

they rolled along. As they finally came to a stop, Graziella yelled out as she came to understand what had just happened.

“Are you an idiot?! Why did you save me?!”

“Why? ‘Cause you were in danger. I just...”

“Just what?! You’re a hero! What do you intend on accomplishing by covering for me?!”

Seized by the pain catching up with him, Reiji’s consciousness grew hazy. He couldn’t help thinking this was a somewhat unexpected reprimand from the arrogant Graziella. She sounded like she was telling him that he’d underestimated their enemy, and that, as a hero, his safety should be imperative above all else.

“Sorry.”

That was the thought that came naturally to Reiji’s somewhat foggy mind. And it wasn’t just intended for Graziella, but also for Titania and Mizuki who continued to believe in him, as well as everyone else important to him that wasn’t present. The reason he was apologizing needn’t be said.

Reiji then heaved Graziella off to the side.

“You complete moron!”

“Reiji-sama!”

“Reiji-kun!”

It’s fine like this...

And just as he convinced himself of that, he could feel a terrifying presence approaching from behind.

“Saving a woman?! What a boring way to meet your end, hero!”

“Ugh...”

Reiji was going to die here. But the moment he resigned himself to that, a blue wind suddenly blew past his eyes.

“Oh?”

Just as he thought that he heard a puzzled voice come from Ilzarl, Ilzarl leaped backward. Seeing this, Reiji promptly turned around. Cutting in between him and Ilzarl was Titania, with two swords crossed at the ready.

“Huh?! Tia?! What’s with those swords...?”

“Leave that for later, Reiji-sama! For now, just fall back!”

Seeing the wisdom in her words, Reiji retreated from the battle. Before he knew it, Titania had popped the collar of her overcoat to cover the lower half of her face, and switched her swords to an underhand grip. But just as quickly as she’d done all that, Titania vanished from his field of vision. As if she’d teleported, she instantly appeared behind Ilzarl and charged in.

As Ilzarl sensed her presence and turned around, Titania vanished again without so much as attacking. She then reappeared behind his back, and this time, she truly intended to strike. Ilzarl used his chains to shield himself.

“Tch, buzzing around...” Ilzarl scoffed in an annoyed voice.

But then Titania vanished a third time.

“Amazing...” Reiji unwittingly muttered in childlike admiration.

Titania was moving around like she was toying with Ilzarl. Even with Reiji’s enhanced vision courtesy of the hero summoning, he could just barely keep up with her movements. She repelled Ilzarl’s flying copper chains with her swords, and whenever she closed in on him, she would unleash a flurry of attacks with both blades.

In response, Ilzarl took evasive action. Even though he’d simply stood in place and blocked Reiji’s attacks, it didn’t seem he had any interest in being hit by Titania’s. For every slash she threw out, he took a step back or to the side to avoid it. But Titania’s slashes were peculiar in the way they arced through the air, so dodging them required much more effort than any normal attack.

And her assault showed no sign of letting up. Spotting an opening in Ilzarl’s defenses, she went soaring in on the offensive, letting fly a cross-shaped slash with both blades before gracefully leaping back. It certainly looked like her mithril swords had caught Ilzarl right in the face. However...

“Even though you don’t possess the divine protection of the Goddess, you put up a much better fight. Also...”

The only evidence of her grand attack was a cut on Ilzarl’s cheek. Despite standing plainly in front of his opponent, Ilzarl nonchalantly wiped away the dripping blood on his face with his finger and looked at it somewhat dubiously.

“It’s been a long time since I was dealt a wound, but to think it would be at the hands of a mere human...”

“Don’t underestimate me!”

“This is as far as you go.”

Titania howled as she broke into a dash and closed in once more. Ilzarl, meanwhile, simply waved his hand to attack. In an instant, five enormous slashes—one for each finger—assaulted the bare rock floor in front of Titania, forcing her to come to a halt. Looking closely, the ends of Ilzarl’s chains were split, making them look like anchors. They floated through air, gathering around her before plunging into the ground. She was now effectively trapped in a chain cage.

“Tia!”

“Ugh! Oh Earth! Surround me and become a firm bulwark! Absolutely none shall pass and threaten this life! Earth Wall Rising!”

Immediately following Titania’s chant, a wall of mud formed between her and the chains right as red lightning came pouring in. The mud wall flickered crimson red and jet black, repeatedly assaulted by the lightning. But it didn’t last long. It crumbled far too easily, leaving Titania completely defenseless. With the next red flash, there was a burst of white smoke and she seemed to disappear completely.

“TIAAAAAAAAAA!”

Entirely drowned out by the roaring thunder, Reiji screamed out for Titania as loud as he could... but there was no answer.

“N-No way...”

Reiji could hear Mizuki mutter in disbelief and despair. Every single person

present shared her feelings and collectively held their breath.

The cloud of white smoke rising up from the chain cage flickered with the remnants of the red lightning. It was an attack easily on par with the red lightning that had so easily destroyed Faylia's spell earlier. But instead of a tree this time, it was Titania's slender body that had taken the brunt of it. No one expected that she would survive it. However, as the white smoke dispersed, they could make out the silhouette of a girl on her knees.

"N-Not yet..."

"So your defenses just barely managed to keep you alive. Even so..."

Pulling his chains up from the ground, he used them to ensnare Titania and toss her aside like an annoying pest.

"Gah... ah..."

Unable to even move, she bounced helplessly along the ground as she rolled towards the pedestals where the relics were kept. She crashed right into one of them, sending the tyrant's cursed tome flying.

The book landed right at Ilzarl's feet. His eyes drawn to it, he stooped down to pick it up. Seeing this, Faylia, who was still being supported by Mizuki, immediately cried out.

"No!"

"What? What's wrong with this?"

"Y-You mustn't touch that!"

She was screaming like her own life was on the line, but it was perhaps even more serious than that. If what Faylia said was true, anyone who touched the cursed book would become just like the tyrant. If a demon general were so possessed, the outcome would be unimaginable.

"Hmph, certainly there is an ominous feeling coming from it."

"If you understand that, then..."

She was going to plead with him, beg him not to touch it. But...

"It's not like I don't have any experience with this kind of thing."

Ignoring her, Ilzarl picked up the book. However... nothing happened. Ilzarl simply scrutinized the artifact. There was none of the tragedy Faylia had so feared.

“...How? After touching that, how are you staying sane...?”

“Regarding that, it’s a privilege of this form. At any rate, to think there was another power similar to Zekaraia...” Ilzarl muttered in a serious voice as he tucked the book on his back using his chains. “I will be taking this. Now then, the only ones who can still put up a fight are... the bastard hero and that woman in the back, right?”

“Urgh...”

Ilzarl was looking at both Reiji and Mizuki, and began walking towards them. He’d dealt with Graziella and easily defeated Titania, who had put up a fierce fight. He was a monster. Beyond a shadow of doubt. And right now, Reiji didn’t even have his sword. He hadn’t had a chance to get it back after dropping it earlier, leaving him completely unarmed. After what he’d seen, he didn’t even think his magic would have any effect. There was absolutely nothing left that he could do.

“Reiji, take Mizuki and run.”

“What...?”

“If a hero dies here, then all will be lost. I will hold this damned monster back. Now go.”

“B-But...”

As Reiji hesitated, Titania got to her feet and followed after Graziella.

“R-Reiji-sama, it is just as Her Imperial Highness says. Pay us no mind and flee for your life.”

“No way! I can’t just leave everyone behind!”

“You needn’t worry. Her Imperial Highness and Faylia-dono are both here with me.”

“Reiji, go and do what it is that you must,” said Graziella over her shoulder. “Or would you have him take that weapon and kill you as well? If even one of

the heroes—the people’s beacons of hope—falls, the demons’ fervor will only grow stronger.”

“B-But...”

“You should have that resolve—if you don’t want to abandon anyone else, that is. Now go. At this rate, everyone here will only die in vain.”

“...”

“In the worst case, use Her Royal Highness as a shield and flee.”

Graziella gave him a glinting grin. She was likely intending to convey her composure, but in this situation, all Reiji could see and hear was heroic martyrdom.

“Have you finished your goodbyes?”

A shadow was leisurely drawing closer. To Reiji, it looked just like the grim reaper. As he was right now, he was staring down an opponent he could never win against. Just as the princesses had said, his only choice was to run away. Even if he didn’t want to, there wouldn’t be a single person who would forgive him for his selfishness if he stayed.

“Wait!”

It was in that moment of desperation that Reiji remembered something. He still had the Sacrament he’d put away before drawing his sword. The only catch was that he didn’t know whether or not he could use it. There were special words needed to awaken it as a weapon, but they hadn’t come to him.

“Ugh...”

Reiji gritted his teeth at his own helplessness. Graziella and Titania continued to urge him to retreat. Mizuki was looking at him worriedly. As the time to make his decision drew nearer, he could hear a whisper in his head.

“Is it really alright to run away? What do you intend to accomplish by not demonstrating your power here? What will you do if you cannot save them?”

The only thing that could be whispering to him... was the object in his hand. And so, tightly—as tightly as he could—Reiji gripped the Sacrament.

“Awaken... WAKE UUUUUUUUP!”

Reiji shouted out in a much louder voice than he thought himself capable of. Having an impossible choice thrust upon him, it was a roar that defied fate. And in response to that momentous cry... the Sacrament answered.

For an instant, the blue gem embedded in the center of the ornament shone radiantly, emitting a gentle blue wave. The next thing Reiji knew, everything around him turned black and white and fell still. Mizuki, Titania, Graziella, Faylia, and even Ilzarl. Time had come to a complete stop. As if to signify that Reiji and the Sacrament were the only exceptions, they still held their color, which looked especially vivid in the stopped, monochrome world around them.

Eventually, the blue wave returned to the gem as if it were rewinding. And before Reiji knew it, the ornament in his hand had become a blue sword that gave off a cold brilliance.

“I did it...”

It had the shape of a narrow longsword, but unlike any sword he’d ever seen in this world or his own, the tip and the edge of the blade were made of a metal that resembled white porcelain. And at the center of the blade was a grand, beautiful blue enameled design. The grip was a stylish wrap of white and blue, and imitating a guard were two white porcelain-like wings atop intersecting circles. In the middle of those circles was a blue gem that seemed like crystallized lightning as it sparkled brightly.

The sword was so precise and pristine that no one would doubt it was a weapon from the future, but it also had the beauty and feel of an ancient work of art. Seeing it manifest, Titania and Graziella’s shocked voices rang in the air.

“Reiji-sama!”

“Reiji, you...”

Reiji was also still gripped by surprise. When he turned around, he could see Mizuki’s beaming face. But as he turned, he could also sense a presence flying towards him. Precisely where he had just been standing, an enormous copper chain passed by in a flash.

“Hmph. So that’s why he called it a weapon. I see... That’s quite the amusing

object.”

Ilzarl nonchalantly gave his impression, apparently unperturbed at this development. Reiji readily turned the Sacrament on the man whose attitude hadn't changed at all since he first arrived. And when he did, as if the Sacrament was responding to Reiji's will, it sucked in his mana and began moving.

The two white circles that were crossing each other diagonally began revolving in opposite directions, and the porcelain wings let out a pleasant chill along with particles of light and a vapor of mana that crawled up his arm. The sword began pulsating like an internal combustion engine, and those vibrations were passed through his hands.

Reiji was trembling, though it was uncertain whether it was because the sword itself was moving, or if it was because of his irrepressible urge to put the sword to use. A shining blue magic circle formed at his feet. As he swung the sword to the side, the air that the tip of the blade dragged through formed a blue crystal trail that broke into diamond dust.

The scattering dust froze the air and ground before Reiji, but there was no sense of intensity or urgency to its workings. Compared to the magic used by Titania, Graziella, and Faylia, it was relaxed. Reiji could barely feel any power from it, but that gentle power was tremendous.

“U-Urgh!”

The moment the crystals were about to reach Ilzarl, he must have sensed the subtle nature of their power. He leaped back, but the tip of one of his chains didn't make it far enough away. When the crystals touched it, it froze, turned blue, and shattered. Indeed, the chain that had broken through Faylia's powerful magic was destroyed with ease.

“The crystal sword Ishar Cluster...”

The name of the sword suddenly came to Reiji's mind. Faylia had said it was something that could freeze anything in existence, but that wasn't quite right. Objects simply appeared to freeze before its sheer power.

And for some reason, Reiji could see that Ilzarl's movements had become

sluggish. When the sword appeared, when it awoke, when he used its power... Even though Reiji had left himself open plenty of times, Ilzarl hadn't taken the initiative to attack him even once. Was it simply the negligence of an arrogant opponent? While Reiji was pondering this, he firmly gripped Ishar Cluster's hilt and leaped forward.

"Huh?! What?!" he immediately stammered.

Much to his surprise, rather than leaping, he nearly went rocketing through the air. It was unlike anything he'd experienced before, and he went much further than he'd anticipated. Feeling like he had lost control, he panicked in the air. Realizing crashing into something at this speed would be bad, he flailed in the air before reaching down with his left hand and spreading his braced legs wide. He tried to catch as much ground with those three points of contact as possible, and kicked up a trail of sand and dirt behind him as he gradually slid to a halt.

"I stopped..."

Facing the wall he'd nearly hit, Reiji let out a sigh of relief. But then, suddenly realizing he was wide open...

"Behind me?!"

"Huh...?"

It was Ilzarl who'd yelled out in shock, and Reiji who was left bewildered. By the time he realized what was going on, everyone was staring at him in surprise. They looked like the unthinkable had just happened. Observing this, a thought crossed Reiji's mind. He wasn't the only one who'd been surprised at his speed—but the reason everyone else's astonishment came later was because nobody had been able to react in time. Even Ilzarl was slow to respond. Adding it all up, the only explanation seemed to be that Reiji's own senses had been accelerated.

Keeping his theory to himself, Reiji focused on Ilzarl's movements. And just as he thought, Ilzarl seemed to be moving much slower than before. Slow enough that Reiji could see openings to attack. But he saw something else in those openings—hope. All of a sudden, the absolute despair of fighting an impossibly doomed battle vanished into thin air.

He blocked the copper chain that came flying at him with Ishar Cluster. He could feel the shock of the blow, but it was nothing compared to what he'd experienced trying to stop Ilzarl's bare hand before.

"This is... the power of the sword..."

"I see... That's why that guy said it could reach even Zekaraia. To think it could elevate a mere offering to being able to put up a fight..."

Reiji could hear surprise in Ilzarl's voice, yet he kept his composure. It was true Reiji was no longer dominated by the despair of fighting an overwhelming opponent, but even so, he could still feel the dominating strength coming from Ilzarl. It told him that he had to fully unleash the power of the sword. As such, he stabbed the tip of Ishar Cluster into the ground with all his might.

"HAAAAAAAAAH!"

Reiji roared, and Ishar Cluster began to radically suck in his mana. As it did, the ground began to crystallize into enormous, glacial, vitreous ores. Rather than specifically surrounding Ilzarl, they spread out through the entire grotto. Ilzarl used his chains entwined with red lightning to fend them off, but the smashed crystals only continued to spread. And eventually, even the chains that were being used to smash the crystals began to freeze. At this rate, Reiji could do it. He could take Ilzarl. And just as he was thinking that...

"Huh? Urgh, ah... Wh-What...?"

Suddenly, his vision grew shaky like he'd been struck with vertigo. Just like that, his knees gave way. He no longer had the strength in his legs to stand. And as he fell, the blueish crystal ores all shattered as one.

"Reiji-sama?!"

"My body... All my mana... was sucked up..."

"With this kind of power, it's obvious it would require a significant amount of mana to sustain. It just means that this weapon is more than you can handle."

Talking down to Reiji like he knew everything, Ilzarl drew closer. And once again, Reiji was left utterly powerless.



Ilzarl was closing in on the vulnerable Reiji, who had used up his mana. This time, there really was nothing he could do. Watching this all unfold right in front of her, a restlessness stirred in Mizuki.

It was exactly the same as when they'd fought Rajas. She was forced to taste the bitterness of her own helplessness. Perhaps this was even worse. Here, because she was a hindrance in battle, she'd had no choice but to fall to the back. And if this was how it was going to be, was there any meaning in her coming with Reiji? She'd promised to help him, but what could she even do? She asked herself all this, but her questions were almost immediately overwritten.

"Do you wish to fight?"

She swore she heard a voice from somewhere.

"What? Who is that?"

While supporting Faylia, who was sweating and panting in pain, Mizuki looked around for the source of the voice. It wasn't the voice of anyone present, and she couldn't see that anyone else had entered the room. As she sat there completely bewildered, she heard the voice again from seemingly nowhere.

"Tell me: do you wish to fight, or do you not?"

Mizuki couldn't understand the intent behind the question, but she'd known her answer for a long time now.

"I... want to fight too. I want to be useful to everyone..."

Immediately after putting her true feelings into words without the slightest hint of pretense or falsehood, Mizuki's consciousness slipped into darkness.



In another sudden turn of events, right as Reiji fell to his knees...

BAAAAAAAANG!

With a utterly strange and incomprehensible sound, the air between Reiji and Ilzarl exploded.

"W-Wuh...."

“Wh-What is it this time?!”

Reiji covered his face to defend from the explosion in front of him. Ilzarl leaped back in an attempt to escape it, but the explosion chased him all the way to the grotto wall. When it began to subside, Reiji could hear something behind him...

“FUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

It was a familiar voice, a loud laughter that he remembered hearing before, that rang through the cavern. Reiji suddenly had a terrible feeling and quickly turned around. Behind him, he could see Mizuki standing there, her arms crossed in a haughty pose as she continued to laugh loudly.

“M-Mizuki?!”

“H-Hey, what’s the matter all of a sudden, Mizuki?!”

Titania and Graziella both directed their confused inquiries at her. And the answer they got...

“My name is not Mizuki!”

Hearing that nonsensical declaration, question marks were floating over everyone’s heads. If she wasn’t Mizuki, then who was she? Their puzzled gazes all seemed to be asking the same thing.

“Every single one of you! You shall do well to listen carefully! I am the ultimate ruler who controls everything in all three thousand worlds, the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami!”

In answer to her bold declaration, Reiji shrieked.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

Indeed, Reiji had entirely forgotten that he was sitting on the ground exhausted of mana. He let out a tremendous wail at the top of his lungs. To him, the least likely scenario conceivable had just unfolded. It was too much to take silently. Seeing him completely lose his composure, Titania called out to him in bewilderment.

“R-Reiji-sama?”

“M-Mizuki! Mizuki, that’s... just... This isn’t the time for that!”

“What are you saying?! If not now, then when would you say is the time?! FUHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Just what had come over her? Totally ignoring Reiji’s pleading, she began laughing more heartily than ever. Watching this curiosity develop, Ilzarl, who had retreated back to the wall, looked almost daunted as he raised an astonished question.

“What? Did you lose your mind?”

“What a rude fellow. I assure you this exquisite mind of mine is exactly as it should be!” With that, Mizuki suddenly clutched at her left eye. “Ah, it throbs... It aches, this left eye of mine... It throbs sonorously as it furiously demands I obliterate the scoundrel who has wronged me...”

Looking closely, one of Mizuki’s eyes was shining with a golden glow. Even though both her eyes had always been the same color before, Reiji could see for himself that they had become heterochromatic—just like she always wanted.

“Hear me, half-naked man! I shall now grant you a fate beyond this plane, dropping you into the eternal glacier known as the depths of hell, born of God’s twisted mind!”

“...”

“You should feel honored! For soon, you will be lining up before the great Demon King! FUHAHAHAHAHA!”

Mizuki thrust her finger out at Ilzarl as she unflinchingly pronounced his fate. Meanwhile, Reiji was pointing at Mizuki, his mouth gaping like a fish out of water. As for Ilzarl, as expected, Mizuki’s boasting didn’t sit well with him and he seemed to be rather irritated. He left impressions in the ground as he firmly stepped forward, exuding a strong, terrifying presence.

“To think that you would be unable to comprehend the glory of the words coming from my divine mouth! You absolute fool of woefully inadequate intellect! Take this!”

With that, a colossal amount of mana was released from Mizuki’s body.

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

Both Reiji and Ilzarl were stunned—one a close friend who had been traveling with her all this time and was surprised at this irregular display of mana, and the other an enemy in absolute shock at the dreadful display of power being put on in front of him. Ilzarl rightfully put up his guard as Mizuki began chanting.

“Oh Fire and Earth. Raise your glorious, innocent hymn. My temple stands firm in this place. Become the red hot iron and the fully-blown furnace, and flood all before me. Follow my hand, Cathedral Forge!”

What Reiji heard was a composite spell unlike anything he’d ever witnessed. He’d never heard those keywords before, either. But as soon as she’d said them, multiple stone pillars shot up from the ground beneath Mizuki. They lifted her up at their center, right up to the ceiling of the immense grotto. Just as Reiji was thinking they looked like they formed a temple, the stone pillars became red hot, seemingly heating the floor beneath them. It looked like they were melting it.

“Climb up! If you bastards waste any time, you too will be caught in the flood of this incandescent red blood of mine!”

“Huh? R-Right!”

Following Mizuki’s directions, Reiji and the others climbed up to her position. And not a moment too soon. The floor of the grotto then sank into boiling red lava, which rippled into a tsunami and rushed towards Ilzarl.

“This is bad! We won’t be able to breathe, Mizuki!”

Seeing the growing amount of surging lava, Reiji panicked. He was worried that the gas it emitted would quickly overtake the oxygen in the grotto, leaving them to suffocate. He immediately urged Mizuki to dismiss her spell, but...

“Do not fear. Even in this enclosed space, as long as you remain within this Cathedral Forge of mine, you need not worry about air. Though there seems to be an exception outside as well...”

“An exception?”

“Cast thy gaze upon that.”

Mizuki glanced over at Ilzarl. Reiji followed her line of sight. He saw what looked like an explosion of lava, and from that explosion... emerged Demon General Ilzarl.

“This destructive power is...”

While Ilzarl was muttering to himself, he looked at his own hands carefully. He'd undoubtedly been consumed by Mizuki's lava, but perhaps through some sort of resistance, the only damage he'd suffered for it was that his skin was somewhat reddened. It was no worse than a mild sunburn.

“No way... Even after being drowned like that, he's virtually unharmed...”

“A monster through and through...”

Reiji could hear Titania and Graziella's terrified voices, but Mizuki was letting out a creepy laugh.

“Even against that, only his skin is slightly burned, is it? Heh heh heh, as one would expect, demi-ogre. To withstand such magic with curable wounds... It looked to me as if you shook off this magic of mine with only your mana. Such a profound black even deeper than the darkness thrust forth by the King of Hell... You may accept my praise.”

Mizuki's declaration as she fell deeper into the intoxication of her imagination dealt a painful blow to Reiji. But Ilzarl seemed to ignore her completely.

“It has been a long time since I've seen someone who could properly use magic. Reminds me of the howl of the dragonnewts...”

“Do not lump me together with beasts! I am the Holy King of the Heavens, a unique existence throughout all heaven and earth!”

Mizuki continued to rain her haughty and fearless declarations on Ilzarl, but he merely snorted before making a bored expression like his interest was quickly waning.

“You really are prattling on about nothing but incomprehensible nonsense, offering. But no matter.”

Ilzarl then turned his back on Mizuki and the others, and just like that, started to head towards the exit of the grotto. Seeing this, Mizuki looked perturbed.

“Why are you resigning? Did you not want that Sacrament or whatever it was, you bastard?”

“I can feast on offerings like you whenever I please. But if I’m going to, it would simply prefer to do so when they’ve fully matured. Until then, I will leave that Sacrament or whatever in your hands.”

“You don’t have to show such patience on my account, you know. Or perhaps you fear this power of mine?”

“M-Mizuki...”

Mizuki continued to provoke Ilzarl, but Titania looked at her with pleading eyes to ask her to stop.

“Do not fear. Against one such as I, there is no opponent that cannot be defeated.”

Without even glancing at Titania, Mizuki remained completely focused on Ilzarl. Having regressed back into her chuunibyou state, she was powered by an incomprehensible level of self-confidence.

“You are a mere offering. Don’t speak with such conceit. I’m saying that I will let you live today. You should be cowering like the others, shivering in fear.”

“Hmph!”

Ilzarl shot a gaze at her that looked like it could kill someone, yet Mizuki simply scoffed. Ilzarl then narrowed his eyes and muttered something.

“Just doing what that guy says... Now that I think about it, that would peeve me too.”

Nobody could hear what he said, but Reiji could somehow sense discontent in his expression.

But then, just like that, the demon who handily overwhelmed the hero and his companions vanished. Reiji and the others were struck with relief as he left, and at long last, the tension left their stiff bodies.

“W-We’re alive...”

Reiji’s hands couldn’t stop shaking. Titania and the others also seemed to be completely spent, and all slackly slumped their shoulders as they stared at the entrance to the grotto dumbfounded.

“Seriously, to think he just up and left...”

“Just what did that demon want?”

Ilzarl had only showed up, laid waste to the group, and left. He seemed to want the Sacrament at first, but it apparently wasn’t a very high priority. In the end, he’d left without it and didn’t seem too upset about it. But while going over what had just happened in his head, Reiji was stuck with a concern that seemed far more immediate.

“That’s right! Mizuki!”

“What is the matter, my beloved fiancé? Suddenly raising thy voice like that...”

“Y-Y-Your—?!”

Reiji was too stunned by her shocking declaration to say anything else. Seeing that he was magnificently bewildered, Mizuki cocked her head to the side.

“What? Is something strange?”

“S-Strange?! Yes, very strange! What’s going on with you, seriously?!”

“There is nothing at all going on. On the contrary, just why are you so bothered?”

Mizuki was broadly grinning like she was having fun toying with him, but Reiji was too worked up to tell what she was thinking at all. In the midst of their antics, Titania called out to him.

“Reiji-sama, more importantly, shall we get out of here? There’s the matter with Mizuki, but I am also worried about Faylia-dono’s condition, not to mention Gregory and the others...”

“Ah, yeah... You’re right...”

Titania’s suggestion was the most reasonable thing anyone had said so far.

And so, carrying an anxiety that could not adequately be summed up in simple words, Reiji lent his shoulder to Faylia and left the grotto with the others.



As for what had happened outside, the knights of Astel and the soldiers Graziella brought with her from Nelferia were injured, but not gravely. They'd all escaped without life-threatening wounds.

From what they told Reiji, after they saw him and the others off, Ilzarl arrived at the temple. At first they thought he was just some shady figure and the monks from the Church of Salvation tried to turn him away, but Ilzarl didn't hesitate to tear into the monks when they opposed him. From there, battle broke out. The spellcasters from the church weren't able to contain him, and every last one of them that tried was apparently eaten.

But, perhaps because he'd already eaten his fill, by the time Ilzarl reached Gregory and the others, he seemed to have lost interest and didn't even put much effort into fighting. If there was something to be thankful for, it was just that.

Presently, the survivors had all been treated with restoration magic and were resting in a recovery room with Faylia. Reiji and the others were gathered together in a separate room they were borrowing from the temple. Recalling the fight with Ilzarl, Titania let out a heavy sigh.

"He certainly was a preposterous opponent."

"Demon General Ilzarl... So that's the kind of enemy we'll be up against from here on out, huh?"

Reiji could only offer a weak reply. There were a meager three things that he could appreciate with certainty right now. That Ilzarl had been a terrifyingly formidable enemy. That he'd been powerless against him. And that he'd been extravagantly foolish in declaring that he would fight despite such powerlessness.

The fact that they'd be up against truly strong enemies had first been impressed upon Reiji back during their fight against Rajas. Naturally, considering the nature of his mission, it was something he'd prepared himself for. But for

them to be so overwhelming... For an opponent to show up that he'd literally been unable to even harm on his own...

Reiji had awoken the Sacrament at some point during the battle, but the sword had reverted back to its form as an ornament. Even when he tried calling out to it now to transform, it wouldn't answer. If they ran into another demon general as things were, he would again be useless.

Was that... Was this really okay? Such questions filled his heart with doubt, but he wasn't the only one gripped by anxiety. Both Titania and Graziella felt the same way. Recalling their respective fights with Ilzarl depressed them, and their usual energy was nowhere to be seen.

Ilzarl and the Sacrament were both important matters, but Reiji would be forced to set them aside for the moment.

"My, my, whatever is the matter? My dear fiancé for whom my desire burns hotter than a fiery dragon's heart as it slumbers at the core of the earth, and whose existence is more precious to me than all the angels who call me master... For some time now, your complexion has been rather poor, you know?"

"Whose fault is that...?"

"Are you implying that the fault is mine? How rude... Well then, I shall let it be."

Mizuki's speech and conduct were one thing, but that wasn't all that seemed different about her. Her very attitude as "Io Kuzami" had changed, conjuring some very unpleasant memories for Reiji. Ever since they'd left the grotto, she'd stood with her arms haughtily crossed, overflowing with confidence. But what stood out the most were unmatching eyes. Indeed, her left eye was no longer black, but gave off a unique golden glow.

Reiji looked over at her with a complex expression. Titania and Graziella, equally unable to hide their bafflement, also beheld her with a certain degree of confusion.

"How do I put this...? Mizuki, isn't it about time you put an end to this act? Do we have to relive your dark past?"

“I am not Mizuki. I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. I got tired of hearing that a long time ago... Ugh, we’re not getting anywhere like this...”

Mizuki... No, Io Kuzami was unabashedly telling Reiji exactly what he didn’t want to hear. At his wits’ end, he felt a strong headache coming on. However, Io Kuzami seemed completely unaware of all this.

“There is no act. Everything is exactly as I say. I am the supreme ruler who oversees all children born under the heavens. Indeed, I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami.”

“Every time you open your mouth, the act just gets grander and grander... Hahh, as I thought, you’ve completely regressed into your dark days...” Reiji let out an anguished groan, then looked back over at her. “Hey, Mizuki...”

“How often must I repeat myself? I am not Mizuki.”

Io Kuzami once more asserted her identity, but this time Titania called out to her.

“Um, pardon... But are you really not Mizuki?”

“Indeed, I am genuinely not the true proprietor of this body—this girl known as Mizuki. I am the holy one descended from the heavens that hears the wishes of all who live in this world.”

What’s genuine about it? Much less holy?

Reiji grumbled to himself in his own mind, but couldn’t actually bring himself to say anything as he winced at her words. It was then that Graziella turned a question to him with a curious expression on her face.

“Reiji, I don’t really understand what’s going on with this Io Kuzami... Could you explain it?”

“...Do I have to?”

“Whatever the situation, it seems we’re stuck with it for the time being, no?”

“How do I put this...? It’s embarrassing to talk about...”

“Why are you embarrassed about it?”

“You know... It’s like when you’re sitting happily together with your family watching TV, and all of a sudden something very adult comes on...”

“I do not understand these expressions from your foreign world.”

“I can’t think of any other good examples...”

As Reiji hesitated to explain, Io Kuzami proudly puffed out her chest and spoke for herself in her typical self-assured tone.

“So be it! If you wish to know about me, I shall inform you. Everyone other than my fiancé should humbly bow down and listen.”

“Who’s going to bow? Just talk.”

“Man, she’s really going to say it... You’re really going to just confess, huh, Mizuki?”

As Reiji started muttering in despair, Io Kuzami took a daunting pose atop one of the beds. The other three people present resisted asking whether that was really necessary. But only after Io Kuzami finished lording over them with her gaze did she get to her explanation.

“I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami. I have awakened to guide the worthless beings collectively known as humanity who have run rampant in this boring world to the true realm of darkness. I am the absolute ruler of the black flame darker than the abyss that grants death without partiality to all in existence. My other names are the Grand Ripper, the Death Child... Right?”

“Don’t ask me! I don’t know!”

“I am certain I had about three other names granted to me, though... I am the one who boils all the malice in the world into an even jet black darkness using that Pandora whose name is karma to...”

“You don’t have to say it! You don’t have to say any more! Please!”

Reiji covered his ears. Perhaps some of his anguish had transferred over to Titania, who was now rubbing her temple with a severe expression.

“I do not understand why, but just listening to her gives me a headache...”

“It’s partly because what she says is incomprehensible, Tia...”

The two of them genuinely appeared to be suffering. Graziella, meanwhile, seemed to be considering the issue rather seriously.

“Reiji, Your Royal Highness... Could it be that Mizuki was possessed by something strange? Didn’t the elf mention something similar earlier? That the reason the king who ruled over this region turned villainous was because he was possessed by a force that drove him to madness and tyranny?”

“Now that you mention it...”

“Could you not lump me together with your kind?”

Io Kuzami was indignant at the comparison, but the more Reiji thought about it, the more he began to think she was right—if he lumped them together, he would feel badly for the tyrant.

“I shall say this beforehand, but I did not so much as touch that book. As another matter entirely, that fiend who serves he who holds the fist that conquered the devil, he who shook the heavens and earth from top to bottom and spread his name across the universe, eager for atrocities greater than the ones wrought by God and Satan—the god of demons—did he not take it with him?”

Io Kuzami was probably referring to Ilzarl. Certainly, Faylia had said that the origin of the tyrant’s possession was the book. But if the same force had possessed Mizuki, would it really be dredging up her dark past? As Reiji wrinkled his brow wondering just what was going on, Titania drew closer to him to whisper in his ear.

“Reiji-sama, what do you think?”

“Maybe—and I mean *maybe*—somewhere inside of Mizuki, she’s actually got another personality or something?”

“Another personality?”

“Yeah, it’s a condition called multiple personality disorder. When people undergo tremendous stress, sometimes they’re unable to keep their mind in balance, and other personalities are born to help cope.”

Reiji gave Titania a simple explanation of a single cause of multiple personality

disorder. Graziella, who happened to overhear this, cut in on their conversation.

“So that is the situation with Mizuki right now? I see... Certainly, that demon unleashed a tremendous fighting spirit. It isn’t strange to think that it would have done her in mentally.”

“Is there a way to turn her back, Reiji-sama?”

“It’s not like I’m a doctor, so I don’t know... But I’ve heard that people with such disorders sometimes switch personalities, or when they’re relieved of their stress, the new personality integrates with the original one. We might be able to find a way to rectify this with enough time.”

“So this doesn’t mean that the real Mizuki just vanished?”

“Theoretically...”

Titania felt a slight sense of relief upon hearing this. But the next to cut in on their conversation was Io Kuzami herself.

“Talking in secret amongst yourselves? Include me as well. Allow the King of the Heavens to hear your foolish conjecture that amounts to no more than grains of rice—no, specks of dust.”

“No. If we include you right now, Mizuki, we won’t get anywhere.”

“Mizuki, do not worry. Until you return to normal, I will help you to the best of my ability.”

“So you would ignore me, Io Kuzami? Nothing but insolence...” She made her dissatisfaction known with a snort, but after doing so, returned to a fearless smile. “More importantly, my dear fiancé, do you not have more to worry about than me to the exclusion of all else?”

“Huh?”

“That.”

Io Kuzami was pointing at the pocket of Reiji’s blazer. Inside of it were the Sacrament and the device called the Lachesis Meter, which he’d received from Faylia. Wondering what she was trying to say, Reiji reached into his pocket, and...

Tick.

“Huh?”

He heard the unmistakable sound of a clock ticking inside of his head. Perhaps saying he “heard” it wasn’t the right way to describe it. It was as if the sound resounded directly within his ears.

“Reiji-sama?”

“Did you... hear that just now?”

“Hear what?”

Titania looked quite puzzled, unsure of what he was talking about. She apparently hadn’t heard the ticking herself. After a short pause to try and listen for something, she questioned Reiji again.

“Reiji-sama, did you hear something?”

“We didn’t hear anything,” volunteered Graziella.

She vigilantly scanned the area to try and determine the source of the sound, but it seemed—whatever it was—that it had only been heard by Reiji. Meanwhile, Io Kuzami was grinning widely like she had before when she was toying with him. Her grin unchanged, she nodded towards what Reiji was holding in his hand. Reiji opened the face of the pocket watch. Just like when he first picked it up, there lay a curved hour and minute hand inside, but this time...

“It’s moving...”

It was certainly different. The curved needles were now moving, if only ever so slightly, and only roughly every minute or so.

“What a sinful measuring device. Its very existence suggests that everyone is doomed to perish, but for it to have been made, it also suggests there is a way to rebel against that fate.”

“Mizu— No, Io Kuzami-san, what is this to you?”

“It is a scale to measure the coming apocalypse. It’s a magic device that represents the rivalry between the inevitable future and the resistance of the

present day.”

“Faylia-dono did say something like that, didn’t she? Something about the beginning of the end of the world, right?”

“In other words, you just repeated what she said in an exaggerated expression?”

“I cannot deny the exaggerated expression... Well, take it however you like. You will only ever have the leisure to do so now, after all. FUHAHAHAHAHA!”

As Reiji looked at the Lachesis Meter with a stern expression, Io Kuzami broke into laughter. Her laughter gradually grew louder and louder, rattling Reiji’s mind and keeping him from thinking. Unable to bear it any longer, he screamed at Io Kuzami.

“Can you be a little quieter, Mizuki?!”

“Will you remember my name properly already? I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami! I am absolutely not Mizuki! Absolutely not!”

“AAAAAH! DAMN IT, DAMN IT, DAMN IT! Why did it end up like this?! How?! SUIMEI, SAVE MEEEEEEEEEE!”

Io Kuzami’s loud laughter and Reiji’s wails of despair echoed throughout the temple. This all happened that evening, one week after Suimei fought Eanru.

Chapter 3: The New Enemies

The battle in the northern part of the Alliance came to an end when the demons, at least temporarily, retreated. The various countries of the Alliance each suffered considerable casualties in the fighting, and so the human forces also temporarily pulled back to reorganize themselves. So, in the end, the overall result of the battle was concluded to be a draw.

Upon hearing that the demons had ultimately been—rather unexpectedly—targeting Hatsumi specifically, the king of Miazen requested Hatsumi and her party return to the capital. Waiting for their arrival, he gave a royal order for the city's defenses to be shored up. It was a kind gesture, but likely a futile one. When it came to an opponent that could overwhelm both Suimei and Hatsumi, no amount of soldiers would be able to make a difference. But nevertheless, it was about the only defensive plan the castle could realistically put in place. And so soldiers were gathered from all over Miazen, and patrols were put on around the clock duty all over the city, arguably to the point of overdoing it.

As far as the inside of the castle was concerned, the royal guard was hard at work as well. They remained wary of Suimei, but under the present circumstances, doing anything about him was out of the question. As such, they largely looked the other way and ignored him completely.

A few days after Suimei and the others departed from the north, it was decided that there would be a break in the fighting with the demons. As such, Hatsumi returned from the battlefield as well. Now back in the capital, she was visiting a certain place on her own.

That place was the boarding house of Twilight Pavilion, where Suimei and the others were staying. Hatsumi went up the wide staircase that was installed in the entrance hall, and, following the leather-covered handrail, headed towards the guest rooms. Before long, she arrived at her destination, and knocked on one wooden door in particular.

“Um, may I come in?”

Announcing herself only after making it through the foyer and to the second floor of the building felt a bit odd, but since she was here to visit someone in particular, Hatsumi thought it was the polite thing to do. After a moment, Hatsumi heard a female voice and footsteps approaching from the other side.

“Coming! Oh, it’s you, Hero-dono of the Alliance!”

“Yes. Um, if I remember correctly, it’s Stingray-san... right?”

“Indeed. It has been... Well, not all that long, no?”

The one to answer the door was Felmenia Stingray. She spoke fondly as she recalled their last encounter, and Hatsumi replied with a calm smile. Felmenia then made a dignified expression and, in the utmost demonstration of her proper manners and decorum, put her hand to her chest and bowed.

“Greetings, Hero-dono. You are most welcome in these humble lodgings.”

“Er, ah, yes, thank you... It’s lovely to be here.”

Hatsumi hesitated just a little at her sudden change in attitude, but Felmenia’s formal demeanor quickly crumbled as her friendly tone and smile returned.

“Incidentally, could it be that you are by yourself? Without so much as an escort?”

“That’s right. I snuck out on my own. If anyone came along, that would be a little troublesome.”

Hatsumi spoke with a bitter smile on her face. It may have been somewhat rude, but she must have been exhausted. No one from the palace thought well of her going to visit Suimei. She’d tried to come see him multiple times since getting back into town, but the king and his cabinet ministers seemed to have passed down orders to the guards to keep the hero within the palace walls for her own safety after what had transpired. So her only choice was to find a chance and sneak out. It was somewhat ironic, but she truly thought that this was actually the safest place to be right now.

“Well, there’s certainly no reason for us to stand here and talk. Please do come in.”

Felmenia stepped back and opened the door fully, holding it against herself to make room for Hatsumi to enter.

“Thank you. It seems I’ll finally be able to relax. The palace and even the streets are all nothing but guards, guards, guards. Just where did they all come out from...?”

“That is just how dire the times are. And so, Hero-dono, what brings you here today?”

“I thought I’d drop by to give my thanks for coming to save me the other day. The guild master said that Suimei would probably be here around this time.”

“Is that so? Suimei-dono should currently be in his room sorting through some documents. If you wait a bit, I do think that he should be here before long.”

“Thank you, I think I’ll do just that.”

Guided by Felmenia, Hatsumi took a seat inside. It seemed Felmenia was getting ready for a gathering of some sort, as she already had some local tea prepared. She offered Hatsumi some, and as she took a sip, she could hear the sound of the door opening again.

“Oh, Lady Hatsumi is here?”

The next to appear was Lefille, who looked a bit surprised to spy an unexpected visitor. Hatsumi stood up from her seat to greet her.

“Good day. Your name is Lefille, right?”

“That’s right.”

After Lefille nodded with a bright expression, Felmenia explained the circumstances of Hatsumi’s visit to her.

“It seems the hero has come to express her thanks for the other day.”

“That’s quite courteous of you. Sorry for making you come out all this way.”

“Not at all. I know I said it last time, but allow me to thank you again for the assistance and reinforcements. Thanks to you, we were able to return safely.”

In accordance with standard Japanese etiquette, Hatsumi bowed to show her

gratitude. Taking the gesture to be excessive, Felmenia started waving her hands as if to say she was exaggerating.

“It was nothing. All we did was lend a hand to Suimei-dono. If there’s anyone to be thanked, it’s him.”

“It’s true. If Suimei-kun hadn’t said he would go, those reinforcements probably wouldn’t have shown up, after all. The credit should all go to him, so please don’t pay us any mind.”

Both girls were speaking modestly. Hatsumi could feel something of a wall between them. Perhaps it was only natural since this was only really the second time they’d ever met, but it seemed like they were being vigilant about something else.

Hatsumi continued sipping her tea as she turned such thoughts over in her head. Waiting for Lefille to take her seat, Felmenia finally broke the ice in a somewhat timid manner.

“Um... Hero-dono, might I ask you something?”

“Yes? What about?”

“It is about Suimei-dono... Um, what is your relationship with him?”

“It seems we’re cousins. Did you not hear about it from Yakagi himself?”

“That is... Certainly, we had inquired about it, but...”

“Is something wrong?”

“Ah, no...”

Felmenia awkwardly looked away. It seemed this was something difficult for her to ask. Hatsumi couldn’t tell whether her roundabout manner of asking was supposed to make her realize or say something, but as she curiously contemplated the matter, Lefille spoke up.

“You can’t beat around the bush like that, Lady Felmenia. Lady Hatsumi, I’d like to be frank and cut to the point. What do you think about Suimei-kun?”

“Wh-What? As in...?”

Hatsumi twitched like someone had just pricked her finger. Being asked what

she thought about him, she could only assume they meant in *that* way. And then, confirming that she was right on the mark, Lefille's cheeks turned pink as she clarified her question.

"U-Um, that's, you know... That is to say... Do you love him or not... as a man?"

"H-Hero-dono, what do you think about Suimei-dono?!"

Jumping on the wagon, Felmenia leaned forward intently—nearly out of her seat—with a dire expression on her face. Both of them were quite serious, but...

"Wait a sec here! Why are you asking me that kind of thing?"

"Because this is an important matter to us!"

And with that, Hatsumi finally had an inkling about their reasons for asking in the first place. And as she realized that, Felmenia and Lefille also seemed to sense just how Hatsumi thought of Suimei. The three of them reacted near simultaneously.

"Tch."

"Hmph."

"Grrr..."

All three girls were now glaring darkly at each other. Like rivals, or maybe even enemies.

It was then that Suimei arrived. After finishing his organizing and coming to a good stopping point in his work, he was in a good mood and entered the room while humming a song. But for some reason, sparks were flying between the three beauties in front of him.

"Uh... What's this? What's happening?"

The battle concerning the thickheaded magician had really only just begun.



Liliana Zandyke had recently developed a strange "cuddling habit."

After she began living with Suimei and the others, whenever her loneliness became unbearable, she would cling to one of them for comfort. In part thanks

to this acquired behavior, she became much more aware of what it meant to be close with someone. To be doted on and loved. It was something she hadn't had much experience with up until now. But even then, when she was alone at night or when she recalled what life was like before meeting Rogue, her thoughts would turn dark. She couldn't escape the feeling that things would just turn out like before, which was immensely painful.

It was at times like that that she sought the embrace of one of her three friends, which was a great comfort to her wounded heart. She knew she was well past the age such behavior was considered acceptable, but Lefille told her not to hold back. That she deserved this and more for every time she'd been denied the warm embrace of a loved one as a child.

Loneliness was something that could settle in without any specific trigger. Such was the case today.

"Who... should I pick... today?"

While walking towards the guest room, Liliana was thinking about who she should demand attention from. If everything was going as usual, everyone should have finished their business for the day and be gathering there for a bit of tea and relaxing right about now.

Liliana normally decided on her cuddling partner by rotation. If she clung to a single person all the time, she would end up being a nuisance to them. So after having Lefille dote on her, next would be Felmenia, and after her would be Suimei, and so on. But while that was the general pattern, she took into account extraordinary circumstances and would sometimes jump forward in the order when it was necessary to accommodate one of her friends.

For the past few days, Suimei had been rather busy organizing all the data that he'd brought back from the darkwood forest regarding the hero summoning ritual. And because he'd been so occupied, Liliana had been leaning on the other two. As such, she was planning on asking him today for a change, but...

"Suimei, please cuddle with... me?"

What she saw when she opened the door was three young girls glaring daggers at each other with Suimei was standing in the middle of it all,

dumbfounded and terrified.

With just a glance, the intelligent Liliana was able to discern what had happened. The fact that her voice had been somewhat drowned out by the creak of the door opening was a stroke of good fortune on her part. Not realizing anything was wrong, the young girls simply glanced her way without saying anything before returning to their standoff.

Suimei, however, was trapped in a situation that felt rather like being on a bed of nails, and beheld Liliana with a relieved expression. To him, she looked like help that had come from the heavens.

“H-Hey, Liliana. What’s up?” he asked in an awkward and pathetic voice.

In response, Liliana slowly began to shut the door as she stepped back out into the hall.

“It’s... nothing. I’ll just... be going now. Goodbye...”

“No, wait. Don’t go back. Don’t say goodbye. Stay here. Please. I’m begging you.”

“Don’t mind me... Good luck.”

“Hey, hey, hey! WAIT! Didn’t you come here because you needed something? You said something just now, right? You asked for cu-something or other, right?”

It was obvious that Suimei was desperately trying to keep Liliana in the room, and all eyes now fell on her. The visiting Hatsumi in particular looked rather scary.

“That child... Liliana-chan, right? It sounded like she just said something about cuddling...”

So someone had heard her after all... Hatsumi shifted her narrowed eyes to Suimei. A hero’s keen senses were not to be underestimated. But neither was her strength. Suimei knew exactly what she was implying, and his voice cracked as he replied.

“Ah... Ahaha! Yeah, that’s... That’s, um...”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been doing indecent things to such a small child.”

“There’s no way I would do anything indecent to Liliana!”

“Then what’s this about?”

“What? No, really, that’s...”

As Hatsumi watched Suimei hem and haw, her eyes narrowed even further. It was just like she was looking at some lowly insect. Even Liliana couldn’t help but shudder at the sight.

It was true Suimei was guilty of cuddling with Liliana, but that was it. He’d never once done it with wicked intentions. He himself had lost his family, so he understood all too well the loneliness she felt. And to help alleviate those terrible feelings, he spoiled her from time to time.

But before he could explain all that to Hatsumi with this kind of tension in the room, surely she would snap and kill him first. (Little did he know she was on edge after having discovered how Felmenia and Lefille felt about him.)

Seeing that Suimei was hard pressed to give her a proper explanation, Hatsumi began reached down for the sword at her waist. Hearing the deadly sound of metal sliding against metal, Suimei let out an unprecedented pathetic yelp.

“Um, you see...”

“That’s actually...”

Felmenia and Lefille tried to come to his defense, but were having trouble finding a lifeline to throw him. After all, it was true that Liliana had come to ask Suimei to cuddle with her. It would be impossible for them to deceive Hatsumi on that front. Really, the only one who could salvage this situation was Liliana herself.

Right now, Hatsumi was closing in on Suimei with a dreadfully menacing aura that easily surpassed that of a demon. In fact, she looked like she might *be* the Demon Lord. And Liliana certainly wasn’t the only one who thought so. She had never seen the Demon Lord personally, but there was no other being she could think to compare Hatsumi to right now. Nevertheless, she stepped in front of her to keep her from getting to Suimei.

“Hero Hatsumi, I did not say ‘cuddle,’ but ‘cudgel.’ I came here to get a more detailed explanation of the cudgel magicka Suimei taught me, which is what I asked him about when I entered. You must have misheard me.”

Under the tension of confronting the maddened hero, Liliana had slipped into mechanical report mode. She’d done her best, but it was still quite the lame excuse. Hatsumi’s grim expression didn’t change at all.

“Hmph. If that’s the case, then why are the three of them having such a hard time saying it?”

“A magician’s magickas are secret arts. They must be kept hushed and treated with all propriety. As such, the three of them were reluctant to speak on the matter out of sheer force of habit.”

“But...”

“Hero Hatsumi, I’m sure I needn’t ask, but do I look to you like such a pathetic child that I need to be cuddled?”

Liliana tried approaching things from a different angle. It was a life-and-death gamble that would decide Suimei’s fate. And when it came time to show her hand... Hatsumi grumbled reluctantly. Liliana’s physique was on the childish side, but her demeanor and manner of speaking were mature enough that Hatsumi came to realize she might have misjudged her age.

“No, you’re quite right. I apologize.”

“I must also apologize for saying anything that invited such a misunderstanding.”

Bringing the matter to an end, Liliana bowed her head. She’d won the bet and Suimei’s life, but it wasn’t all good news. Now that that much was settled, a certain thought suddenly crossed her mind. As a consequence of all this, she wouldn’t be able to cuddle with Felmenia or Lefille either until Hatsumi left.

“Hmph...”

She was already at her limit waiting for cuddles. Grumbling under her breath about Suimei’s philandering ways, she slightly puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“So... just what’s going on here, you three? Though... I have something of an

idea... without even having to ask.”

“That’s what I wanna know! You three have been kinda weird since I got here.”

“Suimei... please be quiet.”

“Oof...”

After shushing Suimei, Liliana returned her gaze to Hatsumi, who childishly looked away.

“It’s nothing. There’s nothing going on with me.”

It was then that Lefille, who had been keeping a watchful eye on the situation, piped up.

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Huh?! That’s, um...”

Seeing Hatsumi’s bewilderment, Lefille cast a sidelong glance her way. In a fluster, it sounded like she might be changing her story.

“You just said there’s nothing going on, right?” Lefille pressed.

Hatsumi’s eyes darted left to right, up and down. They, much like her heart, seemed to be restless. All she could manage in the way of a reply was mumbling.

“You are not speaking clearly,” Felmenia said with something of a grim expression.

“By the way, Lady Hatsumi... What’s wrong with Prince Weitzer?”

Hearing Lefille’s question, Hatsumi’s face instantly turned bright red.

“I don’t have that kind of relationship with Weitzer! A-And when you say it like that, you make it sound like I’m in l-l-l-l-love with this guy or something!”

“Am I wrong?”

“You’re wrong! Both Weitzer and this guy are wrong!”

After clamoring that everything was wrong, Hatsumi puffed out her cheeks in an angry pout and turned away. It was perfectly transparent that she was just

being stubborn. (To everyone but Suimei, that is.) But it seemed Lefille had also grown somewhat embarrassed as she petitioned her next question awkwardly.

“Th-Then... there’s no problem with us getting along with Suimei-kun, right?”

“Th-That’s...”

“Getting along” was just vague enough that Hatsumi was having a problem objecting to it. And as she struggled to come up with an answer, Suimei—who still didn’t really understand what was going on—joined the conversation that he really should have just stayed out of.

“Hey, Hatsumi, I’m a bit lost, but why get so worked up about it? There’s nothing wrong with everyone getting along, right?”

“...And just what do you mean when you say ‘getting along’?”

“What? I mean...”

As Suimei fumbled for words, Hatsumi puffed her cheeks up even more before blowing her lid altogether.

“What?! After all that ‘it’s my job to save her’ talk?! I heard all about it from Selphy!”

“Huh, wuh? What? No, I mean, I remember saying that, but...”

“Didn’t you say you were going to protect me?!”

“Yeah, but isn’t that normal? We’re family.”

“It’s not normal!”

“Wait, what?”

Getting a completely different reply from what he was expecting, Suimei was left dumbstruck. He’d taken a stand to protect a precious family member—and he was completely at a loss having that turned around on him. What else could that possibly mean? It seemed Felmenia was wondering as well.

“Suimei-dono, I would also like to ask in detail just what you were thinking when you made such a claim.”

“I’m also curious,” agreed Lefille. “Very curious indeed.”

“Spit it out!” barked Hatsumi.

The three of them were steadily closing in on Suimei. It was a rather pitiful sight, but he was merely reaping what he’d already sown.

“U-Uh, um... Hey, guys... If you raise your voices and cause a fuss, you’ll bother the other guests staying here, so could you be a little quieter and more amicable? Maybe?”

Suimei tried to smooth things over, but...

“It’s alright, Suimei. Just a moment ago... I put up a sound-isolating barrier... around the entire room.”

“Oh, cool. Thanks for— Wait, that’s not what I meant at all!”

“Was I wrong?”

“Well, I can’t say you were wrong to do it, but... Damn it, Liliana! That was on purpose, wasn’t it?!”

Liliana was currently making the thumbs up gesture that Suimei had taught her, and then turned it upside down. And down, down he fell, far into the depths of hell. There would be no escape. If Liliana couldn’t have her cuddles, it was only fair that Suimei pay the price with equal suffering.

“M-My allies...”

“You have none. If you cut somebody, you will wet your own body with blood, as they say.”

Hearing Liliana repeat the saying she’d once used against him, Suimei’s shoulders drooped in an utterly crestfallen fashion. But the group of girls encircling him showed no mercy in their approach.

“So, Yakagi, about what we were talking about... Care to explain?”

“Didn’t I?! I said I just wanted to protect my family. There’s no particular meaning to it other than that...”

“Talking like that can *only* give way to misunderstandings!”

“Indeed. It seems I need to teach you a thing or two about speaking in such vague terms.”

“Suimei-dono, I told you that you must speak up and express yourself clearly!”

The dirty looks the girls had been shooting at each other earlier now all fell on Suimei.

“Why are all of you suddenly colluding...?”

Consequently, he would be on the receiving end of their nagging and sermons for quite some time.



“Well, it’s about time I go back,” Hatsumi announced.

“I’ll see you off...” Suimei replied like a lifeless zombie.

For a while now, he had been interrogated and lectured. It left him so utterly drained that he was completely disheartened and on the verge of just blacking out. In spite of it being the afternoon and quite sunny, the very spot where he stood radiated gloom.

After Hatsumi said her farewells, Lefille and Felmenia also stood from their seats.

“We will come along as well.”

“That sounds great. Shall we all see her off together?”

“What...? Um, I should really be fine on my own...”

Before she knew it, Hatsumi had an entire entourage volunteering to go with her. Thinking it would be a bother, she tried to decline them, but it seemed they weren’t simply trying to be polite in offering her an escort.

“That’s... not it. With everyone around you... it’ll be harder... for anyone to discover you.”

“Ah, I get it!”

Hatsumi clapped her hands when she heard Liliana’s explanation. She was also somewhat uneasy about hiding her identity with only a robe. But if everyone walked in a wall around her, it would be much harder for the military police to see her face. With their plan settled, Suimei and the others

surrounded Hatsumi and left the boarding house. After walking down the street towards the palace a ways, Hatsumi suddenly turned to Lefille.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I ended up shouting all kinds of things...”

“We don’t particularly mind. There’s no need to apologize.”

Lefille accepted her apology with a refreshing smile. Suimei looked at her like she was crazy and meant to object, but Felmenia scowled at him. Remembering what he had just gone through with a frown, he found himself unable to say a word.

“Goodness me. Really, it is all Suimei-dono’s fault for saying things that invite misunderstandings in the first place... Hero-dono, we all said a great deal earlier, but I do hope we can get along from now on.”

“Huh? Get along?”

Hatsumi was under the impression that she and the other girls had all acknowledged each other as rivals, so Felmenia’s proposal came as something of a surprise. Seeing her confusion, Lefille shook her head and explained.

“That is that, and this is this. There’s no need to compare apples and oranges, is there?”

“That’s how we see it, Hero-dono.”

“You might be onto something there... Mm, all right. Let’s get along.”

“I don’t know what you guys are talking about, but I’m fine with it if it means everyone’s going to get along now...”

With things finally taking a turn for the pleasant, Suimei took in a big breath of the freshly cleared air and let out a relieved sigh. His peace wouldn’t last for long, however. Sensing something else afoot, Liliana got his attention.

“Suimei... There’s a commotion up ahead.”

“Hmm?”

Upon hearing Liliana’s report, Suimei focused his eyes forward. There was indeed something going on further down the street.

“What? A riot in broad daylight? You gotta be kidding me.”

Whatever was happening had gone well beyond the scale of a mere brawl. There was a fairly large mass of people rampaging violently. The shouting was audible even from a distance, and it was only growing louder and angrier.

“I wonder what happened...”

“This can’t be anything good.”

Spotting a man fleeing from the uproar, Suimei questioned him as he passed by.

“Excuse me. About the commotion... Did something happen?”

“I-I dunno. Those guys... We thought they were just gonna get on their soapboxes like normal, but they suddenly got violent.”

““Those guys’?”

“I dunno, man. If you wanna know, go ask someone else!”

With that, the man quickly ran off down the street in the opposite direction of the uproar, leaving Suimei and the girls in the dust. Realizing they wouldn’t get any answers out of the panicking crowd, they gradually made their way through the increasing waves of people fleeing the riot. And eventually, at the source of the commotion, they found...

“These guys...”

“We saw them before, right? The Anti-Goddess something or other?”

Through a break in the crowd of people, they could see several figures in white religious garb carrying metal canes. Lefille had introduced them to Suimei as a suspicious cult that liked to sermonize in town.

But there wasn’t just one or two of them this time. There was quite a mass of them all acting together as they struck their canes against the ground and tore down the eaves and fences of the surrounding houses. And strangest of all, not a single one of them was saying a single word. They were like a silent, violent assembly line, attacking one building after another. It was an odd, strangely eerie sight.

Suimei could hear angry, confused shouts from the crowd asking the odd group what they were doing and calling for them to stop, but the white-robed

figures ignored all such pleas like they couldn't even hear them. There were probably plenty of people who'd tried to talk them down before Suimei and the girls arrived, but it seemed all such efforts had ended in vain.

"They're coming... this way," Liliaana warned.

"What do... Well, guess I don't need to ask, huh?" Suimei murmured.

"Isn't it obvious that we're going to subdue them?!" Hatsumi retorted.

"Naturally," Lefille simply declared.

It seemed they both found Suimei's question rather foolish. They wasted no time in acting, either. They stepped forward and began taking out the armed cult members. Hatsumi used her sword in its sheath to precisely strike her opponents' vitals to stop them from moving without mortally wounding them. Lefille was also using her enormous sword in its sheath to beat down the cult members. Shrieks like frogs being stepped on filled the air.

Before the skill of the two talented swordswomen, the cult members were utterly defenseless and fell on the spot. But just as Hatsumi and Lefille thought that they had brought the commotion to an end, they realized that more people in white robes were pouring out of the nearby alleyways.

"Hang on, just where are these guys all coming from...?"

As Hatsumi's baffled voice reached his ears, Suimei looked over to where the cult members were appearing and activated a far sight spell. He used his magically enhanced vision to follow the line of white robes all the way to its source, and...

"Hey, yo, hold up... This isn't the only god damn place these guys are rampaging around?!"

"What do you mean?"

"They're rioting like this all over the city in every direction. Looks like they haven't gotten to the palace yet, though..."

But even so, they were still stirring the city into an uproar. Hearing Suimei's report, Hatsumi knocked down the cult member in front of her and turned around.

“Yakagi, where’s the most concentrated chaos?”

“Hang on... Around the blacksmithing district. The guys over there don’t just have canes, they’re armed with actual weapons.”

“They probably raided the workshops there. Suimei-kun, what are the military police doing?”

“Looks like it’s taking all they’ve got just to chase down the robed guys appearing all over the place, but there’s just not enough of them... They’re normally just loitering around in droves. Didn’t security get strengthened after what happened last time?”

“I can only guess, but I assume most of them are at the palace.”

“So because of that, everywhere else is basically defenseless? There’s way too few... Ah.”

Suimei suddenly made a face like he’d realized something while he was talking. Picking up on this, Felmenia questioned him.

“Is something the matter?”

“Suimei... You also noticed... didn’t you?” Liliana asked in turn.

Suimei nodded back to her. But it seemed it wasn’t just him who’d noticed. Lefille nodded too. Suimei then took a moment to explain things to Felmenia and Hatsumi, who both looked clueless.

“It’s likely that they’re mixing in with the supplemental guards or something.”

From those few words alone, Hatsumi’s expression turned sour like she’d just remembered something unpleasant.

“Ugh, it’s like the modus operandi of a certain terrorist organization...”

“My thoughts exactly.”

It differed slightly from what she was referring to, but it certainly did smack of terrorist behavior they’d heard of in West. Terrorists would mix in with refugees, tourists, and immigrants to make their way across international borders in order to carry out their deadly deeds. Wolves were blending in with the sheep, just like was going on here.

Once all the cult members in the immediate area were taken care of, Suimei called out to Hatsumi.

“What are you gonna do? Go to the palace?”

“You said the blacksmithing district was where it’s really going down, right? I’ll head there.”

“You would, huh?”

That much was to be expected of her sense of responsibility. That serious side of her hadn’t changed at all, even after she’d lost her memories.

“Then... I will open up... a path for us.”

Liliana emerged at the front of the group, tottering along like usual. She then thrust out her index finger like she was pointing at the approaching group of white-robed figures that stood between them and the blacksmithing district. She brought her arm into her line of sight and held it up perfectly level with the ground. Then she pushed her finger forward ever so slightly.

“Bang, bang!”

Immediately after making those imitative sounds with her mouth, the cult members straight in front of her were thrown into the members behind them with terrifying force. The whole line of white-robed figures started to fall like dominoes, each one screaming as they dropped.

“Ugeh!”

“Hey, what are you— Gwah!”

“Wh-What?! H-Hey! Oof!”

They were standing so close together that each one who fell kept crashing into the next in succession. But even though they were practically taking themselves out, Liliana continued childishly mimicking the firing of a gun, sending more and more of the cult members flying into each other. Since her attack was one with no physical substance, the cult members at the front weren’t even preparing magical shields to defend themselves. Felmenia made a curious expression as she watched this play out.

“Suimei-dono, what’s that Lily is using?”

“It’s a kind of exorcism magicka that makes use of the ethereal. It extends your astral body to directly strike your opponent’s.”

It was but one of many spells that fell under the great umbrella of exorcism magicka. It made use of the idea behind an out of body experience to purposefully manipulate one’s ethereal nature as an exorcism technique.

Using a guide like one’s finger or a staff, one could give their ethereality direction, extending it with force to push away an opponent’s astral body. And because the astral body and the physical body had an inseparable bond, when the astral body was sent flying, the physical body would be pulled right along with it, sending both of them flying together.

So in short, it was an astral attack, and could be considered quite powerful magicka. But as Suimei explained all this, Felmenia looked quite dissatisfied for some reason.

“You never taught me this magicka...”

“Come to think of it, I guess not, huh?”

“You *guess* not? Why did you not teach it to me?”

Felmenia seemed angry that she hadn’t been taught the technique, and drew nearer to Suimei as she addressed him critically.

“Don’t pout just ’cause I taught her things a little out of order...”

“It is not just a little!”

“Technically, this isn’t even a particularly high-level spell.”

“Even so!”

There, she started yelling. She was far more obstinate than Suimei imagined. In a surprisingly unusual turn for her, she was being quite selfish. While they were having this little exchange, Hatsumi cut in and spoke up in a slightly reproachful voice.

“Hey, would you guys mind saving this for later?”

“Y-You are right. My apologies...”

“They’ll all... be down soon. When the way is clear... let’s start running.”

At Liliana's behest, the group made a break for it and crossed the bridge. On the other side, they arrived in the blacksmithing district. They were expecting to find cult members everywhere like Suimei had seen through his magicka, but...

"The uproar settled down?"

The street was lined with stores and smithies, so it had a rather eccentric look compared to other districts, but right now, it was surprisingly desolate. The signs and boxes left outside the shops were all damaged, but they couldn't hear any shouting or ruckus in the area. It was like the storm had already passed through.

"Yakagi, I thought you said the chaos was concentrated here?"

"Yeah. Up until now, it was, but... Just what does this mean?"

Suimei observed their surroundings dubiously. There was nobody around. Were the people of the district and the dwarves who ran the smithies hiding indoors? The fact that not even the violent cult members were around was still quite the mystery to him. While he was looking around, he caught sight of a shadow approaching them from up ahead. They weren't alone after all. Listening carefully, he could hear several sets of footsteps.

So they've come.

And just as he was thinking that, what appeared along with several robed figures was...

"This is..."

"So it's come to this."

"How... unexpected."

"Hey, wait... Seriously?"

Felmenia, Lefille, Liliana, and Suimei all raised surprised voices upon seeing the person standing at the center of the group of cult members. It was someone they knew well.

"I have been awaiting your arrival, hero of the Alliance, Hatsumi Kuchiba."

It was Sister Clarissa, who spoke as if she'd known Hatsumi was coming.

Hatsumi, however, was the only person unfamiliar with her, and made a puzzled expression upon hearing this.

“A cat-eared nun?”

“I am called Clarissa. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

With that, Clarissa bowed elegantly towards Hatsumi. Hatsumi, after seeing everyone else’s reactions to her, turned to Suimei for answers.

“This someone you know?”

“Well, we’ve met before, but...”

While Suimei was talking to Hatsumi, Lefille turned a question to Clarissa herself.

“Sister Clarissa, are you aware that the people standing behind you are causing a disturbance?”

“Yes, I am fully aware.”

“From what I can see, you appear to have no connection to them. Just what is the meaning of all this? I’d like to get a definitive answer from you.”

Lefille intensely pressed her for an answer, but it wasn’t Clarissa that replied.

“Hahh... There’s nothing particularly definitive about this, though.”

“Jill!”

Jillbert lackadaisically walked out of an alleyway with a sigh. And then, as if to clearly declare her side, she took her position right next to Clarissa. She was dressed the same as always, in functional and easy to move in clothing. But today, on top of her dainty shoulder leaned an unsuitably large halberd. It had a long, fat grip that seemed too large for her tiny hands, and an axe blade with a spear tip that was almost as large as she was. As she dropped the halberd from her shoulder to the ground, it shook the ground along with a loud and dull noise.

“Yo, legal loli.”

“I keep telling ya, I don’t understand a word you say, you damn pedophile... But more importantly, you’re surprisingly calm about this, aincha?”

“Well, yeah. From what Sister here just said, I’ve more or less grasped the situation.”

Seeing that Suimei had figured something out, Hatsumi turned to him again.

“Yakagi, what’s going on?”

“It’s déjà vu. Isn’t it kinda similar to when Eanru showed up?”

“Ah!”

Hearing that, Hatsumi saw the connection for herself. Hearing her surprised acknowledgment, Clarissa spoke up again.

“If you know what’s going on, then it will save us some time.”

“Then, Sister, does that mean you are a companion of the dragonnewt who attacked Suimei-dono and Hero-dono?”

“Yes, White Flame-dono, it’s exactly as you’ve surmised.”

“And so these guys are also your allies? For a nun of the Church of Salvation to bring along members of an opposing cult... It’s quite ironic, isn’t it?”

“Certainly, it’s quite a funny story.”

Clarissa began giggling in a refined manner. Meanwhile, Suimei and the others recognized the threat at hand and were each preparing for battle. The one who seemed most dismayed over this development, however, was Jillbert.

“Haaaaahh, why did it have to come to this?”

“Seriously. Jill, if you’re on her side, that means you’re also our enemy, right?”

“That’s how it goes. Honestly, I’d rather not be, but...”

From Jillbert’s way of speaking, she seemed completely unenthusiastic about the whole situation. She wasn’t particularly happy about having to antagonize Lefille, who she’d actually grown to be quite close with. And as if scolding her, Clarissa raised her voice.

“Jill, there’s no use in complaining.”

“I know there’s nothing that can be done about it, but... I was just wondering why things had to end up bringing Lefi and the others in opposition to us.”

“Do you still not understand?”

“Hah?”

Hearing Clarissa’s puzzling declaration, Jillbert made a curious expression. Clarissa then turned her gaze to Hatsumi.

“Hero Hatsumi, we are in need of your power. Could you possibly come along with us?”

“And your reason?”

“Right now, I can only request that you come along.”

“Then I refuse. I have things that I must do myself, so please ask someone else for assistance.”

“Even if I say... that I must insist you come with us by any means?”

“I still refuse. Do you really think I can trust people who do things like this?”

Exactly as expected, negotiations quickly broke down. Just based on the fact that they acknowledged they were Eanru’s companions, it was already clear that a peaceful compromise was out of the question. But after trying unsuccessfully to solicit Hatsumi, Clarissa turned to Suimei.

“As for Suimei-sama and company, I would like you to remain silent and look the other way, but...”

“I refuse.”

“I suspected as much.”

As they showed clear hostility towards her, Clarissa simply nodded like she understood.

“You didn’t exactly have to ask, Clara. The answer was pretty obvious. Eanru reported he was a relative of the hero’s. There was no question that he would oppose us here.”

“It was just in case.”

Clarissa calmly replied to Jillbert’s frankness before turning back to Suimei and the others.

“Well then, I shall be Lefille-san’s opponent.”

“Sorry.”

“There is no need for that, Jill. If you would, please take care of Suimei-sama and the rest.”

Immediately after they decided how they’d be dividing the fight, more cultists began appearing from the alleyways perfectly on cue. Seeing that they were now surrounded, Suimei’s group formed a circle with their backs to each other.

“If they’re that asshole dragon’s companions, then we can’t be careless.”

“You’re right. So what’s the plan?”

“First, we should create an escape path so that we can get away safely no matter what happens. As for who should do what...”

“The nun has already declared her intent to fight me.”

“Please be careful... Lefille. She is likely... a therianthrope... of the liger clan.”

“The liger clan, you say? I thought so...”

Lefille and Liliana seemed to be on the same page. Felmenia was also making a sour face upon hearing their exchange.

“Hey, what’s this about a liger clan?” Suimei asked.

“They’re the ancestors of all feline therianthropes. And of all the beast races, it’s no exaggeration to say that they’re the strongest,” Felmenia replied.

“Wuh, seriously...?”

“First a dragonnewt and now this...”

Upon learning they were faced with yet another powerful opponent, both Suimei and Hatsumi sounded disheartened. In stark contrast, Lefille sounded ready for battle.

“A worthy opponent then,” she bared her fangs and muttered fearlessly.

Suimei then took a look around at the cult members surrounding them.

“We should do something about the white robes first. Menia, please keep an eye on Jillbert.”

“Understood.”

As Suimei and the others were busy discussing their plans, the cultists were slowly closing in. When Lefille leaped out towards Clarissa, Clarissa put her hands into her opposing sleeves.

A hidden weapon.

Having such a premonition, Lefille put herself on guard. But when Clarissa took her hands out, there was only red and yellow powder that almost resembled paint pigment on her fingers. Rolling up her sleeves, Clarissa drew sharp lines with her fingers along her face and arms in a peculiar pattern.

“That’s...”

Suimei squinted at it, feeling he’d seen the pattern somewhere before. And just as he started to think he must be mistaken, Clarissa finished her ritual. Sharp claws extended from her fingers and her canines grew out long enough to reach her chin. Seeing her transformation, Hatsumi and Suimei both raised their voices in shock.

“A saber-toothed tiger?”

“Hey, a Smilodon ain’t no cat...”

As the two of them stared in wonder, ferocious mana began stirring around Clarissa. It was like a predator’s bloodthirst had manifested in the air, which reminded Suimei of something he had seen before.

“Totemism...”

“I am surprised you know it.”

Clarissa had clearly heard Suimei’s quiet mutter, and confirmed his suspicions with a smile. Suimei’s expression, meanwhile, was quite stiff.

“That’s my line. How do you know that kinda thing, Sister?”

“Regarding that... Let’s just say it’s a secret.”

“Shit, there really is something behind all you guys...”

As Suimei groaned bitterly, Lefille—Clarissa’s opponent—called out to him.

“Suimei-kun, what is that?!”

“Totemism is a technique categorized under sensory magicka in my world! Using various symbolic items, it allows the user to mimic the power of flora and fauna! In her case, she’s probably receiving divine protection from the face and body paint she just used! In most cases, the power in question comes from beasts, but...”

“You’re saying she’s receiving power from the liger clan’s ancestral beast, the saber-toothed tiger, right?”

By “ancestral beast,” Lefille was referring to the animal that a therianthrope’s features were derived from. Clarissa likely possessed great instinctual power to begin with, but using totemism, that power was enhanced several times over. Just based on the fact that she was a therianthrope, there was no mistaking that she had a close relation to her ancestral beast and its symbols. All it took was a ritual to activate its power within her.

“Totemism is magicka from my world, but because the principle of the spell is quite primitive, it isn’t impossible that it’s been established in this world. But... you see the problem, right?”

“Just now, Sister recognized the name Suimei-dono used for it—a term that comes from your world. In other words...”

It meant Clarissa—or rather, Clarissa’s group—had some sort of connection to the world Suimei was from. It made him think back to Romeon’s case. There was something there. Something like a dark shadow flickering around these people.

Lefille and Clarissa wasted no time squaring off.

“Clarissa Liger. Here I come.”

“Oh spirits that reside within my body, answer my call...”

No sooner than Lefille finished her chant did a vortex of red wind build up around her, ripping through the blue sky. And the moment Clarissa unleashed her fighting spirit, her ferocious mana sliced through the air like silver slashes. Then they came at each other. Lefille let fly one powerful slash after the other, but Clarissa was evading them with sharp movements, returning her slashes with fierce attacks from her claws.

Perhaps because she was strengthened by totemism, or perhaps because of the ferocious mana forming a sort of barrier around her, Lefille's red wind had practically no effect on her. Normally, that red wind would have blown Clarissa away. And if that didn't work, Lefille could ride it to make an incredible, decisive attack. But neither seemed to be possible now.

Clarissa's combat ability was on par with or even beyond Lefille's, meaning she possessed strength that rivaled Demon General Rajas. While observing their battle with sidelong glances, Suimei and the others were each dealing with the cultists swarming in on them in their own ways. Hatsumi with her sword, Felmenia with wind magicka, and Liliana with the exorcism magicka she was using before. Between the group of them, they were making serious headway.

As for Suimei, he was snapping his fingers, the violent sound of which played out like a rhythm as he continuously unleashed his strike magicka. It didn't take long before the ground was carpeted with the white-robed figures.

"That's the end of the idiots surrounding us! I'll go and help... Huh, wha?!"

Just as Suimei started to call out to Lefille, a magicka circle suddenly appeared at his feet. Even with all the magicka circles he could summon himself, he didn't recognize this one at all. The words, numbers, and design within it were all brand new to him.

"My foot is sinking?! Hey, it can't be... This is a hole to the spirit world?!"

As if he had stepped into a bottomless bog, Suimei's body began sinking into the magicka circle. He attempted to struggle and use flight magicka, but was unable to escape the circle. The spell's structure seemed to be interfering with Suimei's magicka and negating it as it swallowed his body, which was now sunken halfway into the ground.

"Suimei-dono, take my hand!"

As Felmenia thrust out her hand, Suimei smacked it away with a severe expression.

"You can't! If you grab on to me, you'll just get dragged in too!"

"But—"

“I’ll manage somehow! I’ll be right back, so I need you and the others to take care of—”

Before he could finish talking, Suimei sank away into the ground. With a ripple like he had fallen into water, the magicka circle trembled. Seeing this happen before their very eyes, Felmenia and the others were touched by astonishment and despair.

“S-Suimei-dono...”

“Impossible... Suimei was...”

“You gotta be kidding...”

The fact that Suimei had been caught by magicka was as big of a shock to them as if heaven and earth had been suddenly reversed. Facing the consequences of that, they were more flustered than ever before.

“Just now, who could have...?”

It meant that there was someone around who was capable of taking a magician of Suimei’s caliber. As Felmenia scanned the area, she saw no one who gave off that impression. And that only amplified her panic.

“Felmenia, we’ll talk later... Right now, everyone should focus... on the enemies before us.”

“We’re already down to one!”

Liliana and Hatsumi called out to Felmenia and urged her to focus on Jillbert. In response, Jillbert suddenly lifted her left arm into the sky.

“Unfortunately for you...”

Jillbert snapped her fingers and more cultists began appearing from the alleyways. Seeing that they kept coming and coming no matter how many of them were defeated, Hatsumi let out a groan.

“There’s no end...”

“Ain’t that obvious? The Hero of Salvation, a magician on par with Eanru, the Shrine Maiden of Spirits, and important mages from Astel and the Empire... With all of you as opponents, we literally couldn’t bring enough.”

Jillbert swung her arm down, unleashing a wave of power that gave birth to a violent wind. As it blasted forward, it ripped up the very ground beneath it. The first to react to Jillbert's attack was Felmenia.

"Wind, be my guardian. Surround me and repel those who face me!"

Quickly putting her magicka to use, Felmenia shielded everyone from the incoming blast and fragments of earth. Seeing that, Jillbert flashed a broad grin.

"Ooh, nice."

"What... was that just now?"

"That? Oh, nothing. I just swung my arm. There's nothing to it, really. That damn dragonnewt can do something similar too."

Suggesting that her technique wasn't anything special, she spoke frivolously. The others could barely imagine just how much strength would be needed to bring about such a result.

"Alright, 'ere we go!"

Jillbert rotated her waist and brandished her weapon high overhead. Even though she was quite far away, she seemed to be aiming for something. Hatsumi immediately called for her allies to be wary, taking into consideration she might be able to attack outside of her physical range. However, completely skirting her prediction, Jillbert swung her halberd with her whole body behind it... sending the axe head flying from the haft.

"Wha?! A chain weapon!" Felmenia gasped.

"Damn right! This here's my special chain halberd. Better hurry up and dodge it, kiddies!" Jillbert replied elatedly.

The axe was attached to the haft by a chain, which was sailing through the air. Using centrifugal force to her advantage, Jillbert drastically changed the trajectory of the axe by swinging the haft as it closed in on Felmenia and the others. As the attack came in from a blind spot, Felmenia immediately jumped out of the way to evade. And it was a good thing she did. The axe head hit the ground like an exploding meteor, sending dirt and rubble flying everywhere. Felmenia endured the wave of destruction, but groaned bitterly.

“What a completely muscle-headed fighting style...”

“I’ve only known how to fight like this since I was a kid. Well, I’ll let it pass that I don’t have any brains.”

With a smirk, Jillbert retracted the axe head to the haft of her halberd. On the other side, Liliana stepped forward.

“Felmenia... I’ll back you up.”

“That’s—”

“Hey, no! You stay away! I don’t wanna fight with little kids!”

At Liliana’s offer to fight, Jillbert suddenly started making a fuss. She didn’t want to fight against Lefille, nor she did she want to fight against children. Apparently she was a rather a picky opponent.

“In that case... you don’t have to fight back.”

“But I can’t do that either! Aaaaah, damn it! Hey, White Flame! Don’t you dare use Liliana Zandyke as a shield, you hear?”

“Of course not!”

In response to Jillbert’s commanding tone, Felmenia yelled back like it hadn’t even needed to be said. To help cope with this rather unexpected situation, Hatsumi stepped forward too.

“Felmenia-san, I will take the front!”

“You have my thanks, Hatsumi-dono!”

Making good on her word, she immediately ran past Felmenia and bolted towards Jillbert at full speed. Her sword was still in its sheath, held at her waist so that she could draw at any moment. She was planning on letting out a slash while running, but as she approached, something came flying at her.

“Urgh!”

In no time at all, Hatsumi reacted by drawing her mithril sword to block. It caught two orichalcum daggers mid-strike. Looking down the daggers, Hatsumi saw a young girl in pure white vestments with a hood covering her eyes. She was holding the orichalcum daggers in a reversed grip, and was unrelenting in

her attack. She unleashed a violent flurry of slashes, and Hatsumi responded in kind. Despite it being two blades against one, Hatsumi handled it skillfully while slowly falling back. She could see a flash of the girl's eyes from under her hood every now and then, but they looked almost hollow, as if she wasn't really focusing on anything.

"So you're saying you'll be my opponent?"

"..."

She questioned the girl, but received no reply. Like the other white-robed cultists, she was completely unresponsive... but something about this was different.

"That one's one of your companions," called Jillbert.

For a moment, Hatsumi thought of Selphy and the others upon hearing the word "companion," but she quickly realized another grim possibility.

"A companion, you say...? You mean this person is also a hero?!"

"Bingo. Appropriate for the opponent of a hero, ain't she?"

Hearing that question like she was being made light of, Hatsumi gave Jillbert a sharp scowl. The little girl's eyes were completely hollow, which made her think that her will had been taken. In other words...

"If I go along with you people, this is how I'll end up, huh?"

"If you refuse to cooperate, yeah."

After saying that, Jillbert once more held her halberd at the ready. This all happened as the afternoon sun began to fall low in the sky overhead.



"Lefille-san, I can perceive both anger and panic in your sword."

On top of a triangular roof, Clarissa had her back to the red sun as she looked down on Lefille and admonished her. Some time had passed since the beginning of the fight, and it was now quickly approaching evening. As Lefille squinted up towards the dazzling setting sun, she turned a question to her opponent.

"What do you mean by that?"

“Exactly as I said. Your blade is impatient. Not so much that it is distracted, but it is certainly not in equilibrium.”

Lefille snorted as she denied Clarissa’s words.

“I fought an enemy once who used such wiles. In a desperate ploy to seize victory, they played a cowardly game in speaking nonsense to try and shake me.”

“This is a warning. You mentioned victory, but I have nothing to gain from this battle. If you knew our objective, you would naturally understand. Besides, have you not already realized it? To speak of victory so, you must already be shaken.”

“...I’d rather you not speak like you knew what I was thinking.”

“It would not hurt you to heed my warning. But I understand. There is nothing more bitter than hearing unneeded, meddlesome advice from someone with an advantage over you.”

Shrewd, and true. To hear a warning in the middle of a battle was in fact supremely irritating. Having that pointed out on top of everything only needlessly increased Lefille’s irritation.

She wanted to use her sword to shut Clarissa’s mouth. But she couldn’t easily do that in the position she was in, which frustrated Lefille even more. Clarissa wasn’t out of range where she was standing, but even if Lefille unleashed a wave of red wind from her sword, it would never actually hit her. And, unable to shut her up, Lefille had no choice but to listen to Clarissa’s belittling speech.

“Lefille-san, only by accepting such advice are people able to attain strength. For everyone to gain strength that will not lose to anyone, that is my wish. No, that is our wish.”

Clarissa was making a grand sermon no one had asked to hear. In the moment, she truly looked like a priest from the Church of Salvation. However, Lefille had something to say herself.

“Then, Sister, I shall also give you some advice. Voicing your opinion to an opponent is only something you get to do after winning. Only once your foe is beaten to the ground to the point where they cannot speak do you earn the

privilege of lecturing them.”

“Certainly. It is exactly as you say. I am greatly obliged for your advice.”

“Tch...”

She listened attentively. She extended her gratitude. Though Lefille reproached her severely, Clarissa respectfully bowed back to her from atop the roof. For her to remain so gracious in a situation like this really rubbed Lefille the wrong way.

“However,” Clarissa scoffed, “if you obsess over such pride—which is useless as shit—it’ll stick to you like a stain. There’s not the tiniest amount of merit in dying in vain like a piece of trash.”

What she said was completely unthinkable in light of her usual courteous attitude, which had suddenly become vulgar and seething. It was as if it was all to say, “You misunderstand.” Lefille felt a chill run down her spine. But it seemed Clarissa was done with chitchat there. She then leaped off the roof in a flash and headed directly towards Lefille.

Her speed easily surpassed that of a beast and couldn’t be followed by the naked eye. She bolted across the ground like a sword cutting through the air. She passed by Lefille’s flank and attacked—Lefille couldn’t actually tell whether it was with her claws or fangs.

“Ugh...”

All Lefille could see was her afterimage, which she chased with her sword. However, because she was unable to properly perceive her opponent, her slashes were all reckless. Each wild strike had enough power behind it to kill, but a sword that was just swung around in hopes of hitting its target never actually would.

“Hah!”

Trying to predicting the path of the afterimage, Lefille thrust out her sword clad in red wind again and again. But no matter how many times she did, her blade only ever cut through the air. Repeated failure frustrated her, a sense of panic welling in her chest. At this rate, she would lose. As that thought crossed her mind, Lefille tried to shake off the doubt in her heart. She simply couldn’t

accept defeat. She had promised herself she would never lose again.

“In that case...!”

If she couldn't hit, she just had to make it so that she could. Even if it meant sacrificing a finger to save the hand, so to speak. She would ignore the immediate consequences and hang everything on the exact moment she knew her slash would connect. She just had to make sure it was a killing blow. Resolving herself, Lefille opened herself to the attack lunging at her and brought her sword down with all her might.

“HAAAAAAAAAH!”

However...

“Too naive.”

She missed. As she sensed that something had slipped in close to her, a reproachful voice was thrown at her.

“Guah!”

And then, Lefille was blown away by the shock that assaulted her. She could see that she was being struck with an elbow and managed to twist at the last second to avoid a strike to any of her vital areas, but she still suffered the full brunt of the attack. It sent her tumbling across the ground. She could hear Felmenia and the others screaming as well as Jillbert's angry shouting. Her consciousness faded for a moment, but determined not to faint here, she reeled it back with sheer willpower and used the force of her tumbling to spring back up.

“As one would expect of the Shrine Maiden of Spirits, I see.”

“Tch...”

Clarissa swept her claws to the side as if shaking the blood off of them and began walking forward in a calm manner. She was simply overflowing with surplus composure. In contrast, it was Lefille who'd lost her cool, which only felt—painfully—like it drove home Clarissa's earlier point.

Suddenly, a magicka circle drew itself on the ground. Seeing that familiar scene, Lefille, Felmenia, and the others clenched their jaws and readied

themselves. However, what eventually emerged from the circle was none other than the one who'd fallen into it earlier: Suimei.

"I don't know who the hell it was, but they sure fucking did it..."

Down on one knee, Suimei appeared while quietly and profanely expressing his anger. He had changed into his black suit, but didn't seem to be injured in any way. Seeing this, Lefille called out to him.

"Suimei-kun, you're safe..."

"Yeah... Hey, are you alright, Lefi?!"

"Somehow or other..." she managed to say with a meager, forced smile. "But it's probably fair to say that I was defeated."

Kicking up dust as her feet slid along the ground, Clarissa was closing in on Lefille. As Lefille spoke in an irritated tone, she glanced bitterly at her from the corner of her eye.

Judging that Lefille was no longer able to move, Suimei covered for her. Clarissa seemed to be quite wary of engaging with him, however, and jumped back to put a large distance between them rather than continuing her attack. While she was biding her time, Suimei called out to the others to check up on them.

"Menia, how're things on your end?!"

"S-Somehow..."

"Hatsumi!"

"I've got my hands full here!"

"Tch..."

Felmenia had deployed protective magicka to defend against Jillbert's enormous chain halberd. She couldn't tell just where the attacks were coming from since the small dwarf manipulated the weapon midair, so her barrier extended in every direction. With Liliana's support behind her, the two of them were working together to pinpoint the impacts.

As such, they were able to defend successfully, but that was all they could do.

Not too far from them, Hatsumi was swinging her sword, locked in combat with a small girl in a white robe. It looked like Suimei's only option would be to handle their opponents one at a time. Coming to that conclusion, Suimei conjured his mana.

"Yo, Clara!" Jillbert cried.

"I know!"

Clarissa took her distance from Suimei. Jillbert also returned the axe head of her halberd to the haft and once more stood next to Clarissa.

"Jill, do not let your guard down. Suimei-sama defeated Romeon, and even Eanru considers him a worthy opponent."

"I was wondering what he was up to, but I see now... This ain't the 'normal' him. He's cast aside that damn mask of his."

Seeing Suimei's with her own eyes, Jillbert stuck out her tongue at him. She and Clarissa both were also brimming with an intense fighting spirit. Seeing that they were holding nothing back, Suimei returned Jillbert's words in kind.

"You don't have a whole lot of room to talk about hiding behind masks."

"Well, you got a point there."

As Jillbert honestly conceded Suimei's point, Clarissa once more made a proposal to him.

"Suimei-sama, could you not simply take Lefille-san and the others with you and withdraw?"

"That's my line, Sister. I don't know what you're trying to do, but maybe you should just think of another way to do it. How about it?"

"If we could do so..." Jillbert began to answer.

But it was there that the flow of events changed dramatically.

"Clarissa, Jillbert. That is enough. Step back," a deep, masculine voice said from on high.

As Suimei looked up into the red sky to locate the source of the voice, he spied the shadow of a person standing atop the point of a gabled roof.

“Tch, another damn— Hah?”

While he was in the middle of cursing, Suimei realized something strange. It was sundown. It would be dark before long, but right now the fiery setting sun was beaming on the whole city. Especially on a rooftop with no cover, this person’s figure should have been perfectly visible. Yet nevertheless, the one who had ordered Clarissa and Jillbert to retreat was nothing more than a hazy silhouette like a mirage.

“Let’s go,” his voice once more urged them.

“Is that alright?”

“The opportunity has passed. If we tarry, unnecessary things will get involved.”

“What do you mean by—”

Just as Clarissa questioned the mirage man, everyone could hear a nightingale chirping. And immediately following that, the world shook. It was a mysterious shaking of the air unlike an earthquake, and the chirping of the nightingale transformed into the sound let out by an enormous amount of iron creaking.

“...A mana field vibration with this kind of timing?”

Suimei raised a perplexed voice. As a magician, this shaking was a phenomenon he was very familiar with, but he couldn’t understand what had caused it in the current situation. Moreover, comparing it to the shaking that was born of his own magicka, he was left with a rather unsettling feeling. Meanwhile, Jillbert raised a shocked voice at the bizarre phenomenon.

“Wh-What is this?!”

It seemed to be her first encounter with it, leaving her completely bewildered at the shaking which was altogether different from an earthquake. The same seemed to be true for Clarissa, who was standing next to her. She quickly looked around her surroundings while remaining vigilant of Suimei and the others.

“Calm down, Jillbert, Clarissa.”

“But Gottfried-sama!”

“Nothing is wrong. This is within the range of our assumptions. The shaking will calm down soon, and things will settle once more.”

And just as the voice said, the shaking did eventually stop. After confirming that everything had settled down, Felmenia called out to Suimei.

“Suimei-dono! What is this?”

“I don’t even...”

Suimei didn’t have a single clue as to what had caused it. Mana field vibrations were something that occurred when a high-order existence manifested, or sometimes even omens of the outbreak of grand magicka. But it didn’t seem either was the case right now. However, simply the fact that the phenomenon had occurred was a sign of something. Just what was it? As Suimei wondered, he suddenly realized what time it was.

“Ah, it’s twilight!”

It was the ambiguous hour between day and night, twilight. It was the hour it was possible for existences known as beasts of the apocalypse, or apparitions, to manifest in the physical world. As if to confirm his suspicions, the sun fell below the horizon and an indigo veil of darkness slowly crept over the ground. It seemed concentrated in areas, and from those dark spots, pitch black beasts sprung forth.

“Wh-What are those?!”

The pitch black beasts—apparitions—were sprouting up one after the other in the area, shocking Hatsumi. Lefille, on the other hand, was relatively calm and observed the creatures she was unfamiliar with.

“Dogs... No, wolves?”

“They are somehow... quite creepy.”

The pitch black beasts reminded Liliana of the sinful figure and the sinister being. As they came into sight, she reflexively hid behind Lefille.

Certainly, just as Lefille had muttered, the beasts resembled both dogs and wolves. Their bodies were as black as could be, but the spots where eyes should have been were blood red. The shadows seemed to dance and sway around

them. Felmenia stared in wonder at the creatures she had seen once before.

“These are like the monster that appeared at Castle Camellia that time... No, that phenomenon, was it? If I remember correctly, they are a manifestation of twilight syndrome.”

“Yeah, they’re apparitions. The one you saw last time was a B-grade apparition, and these are a smaller version of that. C-grade ones.”

Magicians called the shadowy part dog, part wolf creatures twilight syndrome. These in particular were C-grade apparitions. The first time the phenomenon was observed was in France, and was actually the origin of the phrase “entre chien et loup,” which established their general concept. The phrase “between a dog and a wolf” was also a metaphor meaning between safety and danger, which gave form to the phenomenon itself. It was about as ironic as it could get.

The behavior of the apparitions had no sense of regularity to it. Sometimes they simply lurked in the shadows, their red eyes shining. Sometimes they would howl towards the disappearing sun. Or sometimes, like now, they would attack. And it wasn’t just Suimei’s group—Jillbert and Clarissa were not exempt. As the apparitions closed in on them, Jillbert clicked her tongue.

“Tch, those things are also coming this way.”

“Leave them be, Jillbert. They can only be defeated by sword saints and magicians. It would be useless to raise your blade here. Let us pull out.”

“I get that, but...”

“Gottfried-sama...”

Both Jillbert and Clarissa looked at him pleadingly as if to say something bad would happen if they retreated, but the mirage man standing atop the roof was unmoving.

“No. There is no need for us to defeat them. Even if we do nothing, that man will. He must. Isn’t that right...” Pausing there, the mirage man looked at Suimei. “Modern magician, disciple of the Magicka King Nestahaim?”

As he spoke of Suimei’s lineage, Suimei yelled out to the rooftop in a fluster.

“How do you know that?!”

He yelled, but the mirage man would not reply. It was as if he was simply toying with Suimei. Even though he couldn't clearly make out the man's face, Suimei was certain he could see a smile floating somewhere in the mirage.

“Everyone, we are pulling out.”

At the mirage man's command, Clarissa, Jillbert, and the robed cultists began retreating.

“Wait! Answer my—”

“I have no obligation to answer you, but let's see... I will at least tell you one thing. We are the Universal Apostles. You will do well to remember that.”

“Universal...?”

As Suimei was making a perplexed expression, perhaps to prevent any pursuit, the mirage man began chanting a spell.

“Code Pragmatic. Kenon who resists flames and carries mass. Using those concepts, obey my words, become one, and turn to mud.”

He was invoking the mystical. The moment Suimei sensed it, the space between his group and Clarissa's was filled with a light made of mana that drew figures and symbols within it. Flames then began shooting out of it at random. As they spread through the area, everything was covered in a heat haze and began melting into red mud. And as the mud spread, so too did more flame, effectively creating a shield between the retreating group and the apparitions. The shadowy beasts chased after them, but were unable to make it through the fiery and muddy barrier.

The one who was most surprised at seeing all this was Suimei.

“That spell just now...”

He was completely unfamiliar with the symbols and figures used in it, but the spell itself was clearly not magic that used the Elements of this world. In other words, it was something more in line with his own magicka. He began putting the pieces together as he recalled something similar, but...

“Suimei-kun! I don't know what you're so shocked about, but now isn't the

time to be standing still!”

“Y-Yeah! You’re right!”

As Lefille called out to him, Suimei focused on the apparitions that were now headed towards them. He didn’t have time to think about anything else right now. The veil of darkness was already quite close, and the apparitions were just about to attack.

“Just as the eternal wind conveys! Send the shining and swaying flames to His side! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim dyed in white! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim that shakes off all calamity! Truth Flare!”

Felmenia unleashed her white flames upon the apparitions. And though the white incandescence mowed them down, they calmly remained where they were as if nothing had happened.

“Suimei-dono, what should we do about this?! Even though I used magicka, there wasn’t much effect!”

“Fall back! These guys can’t be defeated with regular magicka! Menia, take Liliana with you and head to the rear!”

“U-Understood!”

Following Suimei’s orders, Felmenia took Liliana, who was hiding behind Lefille, to the rear line furthest away from the darkness. Suimei then called to Lefille.

“Lefi, you fall back too! These guys are special...”

“Please wait. Let me test something out.”

Rather than falling back, Lefille gathered her red wind at the tip of her sword, turned it on the shadows where the apparitions were appearing from, and unleashed it. The red wind, which held a portion of the spirits’ powers, had an effect against apparitions. The ones caught in the turbulent red wind gushed blood as black as tar from their wounds as they crumbled to pieces.

“I can help. Leave these ones to me.”

“Wow... Yeah, okay. Then... Hatsumi?”

Suddenly, Suimei realized that his childhood friend was nowhere nearby. He quickly looked around to find her. When he spotted her figure, she was already surrounded by apparitions.

“Wha...”

She'd been right beside him mere moments ago. Just how did she manage to get so far away? Under the dark curtain, Hatsumi was driving her sword into the constant swarm of apparitions, but it seemed her slashes had no effect at all on them. She was able to strike firmly and drive them back, but she was unable to deal a single wound.

When apparitions attacked humans, it was possible to ward them off successfully just by pushing them away. But that wouldn't eliminate the phenomenon itself. It would take more than physical blows to combat twilight syndrome.

“These things just keep multiplying...!”

While beating back the apparitions with her sword, Hatsumi's unease began to show.

“Hatsumi! It's no good! Fall back! I'll do something about...”

“Say what you will, but these guys will make it through before then at this rate!”

When she said that, Suimei finally realized what was going on. Hatsumi was standing at the head of the bridge. And on the other side of that bridge were droves of people. It was just Suimei and his companions on this side, all of whom were capable of defending themselves. But if even one apparition slipped across the bridge, it would be a slaughter. If the people used numbers to attack the apparitions, they would be able to hold them back to a certain extent, but...

“Shit, if it were just a little later, this would be easy...”

The sky was still bright enough that night hadn't fully fallen. Even if Suimei tried to use his magicka to call down the starry sky, it would have no effect. It was irritating that he couldn't defeat the apparitions all at once, but that just meant he had to take them out one by one. Firing spells as he ran over to

Hatsumi...

“Kyah!”

Hatsumi had been knocked off balance. An apparition tackled her, sending her falling to the ground. The other apparitions seemed to sense it, and their doglike figures all jumped on her.

“Ah...”

A half gasp, half sigh of despair escaped her lips. But there was nothing she could do. Running was out of the question with her hands and feet pinned. Beholding the apparitions on top of her in horror, her sword trembled in her shaking hand.

“Shit! HATSUMIIIIIIII!”

Seeing that she couldn’t move, Suimei came flying in without a care about his own well-being.



She was knocked down by the apparitions. Up until that point, her heart stood firm. But as her body fell to the ground, she was suddenly overcome with a fear that she couldn’t identify.

The apparition’s fangs, their claws... Thinking those things would kill her, her hand trembled, her heart trembled, and her body seized up. Even when she’d stood against demons, even though she’d faced this kind of crisis before, for some reason, she was completely frozen with terror this time.

I’m scared. This is terrifying...

As those words pounded within her head, she was no longer able to do anything. But then she realized this was all familiar. Wasn’t this the same as that time she’d fallen? It was a memory that haunted her. The canine monsters attacking her didn’t help any. It was all too much.

As she sensed the apparitions were about to go in for the kill, she shut her eyes as tightly as she could. She was petrified. But no matter how long she waited, the pain she was expecting didn’t come. When she curiously opened her eyes, a young man in a black suit was now standing over her. It was Suimei,

holding a silver katana in his hands and breathing roughly. Perhaps because he'd been injured in saving her, the shoulder of his suit was torn to pieces.

“Ah—”

This too was the same as before. Just as when he faced off against the dragonnewt, he'd stood to protect her. It wasn't the first time. No, far from it. She'd seen this scene in her dreams. It was a part of her past that she shouldn't be able to remember.

How many times had it been now? How many times had he come to save her just like that? When she was wandering alone in the forest, when the dragonnewt appeared... And there was no telling how many times it had happened in the past.

She was pathetic like this. Why was she always so happy to have him protect her? Even though she was supposed to have become stronger. Even though she had learned the ways of the sword. Even though she should have been able to fight... Despite all that, she was just trembling. Was this the person she really wanted to be?

“This is wrong.”

She hated being the only one who was protected. She wanted to become strong. She thought that if she remained as pathetic as she was, she would never be able to keep up with him. She would never be able to stay by his side as he protected others. That's why...

“I'm... I'm different now.”

Yes, that was it. That was why. So that he wouldn't leave her behind, she thought she would become strong. Yes, that's why...

“I tried to get stronger with a sword...”

As soon as those words naturally came from her mouth, everything she'd forgotten came back to her like surging waves. Who she was, where she had been, who she was with, what she had been doing. Her past, her feelings. Every single memory without exception returned. While dazzled by the raging stream of memories, she gripped her sword strongly and stood up as Suimei called out to her in concern.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Sorry for causing you so much concern recently.”

“...?”

As he looked back at her with a curious glance, she repeated herself once more.

“I’m alright now.”

“Hatsumi, did you...?”

Just based on her words, he seemed to have noticed. As Suimei looked at her in shock, she focused her aim on the apparition that was leaping in at his flank. And then...

“My heart is the phantom of my sword’s blade, and becomes a technique to break the three kleshas that poison the heart of man. Cast my body aside like a rock, and give my life to the steadfast Kurikara...”

The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani. The words she quietly recited were a mantra passed down along with the sword techniques, the dharani. It wasn’t a chant like the ones Suimei would use, but once she recited them, her heart would calm itself and her consciousness would be completely focused on her sword.

An apparition couldn’t be defeated by a simple sword. No, a mundane sword wouldn’t even damage one. But it could ward them away and keep them at bay. As the apparition bared its black fangs, she sent it flying with her sword technique. Other apparitions were closing in from all four directions, but without panicking, she returned her sword to its sheath. And then...

“The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, the Summit of Zen, the Enlightening Longsword that Leads to Serenity.”

As she muttered just like she was reciting a dharani, she drew her sword. The instant she did, she swung it twenty-four times. And every single one of those strikes was driven into the apparitions.

All the people around her could see was a flash of silver lines. But every single apparition that leaped into those silver slashes was sent flying into the air. As

they flew, Suimei hurled brilliant magicka at them that crumbled their bodies instantly.

“Hatsumi... So your memories returned, huh?”

Within remnants of his mana still lingering around them, Suimei looked relieved as if something unexpectedly happy had just happened. Hatsumi looked back at him as she spoke confidently.

“Suimei, I have a long list of complaints for you, but I’ll at least start with my gratitude. Thank you.”

She was being a little stubborn, though her gratitude was earnest. But for some reason, Suimei shuddered.

“Y-Your big brother would like to be spared from being smacked...”

“...You sure can talk, seriously. And since when are you my big brother?”

“Oh, you know, back in the day...”

“That was then, and this is now! But...”

Saying that, she recalled the memory that had terrified her earlier.

“It was... also a dog back then, wasn’t it?”

“Huh? Oh, huh... Now that you mention it, something like this did happen, didn’t it? Well, setting that aside...”

As Suimei signaled her to step back with his eyes, she shook her head.

“I hate that. I’m not running away.”

“But...”

“I’ll prevent them from reaching the other side, so you take care of defeating them.”

She was going to fight too. She wanted to fight at his side. Suimei gave a resigned sigh, then a fearless smile.

“Leave it to me.”

Hearing those reliable words, Hatsumi set out to do what she had to. She repelled all the apparitions that were trying to cross the bridge. Knowing she

was unable to defeat them, all she could do was knock them down and back. As she did, Suimei thrust his hand towards the darkened sky. It seemed his preparations were complete.

“Intra velum. Noctis lacrimarum potestas. Insigne Olympus et terrae pingito. Infestato ad irrationabilis veritas. Caecato, pluvia incessabilis. Ea qui lugent sunt vitium. Ea qui fatentur sunt bonitas. Omne perveniunt ex luce supra tumultum, ex coruscis stellis.”

[Beneath the curtain. The majesty of the tears shed by the night. Colored by the symbol of heaven and earth. Infest towards the irrational truth. Dazzle, incessant rain. Those who lament are evil. Those who confess are virtuous. Everything comes from that light beyond the chaos, from the twinkling stars.]

A countless number of magicka circles of all sizes were floating in the night sky and moved as if they were guns pointing towards their targets. And then, the moment Suimei let out those last words, “Enth Astrarle,” light overflowed as far as the eye could see.

And after that light calmed down, the apparitions had vanished without a trace. Even the black holes in the ground they were coming from had completely vanished as if they’d never been there in the first place.

The quiet night town returned to its previous state. It was as if everything that just happened was nothing but a waking dream. The surroundings had become so calm that it left one to think of it that way.

“It’s over, huh?”

“Yeah.”

As Suimei smiled at Hatsumi, she smiled back. Just with that, she felt like everything that was important to her had returned. Wondering how Felmenia and the others were faring, they turned to look. But for some reason, they were all making a loud fuss. Just what had happened? As they ran over with a sense of unease, Hatsumi could see Suimei suddenly gaze off in the direction Clarissa and the others had fled with a severe expression. And before Hatsumi could call out to him...

“Ars Magna Raimundi... No, that magicka was—”

Suimei's mutter echoed into the dark night sky.



Because their hero had been targeted, the Alliance was busy cleaning up the aftermath. But because they'd predicted that much, most of the chaos was limited to the riot caused by the Anti-Goddess cult.

Speaking of, not a single one of its members was apprehended after the incident. After Clarissa and the others disappeared, the cult members also seemed to have disappeared back into the alleyways and the shadows of buildings where they had come from.

To the Alliance, such a disturbance was completely unprecedented, but it had been particularly trying for Suimei and the others. Naturally, the reason for that was because their opponents had been Clarissa and Jillbert.

Just a few days ago, they'd had a friendly exchange with both women. They had only known them for a short time, but Suimei owed them both a great deal. Lefille even considered Jillbert a close friend. They all had strong emotions about what had happened. It seemed a cruel twist of fate. It wasn't like Suimei and the others didn't understand the world could be harsh, but being betrayed like that was never easy.

And so, several days after their battle with Clarissa's group, Suimei, Felmenia, and Liliana were visiting Hatsumi's room in Miazen's palace to bid her farewell.

Selphy was also there, but having come to an understanding about Hatsumi's relationship with her new friends, she took the guards that were present with her as she left. She was likely being tactful in case they were going to talk about things that they didn't want others to hear.

After everyone settled into chairs, what awaited Suimei was an incessant trickle of dissatisfied complaints from Hatsumi. Asking about why he kept silent about being a magician, she frankly showed her discontent as she grumbled about how he never told her what he was up to. This lasted quite a while, leaving Suimei feeling rather defeated.

Since her memories returned, a great deal of stress came with them. And after taking a short rest, she frankly cut right back into complaining, but

Felmenia stepped in to stop her with a forced smile.

“U-Um, Hatsumi-dono? How about you leave running Suimei-dono into the ground at that?”

“What? I’m only halfway through my list.”

“All that... was only half... you say?”

Hearing her talk like she hadn’t unleashed her true fury yet, Liliana shuddered. Meanwhile, Suimei had already hit his breaking point. He was making an expression like Munch’s *The Scream* as he apologized nonstop.

“Everything is my fault, so please let me off around here...”

“I suppose. It’s also true that you couldn’t help some of it, so I’ll let you get off with just this much today.”

It seemed that she’d gotten the bare minimum off her chest for now. As the atmosphere in the room calmed down, Suimei tried talking to her again.

“...So, how are you Hatsumi? Do you feel better after regaining your memories?”

“Mm. Well, I’ve still got the memories from when I had amnesia, so it feels a little weird altogether, but I’ve got a better grip of the situation I’m in now.”

Part of the reason she could speak so calmly on the subject now was because she knew there was a possibility she could return home. That alone cured a great deal of her anxiety.

“Hatsumi, since you’ve gotten your memories back, I’ll ask you one more time... Do you want to come along with us?”

“No... I still can’t do that. I said it last time, but I jumped into this fight on my own. I can’t quit now.”

“Even if nothing can be done?”

“Suimei, you said it yourself a little while back, didn’t you? If the instructor saw me as I was, I would be punished. If I ran away for fear of my own safety, my dad would kill me.”

Hatsumi smiled as she talked. She had no misgivings about this. It was

precisely because she regained her memories that she was able to follow through on her beliefs with such conviction. As long as she decided to follow the path she was on, there was no need for hesitation in walking forward.

“I see. I figured you’d say that.”

“You’re not going to bring me along by force?”

“I’ll respect your decision. Besides, I think I’ll be able to bring you back good news soon.”

“Have you figured something?!”

“I might be on the verge of a breakthrough. For now, I need to go back to my base in the Empire, organize the information I gained here, and start on trials for the spell... If that damn Eanru hadn’t blown away the ruins, I would have been able to solve it all while I was in the Alliance, though.”

“I see...”

Hearing that it would still take time, a slight amount of disappointment showed on Hatsumi’s face. The same would probably be true for Reiji and Mizuki.

“I know you probably don’t have any intent on returning until the demons in the northern Alliance territories are defeated, but... Well, if the spell is completed, it should be fine to visit home for a bit, right?”

“Yeah, I’m sure everyone is worried. Also...”

“Also?”

She made a stern expression like there was something else serious that needed to be considered. Suimei immediately asked her about it, but she answered as if it should have been completely obvious.

“Attendance records, you know. Attendance records. We haven’t been going to school, right?”

“If that’s all, I’ll take care of it somehow when we get back.”

“How?”

“Heh... I’m a magician, you know?”

As he implied that he would make it work out skillfully, Hatsumi frankly made an unpleasant expression.

“Ugh, you’re the worst... You’re totally planning on using magicka to slide by. Ugggh...”

“What? You want to repeat the year? I don’t really care either way, you know...”

“H-Hmm... that would also be bad, wouldn’t it?”

“Then it’s fine, isn’t it?”

As Hatsumi looked at him like he should be ashamed, Suimei closed up the conversation with a quip. Felmenia was the next to raise a question.

“It seems that things have been decided with regards to your return, but, Hatsumi-dono, will you be alright concerning those who are targeting you?”

“You mean that nun’s group?”

“Yes. As long as they claim to need the hero, I am sure there is a possibility that they will attack again. That being the case...”

What would she do? Really, as long as she couldn’t run away to her own world, it was a danger that would exist. They could attack anywhere at any time. Echoing Felmenia’s concerns, Suimei spoke up.

“Hatsumi, honestly speaking, what do you think?”

“It’ll be difficult. This time we somehow got through because you and the others were there, but with that kind of ability... A swordsman would need to be about as strong as dad to compete against them.”

“Sounds about right, yeah...”

Suimei recalled the fight from the other day. From what he witnessed of Clarissa and Jillbert’s abilities, Lefille, Felmenia, and Hatsumi were all overpowered in battle. The hero’s power was an unknown factor, but on top of Clarissa and Jillbert, they had Eanru in the woodwork somewhere. Then there was the mirage man who Suimei thought was responsible for sending him to the spirit world.

If they all came at once, it was difficult to imagine that even a hero could win against them. However, Hatsumi seemed to have something else in mind...

"I can't win, but I think I'll be able to run away. I have my memories back, after all."

Her expression showed a level of confidence that hadn't been there before. Certainly, now that her memories had returned, Hatsumi was stronger than she was without them. Clarissa and Jillbert were both skilled, but if she devoted herself to running away, she should be able to escape them without trouble. The magician on their side, however, was a different matter. Suimei was unable to say unconditionally that it would be possible to escape him.

"I'll complete the spell to return back home as fast as I can. If I do, we could use it for refuge if things get bad."

"I kind of hate just running away, though..."

"What are we gonna do? That guy's stupid strong."

"Mm... I don't know much about magicians, but if you say so, then I believe you."

After seeing him fight Eanru, Hatsumi recognized Suimei's strength.

Before long, their conversation came to an end, and they parted ways with brief farewells. Suimei and the others left Hatsumi's room, but Felmenia shortly turned to him.

"Now that I think about it, Hatsumi-dono isn't seeing you off?"

"Nah. I was always leaving home to head off somewhere, so she got out of the habit of walking with me."

"When you say it like that, it sounds like you were living together."

Felmenia seemed to have fallen into ill spirits as she looked at Suimei with a reproachful gaze.

"What are you pouting for? We're cousins and our houses were right next to each other. We were just like family should be. Besides, don't I live together with you right now?"

“Huh? Ah, that is true, but...”

In a complete one-eighty from her pouting, Felmenia was now broadly grinning in a happy manner.

“Besides, Lefille and Liliana also live with us too.”

“Yup.”

As Suimei declared that they all lived under the same roof, he didn't really seem to pay any mind to Liliana nodding alongside him. To him, he probably only saw the girls as companions and roommates. He was probably conscious that he was getting along on better terms with all of them, but because each of them had their own reasons—Felmenia had been sent by king Almadious and Lefille had her curse to consider—the late-blooming Suimei who had no experience with love was unable to properly grasp their affection.

“Felmenia Stingray, this is the beginning. It all starts here. You only started learning magicka, and you promised to go visit another world. There are still plenty of chances to get closer. Plenty!”

Felmenia turned her back on them and began mumbling to herself in encouragement. Liliana then tugged on Suimei's sleeve.

“What's up?”

“About that mage... with the large build... from before. Is it true... that if you properly fought him... you wouldn't win?”

“Probably. With a magician of that level, it would be quite difficult.”

“Of that level...?”

“Yeah. It's probable that the magicka system he used is quite ancient, and therefore troublesome... In short, his techniques are outrageous.”

Hearing Suimei's turn of phrase, Felmenia and Liliana both tilted their heads to the side.

“Suimei-dono, you just said it was ancient, but what does that mean?”

“Exactly as it sounds. It would be an old magicka system from my world. He's probably someone who is somehow related to my world.”

There was enough evidence to suggest that— No, there really was no other explanation that he could think of. The savage names that Romeon used, the totemism that Clarissa used, and that magicka the mirage man used at the end. There was no mistaking their sect had some kind of entanglement with his own world.

“There is also Hatsumi-dono’s case, so I am not really surprised after all this...”

“It’s just getting to be a bigger and bigger pain...”

After his small preface, Suimei went on to answer their suspicions.

“To break through that magicka, I need to go back to my world at least once no matter what. I need to be taught by a magician who knows that spell to find out just what its origins are. Until then, there’s probably nothing that I can do.”

Hearing Suimei’s reply, Felmenia and Liliana both looked quite concerned. Suimei then offered some conjecture.

“It’s only maybe... And this is completely subjective, but what he used was a composite concept. Using two or three concepts that are in no way similar, I think he created something that mixed them all together.”

“Mixing together concepts and c-creating a new one?!”

“Yeah.”

Felmenia raised her voice in surprise. Both she and Liliana looked as if this was incredibly difficult to grasp.

“That kind of thing... is it something that can... be gathered and given form?”

“Because they’re mixed, I think it can be given form. It’s the same as anything else. For example, let’s see...”

“For example?”

“A hoe carries the concept of ‘plowing the earth.’ It’s a concept understood by the symbol of an iron bar fastened to a pole. But by fastening another tool to that, a new symbol is made that carries with it a new concept...”

It was something like a crest. As Suimei spoke, he looked to his left and right,

and the two girls still looked quite stumped. But that was only natural. Accepting what he was talking about was like denying pragmatism in the world of magicka; it would be a breakthrough in the immutable laws of magicka. Even if one did not know that, it was still something that could not be easily understood.

“Aaah, sorry. Even though I don’t really get it myself, I was a bit hasty in trying to explain it. Just forget what I said.”

As Suimei tossed that subject aside, Felmenia suddenly asked him something else.

“Are there many magicians in Suimei-dono’s world who use that magicka system?”

“No. That’s also the first time I saw it. I think there should only be a couple people who use it, though.”

“Even though there are that few, you still know them?”

“I’ve got about three guesses. The magicians who used that magicka would have been active during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”

“Meaning?”

“They’ve all lived about five hundred years.”

“Five...?! Are they elves?”

“Nope, humans. Or, it would be better to say they were humans. They stopped being human long ago, after all.”

“Stopped being human...? That’s...”

“They’re all monsters, you hear? Monsters.”

“Monsters that surpass you?”

“Just for the record, I’m basically a baby chick compared to them. Well, at that level, pretty much every living being in the world would just be a baby chick compared to you...”

The true abilities of such magicians could be completely grasped just by ranking them. The reason he estimated himself lowly compared to them was

because of that. If one was not at their actual level, even as a high-ranking magician, there was hardly a comparison. They were mere babes.

“...”

As Suimei fell silent, he recalled an incident from quite some time ago. It was an unusual occasion where Nestahaim settled a dispute between fellow magicians. Along with the magicka they were firing, he let out a single word and reduced them all into infants in an instant. To be able to make his targets abide by his will without even using a spell... It was a technique completely beyond Suimei.

“Suimei... that phenomenon... Was it also that magician?”

That phenomenon—in other words those things that attacked them at the end.

“Nope. That was caused by something else. They aren’t things that people bring about intentionally.”

“The name... if I remember right...”

“Twilight syndrome.”

He never actually formally explained this to Liliana. However, Felmenia had seen it once before.

“Suimei-dono, why did they appear then? When I last asked you, you said that it was something that did not occur in this world.”

“That’s what I thought. In reality, the natural power in the world is strong, so it shouldn’t be at the stage where twilight syndrome occurs.”

“But if it occurred at that time despite that, it means...”

“Just what *does* it mean, I wonder...”

Suimei began scratching the back of his head awkwardly. While he was acting a bit exaggeratedly, he did seem to be actually thinking about it.

“Well, if I had to guess... What those guys are up to, taking that event into account, they’re moving to hasten the end of the world... Wouldn’t that be about right?”

Hearing that, Liliana cocked her head to the side.

“End... the world? But all they did... was swoop in and attack, right?”

“That’s true, but two sayings come to mind. ‘Important matters happen more often than trivial ones,’ and ‘nature does not make great strides.’ Everything in nature proceeds gradually; there are no sudden leaps forward. Thinking of it that way, the reason they attacked was... In short, their goal was to abduct the hero, but it’s also possible one important matter that comes out of this is that they are hastening the possibility of the end of the world by doing so.”

Clarissa and the others had a goal in abducting heroes, that much was clear. It was unknown whether it had anything to do with the demise of the world, but something had brought about the twilight syndrome incident.

“I can’t completely throw out the possibility that it was a complete coincidence... But that kind of thing is out of my area of expertise. I’m not one of the denizens of twilight, so I don’t really know.”

With that, Suimei brought the conversation to an end and brought up another of his worries.

“All that’s left... is Lefi, huh?”

“Lefille...?”

Suimei nodded bitterly as he recalled Lefille’s current condition.

“She’s... the same as always... no?”

“She’s probably dwelling on her defeat. It doesn’t show normally, but I bet she’s frustrated.”

It affected her quite deeply that she was forced to taste defeat at Clarissa’s hands. Since then, Suimei caught glimpses of her acting somewhat impatient.

“Well, it’s not only that.”

“It’s that, right?”

“So it is.”

Thinking about what happened to Lefille’s body alongside her defeat, the three of them each hung their heads down heavily.



While Suimei and the others were in anguish, Lefille was taking action elsewhere, and was in the office of the Twilight Pavilion's guild master, but...

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!
AaaaaaaaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Rumeya-dono, please don't laugh! This isn't something to laugh about!"

"But, but... You know?! If you, if you show me something like that... I'll, I'll... Hah! HAHAHAHAHA, HAAAAA!"

Rumeya was rolling around on the guild office floor, her tails whipping about as she laughed with all her might. It sounded like she might choke and die as she gasped and wheezed for air. Meanwhile, sitting on the sofa in front of her was the one who was laying bare her innocent anger—Lefille, who had once more become tiny.

"There's nothing I can do! It's not like I became like this because I wanted to..."

"Aaah, aaaah... My stomach hurts. This is the best laugh I've had all year."

Seeing that she was still unable to stop laughing, Lefille was on the verge of tears as she scowled bitterly at Rumeya. However, her expression was just far too cute and didn't carry a hint of dignity. After finally calming down from her fit of laughter, Rumeya reseated herself on the sofa.

"No, but really... To think that your body becomes smaller when you use too much of the spirits' power. This never happened to Aldephize. Well, it just shows how large a portion of Lefi's body the spirits occupy is all... Pfft!"

Clamping her hand over her mouth, Rumeya tried to stop herself from breaking out into laughter once more. However, she was at her limits, and her cheeks began to swell out as her mouth filled with air and a small laugh leaked out. On the other hand, Lefille could only let out an exasperated sigh.

"Please put a stop to that already. Suimei-kun and the others will be coming over to say their farewells soon."

"Is that so? Hmph... Then before they get here, there's something I wanted to

talk with you about.”

She held her pipe close as her expression turned serious. Seeing that, Lefille naturally responded in kind.

“Rumeya-dono, what is it that you wanted to talk about?”

After puffing at her pipe, Rumeya pointed a sharp gaze at Lefille which felt like it was piercing right through her.

“...You lost, right, Lefi?”

“That’s...”

“Did you think I wouldn’t know just ‘cause you didn’t mention it? I’d rather you not take me so lightly.”

As if she had seen the fight herself, Rumeya’s words were filled with conviction. Having been seen through completely, Lefille honestly nodded back to her.

“Lefi, do you know the reason you lost?”

“...Because my power couldn’t earnestly reach them.”

“That’s true, but... Are you aware of the other reason?”

Hearing her words, Lefille’s heart jumped in place. However...

“No, it’s just that my skills are still too raw. There is no other reason for defeat.”

Lefille frowned as she denied there being any other reason. She didn’t want to accept it. If she acknowledged it, she felt like a part of what had been supporting her would crumble to pieces. As Rumeya looked at her obstinate expression, she simply smiled and sighed. This seemed to irritate Lefille, as she took on an unexpectedly critical tone with her.

“Do you think that there is something else, Rumeya-dono?”

“It would be simple for me to say it here, but... There’s a parental side of me that thinks it would be better for you to find out yourself and accept it. There would be no benefit to you if I were too meddlesome after all. Heh, what to do with you...?”

As Rumeya muttered in a troubled manner, she puffed out the smoke from her pipe towards the ceiling and tapped the ashes out of her pipe into an ashtray. And then, perhaps having found her answer...

“That’s it. Well, you’ve got that boy and your reliable companions after all, so there’s no need to rush it. Along the way, it will do you good to just look at the fights you’ve had up until now. If you end up losing despite that... Come back and see me again. I’ll strictly reforge you when you do.”

“...Understood.”

“Mm. In short, don’t get too much into a fighting mood. But that’s oh-so hard, especially when you’re young...”

As she trailed off quietly, she must have been thinking of her own experiences. With a faraway look, Rumeya gazed out the window. After silently finishing her pipe, she suddenly smiled and called out to Lefille.

“Lefi, come here for a bit.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Let me pet you.”

“NO WAY!”

Rumeya was waving her hand up and down trying to appeal to Lefille for a good petting as Lefille obstinately refused her. Her hat that was far too big for her body fell over her eyes and she curled up into a ball on the sofa.

“Waah! You’ve become the perfect size to be petted, so isn’t it fine?!”

“It isn’t! Where can you find someone who would be glad to be petted in this kind of circumstance?!”

Saying that, Lefille abruptly turned the other way as Rumeya broadly grinned.

“Even if you say you hate it, I’m just going to pet you forcefully.”

The moment those words reached Lefille’s ears, Rumeya’s figure on the sofa became nothing but an after image. She’d vanished. And then immediately after that, Lefille’s hat was stolen from her with great force.

“Wawawawawah! Rumeya-dono?!”

“I got youuu!”

“Augh...”

As she was pinned down by something soft and delightful, Lefille learned of absolute humiliation. As she was, with her abilities in this state, Lefille had no chance of escaping. And after Rumeysa teased her for a while, her fox ears suddenly began twitching.

“Oops, looks like they’re here. Well, though it’ll be meager, shall we throw a farewell party?”

“Very well...”

Epilogue I

Elliot Austin had just arrived in the western territory of the kingdom of Astel—in Kurant City, to be precise. While visiting the area at the request of the Church of Salvation, he was also en route to the country of Thoria, which lay to the north of Astel. But right here and now in Kurant City, he stood before a towering mansion under the evening sky. In the light of the mana lamps placed outside, he once more looked at the letter that had been passed to him that afternoon.

“My goodness. I get an invitation as soon as I arrive...”

He let out a long sigh, reflecting on how hectic it was to be a hero. Promptly after he arrived, as though he was expected, he’d received an invitation from the lord of the mansion in front of him.

That lord was Lucas de Hadorious, the ruler of Kurant City and an important noble who held great influence in Astel. Elliot had a formal meeting with him set up by the Church of Salvation for the next day, but preempting that, Hadorious had set up a meeting of his own. Elliot had no reason to refuse, so after leaving Christa behind at their lodgings at the church, he’d come to visit the mansion.

Upon introducing himself to the gate guards and flashing the letter he’d received, Elliot was immediately shown inside. As he passed through the door to the private room where Hadorious was seated, he took a moment to appreciate how dimly lit it was. The only thing serving as a light source was the moonlight coming in from the window. The man who’d summoned him was sitting at his desk, exuding a needless intensity from his eyes without so much as saying a word. It was overwhelming, even compared to the aura Graziella gave off.

Elliot was quite taken aback by it, but trying to make sure that it didn’t show on the surface, he stepped forward and stood before the duke. He was definitely pressuring Elliot, but Hadorious simply pretended like he didn’t

realize that and called out to Elliot.

“The hero of El Meide, Elliot-dono... I thank you for accepting my sudden summons. How are you doing this evening?”

“Up until now everything was just normal, but after coming to your estate, I feel like I’m suddenly between a rock and a hard place.”

“I’m sure you do.”

Hearing Elliot’s sarcastic tone, Hadorious responded with a snort. This man seemed to keep his wariness concealed.

As I thought, this man is aware...

Unlike the emperor of Nelferia who always and without exception had an intimidating air about him, Hadorious’s intensity seemed to be used with a sense of purpose. It was like his stone gaze was some sort of test, and it went without question that the one being tested would surely feel the pressure. While Elliot was nursing such doubts, he kept up his facade and questioned Hadorious.

“Are you not going to turn on the lights?”

“I simply thought it would be more refined to sit under the moonlight. If you do not mind, then I would like to leave it as such.”

Elliot internally questioned Hadorious’s mysterious subtleties, but outwardly gave a nod in response.

“And so, what business do you have with me today?”

“As the lord of this town, I thought it was necessary to greet you.”

“If it was a greeting you were after, you could have waited until tomorrow. Besides, calling this a greeting is pure pretense at this point.”

“Regarding that, I recall Astel’s hero saying something similar.”

There, a faint smile surfaced on Hadorious’s lips. Seeing this, Elliot let just a fraction of his displeasure show as he continued.

“If that is all you have to say, then I will take my leave.”

“Now, now, don’t be so hasty. I have one more matter to discuss with you.

The reason I called you here today, bastard, was because I wanted to have a talk with you one on one.”

“Bast— Just what is it?”

Elliot choked back his complaint at the sudden discourtesy and instead urged the conversation forward. Hadorious then folded his hands together atop his desk.

“I’d like to hear your damned opinion on something.”

“My opinion? My opinion on what, exactly? Could it be that you think I’m going to cause some kind of harm to this country?”

“No, I believe no such thing. You see, I simply want to know why it is you wish to save this world.”

To Elliot, this seemed like nothing more than foolish, pompous whimsy—the kind typical of nobles. He was speaking like he was toying with Elliot, but regardless, Elliot replied honestly.

“It is not like I want to save the world itself, per se. I am simply saving the people who wish to be saved, and as a result, the world is also being saved. It is not something that I give much thought.”

“...”

“Does that answer not please you?”

To Hadorious, it must have sounded unconvincing. As Elliot was thinking that, Hadorious shook his head.

“Let me rephrase: why do you want to defeat the demons, bastard?”

“...Just as I said before, to save the people who want to be saved.”

“I see. That is quite noble of you.”

“As I suspected, this answer does not satisfy you, does it?”

“Indeed, it is strange.”

Faced with the continuous stream of indirect replies mixed with sarcasm, Elliot’s tone was starting to betray his irritation.

“I believe that standing up to fight for the sake of others is only natural.”

“However, it does not have anything to do with you personally, does it? The crisis of this world, the people here... You’re an unrelated third party.”

“That is certainly true, but...”

He had a point there, but Elliot had his pride. In his world, he was a brave and well-known warrior. He had built up his own sense of pride and established his own set of values. He would never act only to benefit his own well-being. It was true he wasn’t from this world, but he’d become personally invested in it and its people. He couldn’t just bluntly refuse them. It seemed that Hadorious had also picked up on his train of thought...

“So how does this all necessitate defeating the demons? Even without fighting them, can’t you still save the people of this world?”

“I am fighting the demons because it was requested of me, and I have the power to do so. That is why I complied.”

“I see. You are the same as the others in that regard, then.”

“...?”

Elliot was unable to grasp Hadorious’s true motives behind his mysterious phrasing, and was racking his brain for a suitable reply.

“You have a better understanding than that man, it must be said. At least in regards as to how the world actually works.”

“...?”

“Based on your reply to my earlier question, I will ask you one more. You have resolved yourself to fight the demons, but why do you really think that is? To come to this world and act as a hero to save it... Do you not find it strange that you never once doubted what you were doing?”

“Whether I found it strange or not, my will to fight was nothing other than my own.”

Fighting the demons was something he had decided to do himself. Certainly, the fact that his motivation seemed bottomless was odd, even to Elliot himself, but...

“That is not what I meant, bastard. You are— No, it’s not just you. Every single one of you heroes are being manipulated.”

“Manipulated? By who?”

“The Goddess. The fact that you have all decided to fight with such conviction in this world is no coincidence. It was all influenced by the Goddess and her plans.”

“...”

Hearing Hadorious’s bold declaration, Elliot kept his mouth shut and thought it over. Just where exactly was he going with this? He’d started asking about why Elliot was fighting, and had now moved on to the Goddess... Elliot couldn’t see the end goal of this conversation. To him, it all seemed like some kind of joke. But for some reason, he was unable to just laugh it off.

“And why does that matter to you? We heroes received divine protection from the Goddess, so surely it’s reasonable to assume that there could be some other kind of intervention involved. Besides, I do not think it’s a particularly bad thing in this case if it’s for the sake of saving people.”

“It is just as you say, bastard. However, what if it wasn’t actually for the sake of the people? If the heroes’ existence was only to satisfy the Goddess’s selfish desires, what would you think about it then?”

“Let me riddle you this. Because the nature of divinity is so vast and out of our realm of understanding, it is foolish to assume that gods possess the same mundane motivations that humans do. I do not believe that anything truly divine is capable of greed.”

So he declared. But as Elliot spoke, beads of sweat began forming on his forehead. He’d realized something that he didn’t want to, and it was immediately beginning to weigh on him. The pressure of it, much like Hadorious’s gaze, was relentless.

“If you’re so knowledgeable about the beings known as gods, then you should have also already thought about this. Certainly, gods do not possess a sense of greed. But just what are these so-called gods, really? What exactly do they do?”

As Elliot gulped hard, he contemplated Hadorious’s questions, and in doing

so, recalled a conversation he'd previously had with Suimei. The talk he was currently having with Hadorious wasn't too different. Suimei too had asked him his opinion on the gods, but because Elliot mistook him for a person of this world, he hadn't investigated it any further. If he had, he likely would have arrived at the conclusion he was just about to...

"Well, Elliot-dono?"

"...For the sake of amassing their own power, they are existences that exert their authority."

"And do you think that such existences would allow individuals that they've invested their power in to act freely? You know deep in your heart that you are dancing to the Goddess's tune, correct?"

He was right. Elliot's actions may not have truly been his own will. It was reasonable to wonder if the reason he so thoroughly believed that he had to fight the demons no matter what was truly because something was working behind the scenes to plant that suggestion in his head.

"But... is that wrong?"

"Hmm?"

"Certainly, it may not be my own will. Our fight may be the result of the Goddess's despotism. However, because of that, people will be saved. In that case, I do not think it is particularly a bad thing. You could even say it's necessary. After all, it is the will of the gods."

"To say you're simply doing what's necessary is to deny your own agency in your destiny. Fragile lives are lost or trampled every day because of 'the will of the gods.' Would you still say that's necessary, bastard?"

"What are you referring to?"

But when Elliot asked that, Hadorious answered his question with another question.

"Allow me to ask you this first: What kind of place was your world? Was it a world where people strived to make life better? Aren't those efforts the foundation upon which your world was built?"

“What are you saying? Isn’t that obvi—”

Indeed, to Elliot, it was obvious that people always strove for a better life. As long as people lived, they would push for development and the betterment of themselves and society. However, from the way Hadorious was speaking, it sounded like he was skeptical of something...

It was then that Elliot realized it. Hadorious’s questions had made him realize the mechanism that drove this world.

“It couldn’t be... This world...”

The moment he asked for confirmation, the door to the office opened and several soldiers appeared. As they fell into line, Elliot glanced at them and questioned Hadorious.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Our conversation is over for now. I’ll be moving on to testing you.”

“If it is something violent, then I will lodge a complaint with the Church of Salvation.”

“That’ll only be if you manage to leave here, no?”

“Do you really think they’ll be able to stop me?”

Hadorious’s words were arrogant and daring, but the only forces he’d summoned were mere soldiers. Even if they attacked together, they would be no match for Elliot who was under the Goddess’s divine protection. But as Elliot was thinking this, Hadorious stood up from his desk.

“I’ll be your opponent, bastard.”

“For the esteemed duke to step forward himself... Will it not be troublesome if you’re injured fighting a hero?”

“First, let’s see you try.”

Ignoring Elliot’s sarcasm, Hadorious provoked him. It was difficult to have a spat within a lord’s manor, but judging that nothing would be accomplished through diplomacy now, Elliot drew his sword and attacked. But he was stopped in his tracks by Hadorious’s sword before he realized that he’d even

drawn it.

“Wha?!”

“Hah... As I thought, you jump to action differently from the others.”

“You stopped my sword... with one hand?”

Elliot had no intention of actually hitting Hadorious. He fully planned on stopping just shy of striking him to make a point. The speed of his sword was such that no human should have been able to see it coming, so it was a tremendous shock that Hadorious had been able to block it—wielding his blade single-handedly, no less.

“Hero, surely you do not intend to say that this is all you’ve got... You also held back when you fought the third imperial princess of the Empire, did you not?”

“...How do you know that?”

“Let’s just say I have my ways of finding things out.”

Elliot put his strength into his sword, but the resistance he felt made him leap backward. He then returned his sword to its sheath.

He couldn’t understand this man. He had no idea what he was thinking. At this rate, anything could happen. He could be captured, even killed... Nothing seemed impossible at this point.

Coming to that conclusion, Elliot made his resolve. What he needed to do right now was to use all his strength to make an escape. Still unarmed, Elliot rolled up his right sleeve. When he did, a silver gauntlet appeared on his forearm. He then gave his final warning.

“...If I get serious, it will come at no small material cost to this mansion, you understand.”

“That is only if you are able to use your power well.”

“Allow me to show you just what I can do.”

Electricity coiled around Elliot’s arm. It lashed out, smashing and destroying the furnishings it touched. But even so, he was still holding it back. And it

seemed Hadorious saw through even that.

“A great power, I see... This is why you could not use it in the middle of the city.”

“Naturally. Because of the divine protection from the hero summoning, my power is exceptionally strong. If I used this in the middle of a city, it would be a bother to innocent civilians.”

Just as Elliot was about to throw himself at Hadorious...

“If you have that much power, then it is more than enough.”

“More than enough...?”

“I am talking about the divine protection. If it is that well adapted to your body, then the necessary portion has likely been filled.”

“I do not know what you are talking about, but I am not about to stand down at this point.”

“Do as you please. After all, it is not my role to stop you.”

Immediately after Hadorious’s veiled threat, a shock ran through Elliot’s nape.

“Wh... What...?”

Elliot was puzzled. The sudden blow left his consciousness hazy, and he used all his strength to focus on his senses. The soldiers behind him had showed no signs of moving, but...

“As one would expect of the Lonely Shadow. To think even this hero was unable to sense you. Your title isn’t just for show, I see.”

A name he had heard before reached Elliot’s ears. When he was in the Empire, the people from the army spoke fearfully of the Lonely Shadow, a man with swept-back black hair accentuated with a splash of gray. He had reddish-brown eyes and a rigid face. His presence could meld into any shadow. He was the Empire’s greatest swordsman and assassin.

“R-Rogue Zandyke... Just when...”

“From the very beginning. It was wise to take note of the soldiers who came in, but to neglect the possibility that someone was lurking here from the start...”

It's a mistake one would expect a hero to make."

"Ugh..."

Unable to support his body anymore, Elliot fell to a knee while trembling. While vaguely listening to Rogue's warning, Elliot's consciousness gradually sank into a muddy darkness. After Rogue confirmed that he was out cold, he carried Elliot over to the sofa and laid him down. He then turned to Hadorious.

"...Could you not have done it yourself?"

"It was better for you to. The hero's power is not something that can be underestimated."

"And who was the one who took that power head-on?" Rogue replied in a taciturn manner.

His attitude was insolent, but it seemed there was something of an understanding between him and Hadorious. The soldiers in the room certainly said nothing of it. After a moment's pause, Hadorious raised a different matter.

"However, was that alright? Becoming a Universal Apostle like us?"

"A foolish question. I have sworn my sword to Gottfried-dono. Isn't the same true for you?"

"No."

"Explain."

"My sword is already dedicated to another. I cannot lie about that. Of course, I have not forgotten my great admiration for that man."

Hadorious was clearly thinking of someone. Rogue felt like he could nearly see a hallucination in the direction his far-off gaze was staring.

"Hadorious-dono, there is one thing that I must pass on to you."

"Let's hear it."

"The demons have moved. They've already plunged into Thoria and are on their way to the Empire."

"I see. As expected, they moved precisely as he predicted."

As Hadorious sighed, Rogue raised a doubt of his own. Something that had been bothering him.

“Isn’t this different from the original plan? The invasion of the demons in Astel and the departure of Reiji-dono to the self-governed state. The failure to capture the Alliance’s hero. There have been deviations that cannot be ignored.”

“Regarding that, adjustments are being made on each occasion. As such, there’s no real problem. The original plan was to gather all of the heroes beforehand, but it seems that has changed a little.”

“What do you mean? In that case, the Empire will have to stand and fight against the demons without a hero and end up losing, right?”

“No, that will not happen.”

“Hmm... Then the Alliance’s hero will go to the Empire? Or will we have this hero take care of the demon subjugation ahead of schedule?”

Rogue gave Elliot a sidelong glance, but Hadorious shook his head.

“No, that duty will fall on Astel’s hero.”

“But are Reiji-dono’s abilities not insufficient? A fight against an army of demons would likely be too heavy a responsibility for him. After the incident in the Empire, its prominent nobles have decreased in number. If it’s not Elliot-dono, then I don’t think things will balance back out properly.”

“Regarding the hero of Astel’s abilities, it is not a matter to be concerned over. We will simply play our hand so that he can win. Besides, Hero Reiji is currently quite famous. Because he was made out as the one who defeated ten thousand demons in Astel, his reputation exceeds Hero Elliot’s.”

“But the Alliance’s hero has also defeated a demon general, correct?”

“The Alliance’s Hero Hatsumi has just ended a large battle with the demons in a draw. She was also unable to quell the uproar in Miazen. That will affect her reputation. Meanwhile, Hero Reiji has inherited a legendary weapon from the self-governed state and driven back the demon general who attacked him for it. If he drives back the demons from the Empire on top of that...”

“Certainly, Reiji-dono would be known as the strongest hero.”

Currently, Reiji’s apparent achievements as a hero had indeed surpassed Elliot’s. In terms of actual ability, he was somewhat lacking, but to the people who blindly believed in the tales of heroes, none of that mattered. Seeing that Rogue was convinced, Hadorious glanced over at Elliot.

“All that matters is the faith of the populace. Certainly, it is also important for a hero to have the power to drive back the demons, but that is a secondary concern. Currently, the Alliance’s hero is the strongest of all, but the divine protection she received is inferior. However, since Hero Reiji has been steadily distinguishing himself, the Goddess must also have her eye on him. Naturally, we must put the other heroes to use as well.”

Pausing for a moment there, Hadorious looked up at the moon through the window.

“Let us make sure that Hero Reiji gains the utmost fame that he can so that he receives the Goddess’s favor and becomes a peerless hero.”

To set him up in such a high position, hardship would be completely unavoidable. After all, if he could not prove himself, it would only come back to bite him once he was elevated. Rogue muttered lightly to himself out of pity for Reiji.

Epilogue II

After Suimei's party returned to the Nelferian Empire from the Saadiaz Alliance, they headed back to the house they used as a base. It was just as they'd left it. The alabaster that Suimei had heavily plastered on the walls of the surrounding buildings was still a nice, pure white. The characteristic dankness of such backstreet neighborhoods was nowhere to be found in this place, which radiated an aura of cheer and brightness. With the sunlight shining down into it from overhead, it was almost like a park.

Looking around, several of the cats that Suimei had made his temporary familiars were settled on top of the tables and chairs that had been left in the patio area. They were purring and relaxing as they lay spread out. Some were lazily scratching themselves, some were snoozing away, and some were sunning themselves up on the balcony.

"Kitties!"

The moment she saw all this, Liliana cast aside her parasol and made a beeline for the felines, her reddish-violet twintails bouncing through the air after her. Since she'd been away for a while, she needed a refresher session of quality time with some small, furry friends. Thinking back on it, Suimei remembered that Liliana had been somewhat reluctant to part with the cats when they left the Empire.

"Hug..."

"Meeow!"

After capturing several cats, Liliana pressed them against her cheeks all at once. Because Liliana had made friends with them back when they were temporary familiars of Suimei's, they didn't at all seem to mind her affection. The only one who seemed to think anything of it was the tiny Lefille. Stooping over to grab the parasol that Liliana had cast aside, Lefille scooped up a cat herself and began talking to it.

“I guess you guys aren’t going to return to where you came from, huh?”

“Meow.”

Even as she continued to poke the cat’s cheek and question it, the only reply she received—of course—was meowing. She’d known that would happen, but still felt like she had to try. It was Liliana, who was next to her while gently petting as many cats as she could, that replied for them.

“It’s pretty here... and it’s easy to take an afternoon catnap... so they come around once in a while.”

“Cats love clean places, after all. So I suppose in their roaming around, they enjoy stopping by here to nap and relax.”

“Meow.”

The cats meowed as if to agree, and Liliana listened to them intently. It looked like she was having a conversation with them, but it was just a method Suimei had taught her to come to a mutual understanding with animals.

After the incident in the Empire had been resolved, the cats’ job was fulfilled. So in accordance with their contract (which had been cooperation in exchange for food and a place to sleep for a finite period of time), the magicka that partially enhanced their intelligence was dispelled. That returned them to being normal cats, and they all returned to their regular haunts. But there was no erasing the knowledge they’d gained of this place—which was indeed a wonderful place to take a catnap—so many of them returned quite frequently.

“At this rate, it’ll become a gathering spot for them at night, huh?”

“I imagine so, Suimei-dono. It is often said that cats like to gather.”

Felmenia seemed quite happy about it. She was also rather fond of cats, so the tranquil sight of so many of them together was like food for the soul.

“B-By the way, um...”

Felmenia then glanced back and forth between the cats and Suimei. She’d gone from seeming cheerful to embarrassed as she fidgeted restlessly.

“Hmm? Ah, the cats, right? Go on.”

“Yes!”

Her silver hair streaking behind her, Felmenia practically leaped towards Liliana and began petting the cats as well. Time passed like that peacefully for a while, but then Suimei and the others heard a familiar voice from down the alley.

“Ah, they’re here!”

It was a young man’s voice—one Suimei knew particularly well, and one that was somewhat reassuring to hear. When Suimei turned around, he spied Reiji and his party, who should have been in the Saadias Alliance. Titania then called out to him with her usual composed expression.

“So you’ve returned?”

“Yeah, we just got back.”

As Suimei shrugged his shoulders, Felmenia came running up from behind him carrying a cat. She immediately fell to one knee and properly greeted Titania like a princess.

“Your Highness, it is wonderful to see you in good health.”

“White Flame-dono, it is also nice to see you in such good spirits. Do you like cats?”

“Huh? Um, well... yes...”

The sight of Felmenia courteously kneeling with a cat in her arms was too much for even the self-possessed Titania, who began giggling. After Felmenia replied in an embarrassed tone, she moved the conversation onward.

“Your Highness, if I remember correctly, was it not your plan to reassure the citizens of the self-governed state?”

“Indeed, we have just returned to the Empire this morning.”

“Actually, we got called back by that noble again,” Reiji announced, admitting the real reason for their return.

“That noble again, huh?”

“Mm...”

As Reiji replied with a grim expression, Suimei realized that the person in their group who was usually the loudest hadn't made an appearance yet.

"So, where's Mizuki? I haven't seen her yet."

"U-Um, Mizuki is..."

"What's up?"

Suimei cocked his head to the side as he asked for the details, but Reiji awkwardly looked away. And just as he did...

"FUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Suddenly, an excessively tense, high-energy laugh rang out from behind Reiji and the others. Hearing it, Suimei's heart sank.

"Say, Reiji... Why is it I'm getting such a terrible feeling about that laugh?"

"Don't make me say it..."

As Reiji answered him in a tired voice, Mizuki arrived on the scene—her odd eye shining gold.

"It has been a while, Dark Crimson Hider whose darkness is deeper than that of the universe I inhabit! Oh, my eternal rival!"

"Ahhh... I see."

Just hearing what Mizuki said, Suimei seemed to figure out what was going on. Looking at Reiji and Titania, he could tell that the two of them were at their wits' end. As Mizuki strode over to him confidently, Suimei beheld her with a complex expression.

"You know, Mizuki... didn't you stop doing that?"

"What are you talking about? Besides, I am not Mizuki. I am a unique existence between all heaven and earth, the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah... None of that's real."

As Suimei gave an apathetic response, Felmenia looked at him bemusedly.

"Suimei-dono, just what is even going on here? I am having a hard time

understanding.”

“Even if you ask me... Hey, Reiji, what’s up with this?”

Reiji then explained what had happened in the self-governed state. About how they’d attained the weapon left behind by a hero of old. About how a demon general had appeared. And about how Mizuki had ended up like this.

“I see... So she started acting like this after getting that weapon.”

“Mm. That’s why it’s my fault. If I’d properly protected her, then...”

Reiji’s expression was tense. He’d said he’d protect Mizuki from the very beginning, even before they’d left Astel. That things had turned out like this weighed heavily on him.

“Well, don’t worry about it.”

“But—”

“Mizuki’s also responsible for saying she would go along. Besides, nothing will come out of brooding over it now. Spilled milk and all that. Also, if she suddenly got weird again, isn’t it possible she might just suddenly go back to being normal?”

His burden perhaps allayed by such optimistic words, Reiji’s expression lightened.

“You’re right.”

“Though I have to say, I’m pretty floored by this turn of events...”

“Yeah...”

Reiji looked at Mizuki for a moment with a complicated expression. He likely wanted to say that he wished this hadn’t happened. And he wasn’t the only one in his group who felt that way.

“Well, whatever. Let’s head inside for now. We actually just got back ourselves though, so I don’t have much to offer you in the way of hospitality.”

“You needn’t pay us any mind. We’re primarily here to exchange information, after all.”

Following up on Titania’s polite reply, Io Kuzami—previously known as Mizuki

—took a haughty attitude.

“Hmph. Then let us go to your damned castle.”

“Mizuki, you wait out here for a bit.”

“I am Io Kuzami.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it, Io Kuzami-san. Menia, get Lefi and Liliana and go inside with Reiji and the others.”

After waiting for everyone else to enter the house, Suimei turned to Io Kuzami.

“Now then... Well, so? You’re seriously not pretending here, right?”

“Do you still not believe me, bastard?”

“Just checking. Come here for a bit.”

“I refuse.”

“Of course... Actually, it’s faster for me to just get closer. Lend me your head.”

Looking like he was more than ready to pick a fight, Suimei drew closer. As he did, Io Kuzami put on a smile like she was toying with him.

“Did I not say that I refuse?”

“Can’t hear you.”

Promptly ignoring Io Kazumi, Suimei placed his hand on her head. He hadn’t been able to do anything for Hatsumi because she couldn’t remember who she was supposed to be, but in the case of a split personality, it was possible to return the original personality to dominance without any trauma. And so, despite feeling guilty about it, Suimei prepared to cast his magicka. But just as he did...

“Bastard, do you intend to tamper with this little girl’s head again?”

“!”

Io Kuzami smirked like she knew exactly what Suimei was up to. Gripped with surprise, he took a step back. Io Kuzami then flashed another smirk—a much darker one.

“What’s wrong? That’s not really something to be so startled over, is it?”

“...What are you? And how the hell do you know that?”

Suimei questioned her with a severe expression. What he’d done was supposed to be his secret and his secret alone. How could a split personality that had just suddenly appeared possibly know about it? Doubt and suspicion began whirling around in his head. Meanwhile, Io Kuzami simply continued smirking.

“You’re making quite a grim face, but am I wrong? It’s something that happened before you bastards came to this world. Yes, this little girl had fallen in love with you, but you trampled on that love. Using your damned powers, you shifted her infatuation to a different target.”

“...Yeah, that’s right.”

It was true. At first, Mizuki was seriously interested in Reiji. But while Suimei was helping her approach Reiji, she’d ended up falling in love with him instead. And just as Io Kuzami said, Suimei had used magicka to deflect those feelings onto someone else. Being confronted with this now, Suimei gave Io Kuzami a dubious look. His eyes asked her how she knew all that.

“It’s a trifling matter, really. When I possessed this little girl, I simply had a little peek at her memories. Of course, I also had a look at those damn memories that you sealed away.”

It was then that Suimei somehow came to a vague understanding of just who Io Kuzami really was.

“Answer me. What are you? What kind of spirit?”

“There’s no need to be so angry. I have no intention of making any mischief. The reason that I am borrowing this little girl’s body is simply because our interests coincided. Besides, you are unable to remove me, correct?”

“Don’t underestimate a modern magician. We’ve been exorcising things like you for ages with all kinds of magicka.”

“Enough. You might even be able to do so with me, but the burden on this little girl will be considerable. It may just break her, you understand?”

“...”

Suimei was unable to deny that. If what had possessed Mizuki was indeed a powerful being and he forcefully drove it out of her, it would come at a significant cost. And since he couldn't argue, Suimei simply scowled at Io Kuzami.

“What? Don't make such a frightening face. There's nothing to worry about. I have no intention of bringing any harm to this little girl, though she may yet go through some painful experiences.”

“Is that the truth?”

“I don't lie.”

That much he could be certain about. By their very nature, spirits did not lie. There were occasions that they avoided telling the truth or tricked people, but if a spirit wasn't the mischievous type, they could be taken at their word. So if this being guaranteed Mizuki's safety, Suimei had every reason to believe it. And so Suimei gave up on trying to drive whatever it was out by force. Io Kuzami then looked at him with a curious expression.

“If this little girl is so precious to you, then why do you keep her at a distance?”

“Shut up. I'm a magician, and Mizuki is a normal human. I have to draw a line to keep her safe.”

“I see.”

After a brief reply, Io Kuzami smirked once more.

“Also, don't mention any of this to the others. You hear me, bastard? This is a secret between the two of us.”

And with that, whatever had possessed Mizuki laughed with her mouth.

Afterword

It's been a while, everyone. This is Gamei Hitsuji.

The story this time around is the conclusion to the Saadiaz Alliance arc. Most of Suimei and company's battles are resolved there, and formidable enemies are appearing one after the other. Things are gradually getting more and more serious. Hang in there, Suimei-kun!

After all is said and done, the centerpiece of this volume was the battle with Eanru, wasn't it? It is quite a heated battle, the likes of which we haven't seen for a while!

And then, and then! There's more! In this volume, I wrote much more than I ever have up until now about Reiji-kun's story! It's finally come! Reiji's time to shine! Or really, Mizuki's! (Ha!) From now on, the portions where Reiji-kun becomes stronger and Mizuki's gag portions as Io Kuzami may just increase steadily! It would please me if you looked forward to not only just Suimei-kun's, but to their activities as well.

Allow me to thank everybody who helped safely bring volume 6 out into the world. To chief editor S-sama; illustrator himesuz-sama; designer Horiehideaki-sama; and the proofreading company Oraido-sama, I couldn't have done it without you.

-Gamei Hitsuji

Bonus Short Stories

A Request From Mary-chan

Suimei was in his room at Alto Schloss, the Society's headquarters in Germany, putting together the results of his magicka work at his desk when there came a rapping at the door. After knocking several times, his assistant Hydemary Alzbayne entered the room. When Suimei turned around and asked her if she needed something, she replied in her usual flat tone with zero inflection.

"Suimei-kun, there's just a little something I'd like to ask of you."

"I'm a bit busy right now. I'll have to wait till later."

"Whaaat? But I want it now."

Despite Suimei clearly being in the middle of something, Hydemary seemed ready and willing to force the issue. In response, Suimei turned to her and offered some candid advice.

"And I want to keep working. Think of me for a second, will ya?"

"No way. You should be the one thinking of me."

"You're the one who wants something! It's common freaking sense that you're supposed to be the one being considerate. Can't you compromise?"

"Isn't it because I can't compromise that I'm here making a request?"

"That's... Well, you do have a point, but..."

"Right? So just compromise with me. Life is a series of compromises, isn't it?"

Hydemary spoke in an extremely composed manner. There was no denying the truth in what she said, but such wisdom was hardly convincing coming from someone her age.

"A six-year-old shouldn't be giving me life lessons, damn it... Seriously."

“So, what do you say?”

“I dunno...”

Suimei still seemed reluctant, so Hydemary drew closer and looked up at him from below.

“...The hell are you doing?”

“I’m looking at you with upturned eyes. I was told it was a gesture that would bring down any man.”

Hydemary spoke with confidence in her sources, but this seemed to be her first time putting such knowledge into practice. Her completely deadpan face didn’t quite have the appeal she was hoping for. Yet she persisted nonetheless.

“Nobody’s falling for that,” Suimei sighed in exasperation. “Actually, who the hell told you something so dumb?”

“Miranda-san from Usher’s Bar.”

“Ain’t he a guy?!”

Miranda was the transvestite shopkeep who ran a small restaurant at the foot of the mountain. Suimei would take Hydemary there every once in a while, and the two of them got along surprisingly well. Suimei wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. In any case, Hydemary still didn’t relent.

“Hey, it’s fine, isn’t it? You’re free anyway, aren’t you?”

“You have eyes! You can clearly see that I’m working!”

After shouting at her, Suimei turned back to his desk. When he did...

“Hey, hey...”

“No.”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey...”

“...”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey...”

“Alright already, damn it! Just shut the hell up! I got it, so stop fucking ‘hey’ing me!”

Suimei's eventual downfall was Hydemary's plan to throw off his concentration by being a noisy nuisance. Even if he'd tried to use magicka to do something about it, Hydemary was a magician who rivaled his abilities. One thing might quickly escalate to another, so Suimei begrudgingly consented in order to keep both them and the headquarters safe. Hydemary threw both her arms in the air to celebrate his capitulation, though she remained completely expressionless.

"Yay! That's my Suimei-kun. Your unfortunate face isn't just for show!"

"God, you insult me on top of everything else? What a... Whatever. What do you even want?"

"Yes, about that..."

Hydemary became uncharacteristically bashful, seeming hesitant to say it. Finding this rather unusual, Suimei prodded her to continue.

"Out with it."

"You see, I'd like you to be the experimental subject for my magicka."

"..."

The only reply Suimei offered to Hydemary's request was silence.

"Hey, are you listening? I want you to be my experimental—"

"Oh, I heard you. And I refuse. I'm *not* going to be a guinea pig."

"Whaaat?"

"Don't act surprised! The hell made you think I was just gonna happily agree to be your test subject?! The hell makes you think anyone would?!"

"Oh? I don't think it's anything that unusual."

"This is magicka way off the right path, isn't it?!"

"How rude. My magicka is not sinister."

"I don't even care!"

As Suimei continued to protest, Hydemary stepped closer.

"But it has to be you, Suimei-kun."

“Yeah, I’d be flattered if you didn’t mean for a guinea pig. The answer’s still no.”

“Don’t say such selfish things.”

“I’m not being selfish!”

Suimei had been quite adamantly refusing for a while now, but Hydemary hadn’t backed down in the slightest. Rather than him not getting through to her, it felt more like she was just teasing him. And without one of them conceding, this conversation would likely continue in circles all day and night. So in order to move things along, Suimei volunteered to take the next step forward.

“Out with it. What kind of magicka is it really?”

“It’s that. You know, *that*.”

Suimei looked in the direction that Hydemary was pointing and spotted a large, rectangular box.

“That...? If I remember right, isn’t that the setup for a magic trick to split someone in two?”

“That’s right.”

“And isn’t that the kind of magic trick where you need two people in the box to make it work?”

“That’s just it. That’s the crux of this experiment. I’ve developed a spell to enhance the trick so that only one body is necessary to— Ah! Suimei-kun, wait! Don’t run away!”

Before Hydemary could even finish explaining, Suimei fled the room as fast as he could.

Come One, Come All! The Yakagi Residence House of Horrors!

It was a well-known fact at this point that Yakagi Suimei had a penchant for being dragged into all sorts of trouble. There were plenty of cases where he would stick his neck out on his own, certainly, but after being summoned

another world, he'd gotten involved in something or other everywhere he'd been—from Astel to Nelferia, from Nelferia to the Saadiaz Alliance, and back again.

It didn't particularly help that, no matter where he went, he inevitably ended up picking some kind of fight with whatever authority was in power. Really, the only place he still had amicable relations with was the kingdom of Astel. He'd made enemies in the other two countries he'd visited so far, but the king of Astel was in a similar position without a great deal of allies. Astel was also the country that had brought Suimei and the others to this world, so he had the longest standing relationship with the king there. It could be said that they'd come to an understanding of sorts. But even though Suimei was on good terms with the king, there were still a good many people involved in running the country that didn't have such a generous opinion of him. Our story this time around is about precisely that.

It was also a well-known fact in Astel that when Yakagi Suimei was first summoned, he quite vocally refused to take part in the Demon Lord's subjugation. On the surface, it was because he hadn't received the Goddess's divine protection and held no power. There were those that thought his refusal was quite understandable given the circumstances, but others not so much. They thought him gutless. A coward. They were the ones who'd summoned him against his will, but alas, the world was full of such hypocrites.

Moreover, what had become of Suimei after all that didn't sit well with them. They assumed he'd get his just deserts after allegedly being driven out of the castle, but when they came to find out that he was actually living peacefully in the Empire, it was a rather sore spot. He was in a land he knew nothing about with no connections or friends to rely on. By all reasonable estimations, he should have had a rather rough time adjusting and providing for himself. Yet nevertheless, he'd ended up quite well off. It smelled like some kind of bribery. Like perhaps some influential figure in the upper echelons of the Empire had taken him under their wing. And reading too much into things has a way of making people anxious, especially when they were already apprehensive to begin with.

But regardless of why it had happened, the result of consequence right now

was that a certain noble had sent an assassin. Astel's King Almadious knew nothing about it, of course, and even Duke Hadorious had nothing to do with it. It was a different noble who felt a righteous indignation on behalf of their country, and had let that feeling run off the rails in the wrong direction. They were just spoiled and privileged enough that the moment the notion crossed their mind, they pulled out all the stops to put their selfish plan into action. Yes, *that* sort of noble.

This noble believed rather baselessly that Suimei had, in the time he spent wandering around Royal Castle Camellia as he so pleased, made contacts in the Empire. That that was why he'd left Astel, and that he couldn't possibly be up to any good.

In a sense, it could be said that the assassin this noble had hired was truly the unfortunate one in the situation. In the business of assassins, work was work. And as a mere protégé, this particular assassin had no reason to turn down the job. In fact, it was an exciting opportunity. So upon receiving his orders, he set immediately to work. Mistaking Suimei for a simple coward, he had no way of knowing that he was about to walk into a tiger's den. It was pitiable, really.

The current hour only made things more unfortunate. Assassins naturally operated under the cover of darkness. It was a different story in the modern era where lights were on and there were people out and about regardless of whether it was day or night, but here in this world with no electric lights and a considerably smaller population, night was the ideal time for an assassin to do their work. But the same was true for magicians. And that important detail of course escaped the assassin, for he had no way of even knowing what magicians were.

After making it to the Empire and infiltrating the imperial capital, said assassin was currently in front of Suimei's base.

"How unfortunate for him..."

The whisper that escaped the assassin's lips was likely prompted by pity. Even if he was an assassin, he was still human. Even as a dealer of death, he still had feelings. His target, Suimei, had not only been summoned to this world against his will, it had all been by accident. Furthermore, he had no power of his own

and would be completely defenseless. The assassin felt for him and understood why he'd declined the demon subjugation. So this job was nothing personal. The assassin had simply caught the eye of the overzealous noble who'd hired him. It was a dangerous proposition for someone in his position to cross such a powerful noble, so he'd felt pressured to accept. He had to act—to work—without letting his feelings get in the way. It was a common story.

And so the assassin shook off the emotions that lingered inside him and steeled himself as he stood before the door. As a cat meowed behind him, he got to work picking the lock. It was a commonplace mechanism that didn't offer much of a challenge for a professional, and the assassin easily made his way inside. Unlike houses in Astel, houses in the Empire usually opened into a corridor. Several doors lined the one in Suimei's house, and the assassin began pondering where best to start. Taking a habitual glance over his shoulder before moving on, the assassin realized the front door was open.

"I thought I closed it..."

As he muttered to himself, a cat poked its head in through the gap in the door. Without making a single sound, it just stared fixedly at him, making him feel strangely uncomfortable. Brushing it off, he turned to head down the corridor and spotted a large portrait of a woman decorating the wall. It was the sort of artwork one would expect to find in the house of a noble or wealthy merchant. Seeing it here felt somewhat strange, but even stranger still, the eyes of the woman in the portrait suddenly seemed to move.

That painting is staring at me...

That thought was his first real bad omen. It felt like no matter what angle he looked at it from, the painting was looking right back at him. His confidence began to waver. Knowing he couldn't let himself get hung up on something so silly while on the job, however, the assassin hurriedly moved on. But as he stepped further into the hallway, the eyes of the portrait followed him in a glare.

"—?!"

Seeing the painted woman watch him go, the assassin's body stiffened up. Just what was going on? He didn't have time to sit and think about it, but it was

truly unbelievable. Telling himself it was just his imagination, he moved to take another step down the hallway. And when he did, the portrait's eyes continued to follow him.

“Ugh...”

Was that a groan of fear, perhaps? The fact that the assassin didn't scream spoke to his professionalism, but it was quite clear he'd been stricken with fright. He couldn't help recoiling a single step. He was filled with such dread that he was momentarily sure he'd gotten lost in a funhouse or something. To make matters worse, he suddenly sensed something. He quickly whipped around to see the front door still ajar... and the cat from before still silently staring at him.

“Shit, shit, shit... What the hell is going on?”

His fear began to escalate into full-blown panic. Since there seemed to be no sign of magical enchantment on anything, his sense that something was afoot grew rapidly. He then started thinking he'd seriously stumbled into a haunted house. As fright won out over his sense of obligation to complete the job, he turned to retrace his steps. When he did...

“Daaaaaruma-san fell doooooown.”

He heard the voice of a young girl from down the corridor behind him where he'd just been looking. It made his heart skip a beat. Had he been found by one of the residents? He wasn't immediately convinced that was the case because of the oddity of the words he'd just heard. Maybe it wasn't someone talking to him at all. The assassin stood there frozen in fear for a moment, then slowly turned towards the source of the voice. What they saw was a delicately crafted doll standing down the hall looking at him. Other than the doll, there was nobody there.

“Was it... you?”

He knew there was no way it could be, but he couldn't help the question that escaped his lips. Regardless, the doll didn't answer. The assassin stared at it skeptically for a long moment, but nothing else happened. His sense of dread reaching its peak, the assassin turned to flee the house. When he did...

“Daaaaaruma-san fell doooooown.”

He heard the same voice from behind him once more. When he whipped around again to identify the speaker, there was still only the doll standing in the hallway. Was it... really her talking? The assassin was no longer sure it wasn't, and the dire need to escape seized hold of his legs. He immediately tried to run, but...

“You mooooooved! Now you're it!”

The voice said something different this time. He peered over his shoulder and saw that the corners of the doll's mouth were now curved upward into a smile. But that was the last thing he saw. His consciousness then sank into darkness.

Moments later, quiet footsteps approached from down the hall.

“My goodness, aren't you up past your bedtime?”

Suimei appeared from the darkness and looked down at the assassin with an exasperated expression. It needn't be said what happened to the assassin and the noble who sent him after that.

Learning to Become a Swordswoman

“I will become a swordswoman!” Mizuki had suddenly declared just a few hours ago.

Ever since coming to this world, she had been worried about her lack of power. And, after dwelling on it all this time, she'd woken up with a certain idea in her head this morning: if her magical abilities were weak, she could supplement them with something else. At least, that seemed to be her train of thought.

“Hah! Hyah! Hiyah!”

In the garden of the inn where they were staying, Mizuki was swinging Reiji's orichalcum sword while shouting loudly. Since she'd taken the time to cast physical reinforcement magic on herself, she didn't seem at all bothered by the weight of the sword. But her form was terrible. Her shoulders were all over the place and she was leaning this way and that. It was obvious even from a

distance she had no knack for the blade.

“Um, Mizuki...”

“What is it, Reiji-kun?”

“I think you’d have an easier time if you straightened out your back more.”

“Alright, got it! I’ll give it a try!” she replied enthusiastically, straightening out with a snap.

Upon lending Mizuki his sword, Reiji had promised to give her some pointers while she trained. She was earnestly listening to his advice as she took practice swings, but alas, it didn’t seem to be making much of a difference. Because...

“Raaaaah! Hiiiyaaaaah!”

After another few swings, Reiji swore he could hear a creaking sound and her posture went immediately back to how it was. However, it seemed Mizuki didn’t notice at all. She just continued swinging. This cycle had repeated at least a dozen times now.

“You know, Mizuki...”

“What’s up, Reiji-kun?”

“Well, I was thinking... Wouldn’t it be better if you stopped trying to use a sword, Mizuki? I mean, it’s dangerous.”

“It’s dangerous no matter where you stand on the battlefield, isn’t it? After all, if I was scared of danger, I wouldn’t have come along with you in the first place, Reiji-kun.”

“That’s fair, but...”

It sounded like he wouldn’t get anywhere with a roundabout approach. Worse yet, what he’d just said only seemed to fan the flames in Mizuki’s heart. Her practice swings became more intense—dangerous, even.

After that, Reiji tried several other ways to convince her to give it up, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. She was intent on swinging that sword. But while Reiji was racking his brains, Mizuki suddenly stopped.

“Phew...”

Taking a deep breath, Mizuki looked rather satisfied. But the important part—at least to Reiji—was that she'd stopped swinging the sword. He let out a sigh of relief.

“Now that I'm finished with practice swings, it's time to start practicing killer techniques.”

“WHAT?! NO!”

“Huh? Reiji-kun, what are you yelling for?”

“U-Uh, Mizuki... by ‘practicing killer techniques,’ you mean what, exactly?”

“Killer techniques are techniques that kill, duh. Any self-respecting swordsman has at least one! A good, proper killer technique! Now, here I go! HAAAAAAAAAH!”

With a shout, Mizuki hefted Reiji's sword high overhead and swung it downward. Relying entirely on her physical reinforcement magic, it was an incredible slash. For a moment, Reiji was truly impressed. But really only for a moment. The sword slammed right into the ground and buried itself there.

“Ack!”

Watching the tip of the blade cut into the ground, Mizuki must've thought she'd really done it. She immediately yelped.

“Mizuki, you...”

“Ah... Ah, oh, this? This is proof of the tremendous destructive force of my killer technique, the Anou Grand Slash! So you could witness a glimpse of its power, I intentionally hit the ground.”

Despite her confident words, her eyes were darting about. She'd likely never given a single thought to what would happen if she swung down with all her might. After trying to bluff otherwise with Reiji, she yanked at the grip of the sword to try and pull it out of the ground. She managed eventually, and, as perhaps was expected at this point, proceeded to act like absolutely nothing had happened.

After hearing all the commotion, Titania came out into the garden in the midst of this. She took one look at Mizuki's wild swings and turned to Reiji.

“Pardon my asking, Reiji-sama, but what is Mizuki doing?”

“Oh, that? She suddenly said that she wanted to learn how to use a sword too.”

“I see... But what is she doing?”

“Those are practice swings... More or less.”

Titania hadn't even recognized Mizuki's movements as practice swings. Watching her from the sidelines, it looked more like she was performing some mysterious ritual from an unknown country.

“HIIYAAAAAH!”

Mizuki, who had noticed Titania's arrival, let out a deliberately loud shout in response to her badmouthing. She was doing her best to impress the two of them. And she seemed awfully proud of herself, but Titania observed all this with cold eyes.

“...You call those practice swings? Are you mocking the sword? If you swing it like that, you'll never hit your opponent. You really are mocking it, aren't you? Or perhaps the real mockery here is you? Yes, a mockery. A terrible sham. A crying shame...”

“Tia?”

“Oh, don't mind me! Ohohoho...”

Titania had been mumbling with a dark shadow over her face, but it disappeared instantly as she laughed brightly. Mizuki then stopped swinging the sword and began doing something else with it. Seeing this new, curious motion, Titania's face grew stern again.

“Reiji-sama, what is Mizuki doing now?”

“I wonder... I thought she'd given it a rest, but it looks like she's twirling the sword around in front of her or something.”

Mizuki had the tip of the sword pointed at the ground, but spun the blade to trace a sweeping circle in the air. Reiji felt like he'd seen this somewhere before. It was like something out of a historical drama...

“Ah, yeah. It’s probably the deadly full moon blade.”

“‘Deadly full moon blade’? Is that some sort of technique?”

“Mm. Right now, Mizuki is making circles with the sword, you see? That’s supposed to ensnare her opponent’s focus, allowing her to cut in while they’re distracted. It’s kind of like hypnotism with a sword, I guess.”

“Wha— That sort of technique exists?!”

Seeing Titania’s surprise, Reiji realized—to his horror—what he’d done. Since he’d explained something fictional with a serious face, Titania had taken him completely at his word. He tried his best to laugh it off.

“Haha, no, it doesn’t actually exist. It’s an imaginary sword style.”

“What? It’s not real?”

“Yeah, no way. Not at all.”

“Does Mizuki know that?”

“Of course. She knows it can never be done.”

“...”

Upon hearing those words, a shadow once more fell over Titania’s face. She then silently walked towards Mizuki, and stood behind her as she continued her strange practice.

“Tia, it’s dangerous to...”

Just as Reiji was trying to warn her, Titania kicked Mizuki’s legs out from under her.

“Hmph!”

“Hwah?!”

Mizuki let out a rather comical cry as she fell to the ground. Reiji watched all this in confusion. But just as he was about to ask Titania what she was doing, she picked up his orichalcum sword that Mizuki had been using.

“What was that for, Tia?! I was practicing my killer technique!”

“As if somebody who just started swinging a sword today could use a killer

technique! To begin with, ‘killer techniques’ are not just things you make up! They are an art you learn by earnestly, painstakingly practicing moves into sublime perfection! *That* is the true essence of a genuine killer technique! And so—”

“But killer techniques are where it’s at!”

“Silence! Who said that you could open your mouth?!”

“Eek!”

“Now, you sit right there and you stay there. Are you listening, Mizuki? First things first, know that becoming a swordsman is not something you accomplish in a single day. It is something you earn after pouring blood, sweat, and tears into countless days of training...”

Titania’s lecture continued for quite some time as Mizuki sat there on the ground looking up at her. Even though she was a mage, it sounded like she knew what she was talking about. Like there was an undeniable truth to her words. Naturally, as Reiji was also a relatively amateur swordsman, her scathing lecture was painful to his ears.

“Maybe I should also do some practice swings...”

Reiji exited the garden, muttering to himself. He thought Mizuki called for help as he walked away, but pretending that he’d heard nothing, he went to borrow a sword from one of Titania’s knights.

From that day forward, Mizuki no longer held any reckless notions about becoming a swordswoman.

All’s well that ends well.

The Most Evil of Indoor Monsters! Its Name Is...

On a certain day at Suimei’s base in the Empire, an incident occurred around noon. Suimei was examining some raw materials for his magicka in an interior room of the house when Felmenia came running in in an unusual fluster.

“Suimei-dono! Are you here, Suimei-dono?! A grave situation has occurred!”

“What is it all of a sudden? You’re pretty worked up...”

“How could I not be?! Martial law! I officially declare martial law as of this moment!”

“Wuh?”

Hearing Felmenia’s odd proclamation, Suimei cocked his head to the side. He couldn’t parse what she’d just said. Martial law was normally instituted to stabilize deteriorating public order and handle uprisings or revolts. And since households were typically governed by majority rule in the first place, there was hardly a situation where something that extreme would ever be necessary.

Taking a good look at her, Suimei could tell that she had an urgent problem, but no idea how to handle the situation. Her eyes were darting about like she was at a frantic loss as to what to do. To say she’d lost her composure was an understatement. That was probably why she’d said something so bizarre.

And while Suimei sat there puzzling over Felmenia’s condition, Lefille came running in next.

“Suimei-kun! Where’s Suimei-kun?!”

“Oh, Lefi? You know, Menia just came in and told me she was declaring martial law. What’s going on?”

“Well, I didn’t hear anything about martial law, but I do understand her panic. This is a critical situation, after all.”

“A critical situation?”

“That’s right. Of all the crises that have befallen this household since we began living here, this is easily the worst.”

Suimei was unable to hide his bewilderment. Those words held a certain weight coming from Lefille. He immediately scanned the house for mana presences and used his magicka to take a quick look around, but didn’t spot anything that appeared to be dangerous in the slightest. Next, it was Liliana who came running into the room.

“Felmenia!” she shouted as soon as she entered.

“Lily! How did it go?!”

“I’m afraid... that the target... has escaped... into the kitchen.”

“Into the kitchen, you say?!” Felmenia yelled in surprise.

“This is bad... At this rate, all our food will be compromised,” Lefille groaned with a severe expression.

“Wait, what? Can someone explain what the hell is going already?” Suimei asked.

“A monster. An extremely evil monster... has appeared,” Liliana replied.

“Inside the house?”

“That’s right.”

“No, no, no, there’s no way... right? There couldn’t be a monster outbreak here.”

Since Suimei’s house and the area immediately surrounding it were kept under strict surveillance, there should have been no way a monster had appeared without him noticing. But according to what the girls were saying...

“Strictly speaking... it’s not a traditional monster. However, it is still... extremely evil. In this world, it is known... as an indoor monster.”

“Y-You don’t say... So, what kind of creature is it?”

Suimei posed his question with a raised eyebrow, and it was Lefille who answered him.

“It exudes a dreadful aura comparable to that of the demons. As far as appearance is concerned, you could even call it a winged demon...”

The other two girls were nodding their heads repeatedly in agreement, but this description only puzzled Suimei further. Felmenia, donning a bitter and solemn expression, took over the dramatic explanation from there.

“This monster, you see, possesses brown wings. It also takes to hiding in the shadows. From time to time, it will suddenly appear out of nowhere. And it seems to take a sick pleasure in consuming human food.”

“You don’t say...”

Putting together everything he’d heard so far, Suimei arrived at a conclusion.

“So, is this monster extremely nimble, by any chance?”

“Yes,” answered Liliana. “It very well may be... the fastest creature in all of nature. Even scholars... have suggested as much.”

“And does it make a terrible skittering sound when it moves around? Would you say it’s the enemy of all women... No, of all housewives?”

“That sounds exactly right. Could it be that you too know this monster, Suimei-kun?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

Indeed he did, for what the girls were describing sounded an awful lot like a cockroach. However, to think that they were so reviled in this world that they were regarded as monsters... All three girls looked at him with pleading eyes, begging him to do something about the terrible abomination that had infiltrated the house.

“...Alright. I’ll do something or other about it.”

They then cheered for joy as though their prayers had been answered.

“That’s our Suimei-dono!”

“Suimei-kun is brave indeed. It’s said that even men fear this monster.”

“Suimei... How cool.”

Suimei never thought the day would come where he was treated like a hero for something like dealing with a cockroach. It left him with mixed feelings.

“...”

But just then, a certain doubt stirred in him. This was a different world, after all. There were plenty of mysterious creatures living here that defied all natural reason. He couldn’t deny the possibility that this wasn’t just any cockroach. Perhaps there was a good reason the girls were so terrified of it.

“Is something the matter, Suimei-dono?” Felmenia asked, concerned over his silence.

“No...”

All three of the girls, even together, had been unable to handle the threat. It

was better to approach this situation cautiously. Holding on to that thought, Suimei anxiously stepped into the kitchen.

“Suimei-kun, it’s there! Right over there!”

“Suimei-dono, please defeat it quickly before it gets to the food!”

“It won’t be that big of a deal, right? I mean, it’s not like it’ll ruin it...”

“What sort of ridiculousness is coming out of your mouth?! If that thing so much as touches our food, we’ll have to throw it all out immediately! There will be no eating it! You couldn’t even wash it clean after that!”

“Nuh-uh-uh. Hang on here. Hold the phone. You’ve gotta be exaggerating...”

It’s not like he didn’t understand the feeling, but he really did think it was going a bit far. But as he stood there astonished at the girls’ continued nonsense, the cockroach on the floor began creeping towards them.

“I-I-It’s coming this way!”

“S-Stay back! Stop making that disgusting sound with your disgusting little legs! Uwaaaaaaaah!”

“R-Retreat! Fall back!”

While raising hell, the three girls scrambled behind Suimei. After giving them a sidelong glance over his shoulder, Suimei turned to the cockroach with a somewhat tired expression on his face. Seeing it in person like this, everything became clear. He was quite literally stunned into silence. Meanwhile, all three girls were still shrieking and squealing. It was just a testament as to how much they feared this monster, but...

“It’s so small...”

The cockroach in the kitchen was unexpectedly small. It was no bigger than an adult’s thumb. In other words, it wasn’t even fully grown. Suimei honestly didn’t see the reason for all the fuss, and couldn’t help thinking the girls had gone a little overboard.

“Hup!”

With a snap of his fingers, he used his strike magicka to exterminate the

threat. And as the cockroach was crushed by the explosion of air, the girls raised celebratory cries of relief.

“You defeated it!”

“Thank goodness...”

“Evil must be vanquished... without exception.”

Liliana thrust out her index finger at the squashed bug as if to make an example out of it. And so the squall had passed. As that settled in on everyone, Lefille began nodding in impressed approval.

“Suimei-kun really is amazing. Even before such a big one, you didn’t falter at all.”

“...A big one? That thing?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

It was clear they somehow weren’t on the same page. They stared at each other, heads cocked to the side. Eventually, it was Suimei who broke the silence.

“You’ve gotta be kidding, right? That little sucker’s just a baby.”

“Certainly not. It has been a long time since I’ve seen one so large.”

Hearing Felmenia say that, Suimei was dumbfounded. This had gone past the point of ridiculous. He simply didn’t even know what to say.

“Wh-Why are you going silent now?”

“I have... a bad feeling about this... A very bad feeling...”

“So, um, Suimei-dono, in your world...”

“Yeah, there are bigger ones.”

“...H-How much bigger, exactly?” Lefille asked reluctantly.

Suimei held up his two index fingers side by side to approximate the size for her.

“I’d say a normal one’s about this size.”

“Impossible...”

“That’s gargantuan! Normal humans would never be able to defend against those! This cannot be! You’re lying!”

“I’m as serious as a heart attack.”

Abject fear was visible on Lefille’s face, Felmenia was shouting denial in all four directions, and Liliana’s shoulders languidly drooped in defeated silence. They all fell into their own despair upon learning the terrible truth.

“Do all the denizens of your world battle against such monsters, Suimeidono?”

“You could say it’s an ongoing battle...”

Chances were that someone somewhere in the world was currently fighting a cockroach at this very moment. Pondering the nature of humanity’s war with insects, Suimeidono began disposing of the felled cockroach.

“What the hell is even going on here...?”

The Most Evil of Indoor Monsters! Reiji Edition

Upon stumbling across a certain scene in their rented room in the self-governed state, Reiji had but one thought...

What on earth is everyone doing?

But rather than a question of urgency, it was primarily one of exasperation. For, you see, Titania and her knights were spread out across the room with their weapons drawn and at the ready. They were slowly closing in on a target they had encircled. And it was said target that was truly the cause of Reiji’s exasperation.

“Ugh, to think you allowed such a foe to trespass here... Gregory, Roffrey, Luka! The enemy’s movements are irregular! Stay vigilant and do not lose it!”

Titania’s gallant and commanding voice rallied the others. It would have been a rather impressive thing to see in the middle of battle, or rather, to hear. Despite the bravery in her voice, she was shrinking back. It wasn’t exactly an

inspiring sight. Even her three knights were wavering. And with all of them standing there glued to the spot like they were, it looked like they were playing some sort of children's game.

But then the target went on the move. It drew nearer to Roffrey, who pitifully yelped in response.

"E-Eek!"

"Roffrey, keep it together! How can we call ourselves Her Royal Highness's escorts in such a state?"

Seeing the young knight panic, Luka scolded him. She was taking this dead seriously, which only amplified Reiji's exasperation. It was then that the senior knight, Gregory, took control of things.

"E-Everyone, protect the princess with your lives! We cannot allow that monster to reach Her Highness!"

Perhaps because of Gregory's shouting, the target began moving once more. When it did...

"Waaah!"

"It moved!"

The knights fell into a frantic uproar. With the situation quickly deteriorating, Titania made a bitter expression like she'd been driven into a corner.

"I-If it has come to this, then I will use my magic to..."

Before Titania could enact such violence in the inn, Reiji called out to her.

"Um, sorry to butt in while you're in the middle of something, Tia, but..."

"R-Reiji-sama?! I didn't know you were there... But please be careful! There is a monster in here!"

"..."

By "monster," she was referring to the target they'd encircled. As Reiji looked down, he set his gaze upon the primary cause of all this commotion—a cockroach. And a particularly small one at that. While it was still creepily moving its feelers, it was just sitting there on the floor for now.

Were these people genuinely afraid of it? Or perhaps they were trying to play a prank on Reiji? That was all he could think.

“Reiji-sama!”

“Mm, yeah, I can hear you. So, what’s up?”

“Did you not hear me?! I am saying that there is a monster—”

“Um, about that... How is that a monster? It just looks like a bug to me.”

“Do not be fooled! It is a monster that has threatened households since time immemorial! An abomination that strikes fear into the heart of man!”

“I mean, I know it looks gross, but I don’t think it’s actually hurting anyone...”

“Oh, but it will! It’s even said that a terrible disease can be contracted just from touching it!”

“A terrible disease, huh? Is that what they say...?”

There was no way that was true. As Reiji’s exasperation continued to mount, he heard Mizuki’s voice coming from behind him.

“Oh, Reiji-kuun! I heard shouting over here. What’s going on?”

“Ah, Mizuki...”

Mizuki slipped past Reiji standing at the door while humming, and immediately whipped around to stick her tongue out at him. She was being cute, but the situation being what it was, it didn’t improve Reiji’s mood any. Mizuki, however, was clueless as to what she’d just walked into, and Titania called out to warn her.

“M-Mizuki! Be careful!”

“Huh? About what?”

“Fall back! It’s dangerous here!”

Hearing the urgency in Titania’s voice, Mizuki took a look at her surroundings. Not seeing anything out of the ordinary, however, she only grew more puzzled.

“Ummm... What’s dangerous, exactly? I don’t see anything...”

“There’s no time to waste! Make haste and flee this place!”

“You want me to run away— Aaah!”

Mizuki spotted the cockroach midsentence. Her initial reaction was simply surprise, but then her shoulders began exaggeratedly trembling.

“...Hmph! You sure got some nerve to invade my territory...”

Mizuki began exuding a dangerous aura and a low, creepy laugh. Titania was bewildered by her sudden change in attitude. Seeing it, Reiji called out to her.

“H-Hey, Mizuki...”

“Leave this to me, Reiji-kun. It’s alright. I’m quite used to it.”

“Mizuki...?”

With no further response, Mizuki slowly left the room. When she eventually returned, she was carrying a large number of coins that she’d folded up into a cloth. She then used a string to seal the top of the makeshift bag so that none of the coins could come out. Seeing this, Reiji was reminded of a particular scene from a certain detective manga. The one where coins were stuffed into a sock to make an improvised blackjack of sorts.

Since they were short the staple arsenal of tools for dealing with such a threat—spray pesticide, flyswatters, rolled up newspapers, and the like—she’d likely chosen this as a substitute. It looked like she was planning on crushing the cockroach with it. Indeed, Mizuki wasn’t afraid of cockroaches. To the contrary, she was the type of girl to get rid of them herself upon discovering them. And once she’d finished fashioning her weapon, she sidled right over to it.

“R-Reiji-sama! If we do not stop Mizuki, then...!”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t worry about her. Not Mizuki.”

“No, we mustn’t allow her to get close to it! Please stop Mizuki immediately! She will contract a terrible disease!”

Or so Titania pleaded, but Reiji didn’t move. Meanwhile, Mizuki took in a deep breath, and...

“Get the hell out of my territory! EEEEEEEAAAAAAAAT THIIIISSS!”

The moment she locked eyes on the cockroach, she let out a valiant roar. She

was telling it to get out, but she was fully intent on crushing it. Swinging her improvised weapon, she struck the floor repeatedly with a series of bangs. Witnessing the bloodcurdling sight of a mad warrior at work, Titania and the others were overcome with an indescribable sense of fear.

Needless to say, the cockroach didn't stand a chance against her.

"Hmph... It's over."

After obliterating the cockroach, Mizuki turned an astoundingly triumphant smile on her companions. Seeing her like this, the three knights in the room began muttering.

"A-Amazing..."

"My god, to have defeated that monster so easily..."

"Does Mizuki-dono fear nothing...?"

It didn't take long for their fear to evolve into deep admiration. They looked up at her with ardent zeal like they would a true hero.

"I don't really get what's going on, but that was okay, right?"

"It was magnificent, Mizuki. I never knew you were so heroic... I am seeing you in a new light."

Titania clasped Mizuki's hand firmly in both of hers. Her eyes too were sparkling with admiration.

"What? Naw... I've still got a long ways to go."

"No, the dauntless courage you just demonstrated as you defeated that monster with your own hands was truly commendable. I shall follow in your example."

"Monster? That cockroach?"

"Yes. It's especially praiseworthy that you could challenge one so large."

"I dunno. It was kinda tiny."

"Pardon?"

Titania sounded like she'd misheard Mizuki, but Mizuki simply replied...

“I mean, I’ve taken on groups ’em that size all at once before, you know? Compared to that, this was nothing. Nothing at all.”

Hearing those words, Titania and the others beheld Mizuki as if she were a god.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue: That Memory](#)

[Chapter 1: The Dragonnewt in the Moonlight](#)

[Chapter 2: Seeking the Hero's Weapon](#)

[Chapter 3: The New Enemies](#)

[Epilogue I](#)

[Epilogue II](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind! Volume 6

by Gamei Hitsuji

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