arms over her head to protect herself from the debris. She heard the sound of footsteps approaching and hurried to stand, only to find that one of her legs was freshly torn to shreds.

While Flum struggled to find her balance, Luke closed the distance, while his spiral-sheathed fist wound up to strike. Flum stood firm on her remaining leg and heaved her blade at Luke. The reversal and rotation powers clashed in a shower of sparks, lighting up the street.

Flum was growing desperate, following up with slash after slash as she prayed to get in a blow that would expose his cores.

Even without his right arm, he could still match her blow for brute-force blow. It would have to be speed that won the day. Flum was losing ground bit by bit; she started to withdraw from close quarters. At the same time, Luke raised what was left of his right arm and readied himself to lunge. It was an obvious feint, but Flum’s body still leaned back to dodge the attack.

FWOOSH!

She felt something blast past her bangs. He had formed a deadly replacement for his missing limb, coalescing his power into a phantom tendril.

I gotta get out of here!

Paring down his limbs didn’t do much to stop him. Flum assured herself that

she'd gathered critical intel, even if the fight was a wash.

Swinging her sword one last time, Flum used the force of his counter to carry herself backward and make her escape...

...into another trap.

“Gaaaugh!! Da...!”

Her right leg twisted at the shin, the bone fracturing. Flum gritted her teeth as she landed on both feet. She tried to put some more distance between her and Luke, but it was slow going.

“Oooooouu!” Luke dashed ahead, lowered his body, and slammed into her, following through with an uppercut with his new right arm. She felt a finger squeezing her lower jaw.

It's no good! I can't get away!

An ominous chill ran through her body. Her skin tore away where the spiral-formed finger made contact, burrowing deep through the soft flesh beneath and snaking into her mouth, exposing her tongue to the open air. Moving her head had little effect.

“G-geeehyack!”

The finger crept into her mouth, feeling out a path through her nasal passages. Flum began to emit guttural noises she hadn't even known a human being could make. Her eyeballs were plucked out from the inside as it pressed into the innermost reaches of her skull, where it started to tear away at her frontal lobe.

Flum's face came free from her head and tumbled to the ground. Left with only half her head, she was engulfed in darkness.

Perhaps that was for the best. At least she would never have to see how bad she looked at the end.

She tried to sniff, but only blood poured out.

Unfortunately, enough of her tongue was left to still catch the coppery hint of blood.

She groaned.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

This is pure agony. It's awful. Someone, help.

She groaned again.

A human could still survive without their frontal lobes. It would take a blow to the deepest part of her brain stem to ensure death. However, Flum began to undergo a change as her brain was torn away. She had lost the balance between logic and impulse as governed by the frontal lobes.

In other words, she was undergoing a change in her personality and emotions.

During the short period before her body could regenerate itself, Flum felt her spirit completely shatter.

“Ooooooooooooooooouuu!”

Judging by Flum’s current state, Luke figured that she was in no position to fight back. He went straight in for the kill, reaching out his left hand to crush her brain stem.

However, Flum sensed something coming her way and threw up both arms in front of her.

There was a loud explosion, and Luke tilted backward, feeling something sharp land right between his eyes.

“Oo...ooou...”

He was confused. Flum didn’t have a gun, that much he knew.

Three more shots pierced his shoulder.

“Ooooooooou...”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauuuuu!”

The two abominations groaned in unison. Flum was clearly the one on her

back foot at the moment, yet it was Luke who was losing his nerve.

He frantically searched for the sound's origin before settling on Flum's fingers. Only her thumb remained on her left hand, though the rest of the fingers were quickly regenerating. Magic pulsed around her hand.

That meant...her hand *was* the gun.

Reversal could shoot off things that were fixed in place.

Reversal could take things on the inside and move them outside.

Having lost all logic and reasoning, Flum had turned her own body into a weapon by freezing the flesh around her fingers to harden them and then firing them as projectiles. These reversal-powered bullets of flesh shot straight through the field of Origin's power surrounding Luke to hit their mark.

This was the chance Flum had been waiting for to bring her back from the brink of defeat.

“Aaaaaaaaauuu!!”

What she would think about this once she came back to her senses was another story entirely.

Chapter 18:

Compassion

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAUUUUU!”

This was the best Flum could approximate of a scream while her mouth was still regenerating.

She shot another finger.

“Oooooooooou!” Luke wailed in annoyance and waved his hand in front of him, generating a spiral of air to catch the attack, as their respective energies canceled each other out. He used this opportunity to close in on Flum again, though she was still cloaked in complete darkness. Relying on hearing alone, she shot off a fresh round of fingers. Her shots gouged a hole in his cheek, pierced clean through his shoulder, and lodged in his throat.

He ran straight through the volley, entering point-blank range.

“Oooooouuu!”

He threw his spiral-generated left arm straight toward her face.

“Aaaaauuu!!”

She threw her fingerless left arm up in the way to take the blow.

There was another loud crack as their limbs deflected off each other. Luke made it away without injury while Flum’s left arm now ended at the wrist.

Luke quickly regained his balance and launched another spiral-powered fist at her face.

Flum threw her right arm up this time, resulting in another gruesome injury that left her with nothing to block with.

“Uuuuoooooooooooo!”

If she couldn’t defend herself, then she’d just have to go on the offense. Besides, Flum currently had no fear of death. She took a step forward and swept her left arm at Luke’s side. Before it could make contact, however, it

began to make sick, squelching noises as it spun. Luke had set a trap for her, stopping her from getting an attack in.

Or so he thought.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaauuuuuuuu!!” Her scream was followed by the sound of something snapping off: Flum had centered her magic in her elbow and reversed it, causing the ligaments to explode and sending her forearm shooting off like a rocket.

“Oooooou?!”

Her arm shot straight through Luke’s trap and embedded itself deep in his side. Blood fountained from the open wound in Flum’s arm, but she couldn’t be bothered to care. She’d lost all semblance of humanity at this point.

Flum stuck out her right arm and once again gathered her magic around her elbow.

“...Ah.”

Her brain was now completely regenerated. Returning to her senses, Flum looked down at her arm and recalled what she had done, and what she was about to do...before quickly turning around and running as fast as she could from Luke.

She’d had a chance to put an end to the fight. If she’d shot off her right arm, too, she could have dealt a great deal of damage to Luke. But she simply couldn’t allow herself to go any further.

She’d killed. She’d sacrificed her own body in the heat of battle. She could blame it on her curse all she wanted, but at the end of the day, she destroyed herself over and over in ways no human could. Even knowing how far she’d gone, breaking her own body down piecemeal for weapons was too much.

“Aaah...haaah...haah...I hate...hate this...so...gah!” Looking down at the flapping traces of her left arm as it slowly regenerated brought tears to her eyes.

Once you acknowledged the deep loathing something inspired in you, there was no unknowing it.

The Cavalier Arts and her reversal magic didn't include ranged attacks that could be launched as needed, without setup. Flum fought with a giant sword that required room to wield. She desperately needed a ranged attack to increase her combat options. That was why the idea had come to her, and why she'd no choice but to do it.

The choice to lose yet another piece of her humanity in the process of shooting off pieces of her body was the only one left to her.

"It's a little late to realize it now, but I guess that's right!"

Flum slapped her newly regrown arm against the wall, hung her head, and gazed at the ground. Tears blurred her vision.

She was, after all, still an ordinary young woman thrown into extraordinary circumstances. It was too late for her to be placing limits on herself. She already lost much of her humanity a long time ago, and she knew it.

"But still, there's something different about destroying my own body to use it as a weapon..."

Or maybe she was just too used to things being one way? When you grew too used to something, you began to overlook other options. Would she really be able to return to living a completely normal life when this was all over?

Deep within, she knew that was a pointless question, with all the battles still left to be fought. But it had always been the dream of a bright future that inspired Flum to push through adversity. She ran in the hopes of seeing the day where she lived a life of bliss, where no one was trying to kill her anymore. If she lost sight of that light at the end of the tunnel, she couldn't push on.

But if she didn't, that would mean her death.

"Once I die, it's all over. Even if I fight clean and fair, none of that matters if I don't survive." Flum said it aloud, just to make sure she couldn't walk it back.

Let it go. Be happy. You just added another weapon to your arsenal to rip Origin's throat out with. It still weighed on her heart, but she had to put it aside.

"It's not going to do me any good rambling on like this. Not right now."

She had to fight.

FWOOOOOOSH!

She felt the earth tremble as a loud noise drew closer. She figured it was yet another of Luke's stone drills, probing for her position.

SMAAAAASH!

The drill crashed through the house behind her, closing in fast. Flum leaped straight up, waiting for her mark to pass beneath her before summoning her sword.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaah!" She launched a Prana Shaker at the end of a vicious overhead swipe.

Just as she finished, Luke shot off another spiral blast from his fist, anticipating her assault. The attacks crashed and exploded in a powerful shock wave.

Flum, buffeted by the shock wave, landed safely and slammed her sword into the earth. She immediately followed up with a Prana Storm, suffused with her reversal magic. Though it had a wide area of effect, it was also a short-range attack and failed to reach Luke.

But Flum already knew that.

She wasn't trying to hit him, no. She was looking for his traps. As the wave of her reversal-charged prana rolled past, it threw up sparks where they lay. As long as she knew where they were, she had nothing to fear.

Flum charged Luke.

"Oooooooooouu!!"

Fist against sword. Spiral blast against Prana Shaker. Their attacks canceled each other out again and again in the flurry of blows, the two slowly closing in on each other.

Flum lunged, her sword coming down in a two-handed strike meant to neatly bisect Luke.

FWISH!

Her blade caught the empty air as Luke narrowly sidestepped the blow before

throwing a counter-punch. His spiral-covered fist clashed with her sword, the force of the blow knocking them both backward.

Flum stumbled, finding that her head had fallen into another trap. Her skull began to wrench to the side before she ducked low to the ground and launched herself forward. Luke met her advance with another swipe from his invisible right arm.

Flum flipped over Luke, landing behind his back. She swept at her target, but he spun to catch it with his left arm. Before her sword could make contact, the blade vanished in a bright flash, followed by the familiar glow of the rune on the back of her hand. Now no longer weighed down by the heavy blade, she thrust her hand at Luke's stomach while he was still off balance and defenseless.

Obviously, her hand would be blown away by the protective barrier surrounding him if she made direct contact; she had a plan for that.

"Blast off! Reversion!!"

VOOOOSH!

All five of her digits discharged straight into his body. His face contorted as the pain caught up with him. Luke threw his hand over his stomach and stumbled backward, howling in pain all the while.

He tried to fend her off with his free right arm, and she threw up her left in response—not intending to take the blow directly.

"Eruption! Reversion!" She focused her magic into her arm and detonated it at the last possible moment before the spiral could begin to tear into her flesh. Unlike the projectile attacks she'd used previously, this time, she blew her entire arm up in order to create a powerful pressure wave, throwing them both back and creating some distance between her and Luke.

Luke was the first to regain his balance; he wasted no time in stretching both arms out in front of him, letting loose with a series of spiral blasts. Flum dove and tumbled out of the way until her fingers regenerated. She summoned her Souleater again and ran at Luke, the sword scraping along behind her as she went.

She swung the blade in a gut-unzipping arc...only to find herself in yet another

trap as her wrist twisted hard.

“Gya...another one?!”

Luke turned the tables and pressed the attack as he threw out a right hook.

Flum focused her magic into her feet, distorting the ground beneath Luke and causing him to lose balance, if only for a moment. He focused his rotational powers beneath him, shredding the ground below—just the opening she needed.

“I’m gonna regenerate anyway, so here goooooooooooooooooooooes!”

Flum turned her still-crumpling hand toward Luke and shot it off at the wrist. Her hand, covered in frozen flesh to harden it up further, shattered into dozens of fragments before shooting straight into Luke’s mutated body.

Each successful hit resulted in another shudder and cry of pain.

Flum drew her blade with her recovered left hand and thrust forward. “You’re done!”

Luke tried to throw his arm up to block the blow, but he was too late. The black blade pierced his flesh and made contact with the crystal within.

“Reversion!!”

Her reversal magic transferred into the crystal, causing Origin’s spiral to reverse and create negative energy in its place.

Pushed beyond its limits, the crystal snapped cleanly in two.

“Ooooooooooooouuu! Oooou!”

Flum withdrew her sword and watched as the red musculature started to fade away. Luke raised his arm toward Flum momentarily before it fell limply to his side.

She’d won.

Half of Luke’s face had returned to its original form.

“It’s not over yet!!!” There was a perverse pleasure in his scream.

“What?! No way!!”

He somehow managed to muster enough strength to throw his damaged body at Flum. One way or another, he was hell-bent on beating her—and not because Origin or Mother told him to either. This was a goal he had set personally for himself.

“Watch my arm spin, spin, spiiiiin!” His left arm twisted in its socket, gathering speed until it became a shapeless blur.

Though he was clearly much weaker with one less core, he was still more than strong enough to cause Flum genuine harm. He punched straight at Flum’s left shoulder while her guard was still down, mutilating her arm and causing her to drop her sword.

“Next, your heart!”

He threw another punch at her chest.

“Think again!”

Flum threw her still-regenerating left arm in the way, catching his spinning fist in the palm of her hand while she focused her reversal magic on it. Both of their hands were slowly stripped of flesh and muscle until there was little more than exposed bone, though neither party retreated.

“I can feel it! I can feel it, Flum! I can feel that desire to win burning in my heart! Is this what it’s like to be alive?! Is this what it’s like for normal humans?? This is amazing! Once I win, I can go to hell a happy man!!”

“If all you wanted was a battle of wills, there was no need for us to kill each other like this!”

“I couldn’t let that happen. My fate was chosen for me eight years ago, when I was picked up and taken to that place. You get it, don’t you?? That’s why you’re here battling me to the death, isn’t it?!”

Luke increased his speed, intent on using every last bit of his strength to finish this task. Flum grimaced as he ground away at her bones.

“Nng... I’ve accepted that this is what has to be done!” she said. “But if it were up to me, I wouldn’t want to kill you for such stupid reasons! It’d be great if we could just wipe away all our sins and punishments whenever we pleased, but

that's not the world we live in! Life just isn't that convenient!!"

"You're right, it doesn't exist! Yet Nekt keeps telling everyone that they have to live anyway. We've no past, no future, so how in the hell are we supposed to live a normal life?! Ending my life here is the best thing I could possibly do!"

Flum understood where he was coming from, though she also saw Nekt's side as well. Nekt could hardly accept that death was the best choice. They were family, after all; it only made sense. But would Nekt take a different stance if they chose to die in the face of a life of misery? Could anyone really be satisfied with choosing to live, knowing that nothing but suffering lay ahead?

No one knew the answer to that question. There was no such thing as a right answer or a sure thing in any of their lives. They were reduced to arguing on the basis of emotion and principles.

"So c'mon! Just let me win and have my happy ending!"

"That is not what happiness is about!!"

The rotational forces grew stronger and stronger as they wrapped around Flum's hand, twisting it out of shape. But even robbed of her flesh, Flum refused to give in to Luke.

Both fighters were putting in everything they had, and neither planned on giving up.

But with one of his cores shattered, Luke was only able to fully use half of his body, while the other half wasted away. While his spirit was still in it, his body approached its breaking point. Finally, Flum broke through the stalemate with her reversal magic.

Luke stumbled back, his arm slumping to his side. "Haaah. I should've realized it'd come to this. Ah, well. I can't believe I spent so much time rambling on about my feelings toward this world."

Flum knelt down next to the fallen boy and pulled him into a gentle embrace.

Luke had no desire to fight—he accepted his defeat.

"Nekt looked hurt when she came to find Mute," said Flum. "Do you know what that was about?"

“Aah, yeah, that was Fwiss an’ me. Nekt just would not give up about her stupid plan to save us, so we decided to put a stop to it.”

“What did Nekt say?”

“‘There’s no point in just saving myself. But what I can’t do alone, I know we can all do together. We can start over.’ Nekt even talked about carrying me, if need be. What an idiot, huh?”

Nothing could erase the sins they’d committed. Nekt had to realize that, which was probably why she was so intent on not shouldering the burden alone. She wanted all the Children to live together and share a common future.

“Ya know, for a moment there, I even felt a glimmer of hope. Deep down I must have known that it was hopeless, but for just a bit, I considered what it’d be like for us all to go on living together.”

“Then I’ll take you to Nekt, and...”

Luke shook his head. “Why would someone with their life ahead of them waste their time on me?”

While Nekt was trying to save her family, Luke wanted to save Nekt.

“It’s not just about murder, ya know. We...I can’t let Nekt bear the burden of what I’ve done. Nope, no thanks. It’s pathetic, for starters, and it’d be pretty tacky to boot. I’d rather just do it on my own, whether that’s becoming a human or something else entirely. Nekt should just forget about stupid people like me.”

There wasn’t much more Flum could say. Nekt and Luke both had the same end in mind but chose different roads to get there. It was hardly her place to interfere.

She watched Luke’s consciousness slowly slip away. His eyes drooped closed, and his body began to unravel.

When she fought Satils just a short time ago, she had used her power to string together the cores. But this so-called double drive used by the Children was something different entirely. Once the second core entered their body, the two cores worked in concert to grant them new powers and vastly increase their

raw strength. Perhaps they could only be so proficient with them because they lived with the Origin cores for much of their lives. The burden it put on their bodies must have been immense.

Left to her own devices, Flum had little doubt that Mute would have eventually died from malnutrition. The same went for Luke.

“Y-you really are an idiot, N-Nekt. If...if you just got here a little sooner, you...you...you woulda made it in time. F-F-Fwiss...has...with Mother...” Luke’s body went limp, and he lost consciousness.

Suddenly, Flum sensed a presence behind her. She quickly jerked around to look.

“Ottilie?” she said, taken aback. She’d been sure Nekt would be showing up any moment now.

“Nekt’s got her hands full, so I was sent in her place.” Ottilie walked over to Flum and scooped up Luke’s body.

“Ottilie...are you, uh, are you working with Satuhkie and Nekt?”

“I am, yes. Satuhkie has put me to work behind the scenes along with...”

“Along with...?”

“Actually, never mind. But you can rest assured that I’m on your side.”

She changed the subject quickly to cover up her slip. It was best to keep the subject of Milkit under wraps for now, to keep Flum focused on the task at hand.

“I don’t know what he’d have you do,” Flum said, “but do you really think Mute and Luke can be saved, even in this condition? This is pretty different from the time we saved Ink.”

“I don’t know much about the theoretical side of things, but I doubt they’d have bothered to secure the Children if it weren’t possible.”

“So we know it’s not impossible, I guess.”

Ottilie averted her gaze in silent agreement.

The fact that their operation on Ink succeeded at all was nothing short of a

miracle. Repeating it—getting it down to a science—was mind-boggling.

To Flum, it felt cruel to hand over the Children's bodies after they'd stated their will to die, with the full knowledge of what awaited them. She reminded herself that it was Nekt's feelings that mattered now. Nekt was their family, after all.

"Take care of Luke for me."

"Funny you'd say that, considering you two were trying to kill each other moments ago."

"I can't argue with that. Maybe I'm just not strong enough to fully commit to killing them."

"I suppose some would call that kindness." Otilie smiled warmly at Flum before making her exit.

Flum sighed heavily and looked out at the scene before her. Her strategy to keep Luke away from the guild during the battle had paid off: there wasn't a scratch on it. She could still hear fighting in the distance, but she was completely spent, inside and out.

Flum made her way back to the guild so she could finally call her mission finished.

Luke woke to the feeling of lying on something soft.

Am I still not dead? I'm really bad at this, aren't I?

As he slowly became more aware of his body, he realized that he couldn't move his limbs. He ventured a quick peek and saw a woman watching over him.

"Oh, I see you finally woke up. I was worried about you. That would have been an awful way to go."

Luke opened and closed his mouth, but no sound came out.

"Where are you? Satuhkie operates this facility. You were brought here for an operation."

He shook his head fiercely at the news.

“Not interested? Well, the decision to undergo surgery is up to you; we won’t make you if you don’t want to. But you know, I hear Mute’s going through with it.”

Luke stared at Ottilie, his mouth agape. She grimaced and sighed in response.

“Her surgery is complete. She’s under observation now. Oh, you want to know whether it was a success? Well, I don’t know the answer to that question. But I do know that she’s alive.” She conveniently glossed over the most important part, as Luke continued to eye her with suspicion. “And you’re still against it, I take it?”

Obviously, he wasn’t going to be agreeing to anything any time soon.

“I guess I’m not surprised, in light of all you’ve done. It’s not like you’d just up and decide that you want to live. But...I think I have something that may make you reconsider.”

Ottilie leaned in close and whispered in Luke’s ear. There was a look of sadness on her face as she drew back. For his part, Luke glared at her with contempt.

That witch... How am I supposed to refuse after she tells me something like that?

Mute had likely been put in the same situation, left with little choice but to accept after being given the same information.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. Satuhkie’s the one who decided it.” Ottilie was just playing messenger for the busy cardinal—though she was most certainly being paid for the trouble. “Listen, I don’t love the way we’re going about this either.”

She knew they’d be forever stuck at an impasse if they didn’t do it, though she still couldn’t help but feel bad for these young children, being used like pawns by the adults in their lives.

Chapter 19:

Hideout

“SORRY TO KEEP you waiting!” Welcy came running up, hand waving excitedly in the air, shortly after Gadhio arrived at the Central District park.

She’d left the guild early in the morning to research an issue Gadhio asked her to look into. He obviously couldn’t let her go alone when it was still dark out, so he sent a few adventurers along to watch her back.

“Sorry for the unreasonable request,” said Gadhio.

“Think nothing of it. Especially not considering the times we’re in. Anyway, I foooooound it.” She pulled out an old newspaper.

Taking a quick glance, he could tell that it wasn’t published by her employer.

“So a copy does exist... Good work. I’ll pay you whatever you ask when this is over.”

“Honestly, it’s not money I’m after. I’ve got a contract in my back pocket that I’d like your operation to sign. But we’ll put that all aside for the moment. You see, making sure that we leave behind a correct and accurate history of the capital is a hobby of my brother’s; he built a storage unit for all his newspapers and books. Which, well, if the church ever gets its mitts on you, *we didn’t have this conversation.*”

Gadhio picked up what she was laying down. The church’s work with Origin cores was far from the only shady business they were conducting.

“What do you plan to do with the dirt I turned up on Mother, anyway?”

The front page of the newspaper in Gadhio’s hands read: “Massive Inferno Lights Up Central District.”

“His real name is Mich Smithee, though he goes by Mother and dresses the part. I’ve been thinking that he may have some sort of complex about his own mother.”

“His research involves children, after all. It would explain why he makes them call him Mother. So, what, is he trying to make his own twisted family?”

Mother raised Nekt and the others to depend on him, using their dependence to keep them on a short leash.

“It’s just a guess, but yes, that’s what I think. And now Mother has been abandoned by the church, left with his back against the wall. Try as he might to take it in stride, I’m certain it’s had an effect on his psychological state.”

Welcy nodded with great interest at this revelation.

“So, you think that Mother will return here. But how’d you know where to look? You gave me all these spots in the Central, West, and East districts to check out. Did you already know where Mother’s home was?”

As she spoke, the two turned toward a point nearby.

“I figured being wrong would carry dire consequences. I had to know for sure.”

“Would you mind telling me how you reached your conclusion then?”

“It struck me while I was listening to Flum yesterday.”

Flum had shared her theory about Mute being the author of the letters with the others.

“Humans are immensely complex creatures. While Mute was going about proving her worth as a weapon by slaughtering people throughout the city, she also had a more human side that compelled her to write these letters to get someone to put a stop to her madness. And then there was the matter of her taking care of Cyril.”

“What does that have to do with this?”

“Those were probably her own personal desires. But her desire to serve Mother took priority over all that.”

“I...guess? It looks like they’re just running rampant to me.”

“With the clock ticking down, I think the Children all realized that they still needed to carry out their role of serving Mother. That made me think to mark

all the locations they attacked on a map.”

“And the places you wanted me to check were the only ones left unscathed.”

In other words, the Children were doing whatever they could to keep attention off of Mother. No one had noticed until now because of the sheer scale of the diversion. In fact, the Children might not even know what they were doing, even as they fought to their deaths.

“Susannah Smithee, the woman who gave birth to the person known as Mother, died in a fire that consumed the surrounding neighborhood,” said Welcy. “The capital used the emptied lots to build warehouses and...whoa?!”

The ground shook forcefully beneath them; Welcy struggled to maintain her balance. The tremor felt like it came from the East District. Welcy looked over in time to witness an iceberg crash into the ground, shattering to pieces.

“Was that Eterna?”

“Looks like it. She’s really going all out.”

Looking closer, Welcy caught a glimpse of a fleshy tide scrambling up what was left of the berg, completely covering it in seconds. She squinted to get a better look.

“It’s probably better if you don’t watch.” Gadhio tried to put a lid on her curiosity. “You’ll never be able to see babies the same way again.”

“Huh? You mean that’s...”

Realizing what the squirming creatures were, Welcy decided it best to avert her eyes—and keep them averted for good, if possible.

“S-so anyway, there’s usually a surprising amount of foot traffic for this part of town when you consider that it’s mostly storage.”

That was, of course, until the entire capital had become a ghost town the night before. It had at one time been brimming with activity.

“That made it all the easier for the usually conspicuous Mother to hide in plain sight.”

“There have to be some warehouses around here that have been

conveniently left vacant.”

“Vacant... Hey, what about the ones Shoppe Francois owned?!”

Shoppe Francois was the name of Satils Francois’ company, though it was shuttered shortly after Satils was killed in Sheol and Welcy’s newspaper ran her exposé on her joint illicit drug trade operation with the church.

“Don’t tell me you figured that out already, too. Wow, Gadhio, I’m impressed. So I guess we should just split up, and...”

“No, I’m going alone from here. Go find someplace safe to hide and sit tight,” Gadhio instructed Welcy before they entered the warehouse district proper.

“Okay, so maybe I’m no use in a fight, but I’ve got guts of steel and eagle eyes. You’d take ages to turn Mother up on your own.”

“Assuming Mother’s hiding out here, the last of the Children is going to be coming for me. I can’t worry about protecting you if I need to focus on battling Fwiss.”

“Aah...I...I guess I understand. I hate to lose out on a scoop at the last moment, but that’s life. Corpses don’t get much out of a byline.” Welcy shrugged and turned back, headed for the presses where her coworkers waited.

Gadhio stood before a Shoppe Francois warehouse.

He turned slowly, calling out into the shadow of a neighboring building. “Don’t you think it’s about time that you showed yourself, Nekt?”

A young figure stepped out of the shadows with a peeved expression on her face.

“Hmph, so you noticed me?”

“You really overestimate how stealthy you are. You should probably talk to Linus and ask him for some help.”

“Eww, that playboy? No thanks. So anyway, is this where Mother’s hiding?”

Another voice piped in before Gadhio had a chance to respond. “That’s right. That’s why I’m here.”

The green-haired boy walked confidently up to Gadhio.

“Mother decided that I would get to be the bodyguard and keep everyone away, no matter who they were.”

The look in Fwiss’s eyes betrayed his appetite for indiscriminate murder, regardless of the trespassers’ identities. Gadhio immediately drew his blade and took a fighting stance, though Nekt quickly jumped between them.

“Before you fight, please, just give me a chance to talk with Fwiss.”

“I don’t have anything to talk about with you. After our conversation yesterday, it’s clear that we’re not going to reach an understanding.”

“Listen, things have changed! Mute’s decided to get her Origin core replaced with a heart and become a normal human girl again!”

This was enough to finally shake Fwiss. So much so, in fact, that even the killing intent rolling off of him faded. He stayed silent for a long moment as he pondered this new revelation.

“Luke will probably refuse in the beginning too, but I’m sure he’ll change his mind once he hears about Mute. That leaves just you, Fwiss. All you have to do is be brave enough to want to live!”

Nekt pressed her point home...only to watch Fwiss’s expression change. Though the murderous gaze was now gone, his demeanor could hardly be described as positive.

Gadhio still wasn’t willing to make the first strike, but he tensed his legs, preparing to move at a moment’s notice.

“Ya know, Nekt, I’ve been thinking ever since our encounter yesterday.” Fwiss spoke slowly, deliberately, almost like a parent talking down to their child. “That future you preach on about... Mother’s nowhere in it. Why is that, huh?”

The difference in their love for Mother formed a gulf between the two of them that could not be crossed.

After being lied to about her gender her whole life, Nekt had decided to part ways from Mother. But Fwiss still loved and needed him, and he couldn’t imagine a life without that presence.

“Mother raised us, you know. Mother’s more important than anything else in this world.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Fwiss. Mother stole our futures—even our real parents from us!”

“If it weren’t for Mother, we wouldn’t have been born at all.”

“No, you don’t get it! If it weren’t for Mother, for the church, we would have lived real, fulfilling lives!”

“What does that even mean? That you have to be normal to be happy? So you think that we’re poor, miserable little wretches then? No, Nekt. You’re the one who’s got it all backwards. Being here, dedicating my life to protecting Mother, is the happiest I’ve ever been.”

“That’s only because we were robbed of the right to learn that there are so many other wonderful ways we could live!”

Fwiss raised an Origin core up into the air, with a look of pure, unimpeded joy on his face. “I don’t know any of that stuff. I can only choose what I already *know* is best for me!”

He brought the crystal close to his chest.

I’m not fast enough to stop him in time! thought Nekt.

It was a moot point: Gadhio already made the first move. His black blade whirled through the air and lopped Fwiss’s hand clean off. With Fwiss stunned, Nekt immediately used her Connection ability to teleport behind him, kick his legs out from under him, and wrap her arms tightly around him as she forced him to the ground.

“If that’s all you know, then we’ll just have to go find this new kind of happiness together! I know all of us Children have a shot at it, and I need us all together if we’re going to find it!”

Were their positions reversed, this probably would have been enough to put a stop to Nekt’s rampage. But Fwiss just chuckled, a demented grin forming on his lips.

“Nekt, run!!”

“Too late. Distortion!”

“Hah?! Connection!”

Fwiss was correct: Nekt was too late, if only barely.

Vwwwooooooooo!

Nekt looked toward the unfamiliar noise to see an indistinct shape with an ominous marble pattern to it, twisting and contorting...until it sucked in her arm, ripping it from her body. Her Connection ability took her away from there a fraction of a second later, but she was horrified to find that part of her waist, leg, and even face had been shredded in addition to her arm, almost as if she had been gnawed on by an army of rats.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!”

Gadhio wasted no time in launching a Prana Shaker at Fwiss, which he blocked with a volley of Distortion blasts.

“Was Fwiss always this powerful?”

Blood dripped from Nekt’s injuries before spirals began to form on her skin and close the wounds. Each time one of the spirals appeared, she could faintly hear Papa...no, Origin’s voice.

“No way... It can’t be.”

In their normal form, the Spiral Children were just slightly inferior to Gadhio and the other heroes in terms of their fighting ability. Additionally, while Fwiss’s Distortion ability allowed him to fight in a far more varied and dynamic way than Luke’s Rotation, it was also weaker than the latter.

But what Nekt saw now flew in the face of everything she knew: Fwiss blocked all of Gadhio’s frenetic strikes with a single hand.

“Hmm. Things aren’t exactly going like I planned. I was sure I would have killed you already, Nekt.”

“You really have no intention of coming with me, do you, Fwiss?”

“Of course not. I’m so close to Mother now, and even Papa talks to me a lot! I’m not lonely at all. I can say with absolute certainty this is the happiest I’ve

ever been!” Fwiss threw out both his arms and spun in a circle, laughing maniacally.

“That happiness is one of Mother’s lies!”

“Give it up, Nekt. You’re wasting your breath.”

“But...!”

“If he were still sane, I’d push along with you, but Fwiss is beyond reason now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You also have a core, don’t you? If you just settle down and focus on him, you’ll see what I’m talking about.”

Nekt did as she was told and focused her attention on her manic brother.

What she saw caused her eyes to go wide with shock.

“No...no way... Of all the stupid things...”

Nekt’s lower lip trembled. It took a few moments before she could finally form the words.

“Fwiss...you already have two cores??”

Of all the Children, Fwiss was more dependent on Mother and more devoted to Origin than any of the rest. He was already well on a different path from even Mute and Luke.

In some ways, he was the culmination of the second-generation project.

“So you finally figured it out, huh? Well, let me teach you what real happiness is all about!”

A bundle of red, pulsing muscle tissue shot from the stump at the end of Fwiss’s right arm. Moments later, it knotted into a new hand—which Fwiss wasted no time in using to create another distortion field.

Chapter 20:

Gamble for Survival

FWISS'S DISTORTION FIELD could take anything within a given area—time, space, gravity, distance—and enmesh them together to create a powerful force that could eradicate any matter it touched.

Vwooooo!

A low, thumping bass sound at the base of your skull was the only way to identify the invisible attack. Failure to get out of the way before it made contact would result in an instant and violent death.

“Woo-hoo! Yeah! So this is what the double drive is like! I’m unstoppable!!”

Gadhio and Nekt dove to the side to get out of the way, though with a mere twitch of his arm, Fwiss banked the attack to continue on a trajectory toward Gadhio.

Hmm, so he can alter the direction of his focus, huh? His style works more like a sword art than projectile combat—no, more like he’s using a whip.

Gadhio fled from the attack with everything he had. While Fwiss was focused on Gadhio, Nekt used her Connection ability to hurl some boxes from the warehouse toward Fwiss, but with a quick jerk of his left hand, Fwiss created a large distortion field in the way, easily destroying the boxes in the process.

“C’mon, Nekt, even you have to know just how much more powerful I am!”

“Oh, but I do. And I know for a fact that you can’t keep up with that kind of nonsense for long!”

“And how long is long, huh? Ten minutes? Twenty? Maybe thirty? Gyahaha! This battle won’t even last long enough for you guys to find out!”

Fwiss shot the distortion field he’d previously used as a shield directly toward Nekt.

Nekt teleported away just in time as the field made contact with the building

she had been standing in front of mere moments ago, disintegrating the very matter it was made of. Within moments, the massive warehouse was no more. She trembled at the sight.

Meanwhile, Fwiss's distortion whip gained speed as it pursued Gadhio.

"Watch out, Gramps!" said Nekt.

An instant before the field could touch his back, Gadhio summoned a pillar of rock beneath his feet to propel himself into the air.

"Huh, you're pretty fast for a guy in such heavy armor. How d'ya like this, then??" Fwiss raised his hands, conjuring a distortion sphere that swelled until it dwarfed everyone present.

With a flick of his wrist, Fwiss cast it in Gadhio's direction. Though it weighed almost nothing, it effortlessly obliterated everything in its path, like a massive ball of lead.

"Gramps isn't gonna be able to dodge that in the air. I guess it's my turn, then!"

Nekt threw a nearby building toward the giant sphere, but it was destroyed upon contact, doing nothing to slow it down.

Meanwhile, Gadhio held his sword up with one hand and focused all of his energy, veins bulging across his body.

That thing's pretty powerful...but maybe this'll stand a chance.

Prana was the ability to turn one's life force into strength. The primary choice was to use one's endurance, a force that regenerated over time.

But Gadhio had an idea. The rarer something was, the greater the power it contained...or so he figured. Using more than one core at the same time was similar in that regard. By sacrificing parts of yourself, you could gain access to unimaginable power.

Dig deep. It's gotta be there. Dig deeper—ignore everything else. Deeper still. I don't care what I have to sacrifice.

Gadhio forced himself to focus as he created an image in his mind's eye of two arms reaching deep within himself. The sensation was more distinct,

stronger than it had ever been when harvesting energy for his prana. He dug even deeper, forcing past the ringing in his ears as the barriers blocking his way crumbled.

He was looking for the one thing more sacred than anything else: his humanity.

He found it.

It was wrapped ever so delicately in a thin, sticky film. He reached out his hands and felt his fingers breach that film, spilling a warm liquid in the process.

“Nngg...!”

Gadhio let out an audible groan. It was painful...but also exciting. It proved that this pain could become power.

He reached inside himself, grabbed the crimson object floating within, and began to transform it into prana.

However, humans have limits.

No matter how much they may train, how unbending their will may be, there are limits that normal people cannot surpass.

He was fighting a monster who’d already discarded his humanity. So Gadhio only needed power to beat him, right? No. His goal was far greater than this current hurdle—it was that smirking hag in a lab coat, with her Chimera monstrosities.

He was doing this to get his revenge. With this much power available to him, it should be an easy fight.

Gadhio let out an ear-piercing scream as the bulging arteries in his arms burst within his armor, coating the inside with blood. Deep inside, he felt parts of his body that he thought were important once implode. His vision went red, and bloody tears dampened his cheeks. The alarm bells in his brain rang on, warning him that this power was not to be used.

...Which was exactly why he’d come here to take it in the first place.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!!” He heaved his blade into the distortion at his heels.

Under normal circumstances, it would have evaporated on contact, and yet Fwiss’s field gave first. Prana spread through the blade and traced out across the sphere like veins.

This was Prana Pulser, an explosive prana technique. With a final push of his sword, the outer barrier of the balloon burst, causing the distortion to collapse in on itself and lose its equilibrium, igniting in a massive explosion.

“Ngyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!” Gadhio gathered that explosive energy and hurled it at Fwiss.



Explosion, blast, shock wave, Distortion, prana...the forces of destruction swirled together as they enveloped the young boy.

“Unng...what...was that? No normal human should be able to do that...”

Nekt squinted in the face of the massive blast of heat. She watched Gadhio land with a look of fear in her eyes.

No—that should have been impossible, period. Just who is he, anyway? He’s no chosen one; he doesn’t even have a rare affinity. And yet somehow, he just brought more power to bear than even us Children can? He’d have to sacrifice something huge...maybe his life even, to do that!

Watching Gadhio as blood dripped out of his armor, Nekt grew even more convinced. Fwiss had sacrificed his life for power, and so Gadhio did the same to fight back. She just couldn’t understand why anyone would go that far. Was it even victory at that point?

“Aaauuuunnngh...”

A faint groan of pain rose up from the smoking crater.

Just to be on the safe side, Nekt quickly identified some large chunks of debris she could use as weapons.

“Owww... Heh...haha. I can’t believe a normal human could pull off something like that.”

So much of Fwiss’s body was covered in burns and charred skin that he resembled a ghoul. But as his skin burned away, it revealed bright red muscle fibers underneath that throbbed with the influx of spiral energy. A moment later, his body was restored.

“Heh, made it out unscathed, huh?” said Gadhio. “I really figured that the Cavalier Arts Sacrifice would have got you.”

“Unscathed? I wish. Man, that really hurt. I don’t think I’ve ever felt anything that painful before, Gramps.”

“Your compliments mean little if I can’t kill you.” Gadhio hefted up his heavy blade and leveled it at Fwiss.

Fwiss's fighting spirit didn't waver for a second, even with all the pain he must have been in.

"Honestly, I went too easy on ya. I figured I could smash a small fry like you, who hasn't been graced with Papa's power, no problem. But I guess I was wrong. But since Mother's in danger here, I'm going to have to actually get serious this time."

Fwiss suddenly twisted backward, stopping just before the back of his head touched the ground. His torso then ripped open, revealing the churning and writhing organs within, as they succumbed to the power of the Origin core and began to shoot out of his body as red tendrils.

They coiled and wrapped around each other until they formed a large ring.

"All Range Distortion!"

Nekt and Gadhio hesitated momentarily, unable to anticipate what was coming but knowing the passing calm was an omen of an overwhelming attack.

"Connection!"

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The two determined independently that this was their chance to strike and launched themselves toward Fwiss with all they had.

Nekt brought an entire warehouse down on Fwiss while Gadhio lunged toward his neck, his blade shining with spent life. They were both mighty attacks, imbued with everything the two fighters had to give, but in the moment before they struck, something went wrong.

Vwmmmm!

The world distorted, the speed and direction of their movements skewed, and both attacks missed their mark.

"What was..." Gadhio was certain he said the words, but it took several seconds for them to reach his ears.

"What did he distort this time? Just how far-reaching is this?!"

Nekt tilted her head around to see what was happening, but the movement

felt stiff and unnatural.

Fwiss, still bent over backward, bared his teeth and laughed obnoxiously.

This time, his distortion field had scrambled not only matter, but light, sound, time, and distance over a wide area. Within it, the human eye couldn't be trusted, a voice might never reach its speaker's ears, and nothing moved at the speed it was supposed to. In short, as long as Gadhio and Nekt were in its range, they couldn't predict the results of their own movements. Fwiss, on the other hand, had free rein.

"Second Phase!"

Now that they were unable to move, Fwiss focused his energy into the ring again, powering up another mighty attack. Like the ones he'd used previously, this would destroy anything it touched.

The distortion wave bore down on Gadhio and Nekt. Neither of them could move, although the latter had her teleportation ability available to her.

"Con...nection!"

Yet even that one jump stretched across several seconds. Nekt's mind raced as she tried to think through what was happening. As best she could tell, even the speed of her thoughts had been distorted by Fwiss's technique.

She managed to teleport herself to Gadhio's side and then teleport them both to safety just in time to avoid the blast. All she had to do now was get them out of the area of effect.

Her first attempt came up short. "We're still in this stupid thing, even on the outskirts of the warehouse district??"

"Can you pull off another one?"

Nekt nodded.

The farther they got from Fwiss, the more unstable his power would become. This time, teleporting was much faster, and they were able to successfully break out.

"Gah, that was awful!" Nekt slumped against the wall and let out a heavy sigh of relief.

Gadhio wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his fist and scowled.

“I wonder if he’s going to come after us. We aren’t that far, really.”

“Then we run again?”

“No, we can’t start drawing more people into this. We’ll just have to kill him here.”

“And how do you propose we do that? Last I checked, we didn’t have a leg to stand on.”

“We’ll have to conjoin our powers.”

Nekt laughed in spite of herself.

“Huh? What is it?”

“‘Conjoining our powers.’ It’s like you’re talking to a comrade-in-arms or something.”

“What, you still think we’re enemies? I hate to break it to you, but as far as I’m concerned, we’re on the same team.”

Nekt chuckled. “You think I’m going to fall all over myself for that kind of sappy stuff?”

Even as she spoke, Nekt’s cheeks took on a light shade of pink, though she tried as best she could to not draw attention to it.

Fortunately, even if Gadhio *wasn’t* blind to emotional nuance, there wasn’t time to notice.

“Listen closely; this is serious,” Gadhio said. “His Distortion isn’t unstoppable. I know it can be destroyed if we can just hit it with enough energy.”

“Yeah, I remember when you did that. Are you okay?”

“Don’t worry. My life lost its value to me a long time ago.”

“Flum would be pretty broken up to hear you say that.”

“I know, but as long as the past can’t be changed, this is the only option left to me.”

“That sounds like a pretty awful decision. Not like I’m going to try to change

your mind or anything.”

Nekt felt a wave of sadness wash over her as she heard herself say this. She’d wanted to at least pay Gadhio back for the favor she owed him.

“So what’re we gonna do?”

All things considered, Nekt would need to rely on him if she hoped to live.

She listened closely to his plan...and, as astonishment came over her, fought the urge to tell him how stupid it was.

Fwiss still had a fair amount of time before he ran dry. Even if Gadhio and Nekt kept teleporting around to stall for time, all they would achieve was the death of more innocents, giving Fwiss more to boast about and then claim that they were to blame. But that was all a moot point, as Fwiss ferreted them out a short time later. Gadhio and Nekt stood side by side, ready to face the threat.

“It’s up to you, Nekt!” Gadhio encased his sword in stone.

“At least we’ll never realize what happened if this all falls on our heads. Connection!” Nekt used her power to lift a building into the air. “Just when I thought he wasn’t going to show up, sure enough, here he is. I guess I’ll just have to... Huh?!”

Fwiss vanished. The floating building faltered over Gadhio’s head before it began to fall directly toward him as they both wheeled around to get a fix on where he disappeared to.

“Aww, did you two decide to stop being friends? Hmm...or I guess Nekt finally understood what this happiness I’ve been talking about really is!”

“Not a chance!” Nekt pointed aggressively at Fwiss to emphasize her point.

In fact, not only was Gadhio *not* crushed by the falling edifice—the resulting debris was being pulled into his sword until the blade was encrusted with a whole building’s worth of material.

“Wow...hahaha! Now that’s a pretty nifty trick, Nekt.”

Fwiss stared at the immense sword and laughed.

“This wasn’t my plan, all right. I’d never try something this crazy.” Even seeing it in action, Nekt still thought the whole thing was insane.

“Haaah...”

Supporting a literal tower of stone with his arms alone defied all sense. Watching Gadhio slowly lean back as he kept it aloft was a disarming sight.

“We’ll never win in a prolonged fight, so we need to throw absolutely everything we have into this one attack,” he’d said. “No holding back.”

Gadhio was right, of course. As long as they continued to just slowly hack away at Fwiss, they’d never be able to get past his defenses.

“You’ll need to use your Connection powers to further strengthen my sword.”

The way he spoke implied that this was the only way they stood a chance at winning, but Nekt had her doubts. She couldn’t endorse this plan right off the bat. It was preposterous. Impossible, even.

“Are you insane?? That’s just not possible!”

“We can do it.”

“No, we can’t!”

“Yes, we can.”

“Face it—it’s impossible, Gramps!”

“And I’m telling you that we can pull this off. I just need your help, that’s all.”

Gadhio wasn’t going to be changing his mind any time soon, so Nekt had little choice but to go along, reluctant though she might be.

“Now that I actually see it in front of me, I’ve gotta say...this is still a stupid idea.”

Alas, Gadhio was no longer listening to anything at this point.

He took in several deep breaths to control his breathing; his Cavalier Arts Sacrifice ability was still not ready. While his mind searched for a more effective way to bring this battle to a close, he came across an even more powerful energy source.

Just holding the blade up had brought him to the edge of his abilities only seconds earlier; a moment later, it felt practically weightless in his hands. He knew he could bring it to bear with perfect form.

Fwiss chuckled at the sight of the immense stone pillar, made a fist with his right hand, and wrapped his left palm around it to summon up his power. “To be honest, I hate fighting like a barbarian. I’m starting to understand what Luke was talking about. Ah, well, no time for that. Distortion Sword!”

Not willing to let Gadhio get one over on him, Fwiss conjured an indescribable object that twisted the very air around it as it grew higher and higher.

Nekt’s job was to ensure that Fwiss didn’t attack while Gadhio was still getting ready, but it looked like Fwiss had no intention of doing so. In fact, he was intent on being the bigger man and letting Gadhio get his attack in unimpeded.

“The first one’s on you, old man. Feel free to start whenever you’re ready!” Fwiss’s cheeks were flushed. He was enjoying himself immensely.

“Hng...ooooooooouuuuh!!” Blood trickled out the corners of Gadhio’s clenched jaw, and his eyes went red again as he pushed the muscles in his arms to the literal breaking point, shuddering ever so slightly as he angled the blade toward his opponent and every fiber in his body threatened to snap.

WHOOOSH!

Just angling the blade kicked up powerful blasts of air, forming a low-hanging fog.

With an immense scream, he swung the sword toward Fwiss. “You’re done!”

Fwiss primed his own “sword” to soak up the blow.

FWOOGOOOOOOSH!

“Hwaugh?!” The mere act of one blade coming into contact with the other created such a powerful blast that it sent Nekt flying. She managed to catch hold of a small pothole in the road and yank herself in before looking back up at the battle.

“Haah...haah...wow...he took the blow head-on and survived! Gadhio’s blade is still standing!”

The two opponents wound their blades against each other, neither side yielding. Gadhio's sword was simply so immense that Fwiss's Distortion couldn't destroy it. Gadhio let out another scream and pressed the attack. The ground gave way beneath his feet, and his arms threatened to bend.

"But...I thought he was doing one strike, giving it everything he's got."

Fwiss looked like he was still nowhere near defeat. He angled his blade, deflecting the force of the blow and sending Gadhio's sword sliding down his own sword's length with an awful scraping sound.

"Oh, no...if it hits the ground, he'll never pick it back up!"

With how fast the sword was sliding, it looked all but impossible for Gadhio to stop it. And yet...

"Nhgraaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Gadhio bent backward and recovered, eating away at his own life force all the while.

"He really pulled it off..." It was all Nekt could do to watch in a stunned stupor as Gadhio stopped the sword's fall.

Not wasting any time, Gadhio twisted his body to the side and wheeled at Fwiss with a powerful slash. Fwiss let loose with another Distortion blast, hoping to smash the blade into the ground and shatter it in the process. Gadhio howled, but he still fought his way through the force pressing him down and lifted the blade for another strike.

"Hahaha! I've gotta say, humans can be pretty impressive. I'd never have thought you could do this with your pathetic meatsack bodies!"

Fwiss's admiration for Gadhio mounted as the fight wore on. This widening rift between his own feelings and Origin's dread intent made his cores start to falter.

"Huh?"

Just as the blades were about to meet, Fwiss's sword began to wriggle apart.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Gadhio's sword smashed straight through the weakened blade with an ear-piercing *snap*.

It looked to Fwiss like the entire sky was coming down on him. He crossed his arms in front of himself to mount his defense.

"Distortion!"

Moments later, he heard an awful crash as the attack connected. Though he was spared from a direct hit, he and the sphere surrounding him were hammered into the ground.

"Haaaaah!" Gadhio hefted the sword and followed up with another blow.

"Nnnggaaaah!!" Fwiss's back was against the wall. The match was all but decided now.

"Please just give up, Fwiss," said Nekt. "I really don't want to see you die!"

"What, and do you really think the old man'll just stop if I say that I surrender?"

Another blow. Gadhio looked like a blacksmith working steel. "Haah...huff... that's because I know...you don't plan on ever giving up!"

"Heh, you're right there. I gave my life to Mother, after all."

The ground shook under them as another heavy blow landed on Fwiss.

"Fwiss... Gadhio..."

Ultimately, neither of them were in the wrong. This was going to be a battle to the death from the very beginning.

However, Fwiss's barrier continued to hold up under the onslaught. Gadhio just wasn't able to break through, although he was slowly but surely becoming more and more familiar with how to efficiently use this life force draining technique. If he could just push it a little further...

The prana energy pumped through his arms, into the hilt, and up through a blade so immense that it threatened to cut the very sky right open. The energy coursing through the sword caused it to shimmer like a mirage.

Fwiss chuckled, sounding resigned as he gazed up at the blade.

“I have to admit, you humans are pretty impressive...”

If nothing else, he finally came to understand that Origin was not the end-all-be-all power he had been led to believe. Perhaps he could have become this powerful without throwing away his humanity.

Gadhio roared and struck again. This one, however, was different: in addition to the weight from earlier, it also brought centrifugal force, speed, and prana to the table to create a particularly intimidating attack.

This was Gaea Breaker, the culmination of his art.

The earth ripped open and stone shattered all around them as a powerful whirlwind whipped up, pulling Nekt up from her hiding place and sending her flying.

Fwiss’s Distortion shield shattered like a thin layer of ice, and the sword caught him between the eyes.

The outcome of the battle was apparent before the dust settled.

Gadhio gasped and coughed as he dropped the blade and brought his hand to his chest. Blood sprayed copiously from his mouth. The discarded sword lost its power, and the stones and debris tumbled away.

“Ow ow ow...wait, Fwiss? Fwiss??”

No one came out unscathed, but Nekt was the first to get back to her feet. She immediately went about looking for Fwiss, making her way through the thick haze of dust and digging through the rubble by hand.

Her hand landed on something warm and damp.

“Aah...”

She leaned in closer only to find Fwiss’s eyeball smashed firmly into the ground.

“Fwiss? No... Fwiiiiiiiss!!”

She was standing directly in front of his dying body.

“Nekt...you...you’d really get that worked up over me...?” Fwiss smirked weakly at the sight.

“Y-you’re still alive? After all that, you...you managed to survive?”

As the dust lifted and Fwiss’s body came into view, it became clear that wasn’t exactly true. A single core remained connected to his body—the one which served as his heart for so long. Regardless, it was nothing short of a miracle that he still clung to life.

“I guess I did, huh. But wow, this pain...it’s unbearable. I’m thinking death may have been better.”

Gadhio stumbled over, dragging his leg behind him, and looked to Nekt for their next move. “What do you want to do?”

“I’m taking him back, of course. There’s still a chance to save him.”

“Eww, no thanks. Do you really think I can live a meaningful life like this, even if I am turned back into a human?”

“Frankly, I don’t think you should live at all.” With the most important part said, Gadhio continued. “But even normal people choose life in spite of its agonies.”

“Even you, old man?”

“Of course. Someone high on life wouldn’t throw their soul away just for revenge.”

“Huh...so I guess humans aren’t that different or special after all. Not like I wanted to be one.”

“Well, I’m still taking you with me. That’s what I want, and you’re just going to have to deal with it,” said Nekt. “Umm, are you going to be okay on your own?”

“Yeah,” said Gadhio. “I have some unfinished business, and I’ve got enough left in me to get myself there.”

“Got it. Guess I’ll see you around, Gramps. Connection!” Nekt held Fwiss close as her face transformed into an awful, pulsating spiral. A moment later, they were both gone.

Gadhio muttered under his breath. “How long does she plan to keep calling me that...?”

Though much of the warehouse district was reduced to rubble during the battle, there were still a few places that made it through relatively unscathed. It seemed a reasonable assumption that Fwiss had gone out of his way to ensure that the place where Mother was hiding wasn't dragged into the fray.

Gadhio's body was completely thrashed. A slow but intensifying, burning sensation began to spread through his body as his sense of pain returned. However, he couldn't stop now. Not yet.

He placed his hand to his chest. He could feel his inner flame still burning, but it was growing dim. Fear washed over him, but the thought of Echidna's face and his hunger for revenge put an end to that, as he embarked once again on his search for Mother.

Chapter 21:

Birth

ETERNA'S WATER MAGIC enveloped a baby, holding it in place. Half of its body was crushed; a mélange of blood and smaller babies drained from its wounds. The immense pressure kept them at bay for the moment.

They were currently in a park, where the battle had begun. The bodies of innumerable babies littered the area. The stench of blood was so strong that just standing there was enough to make it permeate your flesh.

The disturbing scene only added to Eterna's desire to get this battle over with as soon as possible so she could finally get out of there. And finally, it seemed like she was about to get her wish.

"This is the end of the road for you."

The water entered through the creature's mouth and into its body, smashing through its esophagus and burrowing downward until it took hold of the core. The baby twitched once before going still. At the same time, the tiny creatures stopped pouring out of its wounds.

"Well, that was a lot harder than I'd anticipated."

The more damage she laid on the thing, the tougher it got, to say nothing of the increased pace at which it milled out its tiny clones. Every time she thought she'd beaten the thing back, she found herself with her back against the wall again. Her shoulder and thigh had both suffered deep wounds, while various cuts and scrapes peppered the rest of her. Eterna used some of her water magic to wash out her wounds, but that did little to alleviate the pain that racked her body.

"The rest of the city's gone quiet. I guess I was the last to finish?" She looked slightly annoyed as she turned west. Smoke rose here and there along the skyline.

She never once considered that any of them would lose. Feeling assured of

their hard-won victories, Eterna set off for the Central District, where Gadhio was supposed to be waiting.

“Take that!”

Linus’s arrow shot clean through the huge baby’s chest, ripping open the flesh and piercing through its core in the process. It and its minions stopped in their tracks.

He wasn’t very good at dealing any sort of damage over a wide area, so the swarm was particularly challenging. He’d decided to redouble his efforts and instead focus exclusively on the main body. Whether that was the right strategy or not, he couldn’t yet say, but considering he made it through mostly unscathed, he had no complaints.

“Hmph. I gotta say, just assessing the damage isn’t doing my mental health any favors.”

He might not be hurt, but he’d nearly spent himself. Two days in a row of pitched fights was pretty rough.

“Well, I don’t hear anything. I guess everyone else is done, too.”

A little while back, he noted a monstrous clamor rolling out from the guild. Considering that whatever it was hadn’t made its way here to back up the giant baby, he figured Flum must have won.

“I’ll go meet up with Flum, and then we’ll look for Mother together. Man, what a day...” Linus ran a hand through his hair and started off toward the guild.

His battle now complete, Gadhio returned to his search and stepped into a warehouse. He was exhausted beyond belief, but he also knew that this would all be for naught if they let Mother get away.

The darkened warehouse was full of abandoned crates stacked high, up to the distant ceiling. The place was vast and offered innumerable places to hide.

Gadhio marched confidently straight toward the center of the building, closed his eyes, and focused his senses. If Mother had any special abilities that might

help him hide, then he was probably out of luck. But thankfully, he was betting Mother was nothing like the Children. Just a normal human researcher. Mother had no choice but to go into hiding now that he no longer enjoyed the Children's protection.

Gadhio traced Mother's presence, his sword in hand, ready to decapitate his opponent on sight. However, just as he was about to arrive in front of the crate that Mother had hidden away in, he heard a loud squelch beneath his foot.

"Gaa...hnngh...guuaaaah!"

A moment later, he heard a bestial cry.

"Oooh...ogo... go...puah...igyaaaa!"

Gadhio was met with the sight of a large man dressed in women's clothes... and a self-inflicted gut wound. Mother looked up at Gadhio and smiled, his teeth stained red with the blood that dripped from the corners of his mouth.

"Just what in the hell are you doing, Mich Smithee?"

This looked like more than a suicide attempt. Mother's maniacal cackling echoed throughout the warehouse.

It was hard to believe someone who had just cut their stomach open could sound so energetic. Clearly, he neither regretted nor feared his death. In fact, he seemed overcome with joy, pursuing it with fervor.

"Hey! I asked what's going on here!" Gadhio rammed his sword into the stone floor next to Mother's head, though the threat had little effect.

Mother responded between cackling fits of laughter. "Cae...sa...rean."

There was something about the excitement in his voice that made Gadhio sick to his stomach.

"A caesarean section?"

"Th-that's...right. To...give b-birth...to that...g-g-g-g-iant...thing. It's a...a strong 'un. A...a...a...little early...b-b-but...it'll...hang in...there." He looked incredibly pleased with himself.

Perhaps the pain was its own reward, the agony that racked his body

transmuted into a sense of elation. However, his heavy gasping betrayed his anguish.

Every time he moved, blood gushed forth like water wrung from a towel.

“I loved...the Children...as if...they were...my own. I...was the...i-i-ideal...mother...to them...to lead...them to...new...heights.” Mother’s face clouded over, his voice grew weak, and his skin took on a pallid complexion as he faded away. He’d said his piece and was happy to die there.

“Don’t go dying on me like that! Hey, hang on!!” Gadhio looked up from Mother’s corpse and turned his attention to a point farther off in the warehouse.

There was a trail of blood leading away from their location.

“A caesarean section, huh? So did he give birth to something? The final form of the Children, maybe?”

Whatever it was, Gadhio ran after the trail. If the giant babies were the third generation, whatever Mother gave birth to was the fourth. But if it had to be raised and nurtured in his stomach, it clearly wasn’t suitable for mass production. In other words, the plan was probably never even up for the church’s consideration.

“Huh. I don’t sense anything. The blood trail just ends at the wall. Where are you hiding?”

If this truly was Mother’s trump card, then that could only mean that it was more powerful than the other Children, even with their twin cores. It sounded like it might have been born prematurely; Gadhio needed to find and destroy it while it was still incomplete.

He waded through the crates nearby, his sword swinging, but nothing came crawling out. He struck the point where the blood trail stopped, shattering the wall in the process. Looking through the hole, he saw the trail stretching outside.

“So it can phase through obstacles, but blood still sticks to it. Huh.”

He couldn’t begin to imagine what kind of creature this fourth-generation

child would be, but he was more confident than ever that it existed as he continued to follow the trail, sword in hand.

Fwiss was set upon with a battery of magical healing spells before the facility staff hurried him to the operating room. Just as he did before, Satuhkie went in to talk to Fwiss and got him to agree to undergo the operation, though he took a little more time than Mute did to win over.

Nekt waited outside the operating room, holding a silent vigil as she watched the door and waited for it to finish. That was where Chatani finally appeared before her.

“There’s something plain wrong about watching you walk around,” she said.

“Well, you complained last time when I did it my usual way. I’m not sure what you want.”

“Hmph. Do you need something from me?”

“Satuhkie has granted permission for Mute to receive visitors. You can come and go as you...”

Nekt used her Connection ability to teleport then and there, not bothering to wait for Chatani to finish speaking.

“It wouldn’t hurt to at least let me finish...haah.” Chatani put his hand to his head and sighed. “No matter what century you find yourself in, those in power never change.”

“And who, may I ask, are you referring to?” Satuhkie stepped up to Chatani’s side.

“I’m pretty sure showing up out of nowhere is *my* move, Mr. Sato.”

Satuhkie smiled teasingly at his fussy companion. “I guess we’re all in good spirits lately. Maybe that’s why I feel like indulging my childish side.”

“A side effect of your kind deeds for the Children?” Chatani’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Kind deeds? Hardly. There was absolutely no need to save them. Worse yet,

each time we complete a surgery, the church loses another weapon. They're nothing more than wasted space now."

"Then why pretend?"

"I was just following your lead. Doctor Chatani, Flum...the two of you have given me something to dream for." Satuhkie spread out his arms and shrugged. Though his words felt hollow, sincerity carried through in his tone.

"Well, that's certainly not my intention," said Chatani. "I've always fought against Origin, and I will continue to do so."

"And that in and of itself doesn't give rise to grand dreams? Had I not excavated that location near Flum's hometown, perhaps I would have used some other means to restore this country. In that case, I would have... Hmm... I suppose I would have joined forces with Echidna. She's easy to please. As long as you give her a place to work and all the money she needs for her research, she'd play along. Then I figure we would have seized the demons' lands before suppressing Origin."

But that would have put him up against Flum. If they could find an artificial way to suppress Origin, they wouldn't need her Reversal.

"I have to say that's a worse fate by far than what I'm doing here," said Satuhkie.

"I'm not sure how valuable it is to compare where we are to futures that never happened. After all, I can only see the world I'm in now."

"Hmm. Ottilie had similar criticisms. But am I really so bad? I'm just doing what I think is right."

"As I said, I can't comment on hypotheticals."

Satuhkie looked visibly saddened by this non-answer.

"What counts as salvation depends on the observer, I suppose. Making one person's dream come true means denying another's. I believe those children are there to help balance the scales."

"Hence the decision process?"

"Oh, but they're the ones who make the decision. I'm simply providing them

with a comparatively better option.”

A smile graced Mute’s lips the moment she saw Nekt appear in her room.

Nekt slowly stroked Mute’s cheek. “Wow, Mute! I’m so glad to hear you’ll... Huh? When did Ink get here?”

Ink held Mute’s hand, tilting her head slightly at the sound of her name.

“Huh? Why the long face? We saved Mute, ya know. You should be happier.”

Mute’s body still bore the marks of when she’d made the decision to throw away her life, but otherwise, she had made a full recovery.

“You should be thankful that Flum got involved. Mute couldn’t have been saved without her.”

They had used a reversion core to nullify the power that had transformed her body into that of a monster. The Origin core in her body was also removed, replaced with that of a prisoner. Satuhkie had made all the arrangements.

Mute was now a normal human, just like Ink.

“I heard Luke’s operation’s finished too, so I’m sure he’ll be over shortly,” said Nekt. “And then Fwiss. Once we’re all together, as normal kids, we’ll be happy. Just like Ink. Right?”

Ink stayed quiet.

“What’s with you, Ink? Aren’t you happy for Mute?”

“No, it’s not that...”

“Listen, I understand. Life’s full of challenges. But hey, with the four...no, the five of us together, we can overcome anything, I know it.”

“Well...”

“Gah, you are such an awful older sister.” Nekt was growing exasperated by the sight of Ink’s sullen expression.

“Nekt...” Mute spoke up, her voice weak and hollow.

“What is it, Mute? I guess you can’t move much yet, but just let me know if

you need anything, yeah?"

"Nekt."

"I'm gonna be annoyed if you tell me you just want to keep saying my name. But...hey, I'll let it go just this once."

Nekt was just happy to have the chance to talk to her sister again. Mute could keep repeating her name as long as she wanted; she didn't care.

She had persisted for just this moment.

"Hey, Nekt..."

"Listen, I can't help you if that's all you'll say. Just tell me what you want."

Mute let out a slow, trembling breath before speaking up again. Her voice was barely audible. "S-sorry."

A tear appeared in the corner of her eye and ran down her cheek before she slowly closed her eyes.

"Mute?" Nekt gave Mute a firm shake, but there was no response.

Ink choked back a sob, and her shoulders trembled as she pressed Mute's hand against her forehead.

"H-hey, Mute. Didja fall asleep? That's pretty bad timing, ya know... I wanted to ask about what you wanted to do next."

Deep inside she already knew the truth, but she didn't want to accept it.

"Oh, Muuuuute..."

Without eyes, Ink was unable to shed any tears of her own, but the sadness she felt welling up in her chest was immense.

"Mute... Mute!! Say something! What's going on here, anyway? They said the operation was a success! We were going to become humans again and then live on like normal siblings, weren't we?!"

Nekt could feel the heat slowly leaving her sister's body through her palms.

"Nekt, Mute's...she's..."

"Shut uuuuuup! Why?! How?! I need answers! Someone needs to tell me how

this happened, and now! Satuhkie! Chataniiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

Nekt looked for someone to take her grief out on as it caught fire. The door slowly opened, but it was neither Satuhkie nor Chatani who answered Nekt’s calls. Much to her surprise, Luke entered the room.

“Huh, this is the first time I’ve ever seen you so worked up, Nekt. Looks like you were a lot more attached to us than I thought.”

His operation only finished recently, and his face was still deathly pale as his new human heart began to adjust. He walked unsteadily to Mute’s bed and sat on the mattress before running a hand through her white hair.

“What’s going on here, Luke? It all went so well, and now this?!”

Luke shook his head.

Nekt looked as if her heart was breaking. “It’s...not? It failed? You mean...you mean Satuhkie lied?”

Luke chuckled at the sight of Nekt’s trembling lips.

“What the hell’re you laughing at, Luke? Can’t you tell? You don’t have long either!”

“Eh, probably so. But think about it, Nekt. We were already supposed to be dead as it is. I mean, our names will go down in history as genocidal monsters. We gave living like humans a shot, but a shoddy plan like that was never going to go over well. In the end, we can’t change the fact that we’re murderers. Not like I really mind.”

“So...you did it even knowing you’d die anyway?”

“Nah, not exactly.”

“Then why?!”

Even as Nekt raised her voice, Luke just offered her a gentle smile and began to explain.

“They said that for your operation to succeed, there needed to be a sacrifice.”

“What?”

Nekt stared at Luke in shocked silence, but he simply shot a toothy grin back

in return.

“Hey, it’s not a bad way to die. Giving up my life to save something of value is a way better ending than just dying, like I originally planned.”

“Shut up!!”

Nekt grabbed Luke. Even knowing that being angry at him would do no good now, she still couldn’t help herself.

“Nekt...”

“This is insanity! This is all to help me? You mean that I brought everyone here just to get you killed?! I knew it was possible we couldn’t save you, but ultimately, I just sacrificed all my family for my own sake?!”

“If they told you, you’d never agree to it.”

“Of course not! I...I don’t want to be alone. If we can’t all be together, then none of this matters. That’s why...that’s why I...uwaaaagh!!” The strength drained from Nekt’s body. She dropped to her knees, tears rolling down her cheeks in despair.

Luke slowly turned his vacant gaze up to the ceiling.

“Mute was the same, you know. That whole operation thing meant to extend her life? Well, all through the surgery, she apparently helped them collect data even while she was in excruciating pain. Not a bad way to die, I’d say. You better burn her name into your heart.”

“Mute...she was a good kid.”

“That she was. Look, she’s even waiting for us. She doesn’t want to go on until we join her.”

“Luke, what are you...”

One look at his eyes told Nekt that Luke, too, was moments away from leaving this world.

Peacefully, quietly, and without any pain...Luke was about to make his journey to join Mute.

“I wonder if it’s happy there? Are we going...to...hell? I...see. We’ll...have a

second...chance with a...normal family. Sounds lovely. Great...even..." He reached out toward something no one else could see.

Nekt grabbed his hand tightly and called out to him. "No, don't go! You can't just say your piece and then leave! I can't be here all alone, Luke!"

"Heh...not bad, not bad at all...this 'normal' thing... I...really...this life..."

Luke's body went limp. He collapsed against Nekt's chest, no longer breathing.

"Luke! No, Luuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuke!!! Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!!" Nekt wrapped her arms around his head and held him close. She screamed so loud that her voice threatened to give out. "How...how could you die and look so happy about it? I just don't get it."

Ink had intuited Luke's emotional state through his tone of voice. It was the first time she'd ever heard him speak so softly. Most of the time he was pretty gruff, if not outright aggressive.

Nekt sniffled.

"They're just selfish, the both of them! F-fine, whatever. I guess I've no right to tell people how to live anyway! But...but still! What about me? What am I going to do left all on my own??"

The sound of her emotionally drained cries echoed throughout the facility.

The other Children might have gone willingly to their own deaths, but that did little to relieve the weight now placed on the shoulders of this young girl who was the only survivor of the second generation.

It'd been about ten hours since Gadhio found Mother and, joined by Flum and the others, carried out a massive search for the fourth-generation child. They pushed themselves to their physical limits, even mobilizing the available adventurers and reporters from Welcy's newspaper, but came up empty-handed. The blood trail came to an abrupt end.

The search party reconvened at the guild to exchange the information they gathered.

Flum let out an exhausted sigh from where she sat at the counter. “It looks like it’s out in the wild now, incomplete or not.”

“Assuming the letter can be believed,” said Eterna, “we still have a few hours before anything happens.”

“Put another way, it’ll finish its transformation if we don’t find it within the next few hours. Maybe.”

Alas, there was still so much that they didn’t know at this point that Gadhio couldn’t speak in absolutes.

“Hmm...but if that thing was growing in Mother’s stomach,” said Linus, “it can’t be all that big, yeah?”

“The Children put their lives on the line just to protect that thing,” said Flum.

It was hard to imagine they could have refused to help Mother fulfill his most fervent wish. But Flum was confident that this was far from over.

“It sounds like this Mother guy had some screws loose, but not in a *stupid* way. There must have been some reason for him to cut open his own stomach and just let it go, right?” Y’lla spoke to no one in particular as she changed Gadhio’s bandages.

No one here could use healing magic, leaving them with only the most basic treatment for their injuries.

“The thing wasn’t fully formed—maybe it just up and died?” Slowe’s words represented what everyone else in the room desperately hoped. Despite their best efforts, their search had ended with them coming home empty-handed. Maybe, just maybe, that was because the creature was already gone.

“Even if that was the case, I won’t be able to let my guard down until I see the body myself.”

“Same. We’ll focus our search on the West District next.”

Though still not properly rested, Flum promptly left the guild.

“She’s really toughened up, hasn’t she? She may even be tougher than me.” Linus stood up and followed after Flum, with Eterna and Gadhio joining them shortly thereafter once his wounds were fully dressed.

It was time to resume the search.

Y'lla and Slowe watched in admiration as the famed party left the guild.

"They're definitely heroes, all right," said Slowe.

"Maybe the rest of them, but Flum would never admit it."

"The way she battles all those creatures to fulfill her calling? I don't see how anyone could call her anything but a hero."

"She hates people looking at her like some superhuman Chosen One."

"Isn't that what she is?"

"Of course not. I can only speak from what I know about Flum, but she's not that outstanding of an individual, ya know."

"I guess I just see her from the point of view of someone she's saved. But now that you mention it, she does seem to act pretty much like you'd expect most girls her age to act."

She could grow depressed, feel greedy, experience the whole spectrum of human emotions. It was both her strength and her weakness...and the reason why Y'lla could never really bring herself to hate her.

Flum and the others ran all around the capital in their search for the "thing" Mother gave birth to. The clock ticked mercilessly on, and they had nothing to show for it.

Linus stood watch atop his perch and gazed out over the city. Nothing. He was sure he'd assessed things correctly, strange as it seemed. Either it was no longer in the capital or it already died and melted away. He became more and more confident of the latter with time.

The sun crested over the horizon and tore away the dark curtain of night. The four heroes met at the guild once again to share their scant observations. The city seemed the same as before; no one even observed any guards making rounds.

The hands of the clock continued their unending march forward.

If they had only known what to look for, then maybe they'd have stood a chance of stopping it. But the only person with access to that information was Echidna, Mother's fellow researcher at the church.

Their final day ended with a sense of uncertainty and foreboding.

"Happy Birthday to You."

The sky itself smiled upon the earth below.

The heroes gathered at the guild for the third time. With the coming of midnight, they were now on day 0. The so-called birthday.

mulF, suniL, anretE, oihdaG.

Slowe contorted his right hand until it resembled a bird and began whacking the floor. "Hey, look, Mom! I made a bird! Gahaha!!"

He repeated the act over and over until his wrist finally broke under the pressure, and he practically begged to die to escape the pain. Alas, it was to no avail.

"Just what...is...when did...the fourth-generation...child grow up...so...!"

Eterna tried to marshal her thoughts, but all that came out was noise. Noise, noise, noise. She clenched her hands tightly around her throat, a look of both agony and pleasure coming to her face.

"Haaannnguaah..." She began to bang her head on the corner of the desk. "Agauu...uugh...gyafu!"

Blood poured freely from the rapidly worsening wound.

There's still some time before the birthday festivities. Curl up in your cocoon and get some rest.

The blood vessels in Eterna's head opened up and turned into threads before slowly, gently wrapping around her.

I used to love sleeping like that as a kid. Mama would reach down and squeeze her hands tightly around my neck.

"Be a good little kid and wait for Mama."

She would always leave a letter for me when I came home. Mama had never been a good kid herself, but for some reason, she expected good behavior of her own. When I saw her charred remains in the wake of the fire, I couldn't think about how self-indulgent she was. She got what was coming to her.

At the same time, I felt a tremendous loss. As much as I hated her, deep down a part of me also loved that woman. At the end of the day, humans cannot escape the blood connection we share with others.

It was then that I realized just what a stupid, pathetic, enslaved species we truly are.

I, too, fell victim to the curse of blood ties. I found myself crawling around like a bug, clasping my mother tight and bawling over her charred body like the maggots that swarmed over corpses. I was no longer human. I was doomed to spend my days squirming like a worm, never to sprout wings.

I can still remember the taste of my mother's ashes. It was awful. And delicious. It was an experience of pure bliss. My love and hatred clashed and gave way to a perverse pleasure.

"Uuunnnggg... Slowe..." Y'lla slowly recovered from the blow to the head that put her out of commission.

She acts like a child, so I might as well make her into one.

"Nngaaa...! Aaaaaaugh! Aaaaaaaa! Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

Y'lla twitched and spasmed before losing control over her bowels and letting a stream of liquid run down her leg, dampening the floor. She swung her head around and around, drool trailing from her mouth. Ah, my child.

She's like me, in a way. Hahaha...I love it. I was holding back, but it's done now.

"Aa...aaaaaa...aaaa..." She let out small groans at regular intervals as her body shook. I could almost feel the beat. What a wonderful rhythm.

I had considered becoming a music composer when I grew up, but I think it's clear that murder suits me much better.

Next up, Flum Apricot. Let's drive those fingers into her soft, unresisting neck

and play her cervical spine like the beautiful ivory keys they are.

“Wa...it... Y...a...”

The back of her skull hit the ground with a loud *thud*.

“Agya... Hagyu! Egau...aa...agauh... A...gapaa...”

Tweet, tweet, tweet. I love it.

Time to play my next instrument: strangulation.

“Stop.” “Kill me.” “You’re wrong.”

“You have to.” “You’re not suited for this.” “Stay away.” “Disappear.”

How annoying. Origin’s wailing voice echoing through my ears...or synapses, even.

Frankly, I had little interest in hearing the alluring voice of God.

However, unlike the [M Subjects for Erasure], my isolation was incomplete, and my body automatically rejected its power.

So...cocoon, I guess? Mere strangulation didn’t seem right, so with the cocoon we went. Round, red, blood...it was adorable. And there was no fear of Origin interfering. The Children were created in there. And Flum Apricot would soon become my child as well, if she were to only enter.

I am Mother. The one and only entity that will serve as the universal force to bring together and complete the Children.

“Gaah... Hngaa...!”

If I just stabbed deep into the veins across Flum’s body and pumped what I had to offer into her, well...she was a [child] after all.

Next up, fingers clenched tightly into Gadhio’s neck.

My, how I hated him. It hurt so much, having to cut myself open like that just to give birth to my beloved child. How sad that I was forced to such painful means. Tragic, really. My mind went over and over the agony and pain I endured as I redoubled my efforts grinding Y’lla’s fingers deeper and deeper into Gadhio’s thick neck.

The thin fingers turned purple and began to snap one by one, but I knew she'd melt away and become my child soon enough, so it wasn't worth worrying over. The pain would be a celebration of the new birth.

"Ga...agauh...! That...ugly...you... Mother...!"

It was strange. Right when people were on the verge of death, they seemed to regain consciousness right in their last moments.

If only children would act as children should. They were going to fade anyway, so we might as well accelerate their ugly, rapidly withering lives toward their ends.

How boring. This was turning into little more than foreplay. How long would it take until this was complete? Hmm, yes, several more minutes. That was fine. In that case, there was no need to use my "toy" for mere child's play like this.

I released that Y'lla woman from my warm embrace and watched as she tumbled to the floor, where she vomited with a groan, her eyes blank and distant.

With that, I faded away, following my network of arteries that carried me through the capital. I began to use the fibers of those arteries to weave a cocoon over the capital. This would be my bassinet.

I am you...and you are me. I was born unto my mother as you, and your children, and their children as well shall be born unto me as their mother. This is the fourth generation. The completed form. The embodiment of perfection. The realization of a dream.

Congratulations. Thank you. This is my celebration...from me, for me.

Chapter 22:

Family

OTTILIE BROUGHT MILKIT and the others she rescued back to the facility beneath the capital for safekeeping. They were kept confined to their spacious room. Food came throughout the day and books were available upon request, but what they wanted most—news from the outside and information about the man named Satuhkie—was strictly off-limits.

The biggest change they witnessed after several hours in the room was when Ink was summoned and taken away. As they walked through the halls, the guard—he struck Ink as a mercenary—warned her not to make any attempt to go outside.

Hallom grew sick from the stress, causing Kleyna to get more annoyed with each passing hour. Was keeping them locked up in here really the best option? The answer seemed far less certain as time went on.

After a short while, Ink finally returned.

“Ink...?”

Milkit jogged over to her side and took the young girl’s hand to lead her into the room.

Her face spoke volumes. She was pale, like she’d seen a ghost.

“Hi, Milkit.”

Milkit led the sullen girl over to the sofa and sat down next to her. Kleyna brought Hallom over as well and sat down on the sofa across from them.

“Why did they only summon you? What did they want?”

Ink bit down on her lip at the frank question but made no attempt to respond. It was rapidly becoming clear that something bad had happened.

“I’m guessing you didn’t hear anything about this facility from that Satuhkie person, did you?” Kleyna asked.

She nodded.

“In that case, there’s probably nothing that Ink needs to share with us,” said Milkit.

“...You’re probably right. But I’d at least like to know what the place outside this room looks like.”

Kleyna made no further efforts to ask Ink any questions.

Milkit sat next to the silent girl, making no particular effort to comfort her beyond sitting next to her and squeezing Ink’s trembling hand in her own. A short time later, Kleyna finally left the sofa to lay Hallow down in bed. That was when Ink decided to break her silence.

“Maybe I was wrong.”

Milkit tilted her head to the side while Ink pulled her knees up to her chest and continued.

“Wanting everyone to live. Maybe that was a mistake.” She bit her lip again.

Milkit didn’t yet know about Mute’s and Luke’s deaths, but she could tell just by looking at Ink’s face that something deeply troubling had happened to her.

“Wanting them to be happy after killing all those people and committing so many terrible acts... I guess it was all pretty selfish.”

“Oh?”

In the past, Milkit would have sat and listened quietly while Ink let out all her negative emotions, but now she felt more confident in her ability to understand other people’s pain and troubles.

“If we’re talking pure logic, then no, that wouldn’t make sense. But I also think it’s entirely natural that you would want to help someone you love when they’re suffering. No matter how bad of a person they may be, even if they’re the worst person to ever walk this planet... If I were in the same spot as you, I would still want Master to be happy.”

Obviously, plenty of people would disagree. But Milkit saw nothing wrong with holding a desire, a wish in your heart. And if that wish was representative of your love for someone, well, then it might just turn into action, too. If someone asserted to you that that was wrong and rejected it out of hand...

perhaps that person had never lost something important before.

Ink smiled slightly at Milkit's reassuring words.

"I see... Thanks, Milkit. I guess you really do like Flum, don't you?"

"Wh-where did that come from?!"

"Huh? I mean, you'd still like her even if she took on the whole world, wouldn't you? I think it's pretty clear you'd go that far. Don't you think, Kleyrna?"

"That's right. I wish I were still young enough to talk about love in such a brazen and open manner. I'd be up to learn some of your tips and tricks, if you'd share."

"You too, Kleyrna? Please don't tease me like that. I'm being serious here..."
Milkit's cheeks puffed out, burning a bright shade of pink.

Ink and Kleyrna giggled furiously at the sight.

"Thanks, Milkit," said Ink. "I'm glad to know that I wasn't mistaken."

"I'm just happy that my words may have been of some use to you."

The two girls smiled at one another, though Ink still had a lot on her mind.

I know we weren't related by blood, but how can I be here smiling just moments after watching my sister and brother die right in front of me? But I'm lucky. I have people who will support me. A place outside my family to go home to. Maybe that's where Nekt and I differ.

This was a fortuitous change for her, but she also felt a certain sadness whenever she found herself speaking with her family. It was almost like there was an invisible barrier between them that dimmed their voices, creating little more than hollow echoes on her side.

"Hm?" Ink looked up as silence fell over the room.

"What is it?"

"Something strange's going on. My skin, it's all prickly..."

Ink's heart pounded in her chest, making her feel lightheaded.

“Ink?!”

She brought her hands to her chest as a pained expression took over her face. Milkit was immediately at her side to help hold her up.

Sweat beaded along her forehead; she began to pant heavily. “A-another... one of...us...is b-being...b-born...!”

Even the so-called failed first experiment could feel the reaction after living for a whole decade with a core embedded in her.

Her body began to burn in response to the change outside. “Milkit, can you please...help me stand...?”

“Of course. What’s wrong?”

“I need to go. If I’ve reacted this way...Nekt must have noticed, too!”

Judging by Ink’s condition, they really should have been calling for a doctor, but she was too fixated on those who were important to her to bother with that. Milkit, who understood the feeling all too well, wasn’t in a position to say no.

“I understand. It may not be much, but I’ll help in any way I can!”

“What about me?” said Kleyana.

“Wait here with Hallom. We don’t know what’s happening yet. Anyway, let’s go.”

“R-right... First off, to the exit!”

Milkit wrapped her arm around the younger girl and followed her directions to their objective.

Nekt stepped into the operating room right as Fwiss’s operation finished, the room thick with the coppery scent of blood. She ignored the researchers, walking to Fwiss’s bedside.

“Mute and Luke are dead.”

Her voice was cold, flat. She was merely conveying facts.

“Huh, looks like Mother’s finally completed the final form, too. You can feel it, right?”

Fwiss didn’t sound terribly bothered.

His chest was bare; the stitches from his reassembly were still an angry red. Nekt didn’t quite know why, but she did note that Fwiss could only move his neck and head.

“I have to say, I’m surprised that you’d do something like this for me, Fwiss.”

“Don’t be a jerk, Nekt. I loved you all almost as much as Mother did.”

“I feel like there’s a difference of at least ten orders of magnitude between first and second place here.”

“Not at all. Maybe three, max.”

This elicited a laugh from Nekt, and Fwiss responded in kind.

However, Nekt’s face instantly clouded over, and her laughter ended as soon as it started.

“You know, I’m not even going to ask what you plan on doing, Nekt. I helped my beloved Mother see through the most difficult of tasks, and now I’m helping out my treasured siblings. I can die happy.”

“I understand. Sweet dreams, Fwiss.”

“G’night, Nekt.”

This was the last time the two would ever speak. Fwiss wasn’t quite dead yet, but he would be by the time Nekt returned. Nekt swiped the core that had until recently been in Fwiss’s body and left the room for the storage locker where Mute’s and Luke’s cores were stored. With that task finished, she teleported from the facility.

“Nekt!” Ink heard the sound of Nekt’s light footfalls and called out from where she was waiting near the exit.

Nekt looked back at Ink. The look of surprise melted away into a gentle smile as she recognized her sister.

“So you’re going to try to stop Mother,” said Ink.

“Heh, even a failed project like you can feel that?”

“And how do you plan on doing this alone, Nekt? You can’t take down something that big, that powerful!”

“You’re probably right, I can’t do it alone.”

“Wait...no...Nekt, you can’t. You’ll die!”

“Let me ask this then.” Nekt’s voice went cold. “Who else besides me can stop it? You and I have a pretty good idea what’s going on out there. If we just stand by and do nothing, Eterna’s going to die. How can you love her so much and still be okay with that?”

“I... I...” Ink knew it was wrong, but she hesitated.

Milkit noticed Nekt smiling. Nekt noticed Milkit’s eyes on her and brought a finger to her lips, asking Milkit to remain quiet.

“But...I don’t like it, Nekt. Not one bit. Maybe when you said that you didn’t see any meaning in surviving alone, you meant that you were okay with dying, but with you gone, that leaves me all alone.”

“You’re not alone, Ink. Just take one look at the girl at your side, holding you up.”

“Sure, Eterna, Flum, and Milkit all treat me incredibly well and care for me. But...that doesn’t mean that I won’t be sad if you’re not here! I don’t want to lose anyone! You felt the same way when you went out to save everyone, didn’t you?? You’re just sad right now ‘cause we lost Mute and Luke and we’re *going* to lose Fwiss. That’s all! The people here are thinking of a way to deal with this, I’m sure. There’s got to be a way to do this without more death! Please don’t do anything rash!”

“You’re being unreasonable, Ink.” Nekt shook her head emphatically. “Don’t be rash? And do what? Think about how scared I am to die?”

But as the words left her mouth, she finally realized something. Mute, Luke, Fwiss...they’d all come here with the same intention.

They’d decided that they were going to die, and even as the situation around

them evolved, their intentions never changed.

“You should be afraid!” said Ink. “It’s absolutely normal!”

“Yeah, well, there are things that I still need to do. This place will be safe from Mother thanks to the reversion core, but Ottilie is the only one here who can actually fight. Even if she did go into combat, she’d only stall Mother. Besides, I’m not just doing this for me but for the heroes, too.”

It was true. There was no sense in denying it. Despite all the chaos above ground, the researchers in this facility didn’t seem concerned. The final form of the Children project—something even the church knew nothing about—had been born last night, and no one yet knew what it looked like or even how powerful it was.

If they could create some kind of weapon using the reversion core, maybe they stood a chance. But once Mother’s last child was complete, Nekt doubted there would be any survivors.

“Nekt...please...don’t leave me alone!”

Ink couldn’t think of any further arguments and could only mumble her final plea.

Nekt stepped close to her older sister and patted her head affectionately before mussing up her hair.

“See ya, Sis.”



Deep in her chest, Nekt ached with sadness even as she spoke the words. She quickly turned her back on Ink before she picked up on the change. She clenched her jaw and marched resolutely toward the exit.

Ink's cries echoed down the hall behind her.

Not so long ago, she would've brushed this whole situation off as an annoyance. Now that she'd experienced loss and the accompanying grief, however, Nekt felt a much stronger attachment toward this girl who'd shared eight long years of her life.

Stepping through the door, she made her way up a long, seemingly endless stairwell. Nekt's mind wandered as she made her way up, one step at a time.

Did Satuhkie recruit me knowing that I would do this?

Satuhkie couldn't know how powerful the final Child truly was, but he must have at least made arrangements. But Nekt had never seen anything that seemed like it could stand up against such a force, no matter how hard she looked.

That could only mean that Satuhkie counted on using Nekt when the time came. Time and again, it was clear he couldn't be trusted, but in the end, Nekt was choosing to do this herself. No one needed to, nor could, order her around.

Or maybe I had no choice at all. Heh, I'm no different from the others.

Even freed of your chains, it was no small task to achieve total liberty. Maybe there really was no way to truly become free without throwing away your life along with it. Put that way, perhaps Mute, Luke, and Fwiss made the right choice. They hadn't gone about it the best way, but with their hands bound and backs up against the wall, they'd made the best choice they could.

She reached up and lifted a covering to reveal a completely normal house on the other side.

Much like how Satils had concealed the entrance to her hidden chambers, Satuhkie also chose to conceal the entrance to his own facility by building it into a facade that looked like a home near the cathedral.

No one actually lived here, and there were none of the usual signs of life or

fresh death. The curtains were shut tight, preventing Nekt from getting a look outside.

Her first sight of the horror awaiting her was when she opened the front door.

“Wow, this is absolutely deranged. Were you really this far gone, Mother?”

She looked up at the wall of pulsating flesh rising high into the sky. Burrowed right into the middle of it was a giant copy of Mother’s face.

Mother, awoken as the fourth-generation child, was in the midst of transforming the capital. Red veins ran across the ground like tree roots, little cocoons sprouting from them and covering nearly everything in sight. They would slowly change color as they achieved a full sympathetic connection, turning purple when they were fully developed. Large arteries from the fleshy mass rising up into the sky stretched down to pump their fluids into the cocoons, prompting them to burst and give birth to large, flesh-colored babies by dumping them unceremoniously to the ground.

Many of them suffered broken limbs and other grievous injuries during their fall, but they would shrug it off and take up the attack on the capital.

“You turned all the survivors into your children...so I guess you still won’t think of anyone but yourself, even till the very end, Mother. You never harbored any love for us, no matter how much we hoped to one day earn your affection. And yet Mute, Luke, and Fwiss all gladly threw their lives away for you. What do you think, Mother? Did your children’s last moments on this earth impress you?”

Mother’s voice resonated directly in Nekt’s head. He made no attempt to answer Nekt’s question.

“Oh, my, it’s been a while, my second failure.”

“At the very least, you could have done the same.”

Nekt felt Mother’s self-serving words bombard the inside of her head in reply. “I have no use for you if you’re just going to stand in my way. You have no right to even consider yourself my child.”

Just as she’d figured, there was never any love there to begin with.

Mother shot one of the blood vessels crisscrossing the city straight toward Nekt's neck. She managed to duck out of the way, but only barely.

"In that case, you're speaking to all of us, Mother!"

Nekt used her Connection ability to narrowly evade the sharpened veins shooting out at her from all directions. Now airborne, she found herself pursued by a much larger tendril stretching from the wall of flesh.

“I’m really sorry to take advantage of you guys like this, but...I really need you to lend me your strength!”

Nekt pressed the Origin cores recently harvested from her siblings to her chest.

“Origin Core...Quartet Drive!!!”

The power of four cores coursed through her body as the diamond-shaped gems spiraled together, drastically boosting her power.

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauuuugh!!!” The skin blew away from her body, revealing a pulsing mass of muscle. The power was simply too great to maintain her human form...or even her heart. So complete was her transformation that it was impossible to tell who or what she had once been.

She didn't, however, lose sight of her enemy.

"Mooooooooooooooooooootheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!!"

Nekt spun herself faster and faster, until she looked for all the world like a crimson tornado, and launched herself straight toward Mother.

Chapter 23:

Reminiscence

LATE INTO THE NIGHT, Leitch heard the voices of people bustling about in the commons of the village where he sought refuge. They were staring at the capital, terror plain on their faces.

Leitch stood with his arm around his wife, Foiey, and gazed through the window in terror.

“Oh, Leitch...do you think Welcy’s okay??”

“I don’t know... I can’t even say for sure what’s happening, but I hope that Flum and the others are all right.”

A massive infant took up the space where the capital once stood. It had grown up right out of the earth, and its immense stomach lay draped unceremoniously over much of the city.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauugh!!” Though low and deep, the beast’s cry sounded just like that of a child fresh from the womb.

The cathedral where the church knights were based was already consumed by Mother’s body, but the soldiers themselves didn’t seem to be suffering from the same deranged state that overcame Flum and her comrades. They, like the castle itself, were protected by an Origin core.

“Ya know, Commander, I really don’t think it’s safe to be standing around here.” Rischel stepped out onto the balcony, looking over at Huyghe as the commander surveyed the city. Huyghe was too focused on the sight before him to respond.

Jack spoke up from the commander’s side. “How often do you get the chance to see Origin’s power on parade like this? From a front row seat, no less.”

Bart fought back the urge to vomit. “Is it really that interesting? Maybe he’s watching something else.”

“Hah, that’s just a question of personal taste. I think it’s quite beautiful.”

“Gah, it smells so awful, I...blaaaaugh!”

“You’ve got some disturbed tastes, Jack.”

Bart heaved again, his mouth stained with vomit.

Rischel knelt next to him. “You really don’t need to be here if you’re gonna keep getting sick like that.”

“I only came because I heard that...all the lieutenant commanders were summoned for a meeting. I couldn’t be the only one to miss it. Gluuuuugh!”

“This isn’t a meeting, ya know. We just came to join the commander. Your presence is hardly required.”

“Sorry,” said Jack, “that was my fault. I called Bart here so I could share this wonderful sight with him, but I guess he can’t quite appreciate the beauty.”

Rischel rolled her eyes. “Jaaaaack. You know Grandpa here can’t handle that.”

“I told you, don’t call me...blaaaaaugh!”

Bart felt as if he were living in a nightmare, enveloped by the smell of sick and visions from hell.

As they watched, one after another, the cocoons covering the city broke open and gave birth.

Back at the castle, another group of people were watching the same sight unfold from their own balcony: Echidna, the head of the Chimera project, and her assistant, Werner.

“I have to admit,” said Echidna, “I had my doubts about the Children project’s ability to ramp up production, but I guess they had a plan.”

“This goes beyond mass production... This is something else entirely.”

“Well, it’s a plant, after all. After swallowing the city whole, it turned all the remaining survivors into weapons. When you look at it that way, it’s a highly efficient way of doing things. Far better than the Necromancy project.”

“Better? Huh.” They were surrounded by a broken hellscape, but apparently, Echidna didn’t quite see it that way.

“You know, if they’d just shown this complete version to the cardinals sooner...”

“Then they would’ve given their official endorsement to Children and not Chimeras?”

Echidna’s lips twisted up into a mix of a sneer and a smile. She leaned in close to Werner before cackling in his face.

“Oh, is that what you really think, Werner? That my sweet, adorable Chimeras are somehow inferior to these tasteless, miserable Children??”

Honestly, thought Werner, I don’t see much of a difference in that regard...

He fought the urge to speak his thoughts aloud, knowing that one wrong step could leave him on a gurney borne for the operating theater.

Werner spread out his arms in a gesture of peace. “Hey, hey, no one ever said that the Chimeras were anything less than the best creatures out there.”

“Hmm, that’s right. My Chimeras are great, powerful, and adorable to boot! It has been decided by divine providence, by fate itself! I will see to it that the completed fourth-generation Children and that super-powered child of the second generation are all destroyed!”

The red fibers surrounding Nekt transformed freely from razor-edged whirlwinds to blades to battering fists as she fought off the onslaught of Mother’s new Children and Mother’s tendrils. Echidna sat back in her chair, crossed her legs, and watched the battle play out.

Human life, at its core, is about exerting your will over others. Be it love, affection, or sexual desire...pursuing any of these is a constant battle of wills until someone caves in. The real winner, though, is whoever stands proudly and without shame at the top of the food chain.

“I am Mich Smithee.”

Wrong.

"I am Mich Smithee, but you can call me Mother."

No, I'm Flum Apric...

“Mother. Mich. Mother. Mother. Mother.”

My...head. It feels like it's...going to buuuuuuuuuuuuaaaaaaaaa!

As you can see, once someone has given up, their only other option is to acquiesce. If the loser is just going to sit around and cry for the remainder of their sad life, it's far kinder to just wipe them out entirely. If Mich Smithee is the winner, then the other Mich Smithee may as well be the loser.

“Such is the life I’ve led...and so will you.”

It was trivial to change someone's expression, just as Mute could do with her Sympathy, but that would do little more than substitute Mich Smithee with an α version of himself. If this α version became one of Mother's children, then α would have to quit being α and instead become Mich Smithee if it wanted to become the best child it could be.

The red blood vessels pierced through the flesh and pulsed as they dug deeper. They began to pump, pushing “me” into the body.

“Why was I born? If only no one were looking, I’d kill you in an instant.”

I distantly recalled hearing my mother say such venomous words to me. Day in and day out, she worked hard as a whore on the outskirts of town just to put food on the table, but unfortunately, she just couldn't scrape up enough to afford an abortion. What was truly odd, though, was that something in this whore's moral code wouldn't just let her throw her child away.

“I could have at least put you to work on the streets if you were a girl, but no one in this town would pay much for a night with a boy.”

Perhaps that was what kicked this all off.

Once, when I was around five years old, I dressed up in girls' clothes and showed off in front of my mother when she was in a bad mood.

“Stop wearing my clothes like that, it’s disgusting! You want to be a whore like me? Then just be born as a girl next time around! Why the hell were you born as a boy, anyway?! And why did you have to look like me, you ugly piece of

trash? I feel sick just looking at you. Die, diiiiiiie!!!”

From that point forward, she started actually making concerted attempts to kill me.

She knew she was under scrutiny, so she did things like shove my head under the water in the bath until I was on the brink of death before she’d let up. As the torture continued, I started to just laugh it off entirely.

“No way, you have to be ill. I...no, stop it, don’t look at me! This is all your fault! Your fault, you hear me??”

As I grew older and my mother passed the prime of her whoring days, she caught some sort of sexually transmitted disease and sickened, growing even more emotionally unstable.

At the same time, both my mother and I grew quite thin. Was it sickness or just our empty pockets? Who can say?

“Hot, it’s too hot! Help...oh, Mich, sweetie, would you be a good boy and...help...stop it! You’re my child...aa...gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!!”

And then that fateful day came. Flames erupted in our part of the Central District. Many of the hookers living in their cheap lodgings went up like matches with their tawdry homes. Mother had a hard time escaping the fire; her leg was hurt, and I—well, I splashed gasoline on her.

“You stupid son of a...! Gyaaugh! You’ve really done it now! You’re cursed, I tell you...cuuu...gaaa! Aaaaaaugh!”

I escaped with my life and came back later to find her corpse, where I finally had a chance to hold her like an affectionate child. I held her, brought my face close to hers, and whispered into her black, crisp ear.

“How did it feel to have all your flesh burn away?”

I’d seen her engage in fetish play countless times before. It must have been pure ecstasy for her to burn alive.

I leaned in, bit her ear off, and chewed. This was the first time I’d ever tasted human flesh.

But that was just the beginning. I wanted to give everything I had in the hopes

that the world would finally understand why I became who I was.

It was warm and red, comforting and sickening all at once. This new womb colony.

Of course, when α became Mich Smithee, it attempted to suppress its identity. However, there was little a child could do in its mother's womb other than kick her stomach as hard as possible. Perhaps a true mother would think it was cute? That's why I was so gentle when I stroked my tentacles across them.

"I'm Mother. I'm Mich Smithee. I...I'm...I am...Mil...kit...right. I...I am...I. I'm Flum Apricot. And I won't let you win!"

Aah, what a pain, that power within you.

There were good and bad sides to transforming α , of course, but ultimately, Papa was little more than the father here. And I was the mother. Mothers hold domain over all matters related to their children, and this was no place for Papa to intervene.

Come now, drink up. Yessss, drink up. Now become me.

"No...thanks. I...don't give a damn...about your past!"

Now that's not nice. And here I thought you'd understand me. You even saved Ink and let Mute and Luke go without putting the final nails in their coffins. We're all murderers, and yet you reject me?

"No...no. You're the one who's hurt all these people, acting like a victim the whole time! I don't care what your mother did. That has nothing to do with your absurd fetishes. That's all on you! You ruined these children's lives for your own amusement; you've killed people for fun! You're just a sick bastard who has made countless people miserable for your own benefit!"

The children enjoyed themselves when they killed. We are alike, they and I.

"You've got no right to talk; you're the ringleader of this circus! You gave them no other choice!"

How annoying. Why must you be so irritating? I'm Mother...your mother. You must never disobey your mother, you know. The same goes with Nekt. Disobeying your mother is very unchildlike. I guess I'll just have to make you a

child then.

The blood vessels spun as they drew closer and pierced the bone.

“Aaugh...aaah...agauu...gya!”

Oh, my, how adorable. The way that your body twitches around and drool trails out of your mouth. My, you’re just like a baby. I’m going deeper; I’ll make you even more adorable. The tips of the blood vessels will invade your brain and flush it out.

“Gahii...kii...hyuu...aa...aaa...aaa...wauh...wara...hi...gyi...gaaa!”

Well, Flum Apricot Mich Smithee? Well, Mich Smithee Flum Apricot?

...Well, Mich Smithee?

“Noooooooo! No, no, noooo!! Aaaaaaaaugh!!”

I pump it in even harder, in higher concentrations.

Say, can you feel it? Can you feel me? Me...me...me...

After my mother died, I cut my own throat to commit suicide, but the church saved me. I studied day in and day out in that church, which was how I encountered the Origin cores and came up with the plan for the Children. The first generation failed. So be it—she was trash anyway. I got over my pain and became even stronger for it. The second generation was much better than the first, but still a failure. I tried every experiment I could think of to raise the ideal children, but they all fell short. They were pathetic little wretches that got underfoot; I made them dependent upon me so I could use them as needed.

“What...are you talking about? Those children...th-they love you...like a real mother! Just like a real family! And yet this is how you...gyaugh!”

Well, if you still can’t understand me, I’ll just have to add some blood vessels, agitate your brain some more.

I wanted to be a mother. A mother. A real mother. So I continued my experiments. The third-generation Children were born in test tubes; they were closer than the second generation ever came to my ideal. But just when I was about to bring the tests to completion...the church demanded I cancel the Children program and destroyed my lab. But I refused to give in. All the

setbacks, all my struggles—they only made me stronger. The fourth generation was so close to completion, so I embedded it into my own body and used my sacrificial pawns to buy more time. After all the trials I had been through, I finally, finally gave birth under my own power and became a mother.

“No...way! You’ve...accomplished...absolutely...nothing...!”

Hm. I guess I can see why Origin has treated you so differently. “It’s no use,” “it’s pointless.” With so many voices running through your head, I guess it makes sense that you just ignore me.

Or maybe Origin isn’t all that different from us humans? Papa is subservient to Mother, and since I’m Mother, that means that Origin shouldn’t be able to stop me.

Well, then. I guess I need to just dig deeper to make sure α is completely wiped out with Mich Smithee.

“Hyaguuuu!”

I’ll start by piercing her palms and feet, crucifixion-style.

“Aaaugh!”

Thighs. Side.

“Gya!! Ggggaaa!”

Cheeks. Forehead. Neck. Navel. Calf. Chest. Shoulder.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!!! Back off! Just stay out of me!!!”

Considering I was born unto myself, I’m being all that a mother should. This is the greatest of joys. So why do you resist me? Haah, just stop resisting and accept me.

The masked woman ran alone through the unrecognizable capital. “Haah... haah...haah...”

She might have stood down if someone told her this was the will of God. But until then, she couldn’t stand by and watch this happen. It was like her body moved of its own accord. An onlooker would probably laugh derisively at her

inability to make a choice; she would probably even laugh at herself. What did she want to do? What was she trying to do now? And where did she want to go?

“Haah...haah...haah...” She stopped. A squishing sound erupted behind her mask, and it filled with blood.

She clenched her fist tightly as she tried to work through the turmoil that came from that bizarre sensation. Looking up, she caught sight of the bobbing cocoons. Their color and intensity changed with the emotional corruption they were exposed to, starting out as a light, semitransparent red before darkening to purple.

“I wonder what kind of face you’re making right now.”

She hadn’t been able to find Linus.

She had hoped to save him, but there were too many issues she had yet to confront.

She stood before Cyrill, wrapped in her cocoon. It had taken longer to get her, possibly because she lost consciousness when she used Brave, or because she was a hero, but in any case, the corruption crept slowly.

“Judgment!” Maria lifted her hand and summoned a blade of light to cut the girl free.

Cyrill fell unceremoniously to the ground, covered in a thick ichor. Thanks to the slow progression of the corruption, she’d suffered only a few scrapes on her hands and legs.

Maria stepped to Cyrill’s side and cast healing magic on her injuries.

“Hnnnnnnng...”

Cyrill groaned in pain momentarily before finally opening her eyes...only to find a masked woman staring back at her.

“Whau?!” She moved instantly to put some distance between them, drew her sword, and took up a fighting stance. “Maria?! Wh-what are you doing here??”

“I came to save you. Take a look around. This is no time for us to be fighting.”

Cyrill wanted to shoot back a few words of challenge, but she chose to take in her surroundings first—the red, pulsing veins blanketing the ground, the forest of cocoons, a darkening crimson sky. Everywhere she looked, there was a new horror to take in.

“Wh-what happened... Where’s Flum? Eterna? Gadhio? Linus??”

“We’re the only ones with control over our faculties. If we don’t destroy this Mother, the completed version of the fourth-generation project, then we’ll meet the same fate.”

Maria gestured toward a cocoon and the massive baby that came tumbling out of it.

“Uuu...wauuugh!”

Cyrill shook her head in denial, wanting to believe for even a moment that the monster wasn’t once human. But the bizarre world she’d awoken to wouldn’t humor her denial. The massive head embedded in the wall of flesh above spoke up.

“No need to run, darling! If you love me, then just stay still, and I’ll love you more than you can stand! Oooooouuuu!”

Tendrils lashed toward them, unwinding and weaving into deadlier shapes.

“Just what is that thing?” Deep inside, Cyrill knew what the creature that took over the capital really was, but the way it attacked defied belief. It took a moment for her mind to catch up.

“As far as I can tell, that red thing up there is on our side. I know it doesn’t seem that way, but some of its consciousness remains.”

Maria’s voice was tinged with admiration as she watched Nekt press the attack against Mother. She turned her attention back to Cyrill, tone growing cold as she fixed her gaze on the terrified and confused young girl.

“It looks like she’s buying us some time, so now’s our chance. You want to save Flum, don’t you?”

Cyrill took a deep breath and nodded. She didn’t trust Maria, but she knew that Flum and the others were in very real danger. For now, they had no choice

but to join forces.

“Well, then,” said Maria, “let’s get going.”

“All right.” Cyrill stood up and, with a bright flash, summoned forth her Epic-tier equipment: white gauntlets, armor, greaves, a cape, and a headband.

They took off toward the mammoth cocoon where Flum was being held.

Chapter 24:

Friends

NEKT USED THE RED FIBERS of her body to spear the babies surrounding her and pump them full of her power of Connection.

Mother could have sworn he heard the brat's voice as the bloated babies floated into the air and shot like cannonballs toward his giant face.

"Why, why would you throw your kin away like this?! Why do you refuse to accept my love?!" Mother's voice bordered on hysterical as he used his tendrils to smack the incoming babies away. Each one disappeared in a bright red mist of blood and limbs as Mother mercilessly shredded his own creations.

Yet more came hurtling from another direction; Nekt was now using her power to teleport them in from farther away. The attack just wasn't good enough to penetrate Mother's defenses, so she tried something new: Rotation. The floating babies began to spin like large tops before they twisted and contorted into spear-like shapes that were promptly launched at Mother.

"Aaaugh! Now you're really making me angry! Who the hell do you think you are, you little reject?!" Mother tried to repeat the same blocking maneuver, only to find it useless against the new attack.

The meaty arrows tore straight through the tendrils and bore down on Mother, finding their mark in his eye, which exploded in a wet squelching noise and a shower of yellow, sticky liquid that rained down on everything below.

"Ow, ow...gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh! It hurts! It hurts, you little brat!!!"

The tendrils thrashed wildly in irritation. Nekt had gotten her strings into the new batch of babies he'd just given birth to, making them her weapons, too.

"And you think of yourself as my child?! You worthless pond scum, look what you did to me after how much I cared for you!! Not that I won't still treat you as my oooooooooown!"

Nekt paid Mother's tantrum little heed.

“Just give up, Nekt. You were one of my experiments; you should be ready to lay your life down for me. I’m the only one who can give your life any value! You should devote yourself solely to me! You understand, don’t you??”

The next tendrill Mother launched came in fast, spinning like a bullet as it moved. The Rotation powers of the fourth-generation children were leaps and bounds more powerful than the ability lurking in Luke’s core.

“I’ll enjoy listening to you plead for forgiveness as you spend eternity drowning in a sea of blood! That’ll teach you to turn your back on your parents, Nekt!!”

Nekt knew that she could escape the attack if she separated her body out into its constituent parts. She quickly shot her threads out and impaled the nearby babies. For a moment, it looked like she might repeat her last attack, but she poured a different ability into them this time: Sympathy.

The Sympathized babies gathered around a tendrill embedded in the ground and began to climb it.

“Ah! Yes, my adorable little darlings! I was waiting for this moment, so I could fawn over you and show you how much I loved you. Alas...alas... If you don’t like being in that world, then get back there and let that miserable failure truly appreciate your hatred!”

Mother tried to knock them away, to little effect. What’s more, the energy pumped into the climbers was about to reach its peak.

Distortion.

BAFWOOM!

They all exploded in unison as the Air Distortion Bomb went off.

The range of the attack was minimal at best, but the distortion field took any matter that happened to find itself inside it and twisted space and time to utterly wipe it from existence.

“...Why?” Mother was so angry at this point that he’d abandoned the maternal routine, wailing in a deep, booming voice. “Why? Why? Why, why, why?! Why, dammit, why???”

Obviously, all his anger was directed at one person.

Nekt let the fibers flow out from her body to form a large, red sphere that floated in the air above her.

“You miserable little failure...no matter how many cores you use, you still won’t be able to defeat me in my perfect form. Why is such a rude and impertinent little wretch like yourself even allowed to live in the same world as me? It’s ludicrous!” Mother regained his composure, mustering a forest of tendrils from the walls surrounding his face.

The tendrils spat out more children. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh echoed throughout the capital. Nekt merely stood by and waited patiently.

She’d held her ground against Mother when he was only wielding one tendril. Obviously, there wasn’t a rock-hard correlation between the number of tentacles and her power, but it was clear that the more of them Mother had at hand, the worse Nekt’s chances became.

“I just don’t get it, I really don’t! This is why parents need to punish their children!!”

Fwoooooooooosh!

Spinning tendrils rained down on Nekt. She let her body fall apart once again, but before she could pull herself back together with the interconnected fibers, she found that the powerful whirlwind was fighting to keep her apart. The strings tangled and tore, blood spraying everywhere.

“I’m not done yeeeeet!”

KWABOOM!

The tendrils grew in number until they resembled a massive pillar, before slamming into the ground and shredding Nekt’s body.

“Foooooound iiiiiiit!”

Mother discovered the four cores wrapped tightly in Nekt’s fibers. He mercilessly smashed them to the ground and rained piercing blows on them. As the vital cores took more and more damage, the discarded fibers began to come together, intertwine, and change shape until they once again resembled a

human.

“Oh, Nekt. You know, I always thought about making you one of my own. Yes, you’re a failure, but I figured that if I could just rebirth you, maybe then I could love you. But...well, now that it’s come to this, I’m just so sad. You know, from the bottom of my heart... Gaaaaaaah!!”

Massive tears dripped from Mother’s eyes, looking for all the world like tears of sadness.

Nekt used the last of her power to move the loose fibers of her muscles and spear more of the babies.

Even though she couldn’t work up enough strength to speak aloud, she somehow knew that her feelings were getting through to Mother.

“You...are...an absolutely...disgusting...abomination!”

“Huh?”

“That’s...not love. None of it. Your stupid game of playing at being a mother... it’s nothing but an annoyance. Just leave us out of your sick desire to play with people like they’re living dolls.”

It almost looked to Mother as if Nekt were smiling, even though she had no mouth.

“Hahahaha... gyahahahaha... Aaaahahaha!! Just up and die already!!”

THWUMP!

The massive tendril stabbed through Nekt. She was only as tall as a large human, making the size differential between the two truly enormous.

THWUMP!

The next blow practically smashed her body to pulp.

THWUMP! THWUMP! THWUUUMP!

Nekt was little more than a blob, no longer recognizable from the creature she’d been moments before. Yet the muscle fibers continued to twitch as the four cores took over.

“Haah...haah...you got what you had coming, kid. In fact, I think I may have

even gone easy on you. Ha...hahahaha! I wouldn't even mind if you're still alive. Then I can give you the agonizing punishment that you deserve."

With Nekt out of the fight, Mother finally turned his attention elsewhere.

"Hurry up, Cyrill! Mother's noticed us!"

"I know! It's just...the shell, it's too strong to break through!"

Maria and Cyrill were trying to hack into the cocoon where Flum was locked away.

"She's beyond help, I'll have you know."

Mother finally realized what Nekt had been doing. She'd known all along that she could never win with the difference in their power, but she'd still used her four cores to bring the battle to Mother. She never planned on winning—only to buy time for her friends.

"Heh, and you couldn't even pull off a trivial task like that. You're a failure, from start to finish. A disaster. Useless. The only value your life ever had came from me."

The tendrils turned toward Maria and Cyrill.

"Cyrill, can you use Brave yet?"

"N-no, I'm sorry."

The nightmare world surrounding them was probably a familiar sight to Flum by now. Even Maria wasn't terribly surprised by what she was seeing. Cyrill, however, was approaching her limit.

Maria had little faith in her at the moment. Though it might have done some good for Cyrill to have Flum close by, she was in no emotional state to properly execute Brave.

"All right then, I guess it's up to me to buy some more time. You keep working on getting Flum out!"

Maria stood up and turned to face the oncoming tendrils. Though human in form, she possessed an Origin core that continued to war with her body. None of that changed the fact that she stood no chance against Mother, though she

at least knew that she could resist Origin's spiral energy better than Cyrill.

There's no way that Mother will let this cocoon become damaged, which can only mean that these tendrils are merely a threat.

THWUMP! The tendrils speared straight to the ground right to her side. The ground beneath her feet shook from the blow.

After the initial shock, then he'll send in the babies and... No, that's not right. He's too far for that. Which could only mean that I'm the target!

The surface of the massive tentacle began to split, making way for countless tendrils beneath to shoot out.

"Judgment Spiral Rain!!"

With a wave of her right hand, Maria summoned a shower of whirling blades.

Every tendril that tried to close in on Cyrill was cut down, but she could never conjure enough blades to counter the volume of attacks bearing down on herself.

"My, my, you're a clever one. I take it you've been completely abandoned now, fallen sister?"

"...Sin Judgment!!" Maria had no interest in engaging with Mother's taunts. She chained one attack into another, this one summoning a much larger blade than before. "Spiral Edge!!"

The blade spun with the power of Origin and chopped through the tendrils.

Mother's body wasn't just durable in its own right; it was also protected by the power of Origin coursing within. Nothing short of a fully committed strike would penetrate Mother's hardened flesh and Origin-conferred wards—hence Cyrill's struggle to open the deliberately fortified cocoon.

The tendrils were far softer by comparison, but it still took a significant amount of magic to cut through them. Knowing this, Mother must have figured that a failure like Maria never stood a chance at causing him any harm, though these spinning blades were about to force him to rethink that.

"How is it that you are able to tap so much of Origin's power? It's more than any other core user I've seen. You don't strike me as some kind of fanatic..."

which can only mean that you must be hiding something deep inside that fleshy little body of yours!”

Mother launched another tentacle; Maria met it head on with her blade. Though she countered it blow for blow, the exertion was taking its toll on her.

“I’m going to rip you open and see what you’ve got in there!” More and more tendrils came flying in.

Maria was already at her limit squaring off against one tendril, so it looked like she wouldn’t be able to stall for time much longer. After confirming that their battle was taking place at a safe distance from Flum’s cocoon, she decided it was time to raise the stakes.

“Spiral Rain Broken Edge!!” Tiny daggers slammed into the tentacles’ flesh, lit up with magic, and exploded.

“Closed Circle, Ray Light Reflection!!” A large sphere of light appeared, inside of which the rays of light bounced back and forth until the inside of the sphere was ablaze with white-hot flames.

“My, my, you’re quite aggressive for a woman of the cloth. Your magic is quite well suited for murder!”

“Hyaugh!” Maria’s face contorted slightly at this, eliciting a booming laugh from Mother. However, it did little to upset Maria’s mental state.

While Maria faced off against the tendrils, Cyrill found herself surrounded by newly generated babies.

“Spiral...”

“You think I’m just going to let you keep dragging this out? Think again!”

“Gaaugh!” Maria barely managed to block Mother’s next strike, but the sheer force of the blow snapped the bones in her right arm.

“As long as my core survives, so shall I. You are powerless against me and my unstoppable Children. But that goes without saying. I am the ideal mother, and it’s only fitting for the rest of the world to become my children as well.”

Maria tumbled backward, her face screwing up as she redirected her magic to assist Cyrill.

Cyrill channeled her heroic energies into her sword as she stabbed into the cocoon over and over again. “Flum... Flum! I’m going to get you out of there, I promise! Hyaaaaah!”

Unlike the multiple affinities that Jean and the Demon Chiefs used, magic based on unique affinities often relied on feeling and perception, and the technique she’d just used to power up her sword was no exception. It had come to her, fully formed and uninvited, and she decided to see what it could do.

“Let...Flum...go!! She’s my friend, and you’re not going to get in the way of that!!” Cyrill blocked out everything around her but her task.

Maria somehow managed to hold her own against Mother while also frequently turning her attention to the incoming swarm of babies, annihilating them, too.

Even as lightning flashed past her and her surroundings exploded, Cyrill remained unfazed. Call it hope that Flum would save her from her downward spiral or call it conviction that this one deed would be penance for her past sins—whatever the case, she was so frenzied that she teetered on the edge of insanity.

The story Maria told her on the way to the cocoon only spurred her on more.

“Flum’s already fought a great many of these Origin core-based creatures. Even after being sold into nearly literal hell by Jean, she learned that her reversal powers gave her the ability to use cursed equipment. She may still get beaten down, sure, but she keeps getting back up every time. She’s completely transformed. She’s like an entirely different person.”

Of course, none of this was technically Cyrill’s fault. Yet in spite of all her hardships, Flum had pushed through the pain of being sold into slavery, through fraught battles with terrifying monsters, and managed to find the strength to fight on. She’d had a far harder and more arduous road than Cyrill had as a hero, and yet, she refused to give up.

If she couldn’t save Flum, the real hero in her mind, then Cyrill Sweechka could no longer claim the title of hero for herself, much less forgive herself for as long as she lived.

She was doing this for someone dear to her. She was doing this for herself. These dueling motives finally found the place they converged, in a brilliant, unyielding point from which she would not be moved.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh! Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!”

Her focus narrowed to a single, perfect point that verged on madness.

Mother was beginning to grow frantic.

Flum had long passed the saturation point of where the transformation should have been complete, and yet, it wasn't working.

“Uung...haaah...gyaugh!”

He understood why Origin needed Flum and why he was doing this. But the longer this went on, the more obstinate the researcher in him grew.

“Haa...aaauh...fauuu...”

She was only barely conscious, floating in a dim, hazy state as her injuries were invaded and pumped full.

“Agyauh...gahyiiiiiii!”

Eyes wide. A scream. Useless. Panic. Open up another wound and insert a blood vessel.

“Agyaaa...gaggaa...gyiiiiiii!!”

Insert, insert, insert. Pump her full of “me”...nothing.

She had to understand all the memories, all the tragedies endured. So why?

“You just don't know when to give up.”

“I think...I finally understand...how you can still...hang on to your sense...of self even...while using all this...Origin power.”

People who used Origin cores quickly lost their sense of self as they became less and less human. However, despite Mother's shocking transformation, that hadn't happened to him.

“Oh? And what do you think you know? This is all thanks to my diligent

work!”

Mother had created this child precisely to ensure that he could forever maintain his sense of self. The Chimera project had stolen various technologies from its rivals in the Necromancy and Children projects, but the theft went both ways. Mother had also stolen the secret to suppressing Origin’s will from the Chimera project.

“I have maintained my mind—my dreams—all to make sure that I become the mother I deserve to be.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Flum unceremoniously shot Mother down. “It’s loneliness. Everything in this...world...exists...for you to use...to achieve your goals. You resist...all connections. Even the children that loved you...so much...you discarded like tools.”

“So what are you trying to say? Those children served their purpose. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Flum chuckled weakly. “I guess you and Origin have a lot in common. That’s why you haven’t been consumed.”

“And knowing that changes nothing, you know, so why don’t you just give up and listen to me, Flum Apricot—or should I say ‘Mich Smithee.’”

Mother’s power reserves were a long way from running dry. He knew that there was no way that this little upstart could keep resisting him.

However, Flum had found a weakness in Mother’s corrupted mind. Or, better put, a weakness in Origin itself.

One of Origin’s unique characteristics was the fact that it would connect or bond with things, though that connection was always incredibly one-sided. Connect, invade, assault...that was how it took control.

Though bonds between people and connections between objects might seem similar in concept, they were nothing alike. Sure, on some level, connecting all living beings into a single entity would eliminate the risk of further adverse relationships between people. It was hardly a surprise that some people and organizations would praise such a complete sense of peace. On the other hand, such an act would also mean the death of all feeling.

“...Milkit.”

Any time things got hard, Flum’s mind wandered to her. Only now did it occur to her that perhaps that was what saved her.

This was something that neither Mother nor Origin could ever understand: Human relationships were difficult. Peace was elusive; gruesome war was omnipresent. It was the curse that humans had to bear—but also the source of their strength.

“No matter what happens, I’ll always be me, no matter what. You can never make me into your image, Mother. Not until I see her again.”

Mother cackled at Flum’s defiance. “What’s this, refusing to acknowledge the fate that awaits you? It’ll do you no good. No one can escape these cocoons. The best you can achieve is having your body ripped to shreds where it’s adhered to you.”

Even if it did tear her body apart, why would that matter? Flum could easily regenerate from that. She had nothing to lose.

“Besides, all this talk means nothing if you can’t even move, wouldn’t you agree?”

Well, then, she’d just have to make herself move.

Flum didn’t concern herself with debating human will or spirituality. Her heart simply longed for the presence of another. Origin and other lonely creatures like it might have protected themselves from the pain other people could inflict, but they also deprived themselves of the power that can be gained from the companionship of another.

Eterna, Ink, Gadhio, Linus, and Cyrill. And Y’lla too, maybe. There were so many people out there, and even if they didn’t always have the best of relationships, their existence gave Flum strength. And then there was the most important person of all.

The connection that we call love.

Flum’s feelings for Milkit were the source of the power that rose up within her...and Origin could do nothing to stop it.

“Ha...aaaaaaah!” Flum tensed her left arm; it was splayed out by the blood vessel piercing through it. She pressed on, feeling an immense pain running through her as she felt something tear away.

Flesh and muscle dangled from the bones of the back of her hand, but she wasn’t done yet.

“Mil...kit...!!!”

Only one thought ran through Flum’s mind, consuming her. She couldn’t think about anything else. She was filled with the desire to see Milkit again, and that desire gave her the power to force her body forward.

Next came her right arm, her back, and then her head. One by one she tore them away, losing flesh in the process as she broke from her bonds. Pain. Cold. Dampness.

The world around her was blurry, making it impossible to see. Her body also felt surprisingly light.

“You broke out of there on your own? Hmm...could it have to do with the collapse of the wall? Or...no...am I wasting away?! In that case...then that means...that means...that disrespectful little lowlife tramp!!”

Mother sent another tendril lunging straight toward Flum’s throat, but she caught it in her hand before it could make contact. “Reversaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

BLASH!

The inner walls of the blood vessel expanded and reversed, tearing it open in the process.

“This is as far as your reversal powers are going to get you. Let’s just see how much you can take before you’ve lost the strength to cancel out my attacks!”

Flum wriggled out of the way of the next blow before slapping it with her right hand and blowing it open.

“Those were supposed to be stronger!! Your magic is really getting on my nerves!”

“That’s not all! The power that drives me to move...to resist Origin...”

“Cut the melodrama and spit it out!”

Flum stuck out her hand and summoned forth the Souleater as she spoke. “Heh...a wretch like you who’s forgotten their humanity would never understand!!”

She rammed her blade straight through the tough red film, and...

Cyrill watched as a black blade came lunging out of the spot she was hacking away at.

“Flum? Flum!” Cyril struck with renewed vigor, widening the hole until it was big enough to catch a peek of Flum on the other side.

“Flum!!!!” She shoved her arms into the hole.

“Cyrill!” Flum immediately recognized the voice and reached out to her.

Just as their fingertips touched, someone—or something—grabbed ahold of Cyrill’s feet.

“Dammit... Behind you, Cyrill!”

A heavily injured Maria shouted out to her from behind.

The battle between her and Mother had grown so intense that she couldn’t keep the babies off of Cyrill any longer.

“Gyah!! Get off me!” Cyrill kicked frantically at the baby to get her leg free, but it only increased the strength of its grip until her femur threatened to shatter.

“No, Cyrill!”

If she let go, the exit they made would close up right behind her.

“Blade!! Impaaaaaale!!”

Cyrill clenched her hand around her sword; a bright glow surrounded it, growing longer. If she could just pierce through its brain... Even after several successive stabs into the baby’s face with her burning ray of light, the monster didn’t yield.

“All right then... Blaster!” A large beam of light shot from her blade, blowing its head straight off.

Alas, even that wasn't enough. The headless baby held tight.

“You just won't give up, will you??”

“It's no use, Cyrill! That's just one piece of Mother's body. Short of destroying the Origin core that serves as its heart, that thing just won't give up!”

A new baby crawled out of the severed neck and made its way up Cyrill's leg before using its hands to tear away at her flesh and burrow into her body.

I'm not going to make it... I'm going to die too, and I can't even help Flum. No...no no no! I can't let that happen!!

There was still one option left to her.

Can I do it...can I...can I really? Do I have the courage to, even after I've been so useless to Flum? No, that's not right at all. I can't give up because I couldn't help her—just the opposite. It's my duty to summon up the courage precisely because I haven't been able to help Flum, because I'm on the precipice of failure. I need to have faith in myself. It's not a matter of if I can do it, no. I must do it. If I don't, I'll just keep repeating the same mistakes, and I'm done with that!!

Her mind was made up. A fire burned in her heart. Cyrill squeezed her hand around the hilt of her sword when she heard a loud *squish* and felt a red thread wrap around her leg.

...Or so she thought. The thread pierced through the creature burrowing into her and tore it to shreds.

“Live...as you please.”

Mute's words suddenly came to mind. Or maybe she really had heard them again, just now.

She couldn't tell if it was a sound, a memory, or a voice on the wind, but whatever it was, she felt her heart warm.

“I gave up...it's over. I'm scared. But Cyrill...you gave this to me.”

It was Mute's voice, but she never heard the words before.

“I made...my decision. How to dream...live. So...I’m returning...the favor.”

Why was Mute’s spirit in that “thread”? Everything happening around her defied all logic and common sense, but she knew one thing for certain.

“Thank you...Cyrill. You were my...first...friend.”

Mute was dead. This wasn’t Mute resigning herself to her fate. It was a way for her to finally close the book on her life, while offering Cyrill a hand so she wouldn’t have to live with regret.

Cyrill clenched her jaw to fight back her tears.

Now wasn’t the time to wallow in her anguish over Mute’s message. No, she was going to turn that into her courage to honor the young girl.

“Braaaaaaaaaaaaaave!!” Cyrill screamed out to the heavens and began to glow.

A powerful wind blew past, blowing away every enemy nearby before a wave of light seared them alive. The red thread went limp and drooped to the ground just as Cyrill turned and shoved her fingers into what was left of the rapidly shrinking hole in the cocoon.

“Guh...graaaaaaaaaaaaaawh!!”

Riiiiiiiiip!

Bit by bit, the hole grew larger.

“Cyrill!!”

“Flum!”

The two women finally found each other’s hands, and Cyrill yanked Flum free of the cocoon, leaving chunks of her body behind where she was pinned down. She cared little for the pain at this point; she didn’t even grimace.

However, the cocoon quickly went on the attack, shooting tendrils out of the newly formed hole. Flum and Cyrill held hands and jumped clear.

“Why...? Why must you always do this to me?? You may have driven me back and put me in this awful position, but I will have the last laugh! Let’s see how you like it!!”

Mother's refusal to give in was born of his jealousy and mistrust.

"Don't let your guard down quite yet! I'm going to need some cover... ngyaaaah!" Maria was thoroughly exhausted at this point. It was all she could do just to fend off Mother's attacks.

Flum could still hear Mother's warped view of the world echoing through her head as she drew her Souleater into existence. She let out a loud sigh.

"It's a shame to be reunited under such conditions. Gah..."

"You can move already, Flum?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just leave these guys to me!"

Flum's sword was abuzz with prana and magic, and her eyes twinkled as she turned to face the swarm of monster babies.

"Enchanted Blade!!!!" Cyrill came to Flum's side, placed her hand over Flum's on the Souleater's hilt, and pumped her magic into it, wreathing the blade in light. The sword was so bright that it lit up even the darkest, gloomiest parts of the capital that had been thrown into shadow after the wall of flesh went up.

"We've got this, Flum."

"Thanks, Cyrill. Let's do this with one shot!"

These creatures, these masses of flesh and muscle had been human before becoming a part of Mother. No matter how many she destroyed, more would come. They were controlled by Mother's core, which was in turn powered by Origin. Assuming they didn't have any hearts of their own, they were essentially living representations of Origin's energy.

In other words, their hearts were exposed to Flum's reversal power at all times.

"Heimdall Grand Stooooooooooooooooorm!!" She brought the sword down and watched as the earth ripped open, a powerful gust of wind whipped up, and light beamed down all around.

What looked like a completely fantastical scene at a glance was a living nightmare for Origin's creatures. The hero lauded for her strength and the tagalong mocked for her weakness came together to annihilate their enemies.

When the breeze died down and the dust settled, not a single creature remained.

“Cyrill...?”

Cyrill turned toward Flum to find her with her hand outstretched next to her face. She knew what Flum wanted, but she paused for a moment to stare down at her own palm.

Flum smiled brightly at her friend. “I just wanted to say thanks again.”

“Flum...oh, Flum, I’m so, so sorry.

“Listen, I know I was holding you guys back. Let’s just say we were both wrong and let it go.”

“No, it’s not that simple.”

“Hmm...well, do you still think of us as friends, Cyrill?”

“Of course!” Cyrill brought her hand to her chest and responded without hesitation.

Flum blushed slightly and felt her heart well up. “Well, then, that’s more than enough. Really, I mean it. All this time I was worried that you didn’t want to be my friend anymore. So...let’s just keep being friends, okay? Now and forever.”

Flum smiled and stretched out her hand, palm side up. She tapped her finger against it several times. Cyrill hesitated for a moment. Could she really do this? Was it really okay? She slowly brought her hand closer to Flum’s until finally their palms touched. Flum closed her hand and intertwined her fingers with Cyrill’s with a silly grin.

“Hey, let’s go back to that cake shop sometime.”

“Right. Once we knock this battle out of the way, I’ll make good on my promise.”

The two young women looked up at the darkened sky and glared at the gargantuan shape of Mother’s face. He was shaking slightly, biting down on his lip in annoyance.

Free from the melee, Maria finally joined up with Flum and Cyrill.

“Thanks to you two, I was finally able to break away.”

“Maria...there’s still a lot for you and me to talk about, but let’s focus on working together for now.”

Maria blinked. It was odd for Flum to speak to her that way. After a moment, however, she laughed gently and nodded.

“I was just about to say the same thing myself.”

For the time being, at least, the three were united against their common enemy.

The sight of Flum and Cyrill together infuriated Mother. He bit down even harder on his lip until he finally drew blood, sending fat droplets to the earth below and staining everything in their path.

“Relationships...love...friendship... Why must you keep throwing such awful, hideous things in my face? You leave me with no other choice than to utterly obliterate you to make sure the world knows how right I am!!”

A massive tendril whipped toward them, spinning as it went.

“Let’s go!” Flum and Maria nodded instantly at Cyrill’s command. The three were united in their battle, if not in fate.



Chapter 25:

The Hero

CYRILL TURNED to the incoming tendril and focused a spell through her blade.
“Chaser!”

Though similar in power and function to her Blaster technique, Chaser exploded into hundreds of tiny, piercing rays of light before impact—each one of which Cyrill directed at different targets. The individual rays were obviously weaker than an undivided attack, but Cyrill focused on the spots Maria had already wounded, causing the injuries to deepen in some places and completely tear apart in others, thus maximizing her damage.

While Cyrill took a moment to bask in her momentary victory, a new threat emerged behind her in the form of a squad of newly born babies.

“Rain!” She threw her hand up in the air, summoning a shower of light.

The “hero” affinity made no distinction between light, dark, fire, water, or any other element. The closest choice would be light, but this was unlike anything a person with the light affinity could conjure up. Yet again, Maria found herself impressed by Cyrill’s power. It was easy to use, cost relatively little, was powerful, *and* covered a wide area.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Flum slammed her Souleater into the ground, releasing an explosion of prana that her reversal magic whipped up into a whirlwind. It made short work of the babies that Cyrill’s Rain already softened up.

Yet another tendril swooped at Flum; Maria ran to intercept it.

“Divine Protection!”

Her shield was only strong enough to withstand the first two strikes before cracks bloomed across it. The third strike landed hard, and the shield threatened to give way.

“Burst!” Before it could pierce through, Maria shattered the barrier herself.

“Spiral Fragments!”

Her technique caused all of the shards to spin wildly like miniature saws and embed themselves into the tendril.

The tendrils kept coming in, undeterred by their attacks and making little effort to avoid any harm to themselves in the process. As the impromptu team fought off one after the next, the once-powerful tendrils went limp and dropped pathetically to the ground.

Flum, already used to this style of fighting, finally spoke up during a brief lull in the battle.

“Hey, Cyrill, Maria...there’s something I wanted to ask you about.”

“Where the core is, right?” said Maria. “I have an educated guess.”

“It could be a trap, you know.”

“No... I think it’ll be fine. I can faintly feel its presence. Right on the other side of that ceiling is an Origin core.”

Flum looked up at the sky, at Mother’s face surrounded by the wall of flesh. It was way too high for them to reach. And even if they could somehow make it up there, it would all be for nothing if they couldn’t destroy the core.

But unless they destroyed the core, this battle would never end.

“I’m pretty sure I can fly you up there!”

Cyrill hopped out of the way of a tendril and let loose with a Blade attack the moment it struck the ground.

Flum shook her head.

“In that case, you’re just going to have to do it by yourself!” Maria dove out of the way of another attack and slashed through the tendril with her light blade.

“That’s the plan. Gravity Reversion!” Flum knocked some debris out of her way, waited, and leaped into the air just as a fresh tendril swept in.

She careened skyward, chopping through a tendril as it presented itself, kicking off the severed tip, and ending her spell as she rammed her sword into its spasming root.

“Did she just...fly?! Wow! Go, Flum!!” Invigorated by her friend’s

achievement, Cyrill picked up the pace as she waded through their opposition—and found time to praise Flum all the while.

“It’s nothing compared to you, Cyrill.”

Flum wasn’t being modest—she really believed that. Of course, she was still overjoyed to receive such praise from her friend. She shyly scratched the back of her head and blushed.

“Just like I thought...” Maria mumbled to herself, though no one heard her through the din.

As the three of them slowly won the upper hand, Mother became more and more desperate.

“All right, let’s do this!” There was a new energy to Flum’s voice as she started to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

It took time for Mother to create babies in the first place, and that time varied from person to person, making it hard to calculate. What was most important was that his reinforcements weren’t endless. It all came down to how many people were left in the capital. She couldn’t say much about the tendrils that came at them in droves, but at least there was an end in sight for the babies. In that case, she could leave them to Cyrill and Maria while she went after the core.

Not like Mother would make that a trivial task, of course.

“Cut it out!!” Mother’s voice boomed throughout the capital; his irritation readily apparent. “What gives you the right to ruin my dream, you little brat? You’ve never known suffering like I have! I’ve finally become a mother myself and broken free of my own wretched excuse for a mother. I will not let you ruin this for me!!”

He was nearly hysterical at this point; his voice rose several octaves, causing the hair on Flum’s skin to stand on end. Maria allowed herself a chuckle at his behavior. He was acting like a spoiled child in the midst of a tantrum.

Flum and Cyrill shot a suspicious glance toward Maria at her out-of-character response.

“Let’s pretend that didn’t happen.” Maria scowled and turned away while the other two shared a smirk. They knew exactly how she felt.

He was powerful, to be sure, far more so than anything the second generation could bring to bear. But it was also hard to be scared of him now.

“You’re shallow, Mother,” said Maria. “The saddest thing about this whole situation is that all this power and potential was wasted on someone like you. And the ones who suffered most? The children whose lives you ruined!”

“Those failures? Were it not for my benevolence, they would’ve died off in the wild! I saved them, so it only makes sense that I had the right to use their lives as I pleased. After all the suffering I’ve been through, I’m the one who deserves to have my dreams fulfilled!!”

It was becoming clear to them that Mother’s victim complex had led to this life of selfishness. This was a perfect example, too. Even after all he’d done, after all the lives he’d ruined, he still didn’t show a shred of regret. All because he was still convinced, even now, that he was the real victim in all this.

“Mute was capable of thinking about others,” said Cyril. “Mother, her friends, and even me. Though we only met briefly, she taught me a lot about how to live.”

“Not just Mute either,” Flum added. “Fwiss, Luke, even Nekt...all of the Spiral Children cared about you!”

“So what?! That’s not the love I’m looking for!”

It wasn’t that he didn’t understand—he simply wasn’t interested in understanding.

Even if he had never had the opportunity to learn about love from his own mother, he’d had countless opportunities to learn it while living with the Children.

“Mute showed me the way,” said Cyril. “Flum gave me courage. Having relationships with other people may be an immense challenge, but I’m stronger for it. There’s a huge world out there that you’ll never be able to see if you keep rejecting relationships with others!”

The more they spoke, the more a part of Mother began to consider that perhaps he was wrong...which was a feeling that infuriated him, and that made him want to destroy everything in his path as his uncertainty flared into anger. He was now so thoroughly enraged that he was completely out of control.

“Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Stuuuuupiiiiiiiiid!”

The ceiling of flesh above them rippled. A moment later, massive arms burst from the surface. He shoved one hand into his mouth and jerked it around, tearing open an even larger hole before he fished something out.

It was a head. A blue human head.

Mich Smithee’s biggest problem, the crux of all of this, was that he couldn’t love himself. After being rejected by his own mother for so long, he learned to hate his own face, voice, gender, and even the very fact that he’d been born.

He hated himself so much, in fact, that he dedicated his life to becoming something else. That was why the head in his hand had no face. It looked like a large egg-shaped object attached to bare shoulders, arms, torso, and legs.

Mother dropped it. Its slime-covered legs slammed into the ground with tremendous force, causing the earth to tremble.

They were now facing a twenty-meter-tall giant.

“All right then, it looks like I won’t be needing you—not as my children. So I’ll just have to kill you instead!”

The giant raised its fist high and smashed it into the ground, causing the earth beneath Flum, Cyrill, and Maria’s feet to swirl. The three of them dove into the air, narrowly escaping the center of the sand whirlpool, only to find that the attack’s range was far greater than what Flum encountered in her battle with Luke. They darted off in different directions the moment they landed.

“Gyahahahaha! Big talk coming from a bunch of cowards!”

Mother’s hearty laugh boomed throughout the capital while the giant’s shoulders heaved in sympathetic convulsions.

“This is my womb, and you are all my children, connected to me by an umbilical cord. Fetuses can run as much as they like, but all they’re really doing

is kicking around inside my stomach! There's no escape for you!"

"I have no intention of running away! Accelerate!!" Cyrill swept her sword in front of her and sped up, blasts of light shooting from the tip of her blade at the giant with every pass as she closed the distance.

"Once you're in close, you'll no longer be able to reject my love!" The giant raised its arm with amazing speed—far faster than a thing that size had any reason being.

Flum followed Cyrill's lead, closing in and letting loose with a Cavalier Arts attack. Something fast, piercing, and highly directional: Prana Sting. She landed a solid blow to its shoulder, but even with all the reversal magic she'd put into the attack, it still failed to pierce the flesh. This was far stronger than the resistance even the babies could put up.

She still achieved her objective. Its pounding fists were knocked off their mark, sparing Cyrill. Cyrill stepped through the narrow opening Flum had made, clenched her hand tightly around her sword, and sent light coursing through it. "Blaaaaaaaaaaade!!"

The giant heaved its arms back into the air. "Aww, too slow. And you call yourself a hero!"

Maria spoke up next. "You're the one who's too slow, I'm afraid!"

She anticipated that another attack was coming and launched a spear of spiraling light.

KREEEEN!

It spun through the air and landed in the same spot where Flum's Prana Sting had already torn into the giant, creating an even deeper wound.

"You stupid harlot!! And you call yourself a nun!"

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

While Mother continued on his tirade, Cyrill charged in close and hacked at the injured arm, finally cleaving it from the giant's body. She may not have had Flum's reversal magic or Maria's Origin power to help her along, but she didn't need it. Simply put, her Strength was ratcheted past 17,000—more than

enough to slice through the giant's toughened body.

“My arm...it's just an arm, but...no, it's more than that! What in the hell are you so happy about?!”

Mother was clearly shaken up by this development, all the while reaffirming to Cyrill that she could be useful.

The wound on his arm quickly twisted shut until the bleeding stopped.

This was all the evidence Flum needed in order to know what they were dealing with.

“Huh...so this isn't like all the other chaff we've been fighting. This one has an Origin core.”

Maria fell back to stand next to Flum. “So you picked up on it, too. Just like the second-generation Children, this giant requires the power of multiple cores in order to retain its shape.”

“Now that I think about it, Mother must've given the Children those cores in the first place.”

“The use of multiple cores has a synergistic effect. The Children were even more complex and powerful than the Chimera project in some ways, putting aside the fact that they were incredibly hard to control.”

“But Mother chose to use one of his limited cores on creating this giant.”

“Right, which explains why the tendrils stopped attacking and the baby production has slowed.”

In short, now was their chance. If they could take down that giant, Mother would be down an irrecoverable asset. It was no easy task—and he knew it. It was why he created the giant in the first place.

Cyrill paid his confidence little mind and kept hacking away.

“Hyah! Fwaah! Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” She was moving so fast, thanks to her Accelerate ability, that her blows blurred into each other. Any normal opponent would have been sliced to ribbons long ago, but the giant still held strong, in spite of its gashes and scrapes.

Cyrill kept the pressure up, leaving no room for the giant to counter. Stuck in place, the giant clenched its fist tightly for a moment before disappearing from sight. Cyrill's eyes went wide.

"It disappeared?!"

She felt a powerful, angry presence looming behind her. It didn't disappear at all; it only made a short Connection jump.

"Aaah, yessss. I see it now: getting revenge is what I've always longed for."

Countless tendrils sprouted from the giant's back. The tips whirled at an unimaginable speed as they whipped at Cyrill from all sides.

"Victory is mine! Ehyahahahaha!"

"Maybe if you were fighting one-on-one, sure."

"I don't know how many times we have to tell you we aren't alone."

A blade of light and prana lopped the tendrils off.

"Now that's hardly fair!"

"What're you going on about??" Flum rushed the giant and scored a deep gash where its left arm was joined to its torso.

"You're surrounded by all your beloved babies, aren't you?" Maria came in next, heedless of the newly grown tentacles intent on spearing her, as the giant tried to focus through the pain. She dove high into the air, easily avoiding the attacks thanks to the Origin core in her body boosting all her stats, and hurled a barrage of light spears into the gash, opening the wound wide.

"You're just wasting your time fighting us like this!" With one powerful slash, Cyrill amputated the giant's remaining arm.

"Rejecting others and trying to recreate them in your own image will won't do anything to eliminate your loneliness, satisfy your complex, or make your dreams come true," said Flum. "It's just going to make your life even more empty than..."

"Graaaaaaaaaaooooooooooooor!!"

Mother was now beyond irritated. The arm sprouting from the sky shoved its

fingers into the large face up above while its eyes went bloodshot.

Flum pressed the attack and dove toward the giant's chest, where the Origin core should be. However, just before she could make contact with the core, Mother let out an immense howl.

"That's...not...truuuuuuuuuuuuuuueeee!!!"

A powerful tornado sprung up around the giant.

"Flum, watch out!" Cyrill was the first to pick up on the danger and charged into her, knocking them both to safety. If she'd been only a bit slower, Flum would have been torn to shreds.

"Thanks."

"No problem. But what are we going to..."

Maria approached the both of them. "That's definitely an issue. We can't get close like this."

Not only was the tornado lethal in its own right, but it was also pulling in debris, and its range was slowly increasing. They had no idea how big it could get, but Cyrill realized that they would soon run out of places to hide.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!! No, that's not true at all! Nooooooooooooo!" Mother's crazed screams sounded remarkably like a child throwing a fit.

"It's like time stopped for him when he was still a child."

"You're absolutely right. The world would have been spared so much pain and suffering if he never existed."

"I know. I just can't stand by and do nothing as so many are sacrificed for no reason at all."

The two glared straight ahead at the giant at the center of the tornado while Maria stood quietly and listened to Cyrill and Flum. Obviously, he'd gone too far, but she still understood how Mother felt on some level. In the face of unavoidable tragedy and the loss of the object of their hate, sometimes a person chose to reject the entire world instead.

Everyone she'd loved had been murdered by demons. The church, the people

whom she thought she owed everything to, had ties to those demons.

Everything she'd believed in was a lie.

If, in the right moment, she'd found a reason to live that was as great or greater than everything she lost...then maybe she could have gotten back on the right track. Sadly, that encounter came far too late to do anything but feed her bitterness.

"We have to break through that spiral somehow. Do you have anything that could work, Cyril?"

"I guess it can't hurt to see if we can just break through with a powerful-enough attack." Cyril stepped forward and thrust out her sword with both hands, leveling it at the giant's heart. She slowly let out a breath. "Blaster!"

A bright flash of light erupted from her blade.

"Whoa!"

The subsequent shock wave caught Flum off guard and caused her to stumble back several steps, while Maria bent her knees slightly to absorb the shock.

The ball of magic slammed straight into the whirlwind; the two forces battled back and forth for several moments before Cyril's shot was knocked away and sent crashing into a building, leaving smoldering ruins in its wake.

"Hng... I can't break through. That was the best I had, too."

"Still, it held up!"

"If I can weaken the spiral with my magic, then you might be able to blow on through."

"Let's give it a shot."

"I'll support you with all my magic, too."

"Be careful, Flum!"

Flum felt a little more strength in her step from Cyril's concern as she bounded off toward the spiral. If it was able to knock magic away so easily, she figured laying hands on it was her best option.

She gripped the crimson hilt of the Souleater tightly, squinted as the strong

winds pummeled at her face, lowered her stance, and pointed the black blade into the whirlwind.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!! Blast Through! Reversion!” She swung the sword with all her might. There was an explosion of light the instant her reversal magic made contact with the Origin field. It was even brighter than when Cyril’s Blaster made contact, if that was even possible.

“As a fellow core user, I’ve got only one thing to say...” Spinning rays of light rose up all around Maria. “Take this! Take it all!”

With a wave of her hand, they shot off toward their target in unison. It was hard to tell who was having a greater impact, but in any case, the whirlwind was weakening.

“Now you’re done! Blaaaaaaaaaasteeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!!” Cyril held her blade steady with both hands and let loose another powerful burst of energy. The force of the blast caused her to slide backward; the ground gave beneath her where she’d dug in her heels.

Even with her impressive stats, the attack was so powerful that it was a challenge to maintain it.

“Get ‘em!!!”

The attack gathered yet more power as she willed it forward.

“It’ll never stand a chance. You’re wrong, after all. It simply won’t make it throooooough!”

Mother was all talk. The ball of light broke through the whirlwind and crashed into the giant.

JABOOOOM!

An immense heat enveloped the giant, disintegrating its upper body in an instant.

Flum found the Origin core floating among the sizzling remains. “Reversion!”

Her magic flowed into the core and reversed the spin of the spiral inside.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauuuugh!!” Mother let out an anguished scream as the

black crystal broke in two with a crisp snap. Flum and the others had no way of knowing this, but the remaining babies reeled back in pain at the very same moment.

“Well, that’s one core down,” said Maria, “but we have no way of knowing how many more are left.”

“By the looks of it, Mother’s stunned for a bit, at least.”

“If we’re going to fly,” said Flum, “now’s our chance.”

The three turned their eyes to the sky. Flum scanned Mother’s massive face for cores.

“You sure about that, Flum?”

Cyrill looked worried; Flum felt a jolt of contentment from her friend’s concern.

“I’m the only one who can do it.”

“I see... You’re truly amazing, Flum.”

“It’s pretty terrifying, ya know? Looks vile, too. If I could just keep my eyes shut the whole time, I would.”

Maria laughed. “You’re right about that. I’d certainly want to keep my distance.”

“You too, huh?”

“I’m only two years older than both of you, you know. I may be one of the holy sisters, but I’m still a girl at heart.”

It was impossible to read her expression through the mask, but this was the first time she’d expressed any sort of affection for Flum or Cyrill.

“Anyway, I want to do whatever I can to help Flum arrive there in the best shape possible.”

“Count me in, too. I’m gonna get you there, promise.”

“Thanks, you two.”

Flum felt her spirits lift immensely at their offerings of support. She knew that

there was no way she would lose now.

“Gravity Reversion!” She tumbled into the sky again, borne for the ceiling.

“Not gonna...happen...!” Mother was slowly recovering from the pain. His voice oozed resentment.

Flum watched as two massive arms appeared from beyond the thick membrane serving as a ceiling over the city.

Cyrill and Maria offered up their support from where they were stationed on the ground.

“Stop right there! Blaster!!”

“Sacred Lance!”

The arms flinched at the blows, and the two kept up the pressure, focusing on the arms’ joints as their attacks slowly ate away at flesh and muscle. A look of peace came over the two heroes’ faces, though the battle was far from over for them.

Mother put the last of his strength into a last-ditch flurry of tendrils. His first snaked toward Flum, but it was quickly felled by her friends on the ground. He sent two more. These were also blown away by Cyrill and Maria. He sent volleys of four, eight, sixteen.

“Seems like he’s doing something different this time. These are easy to destroy, but they keep increasing in number!”

“The core has to be located at the base of all those tendrils. If we focus our fire there, maybe we can take them all out in one go!”

“It’s a good plan, but if we let off on the tendrils, they’re going to get Flum!”

Flum still had a ways to go. If things continued at this rate, they’d soon be unable to keep her safe, to say nothing of stopping the core itself. She took out a few with her sword as they came in, but it was difficult for her to control her movement as she fell upward through the sky.

“I’d hate to have to call her back just because these tendrils grew to be too much and we got overwhelmed,” said Maria.

“Stay back! I refuse to let you come to me! Your dreams are not meant to be fulfilled! Happiness is not meant for wretched humans!!” Mother continued to double down on his strategy, sending more and more tendrils out as they twisted, contorted, and moved about unimpeded.

A literal wall of over sixty tendrils rushed toward Flum.

“How is he still so strong?!” said Cyrill. “I don’t know if Flum can run from that!”

Her whole body, brain and heart included, was at risk of being pulverized.

“Eaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauuugh!!” Every tendril was severed in the blink of an eye by a man on the ground wielding an immense stone sword.

He was covered head to toe in oozing wounds but still very much in the fight.

“Gadhio?!” Excitement filled Flum’s voice as she caught sight of her friend.

“What?!” said Mother. “But how? How could you break out on your own??!”

“Heh, I don’t know either. All I know is that I crawled out when your power waned.”

The destruction of the first core sapped every remaining cocoon. Their mental contamination weakened and, for those with a strong enough will, it became a relatively easy endeavor to break free.

“Damn...damn you!!! But...but I’m still not done yet!!”

“And neither am I! Haaah!”

A volley of arrows streaked into the sky, blasting through more tendrils.

“Linus!” Relief swept over Maria as she caught sight of Linus and knew he was safe.

Just standing up was a feat for him at the moment, since he had to rip the blood vessels from where they’d speared into his body. He smiled at the sight of Maria running over to cure his injuries.

“I’m not done yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeet!!”

Mother was still trying desperately to eke out a victory.

“Unfortunately for you, I made it, too.”

A shower of water bullets shot up into the sky and tore the latest barrage to shreds.

“Eterna, you’re okay!”

“And still got a ways to go.” Eterna flashed a confident peace sign in Flum’s direction.

It was an obvious facade, but she was still alive—they all were. And all here to help her.

“You and your stupid friendship! Who the hell needs relationships with people??”

Mother was no longer able to stop Flum’s advance.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

Her sword pierced Mother’s forehead. She used her reversal power to beat back Origin’s attempts to force her out. She hacked and slashed her way deeper and deeper into his head toward the core deep within.

Chapter 26:

The Champion

AFTER HACKING through the wall of flesh, Flum found herself in an empty chamber on the other side. She held her Souleater tightly as she gazed around the room. Up ahead, she spotted three cores embedded in the flesh.

One core had been used on the giant and another on the tentacles, meaning that this whole massive creature had originally consisted of five cores. As soon as Flum stepped toward them, her path was immediately blocked by a human-sized wall of muscle forced up from the ground below. After a few moments, the muscle twisted into a human shape, clothing and all.

It was Mother.

“Well, you...you...you!! You really messed this one up!!” Mother threw out his hand and shot a blast of spinning air toward Flum.

Flum easily dodged to the side and lunged forward, slicing straight down toward Mother.

She missed him only by a hair as he used his Connection ability to teleport out of the way.

Figuring something like this would happen, Flum dismissed her Souleater in a flash of light and used the momentum of her swing to kick off the ground and reverse direction, sending her flying straight into Mother as he rushed behind her.

He threw his right arm up to intercept her kick, but her reversal magic overcame the Origin power pumping through him and smashed the limb. He clutched at his shattered arm and stumbled backward.

Flum took advantage of the brief reprieve to fall back. Once she put some space between them, she summoned her Souleater. With two quick slashes, she drew a cross in the air, pierced the center of the formation, and shot a powerful blast toward Mother.

He made no attempt to even block the blast and took it head-on, chopping his

body into four large chunks in the process.

Moments later, each of the chunks transformed and grew into another replica of Mother until there were now four facing against Flum.

“I think you’ve had enough fun for now. Why don’t you just be good for once and hand over the cores?” All four Mothers shook their heads wildly and cried in unison. “Not interested. I won’t stop as long as Mother’s still here!”

He’d striven to become a kind mother, to overcome the image of the woman who abused him since birth. He was going to overwrite those painful memories with ones of a happy childhood.

In his mind, he had achieved that goal when he took over the capital and finally became complete.

“My mother, she’s still alive. Look, there she is. Over there, too. And there! Nearly everywhere you look in the capital, there she is! No matter how I looked or what form I took, she was always there to forsake me!”

Flum felt a sense of pity tug at her heart as the four clones screamed in unison. But as she listened to him speak, she realized one undeniable truth.

“You know, you’re no different from her. You both destroyed everything that posed you the slightest inconvenience.”

He was undeniably Susannah Smithee’s child.

“Wh-what?! I...I’m like...her?!”

“You said that she’s all around, didn’t you? Well, she’s inside you, too.”

“No, that can’t be! I...I’m a kind mother; I love my children!”

“I’m sure she felt the same way. ‘It’s fine, it’s just tough love,’ right? Hurting them, denying their humanity, and in the case of the second-generation Children, delivering liberal beatings to vent your own stress. All told, I’d say you’re pretty similar.”

“Love? Th-that...that was all...for...”

Susannah Smithee was a poor excuse for a mother—there was no denying that. But this revelation robbed Mich of everything he’d hoped to achieve by

surpassing his own mother.

Self-absorbed, being quick to dismiss others, verbally abusing the children who loved him as rejects.

Were those actions no different from what his own mother had done...?

“What...what was I to do? I’ve nothing inside, not flesh nor blood, nothing but a soul my mother hollowed out and died in. What was I to do?!”

“It’s a little late to be asking that now. Besides, Cyrill’s been saying it the whole time: you should have listened to what other people were saying.”

“That would have changed nothing!!”

“You’re right, things don’t change that easily; we’re all lost in our own ways. But you had eight...no, ten long years. Even if you weren’t related by blood, didn’t you feel some sort of affection toward these children after living together for so long? Or am I expecting too much from you?”

“How...how would I know? I was never loved by even my own mother!”

“But those kids understood. Even as they were raised completely isolated from the rest of the world, they still learned to love you.”

Both the Children and Mother began their lives together not knowing what love was. But they’d wound up going down completely different paths—and tragically so.

“Failures. Experiments. These were the excuses you used to avoid having to understand these children. That’s why you never noticed. Maybe nothing would have changed once you took up the Origin core, but at least then you could have been at peace with your death like they were.”

Not that Flum thought that was the best choice, but it at least seemed better than dying with this much unfinished business and unresolved anguish.

“...Fine. I get it. Then tell me one thing: what should I do now?” The four Mothers’ voices spoke to his grief.

Flum rolled her eyes and smirked before casually dismissing his question. “There’s nothing to do. You’re a useless piece of scum who’s beyond saving. So you might as well die.”

It was too late. It didn't matter anymore. It wasn't a matter of whether or not he *could* be saved—in fact, he *shouldn't* be.

The realization threw Mother into a fresh rage. Whether it was because it had finally dawned on him that this was the end of his misguided life or because her words had hit too close to home, Flum couldn't say.

“Shut up!! If I can't become happy, then all of this was for nothing!!” The four Mothers leaped toward Flum.

“Big words from someone who took so much from others!”

Flum dashed forward, bisecting one of the Mothers as they crossed paths. She spied the three cores embedded in the wall in a triangle pattern.

Just as she was about to make a run for it, a hand sprouted from the meaty floor beneath her and grabbed at her ankle. At the same moment, she sensed something coming up from behind her.

She reversed gravity and fell upward before immediately letting gravity return as she kicked off the ceiling to land behind her opponent. She swung at an upward angle, chopping the figure in two from his right thigh clear through his left armpit.

The severed halves immediately began transforming into two new Mothers.

“I refuse to accept that it's too late! Killing you will open up even more paths for me!!”

Torso after torso began growing up out of the floor.

“Like I said, killing those who disagree with you won't change a thing!” Flum once again reversed gravity and ran across the ceiling toward the cores.

“With everyone else gone, I won't have to look at Mother ever again!”

Innumerable arms began to grow from the ceiling, scrabbling at Flum's legs. She tried to break free, but she suddenly felt her right foot lock in place and start to tear apart.

“No way...!”

Flum channeled her magic through her body, pulling her leg free before the

rotational force could spread. This had the unintended side effect of throwing her back down toward the ground—a combination of the force put into yanking her foot away and having lost her focus on reversing gravity.

She had only seconds to prepare for the next exchange of blows—hardly enough time to heal. That left her with one option: exploit her damaged leg.

“I’ve already told you, you’re not going to get that retribution!!” Flum froze the wound to staunch the bleeding and create a sharpened point before ramming it into Mother’s head on her way down.

She may have put a bit too much force into the strike; although she was successful in smashing one of the Mothers, she was sent tumbling forward as she fought to regain her balance. But at least she was still moving forward. Flum reversed gravity again, floating long enough to draw her sword and stab it into the floor for support. She lunged toward the cores once more, juking between the multiplying Mothers and grasping arms.

She let out a deep breath and summoned up nearly all of her endurance as she transformed it into prana. Win or lose, this was where it would all be decided. There was no sense in holding back now. She was surrounded by Mothers and a forest of arms as far as the eye could see. There was no escaping now.

Flum let them close in on her until they were dangerously close.

“It’s hopeless...”

She even offered up a cry of helplessness to lure them closer still.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!!” The prana exploded out of her body, disintegrating Mother’s clones and the arms blocking her way. In an instant, she had a clear path to the cores.

Now that her leg was regenerated, all she had to do was destroy them.

“No! No no no!! I don’t want to die! This is all my mother’s fault for giving birth to me!! Why must I be the one who has to suffer?!”

“You were smart. The church even gave you power. You’ve had countless opportunities to change your life—more than the Children ever did! You’ve no

one to blame but yourself for the miserable life you've led!"

Flum cleaved through Mother and stomped on the hands that tried to grab at her. She used what little endurance she had left to force her way within reach of the cores.

"HYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" She slammed the Souleater squarely through them.

The wall transformed into a giant face, biting down on her right arm.

They were both ready to sacrifice their lives just to win.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaarr!!" Mother let loose a bestial howl.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!" But Flum wasn't done yet. She focused all her reversal magic into her right arm before Mother managed to rip it to shreds, setting off an explosion deep inside his mouth.

"Groooooooooaaaaawr!"

Mother's face was ravaged, but the cores remained intact. He began to move on Flum's left arm as the hands growing up from the floor held fast to her ankles. She could hear the sounds of snapping and popping as parts of her body began to twist out of place. Mother's false bodies multiplied once again; these new bodies peppered her with blasts from behind. Her organs ruptured; another blast found its mark in her shoulder, making it impossible to maintain her grip on the sword.

"Isn't it beautiful? It turns out, persistence does pay off! Just watch me as I pull victory from the jaws of defeat! Gyahahaha!"

Mother may have been certain of his victory, but Flum wasn't done yet.

No, that wasn't quite right. She was searching for her inner strength.

She hurt—mentally and physically. She wanted to go home. All she wanted was to chat with Cyrill, hold Milkit tight, eat some delicious food with her friends, take a bath, and sleep the sleep of the dead. She longed to change out of her tattered clothes and buy something nice so she could dress up once in a while.

There was still so much she wanted to do. That was why she couldn't lose.

“If persistence is going to win the day, then victory belongs to meeeee!”

Using her Reversion spell, Flum blew away both of her legs, freeing her from the hands holding her in place.

The force of the blast threw her into the air and toward the cores.

“No...you’re not going to...even without any limbs?!”

Flum summoned the Souleater again and bit down hard on the hilt. All she needed to break the cores was her reversal magic—the force of the blow wasn’t important. All she needed to destroy the cores was a way to transfer her magic into them.

“Mmmph...fwaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Keeping the sword upright with just her teeth was an immense effort, but through sheer persistence, she made contact with the triangular formation of cores. The magic seeped in. The spin reversed. A crack formed.

The clones of Mother and the hands rising from the floor all froze in place.

The now limbless Flum hit the ground and let out a heavy sigh.

“Noooooooooooooooooo!!” Mother let out a blood-curdling scream. The fleshy walls went pale and began to decay.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh! I’m...falling...apaaaaaaart!!”

The vibrant red of the womb surrounding the capital, and with it the room Flum was in, began to fade away.

Mother’s voice boomed out from all around her. “My dream...my future...no! I don’t want to die! I can’t let my life end without getting the retribution I deserve!”

Somehow, Flum found it in herself to pity him. Though she knew it would be a further blow to his pride, she couldn’t stay quiet.

“Would it really be any different had you lived?”

Had Mother been born to anyone other than Susannah, perhaps he never would have become the person he was now. But that was nothing but a hypothetical. In reality, nothing could change that fact.

“Flum Apricot...you’re a hero, are you not?”

Fate had been both kind and cruel to her. If she’d never met Milkit, she would probably have died cold and alone somewhere long ago. That went for Cyril, Maria, and the others, too. They’d had a significant impact on her life.

No one was immune to straying down the wrong path.

“Aren’t you supposed to use that power to save people? You need to do something—you need to help me.”

She had no intention of treating this negligent creature like a victim.

She walked over to the dying Mich Smithee and shot him a cold glare. “Reversing your life won’t save the likes of you.”

Flum felt the floor give way, gravity pulling her toward the earth below, right as her limbs were nearly finished regenerating.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She could still make out his voice over the roar of the wind.

“This isn’t fair. No one else was willing to save me, so I had no choice but to do it myself. Really, this was the only option left open to me. And yet...yet...you won’t even give me the time of day, even though you’re surrounded by so much love and support? That’s absurd. No, I don’t want to die. Who could agree to such an unfair fate? I... I...”

Flum drew her Souleater as she continued to fall.

“I don’t think that logic really holds after what you’ve done to so many people.”

With a flick of her wrist, she loosed a prana blade and cut clean through the sole surviving part of Mother, putting an end to the angry, sniveling voice for good.

Flum let out a sigh of relief. “It’s finally over...”

The battle had cost so much time and so many lives, far more than any she’d been in before. Looking at the city below, she saw vast swaths of destruction with only a few spots left untouched. Much to her relief, her house was still

standing. Whether it was okay for her to be happy about this in light of all the suffering was a question for another time.

Her lips curved upward in a smile as she continued her freefall.

“All riiiiight...”

It was about time to prepare for her landing.

“Nice to have you back, Flum!”

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Cyrill coming up beside her. She had tears in her eyes.

“Good to be back, Cyrill.”

They were still about as high up as the tallest of the cathedral’s pillars, but Cyrill could easily jump to such heights in the grip of Brave. Even knowing that, she still was taken aback to see her there.

Cyrill gathered Flum in her arms and landed gently on the ground before carrying her like a newly rescued princess, to reunite with the rest of the group as they caught up.

“Whoa, hey, let me down! This is embarrassing!!”

At the very least, she didn’t want Eterna to see her like this. Flum squirmed around in a desperate attempt to get out of Cyrill’s grasp, but she merely smiled, showing no indication of letting Flum go. For such a reserved person, Cyrill was being surprisingly forceful.

“Well, you’re certainly energetic, aren’t you?”

Maybe she was just happy to see Flum come back to her safely.

“I guess I’ll just have to live with it.”

Though she finally accepted her fate, a sense of foreboding fell over Flum when she noticed that Eterna was the first person to come into view. It looked like Maria had healed her, along with all the others who’d escaped the cocoons. Hopefully, her injuries were still fresh enough in her mind to keep her more toned down than usual.

Alas, it was not to be. A smirk instantly came to Eterna’s face when she saw

Flum.

“Are you cheating on Milkit now? I’m gonna have to tell her, you know.”

“That’s the first thing to come out of your mouth??”

Eterna laughed heartily at Flum’s exasperation, a rare display of emotion for her. Her smirk transitioned to a much softer, more caring smile as she reached out to pat Flum’s head. It was clear she’d been worried about her, even if she didn’t say so.

Maria spoke up next from where she stood at Linus’s side. “You did good, Flum.”

“You too, Maria.”

This was the first time they’d seen each other since the battle against Mute. Flum had figured that Maria would probably disappear after this battle as well, so her presence caught her off guard.

Maybe she just hadn’t found a chance to leave yet. Linus was persistent, but it was hard to believe that she would choose to stand by his side and maintain a normal life.

“They had us backed into a corner for a bit there,” said Maria. “We’d be dead if it weren’t for you, Flum.”

“Aw, man,” said Linus, “looks like I owe you one again, Flum.”

“Well, if it weren’t for Maria and Cyrill coming to save me, who knows where I’d be right now.”

“Now that you mention it, we owe a debt of gratitude to the second-generation Children, too.”

“Huh? The second-generation Children?”

Flum turned to look off to see what Maria was gazing at. Up ahead was a red, humanoid creature lying on its side.

“Is that...Nekt? Cyrill, could you let me down??”

“I think it’ll be faster if I carry you.”

Cyrill walked over to Nekt and gently set Flum down. She was still too weak to

stand on her own, so she leaned up against Cyril as she crouched by Nekt. Flum placed a hand on Nekt's cheek and felt her palm turn slick with blood—warm blood. Looking closer, she watched the muscles twitch in the rhythm of a heartbeat.

Nekt was still alive, but it seemed unlikely she'd last much longer after all the changes the four cores made to her body.

"But why—how did this happen? Didn't we save everyone? You were going to live on as humans..."

"All the other Children died. Nekt was the only survivor."

Flum turned at the sound of the familiar voice to find Otilie...and, much to her surprise, Ink.

"What are...?"

"I won't bother you with the details, but just know that Milkit and the others are safe."

"Milkit?!"

"The capital is still too dangerous, but Ink here wouldn't give up until I agreed to take her along."

Ink left Otilie's side and relied on her senses to guide her to Nekt. Flum took the young girl's hand and placed it on Nekt's cheek.

"Oh, Nekt..." There was a certain sadness in her voice. She must have realized that Nekt was no longer human.

Otilie pulled out a white jewel and held it over Nekt's face.

"What is that?"

"I'll explain later. But even as powerful as this is, I doubt it will be able to reverse the effect of four cores."

The power of Origin was slowly pulled from Nekt's body. Her mouth and part of her neck returned, though her face and body were largely unchanged. Otilie had known the reversion core could only do so much, so she'd tried to at least make sure Nekt could speak.

Unfortunately, Nekt seemed unaware of the people around her as she mumbled to herself.

“Hang...on... I’m...coming...”

She raised her palms toward the bright blue sky.

“Oh, good, so you did wait!” Nekt was relieved when she finally saw Mute, Luke, and Fwiss. “I was worried I’d never have a chance to apologize.”

The three figures looked back at Nekt in surprise.

“I’m really sorry. It’s just that I had a favor to pay Flum back for, and it was something only I could do.”

She had no regrets.

If she could make all of their wishes come true before her time came, then she could die with a clean conscience. Or at least, that was what she believed.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. You don’t think that it was all a waste, do you? The last thing I ever said to you was goodnight, Fwiss. I knew I was going to be saying good morning soon enough. It wasn’t a goodbye at all.”

Nekt slowly approached the three figures, but it wasn’t to be. Right before she could join them, her path was blocked by an invisible wall.

“Oww...hey, what’s a wall doing here? C’mon, stop messing around. I’m coming with you guys. It’s better than just the three of you, right? I mean, we’ll all brothers and sisters here.”

Nekt stretched out her hand again, only to find the wall standing firm.

Fwiss laughed at the sight of Nekt standing there, closely inspecting her own hand. “You really like to play tough, don’t you?”

“Fwiss?”

Luke shoved his hands into his pockets and smirked teasingly at Nekt.

“C’mon, we all know you want to live. It’s written all over your face.”

“Luke...?”

Mute hugged her doll tightly and spoke next, her voice gentle but strong.
“Live...as you please. For yourself...no regrets. That’s...best.”

“Mute...!”

The three turned their backs on Nekt and began walking away. Far, far away, into a light that was forever out of reach.

“Wait for me! C’mon, you can’t leave me behind!!”

Nekt’s path was blocked by the wall separating the living from the dead. This encounter was nothing short of a miracle. The work of some power watching over her.

“Guys!! C’mon, guys!!!”

That lone ray of light would be all there was to cut through the darkness that threatened to envelop humanity’s very future.

“The cores are...glowing??”

Flum was taken by complete surprise. She’d never seen anything like this before.

Three of the cores buried in Nekt’s chest began to glow, levering themselves free of her body in unison.

“What’s going on?”

Even Maria was at a complete loss from where she stood on the sidelines.

Upon leaving Nekt’s body, the three cores slowly rose up into the air.

Nekt raised her arm as if to call out to the lost cores as the limb began to revert to its original human form. The transformation then spread throughout the rest of her body, returning her to a near-perfect approximation of her original form.

“It’s like some kind of...miracle.”

Ink was quick to correct Otilie. “No, it’s not a miracle at all.”

“I can hear them...Mute, Luke, Fwiss...!”

“Mute’s here?” Cyrill looked up at the sky. Somehow, she could tell which core Mute resided in.

If not a miracle, then what was it? The second-generation Children had, without exception, lived their entire lives with these Origin cores serving as their hearts. All those many years with a core inside them had transformed their bodies into something further and further away from being normal humans.

Origin had infiltrated every part of their being. After all, Origin existed with the solitary goal of controlling, transforming, and bringing grief on the human species.

“But...Origin cores aren’t perfect. There is a way to resist.” Maria mumbled something under her breath, drawing a concerned look from Linus.

“Maria?”

“Loving and caring for others is incompatible with Origin’s power. It can break you free of its control...”

Mother was the best example of that. His constant isolation made him a perfect fit for the Origin cores. The Children, on the other hand, relied on one another to live. Though Origin may have infected every fiber of their bodies, their hearts still had the power to resist.

“This means Origin cannot impose its will unilaterally. Just as Origin filled their bodies, the Children’s wills, in turn, were imprinted upon the cores.”

It was their wish for Nekt to live that caused this miracle to occur. However, it wouldn’t last long with these two powers vying for control within her. The reversion core had managed to reverse the effects and weaken Origin’s power.

The Origin cores rose higher and higher up into the sky until they shattered into hundreds of fragments, each shimmering in the bright sunlight. To Nekt’s blurry eyes, it looked like a beautiful light show.

Even Ink, shrouded in a world of darkness, seemed to be able to see the glimmering shards.

“Just how far...are they gonna go to keep me alive?”

“They love you, Nekt.”

“Don’t be stupid. They...they...”

Nekt and Ink smiled, filled with competing feelings of joy and grief, as they gazed at the sky and thought about their family. Tears flowed freely down Nekt’s cheeks.

In that moment, the Children program finally came to an end.

“I think she’s made it far enough to undergo surgery. You can leave Nekt to me.”

“Thanks, Otilie.”

“I’m going, too,” said Ink. “Oh, and I’ll be sure to tell Milkit that you’re just fine, Flum!”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. It won’t be that long till I see her again, though.”

Otilie lifted Nekt. Accompanied by Ink, she headed back toward the facility entrance, which seemed to still be safe at least. Just as Ink was nearly out of sight, Flum stumbled, as if a thread in her had been pulled to the breaking point. Cyrill rushed to her side to help her up, while Flum managed a weak smile.

Up ahead, she saw masses of citizens splayed on the ground, freed from their cocoon prisons the moment Mother died. While the casualties were innumerable, they had managed to save some people, too.

“That’s all thanks to you, Flum.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Cyrill.”

“Nah, you’re the one who secured our victory.”

“No way, I needed you there.”

“You’re pretty stubborn for being so weak right now.”

“I’m not going to concede this one.”

Though she’d certainly achieved something great, Flum refused to let it get to her head.

Linus, watching the two trying to out-modest one another, stepped in. “All right then, I guess we all shared the victory.”

“We hardly did anything, you know.”

“Right,” said Cyrill. “I wouldn’t call what we did any sort of notable feat.”

“Well, I don’t see a problem with it. I mean, we fought pretty hard while Flum was up somewhere in the sky, didn’t we?”

Maria laughed. It’d been so long since Linus had heard that sound.

“All right then,” she said. “I guess we all worked pretty hard back there.”

Linus kept the banter going, only too happy to hear her laugh again. Flum felt her body warm up under the gentle rays of the sun and was overcome with a powerful urge to sleep. No, sleep wasn’t even the right word. She’d drained her energy reserves dry; she felt as if she could black out at any moment.

“It’s okay, Flum. Just rest.”

The sole desire to be reunited with Milkit kept Flum awake until that point, but once she heard those sweet, gentle words, she could no longer resist.

“Maybe just...for a bit...” Flum’s eyelids drifted closed, and she let her body relax into the comfort of her friend’s warm embrace.

Afterword

HELLO, THIS IS kiki, the author of *Roll Over and Die: I Will Fight for an Ordinary Life with my Love and Cursed Sword*. Thanks for picking up Volume 4.

How did you find Episode 5—what I like to call the Children arc? I guess the biggest new development from Episode 4 was the change in a certain girl's fate. Of course, there were also the exploits of the shady church knights, along with the appearance of a new figure within the church who may or may not have a personal connection to Flum and Milkit.

I hope you're looking forward to the rest of the story!

Anyway, I can't believe that the first volume of the manga adaptation is finally coming out right as Volume 4 is hitting shelves. Sunao Minakata, the author of the manga, has done a great job adding her own original scenes to the story. You've just gotta pick it up—a must-buy all the way!

It's an amazing manga all around. Not only do you finally get to see our favorite receptionist (who was never illustrated in the novel), but you also get to see the members of the heroes' party looking pretty cool, along with some original scenes between Flum and Milkit that'll melt your heart. I really hope you pick it up when you're grabbing this one. Origin agrees!

Oh! And the little extra side story is just to die for! (Seriously, I'm so excited!) I even added some dialogue for some of the original scenes and provided a short story for the manga that involves all the members of the heroes' party and takes things in a strange new direction. I hope you'll give it a read!

...And you know, I just realized how hard it is to write an afterword.

I guess that means that I should resort to the time-honored tradition of having a dialogue with some of my characters to kill some time.

"...An afterword?"

"What is it, Shizuka?"

"I heard a voice. It said something about talking about something fitting for an

afterword.”

“Huh, I wonder who it was? And what’s an afterword, anyway?”

“You didn’t hear it, Katsuki? I heard it clear as day...”

“Nope, nothing. Fuuto, you hear anything?”

“Not a peep. Are you sure your ears aren’t playing tricks on you?”

“No, I heard it. I’m sure of it.”

“Huh, well I guess that’s not entirely out of the realm of possibility. I mean, Shizuka is pretty tuned into these things. Anyway, I think it’s Shizuka’s turn to take Nekt and Ink out for a walk.”

“Ah, that’s right. They’re both just staring at me and drooling. And look at their tails wagging all over the place!”

“They’ve been waiting on you, ya know. I don’t have a lot going on, so maybe I’ll go with you guys.”

“Hey, hey, don’t leave me behind! We’ll all go together.”

“Sounds good to me. Spending time together is what being a family is all about.”

Hmph. I think I tuned in to the wrong channel there. To be brutally honest, it’s really hard for me to keep things in check enough to actually hold a conversation with characters. It takes a real skilled person to do it, and failure can lead to dire consequences. I always heard that authors go through a brutal training regimen to prepare themselves, but that’s nothing more than an urban legend, a lie.

Anyway, I’d like to thank all those responsible for bringing this book into being.

Kinta did a fantastic job beautifully depicting all the characters my mind could come up with, from old men to little girls and everything in between. I felt my heart flutter with excitement every time I saw these different characters brought to life. I’m eternally grateful.

I’m also indebted to my editor, “I,” whom I no doubt caused a great deal of

consternation as this book got longer and longer. I greatly appreciate your assistance.

And of course, there were the many other people working in publishing and you, my dear readers, who also deserve a lot of credit for making this book a reality.

Finally, of course, I want to extend my thanks to all of you who purchased this book.

I hope to see you again if this story gets a chance to continue. If everything goes as planned, there will be threats of incoming nuclear missiles, skies filled with flying Chimeras, and finally, humans and demons will fight together on the same side in an epic battle against the church in its flying city of Tokyo!

See you around!



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