BLUE STEEL

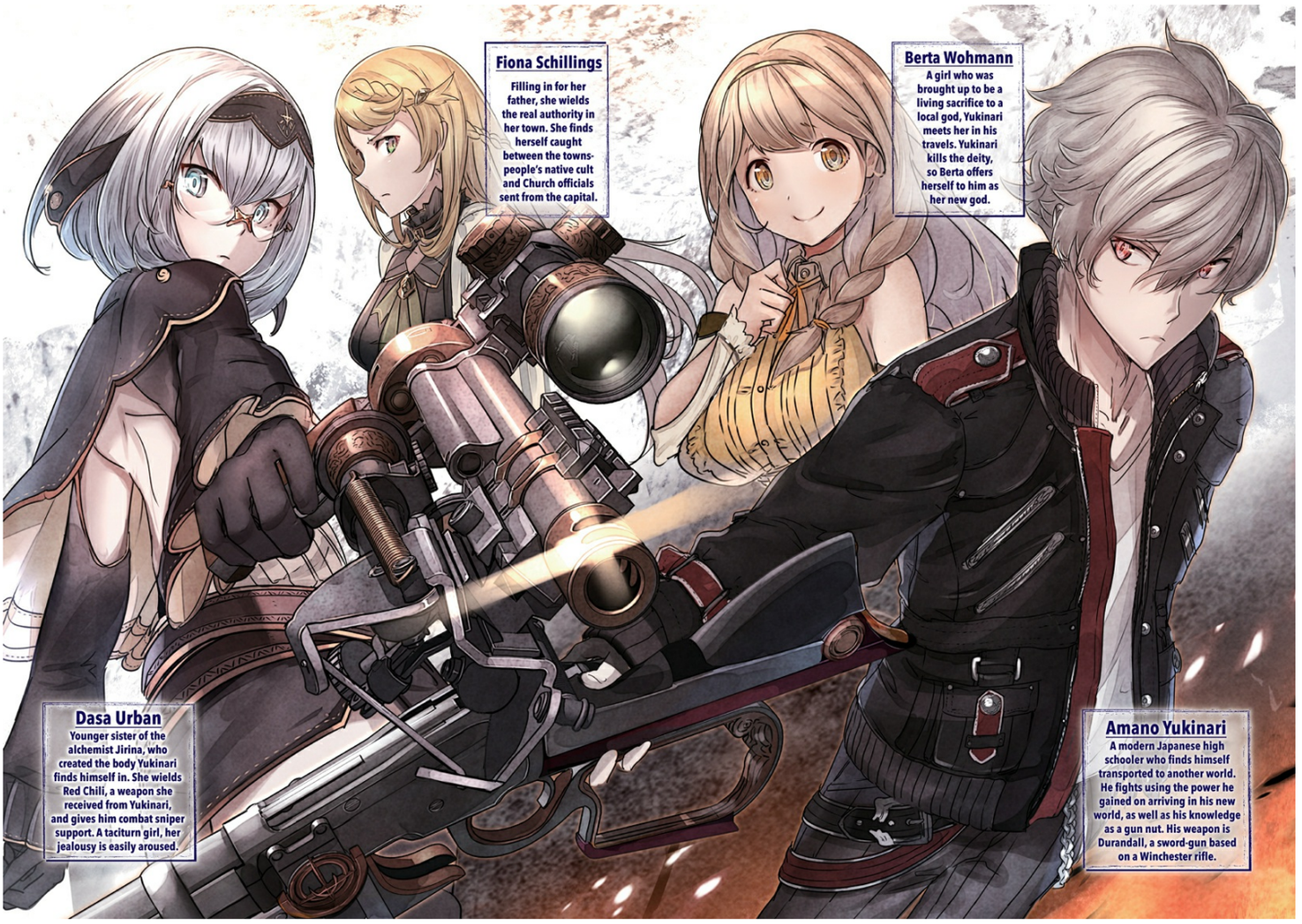
BLASPHEMER



Ichirou Sakaki

Illust. Tera Akai

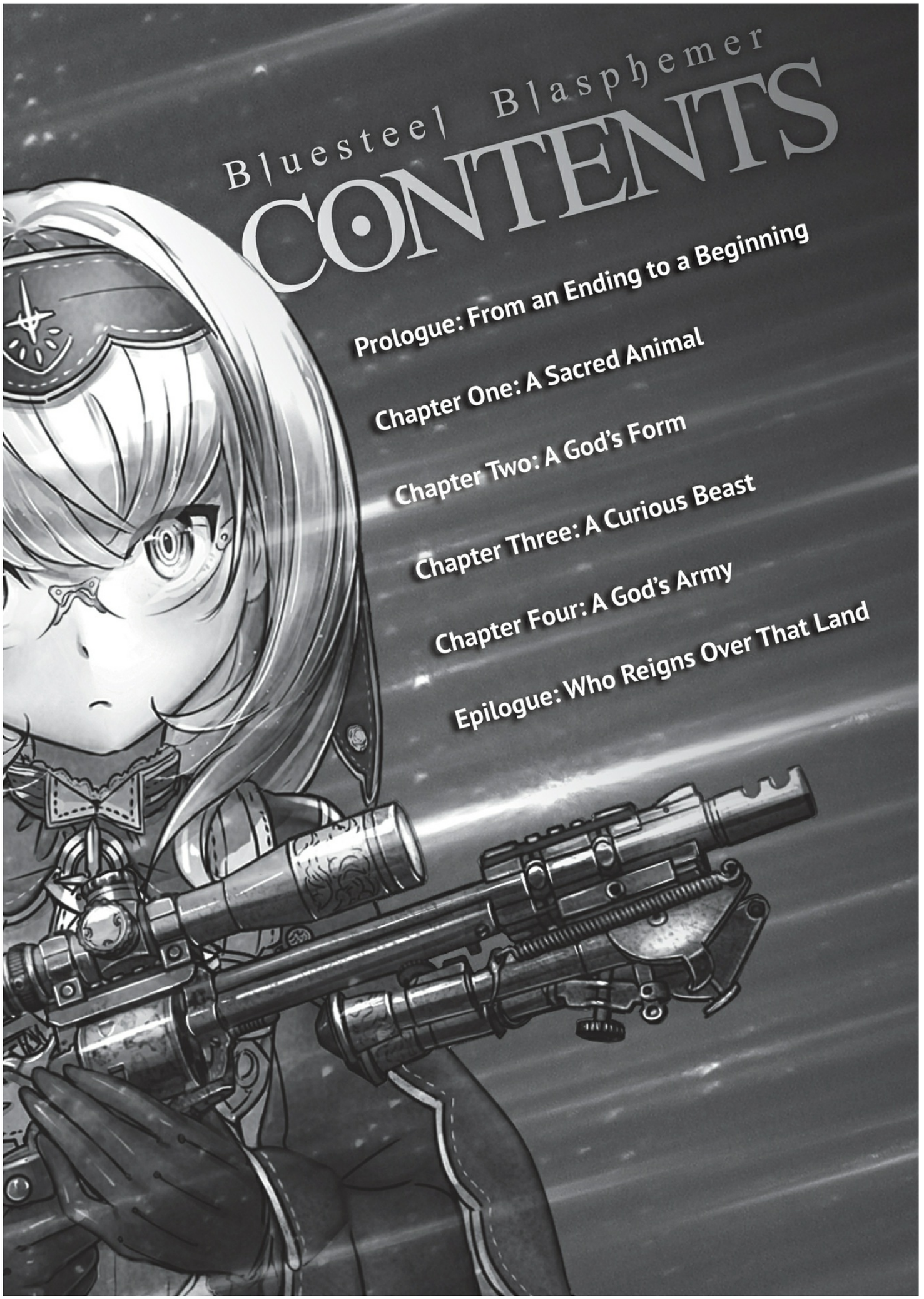

"You think just 'cause you've got a little brains, you're hot shit? You're just an animal. I'll cut you into pieces, cook you up, and eat you for dinner."
He swept the black-lacquered blade noiselessly through the air, then pointed it at the erdgod.
Bluesteel Blasphemer


Fiona Schillings
Filling in for her father, she wields the real authority in her town. She finds herself caught between the townspeople's native cult and Church officials sent from the capital.
Berta Wohmann
A girl who was brought up to be a living sacrifice to a local god, Yukinari meets her in his travels. Yukinari kills the deity, so Berta offers herself to him as her new god.
Dasa Urban
Younger sister of the alchemist Jirina, who created the body Yukinari finds himself in. She wields Red Chili, a weapon she received from Yukinari, and gives him combat sniper support. A taciturn girl, her jealousy is easily aroused.
Amano Yukinari
A modern Japanese high schooler who finds himself transported to another world. He fights using the power he gained on arriving in his new world, as well as his knowledge as a gun nut. His weapon is Durandall, a sword-gun based on a Winchester rifle.


"Let's get these glasses out of the way."
"...mn..."
Dasa gazed at Yukinari with her vaguely unfocused eyes.
Slowly, he stroked her eyelid with the pad of his finger–gently, as if caressing it.

Bluesteel Blasphemer

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Prologue: From an Ending to a Beginning

They say that at the moment of death, a person's life flashes before their eyes. If that was the case, Amano Yukinari thought he really was going to die.

A whole host of memories were blinking in and out at the back of his mind. Fragmentary memories, constantly flashing, with no surrounding context. There were even several events that Yukinari himself had almost forgotten.

Like when he went to see his first movie with his older sister, which for some reason was an old-fashioned Western.

Like when his mother pulled a kitchen knife on his father after he criticized her for pouring money into religion.

Like when he waited alone in the waiting room for his sister's eye surgery to be over.

Like when he stayed up all night fiddling with the model gun he bought by saving up his pocket money.

Like when his sister baked a big apple pie for his birthday.

Like when he accidentally stepped on his sister's glasses and apologized over and over.

The memories seemed to go on forever.

Mu-gen-hou-ei. Dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows.

It is a word that describes the lives of human beings in retrospect: transient and short, like bubbles rising to water's surface and popping. This was especially true for Yukinari.

Sixteen years wasn't long for a human to live, and Yukinari hadn't thought of his life as one rich with ups and downs. But even so, as he stood only moments away from crossing the boundary between life and death, countless scenes crossed his mind, one after another.

This was surprising. Perhaps his life *had* left a comparatively deep, emotional

impression on his memory, even if he hadn't been too aware of it. He had believed he'd gone through life not caring about too much—aside from his sister. Maybe, in the depths of his consciousness, something akin to a survival instinct was loath to relinquish the future that was in the process of being lost.

But before long, the remembrances passing through his mind connected back up to the final scene. That is—

He remembered the vermillion of the flames blanketing his vision. Light and heat that would soon consume everything. It was the period, struck with fatal force, at the end of Amano Yukinari's life. Whether he looked left or right, the flames stood as a blockade, as if to tell him that this was the end of the road.

It was a house fire. He didn't know what had caused it. Was it an accident, caused by some old appliance catching fire? Or was it arson? It couldn't have been that he'd forgotten to turn off the gas or been careless in putting something out. All the cooking equipment in the house worked on induction heating, and neither Yukinari nor his sister smoked. It couldn't have been his parents, as they rarely came home in the first place.

No, none of that mattered anymore. There was only one thing that did.

"Sis!" he yelled out. His outstretched hand was far from reaching beyond the flames. Even if he had been able to reach, it wasn't as though it would have achieved anything, now that he was surrounded by flames on every side. Even so, he couldn't help but to reach out. He couldn't have cared less about himself. But his sister—Hatsune had to be saved.

"Yuki..."

Her form swayed beyond the flames with an out-of-place smile on her face. Had she come to peace with her fate, or had some part of her mind broken from so much fear and despair? Or maybe she was crying. Her glasses were clouded with smoke and heat, and it was difficult to make out her eyes.

The distance to her couldn't have been more than two meters, but it felt terribly far. The air burned Yukinari's lungs as he gasped for breath, and his legs were so shaky, they could give way at any moment. It would be impossible to escape from here now. No, even if they were miraculously rescued at this very moment, it would still be too late. Yukinari's body wouldn't hold out until the

hospital. He already felt no pain from touching the flames; only the feeling of “heat” remained, burned in his consciousness.

“Yuki...” His sister extended both of her hands toward him.

“Hatsune...” Yukinari stretched his scorched hand further.

His consciousness, blurring in the heat, slowly gave itself over to resignation. Couldn’t he at least reach her hand...? If they couldn’t be saved, he wished to at least hold hands with her so they could stay close to one another. Even if their deaths were unavoidable now... if he could die together with the sister he loved, it would at least be the smallest of consolations.

His trembling fingers desperately clawed at red nothingness. And the next moment—

The burning ceiling fell down. Ruthless reality bore down upon them, thoroughly incinerating and crushing his wish so small that it couldn’t even have been called a hope. Confronted by the sight of despair itself, Yukinari screamed —

“Sis!”

Yukinari shouted himself awake.

“Huh?”

For a moment, he didn’t understand what was going on. Was he still dreaming? Yukinari rapidly blinked his eyes. They refocused, and his fuzzy, unclear vision rapidly regained its clarity. His right hand, which he had involuntarily stretched out as he shouted, was grabbing the collar of a young woman who seemed to have been peering at his face.

For a moment, he thought she was his sister, but she wasn’t. Not that there weren’t some similarities. She had a vague, easy-going atmosphere about her, and her facial features had a kind look to them. However, she was a redhead, and her eyes were blue; she probably wasn’t even Japanese. And most importantly, this young woman was not wearing the glasses that his sister never let go of, even for a moment.

“Wh-Who are you?” Yukinari asked, and realized only then that he’d been

placed on something like a hard bed.

“Calm down,” the woman said in a language he had never heard before, her tone quiet. But Yukinari understood, almost as if he’d known the language from the beginning.

“What the—” What on earth kind of language was this? How could he understand it? But first—who was this woman?

“Calm down, okay?” the woman repeated, and rested her hand on his chest. Yukinari had raised his upper body from the bed and was practically hanging from her collar. Instead of pushing him back down, she gently added just a little weight behind her palm, and laid him on his back again.

Although he was confused, he didn’t fight her hand. After all, he felt something like his sister in her. His kind and gentle big sister. He wondered what had happened to her. He wondered what had happened to himself. Was this a hospital? Had they been brought here and rescued from the brink of death?

As he lay on his back on the bed-like thing, Yukinari surveyed his surroundings. He could immediately tell that he wasn’t in a hospital bed or operating room. The room’s light was being provided by old-fashioned lamps attached to the wall, and even more notably, there was no medical equipment: no ventilator to help him breathe or EKG monitor to read his heartbeat. Instead, there were only metal tools, their purpose unclear, and glass vessels, like flasks and test tubes, giving the room a sinister atmosphere.

It’s like some kind of laboratory...

The thing that immediately came to mind was the stereotypical character Yukinari had so often seen in old sci-fi movies: the mad scientist. In which case, was he about to be operated on? No, perhaps he had been already? He couldn’t see a single scar on his arms, which he knew had been horribly burned—

“Are you sore? Does anything hurt?” asked the woman. She looked like a gentle person, certainly not someone who would conduct inhumane experiments. Not only her words, but also her expressions and small gestures showed genuine care for how Yukinari was faring.

“Who on earth are you?” Yukinari asked back, in place of an answer.

“It... talked!” A voice called out, sounding surprised. It was obvious that it hadn’t come from the woman, who had been beside Yukinari the entire time. “Sis, it... talked!” They sounded as if they had just seen a dog or a cat speak.

A small, wry smile broke across the woman’s lips. “Naturally,” she nodded. “‘Man-made and the product of intelligence, they possess all knowledge from birth’—of course, that’s going too far, but I did imprint a functional vocabulary during the procedure, so it’s only natural that he can speak from the beginning.” She turned around to face the person who had spoken to her. It was a girl.

She had a small figure and had her silver hair chopped short, which led Yukinari to think for a moment that she might be a boy. However, the pitch of her voice and the clothes she wore made it clear that she was a girl. He thought she was most likely somewhat younger than the other. She was probably around thirteen or fourteen.

He could see a few similarities to the older girl in her face. Given that she had said “Sis” a few moments ago, the two of them were probably sisters. When compared to the older girl, with her intellectual gaze and graceful air, the younger girl seemed somehow awkward and doll-like.

“In his case,” the woman continued, “unless I’m very much mistaken, he was a living human before, so it’s only natural for him to have a sense of self so he could make full use of his knowledge.”

“Oh... Huh.” The girl gave a little nod, but her sky-blue eyes were looking subtly off-center from both her sister and Yukinari. They weren’t focused anywhere in particular, and her pupils were gazing loosely off toward infinity.

This girl, she...

Probably couldn’t see.

The girl carried a wooden box full of lab instruments to her sister and set it down beside her. She looked confident in her movements. Perhaps she wasn’t completely blind, or she was using sound to roughly determine where things were in relation to her. She seemed to be acting as the young woman’s

assistant, or rather, her gofer.

“Dasa. I’m sure you understand, but you have to keep this—”

“...Mm.” The girl called Dasa answered, nodding.

Satisfied, the woman turned back to Yukinari and smiled. “Are you okay? Do you remember your previous world? Or—”

“Previous world?”

It sounded almost as though he had been reborn. No, more to the point—

“My name is Jirina. Her name,” she said, indicating the girl standing by her side, “is Dasa. Can you remember yours?”

“Yukinari,” he answered, but not without feeling somewhat uneasy and uncertain.

Am I... really Amano Yukinari?

It was the sight of his hands, held up in front of his eyes, that had caused him to question this. They were unblemished hands, without a single scorch mark. Unlike his face, which he could only see by looking in a mirror, his hands were something he saw virtually every day, and their every contour was branded into his memory.

As “palm reading” demonstrates, human hands are unique and come in all shapes and sizes. However...

Are these my hands?

He felt as if they weren’t. These probably weren’t his hands. The phrase “previous world” crossed his mind once more, along with a bleak memory of fire. Had he—

“Yukinari. What a strange name,” Jirina said, tilting her head slightly. “All right, Yukinari. All this must be very confusing for you, but don’t worry. I’ll give you a full explanation of everything.”

“Did I—”

Die? And then—come back to life? No, the more likely situation, as unbelievable as it was—

“It would make me happy if you could trust us,” Jirina said suddenly, with the angelic smile of a young child. All her smiles before now had radiated an air of intelligence and been filled with the kindness of a patient adult, which only accentuated the childish, innocent smile that she wore now and made her look all the more charming.

“Yukinari.” She extended her hand toward him again, this time not to hold him down, but to offer him a handshake.

Yukinari looked silently at the hand offered to him. It was slender and pale, but upon closer inspection it was covered in a number of cracks, cuts, and scratches. It was a worker’s hand. His sister Hatsune, who did the housework in place of their mother, had hands like these. They were the hands of someone who worked in earnest and tried their hardest, even when they weren’t very skilled.

So Yukinari took her hand. Jirina broke into a broad, happy smile. As she lifted him into a sitting position, Yukinari thought idly to himself that she really did resemble his sister Hatsune.

Of course. His sister. Never mind himself—his sister was his priority. What had happened to her?

“Where’s my sister?”

Jirina and Dasa tilted their heads in confusion.

“My sister. Amano Hatsune. Is she safe? Is she alive?”

Ask as he might, no answer came. Yukinari could feel the blanket of silence covering them slowly turning into despair.

And so—

On the other side of absolute death, time began anew.

It was a meeting that this world had not foretold.

Yukinari was still unaware that this event would develop into something that would alter the makeup of this entire world—and he would be standing at the center of it all.

Chapter One: A Sacred Animal

The rain was incessant. The cloudy sky reached as far as the eye could see, almost as though the sky the whole world over was covered with rain clouds. The ceaselessly falling raindrops muddied the ground and slowly robbed those traveling upon it of their body heat. Even an oilskin coat was no help. It felt as though the cold air was slowly soaking into his body.

Yukinari couldn't imagine anything more irritating.

"Maybe this was a bad idea." He looked around. Surrounding him was the scenery of a mountain forest.

It hadn't seemed like a bad idea to come through here at first: the gradient wasn't particularly steep, and there were rows and rows of trees that looked like they could be of some use in sheltering against the rain. However, in this near-deluge, this was like trying to plug the leaks in a sieve; not only that, but it was easy to trip over the wet and muddy leaf mold, making walking immensely difficult.

"This is... depressing..." mumbled the young girl walking next to Yukinari. She had a lovely face, but overall it looked a little slack, almost like she had only just gotten out of bed and was still half asleep. If one were being generous, they would call it a face that exuded natural cuteness. Less generously, they would say that when compared to the faces of others, hers felt like it was somehow missing something. Or rather, that it was impossible to shake the impression that she resembled a doll, an impression which was only strengthened by her short-cut silver hair and large glasses.

While walking, the girl removed her glasses and proceeded to wipe them with a cloth she had taken from her pocket. However, perhaps because she had repeated this a little too often, the cloth itself was also wet and, even after a thorough wipe, small droplets of water were still left on the lenses. This never-ending rain must have been even more miserable for her than for a person without glasses.

Yukinari turned to look at her and called to get her attention. “Hey! Don’t do that while walking—”

Splat. The girl tripped and her small body fell hard onto the ground, mud spattering everywhere.

“Ugh. What’d I tell you?” Yukinari said. Sighing, he stopped next to her and offered his hand. “Are you okay, Dasa?”

“Ewww... I’m all... wet,” Dasa mumbled, unsticking herself from the ground. She put her glasses back in her inside pocket, clung to Yukinari’s arm, and pulled herself up. She couldn’t even see her feet clearly without glasses, and her vision would be worse still in rain like this. They had come this far because she herself had insisted that she could handle it, but it had probably been too much for her after all.

“Ugh...” Yukinari helped the mud-covered Dasa to her feet, then crouched in front of her. Although she was wearing a coat, tripping and falling had inevitably resulted in the layers underneath it also becoming sopping wet. She would steadily get colder and colder if she were left like this. “You’re probably gonna catch a cold. We’d better find somewhere to take shelter from the rain and dry your clothes.”

“Around... here?”

As previously mentioned, for better or worse, this was a gently sloping mountain. Although there were plenty of trees, there was no sign of any caves or rock shelves that might serve as a roof.

“There’s gotta be somewhere, the base of a big tree or something... Wishful thinking?” Yukinari looked around him, but he couldn’t spot anything of the sort.

Perhaps they should have stayed a little longer in the previous town. There was a potential that they might “leave a trail” if they were to stay in the same place for a long time, so they had deliberately decided to set out after they had made modest preparations. It may have been the right move for Yukinari, but maybe not for Dasa: now that this had happened, her physical well-being was at risk. Of course, regretting it now wouldn’t change anything.

“Dasa. Can you walk?” Yukinari asked, offering his hand to her.

“I think I’m... fine,” she said, clinging to Yukinari’s arm once more. “Sorry... Yuki.”

“It’s okay. Don’t sweat it.” Yukinari let out a single sigh and started walking on with Dasa again.

The rain showed no signs of stopping.

●

Friedland was a small town in the mountains. It was located in a basin of sorts sandwiched between mountainous regions to the east and west, and was directly affected by the fickle mountain climate. Of course, that made it a place that received nature’s blessings in abundance, but on the other hand, there was only a limited amount of land there that was suitable for cultivation. And because the area offered nothing unique, the town wasn’t financially stable, nor could it be called affluent.

However, even in such places, human beings have to do what’s necessary to survive. Very few people were able to leave the land where they were born, and this was not true for just the residents of Friedland. The influence of the state, meant to maintain order throughout the entire country, had difficulty extending to outlying regions like this. People always took their lives into their own hands when traveling, and once they were a certain distance from any towns or villages, there was no shortage of threats: not only were there the lawless, of course, such as bandits and night thieves, but also ferocious animals, demigods, and xenobeasts.

“Hey. Look at that.”

Heading down the main street that passed through the center of Friedland and led to the roads outside the town was a procession of dozens of people and a single shrine float. The people in the procession were wearing long robes dyed indigo, and all were holding poles with bells in their hands. Every time they took a step, the clear, monotonous sound of the many bells rang out, and they were trailed by the muddy sloshing of the float’s large wheels gouging out the ground.

It was a ritual procession. This event, held once every three years, was by now a familiar sight to many inhabitants of this town. The sight of a girl sitting atop the float with her head down was also one the people knew well. The thin clothing she was wearing was more like an undergarment, and the few pieces of fabric constructing it were so thin that her skin was visible through them. This clothing was something created especially for this ritual every time it came around, and depending on your perspective, it could have been called incredibly erotic.

The crowd of people standing and watching the ritual procession were exchanging murmurs. “This year’s shrine maiden is awfully young,” someone whispered. There was no excitement in their words; instead of the exultation of festival-goers, their voices carried a languid, gloomy tone that evoked a sense of resignation.

“She’s not half bad lookin’ too. It’s a criminal waste, it is.”

“She was an orphan brought up specifically for this day. What can you do?”

“Look at all the good it’s done. All this rain, and there’s been no river flooding, no landslides...”

The whispers continued as they watched the procession recede into the distance. Their gazes, cast upon the girl sitting atop the float, were much like those of people watching a funeral procession.

●

Before long, the procession reached its destination.

“Get out.” The order came from the three priests who were standing at the head of the line.

“Yes...” Berta nodded obediently and alighted from the float.



The long chains leading from her legs to the float clanked noisily. The priests unclasped the chains. Then, holding them by the end, they led Berta down to the end of the path.

There was a “sanctuary” there. Of course, that was just the name the priests called it by; the building in which they usually slept was located back in town, as one would expect it to be. More significantly, this place set up in the mountains was a ritual site. In short, this place was home to a god, making it a “house of God” in the most literal sense.

Despite it being a “house,” there were no walls. It consisted solely of a patch of land (the kind on which a typical Friedlandian house might have otherwise been built), a number of large stone pillars arranged in the shape of an ellipse, and a single, huge flat rock atop them. There were no other structures—just that.

It was impossible to say how anyone could have created such a monolithic piece of rock; the same went for how it had been placed on top of those stone pillars. It was the work of a god. Gods were gods precisely because they readily accomplished that which was impossible for humans, and it was for just that reason that people prostrated themselves on the ground and worshipped them.

“Here, please.” The priests beckoned her to the center of the sanctuary.

A single iron stake had been driven into the ground. At the top of the stake was a ring, also made of iron, to which the priests reconnected the chains extending from Berta’s legs. The priests were working efficiently. It was likely less that they were used to this procedure, and more that they had a strong desire to finish up this task quickly and leave. They may have been priests, but they were still human. They feared the gods as much as the next person—in fact, even more so.

“Ensure you do your job,” one of them said.

“Yes...” Berta nodded again in answer to the priest’s words. Of course, she understood the meaning of “job,” but she wasn’t about to panic at this point. Perhaps because this had been impressed on her over and over and over again for years, the fear was by now a very familiar feeling.

The priests nodded to the rest of the procession. The procession nodded back and started heading back the way they had come, pulling the float in the opposite direction and leaving Berta on her own. Of course, the priests would monitor the progress of the ritual from a place some short distance away. This was a precaution in case the “shrine maiden” lost her nerve at the last possible moment and attempted to escape, or behaved in some other irreverent way in front of the god once it appeared. It was said that this had happened a number of times in the past, and whenever it did, the priests offered one more “shrine maiden” in order to quell the god’s anger.

Of course, Berta had no intention of doing such a thing. If she could not do her “job,” another “shrine maiden” would be selected from her “little sisters” at the orphanage to pacify the god. Of course, they were only a “family” by name, not related by blood, but those girls were very important to Berta, who didn’t even know what her parents looked like. As she pictured the faces of each of her “sisters” in turn, Berta sighed.

She suddenly frowned in confusion. She had heard a small noise of some sort. For a moment, she thought that the god—the erdgod—had appeared, but if that were the case, the first thing that she’d have heard would have been booming footsteps and roars. She had never heard of a god hiding in the shadows of a sanctuary’s pillar and waiting in secret for the arrival of the “shrine maiden.”

“There can’t be—” Berta walked toward the direction of the sound. The chain had some length to it, so she was at least free to move around inside the sanctuary. She went to its “back” side—the side opposite to where they had come in. She peered around one of the rearmost pillars and gasped.

A man and a woman were sitting there, leaning with their backs against the pillar. Both were likely travelers—they were wearing coats and sleeping close to each other. There were also traces of a campfire at their feet. They had probably suffered from the heavy rain that had been falling until a short while ago and taken shelter here at the sanctuary, then been so tired from their journey that they had carelessly fallen asleep at the same time. The sound she had just heard had probably been made by one of them shifting in their sleep. However—

“These people are...”

Dressed a little strangely. No, to be precise, both the man and the woman had slightly unusual items on them.

First, the tall and lean young man. He was probably about the same age as Berta: late teens or thereabouts. He had a classically handsome face. Even when he was asleep, his face didn’t relax, but looked serious, as if he had spent so long continually agonizing over something that the expression had gotten stuck. He had gorgeous, soft blonde hair that was wasted on a man, but that was about the only thing that stood out about him; nothing else about his appearance was particularly unique.

However, the thing he had by his side was something Berta had never seen before. She imagined that it was probably a sword. It looked like a long weapon in its sheath. Unlike a normal sword, however, it was very bulky around the handle, or rather its mounting. It was a bizarre shape, bigger than necessary, as though the blade of a sword had been fastened to a club. In addition, there were a number of metal-like parts built into the handle. The whole thing looked like some sort of tool.

What on earth was it? Maybe this was actually a normal weapon to see in the capital and large cities, and Berta simply didn’t know of it. Of course, a weapon to protect oneself was essential when traveling, but whatever it was that this young man possessed, it left a much more imposing impression than a mere sword.

And second—the girl. She was short in stature and had a cute-looking face, but because her silver hair had been cut short, she could be easily mistaken for a boy if seen from the wrong angle. Maybe she gave off a different impression when her eyes were open and she had an actual expression on her face.

The strange item this girl had was in front of her eyes. It had two small, glass plates connected by thin, metal parts. They were hooked over her ears and balanced on her nose. It was Berta’s first time seeing this item, as well. Thinking about it, she’d heard from a merchant who came to town that there were things called “glasses,” which were tools used to correct the vision of people with bad eyes. Perhaps that was what these were.

“E-Excuse me.” Berta tried speaking to the two of them. She felt bad for waking them up when they were tired, but if she didn’t do something, they would be caught up in the ritual, and Berta had no idea what kind of reaction these unanticipated beings would elicit from the erdgod. Gods were incomprehensible and fickle. Would it be pleased? Would it be angry? Both were possible. But in either case, there was no doubt that it would mean more victims besides Berta. She raised her voice and called out again. “Excuse me. Please get up.”

Neither of them showed any sign of moving. Making up her mind, Berta extended her hand towards the young man to touch him on the cheek. But just before she could touch him—maybe he’d sensed something, maybe it was just coincidence—his eyes snapped open and he looked back at her.

“Uh...?” It wasn’t clear which of them had made that stupid-sounding noise, but a wordless gasp of surprise echoed around the sanctuary and the mountain forest surrounding it.

●

The residents who had been participating in the ritual procession returned to town and were met by Fiona Schillings, acting town mayor.

“Thanks for your help, everyone.”

The men wearing indigo-blue ceremonial clothes bowed their heads in unison, turned, and walked away from the mansion. As Fiona silently watched them disperse to various places in the town, she repeatedly curled her long blonde hair around a finger. This was a pointless habit of Fiona’s that she did whenever she was irritated.

The ritual procession had returned, but the ritual itself was not over. There was simply no more role for humans to play. The main event, yet to come, was to be conducted by the god of the land. Of course, it was a “ritual” only in name. In truth, it was a brutally heartless feast.

Fiona’s jade-green eyes narrowed, and a melancholy expression distorted the neat and pretty face for which she had been well known back at the academy in the capital. “I suppose it won’t help to express my displeasure,” she said.

“It is, after all, a tradition that has been upheld for generations,” replied the man standing beside her.

She wasn’t particularly seeking an answer, but one had come anyway from the Schillings family’s butler. Not only did he handle miscellaneous tasks within the house, he also assumed the role of assisting Fiona, who was serving as the town mayor in place of her bedridden father. The butler had been born and raised in this town and was of course older than Fiona, even older than her father. For him, this ritual was very, very natural.

“Because nothing could be done about it,” Fiona said.

“But of course. Nothing can be done,” the butler replied and nodded deeply, a smug look on his face.

People often create logic to justify pre-existing facts. Here in Friedland, the ritual was simply accepted. After so long had been spent rationalizing it in the name of "the greater good," no one even thought to question it anymore, regardless of how hard it was on everyone emotionally.

Fiona thought about how it really was scary, what people grew to accept. If she had grown up without ever leaving this town—if she hadn’t left to study in the kingdom’s capital—she would have accepted this ritual without even questioning it. Of course, she understood that nothing could be done about it. The royalty and nobility in the capital did not concern themselves with rural politics. As long as the taxes were coming in regularly, they had no interest, whatever might be happening out here. Even if she made some kind of complaint, they would simply recite that they “respect local customs,” and steadfastly refuse to get involved.

“How long are we going to have to keep doing this...”

“Forever, Milady,” the butler said with a gentle smile.

●

When he woke up... there was a naked girl right beside him.

That was more than enough to disturb Yukinari.

“What...?”

No, on second glance, she wasn't naked, but... in a way, what she *did* have on made her look vastly more inappropriate than "nothing" ever could have. What she was wearing was thin, underwear-like clothing that covered only limited areas. It was made of finely woven silk gauze, and he could essentially see right through it to her skin. It wasn't a matter of just seeing "outlines." If someone were close enough, they could probably discern the peach fuzz on her skin. Yukinari couldn't help but think that going openly and completely naked would be less arousing to wandering eyes than wearing what she did.

Moreover, the girl was cute. She was maybe sixteen or seventeen, her hair was long and flaxen, and she had a pretty face. However, she looked somehow fragile, and the light dwelling in her amber eyes seemed terribly faint. It was far easier to picture her crying than laughing or being angry. She was that kind of girl. Her appearance might even tempt people of a certain disposition to cruelty and the desire to tease her for no good reason. However, Yukinari had no such tendencies.

Dasa, who had been sleeping next to him, also awoke with a mumble of sleepy confusion. She had probably picked up on Yukinari's surprise. She took her glasses off, rubbed her eyes to wake herself up, put the glasses back on, and looked at the girl who was just standing there next to them, not moving.

"You..." Dasa's eyes narrowed behind her lenses.

"Are you into some kinda niche stuff?" Yukinari asked first.

"Stupid..." Dasa delivered a terribly cold assessment of Yukinari's dim-witted remark.

"So she isn't?"

"She's chained... up."

"Uh, yeah, that was my point..." Yukinari said, tilting his head.

In Yukinari's simple worldview, if someone were chained up and as good as naked, they were either a slave or a pervert. But there was surely no way that a slave would just be left by a huge stone monument out here in the mountains. The point of slaves was to put them to work. So the only remaining possibility was—

“U-Um, please, please get out of here quickly...” The girl in thin clothing interrupted Yukinari’s thoughts. Her voice was as timid as she looked, and yet within it, there were unmistakable tones of urgency and panic.

“Don’t you know where you are? This is the erdgod’s sanctuary...!”

“Erdgod?” Yukinari furrowed his brow.

“You might be okay, but the girl next to you,” the girl said, looking at Dasa, “she might be seen as a ‘shrine maiden’ like—”

She was unable to finish her sentence. A squelching sound of feet against wet earth boomed through the air overhead. And then, shortly after—

“Ohhh... Ohhh...” Was that sound, like mud bubbling, a *voice*? “There are... two... whole... sacrifices...”

Yukinari turned in the direction of the voice. And there—

“An erdgod,” Dasa muttered.

Standing there was a gigantic monstrosity. There was no other way to describe it. The textures and shapes of the various parts of its body seemed familiar enough, and it was covered with the kind of fur commonly seen on four-legged animals. But a six-legged creature like this was far beyond a mere “animal.”

To be precise, it had four hoofed legs and two additional limbs that were not identifiable as arms or legs growing from its body. At the ends of those two limbs were long, thin “fingers” that seemed to dangle down, and they were all moving independently, restlessly, like the legs of an insect. Moreover, its head was clearly not that of a four-legged animal. In fact, its face was constructed more like a monkey’s—no, a human’s. It was round, and its eyes, nose, mouth, even its ears were gathered close together in the hairless area at its center. It was as if a tiny human face had been embedded in the middle of a faceless ball of meat.

Then was this thing human? It did have a human-like face, and it could understand and use human language...

“SACRIFICES. SACRIFICES.”

“SMALL ONE. WANT. WANT.”

“EAT MAN TOO.”

There were other monstrosities crawling around the huge one’s feet. They were about the size of a dog or cat, but again their heads were more like those of humans than four-legged animals, creating a horribly incongruous picture.

“What are these guys...?”

“An erdgod and... its familiars,” Dasa replied.

“Erdgod? You’re telling me this thing is a *god*?”

“Most were animals at... first,” Dasa said, opening up her case and reaching inside.

“Animals, huh... Well, yeah, it doesn’t look like we’re gonna have much of a conversation.”

Yukinari looked around with a weary expression. There was one gigantic monster—or should it be called a god?—called an “erdgod,” and its ten or so divine familiars. They were each holding a position to surround the megalithic structure the girl had called the “sanctuary,” and all were staring at the three humans. The familiars’ faces resembled those of human beings. However, it was impossible to sense any higher form of intelligence in their expressions, and drool was dripping from their half-open mouths. At least the erdgod, which could have been called their boss, did not have a face that slack.

In any case, Yukinari, Dasa, and Berta were in the very picture of a tight spot. Not only were they surrounded, their enemies were horrible monstrosities. Although the familiars had bodies like large dogs, it was still clear just by looking at them that they were not something that a human being could handle on their own. If it came down to a bare-handed fight to the death, a human wouldn’t even be the favorite against ordinary, medium-sized canines. The dogs would jump at him all at once, and he would be bitten to death, powerless to stop them.

“SMALL ONE! EAT!” Making its move before the others, one of the familiars started to approach. It seemed to have determined that Dasa could be its prey and was advancing, hoping to sink its teeth into her. The girl in thin clothes

belonged to the erdgod, but it looked like the other two, who hadn't been planned for, were first come, first served.

"EAT, EAT!" Barking the words more than speaking them, the familiar leaped at Dasa. The jaws of its very human-like face opened, and its fangs, which were unequivocally those of an animal, snapped for the kill as saliva trailed from them. And then—

There was a deafening noise—a violent explosion of sound, a voice of dissent at this insane banquet. The familiar that had jumped at Dasa bent in midair and fell to Dasa's side in a strange posture. But that was all. The familiar did not get up again but just lay there, its body twitching and convulsing. It was clearly near death. The erdgod and the other familiars froze in shock. It seemed that they were intelligent enough to understand that this was an abnormal situation.

"Yuki," Dasa said, looking at him. "I'm going to... use it."

"You already did... Ehh, whatever. It's not like you had a choice." Yukinari nodded at her. Permission received, Dasa aimed her weapon again, this time with proper form. The last time had been a quick draw, so she hadn't had enough time to take aim.



"Red Chili."

Dasa whispered the weapon's name as she held it at the ready. It was a black, large-caliber revolver fitted with a scope and bipod, clearly excessive and inappropriate for the hands of a young girl.

●

"Huh...?" Berta stared blankly at the scene in front of her.

There had been a thundering, earsplitting sound as if lightning had struck very close by, and the next moment, one of the familiars was rolling on the ground, gushing blood. Judging by the way it was twitching with its tongue hanging out and eyes rolled back in its head, it was in no state to stand anymore. It had probably been dealt a fatal wound.

But how? Even a single familiar was incredibly challenging for a lone human to deal with. How had a girl clearly smaller than even Berta, in a single attack...

"Killed... it...?" Berta said with a gasp, looking at the familiar, which was no longer moving.

The black item that the girl was holding was most likely a weapon. But it wasn't a sword, and it wasn't a spear. Nor was it a bow, or even a club. It was something that Berta had never seen before—in fact, never even heard of. It was a weapon that made a deafening noise like thunder. In which case... she didn't know how it worked, but maybe it was a weapon that fired lightning or something?

"DEAD..."

"DEAD?"

"DEAD!"

"DEAD!"

Berta could tell that something like unease was spreading among the familiars. Although they were the servants of a god, they were not gods themselves and were still mortal. Unlike the erdgod, it was not impossible for an individual human to fell them—if the human had a weapon of unparalleled strength. Berta understood the logic, but even so...

“...What is... the meaning... of this... You... oppose me... the holy... guardian... of this... land...”

There was a sound like mud boiling. No—that was the erdgod’s voice, the words of a god boiling with anger. Perhaps it had affected the familiars, too. They were clawing up the ground with their four legs, muttering words like “KILL,” “BEAT,” “RIP,” and “TEAR.” It looked like they might attack all at once and at any moment. An ordinary person’s legs might have turned to jelly, or they might have wet themselves in fear. Yet this boy—

“Are you... a demigod... looking to... usurp me... as erdgod...? Or are you... a human... foolish enough... feeble enough... to not know... the natural... order...?”

“A god? Hah... A god, huh,” the boy answered with a faint smile. It wasn’t empty bravado. There was virtually no tension in his expression or his voice. In fact, he looked like he was standing in a relaxed pose. The only hint that this was a proper “stance” was that at some point, he had placed his right hand on his weapon, that long sword with the strangely bulky mounting. “Hate to burst your bubble, but I’m neither.”

“You...”

“An erdgod, huh... I see.” Slowly, the boy drew the sword and freed it from its sheath. He swept the black-lacquered blade noiselessly through the air, then pointed it at the erdgod. “You think just ’cause you’ve got a little brains, you’re hot shit? You’re just an animal. I’ll cut you into pieces, cook you up, and eat you for dinner.”

This insult showed a fearlessness toward the divine that went far beyond irreverence. But where on earth was he getting that confidence? It was the girl’s weapon that had killed the familiar, and even more crucially, it was impossible for a single human to fell the beings known as “erdgods”; being able to kill a familiar meant nothing.

Neither swords nor arrows worked on most of them. Their fur was harder than an iron helmet, yet flexible. Human weapons, whether they be blades or blunt instruments, would never reach the flesh behind it. Not to mention the sheer strength they packed in the attacks from their gigantic bodies. They could

easily kill a human in a single punch. On top of which—

“Even you humans... are merely... monkeys... with brains...” The erdgod bared its teeth and grinned. In keeping with its claim of being a god, erdgods had an intelligence that matched that of humans; they were different from animals. It was said that crafty tricks didn’t work against them, and that doing something like that was, in fact, often counterproductive. That was why humans had decided to enter into an agreement rather than a confrontation with erdgods, worshipping them and offering them sacrifices in exchange for their power.

“Yeah. You might be right!” The boy, showing no sign of fear, was still pointing his sword in challenge directly at the erdgod. Nothing good could come of a human challenging an erdgod. That was what Berta had been taught, at least. It was common sense, common knowledge that everyone who lived all the way out here *knew*—it was the fundamental understanding, burned into their heads, that informed all their decisions.

“R-Run!” Berta screamed, but it was too late. Her voice was drowned out by the erdgod’s roar as it attacked the boy.

●

Dasa leaned her back against a nearby pillar, securing a temporary place to stand. She pulled off her hood, took out her “ears” from her bag, and attached them to her headband.

Yukinari was the one who had actually made them, but the design was hers and based on her own knowledge and experience. It was her very own battle item. The construction wasn’t especially complicated: they were just large, triangular, parabolic microphones.

These ears, which had several times the area of Dasa’s own, efficiently picked up the surrounding sounds and fed them to her own ears without the slightest loss of detail. They’d been created based on the shape and structure of animal ears. And therefore—

“EAT!!” One of the familiars came flying at Dasa.

“...Enough.” Almost without looking, Dasa pointed Red Chili at it—the hammer was already cocked—and pulled the trigger.

A .44 Magnum bullet thundered out of the barrel. Dasa had good grip strength, and in any case the gun barely kicked, thanks to the recoil compensator attached to the muzzle and the weight of the scope and bipod. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the familiar collapse and writhe on the ground, then cocked the hammer again with her thumb, readying the next round.

“E-Excuse me...!” said the sacrificial girl beside her.

“Keep... quiet. Don’t... move.” Dasa aimed Red Chili ahead of her. In exactly that spot was a familiar about to jump at Yukinari diagonally from behind him.

She fired without hesitation. It was close range, so there was no need to use the scope. The bullet and its powerful point, originally loaded for hunting purposes, impacted the familiar’s hind leg—and tore it clean off.

“Erk.” Yukinari noticed the familiar and turned toward it, swinging his weapon Durandall around with him and bringing it crashing into the familiar’s neck. Its head flew off to the side.

“Yuki, concentrate on your own... enemy.”

“I know. Thanks!” Yukinari turned to face the erdgod once more.

As she was checking on Yukinari, Dasa used another three .44 Mags to kill three more familiars. Including the one she had killed initially, that made five total. It wasn’t quite half, but they had at least reduced the familiars’ numbers by a third.

Perhaps wary now that several others among them had been killed in quick succession, the familiars’ movements became hesitant and dull. Meanwhile, Dasa opened Red Chili’s loading gate, ejected the empty cases, and started mechanically reloading it with more .44 Magnum cartridges she had pulled from an inside pocket. Red Chili produced satisfying, metallic clicks as she worked. All the while, Dasa’s eyes were trained on the familiars and the erdgod who governed them.

“So they are a part... of the erdgod... after all...”

Every time one of the familiars was shot and killed, the erdgod’s body trembled faintly. Dasa remembered her sister Jirina telling her once. These

beings called “erdgods,” or sometimes “demigods,” started as normal animals. It was said that when a group of a certain size centered around an aged individual and they achieved a mutual spiritual link, they would acquire the intelligence and character of a god. Gods acquired their power through being worshipped by those beneath them. In other words—

“The more familiars we kill... the more we can reduce the power of the erdgod... itself,” Dasa said under her breath, and aimed Red Chili, now fully loaded, not at the erdgod, but at the crowd of familiars surrounding them.

●

The erdgod’s stout arms extended toward Yukinari, aiming to tear him apart. Yukinari dodged, slashing into the erdgod’s palm at the same time. The feel of the slice was odd, almost like cutting into the ground itself. Feeling that his blade was sliding across the erdgod’s fur, Yukinari’s face creased into a slight frown.

“Ugh, *really*?”

“NWOOARRR!” The erdgod ignored Yukinari’s attack and continued trying to grab him. Even Yukinari would be in serious trouble if he were caught by this thing. Its size and muscles made it look like it could easily split a human being in two. That it had formerly been an animal was easy to believe. It was seriously strong. However...

“Heh!” Yukinari weaved between the stone pillars, to the left then to the right, continuing to dodge the erdgod’s arms. The sanctuary’s construction itself interfered with the erdgod, making the small Yukinari—small only in comparison to the erdgod, of course—almost impossible to chase. Its arms insistently stretched for him anyway. Yukinari knocked them away from him with Durandall. Arms already stretched to their limit didn’t hold even half of their normal strength.

“GRHH... YOU...” The erdgod growled in irritation.

Yukinari gazed at it, amused. “What’s wrong, beast? Forget how to string together a sentence?”

He cast a glance through narrowed eyes at the familiars crawling on the

ground. Dasa had already killed ten. Apart from the erdgod himself, there were now only three or so of them left. This was Yukinari's first time actually seeing an erdgod, but he knew what kind of being it was. He had been given that knowledge in advance. He was also roughly familiar with the theory the alchemists propounded regarding where the source of an erdgod's intelligence and characteristics was located.

"How's it feel to lose parts of your external brain? Goddy go dum-dum?"

"RAARRR!!" The erdgod roared in anger at Yukinari's provocation. Apparently, he'd hit the nail on the head.

Maybe the erdgod had started to get impatient or forgotten itself in its anger. It forcibly broke a section of the sanctuary apart, pushed the large and tilting slab of stone slightly aside, and closed in on Yukinari. It planted its two back legs firmly on the ground, and with its remaining four legs—or were they arms?—the horrible monstrosity caught Yukinari from all sides.

Two "front legs," either one of which looked like it could crush a human being, and two substantially thinner "arms" enclosed Yukinari from all four directions. The erdgod picked him up with those four "limbs," and brought him up in front of its face.

"...DAMN... YOU...!" The jaw of its gigantic, human-like face opened as if to devour him, exposing its fangs and tongue.

"You really are a colossal dumbass," Yukinari said casually, even as he stood moments away from being eaten head first. His eyes were focused intently inside the erdgod's mouth—at the very back, where it connected to the throat. There was a small animal there, or at least the top half of one, baring its fangs. It was growing inside the erdgod's mouth, a body living inside another body.

"Real smart move there, showing off your own weak spot." Yukinari thrust Durandall at the head of the wild-dog-like thing at the back of the erdgod's throat. Of course, the tip of his blade failed to reach. The sword's point merely made a small nick in the erdgod's comparatively soft tongue. That was never going to be enough to kill an erdgod. However...

"Just die already. Goddamn," Yukinari said, and pulled the trigger. There was an explosion of sound from Durandall's "mounting"—which was actually a cut-

down, lever-action rifle, a Winchester M92 Randall. A large-diameter explosive round hit the wild dog's head without the slightest deviation. And the next moment, the monster's core scattered red blood and flesh in all directions, like a blooming flower.

●

The ground shook hard as the erdgod's gigantic body hit the earth. Because of the weight of its body, the damp ground caving in was completely expected. However—

Berta gasped. The erdgod... had *broken apart.* Its huge body, which had functioned as a single god, broke up into disconnected "parts" like a tower of blocks collapsing. An instant later, those "parts," which looked like chunks of flesh, changed shape once more, this time into small animals—although again, small only compared to the erdgod. A wild dog. A badger. A field mouse. A weasel. A number of such animal carcasses were lying on the ground. Berta realized that this was the erdgod's true identity—the vessels that had made up its "holy body." In other words...

"You felled..."

A *god*? By themselves? Just the two of—no, practically speaking, he had managed to kill it on his own...

Berta looked around, feeling like she had just witnessed something impossible. Already the familiars had returned to being the wild dogs and badgers that they had originally been. The traits that came from the erdgod's divine spirit had disappeared.

"Those people—that person—"

Lastly, Berta stared stunned at the boy who had felled a god. Was it that weapon that had made this "deicide" possible? But no matter what weapon they had, was it really possible that an earthly being, a lone human, could kill a god? Wasn't such an act... simply a miracle? She remembered the words the erdgod had spoken before it was felled.

— Even you humans... are merely... monkeys... with brains...

In the broad definition, monkeys were animals, too. And it wasn't necessarily

the case that humans were in an entirely different category of their own. If humans, too, were animals... maybe the same rules applied to humans as well?

In short... “Is that person—no, is he a person at all...?”

At the other end of Berta’s awe-filled gaze, the boy returned his sword to its sheath and casually stifled a yawn.

●

“He *killed* an erdgod...?”

Even after saying the words out loud, the priests still couldn’t believe it. They had been tasked with the job of confirming, from a lookout platform a short distance away from the sanctuary, that the sacrificial “shrine maiden” did her job correctly. Specifically, it was their holy work to witness the entire course of events, until the erdgod and its familiars had devoured the young female sacrifice and left satisfied, and preserve it all into record. But...

“Who—no—*What* is that boy...?”

“The weapon, is it that weapon that’s the problem?”

“But I can hardly imagine...”

Their astonishment creeping into their voices, the priests exchanged glances. They had been taught that the ultimate greatness was to shut off their minds, for good or ill, and ensure that the preordained procedure—the ritual—was repeated. To them, continuing to follow the example of those who had come before them offered stability, security, and truth, and was the very definition of faith. And so, they were extremely weak in the face of an unexpected situation like this.

“This is serious. This is very serious.”

“We need to return to town immediately and report this.”

They spoke to each other in whispers and hushed tones, their faces close together—even though this place had been chosen specifically for its distance from the sacrificial ritual, and there was no way their voices would carry there. Then, they hurriedly climbed down from the lookout platform and scurried back to town.

Chapter Two: A God's Form

The immediate threat seemed to have passed.

The animals which had comprised the body of the monster called an "erdgod" all seemed to be dead; they weren't so much as twitching. Maybe after its "core" had been killed, they'd all been taken down with it. It was also possible that they were in thanatosis—animals sometimes feigned death when they sensed danger—but that would just mean that they feared Yukinari and recognized him as a threat. It was unlikely that they would suddenly attack.

In any case—

"Guess we don't have to worry now." Yukinari approached the girl in sheer clothing and grabbed hold of the chain that was connecting her to the iron stake. "Dasa, all okay?"

"I'm... uninjured," Dasa answered plainly. She had never been very expressive to begin with, but after the death of her older sister Jirina, she had become even more doll-like. She seemed quite indifferent about herself, so if Yukinari didn't ask, she was liable to stay silent, even if she was seriously injured.

"And you, you okay as well?" Yukinari asked the girl as he tore the chain from the stake.

"Ah—h—" The girl made a small sound of surprise. Her voice was full of bewilderment and hesitancy, and there wasn't much of a sense of joy at being released. Or perhaps she was simply still shaken up from having had such a close-up view of that last battle.

"What? You don't enjoy being chained up, right?"

The girl didn't respond. Still sitting on the ground, she looked up at Yukinari's face. For a while, her expression swung between surprise and fear, but eventually she began to nod her head firmly, as if she had convinced herself of something.

"Yes... Yes, I..."

“Seriously, *what*? Is there something on my face?” Yukinari had no idea what to make of this.

The girl simply mumbled quietly to herself instead of answering his question directly. “I see... I suppose things like this can happen.”

“Like I said, what are you talking about?” Yukinari asked again, and the girl raised her head and spoke to him.

“I must confess that I have never heard of a god with the form of a human, but... you must be this land’s new erdgod.”

“What...?” Now it was Yukinari’s turn to be bewildered. The girl didn’t seem to be joking or spouting nonsense. Her expression was dead serious. Lacking much of this world’s conventional wisdom, Yukinari couldn’t make sense of what the girl was telling him. “Dasa, please tell me what this girl’s talking about.”

Dasa’s expression remained neutral and she didn’t answer. It seemed less like she didn’t know, and more like she was thinking.

“My name is Berta. I am a shrine maiden who worships the erdgod of this land.” The girl paid Yukinari’s bafflement almost no notice at all. “I offer myself to you. Please bring this land tranquility and good harvests...” The girl in the gauzy costume rose to her feet for a moment, then put her hands together in prayer and kneeled in front of Yukinari.

“You *offer yourself—*”

Yukinari looked at the girl again. As mentioned previously, she was not naked, but the way she was dressed—if you could call it dressed—might have been far better than nudity at turning someone on.

Thanks to the sheer clothing, he could see all the outlines of her body; he could even see shaded patches due to the differing degrees of light penetrating through the cloth. It wasn’t much different from being totally exposed. Moreover, maybe because she had gotten a little involved in the previous fight, her clothes were torn in a few places and bare skin peeked out on areas of her body that should have been concealed. She was good looking, too. It would have been strange for a healthy young man not to find this arousing.

“Yes. Please, I am yours to do with as you will.”

“Huh? Really? I can? Well, I don’t really get it, but—”

Was this a gift? A traditional gift in her culture? Wouldn’t it be rude to decline something that had been prepared especially for him? As Yukinari pondered these vaguely stupid thoughts, he heard a metallic click behind him. Realizing that it was the sound of Red Chili’s hammer being cocked, he put his hands up and tried to make an excuse.

“Uh. I’m not, uh. Y’know. Respecting traditional culture is cool and all, but, uh, yeah, I can live without.”

Even he couldn’t make much sense of that one.

“...Stupid,” came a flat-sounding voice. Yukinari looked back over his shoulder to see Dasa lowering Red Chili—she had been pointing it into the air—and decocking the hammer.

●

The scope of human understanding is very small.

As the commoners toil with sweat on their brows, they may sometimes grumble with envy about the nobles and government officials, who earn their food by merely sitting behind their desks. However, the masses most likely have no comprehension of the hardships those above them experience. Of course, this holds in reverse, as well: nobles and officials do not know the hardships of farmers and craftsmen. They may understand them in a scholarly sense, but they do not truly feel them. And as Fiona carried out her work as deputy town mayor for her bedridden father, she thought that she was no exception.

Of course, she didn’t think that that was a bad thing. Each and every person had a gift they were born with and a role to play in society. And those roles were all deep, and not easily understood by others. There were things that only farmers could do, there were things that only craftsmen could do, and there were jobs that could only be done by a noble or a government official.

However, when the range of your life is narrow, so becomes your way of thinking.

Only a very small section of society was allowed to attend the school in the capital as she had—only the children of the privileged classes. Even in her case, her father had pulled quite a few strings for her to study there. They were technically “nobility,” but those begrudgingly included at the bottom of the list were certainly not affluent. The Schillings family was a powerful *local* family; “nobility” was nothing more than a label afforded to them by the capital for the sake of convenience.

The way commoners saw things was narrower still. They took the routines of their ancestors as a given.

No one doubts that the sun will rise in the morning or that it will set when night comes. Even if someone did hold such a doubt, it would soon be forgotten in the bustle of daily life. With the single word “obviously,” people stop thinking, and even taking notice of their surroundings. Life in this world was too harsh to endure any other way—and Fiona herself understood that well.

“...I suppose the erdgod will have feasted on her by now,” Fiona said quietly, allowing her eyes to drift to the window.

In name, a shrine maiden serving a god. In truth—a sacrifice to the erdgod.

Even a ritual as deceitful as this becomes “tradition” after a hundred or a thousand years. Girls almost the same age as herself were regularly offered up to and devoured by creatures that called themselves gods. She understood that this path led to the fewest victims, but the ritual had gone on so long that even the feeling that the girls were “victims” had started to diminish. The priests seemed to teach the orphans who were candidates to become shrine maidens that it was a great honor to be offered to an erdgod.

“If that girl had been born under other circumstances, her life could have been different...”

They were children with no one to depend on. Because they didn’t have parents, there was almost no one who would protest if they were made into sacrifices. So an orphanage was created to efficiently provide those sacrifices, and the priests preached to its good name, so that they wouldn’t be tormented by the guilt of their own consciences.

If there were no sacrifices, it would be difficult for people to live on this

impoverished, infertile land. It was obvious that without the erdgod's "protection," a hundred people, if not more, would die every year. Fiona understood that much. But at the same time, she knew: those beings called erdgods were the "demons" that were taught about in the capital's Central Church.

Erdgods were not absolute justice. They did not even represent "good." The only reason they had been deified for so long was that there was simply no better option. At the cost of one life, many could be saved. How could Fiona argue with that? The only option was to convince herself that this path was the "best."

Fiona stopped writing, gently closed her eyes, and massaged her eyelids. There was no sense in dwelling on this. Shrine maidens had their role, and Fiona had hers. And if the "shrine maiden" was going to fulfill her role, it was surely inexcusable for Fiona to neglect her own.

She let out a sigh and returned to her duties. But before she could write another word, there was a rush of busy footsteps, and the doors of the office suddenly opened.

"Milady!"

A line of servants with faces full of alarm formed in front of Fiona. She frowned heavily, fully intending to reprimand them for their rudeness.

"What is all the fuss? Knock before you come into—"

"Our apologies, Milady... This is urgent!" They were all incredibly agitated; veins were bulging on their sweat-covered foreheads, and they were almost out of breath. "Milady," they cried out in voices approaching shrieks, "something—something serious has happened at the sanctuary!"

●

The beings called erdgods were special.

Similar beings included "demigods" and "xenobeasts"... or rather, erdgods and demigods were essentially the same thing. The difference was in whether they "settled" in a particular land or not.

The defining point of “erdgods,” which literally meant “gods of a land,” was that they had the power to form spiritual bonds with a specific area and exert their influence upon it.

Erdgods could manipulate the environment of the land in which they settled. Not only did they have the power to fertilize the soil, summon rain, and dictate the success of crops, they could even protect people from the occasional disaster, like floods and hurricanes. On the other hand, once an erdgod took root in a land, they would no longer be free to travel far from it.

Publicly, it was said that the shrine maidens were sent to an erdgod to relieve its boredom. However...

“Um, Lord Erdgod?”

“You’re not getting it. I’m not an erdgod.”

The girl tilted her head. She seemed to be thinking. Suddenly, a concerned expression flitted across her face. “Am I not good enough to satisfy you?”

“Oh, no, by the look of you, I’d be *extremely* satisfied. I—” Yukinari stopped abruptly when he heard the click of Red Chili being cocked again behind him.

“Look. I don’t recall ever becoming an erdgod, okay? Uh, let’s see, what’s your name?”

“My name is Berta,” the girl said, respectfully bowing her head. It seemed that Berta had completely mistaken Yukinari for an erdgod and was serious about offering herself to him. Yukinari, on the other hand, couldn’t understand the reasoning behind treating him like a new erdgod just because he had felled one himself.

“Dasa, help me out here,” pleaded Yukinari, looking back at her for help.

“...I’ve heard of this before from my... sister,” the girl with silver hair said haltingly as she opened Red Chili’s loading gate and swapped the spent cases out for new cartridges. “A king can... ascend to the throne by killing the previous king... and usurping his position... and gods are the... same.”

“The hell?” Yukinari groaned. “That’s a barbaric system.”

“Erdgods are... bound to the land. By settling in one place... they gain a

number of powers... but... they become part of the land... so...” Dasa closed the loading gate with a click. “...they don’t... die.”

“It did die, though. Easily.”

“I mean they don’t age. But... as animals... they gradually ‘weaken.’ Their minds wear away. Because they’re becoming a part of the mountains, rivers, and... valleys.”

“Hmm. Not sure if I get it or not...”

“That’s why—” Dasa’s hands stopped. “That’s... probably... why they eat... people. To preserve... themselves... they eat... humans... who have... strong selves.”

“Are you talking about intelligence or something?”

“Probably...” Dasa nodded.

They ate humans not to maintain their physical bodies, but to maintain their spirits, including their intelligence—to maintain their *selves.* Other living beings would likely be fine as well, but it was probably more spiritually efficient or something to eat humans, who had intelligence in the first place. “This is just my thought... but... I think other demigods attacking and killing erdgods is... a kind of metabolic turnover.”

The new took the place of the old. In this ever-changing world, that was nothing particularly special. And to the extent that they could not be killed, the rotation of the immortal erdgods was accomplished by them being felled like wild animals. Dasa’s information came secondhand from her sister and seemed to involve a substantial amount of guesswork and assumptions, but Yukinari thought that it did make logical sense.

“Um... Lord Erdgod?” Berta said to Yukinari timidly.

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not an erdgod?”

“No, you felled the previous erdgod. I still believe the only ones who can defeat an erdgod are beings of equal godhood.”

“No, seriously, I just killed it like normal. With this thing.” Yukinari indicated the weapon in his hand, Durandall, but Berta seemed to have no interest in it.

“Please grant this land protection, tranquility, and good harvests... Please... Please...” Berta’s pleading expression was as serious as ever.

Yukinari looked up at the sky for a moment. “No. I refuse.”

“Lord Erdgod...?”

“I’m not an erdgod, and I don’t plan on becoming one. I don’t know how, and becoming one with the land and losing my sense of self? No thanks. I’m not up for the cannibalism, either.”

The girl fell silent.

“I’m not special. Our weapons are just a bit weird. That’s the only reason we could kill that erdgod. You could have done it, too. Deicide. Just gotta know how to use these things and not mess it up.” He glanced at Dasa, and Berta followed, looking at her in awe.

Dasa gave a small nod and held up Red Chili. “Yuki’s not normal... but... that aside... that erdgod was defeated... mainly by armed force.”

“Quit talking about me like I’m some pervert,” Yukinari grumbled.

Berta interjected. “But that’s—”

“*Anyway!*” Yukinari cut her off. “You don’t have to be *eaten* anymore, okay? Let’s just go back to your town for now. In fact, show me the way, would you? There’s a bunch of things I need to get.”

“You’re not a god...” Berta still seemed to be stuck on that. Looking again at Durandall, she said in a low voice, “You say that that strange sword is what felled the erdgod.”

“Right. I’m not anything big and impressive like a god, I’m just a—” Yukinari hesitated for a moment. “A human,” he said forcefully.

For a while, Berta appeared hesitant. Then, she looked at Yukinari and Dasa in turn. “I’m terribly sorry. I’m not too bright, so I still don’t understand very well, but I’ll show you to town if that’s what you request. I must go anyway, to explain things to the priests.”

“That’ll do for now. Thanks.” Yukinari let out a long sigh.

•

The priests' report was astonishing.

"He *killed* the erdgod? A single human, on his own?" To be honest, Fiona couldn't believe it.

They may have been called erdgods, but they were originally living creatures. Killing them wasn't an impossibility. There was even precedent, though she had only learned about that and hadn't been around to see it. However, if she remembered correctly, that had been a special case, involving dozens, hundreds of people, placing traps and bringing out siege weapons. At the very least, an erdgod wasn't the kind of thing that just one or two human beings could kill without any preparation.

"Are you sure there hasn't been some mistake?"

"Yes, Deputy Mayor," one of the priests said to Fiona. He appeared agitated. "I swear to it—we saw a human being, who appeared to be a traveler, fell the erdgod."

They had probably come running back here from the viewing platform meant for overseeing the ritual. The priests' hair and garments were wet with sweat, and they were still breathing heavily. One of the priests had a blood-stained cloth held to his forehead. When asked, he said that he'd tripped and injured himself on the way back. At any rate, this story was too intricate to be a lie, nor was there a reason to tell one.

"Let me ask your opinion." Fiona directed her eyes toward the old high priest who had visited the mansion with them.

He was the leader of all the priests in this town, and in charge of organizing the rituals. Like Fiona, he was from a family that had lived in this town for generations. He was also right at the top of the list of people who never questioned the rituals. However, his extensive knowledge showed that he had spent his many years wisely.

"Is it possible for an individual to kill an erdgod?" Fiona asked.

"It is not impossible in *theory*..." the high priest said with a frown. "But... that is somewhat like asking if an individual can level a mountain or hold back a

river.”

Everyone present, including Fiona, fell silent.

Humans were capable of using their hands and feet to dig up soil and carry stones. It would certainly be possible for an individual to change the terrain like that, if they could spend a hundred or a thousand years on it. However, that was entirely unrealistic. In that sense, it would be no exaggeration to call such a thing impossible.

The high priest’s words made perfect sense.

●

The town where Berta lived was surprisingly close by.

Yukinari felt that it had taken them just about an hour on foot. Although it was a mountain path, because the route between the town and the “sanctuary” had at least been leveled out and maintained a bit, it could have been called an easy journey, for the distance.

The town was built in the standard way for a small rural city. It was surrounded by “walls” meant to ward off animals. They had been made by piling up soil and stacking up bricks and stones. There were gates of various sizes leading off in several directions. Guided by Berta, Yukinari’s group entered the town through one of the smaller ones.

There didn’t seem to be anything like an inn—according to Berta, there were almost never any visitors to a small town like this in the first place—so Yukinari’s group gave up on the idea and headed for the street market to procure food and some supplies.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

Yukinari felt a strange sense of discomfort. All around, the townspeople were shooting looks at them. No—they were not directed at Yukinari and Dasa, but at Berta, who was leading them.

These were absolutely not the warm gazes of people welcoming back a survivor, but they weren’t particularly cold, either. To pin these looks down to a single emotion was difficult, but the one that seemed to be coming through the

strongest was “confusion.” People were looking at Berta in bewilderment, as if they had seen something that had no business being there.

“I murdered a monster and saved a girl who was about to be sacrificed. Look at her. She’s come home safe and sound. Shouldn’t they be pleased?”

“Yuki... that’s not it. I think this... is...”

As if Dasa’s words had set them off—although it was surely coincidence—the townspeople began to gather. They seemed to have made up their collective mind. They stood surrounding Yukinari and the others, blocking their way both forward and back.

“What? Outsiders aren’t welcome here, is that it?”

“Hey! Berta!” said one of the residents in an accusatory tone. “What are you doing here?”

“...I...” Berta looked at the ground, at a loss for words. In truth, he probably *was* accusing her.

“Why have you come back alive? You’re a shrine maiden! You were supposed to be an offering to the erdgod!”

Once one started disparaging Berta, the rest followed in a chain reaction.

“What happened with the erdgod? Surely you didn’t... mess something up?”

“You better not have run back here instead of carrying out your role!”

“Why do you think we’re paying our taxes to raise you orphans—”

“If you incite the erdgod’s wrath, this town is finished...”

The townspeople pelted Berta with harsh words, one after another. There was not a single voice rejoicing that she had come back alive.

“...Yuki.” Dasa called his name in a quiet voice and touched his right hand.

Yukinari had been on the verge of yelling at them. Breathing out slowly, he released the pressure that had been building up inside him.

Just then—

“What are you doing?!” A voice coming from the end of the street silenced

the townspeople and their harsh criticisms. Wondering what was going on, they looked over and saw a few men wearing what appeared to be priests' robes standing on the other side of the human fence of town residents. They made a beeline for the group and, after pushing the residents of the town aside, they stopped in front of Yukinari and the others—no, in front of Berta.

This town's priests, I guess. Well, I'm glad they shut these guys up... but...

The fact that they were priests of course meant that they worshipped the erdgod. Which meant—

"Berta..." One of the priests called out to her in a gentle tone. "Raise your head, please."

Berta kept her head lowered in silence. She looked like a criminal about to receive her sentence.

"Raise your head, I told you," the man said, his tone dangerously sharp.

"Yes, Father." Quivering, Berta raised her head.

With a gentle smile, the priest looked at the girl's face. "Why is a shrine maiden who went to the sanctuary to do her job here, in this town?"

Berta said nothing.

"I do not believe for a moment that the erdgod was not there."

"Father, I—"

"Do *not* talk back!" Out of nowhere, the priest raised his voice and yelled at her. Berta shrunk back as though she had been struck by lightning. The priest, however, quickly returned to his original, calm tone and continued. "You should know better than anyone what your role is. Why did you come back?"

The priest was ultimately no different from the other townspeople in what he was saying. No, in fact, his interrogation felt like the harshest of them all.

"Yuki—"

"Hey! Pal!" Yukinari stuck himself between Berta and the priest. This time, Dasa didn't have time to stop him. "A girl from your own town's come home safe. I don't think she deserves to be treated like that."

“And who are you?”

“Are you a traveler...? What are you talking about?”

“If you’re an outsider, we’d appreciate you staying out of this.”

“It’s understandable that a vagabond like you would not know how things work around here, but even so—”

Their words themselves were polite, but their voices were tinged with a clearly insulting tone. Yukinari scowled, and he stepped forward. He considered whether he ought to give every person here one big punch to the head each, but just then—

“Stop! Stay right there, all of you!”

A new voice made Yukinari stop in his tracks. He looked back towards where it had come from, and found a young woman standing there, short of breath. She must have come here in a rush. There was a little sweat on her forehead, and her long, blonde hair was in total disarray. The elegant, tailored one-piece dress she was wearing made her flustered appearance stand out all the more.

“Due to circumstances, the ritual’s being postponed for the time being!” The young woman cut through the crowd in the same way the priests had as she spoke. “Just get back to work, all of you!”

The townspeople looked at each other and reluctantly dispersed. There were some who glared nastily at Yukinari’s group—or rather Berta— as they left, but none of them decided to continue the verbal harassment—for the time being, at least. After they were gone, the only ones left were Yukinari, Dasa, Berta, the young woman, and the priests. No—there was one other.

“Deputy Mayor...!” A somewhat elderly man in robes arrived. This man, too, seemed to be a priest, but his clothing was slightly different from the others. His position—or rank—was probably different. He seemed to have followed the girl here. But unlike her, he stopped in the middle of the street and made no attempt to approach Yukinari’s group.

“I chased them off for the time being,” the girl who had been called Deputy Mayor said, looking at Yukinari. Yes—the girl’s first words were addressed not to Berta, but to him. “Would you three mind terribly if I asked you to come to

my mansion?”

“Deputy Mayor—Milady, you mustn’t,” the elderly priest said reproachfully. “That man is the sinner who interfered with the ritual—”

“Interfered with the ritual?” The three priests who had arrived first looked at Yukinari in surprise.

“Then this man must have taken the shrine maiden—”

“Sinful...!”

The priests denounced Yukinari one after another, then moved forward to grab him; maybe they intended to take him into custody. Yukinari moved back defensively. But the priests weren’t finished.

“I think we should capture him, cut off his head, and offer the shrine maiden up again along with him. We should beg for the erdgod’s forgiveness.”

Hearing that, Yukinari placed his hand on Durandall, which was slung across his back. However—

“Are you all in your right minds?! You intend to fight this thing?!” the deputy mayor yelled, pointing at Yukinari. “If the reports of the ritual witnesses are accurate, this being felled the erdgod! *On his own!*”

“Being? *Thing?* Sorry?” Yukinari frowned at the deputy mayor’s total lack of reservation. However, her outburst had a far greater effect on the priests than anything else.

“He did that to the erdgod...?”

“Felled? You mean he killed it?”

“*Yes!*” the girl practically shrieked at them.

The priests exchanged looks of disbelief, then returned their gazes to Yukinari. Then, as if they had suddenly realized that they were actually face-to-face with a terrible monster, they all fell a step back.

“What’s your name, sir?” the young woman asked.

“Yukinari,” he replied, feeling some relief that here, finally, was someone who looked capable of holding a reasonable conversation. Of course, it could be that

this girl was simply being cautious because she knew that Yukinari had killed the erdgod. She might feel just as disgusted at Berta as the others. “If it’s hard to say, I’m fine with Yuki. This is Dasa.”

“Yukinari, Dasa. My name is Fiona Schillings. And you were... Berta, I believe. I’m inviting the three of you to my mansion. Follow me, please.”



The young woman spoke sternly, almost as if she were ordering them. Turning on her heel, she walked back the way she came. The elderly priest, and the other priests too, rushed to follow after her.

“What is the deputy mayor thinking?”

“That man murdered our erdgod... Surely she isn’t going to—”

The priests whispered to each other.

There was no sign that Yukinari’s group was going to be welcomed, but even if they did reach the market, judging by how the townspeople just now had acted, it was hard to imagine that their shopping trip would go smoothly. Doing as she said was probably the safest move for now.

Yukinari and Dasa looked at each other. They did what they could to encourage Berta, and the three of them followed the girl.

●

As she invited the three of them into the mansion—the young man who called himself Yukinari, his partner, and the shrine maiden girl—Fiona’s mind raced. What in the world was Yukinari? It seemed beyond doubt that he had defeated the erdgod... but just as the high priest had said, it was inconceivable that an ordinary human could defeat one.

Erdgods and demigods originated from animals, but by living so long and being provided with intelligence, they broke out of that zoological category. In terms of their powers, they surpassed even humans, and it was for that reason that they were called gods. An erdgod was simply a demigod that had put down roots in a particular area, but once it absorbed the land’s energy, it became much tougher than it had even been as a demigod. It would no longer die of old age, and whether cut by a sword or stabbed by a spear, it could scarcely be injured at all, let alone dealt a fatal wound.

If anything could defeat an erdgod in a one-on-one battle, it would have to be another demigod. And in fact, although it was a rare occurrence, such a “changing of the erdgod” was known to be possible. The Schillings family records showed that in the past three hundred and some years, there had been two—just two—recorded instances in which a demigod had attacked an

erdgod, killed it, and become an erdgod itself. Which meant only one thing—

That Yukinari boy must be either a demigod or something of equal measure...

Not even Fiona, who had enriched her knowledge in the capital, had ever heard of a demigod taking the form of a person. However, humans and animals were both living creatures. Considering this, the idea that a human being could also, for some reason, live a very long time, and so become a demigod, was impossible to rule out entirely.

In any event, Yukinari was something equal to a god. Not only could he evidently speak human language, but his morals were close to a human's and he could talk rationally, unlike other demigods. At the very least, he didn't seem to have laid a single hand on Berta, who had been offered as a sacrifice. Did this mean that it would be possible to negotiate with Yukinari in a way other than by offering sacrifices?

After walking down the corridor for a while, Fiona opened the door to the drawing room. "Please, go on in. Sorry about the mess."

"Thank you."

"Like...wise."

Yukinari and Dasa went in first, then Berta, then the high priest and the other priests. Once everyone had entered, Fiona closed the door and offered chairs to Yukinari and his two companions.

The reason that she offered chairs to them first, rather than the priests or the high priest, was because her highest priority for the time being was to not upset Yukinari. Yukinari likely had power comparable to an erdgod, and if so, it would be no trouble at all for him to kill every one of the people in this place if he felt like it. It was not without reason that the priests had been opposed to inviting them to the Schillings residence.

However, if she had left Yukinari's group there, it would most definitely have developed into some kind of trouble. And the likely result would be citizens dying. As the deputy mayor, she could not allow that to happen, even if it meant inviting a monster into her very own house.

"First things first," Fiona said, as she seated herself opposite Yukinari and the

others. “I want to hear it from you directly. Yukinari, you killed the erdgod, correct?”

“Sure did,” he said, nodding honestly. Some of the priests who hadn’t been informed of the situation gave short groans, but now wasn’t the time to be paying attention to them.

“I see. Honestly speaking, I am quite relieved that the one who killed the previous erdgod is someone like you, who I can reason with. Because if an unpleasant successor were to come, it really would threaten the town’s survival.”

“It sounds like you’re another one who thinks of me as some erdgod or demigod or something.” Yukinari briefly sighed again. “I’m nothing like that. I’m human.”

“But you killed an erdgod,” Fiona said, looking directly into Yukinari’s eyes. “Killing an erdgod is beyond the ability of one person. It would be impossible for even the most skilled soldier to kill one of those things one-on-one. How did you do it?”

“This.”

Yukinari removed the piece of equipment—most likely a weapon—he’d been carrying on his back and showed it to Fiona. It had a bulky mounting, but otherwise, it looked like nothing other than an ordinary sword. Or maybe that mounting had something to it? It did sort of look like it had a complicated structure.

“This weapon’s a little bit special. You can think of it as a kind of magic, if that helps.”

“Magic, you say...”

Fiona had heard stories about people who had unraveled the knowledge hidden in all things, and used it to make inexplicable things happen. In the capital, the True Church of Harris conducted regular inquisitions; it seemed people were being burned at the stake as a result. But most of those who claimed to be able to use magic were just frauds. Even if a real magic-user did exist, it would probably be difficult to distinguish them from the fakes.

“It’s not like that thing was an indestructible monster or anything, right?”

“No, not theoretically,” Fiona answered.

“Theory or not, you guys know they can be killed, right? Why do you put out sacrifices?”

In a sense, this was an extremely legitimate question. However, it was also the kind of question asked by someone who had lived in a blessed land. This boy was unaware that there were people who wanted the protection of an erdgod even if it meant offering sacrifices—people who lived in a land where, without that protection, they were in constant danger of starving to death.

Sighing, Fiona explained. “There are all kinds of erdgods. Some are even mild-mannered, although that’s extremely rare. Conversely, some are desperately cruel. You’re right that they’re not immortal, but virtually no ordinary human being can defeat one. It’s impossible with any normal weapon. The only thing that just barely works is a fully armed group of warriors, or otherwise, the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris.” And neither of those were here in Friedland.

Fiona didn’t miss the subtle twitch in Yukinari and Dasa’s expressions. They had probably reacted to “True Church of Harris.” Maybe they had some connection to it? It was said that there were many clever people—so-called wise men—in the Church. Perhaps Yukinari’s weapon had been made by the Church. That would at least make some sense...

Yukinari scratched his cheek. “Well... Look,” he said cheerfully, as if to dodge some kind of question that hadn’t been asked. “The point is, the erdgod’s dead. There’s no need to offer up any more sacrifices. That’s a great thing, right?”

The priests, who were standing against the wall, stirred. Fiona and the high priest glanced their way and sent them looks that held them in check.

“We’ve been sleeping rough for a while now,” Yukinari said, glancing at Dasa. “We were just hoping we could find somewhere around here to stay, but... yeah, some people are pretty mad with us. I get that. We’ll leave town right away.”

In contrast to Yukinari, his silver-haired partner did not look very tough. A

journey like that, which forced her to sleep outside for nights on end, would be extremely exhausting.

“That won’t do,” Fiona said to Yukinari as he started to get up. “We need you to stay in this land for the foreseeable future.”

“What? Why—”

“We were receiving the erdgod’s guardianship in exchange for offering it sacrifices. But now that that arrangement has collapsed, other demigods will gather, vying for the position of erdgod.”

It was like an animal’s territory. If there was an erdgod here, other demigods would not dare to approach unless they were significantly stronger. The fact that erdgods warded off other demigods was another reason they were deified by humans.

“So... your town’s in danger and you want us to protect you or something?”

“No,” Fiona said, shaking her head. “You’re the one they’ll be after.”

“*What?* Why—”

“Nature dictates that the one who has the right to become the next erdgod is the demigod that killed the previous erdgod. But you haven’t settled in this land. You have left a ‘vacancy,’ and demigods will gather in the hope of claiming it. However, if they find the one who killed the predecessor there... I imagine they will try to kill you first.”

Yukinari frowned and fell silent. Of course, if he decided to take the coward’s way out and flee the area, the demigods would probably start fighting over the ‘vacancy’ among themselves and not pursue him. But...

“And of course, as I said earlier, if an unpleasant demigod becomes an erdgod, it will be a matter of life or death for us. The fate of our town hangs in the balance.”

It was usual for an erdgod to ask for a sacrifice once every two or three years, but if it was an unusually “gluttonous” one, it might request a yearly sacrifice. Some erdgods were said to request two, three, or even far more people at once.

“If we get caught up in a battle between demigods, we will suffer casualties. Erdgods are not the only ones that gain power from eating people—demigods are said to as well. Naturally, they will attack this town before the fight in order to eat their fill.”

Even as she spoke, Fiona was aware that she was taking a risky gamble. She was trying to appeal to Yukinari’s “benevolence” and “common decency,” despite knowing that he was not an ordinary human being. Even human beings found it hard to hold onto those when their backs were against a wall, so it was probably far too optimistic to expect that something comparable to a demigod would even possess them in the first place.

But on the other hand, Fiona had seen Yukinari get angry at the priests. He had displayed clear displeasure when the priests had criticized the girl called Berta for returning alive. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change this town, bound by its cruel and antiquated system of erdgods and shrine maidens.

“We’re going to need you to stay in this land in place of the erdgod you killed,” Fiona said as forcefully as she could.

●

“Please stay here in my mansion overnight,” said Fiona Schillings, the girl who was apparently standing in as the town’s mayor. “I won’t charge you for lodging, of course.”

To be honest, Yukinari wanted to leave this town behind right away, but he was hesitant to make Dasa sleep outside again. She never breathed a word of complaint, but that just meant that when she did collapse, it happened without warning. He wanted to let her rest under a roof whenever possible.

Yukinari, Dasa, and Berta had each been provided with their own room. This was because when Fiona had asked Yukinari and Dasa if they were married or lovers or something along those lines, they had both immediately denied it. However, despite that, Dasa was currently sitting on Yukinari’s bed.

“Let’s get these glasses out of the way.”

“...mn...”

Dasa gazed at Yukinari with her vaguely unfocused eyes. Yukinari got the impression that her cheeks were red, but he couldn't afford to think deeply about it. This was delicate work. If he didn't concentrate, he could mess it up badly.

"Close your eyes."

"...mn..."

Dasa closed her sky-blue eyes as Yukinari asked. He brought his face close enough to hers that they could feel each other's body heat, and then he touched her eyelid with his hand.

"Mn... mmn..."

Slowly, he stroked her eyelid with the pad of his finger—gently, as if caressing it. First the left, then the right. He touched gingerly, constantly monitoring her reaction.

Dasa was moving a little, so he softly cupped her face in both hands and held it still. He slid the pad of his thumb up her cheek and onto her eyelid.

Another little moan escaped Dasa's throat.

They had done this a number of times before, but she always blushed and shivered like it was the first. Her reactions, a mix of anxiousness, expectancy, and shyness, were in a way terribly erotic, and Yukinari was conscious of something inside him swelling up. Repeating to himself that he was only touching her face, he focused on the job at hand.

"...Yuki..." Dasa breathed his name as though imploring him for something.

"Opening them."

"...mn..."

Touching her trembling eyelashes, Yukinari lifted Dasa's eyelid upward with his fingers. A beautiful, glistening eye filled with the color of the sky reflected his face. Yukinari squinted, but he could see no clouding there at all. In both eyes, everything seemed to be okay.

Finally, Yukinari softly blew on her eyeball, as if kissing it.

A visible shiver ran through Dasa's body.

Yukinari removed his hand from her face. "How does it feel? It doesn't hurt at all? It doesn't sting or smart? You're not having any problems with the way you're seeing?"

"Probably... okay," Dasa said, her voice somewhat unsteady.

"Okay. Well, good." Yukinari lowered his hand and let out a breath. "I'm not a specialist... To be honest, all I know is the little I heard when my sister had to have her operation. I don't know what kind of inconveniences the artificial lenses I made could give you. Cataract surgery itself seems to have been around a really long time. But that doesn't mean the one I did was necessarily perfect."

Dasa was born with cataracts.

For that reason, she could neither read nor write until she was fourteen years old. However, her memories of helping her older sister Jirina, who had been an alchemist, went back as far as she could remember. Because of this, she had a wealth of knowledge about alchemy and its related fields, but on the other hand, she occasionally revealed an equally large gap in her general knowledge.

Dasa's eyes now had artificial lenses made by Yukinari.

Surgeries to treat cataracts had been taking place since the ancient Greeks. The precision of the work aside, the principle itself was relatively simple. It essentially involved removing the cloudy lens and inserting an artificial lens in its place.

Yukinari's hands had brought light to Dasa's eyes, but as he himself had said, he was not a medical professional. He was concerned that the cataracts might recur, and there was also the possibility of other complications. It was for that reason that he regularly examined Dasa's eyes. Dasa's glasses, too, were there not just to correct her vision, but to protect her eyes as much as possible.

"Yuki...?" Dasa said, putting her glasses back on. "What... next...?"

"What, huh... Hmm. What."

Yukinari sat down beside Dasa and sighed. Felling the god of this land before finding out anything about it had been a big mistake. Fiona's words had

certainly given him pause. It would leave a very bad taste in his mouth if he left town now, knowing that its people, including Berta, would be attacked by demigods. He thought that Fiona's argument for wanting him to stay here and protect the town as an erdgod made a lot of sense. But Yukinari had a reason for traveling—no, a reason for not staying in one place. He had to protect Dasa, even if it meant being a wanderer until the day he died.

"I've got my promise with Jirina to think about..."

"...Yeah." Dasa's expression turned a little complicated at Yukinari's mention of her big sister. It was a very subtle change that no one but Yukinari, who was by her side constantly, could have noticed.

"And you and I both know nothing of the world."

"...Yuki..."

As if to distract her mind from her anxiety, Dasa wrapped both her arms around Yukinari's left arm and clung to him. Maybe because she had spent the majority of her life almost completely unable to see, Dasa often touched Yukinari like this, to make sure that he was definitely there. She also had a habit of putting her cheek against his chest and trying to smell his body odor, perhaps for the same reason that the first thing a dog wants to do with an object is sniff it. In Dasa's case, she had spent too long relying on sound and touch rather than sight. Despite her trust in the treatment Yukinari gave her, she was probably unable to let go and rely fully on her eyes.

In many ways, she was a girl with a very unique background. And that was why only Yukinari could protect her.

"Taking revenge and running away was all well and good, but we never had anywhere to go."

"...Yeah." The corners of Dasa's lips trembled. And once again, Yukinari was possibly the only person who could recognize this for what it was: the brightest smile Dasa could force onto her face.

•

Cultural customs vary from land to land and mostly take shape out of some kind of necessity. If the climate differs, it's only natural for the culture, customs,

and especially the lifestyles to be different as well. Clothing, food, shelter, and all the other basic needs change to accommodate the land.

Baths, for instance, differ depending on how easy it is to procure water and fuel, as well as other factors like the atmospheric temperature and humidity. In some places, people wash their bodies with buckets of rainwater; in others, steam baths are the norm. In fact, the style of bath used in countries like Japan, in which a bathtub is filled with gallons of steaming hot water, was apparently classified as a rather rare type in this world.

So when Yukinari heard from Fiona that this particular region had this rare type of bath, his delight was on another level. Apparently there was a hot spring nearby from which hot water could be drawn. The Schillings residence, too, was furnished with such a bath. And it was quite spacious. It was about the same size as a bath in a Japanese hot spring inn; about ten people could probably bathe together if they felt like it. The bathtub itself was made of stone, and the way it felt somewhat like an outdoor bath while being inside suited Yukinari's tastes.

"Ohhhhh..." Yukinari couldn't stop a sound of appreciation from slipping out as he sank into the bathtub and stretched out his legs. It was a feeling he hadn't experienced in a very long time. "I guess even this body gets tired..." As he relaxed in the hot water, he looked up to the ceiling. A drop fell and splashed directly on his nose. "Geez, that's cold! .....Ha. Hahaha, yeahhh, this is what a bath should be like!"

He kicked his legs about in the water for no reason. He felt like he'd returned to his childhood. Come to think of it, he'd visited public baths several times with his big sister Hatsune when he was young. The bath in their house had broken, but as children, there was nothing the two of them could do about it themselves, and their father and mother rarely came home. So the two of them headed out together, pocket money clenched in their hands. He still vividly remembered the two of them holding hands and walking through the town in winter, with a single scarf wound around both their necks. One time, another customer had taken pity on those two children enduring the biting winds to come out to a public bath, and bought them some fruit-flavored milk. That act of kindness from a nameless stranger stood out as a happy memory.

As Yukinari thought back over his “previous life,” the sound of a door opening came from the direction of the changing room.

“Hm?” He turned his head quickly to see the door opening and a single figure stepping through into the bathroom. It was obviously a girl.

“Seriously...?” Yukinari said in a low groan, narrowing his eyes. And through the veil of steam came Berta, naked as the day she was born.

Yukinari had already seen the shape of her body back when she was wearing that sheer cloth, so he was already mostly familiar with it, but there was no denying that it created a different impression here in the bathroom. She had a gorgeous, well-proportioned body that curved in all the right places. The smooth roundness of her breasts was greatly arousing to the senses, and her skin too, wet from the steam, was undeniably seductive.

Berta walked directly toward Yukinari.

“What are you doing?” Yukinari voiced the obvious question.

It was difficult to tell whether it was because of the bathroom’s temperature or whether she was embarrassed, but Berta’s cheeks reddened. “I exist to be offered to the erdgod, so...”

“That’s really not a reason...”

Maybe she thought of herself as having died once already, and so she didn’t care what happened to her? But the way she was willingly exposing her naked body to him now was almost as if she was *asking* to be assaulted—

“Hold on, so this *is* what you meant when you said you didn’t mind being eaten?”

“I don’t know if you are an erdgod, or something different.” Berta came right up to Yukinari and kneeled. “But you aren’t trying to eat me... And if this continues... I won’t be able to do my job...”

Yukinari wondered if being accused of “coming back without doing her job” had caused her to feel strangely pressured.

“Since you assume the form of a gentleman, I thought that in order to please you, I should... um...”

“Okay, look. I’m very happy and all. I mean, what more can a guy ask for, right?” Yukinari tilted his head toward the ceiling yet again and sighed. “But you know how it is. There’s someone here who’ll be mad at me.” Yukinari pointed.

“Huh...?” Berta looked behind her. There was the door that she had just now come through. It was made of wood, made loud sounds merely by being opened and closed, and seemed to be slightly distorted. And it looked like it wasn’t completely shut. There was a slight gap.

And on the other side of that gap—who knows how long she’d been there—Dasa could be seen polishing Red Chili with a blank expression on her face. Yukinari felt like asking why she had chosen that place specifically to polish her gun, but Dasa would probably not have answered anyway.

“...Dirty.” A solitary word spilled quietly from Dasa’s lips as she stopped polishing Red Chili. For some reason, she also half-cocked it and made a show of spinning the cylinder.

“You see the nightmare I have to deal with?”

Berta seemed confused.

“More to the point,” Yukinari said to the ceiling. He felt uncomfortable looking at her directly. “Did that Fiona Schillings tell you to do this?”



Berta said nothing, but looking at the way her body was subtly trembling, he seemed to have hit the bullseye. Supply a woman for the sake of the town—not an idea one would expect from a young woman like Fiona, but not one that was unheard of, either. Or perhaps it was the priests who had instructed Berta to use her body to manipulate Yukinari. If Yukinari felt even a little grateful for it, that would already be a success, and if he got passionate about her and succumbed to her body, so much the better. That was probably their thinking.

“All that stuff about your ‘job’ or whatever... let’s put that on hold for now. How about you just come on in?” Yukinari pointed to the bath, which was full to the brim with hot water. “There’s no point in you getting cold.”

●

While Yukinari was in the bath, Fiona had arranged a meeting with the priests in her office.

“Demigod or whatever else he may be,” said one of the priests, “he must be made to take responsibility for killing the erdgod that was protecting this land.”

Once they accepted the reality of the situation, they were quick to change their thinking. Of course, being a priest in this area demanded that of you. After all, the shrine maiden candidates and the priests lived under the same roof and ate food from the same pot, and yet the priests had to send them away to be sacrificed—and they had to do this on a regular basis. Granted, the shrine maidens were being raised for this purpose, but even so, no one who formed a strong attachment to things could possibly fill such a position.

The priests were attempting to come to an agreement about installing Yukinari as the new erdgod.

“However, I doubt it is within our power to keep him bound in any way.”

“After all, he has enough power to fell an erdgod.”

“In which case, I would suggest the wisest move is to win him over by presenting him with a shrine maiden.”

In short, they seemed to reason that since he looked like a man, they might be able to win him over by sending him a woman. It was an indecent idea, but

there was no other way.

“I have already spoken to Berta about this. Please, rest at ease.” Fiona closed her eyes and breathed out deeply. “How long must this go on?”

“Well... These are the laws by which our world is governed, I’m afraid. It is not in our power to do anything about them.” The high priest spoke as if lecturing her. “Animals eat the grass, people eat the animals, and gods eat the people. That is the way of the world. There is no use fighting it. You just need to accept it.”

“Do I?” Fiona narrowed her eyes and glared at the high priest. “But in the capital—”

“You’re referring to the True Church of Harris?” The high priest shot back the question as if to stop Fiona in her tracks. “We, too, have heard the rumors. They say the Missionary Order can fell even erdgods. The word is that they are gaining more and more followers.”

“Yes.”

The Church had a lot of influence in the capital. In fact, the majority of people who lived there were believers in the Church. Royalty, nobles, and commoners alike followed the True Church of Harris. Historically speaking, their school of thought was relatively new, but despite this, the Church’s easily understandable doctrine and the “power” it had displayed on numerous occasions had led to a rapid increase in followers.

“But Deputy Mayor—no, Milady,” the high priest said in a gentle tone, “think of what your ancestors would say if you abandoned the time-honored traditions and replaced them with such emerging teachings. Think of the sorrow it would bring to your father, who lies bedridden.”

“Yes, I can imagine.”

Fiona had attended the school in the capital for about four years. Besides reading and writing, it was a place to acquire a broader knowledge and develop critical thinking. There were others there just like her, from all kinds of regions, who had come there to learn. Through associating with them, Fiona had learned that the kinds of unreasonable customs and traditions that took root in

rural areas truly did come in all shapes and sizes, and most of them were irrational. In Fiona's mind, the sacrifices to the erdgod were the epitome of this.

However, no one would even attempt to change their way of thinking—not the high priest, not the lesser priests, nor even most of the townspeople. Fiona thought that they were probably scared. To change your way of thinking was to admit that you had been wrong before. If they admitted that offering regular sacrifices was itself a mistake, they would have nowhere left to turn. It was because they believed that they were doing the right thing that they had been able to keep such cruelty going as a tradition for so long.

"We have our own way of life here. I urge you—"

"I understand."

As the high priest admonished her in a calm tone as if he knew everything, Fiona hid her irritation and simply nodded.

●

The night air felt good on his heated body.

Yukinari had gone out alone into the mansion's courtyard and was cooling himself down.

Dasa had immediately fallen asleep in her own room. The exhaustion of the journey had probably caught up with her. By now, she was probably sleeping so soundly that even pinching her cheek and pulling on it wouldn't wake her up. She may not have complained, but Yukinari could tell that she was overdoing it.

"...But still."

If chased, you had to run. The only people Yukinari and Dasa had to rely on in this world were each other. If someone wanted them dead, they had no choice but to run and never stop. No matter how strong he was in battle, if he had to constantly be on the alert for assailants, his mental stability would wear down within a month.

"This part of me is just the same as ever," Yukinari muttered, looking up at the starry sky.

"Yukinari."

A voice called to him from behind. “So this is where you were.”

He could tell who it was without turning around. To tell the truth, he had basically known that someone was approaching him. He could sense her presence. Although he couldn’t say that he had fully mastered this body yet, he had to admit that its senses were abnormally sharp. Not just that, he had strong arms and legs, and stamina as well. His body was highly capable in all aspects.

That was why he found it frustrating that his mental fortitude was still locked at the same level. Of course, that was what made Yukinari who he was, and proof of his identity.

“Was Berta not to your liking?” Fiona asked as she stood beside Yukinari.

“It’s not about whether she’s ‘to my liking.’ And I just knew you put her up to it.”

“Or is it a matter of numbers? You have a girl traveling with you, so I thought one would be sufficient, but we do have other shrine maidens. If you’d like more, it’s quite possible for us to supply them. If you would do us the favor of letting us know your type, I am sure the priests would find someone suitable.” Fiona had no qualms about discussing this. Perhaps this showed they had a working system for "producing" new sacrifices.

Yukinari didn’t appreciate her attitude of speaking of others like objects. So he decided to mess with her a little.

“Type. How about... blonde hair, green eyes?”

Fiona’s face tensed.

“I like a woman who’s had a good upbringing and behaves like a princess. And I want to pin her down and make her squeal. Yeah, that sounds like my type. Think you could get me one of those?”

Despite looking overwhelmed, after a pause, Fiona gathered together a response.

“Yukinari.”

“Yes, Princess?”

“I’m not certain whether or not I can squeal for you, but would you like to

come to my room? Right now?”

“It doesn’t have to be squealing, panting’s fine too—wait, what?” Yukinari looked at Fiona with wide eyes. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“I should like to think I do,” said Fiona, forcing a smile.

Her profile, which in appearance still held its youth, now looked terribly grown up—no, even aged. She had probably been through a lot more than Yukinari had thought, and understood the world that much more as a result. At the very least, a person who had gone through life without ever making a difficult decision, without ever being inconvenienced, could never wear a face like this.

“I am the mayor’s daughter, don’t you forget. The daughter of the person who governs this town. If I can protect the entire town at the cost of my own purity, I would call that a very small price to pay.”

“...Wow.”

“My father wanted me to become a good ruler, and so he sent me to the school in the capital in order to broaden my perception. I think he spent a not-insignificant sum of money on it. Someone who’s probably starving to death somewhere out there today and whom we were forced to abandon could probably have been saved with that money.”

“That’s—”

“So, I can’t afford to become a substitute for the shrine maidens. If I were to be eaten by an erdgod, that money would be wasted, money that could have been used to save five or ten people. If I’m going to sacrifice this body, it will only be when I’m certain that by doing so I can save the lives of at least ten people living in this town.” Fiona spoke just the facts, without emotion.

“Yuki, if there’s one thing I can say for certain about you, it’s that you aren’t eating and killing shrine maidens like an erdgod does. So when Berta and I offer ourselves to you, you know that we wouldn’t be ‘one use only,’ don’t you?”

“...Well... I guess,” Yukinari said with a vague smile.

“You could protect this town for five years, ten years, or perhaps even longer.

That would be more than adequate compensation for us.”

“Sorry, but... making it rain, stopping floods, and making the land fertile... all that is impossible for me, you know.”

“Nevertheless, you felled the erdgod, didn’t you? That is none other than a proof that you have the same level of power as the gods.”

“Not this again...” Yukinari sighed and slapped a palm against Durandall on his hip. “Like I said earlier, I just used a slightly special weapon.”

He had fiddled with Durandall’s appearance a little, but practically speaking, it was just a cut-down lever-action rifle, a Winchester M92 Randall Custom, with a blade attached to it. It took some getting used to because of the weight balance and so on, but ordinary people could obviously use it, too.

“I seriously wouldn’t mind just giving you this thing to pay for one night’s accommodation.”

“I don’t know what kind of thing that weapon is—but it won’t do us any good just to be given a sword. Any sword is no more than a stick without a swordsman.”

“Fair point.” Yukinari shrugged his shoulders. Even if the inhabitants of this town obtained Durandall, it would take some time to learn to use it effectively. There were also other things to consider: the supply of .44 Magnum bullets and the replacement of worn or damaged parts. Certainly, it was not as simple as handing over Durandall and everything would be solved. In that sense, working with guns was difficult in a lot of ways.

“By the way...” Fiona suddenly changed the topic. “You seem to be traveling somewhere... Do you have some goal you’re in a hurry to reach?”

Yukinari hesitated for a moment. This had nothing to do with Fiona. He had no obligation to talk to her about it. But after having made Fiona talk about her “resolve,” it felt unfair to not speak a single word about himself.

“I made a promise to someone,” he said, looking back in the direction of the mansion. “That I’d protect the girl you saw me with. Dasa.”

“Protect her from what?”

That one, Yukinari couldn’t answer. He couldn’t decide how Fiona’s attitude would change if she found out the truth. Even more so if she had once been in the capital. This girl was astonishingly rational—but even so, humans were incapable of making all their decisions based purely on rationality, like a machine.

“Is that something you can’t do here?” Fiona asked, tilting her head. It was unclear how she had interpreted Yukinari’s silence.

“I don’t know...” He had promised Jirina that he would protect Dasa. To Yukinari, the alchemist Jirina Urban was a mother, a sister, a savior, and someone sorely missed after her death. He could never see her again. Therefore, the promise he made her was unbreakable.

However, how to keep that promise was not necessarily set in stone. It was unclear to Yukinari whether even continuing to run was truly the best option. The fact was that Dasa seemed to be very tired, and if they kept up this burdensome journey, a fatal problem could develop someday. But still...

“I really... don’t know.”

The night wore on. With the night air cooling their bodies, Yukinari and Fiona stood awhile in silence, under a canopy of stars.

Chapter Three: A Curious Beast

This place was called the sanctuary. It was a place to worship the erdgod. In fact, however, this was a sacrificial altar, and not the kind of thing that should be called a building. Although there were pillars and ceilings, there were no walls to partition the inside from the outside. It was simply a feeding ground for the monster called an erdgod—no, it was simply a dinner plate.

The sanctuary was empty now. Just the other day, a fierce battle had unfolded here, and the carcasses of those killed had been left here to rot. Yet now, they were gone without a trace, as if the whole place had been wiped clean. There weren't even any bloodstains. The bodies of the erdgod and its familiars had suddenly disappeared.

"VUOOOOOoooOORRR...!"

A voice carried to the sanctuary from somewhere deep inside the nearby forest. It sounded like the howling of a beast, and yet it had something to it that was clearly different from any animal. It was the ring of intelligence. Compared to the voice of an ordinary human, it was terribly primitive, and alien... but that made it feel all the more raw.

Neither human nor animal, it was too uncanny for a single word to describe. That voice was the proof that animals that had discarded their animality had descended upon this land now that an erdgod "vacancy" had formed—just as Fiona predicted.

●

Dawn broke.

Yukinari and Dasa decided to take a walk around the town. In truth, the option of leaving the town as soon as possible remained very attractive, and Yukinari himself might have been prepared to do so. However, Dasa's tiredness was more serious than he'd thought, and so they had decided to postpone their departure for the time being.

After checking the condition of Dasa's eyes, Yukinari glanced toward her case. "Okay, let's go check this place out. Make sure you bring Red Chili, Dasa. Just in case."

"...Already have... it. Spare bullets... too."

Yukinari slung Durandall over his shoulder, and the two of them started walking down the second floor corridor of the Schillings residence.

"Lord Yukinari—"

Berta was standing at the top of the staircase. Today, instead of that excessively seductive shrine maiden outfit, she had on the same kind of clothes any completely ordinary woman in this town would wear. Because of that, she looked somewhat more composed and brighter than when they had first met. She really did look like any ordinary girl now. However—

Don't tell me she's been standing there all this time?

That suspicion suddenly crept into Yukinari's mind.

Unless you did something crazy like jumping out of a window, you had to go down these stairs to leave the Schillings residence. In other words, the position where Berta was standing was a key point to monitor so that Yukinari and Dasa couldn't leave without telling anyone.

Of course, even if that were the case, it was probably not Berta who had wanted to do this. It was much more likely that Fiona or the priests had given her instructions.

"Are you going out?" Berta asked, tilting her head slightly.

"Yeah. Thought we'd wander about the town for a bit."

Hearing this, a small and gentle smile rose to Berta's face. "In that case, allow me to show you around. I was born and grew up here. I know every corner of it."

"But you have things you want to do too, right?" Yukinari said carefully. "We're just gonna stroll about for a bit, you don't really need to *guide* us..."

"No, I am a shrine maiden," Berta said, shaking her head. "Serving the erdgod is my role."

“That doesn’t mean you have to—”

“My body and heart exist for the erdgod, too.”

She must have meant that her desire was to do something for Yukinari. She was probably still laboring over the fact that she couldn’t complete her “job” as a shrine maiden. She hadn’t been eaten by that monster, nor had she succeeded in using her body to service Yukinari the night before. She was probably feeling uneasy, as if everything had been left unfinished.

Of course, Yukinari did not regret helping Berta. However, it was undoubtedly the result of him having done so that her very position in society was now in danger. In that sense, Yukinari felt responsible for her.

“Okay. I think I’ll take you up on that, then.”

“Yuki...?” Dasa looked at Yukinari’s face from beside him. She seemed a little surprised. Berta’s expression also filled with surprise—and joy.

“Are you sure?!”

“Don’t ask me that when you won’t take no for an answer... Anyway, this town is pretty big. The last thing we want to do is get lost, so on second thought, we probably would be better with a guide.” The explanation was more for Dasa’s sake than Berta’s.

Berta nodded enthusiastically, her expression brightening. “Yes, Lord Yukinari! I will do my very best to show you around!”

“Okay, you don’t have to go too nuts...”

And so, Yukinari and Dasa decided to have Berta guide them around town. Perhaps Berta had indeed been tasked with watching them, because despite meeting the gaze of several Schillings family servants downstairs and at the mansion’s entrance, none of them said a word. They each merely gave a single, reverential bow. It was likely that Fiona had impressed upon them not to be rude. It wasn’t a bad feeling to be treated politely, but when Yukinari thought about the reason—that they expected him to be an erdgod—it weighed upon him quite heavily.

“This way.”

Berta walked a few steps ahead of Yukinari and Dasa, frequently turning back to talk to them. Soon they reached the center of the town and the main street that ran through it like an artery.

It was a small town, but still very busy, and there were street vendors everywhere selling their wares. However, most of them only had food and daily necessities; there were only a few shops dealing in luxuries and sundries. The town as a whole was probably poor. It looked like it had all the elements of a reasonably respectable town—there were no issues with the buildings, and the districts looked well organized—but Yukinari supposed that luxuries were something they couldn't afford to think about.

"I see..." muttered Yukinari.

This was a remote town in the countryside, where the quality of the harvest had a direct effect on the population. It was perhaps no surprise that they would want to pray to the gods for help. But—

"They aren't *completely* disconnected from the capital, right?"

"I don't... think so..." Dasa answered.

Last night, they had eaten dinner at the Schillings residence. There, they had been provided with a whole assortment of tableware that appeared to have been industrially mass-produced. In particular, the sets of knives, forks, and spoons that had been set out had all been made the same way, and with such precision that it was impossible to imagine that they could have been handmade.

In other words, there *were* industrial products flowing here from the capital, even if they were extremely limited. And apart from that, there were also metalworkers in this town. In which case—

"This is the orphanage where I grew up." Berta's voice interrupted Yukinari's thoughts, and he looked in the direction she was pointing. There towered a surprisingly impressive-looking stone building.

"Orphanage, huh."

"Would you like to see?" Berta asked with a tilt of her head.

“...Yeah. Please.”

“Okay. In that case—”

Berta went through the gate and into the building. Yukinari and Dasa followed behind.

Inside the building, a number of girls were in the middle of cleaning. One of them noticed Berta, and a look of shock spread across her face.

“Berta...!”

Once they heard that name, the other girls immediately stopped what they were doing and came running up to them, still holding their cleaning supplies.

“Didn’t you go to the ritual...?”

“Berta!” a younger girl said. “But how?!”

The girls’ expressions were filled with disconcertment. It wasn’t that they were pleased. Rather, they looked as if they had seen the dead walking among them—

“Some things happened and... I’m back.” Berta said, managing an ambiguous smile.

There was a certain awkwardness in her tone of voice, too. To her, it might have seemed like these girls were criticizing her for coming back without doing her job, just like the townspeople from yesterday. But—

“Then, Sis, Sis, can you live with us again now?”

A few of the girls who were especially young were clinging to Berta with their faces lit up. Maybe they didn’t yet understand the meaning behind “shrine maidens” and the “ritual.”

“I’m... not sure.” Berta looked a little troubled and at a loss for an answer. But at the same time, she looked somehow happy.

“...Yuki...”

“Yeah?”

Dasa called Yukinari’s name from beside him, as if she had suddenly thought of something.

“I’m glad we... saved... her.”

“Yeah.” Yukinari nodded.

Dasa was probably seeing Jirina and herself in Berta and the young girls.

Jirina had been Dasa’s only family. She had no parents that she could remember. For all intents and purposes, Jirina had been the one who had raised her. That was why being robbed of her had left such a big hole in Dasa’s heart.

There was nothing more Yukinari could do for her in that regard, but—

“I’m glad, too.” He nodded and plunked his palm on top of Dasa’s head, then started to run his fingers through her silver hair.

“...mn.”

Behind her glasses, Dasa’s sky-blue eyes crinkled into a happy smile.

●

While Yukinari’s group was visiting the orphanage, Fiona was talking with the priests in her office at the Schillings residence.

Specifically, the priests had been around investigating the state of the town and the sentiments of its residents, and were now giving her their reports.

“...So,” one of the priests said with a clouded expression, “the people are growing suspicious of that man, the woman with him, and Berta as well.”

“In particular,” another priest added, “because Berta came home alive without doing her job, many are fearful of incurring the erdgod’s anger. There are even calls for the ritual to be conducted anew, with his female partner as a second offering.”

The townspeople weren’t thinking in their wildest dreams that Yukinari might have killed the erdgod. Indeed, had Fiona not received the initial report from the priests, even she would not have believed it—even if she had been told of the erdgod’s demise by Yukinari personally. So it was no wonder that the townspeople were convinced that Berta had simply run back home. And because there hadn’t been a sacrifice at the sanctuary, the citizens were wary that the erdgod might be angered by this violation of their contract and attack the town.

The fact that the erdgod had died—that Yukinari had killed it—was being kept very quiet. A gag order had been placed on the priests, and there were very few people who had all the accurate information. But eventually, someone would go to visit the sanctuary, and once that happened, it would not be long before it became known that the erdgod had been killed. No—before that, the next erdgod might be born, and might come to the town seeking a contract. Once that happened, they wouldn't be able to keep it a secret anymore.

"This isn't good..." Fiona said, sighing.

It was conceivable that the people of this town could attack Yukinari, his companion Dasa, or Berta. What would Yukinari do then? If he felt like fighting... it might not be a total massacre, but dozens, no, hundreds of people could end up dead. There needed to be some kind of compromise. For example —

"Now that the erdgod has been killed, in the not-so-distant future, demigods and xenobeasts will sense that it is missing, and they will come here. Can we not at least *superficially* position that man in the sanctuary as a new erdgod?"

This question came from the high priest and seemed to represent the thoughts of all the others. Essentially, even if it wasn't possible for Yukinari to "settle" in this land like an erdgod—to form a spiritual bond with the land and protect the region—perhaps he could still carry out the other role of an erdgod: protecting the town from the threat of demigods and xenobeasts. Given that Yukinari had killed an erdgod, it was certainly true that he had the power to make that possible.

"It's up to you, Deputy Mayor." The priest pressed Fiona for an answer, a serious expression on his face.

"He is still not convinced, unfortunately..."

Yesterday evening, Fiona had again ordered Berta to win him over. The words she had actually used were simply, "Just service him somehow and get him to like you, any way you can." However, it didn't seem to be going very well. It was likely because of the girl he had with him—Dasa. The relationship between her and Yukinari was unclear, but there could be no mistaking that she was precious to him. Then...

“If we had to, we could take the girl hostage.”

“You actually mean that?” Fiona asked, honestly hoping for them to say no.

However, every one of the priests, the high priest included, nodded back. They were deadly serious.

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Yukinari learned that the orphanage was, as a matter of fact, being run by the priests. The reason the building was so splendidly built was something to do with it being created as part of the sanctuary—not the ritual site, but the place the priests were stationed. That sanctuary was just beyond this orphanage.

In that case, Yukinari thought, he might bump into those priests soon—but he was told that they were all out. So, with no sign of any trouble on the horizon, Yukinari was taking it easy while the orphans showed him hospitality.

“I’m afraid it isn’t anything special...” Berta said. She and the other young girls had brought him some tea.

“Thanks,” Yukinari said, and took the wooden cup and saucer that Berta was offering him.

There was something on the saucer that looked kind of like a tree root. Was this a snack? Or were you meant to stir the tea with this to... add flavor to the tea or something? He turned back towards Dasa and gave her a questioning look. She didn’t seem to know either, and replied by shaking her head.

“Hmm...”

He didn’t want to repay Berta’s kindness by doing something really stupid. Unfortunately, she had stepped out of the room—presumably having something to do—and so he was unable to ask her what he was meant to do with it.

Yukinari sipped his tea to buy himself some time while he considered his options.

“Mister?”

Yukinari looked beside him to see that a young orphan, about five or six years old, had appeared from somewhere and was now watching him with a curious

expression on her face.

“Aren’t you going to eat it?”

“Ah, so you do eat this thing.”

“Yeah. You bite it. And then, it tastes sweet.”

“Right...”

Apparently, it wasn’t a kind of fruit or flower, but a plant more like sugarcane that stored sugar directly in its stems, leaves, and roots. Yukinari took the root in his hand, and—

“Hm?” He glanced in the girl’s direction again. She was gazing straight at his hand with her mouth half-open.

“You want it?” Yukinari finally asked.

“Can I?!” Her face brightened immediately, and she stretched out her hand for the root. Yukinari handed it to her, and the girl used both hands to snap it in two, then snapped each of those halves again, splitting it into four.

Then, turning around, the girl said, “Hey, come see what he gave me!”

Two young girls of about the same age came running from the doorway. Evidently, they had been watching Yukinari from there for a while. It was rare for the orphanage to have visitors, so this was understandable behavior for children full of curiosity.

But—

“Hey! What are you doing?”

Berta had come back into the room. Her words indicated that she was admonishing them, but her tone of voice wasn’t very stern. Yukinari got the sense that she was in disbelief at how brazen these young girls were.

But in any case, this changed his impression of Berta slightly. Berta had always mostly given the impression of a mature but somehow timid adult, but the way she treated her “sisters” that shared the orphanage with her was definitely more reminiscent of an older sister.

The priests took minimal involvement in the management of the orphanage,

so the older girls had no choice but to take command over the running of day-to-day life. The result was this system, where the older orphans looked after the young.

Berta crouched down in front of the girls and gently told them off. “That sweet is for our visitor, remember?”

“But he gave it to me...”

“When that happens, you say, ‘No, thank you.’”

“Aww,” the girls cried out in a chorus of disappointment.



“But there weren’t any sweets yesterday, or the day before...”

“Uhh, please don’t worry about me,” Yukinari said, putting on an amiable smile. “I, ehh... What can I say, uh... I don’t like sweet stuff, anyway.”

That wasn’t exactly true; he just wanted to let the girls eat it. From their obvious reactions and the way that they used the word “sweet” to refer to a tree root that had almost gone straight from the ground to the plate, he could tell it was a rare treat for them, as plain as it looked. And he thought that food should probably be given to the people who would get the most joy and pleasure from eating it.

“Me... too,” Dasa said, and offered her saucer to the girls as well. The girls brightly thanked Dasa in unison and took the sweet without hesitation before Berta could even begin to stop them. Obviously feeling like they’d made a new friend, one asked Dasa if they could call her “Big Sis.”

Yukinari himself felt a warm glow watching them. There was something pleasant about how they were so honest about what they wanted. Dasa, meanwhile, was blinking with a stunned look on her face.

“What’s up?” Yukinari asked.

“Big... Sis,” Dasa mumbled, seemingly confused. “They called me... Big Sis.”

“Well, from their point of view—”

Yukinari got that far, then realized. Dasa had never really interacted with children younger than herself before. So she’d only ever experienced being treated like a *younger* sister.

Dasa was always the young one—obviously so from the perspective of her actual big sister Jirina, but also from Yukinari’s point of view as well—so it was impossible for him to avoid treating her like a little sister. He imagined he was treating her that way, at least. Yukinari had never actually had one, only his older sister Hatsune, so he had to rely on his imagination. But—enough with the technicalities.

“Huh. Dasa the grown-up, older sister. Hard to imagine.”

“...Yuki.” Dasa puffed up her cheeks a bit and glared at Yukinari. “What do you

mean by... that?”

“Nothing really?”

“You know, I’m not just... someone for you to—” Dasa started to say something, then stopped. Her cheeks went red, and she looked the other way.

“For me to what?” Yukinari asked with a bemused chuckle.

This wasn’t the first time that Dasa had reacted peculiarly to the words “older sister.” She had acted unusually like this a number of times before—a sort of irritated, sort of yearning response. Yukinari didn’t know what this was, and Dasa wouldn’t answer even when asked...

“I am so very sorry...” Berta seemed to be feeling very embarrassed and apologetic. She looked exactly like an older sister apologizing for the misconduct of her younger siblings, and Yukinari found that feeling very nostalgic.

Hatsune and Jirina.

They had been so important to Yukinari—and he had lost them both.

“Seriously, you don’t need to worry about it,” Yukinari said, watching the young girls run out of the room giggling as Berta shooed them out.

“I got to see a lot of good things.”

“Good things?”

“Dasa being called ‘Big Sis.’ What you look like as a big sister. Stuff like that.”

A troubled expression fell upon Berta’s face. Yukinari wondered if he had said something bad.

“I don’t think I’m a good big sister...” Berta’s expression suddenly clouded over. “I’m a disgrace for coming back alive...” Yukinari frowned. Just as he’d thought, it was still playing on Berta’s mind that she had not done her “job” as a shrine maiden—as a sacrifice.

“What kind of big sister am I, when I’m not even able to do a simple job to protect my little sisters...”

She must have been talking about preventing the other girls from being

offered as sacrifices by becoming a sacrifice herself. According to what he'd been told by Fiona and the others, if the shrine maiden could not do her sacrificial job, the erdgod would often go berserk, and two or three shrine maidens would be needed to quell its rage. It was certainly possible to say that despite Berta's dedication, she had been unable to fully protect the other girls. However—

"Sure you are," Yukinari said, and pointed to the tea that Berta had served to him. "You're servicing me plenty well."

"Lord..." Berta blinked a few times, seemingly unsure how to react. She lowered her gaze away from him a little before continuing. "Am I... um... really... giving you good service?"

"You are, yeah. You're even showing me around town and stuff."

"I just... wondered if it's all right for it to feel... this easy..." Berta hesitantly strung words together.

What she was trying to say, in short, seemed to be that this was far easier and involved less suffering than being eaten alive by the erdgod, so she wasn't really getting the sense that she was serving him. It seemed that "service" to Berta had to be some kind of hard work.

Maybe this feeling had arisen out of a sense of guilt for having been raised with the town's tax money. The priests and even the townspeople themselves had probably hammered that way of thinking into her at every opportunity so that she would naturally accept her fate as a sacrifice.

"It's fine. Seriously," Yukinari said strongly. "I feel sorry that the one you're serving isn't actually an erdgod. But that's not *your* fault. I was the one who chose to barge in on that ritual. If anything, you could be blaming me for this."

"No, I could never—" Berta looked shocked at the thought, as if she'd never even considered it.

"Anyway, if I'm gonna have you nearby, I'd way rather you be thinking, 'Serving him is so easy!' than, 'I'm suffering, it's hard,' and stuff. Personally."

"Oh, no, I wasn't—" Berta hurriedly shook her head. Then, she said in a mumble, "Lord Yukinari, you're... a strange person."

“Yeah, I’m aware I stick out as suspicious.”

“No, I meant, um...” Berta tried for a while to search for a good way of wording it. “I’m terribly sorry, I can’t express it very well...”

She was looking meekly at the ground and her cheeks were reddening. It almost looked like she—

“Uh... that’s okay,” Yukinari said, scratching his cheek out of a strange sense of embarrassment. Dasa glared at him with scornful eyes.

“...Womanizer.”

“What did I do?!” Yukinari cried out in protest, feeling like he’d been utterly wronged.

●

After Yukinari and Dasa had finished their tea and spent a short while playing with Berta’s “little sisters,” who had started to grow attached to them, they left the orphanage to walk through town again.

There hadn’t been any particular meaning in stopping by the orphanage, but Yukinari felt a little glad that he had. Ever since arriving in the town of Friedland, he had been constantly hearing about sacrifices and other sickening things. Having the chance to play with innocent children had been very comforting. However...

“I just can’t shake that feeling...” Yukinari said to himself as they walked down the street.

The town was acting strangely. Whenever the residents laid their eyes on Yukinari’s group, they immediately started to crowd together into little groups and whisper among themselves. And those groups would throw occasional glances toward them. Their gazes could not be said to be friendly by any stretch of the imagination.

“I thought so...” Yukinari muttered, looking at Berta walking in front of them. The townspeople’s stares were focused not on Yukinari and Dasa, but rather on her.

Berta was walking normally at first, but as time went on, she started slouching

and bending slightly forward. Her neck was shrinking into her shoulders as she walked, as if she was hoping she could just disappear inside herself.

“What the hell is their deal? Whispering like that. It’s creepy.” Yukinari deliberately pretended that he hadn’t realized the reason.

Berta stopped in her tracks, turned back to face him, and said with a forced smile on the verge of crying, “That’s... because I had the nerve to come back when I didn’t do my job...”

“You mean as a sacrifice?”

“Yes.” Berta nodded.

“Shrine maidens depart for the temple regularly. The townspeople’s taxes and donations are what’s used to raise the orphans chosen to be shrine maidens. That’s what keeps this town protected. We’ve had this tradition for a very long time...” She spoke clearly, but with her eyes to the ground. “Our daily lives are only possible because of their taxes and generosity...”

“Sounds kinda like the sacrificial rituals of the ancient Aztecs and Incas...” Yukinari recalled something he’d heard in his previous world: in ancient Aztec and Incan society, ritual sacrifices were conducted in which sacrifices were killed as a tribute to one of their gods. Up until the moment the sacrifice was killed, they would be treated as if they were the incarnation of that god. They would live without ever needing to work and never suffering any inconvenience. However, in the end they would have to pay the bill for it all with their death.

“What’s that? Ancient... as te...?” Berta asked Yukinari with a mystified expression.

“Ah, nothing,” Yukinari said, shaking his head. “Just talking to myself.”

If he started talking about his “past world” here, he would have an awful lot of other things he’d have to explain as well, including why he and Dasa were even on this aimless journey in the first place. That would be bad. Probably.

“Only...”

Something occurred to Yukinari, and he turned to the orphanage behind him.

It was solidly built out of stone, and looked considerably better than the other buildings. However, upon much closer inspection, the building had no external decoration of any kind. Its appearance could be summed up with a single word: plain. To Yukinari, it almost looked like a prison.

“With the rituals of the ancient Aztecs and Incas, I heard that the sacrifices were allowed to have their own way all the time, until the very day they were to be killed...”

It was faint knowledge at the back of his mind, so he didn’t know how reliable it was. But he thought he remembered hearing that the future sacrifices to a god were often equated with that god, and the people served them with the utmost reverence until the fateful day arrived. Yes, it was an honor to be a sacrifice. Yukinari felt uncomfortable with the idea—it went against his values—but the sacrifices of the ancient Aztecs and Incas might actually have been glad to give their lives for it. But here...

“It’s more like—” Yukinari swallowed his next word back down. He couldn’t bring himself to say “livestock” in front of Berta.

“Yuki...?” Dasa looked up at Yukinari questioningly.

“It’s nothing,” Yukinari said, and smiled at her. Just then—

“Yukinari.”

Fiona and a few of the priests were walking towards them from the other side of the street.

Fiona and the others suggested to them that they all visit the “sanctuary.”

“To see for ourselves, Yukinari, whether you really did fell the erdgod.”

That was the pretext, at least. Yukinari had his doubts whether it was the actual reason. If they only wanted to find out whether the death of the erdgod was true or not, there was no need to make the three of them come as well. And certainly there was no point in having ten or so priests tag along.

That being said, he was starting to get sick of walking through town anyway, due to the townspeople constantly staring icily at Berta, so he decided to go along with Fiona’s proposal.

However, when they reached the sanctuary, they were unable to confirm the corpse of the erdgod. It wasn't there. Anywhere. Not a single part of it.

It wasn't only the erdgod that was missing; even the bodies of its familiars were nowhere to be found. There were traces of blood here and there, but they were truly no more than traces, and it was impossible to distinguish whether they had come from the erdgod and its familiars or from the many shrine maidens that had been sacrificed here up until now.

"Where is it that you say you felled the erdgod?" Fiona asked.

"Well, it *should* be just around here," Yukinari said, pointing to one of the sanctuary's broken stone pillars.

That's strange. A body can't decompose to nothing in just a couple of days. Was it eaten by something? This place is surrounded by forest... I could imagine there being a pack of animals around...

"There's no body," Fiona said, frowning.

"No, there isn't." He was forced to agree. "Any chance that it could've melted and, uh, disappeared?"

He looked to Dasa for help, but she shook her head. It probably meant that she didn't know. Like him, she knew about as much as was written in a dictionary and nothing beyond that.

Berta offered an explanation in Dasa's place. Perhaps she thought she might as well, since she had nothing else to do. "I've been told that erdgods are creatures that have lived for a very long time and exceeded a certain 'limit.'"

"Exceeded a limit?" he asked.

"Yes. They're living creatures that have exceeded their intended lifespans in some way or another and, as a result, gained tremendous power and wisdom surpassing human beings. We call such beings 'gods,' or sometimes 'spirits.'"

However, "spirits" were apparently beings that had begun to discard their physical forms. To Yukinari, it seemed like a stretch to call them "living creatures."

"Sounds like the *Yaoyorozu no Kami.*"

“*Yaoyo*... What’s that?”

“Nothing,” he said, shrugging.

“Because of their power, they reign over humans as higher beings,” Fiona said to him, taking over from Berta. “That includes demigods, erdgods and their familiars, and xenobeasts. Erdgods are what we call the beings that manage to form a spiritual bond with the land and become able to exert influence upon their environment.”

“I’ve pretty much heard about all of that...”

“We—our ancestors—made ‘contracts’ with those erdgods. We’ve maintained those contracts for generations. We’ve relied upon the erdgods for this area’s protection in exchange for regularly offering them shrine maidens. The reason they’re called ‘gods’ is the bizarre way they look.” There was clear bitterness in the tone of Fiona’s voice. She evidently wasn’t a supporter of this sacrificial system.

“...Demigods... erdgods... xenobeasts... spirits...” It was Dasa muttering the words. She was keeping her voice low, so it would only be caught by Yukinari. “...In the Church’s... ideology... they’re just collectively called... ‘demons’...”

“Demons, huh?” Yukinari also kept his voice somewhat subdued in reply. “Doesn’t surprise me that a monotheistic religion would treat them that way.”

“Yukinari.” Fiona looked into his face. “I know you said you didn’t want to, but given that you killed the ‘god’ that we were worshipping, we would like you to take responsibility for the fact that our town is now defenseless.”

“Like I said—”

“So I have a new proposal for you,” Fiona continued, cutting him off. “If you can’t do the same things as an erdgod, then please, at least stay here in this sanctuary.”

“...What?”

Yukinari looked around him. They may have been insisting on using the word “sanctuary” to describe this place, but the truth of the matter was you couldn’t reasonably call it a “sanctuary” anymore. The most you could say was that it

“used to be” a sanctuary. The structure here had been hard to call a building even before, but now several of the stone pillars were broken, and the huge slab that they had been supporting was tilting toward the ground. Asking them to live in this place wasn’t much different from telling them to camp out.

“This will also serve to prevent meaningless strife between you and the townspeople.”

“Oh. Right.” Yukinari nodded, a sour taste in his mouth.

The reason the townspeople, who had been giving Berta icy looks, had been condemning her was solely that they had the safety of the town in mind. That attitude hadn’t arisen out of a deeply-rooted reverence toward the erdgod. They didn’t actually care whether Berta became a sacrifice or not; as long as an erdgod or something similar was protecting the town, they would be happy.

As a corollary, if they learned that Yukinari had felled the erdgod, they would no doubt turn on him. In fact, they would probably lump Berta, Dasa, and Yukinari all together as equally responsible and demand they do something about it. And if the three of them refused, who knew what they might do...

“How are we supposed to live here, though?” Yukinari protested. “There’s nothing here.” Indeed, all that stood there now was a number of stone pillars. “It’s a bit much to ask us to sleep out in this windswept place.”

“We can build a hut that will serve the purpose,” Fiona said. “And of course—”

One of the priests interjected. “There is no need for the girl to live here.”

Beside Yukinari, Dasa pointed a finger at herself and tilted her head in confusion.

“Excuse me!” Fiona raised her voice. “I told you to leave that for now and let me persuade him—”

“The girl will live in town,” the priest said, ignoring Fiona. At exactly the same time, several other priests forced themselves between Yukinari and Dasa.

Yukinari reacted fast—then stopped himself. The priests were all reaching inside their robes.

They most likely had blades hidden in there. If he made any wrong moves, they would kill Dasa. That was what they were saying.

Both Yukinari and Dasa were armed with guns, but it would be far faster for a priest to pull a blade and slash or stab them at short range. And worst of all, Dasa's Red Chili was in her case. She couldn't immediately pull it out and fire.

Dasa had been within arm's reach, and because of that, Yukinari had let his guard down.

"Yuki—" Dasa's expression had stiffened a little. She no doubt understood the situation. Berta also looked flustered; her eyes were flicking back and forth between Yukinari and Fiona. It looked as though she hadn't been told about this.

"There's no need to worry," a priest said, his expression also somewhat strained. Maybe he was feeling the tension as well. "We will ensure that her basic needs are met."

"By throwing her in a place like the orphanage Berta grew up in?"

"Pardon?" the priest replied, as if he couldn't see anything wrong with that.

"Yukinari, I—" Fiona said, panicked.

"I know." Yukinari nodded back at her.

Judging by what she had said to the priest just now, this "hostage" business had probably been discussed beforehand, and Fiona had rejected it. She might have said that she would persuade Yukinari and told them not to get involved, but the priests had ignored her order as deputy mayor. They must have thought it unlikely that a young woman like her would be capable of persuading him.

Yukinari breathed a long sigh. "Goddammit."

He could imagine that Dasa might be put up as a possible sacrifice to prepare for the eventuality of him dying in a fight against the demigods and xenobeasts. From the perspective of the people living here, that would be the most rational approach, and one that would receive no complaints from anyone except those involved.

"Look," Yukinari said, scratching the back of his head. "I'm willing to admit it

may have been a bad move for me to kill the erdgod before I knew how things worked around here. Okay, it *was* a bad move."

"Yuki—" Dasa tried to say something, but Yukinari saw the priests grip her shoulders tightly as if telling her to shut up.

"But people, how about you look a bit more at the 'here and now'?"

"The here and now?" The priests sounded suspicious. Fiona, meanwhile, had her eyes opened slightly wider than normal, as though Yukinari had seen right through her. There must have been something in his words that had resonated strongly with her.

Yukinari had discovered, or rather confirmed, a number of things while walking through town.

The level of this world's culture and civilization, when compared with Yukinari's "previous world," seemed at first glance like the Middle Ages: it was dominated by a terribly superstitious way of thinking, and in the noble name of preserving tradition, no one even considered improving their quality of life or reforming the system. It should be said that the people of this town were not simply lazy, of course; they just had too much else to deal with to think about such luxuries.

In actual fact, however, the technology and facilities to make a number of industrial products did exist in this world, and their benefits extended to this town as well, even if only in a limited capacity. This world didn't quite measure up to the 'present' of his previous one, but it was at least possible to consider it 'modern,' somewhere around the level of the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Of course, not everything had developed here the same way as in Yukinari's "previous world," but he thought that the people of this town should at least be able to find other ways to improve their standards of living instead of remaining stuck in the past.

"I understand that leaving everything to the erdgods or whatever is easier," Yukinari said, fixing his gaze on the priests. "You don't need to think about anything that way. But this can't go on for—"

His words were interrupted by a short, terrified shriek.

Everyone spun toward the source of the noise.

It had come from one of the priests, who had been a short distance away from the rest, investigating the state of the “sanctuary.”

He was—

Fiona and Berta’s screams stuck in their throats.

The priest was in the grip of a doomful beast of gigantic proportions. The priest’s head was split open, and the beast was guzzling the gray matter of his brain.

It unfurled a long tongue from its fang-filled mouth and inserted it into the priest’s skull. There came a series of disgusting slurps, each of which caused the priest’s body to convulse and his eyes to roll back into his head, so only the whites could be seen.

“...Xenobeast...!” Dasa said quietly. And she was right. This was what Fiona had called a xenobeast—an animal that had discarded its animality.

●

Fiona felt all the hairs on her body stand on end.

She knew *of* xenobeasts and demigods, but this was the first time she had been face-to-face with one. These monsters had very rarely dared to come close before, because the town had been protected by the erdgod—it was the erdgod’s territory. Even those monsters who had come here hoping that they could usurp the erdgod were usually killed by it well before any human laid eyes on them. But this—

“No... No, it’s too...”

This was completely different from looking at a picture or hearing a description. Just by *being there,* this monster filled everything around it with despair. She could tell at a glance: there was no way a person could fight this thing and win. It was covered in thick bristles, each of its four limbs was larger around than a human’s torso, and a huge number of horns—or perhaps fins—were growing up the length of its back all the way to its head. A human being wouldn’t even survive a collision with it. Their whole body would be

immediately smashed and torn apart, their last breath forcibly expelled.

The fingers on its two forearms were long like a human's, and they seemed capable of complex movements. In fact, even now the monster had those "hands" in a tight grip around the priest it had recently caught.

"...Xenobeast...!"

Fiona couldn't tell who had said that word, but they weren't mistaken. This was not a demigod. It was a monster that had both failed to become a demigod and deviated violently from what had once made it an animal.

One of the elements that made the demigods demigods was their clearly higher intelligence when compared to animals, most obviously their ability to speak human language (albeit poorly). However, this monster lacked that. It had yet to utter a single human word, and, most tellingly of all, its face was that of a beast or animal, never showing any human expression.

"R-Run..." one of the priests said from the ground. His legs must have been too weak from fear to follow his own advice. "Th-They'll eat your... your..."

The xenobeast was eating its victim's brain. Its long tongue lapped insistently at the contents of the priest's head, cracked open like a walnut, as it sucked and gorged on everything inside. If it had simply been hungry, there would have been plenty of other parts of the man it could have eaten, but this monster was first and foremost sticking to the brain—the fount of intelligence.

It was... trying to ascend. From a beast... to a god.

Some animals acquired intelligence naturally by living for a very long time. Some among the xenobeasts, however, were more eager. They sought out the places where intelligence dwelled—human brains, or the brains of other demigods—and fed on them in an attempt to push their intelligence over the threshold. This thing must have been one of those "strong-willed" creatures.

Fiona stood aghast, unable to tear her eyes from it.

The priest was no longer even twitching. The xenobeast must have finished consuming his brain. It tossed the body away, then cast its mindless, animal eyes around. Fiona couldn't tell what its criteria were, but when she realized that the focus of its gaze had met with hers, she inhaled sharply.

Its eyes were saying clearly that it was going to eat her next.

And barely a moment later—its already huge body rapidly grew large in her vision. She knew it was rushing straight toward her, but she couldn't move from where she was standing. It had struck terror in her, and she was completely in its grip.

She had to run.

She knew it, but her body wouldn't move.

She was going to be killed. No, devoured. Fiona pictured her own grisly end and grunted in revulsion.

The xenobeast barreled toward her, closer, closer, and then—

A short shout and a black blade penetrated that nightmare together.

Confusion reigned. The xenobeast staggered. And with unstoppable forward momentum, it lurched wildly to one side, passed her, and slammed hard into one of the sanctuary's remaining stone pillars.

It stooped down there for a while as the pillar crumbled.

"Wake up," someone said as they grabbed her by the arm and pulled.

She snapped to her senses and looked up to see that Yukinari was suddenly standing right beside her, holding that weapon of his—"Durandall," she thought it was called—in his right hand.

She noticed something strange lying on the ground. A lump of meat shaped like a human palm, but obviously several times larger. It was the end of one of the xenobeast's forearms.

"He... cut—?" she said distractedly.

The bristly body of a xenobeast was said to be difficult even to slice into. A normal blade would slide across the surface or clash uselessly against it. But this man had *cut off* one of its legs.

Granted, he had probably used the momentum of its own charge against it. But doing that would mean his hands taking the full weight and impact of that tackle. It would be like swinging an iron bar at a huge boulder rolling down at

you. Normally the weapon would just be smashed out of your grip.

“Hey.” Yukinari was calling out to her. “Is that thing what you’ve been calling a xenobeast?”

She looked up at his profile, half in a daze. “Ah... Yes.” She nodded.

“Let me make sure I’ve got this. It’s not the same thing as a demigod. ‘Beast’? It’s not a god at all, then?”

“Ah...” Still shaken and struggling to keep up, she tried her hardest to answer his question. “Demigods have powers just like erdgods except... they don’t have a territory... They have the same kind of intelligence, too, human intelligence... But xenobeasts...”

Yukinari frowned as he listened. “So we’re not gonna be talking things out with it.”

“Right...!”

It was possible that if they allowed it to eat a few more human brains or waited a few decades, this xenobeast might succeed in becoming a demigod. However, neither she nor the priests could afford to wait for it.

“Get back.” Yukinari stepped forward, putting himself between her and the beast. Then, he held that sword she’d heard so much about in a peculiar stance, resting it on the wrist of his raised left arm, and said, “I’m killing it. That okay?”

She noticed he’d thought to check with her. He must have learned from what happened the last time he killed a creature without thinking too deeply about it.

As she looked at his face from the side, she couldn’t see any trace of fear or hesitation, even with this monster in front of him. He genuinely thought that he could defeat it. That he could kill it. As for her—

“Y-Yes...!”

She could do nothing but nod.

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There was more than one of them.

Only one had charged in at first, but many followed its lead. Monsters—xenobeasts—of all shapes and sizes came out from between the trees. Every one of them had a sinister feel about it that was clearly nothing like that of an ordinary wild animal. Almost every living thing possesses an innate “functional beauty,” but in these creatures it was nowhere to be found. And yet—

This might be how humans look to animals, Yukinari thought.

The default for wild animals is to walk on four legs, not two. From their perspective, human beings, who have a body shape optimized for bipedal movement, must look like the strangest things they’ve ever seen.

In any case... the only choice here was to drive these monsters away and make an escape. Defeating them all would probably have been another option... if not for Fiona, Berta, and the priests. It would be too difficult with this many liabilities around.

Dasa already had Red Chili out. Yukinari started to give her directions. “Dasa, you’re in charge of Berta, the girl, and the rest of them.”

The large xenobeasts aside, there was a good possibility that Dasa could take down the smaller ones just with Red Chili. Even if that didn’t work out, she could at least wound them or threaten them or something. Anything to stop them attacking would be good enough.

“Also, if you’ve got any breathing room, give me sniper support.”

“...Bossy,” Dasa said, nodding anyway.

Satisfied, Yukinari looked back from Dasa and began by firing Durandall at the xenobeast with the severed front leg. There was a loud boom, and the .44 Magnum bullet pierced its massive, horribly misshapen body.

The monster twitched, and it shakily stood up.

Yukinari frowned. “Like it got bit by a mosquito.”

That might have been an exaggeration, but it was clear that it hadn’t been dealt a fatal wound. Yukinari was using soft point hunting bullets with an emphasis on destructive power, but even so, he’d had no expectation that he’d be able to kill a monster with such a huge body in a single shot.

“I’ve really gotta think about preparing a Magnum rifle or something soon.” With a flourish, he pulled Durandall’s loading lever to chamber the next round and advanced, firing shot after shot into the monster.

GIIIAAARRRRR!!

The xenobeast roared in anger.

It had taken five Magnum bullets, and though its wounds weren’t immediately fatal, it was bleeding all over its body. If those wounds didn’t heal, it could even die from them—but Yukinari couldn’t wait for that.

He kicked off against the ground. Dashing towards the xenobeast, he fired the last shot. And then, through the spatter of blood and scatter of bristles, Yukinari thrust Durandall into the monster’s new mouth.

Thanks to the hole created by the Magnum bullet, the tip of his blade plunged smoothly into the monster’s body without slipping. He twisted the blade a quarter turn so that Durandall’s loading gate faced upwards, grabbed a .44 Mag from his pocket and chambered it, and with the sword still lodged in his enemy, he fired.

GYAAUGHH!

It felt that one. The xenobeast convulsed and tried to back off. But Yukinari wasn’t about to let it get away. He stepped forward with it, keeping the blade stuck inside, and unloaded another two rounds into its body.

GYAAAA...AUUGGHHH...!

The xenobeast was writhing. Small xenobeasts were trying to attack Yukinari all the while, but they were being held back and taken out by Dasa on sniping support.

“Do us both a favor and get... dead!” Yukinari wrenched Durandall around further to finish the monster off.

Blood gushed from the wound, soaking Yukinari’s arm, shoulder, and face. And then—

GYOOOUUUGGGHHH!!

That might have been its dying scream. The xenobeast convulsed even more

violently. Its muscles seemed to tighten and become rigid, and Yukinari could feel them solidifying around Durandall's blade. Taken by surprise, Yukinari gave a short grunt, but it was already too late; Durandall's sword was bent in half.

Maybe he'd treated it too roughly. A normal sword wouldn't have survived this long, and might easily have bent at the base right at the beginning, when he cut off the monster's front leg.

"Yukinari?!"

Was that Fiona screaming out? But Yukinari knew he was still okay, and he couldn't afford to turn around to give her reassurance. He pulled Durandall back out and slid more .44 Mags into the loading gate one by one. This was the weakness of this type of gun compared to modern guns: they were a pain to reload. Unfortunately, guns like Red Chili and Durandall—lever-action revolvers and lever-action carbines—were the only guns Yukinari knew how to build. He didn't know the construction of big bore Magnum rifles, which meant he would have to piece together the design through trial and error—and as he had grumbled earlier, he hadn't found time to do that because they were always on the move.

"Yukinari!" Fiona screamed. "Look o—"

Fangs bared, several xenobeasts jumped Yukinari from different directions. Shooting them all down at once was, of course, impossible.

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The xenobeasts launched themselves at Yukinari from all sides.

Dasa's reaction was quick. Two of the xenobeasts crumpled in midair, struck by her bullets, and fell pathetically to the ground. But the remaining five piled on top of Yukinari, their violently thrashing tangle of bodies pushing him to the ground. Then a second wave came. Several more of the monsters hurled themselves at the pile, which grew to look like a gigantic ball of flesh. Yukinari was buried and hidden from sight.

"Yukinari...?!"

"Noooo!!"

Fiona called his name in shock, and Berta let out an anguished cry. However, one voice among them was strangely composed.

“...It’s Yuki... He’ll be okay.”

The others glanced over in surprise. Dasa was still continuing her attacks, an explosion of sound accompanying every shot. She said it again. “It’s Yuki... He’ll be okay.”

“B-But he—” Fiona couldn’t continue. He couldn’t possibly be okay. Dasa was just telling herself what she wanted to hear, preferring to bury her head in the sand rather than confront the horror, the reality in front of her.

But behind her glasses, Dasa’s eyes were fixed on the ball of flesh, and absolute confidence dwelled within them.

Then—

An indescribable sound.

Fiona’s eyes were drawn back to the mass of meat.

“Huh?”

The scene unfolding there was hard to believe. The meaty blob was falling to pieces.

One after another, the curiously shaped monsters were peeling off it and falling to the ground. There wasn’t even a hint of movement from them after that. They looked as though they had all expired. In the middle of those fallen beasts, Fiona saw Yukinari get to his feet.

That wasn’t all.

“H-How...?”

The xenobeasts’ bodies all had huge chunks taken out of them. The location and the shape of the wounds were different, but they all had in common the simple fact that parts of their bodies were completely gone. Fiona noticed something else, too. The xenobeasts’ wounds... weren’t those the parts that had been touching Yukinari? If Fiona’s imagination was correct, the mass of bodies that had been covering Yukinari had been gouged in a very specific way. A sphere centered around Yukinari had been cut out, and this was the result.

But what kind of power could make that possible? And if a sphere *was* cut out, then where did all the stuff inside it go?

Fiona wasn't the only one who was dumbfounded. *Everyone* present except for Dasa had been struck speechless. They should have been glad that Yukinari was alive—but that and everything else was completely lost amid this incomprehensible sight.

"What on earth...?" Fiona whispered to herself. Then, noticing something, her eyes went to Yukinari's feet. What was all that white stuff scattered everywhere? It was like flour, or salt... a white powder was strewn all around him. She felt sure it hadn't been there before Yukinari was attacked. The ground around this area was covered in leaf mold. A white powder would have been impossible to miss.

"...He's okay."

For the benefit of Fiona and all the others who were still unable to accept the reality of what they were seeing, Dasa repeated it for a third time in a composed voice. "Yukinari is... okay... but..."

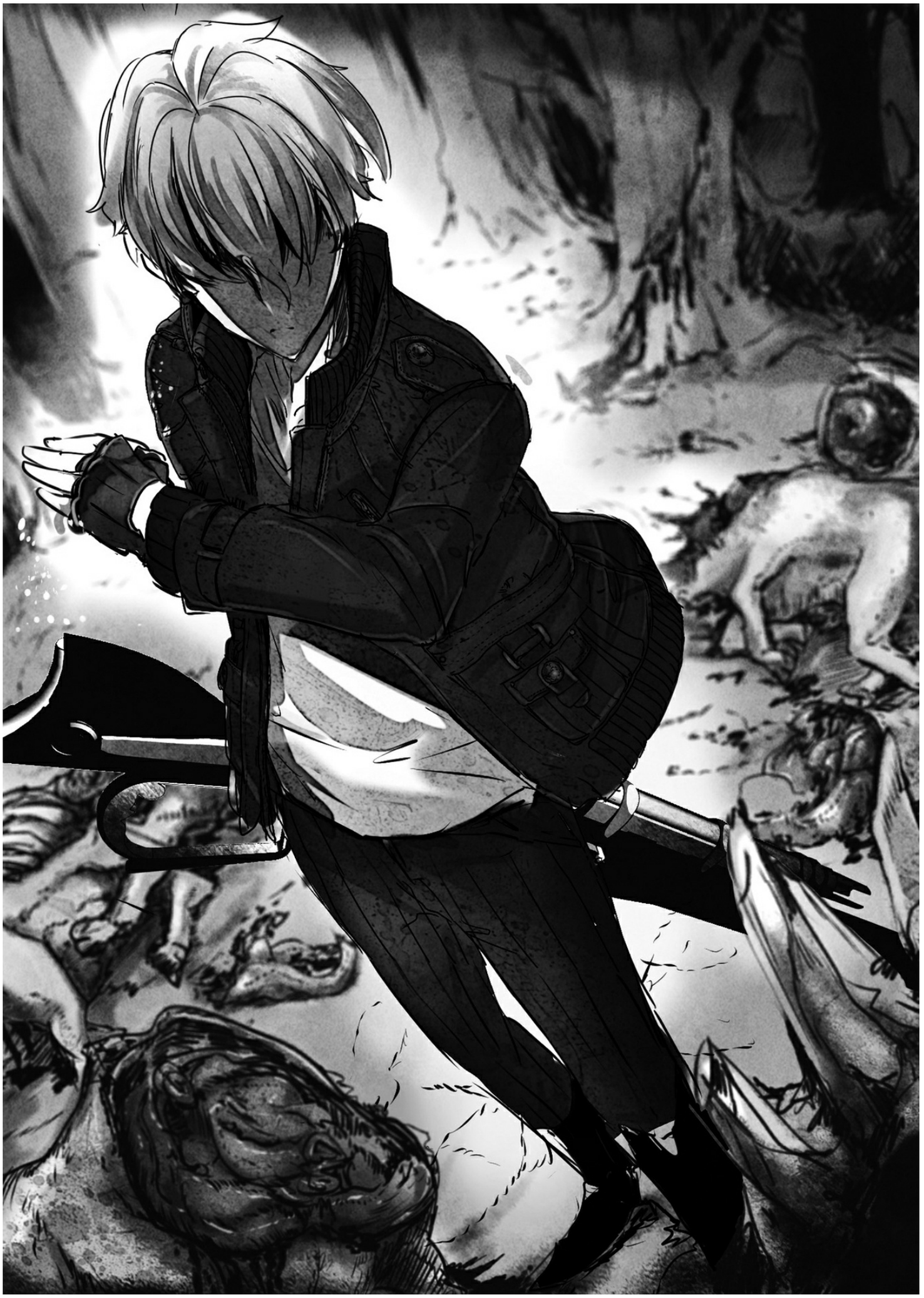
Why was he fine? It was impossible that anyone could emerge unharmed from a situation like that. Plus—

"The sword—"

As Yukinari stood in a confident stance, Fiona's eyes—all their eyes—settled on the sword gripped in his right hand. Far from being bent in half, its black blade didn't have even a single scratch.

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One remained.



A large xenobeast rivaling the size of the first one Yukinari had beaten was slowly circling him. They were exactly the movements of a large predator with an eye on its next meal. Being forced into a stare-off with a beast over three meters in length would cause any normal person to piss themselves, but Yukinari looked relaxed, if anything.

“You get it now, huh. I’ll bet.”

The reason it wasn’t immediately attacking must have been because it had seen the other xenobeasts fall.

It was wary. Of Yukinari, yes—but moreso of Durandall.

“One of us has gotta do something,” Yukinari said, pulling a new bullet from his pocket and slipping it into the gun. “I guess that’s gonna have to be me.”

Triple-charged. And the bullet was a frangible safety slug.

He took a single step towards the xenobeast. The next moment—

GROOOOOOAAAAAARRR!!

Roaring loudly, the xenobeast charged. It may have been trying to do what Yukinari had done once before: confront the charging enemy head-on. It had its neck and back curved to point its blade-like horns and dorsal fins at him. If it hit him dead on, he would probably be skewered and torn to shreds. So—

“You think a god can beat me? You’ve got your head up your ass!”

He thrust Durandall towards it and pulled the trigger. There was a deafening boom, and the special bullet sunk into its mark. The xenobeast’s body—or rather, its head—burst open wide like a red flower blooming.

Safety slugs are a special type of bullet specialized for use against flesh. They have low penetrating power, but if they hit, the birdshot inside them scatters everywhere, blasting a huge hole in their target. They are so powerful, in fact, that not a single government agency wanted to adopt them, because virtually everyone shot with them died.

On top of this, three times the normal amount of explosive charge was being used to propel that bullet. The energy of the explosive, converted to speed, forcibly buried that special bullet deep into the head of its target and then burst

it into fragments. The result—

Ggh...grghh...

The xenobeast tottered, a huge chunk of its head missing.

The point of Durandall's blade was embedded deeply into it only a moment later.

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Berta couldn't believe her eyes. She had witnessed this sight once already here, just yesterday; but even on the second occurrence, her common sense insisted it was impossible. It was as real as could be; it had unfolded right there in front of her. Yet this knowledge only forced her to doubt her own sanity.

The xenobeasts attacking them... had all been exterminated by Yukinari and Dasa. No—Yukinari had pretty much done it all on his own. Dasa had merely provided backup and kept the monsters attacking them at bay using that weapon that roared like thunder.

He had felled an erdgod and a group of xenobeasts; on top of that, he didn't look to have been injured in any particular way. He looked awful, covered all over in xenobeast blood spatter, but he himself didn't seem like he'd gotten hurt anywhere. He was even grumbling about how he stank of blood and wanted to take a bath, as if the whole thing had been no big deal. Did he not think this was amazing? Was he not even proud of himself? How could that be when, in her eyes, this was nothing more or less than a miracle? He looked so natural. If someone had told her that this man was God, she would have believed it without a trace of doubt.

"This... This is the power that felled an erdgod..." Fiona said quietly from next to Berta. She, too, was staring stunned at Yukinari.

"Aaahhhhh..." A word like a breath. Berta unconsciously fell to her knees, struck with awe, like a devout believer present for the earthly advent of God. And almost without awareness, words of prayer slipped from her mouth. "O Lord my God... I give myself to thee... Please, grant this land tranquility and good harvests..."

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A single road led through Friedland's town wall to the outside world, dodging the thick forest to link up with the mountain valley. Wide for a country road, it had been painstakingly cleared of any stones that might frustrate passage and carefully trampled so that no weeds would grow. That was because this road joined to the major roads that connected these outlying regions to the rest of the country. It was likely the only road around here that would allow the large wagons that the street sellers used to pass through without problems. For the towns and villages in this area, like Friedland, this road was an important public good enabling them to connect with others.

A bizarre band of people were traveling down that road in single file. Leading the way were around thirty people on horses. They were knights, it seemed. A few covered wagons followed behind them. There were a dozen or so people walking alongside the wagons, perhaps to make sure that the cargo didn't fall off. So far, unusual, but surely not bizarre.

The thing responsible for making this procession look as odd as it did was following behind the wagons. It was another wagon—but this one was extra large. Almost double the width of the other wagons and quadruple the length, its gigantic frame was supported by twelve steel wheels, six to a side, and it was being drawn by a team of more than twenty horses. White cloth covered it, making it impossible to tell from the outside what it was hauling. However, from the fact that its load had not been split among several ordinary-sized wagons, it wasn't difficult to imagine that it had to be something pretty big.

A dozen people were riding on the back platform of the huge wagon and keeping an eye on its cargo. There were another thirty knights bringing up the rear to match the ones in front. And moreover, the knights, the people on foot, and the wagon drivers were all armed. They had swords and wore armor—some more than others, but regardless, they all looked as if they were headed to the battlefield.

Whose army was this? And what exactly was it that nearly a hundred fully armed soldiers were transporting?

With no one to question them, the bizarre armed group moved along in silence, down the long, long road to Friedland.

Chapter Four: A God's Army

It had been four days since Yukinari and Dasa had brought down the horde of xenobeasts. A small hut had been built with all haste at the sanctuary—or rather, at the place where the massive rock known as the sanctuary had once been. They managed it by diverting lumber the Schillings family had intended to use to build a storehouse on a vacant lot, and the result—although everyone referred to it as a hut—was about the size of an average house.

Because the material had been on the verge of becoming a storehouse, however, the interior was singularly unadorned; it was just a one-room space. Open, in its way, but strangely unwelcoming. Bigger than it had to be, really—even if that wasn't the reason it seemed so cold.

Yukinari sat in a corner, looking out at a room populated with jury-rigged chairs and beds, along with a few pieces of furniture that looked like surplus items from town. And for some reason, there was Berta, too, right next to him on the bench-like seat.

"No offense, but, uh, Berta..."

She blinked and looked at him when he spoke. "Yes? Do you need something, Lord Yukinari?"

The faint tinge of despair that had hung about her several days earlier was gone, replaced by a guileless look, pure and virginal. The edges of her mouth crinkled into a smile, perhaps brought on because Yukinari had spoken to her, or even more likely, because he had said her name.

"...why are you sitting here?"

"I'm sorry?" She didn't seem to understand what he was asking. But after a moment's reflection, she smiled and said, "Because this is where you're sitting, my lord."

"Yeah, well, no two ways about that..."

He had been less concerned about her sitting there than about *how* she was

sitting—specifically, the way she almost seemed to be cuddling up to him. In fact, there was practically no personal space left between them. And the moment Yuki sat down anywhere, Berta would come pattering over and squeeze next to him the same way.

“I mean, why are you sitting... *next* to me... like that?”

No sooner had he spoken than Berta’s eyes went wide and she threw herself prostrate on the ground.

“Forgive me, Lord Yukinari! I’ve forgotten my place!”

Yukinari quickly reached down, catching her shoulder and wrenching her out of her quivering kowtow.

“Hey, stoppit! What’s gotten into you?”

“I have offended you, my lord!” she said, her eyes swimming. “Surely you will punish me for this affront.”

“Affront? Punish you?”

“Yes, sir. As much as you need in order to slake your anger.”

Yukinari was more than a little taken aback. “Hey, how can you—I mean, when you talk about punishment with that look in your eyes, it makes me feel kinda... *weird*.”

Berta’s expression suggested she would have been perfectly happy to be partnered with some sadist, but unfortunately for her, Yuki was a lot more vanilla than that.

“Look,” he said, “I really didn’t mean to sound harsh or critical or anything. Forget it, okay? Just... sit down.” He made a helpless gesture at the spot Berta had recently vacated.

“Yes, sir!” she said, resuming her place with her face practically sparkling. “Thank you so much.” Then she began to shuffle, bit by bit, until she was scrunched up next to him again. She was wearing normal clothes now, but the image of her in those sheer vestments hovered in the back of Yukinari’s mind, making him antsy.

From the other side of a small desk, Dasa fixed him with a dark stare.

“Wh—What?”

“...Yuki.” She looked somehow sullen.

“Huh?”

“You womanizer.”

“But I didn’t even do anything!”

Truth be told, Dasa had seemed in low spirits ever since they’d moved to this house. Yukinari had decided to ask Fiona for permission to stay in the area for a while. As far as he was concerned, it had nothing to do with filling in for the local erdgod or anything. Dasa was obviously exhausted. He was doing it for her. Of course, since he couldn’t very well have Dasa being held hostage, her being allowed to stay with him at the sanctuary was one of his terms.

But he hadn’t expected Berta to stay there, too.

Now Dasa looked at Berta and said, “Berta, remind me why you’re... here, again?”

“I guess I thought that was obvious,” she said with a blank look, quite different from her earlier reaction to Yukinari. “Lord Yukinari is here.”

“And why do... you have to be where... Yuki is?”

Berta responded without a second’s hesitation. “I belong to my lord. As a shrine maiden, I’ve been offered to him.”

At this, Dasa’s displeasure palpably deepened.

Yukinari sighed. “Aw, fer...” This was hardly the first time they’d had this conversation, or one very much like it. Since it was obviously just going to go in circles, he was determined to put Berta out of his mind for now and think about what he was going to do next.

For starters, it looked like they were going to be living in this hut for the foreseeable future. They were essentially going to be placeholders, either until their “pursuers” found them, or until a slightly better erdgod—slightly better in the sense that it could be remotely reasoned with—showed up.

Unlike the Schillings mansion, the tiny cottage that had been built on the

remains of the sanctuary truly served no greater purpose than to keep the elements at bay. Fiona had said that if there was anything they needed, they should feel free to ask at any time, and she would do everything in her power to see that it was promptly provided to them. But the total lack of even the slightest creature comfort left Yuki unsure what to ask for first. This place didn't even have a toilet.

They could use the bushes outside, of course, and did. But it wouldn't take a xenobeast to give them a miserable time if it literally caught them with their pants down—a dangerous wild animal would be enough. In light of that, Yukinari wanted to get this particular situation resolved as soon as possible.

And if they had no toilet, even less did they have a bath. Just to get water, they had to go to a nearby swamp or lake and bring it back themselves. It was an onerous process. A bath as such wouldn't be that hard to make: just dig a hole somewhere around, line it with rocks, and voilà.

A bath, huh...

His thoughts wandered to his night at the Schillings mansion. And from there to Berta, buck naked and insisting she was "offering herself" to him. She wasn't unusually well-endowed, but she had curves in all the right places. Sure, it was arousing. Or rather, she looked soft—like it would be very pleasant to hold her close.

"...Yuki. You're thinking lewd thoughts again."

"Whatever!" Yukinari scrambled to deny it. "I was thinking about what comes next."

"What comes next?" Berta said. "You mean, like, tonight? Will you let me offer myself to you?"

"Do me a big favor and don't get distracted, okay?"

"But I..."

"And anyway, I told you, you don't have to offer yourself to me, or serve me, or anything!"

"But then, I..." She took a long breath. "Then I couldn't be with you, Lord

Yukinari.”

“And another thing I’ve told you is I’m not your—”

But before he could finish his sentence, Yukinari thought of something. Berta probably had nowhere to go in the town anymore.

So long as Yukinari was there as acting erdgod, neither she nor anyone else would become sacrifices. To the townspeople, this probably just made it look like they’d been paying their tax money to support people who were now useless. That would go for all the children at the orphanage, but it would be especially bad for Berta, who had actually been chosen as a sacrifice and had had the gall to come back alive. If she wanted to stay with Yukinari, well, maybe it only made sense.

Still, though...

“Look, if nothing else, I’m not a god.”

Berta smiled and contradicted him with an unusual alacrity. “That’s not true. You’re *my* god, Lord Yukinari.”

Yukinari wondered if it was common practice to try to seduce deities around here, but he realized that with him never so much as touching her, she was probably just trying to do her job the best way she knew how. Trying to stay with him.

“You guys don’t seem to understand, though. I can’t ‘take care of the land’ or whatever it was you said the erdgod did. Make the harvest bountiful, send the right amount of rain at the right time.”

It was said that the erdgod put down roots in the land, becoming of one body with the meridians of the earth it ruled. This enabled it, to an extent, to control the weather and environment of its territory. Even granted an understanding of the area’s meridians, being able to dictate the weather was indeed a godlike power.

There had been rain dances in Yukinari’s “previous world,” some of which had even been scientifically shown to have some effect. It seemed to be something about how the fires lit for the ceremonies created an updraft, which caused the clouds to do... something. That much, Yukinari thought maybe he could

manage. But more?

“Let me ask you something,” he said, thinking of the map Fiona had shown him of the town and the surrounding area. “I’ve been thinking about this ever since we stayed at Fiona’s place. Aren’t there a lot of things you could do with the land instead of making sacrifices to erdgods and letting them handle it? I mean diverting rivers, flood works, breeding better crops. All kinds of things.”

Berta was dumbstruck for a moment. “Diverting... rivers...?”

“Sure. Flood control.”

“Flood... control...?”

“Don’t tell me.”

“I don’t... know what you mean...” She sounded utterly mystified.

Yukinari gave a bellow. “I knew it! I knew that had to be it!” He raised his head and heaved a massive sigh.

“Lord Yukinari...?”

“Yuki...?”

Berta and Dasa looked at him, both girls now equally perplexed.

This place wasn’t like Yukinari’s “previous world.” Not in any number of ways.

There, for example, no parity had existed in technological and cultural development. Indeed, inequality was practically the norm. There were times and places that boasted the right conditions for the swift development of culture or technology, and others that discouraged the same. Accidents of geography—including how easy it was or wasn’t to get around—could mean the spread of new ideas in one place and not another. Take China, or Africa—areas so big that it was possible, if care was not taken, for century-wide gaps in progress to develop just within those places. And that was in a world with planes, trains, automobiles—and above all, telephones and the internet. How much more would such discrepancies develop in a world like this?

All that was to say that the speed at which new developments spread would be very slow. Add to that how tradition tended to resist the integration of new ideas: witness how Friedland had been adhering to its agreements with the

erdgods, and the attendant system of sacrifices, for hundreds of years, until it seemed nothing else was possible. On top of that, the people whose livelihoods depended on this tradition—like those priests—were probably making a profit from it, as well. The people who lived off this old custom needed it. This meant that no matter how outdated the practice might be, no matter how repulsive it might appear, it would not be abandoned easily.

It was hard for new things, be they objects or ideas, to enter such a situation, and even if they made their way in, it was harder still for them to stick. To be accepted, these new things had to have such force as to clear away the existing culture or technology in one fell swoop.

Dam works and land improvement were no different. To this point, the villagers had made do with the sacrifices to the erdgods. It was enough for them, and it robbed them of even the seed of the impulse to seek a new way.

“What am I getting myself into...?”

Faced with two girls giving him completely blank looks, Yukinari let out a long sigh.

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A farmer’s day starts early. Fields obviously couldn’t be located right in the middle of town, so the farms were outside the town walls by necessity. By the erdgod’s grace, the town was mostly safe from dangerous animals, but even so, one could never be sure when something might happen—so the farmers went out to the fields in groups, always cognizant of where they were in relation to the town, so they could run back if need be. Today, as always, the work started while the sky was still dark.

“Time to get started!”

Their skin was tanned from long hours working in the field every day. The blisters on their fingers from using spades and hoes and sickles had long ago burst and become calluses. They were laborers all, but even so, the harvest seemed likely to be slim. Crops were not easy to grow in this soil, and for simple geographical reasons the space for fields was limited. Without the agreement with the erdgod, at least some people likely would have died of starvation each year.

The men wordlessly lifted their spades and set to working the earth. They might speak once in a while, not ceasing the methodical movements of their hands, but the topics were everyday matters and were soon exhausted. Thus, they passed most of their working hours in silence.

“Huh?”

Until one of them, taking a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow with the cloth draped across the back of his neck, noticed something.

Something was coming down the road that passed by the fields—the road that ran straight through the middle of Friedland.

What could it be? At first, the men thought it might be a group of traveling merchants. Most were who came along this path. There were no tourists, because there was nothing to see around here. Whatever they had in Friedland, other towns had, too; and there was nothing they had that could not be found elsewhere. It was the very definition of a country burg.

But it didn’t take the men long to realize that these were no merchants. Mounted figures in full armor rode at the head of the group—knights, most likely. Behind them came a cart with a curtain on it. And behind *that*—

“What in the blazes?!”

A massive cart, obviously purpose-built, followed. The first farmer vacantly watched the procession approach. The other men, noticing his strange behavior, looked up one by one, and then they, too, stood entranced.

Along with the knights and the two carts were some attendants on foot. They wore armor, too, albeit simpler than the knights’. Their outfits showed some individual differences, the types and patterns not quite uniform. But there was one feature all of them had in common: a red cross.

Someone let out an awed whisper: “It’s... It’s the Missionary Order... The True Church of Harris...”

The spade dropped from the hand of the man who had first seen them. He stood, wide-eyed, as the Order passed by in close formation, heading for the gate to Friedland.

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“So it’d look about like this, I guess?” Yukinari cocked his head, looking at the map lying open on their table.

It was a crude thing, drawn in pencil on sheepskin parchment. He had told Berta he needed the parchment and pencil, and Fiona had been quick to provide them. Paper-making technology did exist in this world, so it was possible to get normal paper. But the paper available in Friedland was of poor quality, and clearly wouldn’t stand up to much punishment, so he went with the sheepskin instead. They were going to be making a lot of use of it, and he wanted something that would last.

The pencil was so they could easily erase anything they wrote or drew, to correct any mistakes. It was Dasa who had made this particular choice. During the years when, unable to see, she had assisted Jirina, she had gained more than a little practical experience in handling paperwork and the like.

“All that really matters is the direction of the river flow,” Yukinari said. “That, and any hills. Does this look right?”

“Yes,” Berta said with a nod. “There’s a river here, and a little hill in this area.”

“And the sanctuary’s here?” Yukinari pointed to a spot on the far right of the map, making sure he had the right place. He had marked the sanctuary with a double circle. The town of Friedland was in the center of the parchment. They had marked the relative altitudes of the surrounding terrain.

“Yuki,” Dasa said with a quizzical look, “what... are you... doing?”

“Hm? Oh...”

When he had said he was going to make a map, he had detailed his requirements for paper and a writing utensil, so he’d thought she understood what he was up to. But he realized that Dasa had been—not sheltered, perhaps, but under her sister’s wing for so long that she had learned a great deal from books (much of it about unusual subjects, like alchemy), but knew little about the wider world. Things like geography and farming were completely outside her experience. Not that Yukinari himself was any kind of specialist.

“I might not be able to change the weather or any godlike stuff like that, but I

figured I could manage something.”

She looked puzzled.

“Think about it. If we change the path of the river even a little, we could probably create more farmland, right?”

“Could... we?”

“No reason why not. Uh, let’s see, here...” Yukinari mentally went over the tools Jirina once had in her laboratory. “You used stills in alchemy, right?”

“Yes. The glass ones...”

“Uh-huh. And some of them were in these really weird shapes, right? Spirals and stuff?”

“Yes,” Dasa said after a pause. “I remember that.”

“Well, why were they in those shapes? Just for fun?”

“It was an... effective way of channeling... radiant heat. Wait... You’re saying...?”

“Exactly!” he said, thrilled to have gotten through. “I knew you were a quick one, Dasa.”

As Yukinari smiled and nodded, the blank look came back over Dasa’s face for an instant, and then she flushed ever so slightly and averted her eyes.

“Water flows from higher places to lower places, and if you constrict the flow, it gets stronger—strong enough to turn a waterwheel, even. Or think of a dam. We could build a flood gate. Make a retaining pond, control the water that way.”

“I get it...” Dasa already seemed to have understood what Yukinari was driving at, and appeared quite impressed. Berta, however, remained totally lost. She sat with a hesitant smile on her face, not saying a word.

“And it’s not just water,” Yukinari went on. “If you change the quality of light on the fields, you could potentially affect the way the crops grow. We could put the mountain slopes to work for us.”

“...That’s true, I’m sure,” Dasa said with a frown. “But what... about labor?

Time? Technology? How do you mean to... actually do it?" Dasa, as an alchemist's assistant, understood that these oft-overlooked ingredients were in fact the most crucial part of the success of any venture. "And in... the case of altering terrain... tools." There was a beat. "...Oh..."

She seemed to have reached the same conclusion as Yukinari. She looked at him, her eyes wide behind her glasses.

"Yeah, that's right. As long as I'm here, *that* won't be a problem, right?"

Dasa's expression darkened. "But, Yuki, that..." She seemed to ruminate on something for a moment. Then she said, "Yuki..."

"Yeah?"

"You... decided to stay here... because of me, didn't you?"

He could tell how guilty she felt about this, so he tried to sound easy-going as he said, "What brought this on? I mean, yes, that's part of it, but really, I was just pretty tired."

"But Yuki, if you... use your power..."

"Ahh, don't worry about it. I'll make sure everything's okay." He put his right hand on her head and mussed her hair.

"...Mm." She closed her eyes happily.

She had, as we have said, been blind before, and she favored other senses more than her sight, especially hearing and touch. In a word, touching and being touched comforted her more than a smiling face ever would.

Berta watched the two of them for a long moment, and finally she came up next to Dasa and said, "Um..." she said, bowing her head slightly.

"Huh? What's up?"

"C-Could you... do that for me, too?"

"...Erm." Apparently, she wanted her hair mussed, too. "I'm not sure about..."

Yukinari was flustered, but Dasa clung to his arm—as if to communicate *This is mine!*—and said, "Absolutely... not...!"

•

Unexpected visitors came to the Schillings residence that day.

As the mayor, Hans Schillings, was bedridden, his daughter Fiona normally entertained guests in his stead. But these were no normal guests. They demanded to see Hans Schillings himself.

The Schillingses could not refuse. Hans emerged into the sitting room, Fiona supporting one arm and a butler the other, to meet the callers. He seated himself, still in his bedclothes, with a comforter over his knees.

“My apologies that I don’t look more fit to receive guests. I know what a long journey it is to get here from the capital.”

Fiona and the butler stood a step behind Hans, against the wall, facing the visitors. The mayor went on quietly:

“And... to what do I owe the honor?”

Fiona admired him just for being able to speak without a tremble in his voice. He was faced with two knights in full armor, bearing swords. Even though they were now indoors, the men made no move to take off their helmets. It seemed less that they were unacquainted with etiquette and more that they hoped to intimidate the object of their call.

Their faces were visible from just below the eyes, so it was possible to guess their ages. One was a man in the prime of his life, his mouth surrounded by a beard. The other seemed considerably younger.

The older man began to speak: “By the inestimable mercy of His Holiness, we have come to bring to this benighted country the exalted teachings of the Church of Harris. To worship in the cults of the lawless ‘demons’ is fatal to your souls, which shall be dragged into Hell. We are in this land to inculcate the Church’s teachings, and thereby to bring all to salvation.”

After a long moment’s thought, Hans grunted, “Hrm?” Behind him, Fiona and the butler looked at each other. None of them had the slightest idea what this man was trying to say. His message had seemed very roundabout, perhaps exaggerated.

“In other words...” Now the younger man spoke. Perhaps he was concerned to see that Fiona and the others did not immediately understand, or perhaps he

had always intended to add something in the way of a clarification once his companion had spoken. He sounded terse, almost snide. “...We are here to spread our glorious teachings among you stupid, ignorant country people.”

The three Friedlanders caught their collective breath. So these men were missionaries. But then, why were they armed?

Something more bothered Fiona, something personal. She thought she recognized the voice of the young man. When she looked closer at what she could see of his mouth and chin under his helmet, she was sure she had seen him before...

“That will do, Lansdowne.”

“Yes, sir. *Mea culpa*, sir.” He bowed his head slightly at the older knight’s rebuke. They said no more to each other, but that name alone was enough to bring open shock to Fiona’s face.

“Lansdowne! Is that you?!”

“Ha! Finally remembered, did you?” The knight called Lansdowne raised the visor of his helmet. The face that peered out at her was one Fiona knew all too well—a classmate from her days at the academy in the capital.

Arlen Lansdowne.

The son of a certain noble house, he had not been very well regarded at the academy. His every word and act dripped with arrogance. He was a man with no concept of equality: on meeting a new acquaintance, the first thing he wanted to know was whether they were above or below him. If below, he would not hesitate to treat them with open disdain, while a social superior would bring a flurry of obsequious fawning. He was not a difficult person to understand, but woe to the one he judged to be beneath him. It was a category into which Fiona, hailing from an undistinguished country backwater, naturally fell.

“So you’re still alive.” She made no effort to hide her contempt. It was not surprising, Arlen being as we have described, that he got into a great many fights—some of which were rumored to have ended in bloodshed.

“What a way to greet a classmate. Good to know you haven’t lost your

insolent streak."

"I don't want to hear it from you, Mr. I'm-one-of-the-chosen-people."

Arlen only smirked. "The chosen people. An intriguing choice of words for the exalted who give guidance to the lowly."

Fiona thought back to her time in the capital. She recalled that it had been quite popular among the children of the nobility to join the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris. It afforded one a certain prestige; in the capital, it was felt that a stint with the Order showed one to be a person of impeccable character.

In fact, an invitation had been extended to Fiona. She had refused, intending to return to Friedland immediately after graduation to assist with her father's duties—but Arlen, it seemed, had been perfectly happy to jump on the bandwagon. It was, she reflected, very much in character for him. The True Church was, at present, the very epicenter of power. At times, the royal family had even been known to order policy in accordance with the wishes of the church.

And the elite of the Order was a group known as the "Civilizing Expedition." Fiona knew them only by rumor—they were said to travel to the far corners of the land, where people were still beholden to the old cults, to spread the new and correct teaching: that of the True Church of Harris. The many dangers of the wild frontier meant that these were no ordinary missionaries, but men who carried weapons and were versed in the arts of combat—knights, a veritable host.

But these men aren't just equipped to fight some bandits, or even demigods or xenobeasts, Fiona thought.

Rather, they appeared nothing less than an army set on invasion.

Outwardly, the Harris Church placed great emphasis on freely choosing one's own faith, but they seemed more than happy to show the sword to any who did not obey their teachings. They lead people to their new religion at the sharp end of a weapon, then proclaimed the people had chosen the faith of their own free will.

“Have you heard the saying, ‘If you go into the fields, learn the songs of the farmers’ babes’?” Fiona spat, her annoyance clear.



“Fiona!” Her father tried to stop her, but she went on regardless.

“It means you should respect the beliefs people already have!”

“You see, Corps Commander?” Arlen did not respond directly, but spoke to the older man, apparently a leader in the Expedition. “The very picture of an ignorant barbarian. She was ever thus, even at the academy.”

“Barbarian?!”

“Listen to me, Fiona Schillings,” Arlen said, a haughty smile forming on his face as he looked at her once more. “First and foremost, your understanding is mistaken—impotent and feeble! Just the sort of boorish navel-gazing I would expect from you. You presume to accuse us with your platitudes, as though you knew anything of the truth of the world, as though your views were anything but narrow. You do us, and yourself, a great evil. But we are here to put right where you are wrong. Show proper gratitude.”

“Just who do you—”

“I understand that in this town you continue even now the inhuman practice of living sacrifice.”

Fiona could say nothing to this. Arlen saw his chance, pushing ahead:

“Pitiful! To think such a pathetic tragedy should continue in this day and age! It is time such things were done away with!”

“It is true,” Fiona said, narrowing her eyes, “that I don’t think much of the sacrificial system, either. But I detect the threat of violence in your words. Why is that?”

“Why? The fool asks why!” Arlen looked at the ceiling and gave a theatrical sigh. “Surely you know! We are weapons being wielded on your behalf, to cleave through the ‘demons’ that infest this land and bring you salvation! We are righteousness—yes, we could be called righteousness itself! And it is the power of righteousness that you sense—please, do not be so crass as to call it ‘violence’!”

“Demons... You mean the erdgods?”

The older man broke in sharply: “The God we worship is the only god!”

Apparently, the use of the word “god” had struck a nerve. He went on: “Other beings may have powers that imitate God’s. But they are evil spirits, or even demons. We shall cast them out. And not only for a time, but forever.”

“Forever...?”

What could he mean? True, the Missionary Order was reputed to have great strength. They might even be capable of killing an erdgod or a demigod. But nothing ever ended with the felling of a single god. Just as she had told Yukinari, demigods and xenobeasts would come to try to take the newly vacant territory for themselves.

“You, all of you, shall never again be without our protection.” Arlen spoke in an exaggeratedly grandiose tone, unmistakably mocking them. “It has already begun. Look at your town square.”

“What...?” Fiona, her father, and the butler looked at one another, wondering what he meant.

The Missionary Order did its work quickly—and altogether unilaterally. The missionary knights rode through the village on their horses, exhorting the people to come to the square in the center of town. Those who had gone out to the farms were called back, until nearly every resident of Friedland was gathered before the Order.

“Good! The next person shall now be granted the Holy Mark! Come forward!”

The knights had lined the people up in front of three stations granting the Holy Mark, and they were now giving the people this sign of faith in the True Church of Harris.

The people, for their part, had scant understanding of what was happening to them. The True Church of Harris was known by name even in these far reaches, but like *capital* or *king*, it was a term with little relevance to the life of the average Friedlander. In fact, the people understood barely half of what the men of the Missionary Order were saying to them, so many were the words that bore no influence on country life. But since the knights proclaimed that they were acting with the full approval of Mayor Hans Schillings, the villagers decided they might as well go along with it.

What was more, for the Friedlandian people, “religion” was not something about which one made a deliberate choice. They followed the local cult from the moment they were capable of following anything—indeed, it was so ingrained that it did not even have a name—and they would do so until they died. It was intimately connected to their daily lives, something deeper even than “common sense”—not a “faith” in which they purposefully believed.

Neither was the native cult of Friedland about having respect or even love for its deity. It was motivated by simple awe of creatures whose powers vastly exceeded those of humans; it was a way of avoiding unhappiness and misfortune in this life. Fear of the gods was instinctive, but this did not necessarily beget veneration or affection—if anything, it might be said that simple fear, in every sense, was what had given rise to the native cult in the first place.

So “religion” was among the words the people did not understand. They did not even grasp that they were being converted. Rather, most of them were simply in line because they had been told they were going to be given something—the “Holy Mark,” the knights had called it—and they regarded anyone who would give them a gift as praiseworthy.

“We shall bestow the Mark. Give us your neck.” One of the missionaries held up a metal ring. A small cross shape extended from the bottom. This was the true “Holy Mark,” but the villagers seemed to take the entire device as the Mark in question. One of the townspeople, completely unknowing, bowed his head, whereupon the missionary put the ring around the man’s neck, then struck it with a little metal instrument with a split tip.

Riiiiiing. The sound hung in the air for a long moment before fading.

“Hrrk...?!” The villager made a strangled sound as he experienced something he had never felt before. The metal ring began to shrink. It shrank until it fit perfectly around his neck like a necklace, stopping before it got so small as to constrict breath or blood flow. The metal band had thickened slightly as it shrank, but the villager certainly didn’t notice such a fine detail. Instead he, like most of the others, wandered away touching the “Holy Mark” in puzzlement, as behind him a voice sounded, *Next!*

Suddenly, there was a pained shout: “Just what is this?!”

The villagers looked up to see acting mayor Fiona, standing there with what appeared to be two of the knights of the Missionary Order. She had probably come running from the mansion and was breathing hard. One of the knights spoke:

“A gift, from us. The Holy Mark. All the faithful wear it.”

“I’m familiar with the Holy Mark! But you’re collaring them like animals!” Fiona pointed to the metal bands.

This set a murmur running through the crowd. Hadn’t the Order said they had the cooperation of the mayor? Then why did Fiona now seem aghast? Why did she seem to be arguing with them? And those metal bands. Now that Fiona said it, they really did seem like a collar such as one might put on livestock...

“How dare you! You are beyond impudent. The band ensures that the Holy Mark shall never be far from the faithful. If anything, it’s a blessing. Don’t trouble yourself about it.”

“But—”

“What in the blazes?!” one of the villagers exclaimed. “It don’t come off!”

He must have tried to remove the band when he saw Fiona criticizing the actions of the Missionary Order. But the Mark held fast; though they scrabbled at it, the villagers could not even loosen the bands, let alone remove them.

That first cry sparked a chain reaction. Having discovered that the metal bands would not come off, the people began to close in on the knights, their faces dark with fury.

“How d’you expect me to work with this thing around my neck?”

“Yeah! Take this off, now!”

“I ain’t gonna wear this!”

The crowd of disgruntled villagers seemed to grow with every blink of the eye. There were, obviously, more Friedlanders than missionaries. They surrounded the knights and began to chant, *Take these off! Take these off!*

One of the knights spoke. “You preposterous asses! You are beyond foolish.”

And then, in the next instant, a tortured scream went up. Then another, and another—all the townspeople at once.

“It burrrrns!”

“Yaaaarrrgh!”

Every one of the villagers of Friedland was screaming: men and women alike, from grandmothers too old to walk without a cane to children who could not yet speak whole sentences. Some had fallen to the ground, thrashing.

“What is this?! What’s going on?!” Fiona demanded in horror.

“Those bands are wonderful things,” laughed a young knight standing beside her. “They’re a little contrivance of ours that allows us to know the general location of each believer, and promptly bestows punishment from God on any who might think to turn their back on the faith.”

“Punishment from God? You mean punishment from *you*!” She pointed to a box next to one of the stations where people had been receiving the Holy Mark. She had seen one of the knights do something with it immediately before the townspeople began screaming.

“It is from God,” the young knight repeated. “Inestimably so. The arrogance of sin becomes a fire redounding upon the sinner, scorching his profane flesh.”

The fingers of those who had attempted to remove the rings were red and swollen, suggesting that the devices had indeed become hot enough to burn. The villagers had no idea how this was possible, but it was torture; that much, they understood.

“How can you do this?!” Fiona said. “When I was in the capital, I never knew the True Church of Harris to do such awful—”

“This is not the capital,” the young knight said evenly. “On the frontier, we treat you people like the barbarians you are.”

“And you think you can just march in here and—”

“What’s more,” the knight went on, speaking over Fiona, “there has been a change in leadership. Our new acting Dominus Doctrinae is a hard man.

Especially toward heretics.”

•

Yukinari looked at the map and grunted, folding his arms. It was complete for the moment.

“Now, as to the question of what we do from here...”

He had based the map entirely on what Berta had told him, not on anything resembling the results of a proper survey. Frankly, much of the diagram was no more than guesswork. It looked a bit like a child’s “Map of My Neighborhood.” Chances were that it was wrong in more than a few places, but it was enough to allow them to start thinking about how to improve Friedland’s farming situation.

“For starters, I think we do this here...”

“Lord Yukinari...?” From beside him, Berta was giving the map a mystified look. The various letters and symbols he had scribbled all over it didn’t seem to mean anything to her—but then, since she appeared to be illiterate, that wasn’t surprising. Dasa sat on Yukinari’s other side, clutching his arm for no reason in particular.

Berta ran her finger along a particular line on the map. “What’s this?”

“An irrigation canal. And this is a reservoir. I’m trying to decide where the floodgate would work best. Although we can’t really be sure until we see the place for ourselves.”

“An irrigation... canal...?”

“Well, in extremely broad terms,” Yukinari said, as if partly to remind himself. “Most crops—plants and such—will grow even without soil. Maybe not legumes, but leafy vegetables will, for the most part.”

Berta made a sound of confusion.

“Plants grow by putting down roots in the soil, fixing themselves in place so they can get bigger. They get water and nutrients from the ground, too. That’s why you need a certain amount of land area for any given plant to mature.”

As he spoke, Yukinari tried to think back to his “previous world,” where his

sister had done aquaculture as a hobby. Ever devoted to her interests, she had grown everything from cherry tomatoes to spinach and basil on their porch. Aquaculture, which didn't use soil, minimized the number of harmful bugs and yielded a relatively large harvest per unit of surface area. Or anyway, that was how she had explained it to him.

"Basically, if you can keep the plants in one place and make sure they get plenty of water and fertilizer, you don't even need soil. You can grow twice as many crops in the same space."

Berta was silent.

"I mean, I know jumping right to aquaculture probably isn't feasible. But even so. All I'm really saying is, as long as we have a steady source of water and nutrients, even the fields you have now should yield richer harvests."

"I... I see..." Berta said, appearing overwhelmed. Yukinari reflected that all of this probably made little sense to her, even as he kept talking.

"Let's worry about fertilizer later. We have rivers, which means we can get water. We just need to find a nice, easy place to dig an irrigation channel."

Berta was quiet for another moment; she stared at the map and blinked several times. Then she said, "And then Friedland will have plenty of crops?"

"No promises. But given I'm no deity, I thought I'd start with what I can do." He shrugged, offering a pained smile.

"How did you come up with this idea, my lord?"

"How? I mean..." Irrigation was practically inseparable from farmland in Yukinari's mind. It was the obvious thing to do. But maybe it would be a leap of the imagination for the Friedlanders, who thought the obvious thing was to rely on the erdgod's ability to influence the environment.

"It's not my idea," he said finally.

"It's a rare person... who *would* think of it," Dasa said.

"Dasa's right. Don't worry about it," Yukinari said, plopping a hand down on Berta's head.

"...Yuki."

“Oh, sure, sorry.” At a miffed look from Dasa, he put his other hand on her head and mussed both girls’ hair. Dasa seemed to feel that if Berta was going to get her head rubbed, she deserved just as many rubs herself. Yukinari didn’t exactly follow her logic, but if it kept her happy, he had no problem giving her all the pats on the head she wanted.

But even as he ran his hand through her hair—

“Yuki...” Dasa furrowed her brow. “Someone... is coming.” Her senses were sharp; she had probably heard footsteps coming toward the sanctuary. A second later, Yukinari heard them, too, and then there was a pounding on the door.

“Yukinari! Open the door! Please, let me in!”

Yukinari knew that voice. “Fiona...?” He went to the door and pulled up the bar that they used in place of a lock. Fiona all but fell through the doorway into their hut. “Why are you so—whoa, what?!”

She immediately wrapped her arms around Yukinari’s torso, clinging to him.

“Yukinari! Yukinari, help us!” she choked out. He had gotten the distinct impression that the deputy mayor was a strong woman, so to see Fiona reduced to this blubbering, terrified state understandably startled him.

“What is it? What’s happened?” He took her by the shoulders and held her at arm’s length, looking her up and down. As he had suspected from the moment she grabbed onto him, Fiona looked like a mess. Her skin showed through tears in her clothing—and not the kind of tears one would get from running through the woods on the way to the sanctuary and catching one’s clothing on branches. These were clearly the result of an act of violence.

Dasa and Berta jumped to bring a blanket, which they set around Fiona’s shoulders. It seemed to have a calming effect—she sat down where she was and said shakily: “The True Church of Harris—the Missionary Order—they’re here...!”

Yukinari and Dasa looked at her with eyes wide. Berta, however, cocked her head as though she hadn’t understood any of this.

“The Church is here?”

“Yes. And they’re ‘civilizing’ the villagers right now! When I lived in the capital, I heard that the Church sent out missionaries, but I never dreamed they’d—that they’d come all the way out here...!”

“—Yuki,” Dasa said, an edge to her voice. “Is this... because of us?”

“I don’t know,” Yukinari said, frowning. “I didn’t think we had any pursuers, but...”

Fiona, whether or not she had any idea what the two were talking about, grabbed on to Yukinari afresh.

“The Missionary Order—they go around killing erdgods and demigods! If they find out about you, I’m sure they’ll kill you, too!”



While the Order were nominally missionaries, their real purpose was to wage war against the erdgods. They were organized into troops that would bring down a region's erdgod, then stay in the area to exterminate any demigods or unholy creatures that appeared. In a sense, these human-organized groups were a system that served as a replacement for the erdgods. And of course, unlike the local deities, they demanded no living sacrifices. That made them at least somewhat better than the erdgods, and perhaps accounted for the rapid spread of the power of the Harris Church.

And yet...

"What's happening in town?" Yukinari asked.

"The Knights of the Order are giving the Holy Mark of the Harris Church to the people," Fiona said, her voice still trembling. "It's like a collar—as if they were animals—!"

She was interrupted by an imperious voice from outside. "I know you're in there! Come out!"

Yukinari and the others hadn't heard the voice before, but they had a pretty good guess who it belonged to.

"They... They followed me?!"

"Looks that way." Leaving the astonished Fiona to Dasa and Berta, Yukinari picked up Durandall.

●

Fiona always turned to the erdgod in a crisis. At least, that was what Arlen assumed. And that was why, on his recommendation, his corps commander had let Fiona go.

"She may have studied in the capital, but she's a provincial savage to the end," he said, ridicule tinging his voice as he looked around the so-called sanctuary. It was little more than some stone pillars. Arlen could hardly conceive how it qualified for such an illustrious term, nor could he imagine what Fiona thought she was doing here. She had fled into a structure that was clearly a hastily constructed warehouse.

“Now, then...” Arlen lowered the visor of his helmet and raised his right hand. In response, the other knights began to surround the hut. The corps commander had given Arlen authority to pursue Fiona and deal with her as he saw fit. He had the power here.

“It hardly looks like one of their monsters would be in there. Still...”

The soldiers had the hut completely surrounded. Besides their swords, the knights were armed with massive bows. These bows shot steel arrows and had to be drawn using a windlass—they were much too large to be drawn by hand. Hence it was an ordeal to reload them after a shot had been fired.

No arrow, however powerful nor made of whatever material, was likely to fell an erdgod with just one or two bolts. But ten or twenty people who could ready and fire one after another, without pause, could overwhelm the opponent. If even that did not bring the creature down, they might have to resort to their most powerful weapon. But the arrows would be more than enough to buy time for that.

Come out! he said, and then waited a moment. At length, the door of the hut opened and a lone young man appeared.

“Hrm?” Arlen frowned. The boy was unmistakably human—or at the very least, he was not some misshapen creature.

“Identify yourself, prole,” Arlen spat, and the boy—with a squint and nearly as much displeasure in his tone—replied:

“I’m the erdgod around here.”

“You? You must be joking.” The gathered soldiers laughed. Who had ever heard of a human erdgod? They all assumed he was some servant, a menial who cleaned the sanctuary or some such.

But then came the *crack*.

Arlen reeled for a moment, unsure what had happened. He had felt a stunning impact, as though the shield in his hand had been hit by a war hammer.

“Wh—What in—?”

There was a gaping hole in his shield. Something had punched a hole in it. That much, he grasped quickly. But how in the world...? The boy was standing some distance from him, and he didn't seem to be holding any kind of bow. But—wait. He was pointing a crude-looking sword of strange construction in Arlen's direction. Maybe he had a device that launched something from that sword, the same thing that had made the hole in Arlen's shield. But a shield was a shield, even if, like this one, it was relatively thin and light. Even to pierce it with an arrow would be difficult—and he didn't see the object that had caused the damage anywhere. It could have been as small as a pebble, but then how could it have ever done this?

"I hear you Church dogs are trying to mark *my* territory." The boy smiled, showing his teeth. It was a violent expression, brutal—beastlike. "So I think you're asking for some personal punishment from a god."

"Why, you—!"

"Even if it's—not yours—!"

Overawed by the boy's grin, Arlen shouted with a hint of panic: "Sh-Shoot him! Fiiiire!" The knights, who seemed as disturbed as Arlen had been by the deafening noise and the unidentifiable attack the boy had produced, complied.

But the boy simply ducked back into the hut to protect himself from their arrows. One shaft after another buried itself in the structure's outer wall. And an instant later—

Crack.

The sound came four times in succession. Small fires flickered within the hut, and almost simultaneously, four knights keeled over onto the ground. They cried out, clutching their shoulders or legs. Blood trickled from the chinks in their armor. They had been attacked. Whatever it was that had been able put a hole in a shield could also presumably pierce armor to strike the soft flesh beneath.

"You accursed—!" Arlen found himself looking at the boy and another human form: a small, silver-haired girl. She, too, carried some strange tool—no, some weapon. One or two of the four blasts must have come from it.

Arlen gritted his teeth and growled in anger. He did not know at this moment exactly how his enemies were attacking him, but he knew that they could protect themselves from his assaults, while the shields and armor that should have defended his men were useless. And any attempt to dodge the attack would be futile because it could not be seen with the naked eye. There seemed no hope of victory.

Even Arlen could see not to hold back any mote of available force. This situation called for one thing.

He ordered the missionaries: “Awaken the statue of the guardian saint!”

●

There are certain things we can’t forget, even if we desperately want to. Memories that are burned, not into our eyes, but into our very brains, where they will never fade. We recall them at the slightest prompting; at times, they become the fodder for our nightmares. Yukinari’s experience had yielded two such indelible moments: one was when he and his sister had met the final seconds of their lives in his “previous world.” The other was the day Jirina died.

She spoke her last words as Yukinari propped her up in a widening pool of her own blood.

“I’m... sorry, Yuki... Please—take care... of Dasa...”

And then the breath of life left her. There was not a hint of *Save me* or *I don’t want to die*. To the bitter end, her whole concern had been for him and for her little sister. Yukinari sensed how much he and Dasa had been loved.

Jirina was in an appalling state. She had puncture wounds from bladed objects in multiple places. Most likely, she had been surrounded by a group and stabbed repeatedly. Yukinari was amazed that she had managed to get away. She had willed into motion a body that should never have been able to budge—all so that she could tell Yukinari and Dasa to run away, tell them it was not safe here anymore. For that, she had used the last of herself.

And then, as Yukinari sat still clutching Jirina’s body, they appeared.

“Damnable witch!”

Men proudly displaying scarlet-colored crosses: the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris.

And each of them carried a sword stained with Jirina's blood.

The soldiers each had a choice insult for her.

"Ungrateful, heretic scum!"

"Thought to defy us, did you?!"

"Hand over that body, you sniveling—"

What happened next, Yukinari couldn't quite remember. The next thing he knew, he and Dasa were burying Jirina. They had no coffin, but they wrapped her neatly in a cloth, and returned her to the earth.

This whole event solidified one particular feeling within Yukinari: hatred for the Harris Church.

He had already held a fairly dim view of religion. In his "previous world," his mother had gotten sucked into one of the "new religions," the popular cults that sprang up like daisies in modern Japan; she had left her family for this new faith and never looked back. But with Jirina's death, he came to despise religion at the deepest level. And at the burning core of his hatred, then and always, was the Harris Church.

He wanted to get revenge on the Church for Jirina. Dasa said that Yukinari, insane with rage, had slaughtered those directly responsible for Jirina's death to the last man. But the Church itself was the reason they had murdered her as a witch, after using her skills as an alchemist for so long. If he could have, Yukinari would gladly have killed every one of the Church's members, certainly all of the knights of the Missionary Order. But Jirina's last words—*take care of Dasa*—held him back.

To protect Dasa, he had to run. That was why the two of them spent their days fleeing from their Church pursuers. The Church had put out wanted posters for both of them, so they skirted any town that might be home to Harris sympathizers, never staying long in one place, keeping the capital—the Church's home—always at their backs, traveling and traveling as though to one day reach the edge of the world.

But now...

“If you bastards are going to show up right in front of me of your own free will, that’s something else.” Yukinari grinned, baring his teeth. Now he was the pursuer, bearing down on the retreating missionaries. They seemed to be heading for Friedland. Fine. He would follow them right in, and then he would destroy all the knights who were “civilizing” the people there, too.

Suddenly, though, he started. Something strange was coming down the road that ran from the town to the sanctuary. It was an extremely large wagon. Several times the size of any normal transport, its oblong platform carried something gigantic and covered in a shroud. The missionary knights practically fell over themselves trying to reach it, all of them shouting at the top of their lungs.

“Bring out the saint! Ready the saint!”

“—Yuki.” Dasa had run up beside him.

“Dasa! Stay back. This is dangerous.”

“It would be much more... dangerous for you alone,” she said, cocking the hammer of Red Chili.

“I can’t believe—you know what? Never mind. Just stay close.”

“...Mm.”

“Any guess what they’ve got there, Dasa?”

She paused a long moment before answering: “No idea.”

As they spoke, they watched the missionaries, who had begun to work some device attached to the wagon. Was that—

“An organ?”

A sudden sound rang out—a melody. Apparently, the thing was a pipe organ, albeit a small one. A pipe organ was a musical instrument that was normally built directly into a building. But it seemed this one had been constructed as part of the wagon itself.

And then, the knights began to intone together.

“*Holy, holy, holy! O our august forebear! O saint who guarded the revered teachings, be incarnate now in sinews of steel, and come forth thyself to battle!*”

“*To battle!*”

“*Holy, holy, holy, holy!*”

“*Holy, holyyyyyyyyy*!”

The knights sang in unison, their hands joined in front of their chests, until their eyes were bloodshot.

Yukinari jumped as, in the next instant, there was a violent wind. The shroud, large enough to swallow a small house, cracked in the gust, then began to ripple wildly. This was accompanied by shouts of acclamation from the missionaries:

“Look! The saint comes forth to battle!”

“To battle!”

It was the instant after that that a gigantic form came down between Yukinari and the knights. There was a great crash, the earth of the sanctuary road caving in.

“Now, just a good goddamn minute here—”

Even Yukinari was surprised—indeed, flabbergasted. The thing that stood before him and Dasa, the thing that had vaulted off the huge cart, flying several meters before it crashed to the ground...

“Who knew they had toys like this?”

Yukinari might have termed it a “giant robot.” It was more than five meters tall—perhaps not quite six, but a mere human standing in front of the towering figure could not have helped but be intimidated. It was obviously made of steel, and looked unfathomably heavy. And yet, the thing had *jumped*. It was as though a tank had leaped clear into the sky: the only possible response was despair.



The knights had taken up their chant—or perhaps their prayer—again.

"*Holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy!*"

As the knights exclaimed, the pipe organ began to play even louder, and a reaction could be seen in the spikes—dozens of them, hundreds—that covered the steel giant.

No. Those aren't spikes. The end of each was split in two. They were...

Yukinari squinted: "Tuning forks...?"

Tuning forks. A vast number of them, in every size. They vibrated in time with the organ and the prayers, and each time they did, the metal monster would make some small movement.

"The forks... must be a way of... controlling 'holy oil,'" Dasa said.

"Good guess," Yukinari nodded. "I take back what I said, Dasa. You have to fall back. Back to the hut."

"But, Yuki..."

"I need you to handle Berta and the little princess. Keep them safe—and above all, yourself, too. I'm likely to have my hands full with this thing." As he spoke, Yukinari passed Dasa a .44 Magnum cartridge he'd taken out of his pocket.

There was a long beat before Dasa said, "I understand." Then she nodded, but kept Red Chili at the ready even as she backed away. If she had to go back to the hut, she was going to cover Yukinari as she did so. Her courage was bracing to him, but this was no time to stop and offer a word of thanks.

"It's probably just a machine, basically," Yukinari muttered, watching the giant draw the sword at its waist. Suddenly being confronted with this thing had taken some of the wind out of his sails, it was true. But he just needed to stay calm and think. This wasn't a miracle. It wasn't anything. Just a puppet, with sound instead of strings, and tuning forks to make it dance. The missionaries were controlling it with their organ and their prayers.

As for how it moved—the answer was probably "holy oil." The most closely guarded of all the Church's secrets, holy oil was a blood-red substance with

unusual properties, capable of storing heat and energy within itself. When the proper stimulus was applied—probably the vibrations of the tuning forks, in this case—it could be made to heat up, or change its volume, releasing that energy. It was like a battery that stored not electricity, but heat and even “motion” itself. It would essentially be the muscles of this giant.

“You got that power from the very alchemists you decried as heretics. And you’re not even a little ashamed to use it? I guess it’s refreshing to see people embrace their own hypocrisy so eagerly.”

“Holy oil” had originated with alchemy as it was practiced in this world. The Church had hunted down the alchemists as “heretics,” but had taken for itself those whom it thought might be useful. Now they were held in some secret place, forced to produce the devices that performed the Church’s “miracles” while their families and loved ones were held as hostages.

Jirina had been one of them.

Her parents had been captives of the Church as well, and she had lived her entire life—and then died—never so much as seeing the world outside it. That was why Yukinari would never forgive the Church. Jirina had been the “mother” who had given him a second life, the “sister” who had guided him when he did not know his left from his right—and they had taken her from him. That, he would not forgive. Let them bring out weapons of overwhelming destructive power—he would not waver in his vow.

“God’s punishment!” the knights bellowed. “Mete out his wrath!”

The giant—carved, it seemed, in the likeness of the guardian saint of the True Church of Harris—brought its sword down on Yukinari. It left an afterimage in the open air, and the boom of disrupted atmosphere followed. The need to control it by sound meant there was a brief delay before the statue moved. But once it did, it was much faster than it looked.

Boooom...

With a rumble that seemed to come from the earth itself, the sword carved a furrow in the ground. The trench was several meters across and more than twenty centimeters deep. It may not have looked like much, but it represented a staggering amount of force. The blade did not appear to be sharp, but it

would not have to be to dash apart any human caught in its path.

“So this is what they use to kill erdgods...”

The statue certainly seemed capable of going toe to toe with a god. And if the simple villagers of areas like this could see it do so, how easily it could be portrayed to them as a miracle from God. How conducive it was to evangelism when the villagers could be told that the venerable guardian saint of the True Church of Harris had become embodied among them as an invincible man of steel, to destroy the “demons” that dared take for themselves the name of God.

One of the knights cried out: “Die, demon filth! Die like all the others!”

The statue reiterated its attack. Yukinari had been right: the single motion in which it swung its sword, then stepped forward to reset its stance, was startlingly quick, but the two phases were completely separate. They were like two comic book panels side-by-side, something missing in the space between. It was almost like the way some reptiles or amphibians moved; stillness was utter and motion instantaneous, making them extremely difficult to read.

Swinging its sword, the statue advanced on Yukinari, the cloth that had covered it now flapping behind it like a cape.

A challenge rose to meet the creature: a gunshot, the sound of a .44 Magnum.

The noise carried with it a bullet—but it left barely a scratch on the thick armor. As powerful as Magnum bullets were, they were still pistol rounds. Even with the armor-piercing metal-tipped round he had used, it simply lacked the sheer energy necessary to destroy the statue. Yukinari worked Durandall’s loading lever, letting off five rounds, but they did as good as nothing at all.

Melee combat, then. Sword time. But the statue had the unequivocal upper hand in both power and reach. Even if he could get to it, who knew how many joints or other destructible parts there might or might not be on this steel puppet?

“Dammit! I really should’ve made me an anti-materiel rifle!”

Well, if a good, clean fight was out of the question—Yukinari circled around the statue to get it out of his line of fire, then took aim at the knight working

the organ attached to the huge wagon. But no sooner had he done so than the statue turned toward him and an inferno came lancing from its abdomen.

“Yow! That’s hot, dammit! It’s got a flamethrower?!” The weapon was probably intended to deal with opponents that got too close for its sword. Since it was not connected to the actual movements of the statue, it could be fired at any time. Against all appearances, a surprisingly logical design.

“Well, ain’t this a pickle.” Yukinari could not get the first inkling of a strategy.

As he frowned at this conundrum, he suddenly noticed: a group of ten or so missionaries, cutting a wide circle back toward the road—back toward the sanctuary. The slope of the land was gentle, yet once off the beaten path, they could not move very quickly. But—

“Dasa!”

There was no question. They had decided Yukinari was too powerful; they meant to take Dasa, Berta, and Fiona as hostages. Dasa had Red Chili with her, of course, but she wouldn’t be able to hold off a simultaneous assault by six or more people. Single-action revolvers are simple in construction and terrifically powerful—but loading and ejecting bullets in the heat of battle is a tall order. That’s why characters in Westerns always carry two guns.

“Damn it all...” Yukinari found himself spinning to follow the missionaries.

The next second, the statue of the guardian saint brought its sword down at him with all the force it could muster.

●

Fiona, Berta, and Dasa could see the missionaries coming. They thought of trying to close the door and barricade themselves inside the hut, but the place had been built in a hurry and was not what could be called very sturdy. Ten or more grown men of a mind to do so could easily break down the door.

“...Stand back,” Dasa said. She placed a chair in front of the door and kneeled in front of it, her bizarre black weapon in her hands. She extended two sticks attached to the underside, using them like feet to set the weapon on the chair. Then she looked through a cylinder affixed to the top.

Silently, Fiona led Berta around so they were directly behind Dasa. Fiona had no idea how Dasa's weapon worked, but Dasa would point it at someone, there would be a roar, and then the person would die. This meant that, although it was totally different in size and shape, it was somehow kin to the bow and arrow. Having allies in front of you while trying to use a weapon like that could only be trouble.

"Good... thinking." Dasa sounded pleased. Apparently, Fiona had had the right idea. Dasa turned her weapon on the encroaching knights.

And then that roar. For the barest moment, it blocked out every other sound. Fiona saw one of the missionaries pitch forward and collapse. He screamed, holding his thigh. That must have been the site of the wound. But his thigh should have been armored. Not heavily, true, but a metal plate protected it, thick enough to repel an arrow and curved so a sword would slide off. Yet this girl had wounded him there—and so easily.

"Ho—Hold fast!" The remaining knights shouted encouragement to one another. Dasa answered them with another roar. Holes appeared in the shields they were holding up, and despite their armor they fell to the ground clutching shoulders and legs. None appeared to have died on the spot, but each was trying to look after his own injury and howling. It seemed to be more than the pain: it was the terror of finding themselves at the mercy of a weapon they could not see and did not understand. The thing Dasa was using tore through the shields with which they were accustomed to stopping swords and even arrows. For these men, it must have seemed a nightmare.

"Try... Try this on for size, heretic scum!" One of the men who was still standing took the shield of a fallen companion, layered it with his own, and hid behind the two shields together as he crept closer.

Dasa attempted to reply, but—

"Ha—Ha ha! It worked!" the knight cried out. "I'm safe!" It seemed even Dasa's attacks could not penetrate three layers of steel—shield, and shield, and armor. The other knights learned the lesson quickly; they, too, began taking shields from injured comrades and using them in pairs.

Fiona said nothing, for there was nothing she could say. From where she was,

she of course could not see Dasa's face, but she had to imagine the girl was shaken to find her weapon thwarted. And they all knew that if the missionaries got close enough to use their swords—if they got within arm's reach—then Dasa's last hope of victory would vanish.

The weapon roared twice more. The man now at the head of the missionaries paused in surprise, but then resumed his advance. Apparently, even two attacks in a row were not enough to break the enemy's defenses. The knights had slowed somewhat, perhaps on account of the increased weight of carrying two shields. But then...

"...Out of bullets," Dasa muttered. And the missionaries were upon them, were there before them.

One of them raised his sword. "You damned—" But no sooner had he begun to speak than he crumpled forward.

"Dasa!"

The other knights turned at the shout. Yukinari was sprinting down the path, Durandall in his hand. The missionary who had just fallen must have been hit from behind by Yukinari's weapon. The knights had been so focused on protecting themselves from Dasa that they had failed to protect themselves from or even pay attention to what was behind them.

Now, though, Berta made a dumbfounded sound. Yukinari was not the only thing coming down the road. Something followed him, becoming slowly visible as though rising from water: a towering human shape.

"*Holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy!*"

The thing stood almost proudly, accompanied by the strains of a pipe organ and the chanting of the knights behind it. Then it made a great, horizontal sweep at Yukinari with the sword in its right hand. Yukinari, like the missionaries, was no longer thinking about what was behind him. He was entirely focused on Dasa. So he had no chance of dodging the blow; it caught him squarely.

Yukinari exhaled sharply as the huge blade—basically an iron plate, really—struck him. It did not cleave him in two, so it must not have been very sharp,

but it did send him tumbling through empty space like an errant leaf from a tree. And if the weapon had power enough to send a human flying, it had surely crushed flesh and shattered bone when it struck. In the worst case, it might even have broken Yukinari's back or ruptured his internal organs, killing him instantly.

"Yukiiiii!"

Dasa's scream echoed through the sanctuary.

A moment's impact. The vast, heavy thing cleaved away Yukinari's consciousness of the outside world. Darkness enveloped him; everything sounded distant. He went numb all over, and he could neither taste nor smell anything. Robbed of the senses that should have connected him to his environment, he felt himself falling toward the bottom of a profound darkness.

This was bad. His brain wasn't working. He could hardly think. Only a building, instinctual panic rose within him. And with it—

"Yuki..."

His older sister, Hatsune, reaching out to him through the flames.

"I'm... sorry, Yuki... Please—take care... of Dasa..."

Jirina, covered in blood, but smiling at the last.

His previous world, and this one. Twice, Yukinari had lost people who were dear to him. Perhaps he could have saved them. Could have helped them. Could have done something. The thought hurt so much it nearly drove him mad.

"Well, shit."

It was what caused him to grumble in the darkness.

"I knew I wasn't cut out to be a god."

Yukinari had a power. But he hesitated to use it, because then everyone would know what he really was, and fear him. To use his power was to risk getting that look, the look of terror at something not human. For his power was beyond that of any normal person.

Until this moment, Yukinari had insisted on being human. But if the cost of

being human was losing Dasa, he wasn't willing to pay it. He had promised Jirina. But it was more than that.

"Dasa..."

The girl had not hesitated to stay with him, even knowing what he was. She might seem expressionless and dispassionate, but a pat on the head was all it took to bring her joy.

He wouldn't lose someone else. He wouldn't lose her.

Let them fear him as a monster. Let them revile him as a beast. What did he care how those nameless others thought and felt? He had to use his power without hesitation, without question, without remorse—had to use it to bring about his own desires. And was this not the province of Almighty God?

And so—

"Yuki!"

Dasa's voice was calling him.

He had to go.

He would not lose someone else, not this time.

He clung to Dasa's voice like a lifeline, using it to claw his way back to consciousness. He found himself sprawled next to the path to the sanctuary. When he opened his eyes and looked up, he saw the statue of the guardian saint with its sword raised, ready to strike the final blow.

"Now meet your end, demon!"

The words rang out like a death sentence; the pipe organ reached a frenzied pitch. The massive blade fell toward Yukinari with a roar of rending air.

But it was followed by a sound of confusion.

Yukinari was grinning, baring his teeth.

"Who said that?" he asked. "And who the hell were you saying it to?"

The missionary knights froze in place. And no wonder: they did not have the slightest idea what had occurred. It had happened in an instant; Dasa alone might have understood what it was. As for Berta and Fiona, even if they had

seen it, they could not have understood it, for it would have been unlike anything they had ever witnessed before.

First, there had been a flash of blue-white light in between Yukinari's upraised palm and the statue's sword as it came down on his hand. Neither a spark nor spray of blood, the flash—the light almost cold—shone so strongly that everyone around cast a shadow in it.

Then the sword had vanished.

Or more accurately, the vast majority of it had, without warning or apparent reason, been annihilated. Most of the sword, centering on the part Yukinari had been touching, ceased to exist, leaving only a small piece near the hilt and another small bit of the tip. With nothing to support it, the tip flew through the air, slamming into one of the trees that grew near what remained of the sanctuary and causing it to buckle.

And then, once the sword was gone, the light enveloped Yukinari's entire body. The very sight of him merged into the light, and in the next instant, the light was gone again. In Yukinari's place was...

"...A knight...?" Fiona murmured, astonished.

Yukinari appeared to be an armored knight. But he looked obviously different from the knights of the Missionary Order. His armor bore no intimidating ornaments, and the deep turquoise material that covered his body was apparently sewn directly onto the black cloth beneath. The impression he gave was very much a human one.

But he also possessed one thing that no human did: wings. They grew from his back, drooping like branches heavy with fruit, the feathers made of something translucent, like glass. They produced a pleasant jingling when they rubbed together. The sound almost felt like a cool breeze, but the feathers must actually have been quite hot, as Yukinari's back was obscured by a heat haze.

A helmet covered his head with hardly a crack or seam—but perhaps the missionary knights noticed the red eyes that glowed from the visor, the eyes of the boy they were trying so enthusiastically to murder.

One of the knights pointed a shaking finger at the blue-clad figure.

“It can’t—It’s can’t be! This isn’t possible!”

“What?” a companion demanded. “What are you talking ab—”

“That’s the ‘angel’!” the man nearly howled.

There was a sort of collective choke, and a grim look spread among the knights.

“I’ve seen him! I saw him on that day a year ago—that’s the ‘Blue Angel’! He killed the old head of the Missionary Order, and the Dominus Doctrinae!”

“Thanks for catching everyone up.” Yukinari grimaced behind his mask. “Dammit, this is why I didn’t want to do this, especially not in front of a bunch of Church types! I knew you’d make the connection.”

The two wings on Yukinari’s back began to open, a ring of blue-white light forming between them and starting to spin, faster and faster. The power of the “angel” could in fact be used in a normal body. Yukinari could have used it during his battle with the xenobeasts to destroy them effortlessly, but there was an appropriate body makeup for using the power to its full capacity. The most effective thing was to redefine his own form as this “angel,” covered in armor, with wings like glass.

“The ‘Blue Angel’...!”

“The Bluesteel Blasphemer...?!”

The knights were already losing their nerve. The massacre Yukinari had perpetrated—killing all those knights who had murdered Jirina, then forcing his way into the building where the head of the Missionary Order and the then-Dominus Doctrinae resided—was known to at least some of these men, and they seemed to regard “Blue Angel” and “Bluesteel Blasphemer” as the names of a nightmare.

“K-Kill him!” one of the knights ordered in a strangled voice. “Destroy him! D-Do *something*!”

The strains of the organ resumed, and the statue of the guardian saint tossed aside its decimated sword to come at him hand to hand. But Yukinari simply

met its fist with his own balled-up gauntlet, a single, direct blow—and the statue's arm, from its hand to its elbow, seemed to ripple, and then crumbled away to white powder.

Physical decay.

Yukinari's power, the Angel's power, was to freely manipulate the state-of-being of anything he touched. It was, in effect, living alchemy. The alchemists the Church had kidnapped and worked so mercilessly—including Jirina—had been striving for centuries to achieve this, the pinnacle of their art.

If Yukinari so wished, he could turn water into wine or stones into bread. This involved the consumption of information, so when changing more than a certain amount of physical material, he would have to first touch something and turn it to dust—that is, he would have to take the information about its form and store it up. But just as when he had transformed into the "angel," Yukinari could both store and spend information at the same time.

Either way, at this moment, it hardly mattered.

"The statue of the guardian saint...!"

The knights were in an uproar about their statue. It had been the guarantor of their invulnerability, and Yukinari had destroyed it at a touch—or part of it, anyway.

"I guess that thing's just too big to do it all at once," Yukinari muttered, joining his hands in front of his chest. He pressed the palm of his left hand against the palm of his right.

"In that case—"

He focused his attention on his power. The construction could be simple. He really needed no more than a cylinder. He had made primers and powder so many times that they were second nature. What this moment demanded was something with the firepower of an anti-tank weapon. If he only planned on using it once, then all he needed was a barrel. He could make it of chrome-molybdenum steel, and he could load nitroglycerin, nitrocellulose, and nitroguanidine into the base. A large-diameter primer could cap it off.

The rounds would be stainless steel, armor-piercing. And the caliber...

There was a collective sound of shock as, the next moment, Yukinari pulled a “staff” nearly two meters in length out of his left palm. No—it was not a staff, of course, even though it was shaped like one. It was, essentially, an oversized .44 Magnum bullet. The caliber must have been three times normal, the amount of gunpowder probably twenty-seven times, and it had a cylinder attached as a barrel. Yukinari had produced it so quickly that it could boast nothing but the utmost simplicity, but as something that was only to be used once, that was enough.

“Try *this* on for size!”

He pointed the “spear” at the statue’s body, lining it up with a chink in the thing’s armor. Then he took a step back and raised his right hand, before giving the base of the “spear”—that is, the primer—a solid smack.

There was a gunshot—no, an explosion. Next came a screech of metal, and the guardian saint’s torso caved in as a 132-caliber bullet—a massive thing 1.3 inches in diameter—went through the air, through the statue, and out the other side. Crimson “holy oil” poured like blood from the wound—and then the Missionary Order’s anti-personnel weapon fell to its knees as if it were dying.



The knights uttered inarticulate screams, nearly tripping over themselves as they fled. Yukinari turned toward them, picking up Durandall, which he had cast aside. He took aim—

“Yuki!” Dasa came running up, wrapping her arms around the blue armor. “Yuki, Yuki, Yuki!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine, just—stop shaking me,” he muttered as she rattled him with her embrace. By the time she stopped, though, the missionaries were out of range.

And then he was confronted with the shocked expressions on Fiona’s and Berta’s faces.

“Who, or... what... are you?” Fiona breathed.

It was understandable. The “angel” had begun as a man-made human, one of the miracles intended to be trotted out to convert the populace. A tool for evangelism. *Behold*, the missionaries could say, *the wonders of the power of our faith! This rock has become bread.* Or, *In response to our faith, God in Heaven has sent unto us a messenger to work mighty deeds among us.*

Of course, the existence of this creature was a secret to all outside the Church, and the angel itself lacked any will of its own. Even its human form owed much to its purpose as an object of display. Consciousness or selfhood could only make a tool harder to use. Thus, while ten or so “angels” besides Yukinari existed, they were really no more than puppets made of flesh. They only functioned when used by the missionaries—in that sense, they were much like the statue of the guardian saint.

Of all the angels, only Yukinari had a sense of self. Jirina had made him, and the Church had killed her for it; his creation, they said, was an act of rebellion against the highest echelons of the Church.

But Yukinari, for his part, simply gave a rictus grin under his mask.

“That’s a damn good question.”

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Yukinari and the others loaded the wounded knights onto the huge wagon

and went back to Friedland. The remaining soldiers of the Missionary Order were there completing the “conversion” of the people—that is, giving them the Holy Mark. But at the sight of Yukinari in his blue armor, they took fright, and in terror surrendered. All he had to do was show them a piece of the statute he had destroyed. If he had defeated their most powerful weapon, then there was no way the knights, with their reduced numbers, could control this town.

“Th—This is not over!” one of the knights, who had been gathered in the town square, said hatefully. He was one of those who had come to the sanctuary; according to Fiona, his name was Arlen. She said they had been classmates when she studied in the capital. But for all their acquaintance, she seemed perfectly disgusted by him.

“N-Next time, we’ll—we’ll bring something even more awesome! Staggering beyond belief! Five guardian statues—no, ten!”

“So,” Fiona said to him, sounding more exasperated than angry, “you’re going to go back to the headquarters of the True Church and tell them you’re an incompetent who let their ultimate weapon be destroyed by one boy?”

Arlen goggled at her, lost for words.

Fiona whispered to him: “How about we make a deal, you and I?”

“A—A deal?”

“Mmhm. You send back a false report to your superiors. You get to save face, and we don’t get bothered by anymore ‘civilizing’ armies. If you promise not to do anything untoward, we’ll let you knights live here.”

If they simply chased Arlen and the rest out of the village, the Missionary Order would make other attempts to convert the area. Of course, the same went if they were to kill the knights in their custody. If the Friedlanders could convince the men to send a false report, though, it might work out to everyone’s benefit.

But Arlen responded, “Who are you s-slaves to make such offers to us?!” He pointed at the rings that everyone but Fiona wore around their necks. People are quick to show their true colors under duress, and despite his euphemisms and speeches of earlier, it was now clear that to Arlen and his companions,

these country people were little different from servants.

“That’s right!” the other knights began to chime in. “You cannot defy us, so long as you wear the Holy Mark...!”

It seemed a special tone had to be sounded in order to release the rings.

“Are these the collars you were talking about?” Yukinari walked over to a young child—one of those he had met at the orphanage—and touched her neck.

“Sorry. I just need you to hold still for a second.” Then he touched the ring she wore. No sooner had he done so than it turned to a dust like sand that drifted to the ground.

The knights of the Missionary Order could only gape.

“So now we’re all equals here, right?

“We... We could never...!”

Arlen and his knights were deeply unsettled. An unpleasant smile came over Fiona’s face.

“Well then,” she said, “what do you propose we do?”

Epilogue: Who Reigns Over That Land

It had been about ten days since the arrival of the Missionary Order. It had been decided to build a house—a sanctuary—for the “erdgod” once more, upon the ruins of the old one. This would be no improvised hut made with whatever was at hand; it would be a sturdy structure of brick. But because building it would demand a certain amount of work, the effort was undertaken not by the townspeople, who all had jobs to do, but by a group of temporary laborers under the watchful eye of a master carpenter.

“Come on, don’t slack, now!” The baldheaded, muscular carpenter lost no opportunity to fling invective (or was it encouragement?) at his workers. “A god’s going to live in this house. We wouldn’t want to disappoint him!” Most of the men wore dark looks on their faces, but they worked silently.

One, however, could be heard to say, “Why should I be reduced to such...” It was Arlen, muttering to himself as he toiled. He might have believed he was keeping his voice down, but the master carpenter saw and heard all.

“Why? This ain’t yer capital, and you ain’t in charge of anything here.” He gave Arlen a jab in the head with a beefy hand.

Arlen and the others had ultimately found themselves with no choice but to accept Fiona’s “suggestion.” They reported to their Church superiors that they had successfully slain the local erdgod and converted the populace, and that they would be staying in the area. And they would—but of course, not as knights of the Missionary Order. Fiona and the rest of the town could hardly allow that. Their weapons had all been confiscated by the villagers, and the former knights were set to menial tasks wherever they were needed.

The twenty or so knights who had fallen victim to Yukinari and Dasa’s attacks were permitted to focus on resting and recovering—but they were, in a sense, hostages to keep Arlen and the others in line.

“If you have the energy to run your mouth, you’re not working hard enough! Move those hands!”

“...Yes, sir.”

Arlen apologized, then heaved a sigh and went back to work.

●

There are things we understand even without putting them into words. But sometimes, if we don’t put them into words, we can’t move on. That is what ceremonies and rituals are for: to allow us to turn toward the future, a future different from our past.

“Lord Yukinari...”

In the parlor of the Schillings residence. Fiona’s father, Hans, and their butlers had said they would be happy to attend, but Fiona had turned them down on the grounds that she and Berta were most suited to making this particular case to Yukinari.

Which case?

“...Please, stay in this area and protect the town from demigods and xenobeasts.”

It was a plea he had heard many times from Berta’s lips. But now she was not begging him in the midst of a crisis, but asking him formally as he found himself in the Schillingses’ parlor for the second time. And that gave the words a distinctly different cast.

“I dedicate anew my body, my heart, my soul—everything I am, to you. Please...”

“Uh, but...”

“Yukinari,” Fiona said from her place beside Berta. “Consider this a request from me, as well.”

Yukinari was silent.

“We’ve managed to throw the True Church off the scent for now, but if they get wind of the truth, there will be reprisals.”

“Can’t you just make an excuse?” Yukinari said. “Tell them some dirty, rotten erdgod made you do it?” He indicated himself with a wry smile.

“I suppose it’s possible,” Fiona murmured with a frown. “You know, we are building a new, proper sanctuary.”

“That really isn’t the problem.”

“Is—Is Berta not enough to satisfy you? If you need... something more, then as I told you—I’m available as well.”

“Okay, stop right there.”

Women and money were the two traditional means of winning a man to your side—and Friedland didn’t have much money. They needed some way to convince Yukinari to stay. And Yukinari, at heart, was really just a teenage boy. It was hardly as if he was unhappy to have the attentions of two such beautiful young women as Fiona and Berta. But...

“I admire your resolve, I do. But don’t you get it?”

“Get what?”

“I’m not human,” Yukinari said, as forcefully as he could. “You saw it yourself.”

“Yes. We did.” The two women nodded.

“And you’re not worried about... you know. *Offering yourself* to something like me? Didn’t anyone ever teach you to value yourself?”

“You look human enough,” Fiona said. “And supposedly, there even used to be marriages between humans and erdgods. Although I’m not sure if it’s true.”

“What,” Yukinari asked after a pause, “beautiful maidens and horrible beasts?”

It was true that in his “previous world,” Yukinari had known of a number of myths and legends that spoke of the same sort of thing. And this world he was in now, with its erdgods and xenobeasts, certainly seemed full of creatures that would be right at home in those stories. Maybe the people of this world would have less of an objection than Yukinari himself to becoming the spouse of something not human.

“Listen. The Church made me. I’m—”

An artificial human. An “angel,” a tool for proselytization. In other words, his very existence was meant to be a secret; and as if this were not motivation enough to hunt him, the Church would still want revenge for the deaths of the prior Dominus Doctrinae and the head of the Missionary Order. If the Church found out he was here, he would not be surprised if they sent every knight in the Order to Friedland.

“Let me try to put this another way—alright, Yukinari?” Fiona said, her tone suddenly growing more familiar. “I’m really glad I met you. I hated the old system of sacrifices; I really wanted to do something about it. But I—” For a moment she stopped, hesitating. But then she went on: “I didn’t have the courage.”

“Courage?” he asked.

“Yes. To plot a future different from our past.”

There was a long pause. “I don’t...”

“I believed it had to change. But changing something that’s gone on so long—there are a lot of challenges in that. And if you get it wrong, you could even make things worse. Those were my reasons—my excuses—for not doing anything.” Her tone carried a note of self-recrimination, yet her face was bright. “But you broke down all those old, frozen things. Maybe you didn’t mean to—maybe it was just chance—but I don’t care.” Fiona had bowed ever so slightly, looking at the ground, but now she looked up at Yukinari’s face. “I wonder if maybe that’s what gods are.”

“How’s that?”

“They kind of follow along—take the things humans just happen to do, and find meaning in them. They exist as gods, and even if they don’t do anything—well, that’s where the meaning comes from.”

“I think you’re confusing gods and pets.”

“It’s possible,” Fiona smiled. “So stay here, Yukinari. With us. Please?”

“Um, p-please add me to the—the list of people who want you to st-stay here,” Berta said. “I want you to stay with us, Lord Yukinari—and I want to stay with you.”

Yukinari said nothing, then let out a long sigh.

A god. A pet. It didn't matter. What they were saying resonated with him far more strongly than any appeal about "the good of the town" or "the good of the people" ever would have. And so...

"...Alright."

Fiona and Berta looked at each other in astonishment, their faces shining.

He followed this up with a feeble attempt at pretext: "I was just thinking I couldn't drag Dasa all over creation forever, anyway." Then he turned to his partner as he noticed her intense stare. "Erm...?"

"Yuki," Dasa said sullenly. "I knew... you were a... womanizer."

"Hey, all that stuff about offering themselves or whatever, that's their words, not mine."

Dasa wrapped both her arms around Yukinari's left arm, silent.

"Dasa?"

"But I want you to be able to be free, Yuki." She looked at her feet as she spoke. "Don't be... burdened by your promise... to my sister."

"Dasa..."

"Otherwise, I would surely..."

Surely what? he wondered. But she didn't finish her sentence, only tightened her grip on his arm. He let out a breath and put a hand in her silver hair.

This seemed to prompt Fiona and Berta to begin discussing some kind of order between themselves.

"So I guess that means starting tonight, we can just take turns in Yukinari's bedroom?"

"Oh! In that case, I'm—"

"Hey, you," he said. "Better cut that out, or this conversation is going to go south fast."

"You think?"

“Oh, I don’t think. I know.”

Fiona gave him an inquiring tilt of her head. “Is that your command, as a god?”

“Yeah, I guess. I command you, as the god of this land—drop that talk for now.”

Yukinari let the words out with a sigh, acutely aware of Dasa, her look swiftly darkening, beside him.

Afterword

Hello, hello. Your humble author, Sakaki, here.

Welcome to *Bluesteel Blasphemer*, my first work for Hobby Japan in a while.

This book is what you might call an “Other-world Chea-rem,” as in “an average guy gets transported to some **other world** with a **chea**t that makes him the strongest character around while all the girls who show up instantly fall in love with him and he winds up with a ha**rem**.” This is a kind of story that first really came into its own with web novels.

Now, typically in these stories, convention demands that the main character be the strongest thing in sight. And you need some excuse for that. So the protagonist is incarnated as a hero, or occasionally a villain, or sometimes a leader in the army despite having no physical capabilities. There are lots of variations.

You might be tempted to classify this work of mine, which I’m writing from my usual undisclosed location, in this “Other-world Chea-rem” genre. Such stories, however, typically feature characters who have no real fighting ability and forge ahead based entirely on an abundance of nerd knowledge. There are even ones where bar cooks or members of a high school cooking club aggravate the people in this other world with their food.

The whole “strongest” routine might be an innovation, but the enjoyment of this type of story can be traced back to books like *G.I. Samurai*, although that doesn’t focus as much on individual capabilities. In terms of movies, you could look to things like *The Final Countdown*, which features F-14 Tomcats shooting down Zero fighter planes.

In light of all that, I thought, *How fun would it be to fight monsters or sword-wielding knights with modern weapons like guns?*

But here we run into a problem. Guns need gunpowder to be anything more than a bludgeon, and you would expect gunpowder to be awfully difficult to

come by in these other worlds. Even the Self-Defense Force unit in *G.I. Samurai* finds itself unable to keep up supplies; at the end of the movie, they have to abandon their tank, while in the novel, an inability to get fuel forces them to limit the use of their generator.

So, then, how to have a main character who achieves his position as the strongest by using guns? I mulled over a number of possibilities, and the outcome was *Bluesteel Blasphemer*. You might notice that the term “blue steel” can also refer to the results of protecting the steel (not stainless steel or wood) parts of a gun from rust through a process known as “bluing.”

Since I had gone to the trouble of setting up this world, I wanted the heroine to have a gun, too. The orthodox approach to a girl with a gun says you must give her a huge rifle. (This provides a nice contrast between the cuteness of the little girl and the bad-assery of her firepower.) I had been doing that until recently in a certain work of mine, and I decided to give things a twist this time.

She wears glasses, but she’s a sniper. She’s a sniper, but she uses a pistol. And not just any pistol—she sticks a scope and a bipod on a revolver!

Yes! That’s it! Sniper girl with glasses and a scope-ready custom revolver!

Incidentally, you may think a revolver with a bipod and scope, intended for sniper use, is a pretty poor excuse for a custom weapon. That maybe it was just made of whatever parts were lying around, or that the person who put it together was not thinking very hard. But while real-world examples aren’t common, some such guns actually are used by the French special forces.

I do have a specific reason in mind for having the main character use a lever-action carbine and the heroine a single-action revolver—but forget about that for now. I’m not normally that into guns, so to write this book I went out and bought a bunch of air guns and model guns. That’s right: it’s all research. Not a flimsy excuse to... No... Really...

Well, anyway.

I tried to basically re-create the heroine’s “Red Chili” using an air gun, thinking it would be good reference material for my illustrator, but to my surprise Tera Akai-sensei created 3D models of Durandall and the various other weapons. I can’t thank him enough.

And while this book doesn’t exactly conform to the standard blueprint, it’s true that the guns are pretty cool and the heroine is pretty cute, and I can’t wait to see it in published form.

I can’t wait for you to read it, either. I will be thrilled if you enjoy it.

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by Ichirou Sakaki

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