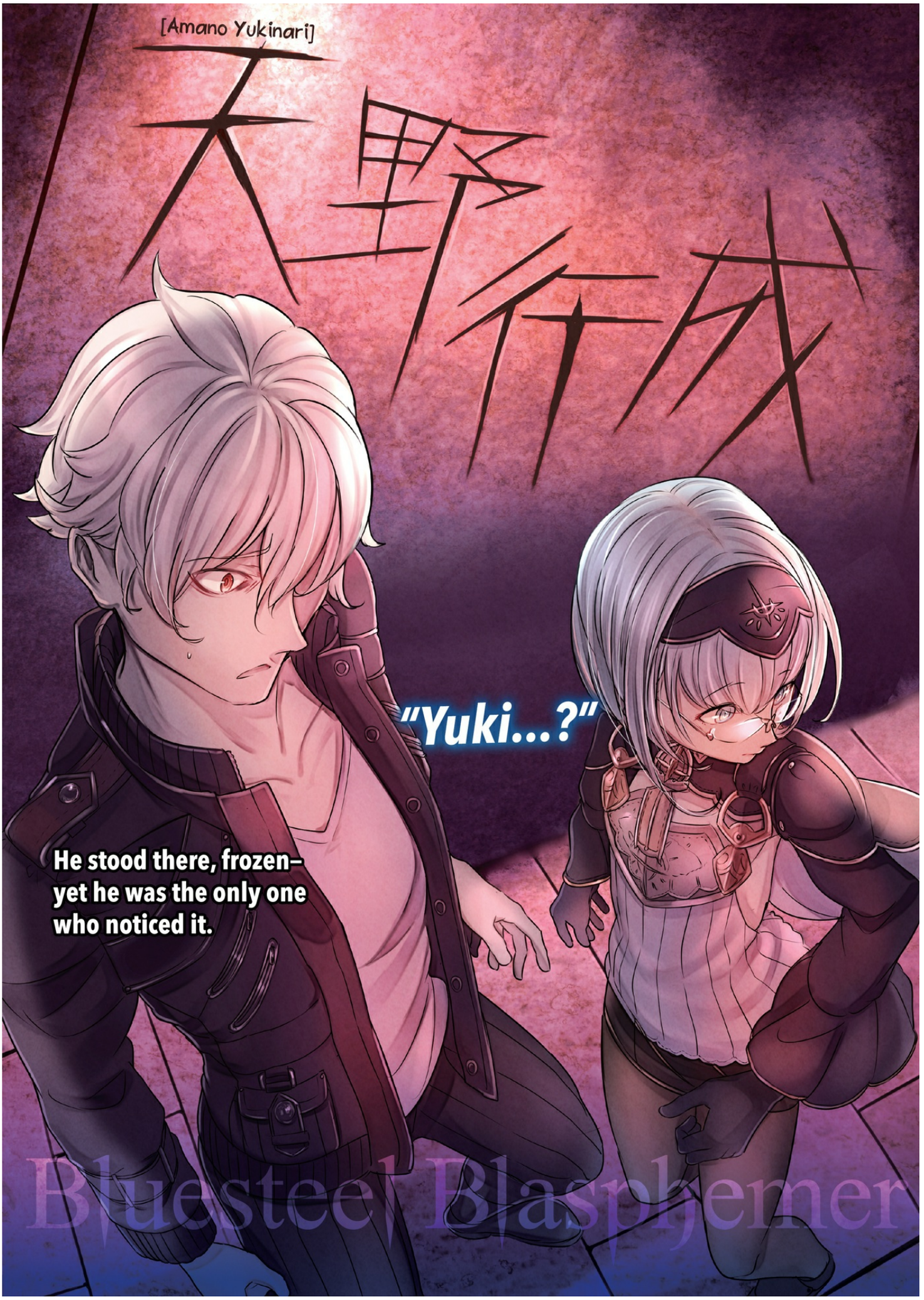
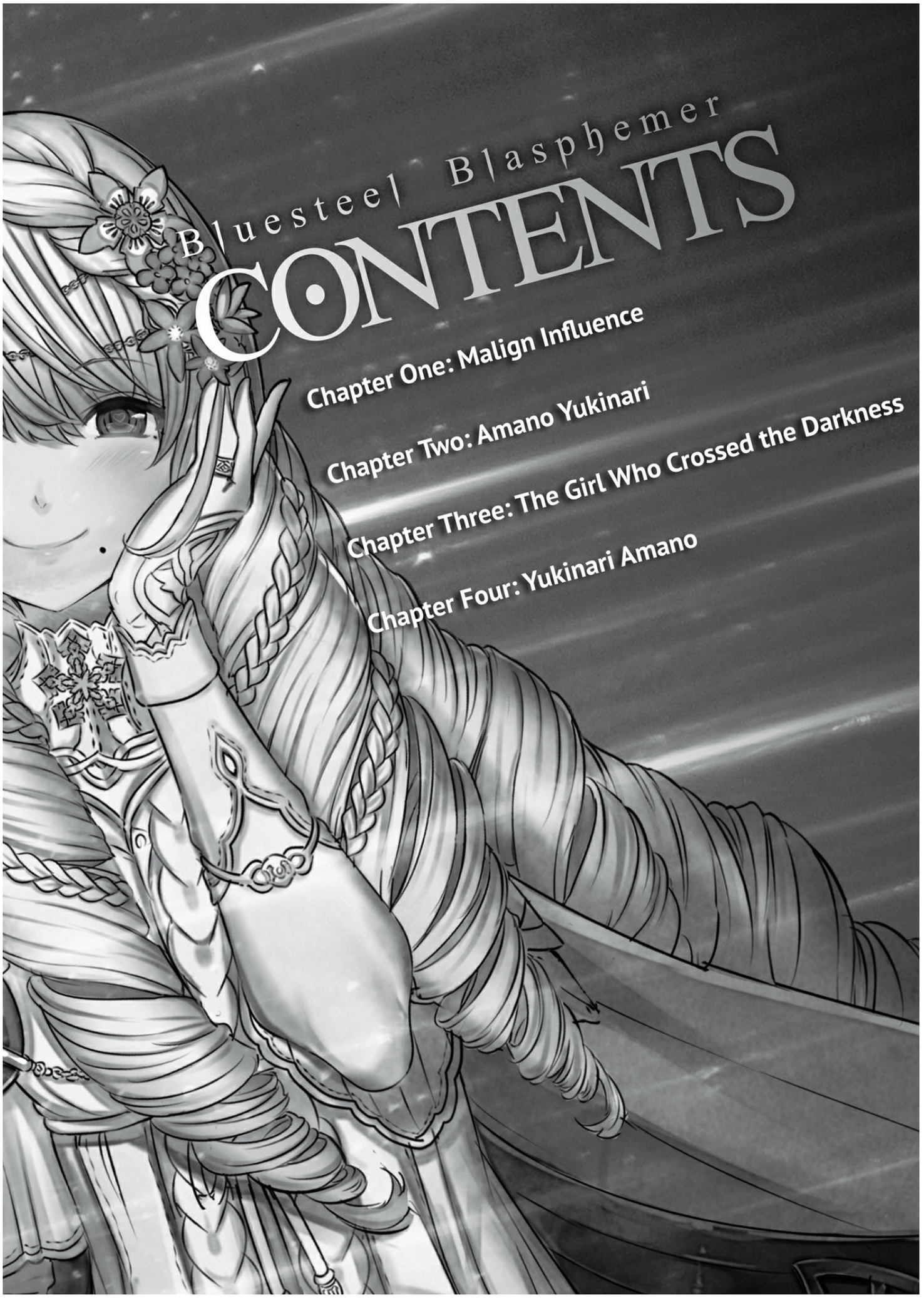

BLUE STEEL
BEASTEEMER
4
Ichirou Sakaki
Illust. Tera Akai


BLUESTEEL BLASPHEMER
4
Ichirou Sakaki
Illust. Tera Akai


[Amano Yukinari]
天野行成
"Yuki...?"
He stood there, frozen–
yet he was the only one
who noticed it.
Bluesteel Blasphemer


"I guess I would've hit you anyway."
"...oww... ahh..."
Yukinari noticed that Angela, still kneeling, was moving her knees a little. She looked at him. She was shaking. Were her cheeks red because he had hit her? Or...?
"Ah... ahhh..."
"I–Insect!"
Angela opened and closed her mouth, finally frozen in place by Yukinari's stare.
"What's the matter, you insect?"
"Say something!"
Then he slapped Angela's face. The dry sound echoed around the basement room.


After a very long time, Yukinari said,
"What do you mean... again?"
"So, my dear Yuki, let's–just the two of us, together– die again."



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Chapter One: Malign Influence

Angela Jindel had always hungered for something.

Born the daughter of a powerful noble family, blessed with both looks and intelligence, she had become used to being better than those around her from a very young age. Indeed, the people around her recognized it—even sought to put her ahead of themselves.

Angela's mother, despite being a woman, had pushed aside her less competent brothers to take over headship of the Jindel house. She often seemed to look down even on her own husband, who took the Jindel name. Angela's father never objected to this; he was less a partner than a servant to her mother. In noble society, where men were normally more valued and respected than women, this was very unusual—but Angela's mother was made of stern enough stuff to make it possible.

With these people for parents, Angela naturally grew into a capable woman who refused to be bested by any man, and her achievements showed as much.

She had originally entered the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris to bolster her reputation. She had to show that she wasn't just smarter than the men around her; she could beat them in matters of war as well. Hence, Angela had studied the martial arts since she was a child, and once she joined the Order, she never showed any fear of battle, be it with barbarian tribes or erdgods, demigods, or xenobeasts.

But the converse of all this was that there was a constant thirst in Angela. Something was missing. Unfulfilled. The fact that she didn't know what it was only increased her anxiety about it.

She believed that when she finally figured out what this thing was, it would turn out to be very simple, a blunt force rising up from within her, unyielding precisely because it was so obvious.

But if she continued as she was, she would never find it. That much, she

knew. So Angela threw herself into her Church duties as if to forget the longing within her. She memorized the scriptures and proclaimed how wonderful they were to all who would listen. Everyone around her could only marvel at her fervent devotion.

In due course, she surpassed all those moronic men; in the blink of an eye, she was a vice captain. Of course, it helped that she came from a famous family such as the Jindels, but she was able to gain the position at the tender young age of twenty because of her own competence and intense effort.

When she opened her eyes, however, she was in a dark room. The decor could have been generously described as minimalist; bare stone walls were all she could see. The room was humid and smelled faintly of mold. She presumed she was underground somewhere.

She blinked her almond-shaped, catlike eyes and sighed.

First, she should take stock of her physical condition. She moved her hands, feeling her face and then her body. This was not, of course, to ensure that she was unhurt. It was to check that this was not a bad dream—that it was, in fact, cold, hard, pitiless reality. She didn't know how many days had passed since she had been imprisoned here, but this had become her ritual each time she woke up.

The dull pain of the blows remained here and there on her body, and pain lanced through a cut on her right arm, although the wound was shallow. She was not manacled, but her armor had been taken from her. Perhaps they assumed it would have a weapon hidden in it somewhere. Instead she had been given a completely plain one-piece dress, just a piece of cloth with a hole for her head. It was tied with rope in a few places. Practically rags. If she moved carelessly, her chest and behind would be on full display.

Maybe because it was underground, the room was warmer than it looked, and she had been given a blanket, albeit a ratty one, so there was no fear of her freezing. The only people who got anywhere near her room were the female mercenary and the girl who came to deliver her meals and empty her chamber pot, so Angela didn't have to worry about being seen by any men, but that didn't change the fact that she was embarrassed.

This was all a perfectly normal way to treat a soldier from a defeated army.

“Hrk...”

Friedland was a speck of a frontier town. And it was where Angela’s shining record had been besmirched for the first time in her life. The Ninth Missionary Brigade, to which she belonged, had been in the middle of a civilizing expedition. The True Church of Harris was great and powerful—but even the Church’s glory didn’t extend this far from the capital; this area was still home to barbarians who believed in local cults that worshipped evil spirits.

Specifically, the erdgod cults.

These so-called “deities” ate people. That was how they gained strength, returning a portion of that strength to the earth. That made the land abundant, allowing people to live in areas that would not normally have yielded enough to be habitable. Of course, the monsters called erdgods didn’t improve the land for the people’s sake. It was just a way of making sure there was a steady supply of living sacrifices available.

In short—and she felt dirty even thinking this—those beasts raised humans like livestock.

It was hideous. What human would acquiesce to be treated that way, even if it was for their own survival?

The glorious and honorable knights of the True Church of Harris had been dispatched to spread the Church’s precious teachings among those who clung to such awful faiths. It was they who would bring the true teachings, and it was the Missionary Order that had organized and militarized them.

Angela had come to the frontier town of Friedland as vice captain of the Ninth Missionary Brigade, along with her subordinates. Her sacred duty had been to announce the will of God to this place where monstrous beliefs had taken such root.

She had felt no anxiety about this. Her strategy had included not one but two of the statues of the guardian saint, the missionaries’ ultimate weapons, capable of destroying an erdgod in a single swoop. There had been no chance of defeat. Or shouldn’t have been.

But Angela and her forces had, in fact, lost. Her statues had been destroyed and her followers scattered, and she, their commander, had been captured and imprisoned.

She wasn't sure how many days had passed since then. Her wounds had given rise to a fever that made the first several days after her capture fuzzy, and because no light got into this basement room, she didn't know when it was day and when it was night. There was a window the size of the palm of her hand on the door, but only a flickering lamplight came in through it. She could judge the passage of a day only by how many times meals were delivered to her.

"This is the worst," she muttered to no one in particular.

Born a daughter of nobility, hailed by all and sundry for her talents, made a knight of the True Church of Harris—there was no blemish or failure anywhere in her life. Everything had been ideal, precisely as she had imagined it.

Yet now she was subjected to this humiliating treatment.

Her wounds had been tended, and they brought her food. There was nothing that compelled them to treat an enemy, a mere defeated soldier, that way. From another perspective, it could be that the Friedlanders were keeping her alive because they sensed some advantage in doing so. Whether Angela liked it or not, she was going to be used by her enemies.

Just the thought made her want to vomit. What base humiliation. And it was all because of...

"That man...!" She could see his face in her mind's eye. A white-haired boy. The reason Angela was in this situation. "The Bluesteel Blasphemer...!"

He was a monster in the form of a man. He had single-handedly destroyed a statue of the guardian saint and brought about the defeat of Angela's unit. Of course, he'd had the help of the Friedlanders and the female mercenary, but those had been minor considerations in light of the power that man had displayed.

He had defeated the statue, the one that destroyed gods.

She couldn't shake the image of him. It wouldn't go away. She understood that she feared him on the deepest level of her being, and that was the most

awful thing of all. In the bright light of the teachings of the True Church of Harris, the only thing the believer should fear was God above.

“Hrk...”

A tremble passed through her, nervous energy with nowhere to go. At the same moment, Angela detected the sound of footsteps approaching her prison.

She looked dubiously at the door. At first she thought it might be her meal, or a change of chamber pot, but these weren’t the footsteps she was used to. There were more of them than usual. Three people, probably. And one of them had a long stride. Someone tall.

And then...

“*You*?!”

The heavy door opened to reveal the one Angela had pictured so many times. The Bluesteel Blasphemer.

He was tall and thin, obviously powerful, showing no sign of weakness despite his lean form. His features were symmetrical and young-looking, yet he had white hair like an old man and pupils the color of blood—somehow, it made her think of Death.

His name, if she recalled correctly, was Yukinari Amano.

It was the first time she’d seen him since she’d been taken prisoner.

“Angela Jindel, right?” Yukinari cocked his head slightly as he spoke. The gesture looked somehow cynical to Angela, nonchalant, and that frustrated her. It showed that he knew he was in a vastly more powerful position than her and was intent on reminding her of it. It disgusted her, so much that she began to shake.

Was there no way to get that pretty face twisted in pain and humiliation? How good that would feel. She had done it to every other man she’d met who had taken her lightly because she was a woman, but at this moment, Angela had very few options.

“Looks like your wound is a lot better,” Yukinari said, eyeing her right arm. “Maybe we could sit down and talk one of these days?”

“Hrmph,” she said. “I have no obligation to parley with the likes of barbarians.” She didn’t understand the trembling that came from deep within her, but she consciously suppressed it as she spoke. She was careful to make the mockery in her voice and smile obvious. “Release me. Immediately!”

“Sheesh,” Yukinari said with a frustrated sigh.

Then a voice came from behind him. “You knew she would be like this. Just torture her already.” It was the mercenary woman who stood guard over Angela. She had red hair and feline grace. She was rather tall for a woman, almost Yukinari’s height. Her smallest gestures, the way she carried herself, indicated a well-trained body. But unlike the knights of the Missionary Order, her demeanor was unpolished. Crude, even. She was one of those contemptibles who fought not for faith but for money.

Yet even so, every now and again she would do something that hinted at a more noble bearing, and Angela found it confusing. Or perhaps she was a former noble who had fallen from grace. Her name was... Veronika, yes?

“Torture her, huh?” Yukinari said. “Not really my thing.”

“How can you act so superior?” Angela demanded, staring at him. “You’re the Bluesteel Blasphemer, the evil murderer.”

She knew who and what Yukinari really was. He was actually a creature called an angel. They were spiritual beings summoned to this world by the True Church of Harris in order to demonstrate the Church’s miraculous power and proclaim the Church’s ideals to the world. Just the same as the Missionary Order, in other words.

This man, however, had abandoned that august vocation. Had even betrayed the Harris Church, slaughtering a vast number of believers. The details were not public, but rumor had it that the death of the previous Dominus Doctrinae could be attributed to this Yukinari—the Bluesteel Blasphemer—as could the sudden changeover of much of the Missionary Order’s command structure.

“You are a betrayer, an apostate who turned against the True Church of Harris even though you were summoned to this world as an angel. So it seems it’s true that even the holy ritual might meet with failure when what is unclean mingles in it. A true pity.”

“Unclean...?” Yukinari’s brow furrowed.

Angela seemed to enjoy his reaction. “To think, after His Holiness, in his benevolence, had her help in the ceremony to summon one of the exalted angels.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know,” Angela said, a smile on her face. “The witch. The one who was at the ritual by which you received flesh.”

Yukinari was quiet for a moment. “Are you talking about Jirina?”

“Yes! Yes, was that her name? His august Holiness, the former Dominus Doctrinae, made only one mistake, and that was showing any feeling at all for that contemptible magic-worker.”

“Jirina was an alchemist. She didn’t help with or witness anything...”

“Yes, I know. Most likely, His Holiness hoped that participating in the sacred ceremony would open Jirina’s clouded eyes. Yet even though she was given that priceless chance to see the truth, that witch profaned the ritual, plotted to make the angel her own! It is difficult to save someone out of such idiocy, out of such baseness—”

“Shut up.”

“I believe she was killed with a sword to the belly at the end, wasn’t she? The former leader of the Missionary Order was himself a merciful man, to let her meet such an easy end. A disgusting witch like her, a betrayer and apostate, should be drawn and quartered and fed to the pigs—boiled alive—!”

“I told you, *shut up*.”

“Such creatures are vulgar and lewd to begin with. They should have chained her in the dirtiest brothel, made her serve as a slave so she would at last understand the depth of her sinfulness, and then finally—”

There was a dry sound of impact, and Angela’s vision tilted crazily. It was only a moment later that pain began to spread slowly through her left cheek, and she realized that Yukinari had slapped her.

He had done it on sheer impulse; Yukinari himself was looking at his hand in

surprise. Angela was almost as shaken as he was.

“Y-You see?” she said. “Barbaric! Look what the filth of that witch has done to an angel! How sinful, how vile a woman she must have been! What an error on the part of His Holiness, to have come anywhere near a woman who was fit only to have men force themselves between her legs!”

Yukinari watched Angela as she shouted, saying nothing.

A strained sound squeaked from between Angela’s lips as she watched the expression disappear from Yukinari’s face. For the first time, she realized it was possible to see the moment when someone’s anger burned white-hot. Or perhaps it was simply more obvious with Yukinari.

The Bluesteel Blasphemer. A man who could single-handedly overpower a statue of the guardian saint. A man who could kill gods.

Angela found herself like a small animal before a predator; she felt the instinctual terror of a living thing faced with an impossibly powerful enemy.

She couldn’t win. She had no hope of defeating something like this.

She had, of course, accumulated plenty of experience against a variety of opponents in her study of the martial arts, and there had been times when she simply hadn’t been strong enough to achieve victory. But even then, she had been more or less able to gauge her opponent’s strength and then sometimes think of a clever way to win. There may be differences between men and women, but humans are humans. Differences in strength aren’t absolute; they’re a gap that can be bridged.

But this thing, this man, he was different. Completely different. She didn’t have the first inkling what she might do against him. The difference in power between them was simply too vast. Finding a chink in his armor or coming up with some clever little trick would avail her nothing. She was like a fly facing a bear. She had no hope of turning the tables, of coming out victorious.

Angela began to quake from simple fear.

“If you’re willing to say all that,” Yukinari said, and he sounded strikingly nonchalant. “Then I assume you’re ready to meet the same fate yourself?”

His hand reached out and grasped her by the neck.

This was the hand of an angel, a hand that could perform miracles. If he wanted to, Yukinari could spit fire from his palm or create a blade out of thin air. He might as well have been holding a dagger to her throat.

Angela gulped heavily. An unfamiliar sensation came from deep within her, causing all the hair on her body to stand on end in an instant. *The same fate?* In other words, he would do to her all the things she had just suggested doing to Jirina?

Tear away the ragged cloth (barely) covering her body. Beat her, kick her, make her crawl on the ground. Then he would grab her legs and—

“S-So you intend to rape me?!” she exclaimed. He didn’t respond. “I sh-should expect no more from a b-beast like you! You’re trash, tainted by that awful witch, and y-you should kn-know your place!”

Yukinari was absolutely silent. He only stared at her, his eyes red as blood.

He was angry. Yes. Enraged. She needed him to get angrier. So angry he forgot himself. And then... What? What would happen?

“There’s a word for you among the common people—*barbarian*!” Angela, still trembling, hurled every insult she could think of.

She suddenly had a sense that the something that had gone unfulfilled in her would soon be satisfied. This. This was it. Something like a god—no, more powerful than a god—would come against her with overwhelming violence, force her to yield to it...

“That’s enough.”

It was Veronika who had broken in. But which of them was she speaking to?

The mercenary had one hand on Angela and one on Yukinari. Yukinari released Angela’s neck with surprising alacrity.

“I know she provoked you. But what were you thinking, Yukinari?”

“...You’re right. I’m sorry.” He let out a long sigh.

Slowly he regained his composure, the blinding rage that had possessed him a

moment earlier draining away. Angela watched it go with an inexplicable disappointment.

●

When Yukinari got back to the reception room, he all but threw himself on the sofa. He put a hand over his face and let out a long sigh.

“Yuki...?” the girl who sat down beside him asked in puzzlement. She cocked her head to look at him, causing her simple, not-quite-shoulder-length silver hair to quiver. She was pretty; there was no question about that. But...

“Did... something happen...?”

Her skin was white as new-fallen snow, her eyes blue as jewels, and combined with her somewhat hesitant way of speaking, she appeared almost doll-like: she gave off a slightly stiff, cold aura. Like a delicate work of art that was very nearly lifelike. Her glasses, the glass-and-stainless-steel vision aid that bisected her face, strengthened the impression.

This girl was also somewhat lacking in facial expression. It was possible to guess from her gestures and words that she was concerned about Yukinari, but her tone and face hardly wavered. Her actions were human actions, yet some essential ingredient of humanity was lacking about them; it was almost like she was only pretending to be human.

Dasa Urban. Yukinari’s partner, and the little sister of the person to whom he owed his life.

“Oh... No... Not really.” He gave an ambiguous shake of his head.

He couldn’t tell Dasa. It was her sister, Jirina Urban, about whom Angela had been saying those awful things just moments before. Dasa had loved Jirina even more than Yukinari did; he had no idea how she might react if she heard half of what Angela had said. Actually, he had a pretty good idea, which was precisely why he wasn’t going to repeat any of it to her.

“.....Mn.”

Dasa gave a small nod as if to say, *I understand, you don’t have to tell me everything*. Her right hand made a flowing motion, almost too fast to see.

Grasped in her willowy fingers was a crude metal weapon she had pulled out from somewhere.

Red Chili: a Sturm Ruger Super Blackhawk .44 Magnum Custom. In other words, a handgun. In this world, where even the concept of guns hardly existed, it might not be an exaggeration to say that Dasa was the only “hand-gunner” alive. A larger weapon might not have worked with her lithe body, but this little pistol was perfect for her. With the hammer half-cocked, she opened the loading gate and checked that the rotating chamber was loaded. Every step of the process seemed utterly familiar to her.

“Okay. Hold on. What do you think you’re doing?” Yukinari said.

Dasa, already rising from the sofa said, “That... missionary woman. I know... she said something terrible to... you, Yuki.”

Dasa knew Yukinari had gone down to the underground room to interrogate Angela Jindel, who was being held captive there. And when he came back, he was suddenly sighing and sinking into the sofa. It wasn’t hard to guess that something had upset him.

“I am going to make... her pay.”

“I told you, wait. What have you got in mind, waving Red Chili around like that?”

“It’s all right,” Dasa said expressionlessly. “A bullet in the palm, say, wouldn’t be fatal.”

“What’s all right? Just stop it. Please stop.”

Dasa looked at Yukinari closely, but when he asked her a second time, she sat down beside him again. Apparently, she had given up the idea of an interrogation of her own—or, well, since she didn’t intend to ask any questions, it would have been mere torture.

“Looks like you’ve collected yourself a bit, too.”

The words came from Veronika as she entered the room a moment later.

“Yuki... too?” Dasa asked, cocking her head again.

Veronika leaned against the wall beside the door and gave a sad smile. “A few

minutes ago, Yukinari looked ready to torture that woman to death."

"Really? Yuki did...?" Dasa blinked behind her glasses. She must have been surprised. Yukinari rarely resorted to violence, and he wasn't the type to take joy in hurting someone else, even his enemies. All the more so when it came to women and children. Dasa knew this better than anyone, so she was truly startled.

Now a third voice, somehow hesitant, joined the conversation. "Um... Lord Yukinari?"

A girl had come in with tea supplies on a cart and began serving tea on the table near the sofa.

"You must be tired," she said. "Please, have some tea."

This girl had braided, flaxen hair; she gave a very simple impression. For better or worse, she formed a contrast with Dasa; she was full of gestures and expressions that bespoke a constant jumpiness. Her facial features were pretty, but the first thing one noticed about her was not her looks so much as a sense of vulnerability.

The girl's name was Berta Wohmann.

She was one who, for a variety of complex reasons, had been "offered" to Yukinari. She was often to be seen attending him or doing various chores. But at the moment she was staying in this house, the Schillings mansion, helping to look after the prisoner Angela and Veronika, the female mercenary who was guarding the captive.

"Oh, thanks," Yukinari said.

Berta smiled. "Not at all." She looked down, blushing.

Her position of servitude to Yukinari was not initially something she had chosen for herself; it was the result of a number of factors outside her control. But be that as it may, she had come to respect Yukinari greatly. Over the last several days in particular, she had been acting like the very picture of a maiden in love each time she had seen Yukinari, and it left him very confused.

"What the hell was all that about, anyway?" Yukinari said, sighing again.

“What exactly happened?” Another girl, with blonde hair and blue eyes, entered the room behind Berta. She was a beauty, very collected; she seemed a bit more adult than Dasa or Berta. She wasn’t any older than they were, but she had more experience as an administrator than her contemporaries did.

Fiona Schillings—the daughter of the mayor of Friedland, currently filling in for her father. She had studied in the capital and had a broad range of knowledge; she was a quick thinker, yet very flexible. There was hardly any need to call her the “deputy” mayor anymore—it wouldn’t have felt wrong just to call her the mayor.

“Er, uh, you know...” Yukinari trailed off, unsure exactly what to say.

Veronika answered for him. “Angela Jindel insulted and provoked Yukinari every way she knew how. He got pissed enough to slap her.”

“Yukinari did?” Fiona said in surprise. She, too, knew how he usually acted. She hadn’t been around Yukinari for as long as Dasa had, but Fiona was a keen observer of people.

“I just... I just sort of saw red.”

“So it *is* possible to get a rise out of Yukinari.”

“Disappointed?” Veronika asked. “Sorry to find out he’s a disgusting villain who would raise his hand against a woman?”

“Not especially,” Fiona said with a laugh. “I sort of feel like it makes him more human.”

“You might be right about that.”

“Anyway,” Fiona went on, looking at Veronika, “a real brute would use his fists when he decided to beat a woman. The fact that Yukinari used an open-handed slap practically proves he’s a gentleman.”

“...Heh. Could be,” Veronika said with a smirk and a nod. As a mercenary, she was probably all too well acquainted with moments when people’s true colors came out. “That woman had a weird reaction, though,” she went on.

“Weird how?”

“She wasn’t intimidated at all when Yukinari hit her. If anything...” Veronika

frowned and stopped for a moment. “It was like... It made her try even harder to rile him up.”

Yukinari pictured Angela’s face. She had been bright red, her eyes shining, her breath ragged—there had been something strange about it. She had been trembling, but not from fear or anger. More like... excitement, almost. Truthfully, recalling the incident made him a little sick. In the moment, Yukinari had been agitated, angry beyond belief, and he hadn’t thought about anything that was going on. But now...

“She wasn’t insulting him just because he’s her enemy?” Fiona asked.

“I don’t think so,” Veronika replied, looking a bit perplexed. “That was joy, I’m sure of it. Although I don’t know if she herself noticed.”

“Joy...?” Fiona, Berta, and Dasa all looked at each other, mystified.

“I’ve run into a lot of different people in my mercenary work,” Veronika said. She let out a breath. “There are some out there who... Well, they enjoy certain stimuli that people normally don’t.”

“What does that mean...?” Berta whispered, genuinely stumped.

“Mercenary work attracts a lot of people who aren’t welcome in polite society,” Veronika said. “Strange people, people who aren’t very easy to get close to—they’re the rule, not the exception. Especially ones who have specific preferences related to... ahem. *That* part of their bodies. Some prefer partners of the same sex. Others can’t get off unless their partner is way younger or older than they are.”

“Ah... Now I get it.” Fiona nodded knowingly. Dasa and Berta were listening to Veronika with evident interest.

“Then of course,” she said, “there’s the people who want to do it with their own sister.”

Veronika’s offhand comment tugged at something in Yukinari’s heart.

Where he came from, strong feelings of love or attachment to an older or younger sister—especially romantic feelings or sexual desire—were popularly known as a “sister complex.”

Hatsune...

Amano Yukinari had grown up under rather unusual circumstances. Neither his mother nor his father had been home often, and for as long as he could remember, he and his older sister had had only each other. So the first thing Yukinari thought of when he heard the word *family* was not his workaholic father nor his cult-member mother, but his sister, Hatsune.

Typically, the first "other" that human children recognize in their worlds is their mother. This is why the mother is such an influential presence for most children, the first object of their burgeoning love. But the first "other" Yukinari had acknowledged in his world was his sister.

She was the one who understood him best, the member of his family he loved the most. That was why, as the flames roared around him in the last minutes of his life in his prior world, he took solace in the fact that at least he and his sister could die together.

And yet...

I'm the only one who ended up here.

His beloved sister was gone.

He, and he alone, was alive here, blessed with friends in this new world. Sometimes he even felt guilty about it.

"Lord Yukinari..."

Berta hesitantly called his name, bringing Yukinari back to himself. "Huh? Oh, Berta, what is it? What's wrong?"

The girl who called herself Yukinari's "shrine maiden" looked at him with pleading eyes. "Lord Yukinari, do... do you prefer 'unusual stimuli'?" She had the same apologetic tone as ever, even as she approached this most sensitive subject.

"Huh? Wh-What brought that on...?" He felt just a tiny bit panicked, maybe because he'd been thinking of his sister until that very moment. He supposed there was no way Berta could have known that. He didn't even think she knew that he'd once had a sister.

“Oh. I just— I thought if I knew what you liked, Lord Yukinari... I might... be able to offer it to you...”

“You’re already offering me what I want. You’re doing fine.”

“Yes... but...” Berta seemed more worried, more displeased, than usual. And beside Yukinari, Dasa seemed to be having an odd thought...

“Yuki...” She suddenly clenched her fist as if in resolution. “It’s all right.”

“Uh... What is?” He had a bad feeling about this.

“I don’t care if you... prefer something strange. I’ll try... my best.”

“You don’t have to try anything. Wait... try what?”

“A slap...?” Dasa moved her right hand as if to pantomime hitting something. Despite her lean frame, she had surprising strength, and a slap from her looked like it would hurt.

“I’m really not into that kind of thing.”

“Is that... right?” She looked puzzled.

Veronika had been watching the exchange with amusement. “Well, the interrogation didn’t get us anywhere,” she said. “But that girl ought to at least be useful as a hostage. I say we just keep her in that room for now.” She seemed to be trying to bring the conversation to a close.

“For now? How long is that?” Fiona asked. She probably wasn’t entirely comfortable having one of the enemy in a room directly under the house. Yes, Veronika was guarding the prisoner, and all of Angela’s weapons had been taken away, but even so.

“I don’t know. It will depend on what our enemies—on what the Church does.”

“I don’t suppose we should send an emissary from our side to negotiate with them.”

“I appreciate your consideration for my comrades, but...”

Veronika frowned. Some of her fellow mercenaries, as well as the merchant who was their employer, were still captive in the town of Aldreil. Part of the

reason they'd kept Angela alive and captive was in the hope that they could trade her for Veronika's friends.

"But I'm pretty sure this is the first time the Church has ever seen a town they couldn't overpower, despite the use of two separate guardian saint statues. The missionaries left in Aldreil are probably pretty confused. There's some possibility they might even hesitate to report to Church headquarters. But whatever the case, I think we buy ourselves more time if they don't know exactly what we want."

"I see," Fiona said, nodding in agreement. Whatever stance Friedland took vis-à-vis the Church after this, it would be best to make sure they had enough time to prepare the town.

"I assume the Aldreil garrison is well aware that we have that woman hostage. If they have any interest in an exchange of prisoners, they aren't likely to kill my friends or employer."

Angela was the scion of a powerful noble family; before her capture, she had been vice captain of the Ninth Missionary Brigade. There was no question she was someone important, and the Church would presumably want to get her back if it could.

"In other words, we're okay for a while, huh?"

"However long that is."

"Is that good by you, Yukinari?" Fiona looked at Dasa, Berta, and then Yukinari in turn, and none of them objected.

"Sounds like we have a plan," Yukinari said with a shrug.

●

The town of Friedland was located on the frontier.

At least, the frontier from the perspective of the capital, the place considered by many to be the center of the world. It was also on the frontier from the simple perspective of the density of the transportation network and the flow of goods that resulted therefrom.

The area where Friedland was located was essentially a giant wasteland

pockmarked with human settlements, connected by the merest of country roads.

Even those roads had been made back when the king's army was attempting to civilize the area. Now the responsibility of caring for them fell to the various districts and merchants' associations, and upkeep was sporadic at best.

The roads, which were made of stone or brick near the capital, turned to dirt in this part of the country. After a rain they were muddy, making life difficult for the merchants and travelers who were their primary users. In some places, fields of tall grass came right up to the roadside, while in others the path ran along sheer cliffsides.

The poor condition of the roads made accidents more likely, yet the attempt to guard against trouble meant taking no shortcuts. As a result, many were the times travelers would be forced to camp out far from any human habitation. Lawless bandits were a concern, as were wild animals, xenobeasts, and demigods. One literally took one's life in one's hands to travel these country roads. Merchants would go heavily armored, or at the very least accompanied by mercenary bodyguards, and everyone avoided moving at night.

But now, a lone traveler could be seen on the road to Friedland.

Strikingly, it appeared to be a girl in her early teens. She had long, platinum-colored hair, but her irises were purple as a precious stone.

Her body was as elegant as it was possible to be. It was hard to tell at a glance where she had come from, but it was clear enough that she was not accustomed to travel. The air about her suggested that she didn't even have much experience of leaving home—truly a sheltered girl. Above all, her clothes were not those of a traveler. She wore a long dress, almost blindingly white, as well as woven sandals. She didn't even appear to have a bag, let alone a weapon—she looked like she was just going for a walk through town.

Clearly, she wasn't in her right mind. The very fact that she had managed to get this far safely bespoke an almost miraculous luck. But how long would her luck last?

The girl stopped walking suddenly, a puzzled look on her face. At the same time, the grass by the roadside rustled.

Igi. Gi. Gigigigi. Gigi. Gi.

A strange voice came from the bushes. Something was hiding nearby, and it was getting closer. That much was clear. The girl, however, showed no sign of concern; rather, she blinked as if in confusion and looked toward the sound.

Gigigigi!

Now the sound from the grass was unmistakable, and a bizarre creature launched itself out of the weeds.

It was an animal, huge and ugly. Its body was covered in fur and, surprisingly, it walked on two legs. But its legs were short and its arms were long; it walked hunched forward in a way that suggested moving on all fours might have been more efficient.

Perhaps it was a variety of monkey. Or had been. It was animalistic, yet not an animal. It was weirdly human, and yet not human. Its face was close to a human face. It was unsettling, as though someone had stuck a human head on an animal's body. It was bizarre, and it reeked. A hideous creature trapped somewhere between human and animal.

"Brrrrn..."

What's more, it spoke. Emotion, something more than animal but less than human, was evident in its eyes. It craved something, something that went beyond the basic instinctual need for food or sex.

"Brr—Brrrains!" Its head nodded vehemently up and down. "Brains, Brains, Brains... Gray Matter... Give It To... Me...!"

"Brains? Gray matter?" the girl repeated with a stumped look.

A full-grown adult could not have helped but be terrified by the misshapen creature, but there was no change in the girl's demeanor. She was no more

bothered than if she had seen an odd-looking cat or dog during a walk through town. Nor did she seem surprised that the animal could talk.

“Brains... You Give Me... Brains, And I... I Let You Go...”

“Well, I’m just not sure it works that way,” the girl said earnestly. “I don’t think I can give you my brains.”

“Brains... Delicious. Suck Brains, Slurp Brains, Chew Brains... Head... Get Smart... Slurp Delicious, Delicious Brains!”

They seemed to be talking past each other.

Perhaps that was only natural. The thing that had appeared in front of the girl was not intelligent enough to hold a proper conversation. That was precisely why it wanted human brains: so it could get smarter.

A demigod. That’s what creatures like this were called. A type of living creature who, for any number of reasons, had surpassed its normal lifespan and become something greatly spiritually advanced. They were somewhat more intelligent than mere beasts, yes, but it was nothing approaching human intelligence. Thus, in order to become smarter, they sought to consume the brains of intelligent creatures and continue to raise their spiritual status.

Their physical capacities greatly outstripped those of humans. A young woman, walking along in sandals, had little hope of escape.

It was unlikely that all these calculations entered into the demigod’s approach, though.

“...Hrn?”

The girl took a nonchalant step. Not back. Forward.

One step. Two, three.

The girl got so close to the demigod they could have touched. The fact that the creature didn’t react was perhaps because even this monster was at least smart enough to realize how strange the girl’s actions were.

Suddenly, the girl had weapons in her hands. Where had they come from? They were shimmering, double-edged rapiers. An extremely simple creation—nothing more than a blade, a grip, and a hilt between them. There were no

unnecessary flourishes; the only thing resembling a decoration was the rose worked into the crescent-shaped guard that ran from the bottom of the sword to the hilt to protect the girl's fingers. That part, and that alone, was as red as if it had been drenched in blood.

She had one of these rapiers in each hand. It was impossible to say where she had pulled them from. She had certainly not been carrying a weapon as she walked along. She hadn't even had a bag with her. It was as if she had produced the swords from thin air.

She thrust. The movement looked so natural, it was almost as if she were simply handing the sword to the demigod. She didn't appear to have put strength into it, and indeed, the tip pierced the demigod only superficially. Nothing close to a fatal blow.

Surely it hadn't even reached the demigod's muscles. Maybe it had pierced the skin, but then again, maybe it had stopped at the layer of fur. The demigod's fur was, after all, stronger than crude leather armor.

Obviously, the next thing to happen was that the creature would strike back with its claws. It would rend the girl into pieces.

Or should have.

"Hrr... rrrr... HRRRRRRAHHHHHH!!" The demigod fell backward, howling. No. Screaming. At the same time, something began to spew out of the rapier where it had been stopped. "ERRRAGGHHH!! GRRRRAHHH!!"

The girl didn't move. The sword hadn't moved either, from where it had stopped after administering that tiny pinprick. Yet somehow, the tip of the sword was now peeking out of the demigod's back.

What was more, an instant later, rapier blades suddenly emerged from all over the demigod's body.

"HRRRA...GGHH..."

The monster slumped over.

It only made sense that if someone had been pierced by a host of blades from inside their own body, they would die. That, at least, is what a human would

expect. But the demigod continued to collapse.

Demigods weren't made up from a single animal. In many cases, they attracted and covered themselves in creatures called familiars, the group forming a larger body that acted as a single living thing. Hence, killing the "core" animal released the bonds that held the familiars together. Then again, it was also possible that strength may well up from within one of the familiars and a new core may appear. Completely exterminating a demigod was difficult for that reason.

The girl, however, unflinchingly set about the business of cleaning up the familiars.

"Krah?!"

One familiar found itself pinned to the ground. The girl had tossed the sword from her left hand down into it. The other familiars seemed to see this as an excellent opportunity to escape, and scattered. The girl had only one blade left. Perhaps the familiars assumed that even if the girl gave chase, she could kill at most only one more of them.

How wrong they were.

Thock, thock, thock, thock, thock. One by one the familiars found themselves immobilized. It was a hideously easy slaughter.

The girl pierced one familiar after another with rapiers that came from they knew not where, looking as happy as if she were twirling in the rain under an umbrella. Closer inspection, however, revealed that these creatures had not simply been impaled. Each animal had holes all over its body. Just like the original demigod, they had been stabbed to death from the inside.

But... how?

What in the world had happened to them?

Where did so many swords—more than thirty of them—come from?

"Is that all of you?" the girl asked as she finished off the last creature. She looked as innocent as a small bird.



“I’m very sorry. I guess I’m the one who got something here.”

What could she possibly mean by that?

Suddenly, the wind came up. It wasn’t very strong, just enough to elicit a susurrus from the trees, yet all at once the impaled familiars dissipated, turned into dust that was carried off by the breeze. Nothing remained of them.

The girl set off walking again, relaxed. She left behind her more than thirty rapiers, standing like gravestones.

●

Before sunset, Yukinari and the others had left the Schillings mansion and returned to the sanctuary. Despite the imposing name, the sanctuary was not some huge stone building. It was on the large side, but it was just a house. It had been built for Yukinari, who now protected Friedland in lieu of an erdgod. Yukinari wasn’t always completely comfortable using the term “sanctuary,” but it seemed to make the most sense to the townspeople, so he went along with it.

“This has gotten to be a serious pain,” he muttered, sitting in a space known as the audience hall.

Yukinari had actually gone to interrogate Angela again before returning to the sanctuary. This time, to help avoid getting agitated, he had brought Veronika and Fiona with him, but the outcome had been the same.

Angela seemed to have grasped that insulting Yukinari himself was less effective than demeaning Jirina, and she had resumed her provocations. At length Yukinari had found himself unable to control himself again, but Veronika had stopped him when it appeared he might do the girl harm. It was a failure on his part. He had been right, though, to avoid bringing Dasa along. There was a good chance she would have simply left Angela with a Magnum bullet in her. Not just for insulting Dasa’s older sister, but for upsetting Yukinari as well.

Obviously, killing Angela wouldn’t get them anywhere. Even doing her any physical harm would be meaningless. Finally, Yukinari decided to suspend his interrogation for the time being, to give all of them a day or two.

“The question is how the Church—how the Missionary Order—is going to move against us.”

The thought reminded him that he didn’t have time to waste. The battle with Angela’s forces meant Yukinari and his allies had become proper enemies of the Missionary Order. They hadn’t utterly annihilated the two missionary units that attacked them, so there were survivors who could have, and presumably had, reported that Friedland had taken hostile action toward the True Church of Harris. It was possible that even Church headquarters already knew.

What was he supposed to do now?

Initially, Yukinari had hoped to get information from Angela about the city of Aldreil, where her forces had been based. He’d assumed she would know something useful, since Arlen Lansdowne, another missionary knight, had informed him of the surprising fact that the girl Angela was a vice captain with a civilizing expedition despite her youth.

If possible, he wanted to rescue Veronika’s companions who were being held in Aldreil. That was his first thought.

Yukinari had made several simple weapons, Durandalls and Derrringers, but the people of Friedland were still essentially amateurs when it came to making war. There was a group of men, a sort of community watch that served to protect the town from threats both internal and external, but they functioned mainly in an emergency capacity. Once upon a time, the town had been under the protection of the erdgod, leaving them now with few defenses against any vicious animals in the surrounding area. The community watch was no more than a sort of police force; it was certainly not an army prepared for battle.

If they were going to have to fight the Missionary Order, it would certainly be invaluable to have people on their side who fought for a living.

In this world, after the capital’s wars of unification, there had been no major conflicts for decades, centuries even. However, territorial skirmishes among local lords continued unabated, and that, he’d heard, often meant employment for mercenaries.

Yukinari had considered the possibility of attacking Aldreil in order to rescue Veronika’s mercenary friends. But he balked at the notion that after being so

careful to fight only defensive battles, he would now deliberately attack another city.

Attacking was just another way of saying you were going there deliberately to kill people. Yes, of course there were cases where treachery opened the town's gates bloodlessly, or an army's sheer numbers so overwhelmed the opponent that they simply surrendered. But Yukinari, and Friedland, hardly had the strength for such things at that moment.

An effective attack against Aldreil—in other words, one that produced the fewest number of casualties on both sides—would hinge on information Angela could give him. But...

"She can't be pretending... can she?"

Surely she wasn't just pretending to have an unusual sexual fetish just to avoid being tortured. Especially not because she herself didn't seem to realize what she was doing. Veronika had been right; Angela had a masochistic streak. Even if she had a pretext that allowed her not to think too hard about it: the belief that she was faithfully and fearlessly resisting Yukinari, the Church's enemy, even as he held her captive.

But she had so clearly wanted him to slap her again. At least, it had looked that way to him. That was why she had tried so hard to anger him.

What a frustrating person to deal with. He could try torturing her, but it would only bring her pleasure. There were, of course, ways of inflicting so much pain that it would overwhelm even the most twisted desires, but Yukinari didn't know how to go about it. What if he hurt her too much and killed her? Then everything would be lost. He also wasn't sure if Angela was eager to be struck by anyone, or just Yukinari.

He supposed that it would be possible to figure out the answer to that question, but it bothered him that he should have to indulge his enemy's fetish so much. Torture was supposed to be torture, but it could so easily turn into something she enjoyed. How absurd.

Yukinari sighed loudly.

A voice responded. "What is the matter?" A strange-looking girl peeked into

the living area.

“Ulrike...”

The girl’s face was perfectly normal; indeed, she was adorable. She lacked nothing in cuteness. But her hair was green like new leaves, and on her head she had horns. There were two on top of her head and two toward the front. The two in front stuck out almost like the horns on a traditional Japanese demon, but the two behind split into several branches, giving an odd sense of volume. It gave her otherwise sweet face a certain intimidation factor.

It all made sense, more or less.

This girl was a god—or rather, the terminal of one.

Ulrike. That was what Yukinari normally called her, but it was only the name of the “terminal” girl; behind her was a plant-god. Specifically, Rostruch’s erdgod, Yggdra. Because Yggdra’s main body couldn’t move from where she was, Ulrike had come to Friedland as something like her representative.

“You look rather tired. Did something happen in Friedland?”

Ulrike hadn’t gone to the Schillings residence. Yukinari had asked her to keep an eye on the sanctuary while he was gone. Incidentally, there were plans to build a sanctuary for Yggdra’s representative next to Yukinari’s own residence, but since the defense of the town was being prioritized, the construction of Ulrike’s sanctuary had hardly begun, and for the time being she lived in Yukinari’s building.

“It’s the... the girl from the missionary knights. I didn’t manage to interrogate her...”

“You weren’t able?”

“Well, uh... How do I put this?” Yukinari tried to find the right words, but couldn’t think of a good way of saying it, so he decided to be blunt. “This woman is... I don’t know if you could call her a pervert. She’s got strange preferences. She enjoys being hit, so you can’t really intimidate her. Even torture probably wouldn’t be very effective.”

“Oh-ho,” Ulrike said with interest. And then...

“...Yuki.”

“Lord Yukinari.”

Dasa and Berta, apparently having finished changing clothes, entered the living area.

“What’s... wrong?”

“Oh, uh, nothing. We’re just talking about Angela again,” Yukinari said, scratching his cheek.

“Yukinari was telling me how she derives pleasure from being hit, so he’s unable to interrogate her,” Ulrike said. Then she cocked her head quizzically. “Perhaps I could turn her into a familiar?”

“Huh...?”

“We begin by killing her,” Ulrike said, with a complacent smile that made her look as innocent as a little bird. “Then, before the body rots, I place a seed—or more properly, a sprout—in it. Actually, she needn’t be killed. I can do it while she’s still alive. At any rate, it would turn her into one of my familiars, and I could control her. Her memories would remain largely intact, so I could make her tell you everything you wanted to know.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait,” Yukinari said a bit frantically.

Ulrike, or rather Yggdra, was unusually warmhearted for an erdgod; she wasn’t given to the brutality of attacking or killing people. Still, she wasn’t human. She was, ultimately, a plant. She sometimes had a very different way of thinking from Yukinari, and was capable of nonchalantly saying things whose morality Yukinari would seriously have questioned.

“I don’t want to kill her.”

“No?” Ulrike blinked, perplexed. “I believed it was rather a good suggestion.”

“I’m not saying it wouldn’t be a way to get the information from her...”

Sometimes combat ended in death; that was unavoidable. But Yukinari hesitated to kill someone who wasn’t resisting. Angela would no doubt have laughed and reminded him of the slaughter of Church people he had committed in the capital. But he had been in a frenzy then, and now, with cold hindsight,

he felt a certain guilt for it—and that was why he wanted to avoid death as much as possible, even the death of those associated with the Church.

“In that case,” Ulrike said, “the opposite would also be a possibility.”

“How do you mean, the opposite?”

“You say she takes pleasure in pain and torment? Then help her to enjoy herself.”

Again, her expression was all innocence. But she seemed to be thinking along slightly inhuman lines, a somewhat alien set of values.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Hit her, punch her, kick her. Perhaps break a finger or two. Cut off an ear. Hmm... What other ways are there to torture a human...?” Ulrike pondered for a moment. “Ah, rape! Yes, rape. If you raped her, would this not give her the greatest pleasure, on which account she might obey you? It would be what you humans call a win-win. A fine idea.”

“No, I really don’t think—”

“Or do you mean that this Angela girl is not to your own liking, Yukinari? It is my understanding that human males require emotional stimulation in order to pollinate a female.”

Yukinari could only put his head in his hands.

It was all too obvious that Yggdra wasn’t human. She wasn’t even an animal; and her way of thinking allowed her to tread with a smile on ground that humans would consider taboo. Even her use of the word “pollinate” was a sign of how different her views of sex were from most people’s. And the total lack of malice on her part made it difficult to decide how to respond.

I guess maybe plants aren’t big on morality, Yukinari thought.

The sexual behavior of plants, *i.e.* pollination, was typically not something that happened one-on-one, nor were plants able to freely choose their partners. That choice was made by the wind or by insects, without any deliberate action on the part of the plant.

Of course, by turning humans into familiars, Yggdra gained some notion of the

human concept of sex and all that was associated with it, but the erdgod lacked any visceral understanding of it. But still...

“U-Um, Lord Yukinari...?” Berta, who had been quiet until then, spoke up as though she had just thought of something.

“Hm? What’s up? Something bothering you?” Yukinari turned to her like she was holding out a hand to help him out of a terrible swamp.

“Um, there’s... something I want to ask you, Lord Yukinari,” she said, all hesitation.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Lord Yukinari..... Ahem.” She looked down at her knees for a moment. “Are we not to your preferences, Lord Yukinari...?”

“Say what?”

“I mean, your... your desires!” There was an unusual edge to her voice, a sense that she was resolved to this—there was a decisiveness in her tone that was very uncharacteristic of her. Perhaps she had had to work herself up to saying this, because immediately after, she flushed red and looked at the ground.

“Is this about what we were talking about at the Schillings place?” Yukinari sighed.

True, the subject had come up, but Yukinari had passed it off lightly, as though it were a joke. But Berta, it seemed, hadn’t been able to accept that. He hadn’t expected it to come back to haunt him like this. And then...

“Who’s... ‘we’? Does it in...clude me?” Dasa asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes. Us. All of us.”

“That’s surprising. I’m very much within Yuki’s preferences,” Dasa said. “He likes girls with glasses... and silver hair... I think.”

“Hey, wait. Don’t put words in my mouth,” Yukinari said.

“Am I... wrong...?”

The look Dasa gave him brought him up short.



Her expression and tone were as blasé as ever, but there were subtle hints of anxiety that Yukinari was able to discern.

It would have been a lie to say he didn't see Dasa as a member of the opposite sex. It was the same with Berta. Even Ulrike—when he had seen her at her "morning exercises," buck naked, he had felt a certain sexual stirring. He was an angel now, but if he wanted to, he could probably have sexual intercourse just like when he'd been human. But...

"Arrgh," he groaned.

Berta wasn't finished yet. "I'm the shrine maiden who's been offered to you, so I want to help you in any way I can. If I can change myself to suit your tastes better, I will."

"Look, it's like I said before, it's not your duty to—"

"This isn't about duty!" Berta said hotly—before turning red again and looking at the ground.

He had never known Berta to be so forward. Something had changed within her. Now that Yukinari thought about it, he realized how long it had been since the two of them had talked face-to-face like this, what with Berta living at the Schillings mansion to look after Angela ever since the last battle. Maybe the key lay somewhere in that fight.

What am I gonna do?

Quite apart from his instinctual physical desires, Yukinari cared deeply for all the women in front of him. But was that reason enough to make love to them?

What the heck... is going on here...?

Despite the question he asked himself, Yukinari had a fairly good idea of the truth of things. He had trouble picturing himself in that sort of relationship with Dasa or Berta, or for that matter Ulrike. It just didn't seem real, somehow.

Who would do, then? One image floated up in his mind...

An outstretched hand. Inviting. Healing.

The hand belonged to Jirina, the first person he'd seen when he arrived in this

world, and it belonged to the last person he'd seen in his previous one.

Big Sis...

Amano Hatsune. His older sister by blood.

Of course, carnal desire for one's own sister was not something that was normally smiled upon. So who was he to criticize Ulrike if her ideas seemed a little off?

But at the moment immediately before his "transference," immediately before the Amano household was engulfed in flames, it had been full of a strange atmosphere. One that made common sense madness, and madness common sense. The place somehow turned systems of value on their head, caused taboos to lose their force.

Common sense wouldn't make them happy. Common sense held no salvation for them.

Yukinari, and Hatsune, too, had understood that all too clearly.

That was why they had spent their days in each other's arms. That was why—

Suddenly, it came to Yukinari. The guilt. The sense that he had been wrong.

Hatsune was long dead now. If that was his punishment for allowing improper feelings between siblings... then how could he go on to be happy with someone else, as though he had simply forgotten what happened?

"Well, uh..." he said. "Honestly, I've just been so busy lately... I haven't had time to think about it."

So he forced a smile onto his face, at least for now.

●

It was twilight. The day was ending, and everything was bathed in a golden light. It wasn't the best time for humans, with their poor night vision, to be out and about. All the more so when they were outside the town walls, where there was no artificial illumination. Many of the most dangerous animals were nocturnal, and everyone who had busied themselves with farm work beyond the walls during the day tried to get home early.

Amongst the fields near Friedland...

A man and his wife were walking back to town. The man was wearing work clothes specked with the mud of the field.

“Well, that’s another day’s work done,” he said with a smile, resting his hoe on his shoulder. With his free hand he scratched just under his nose. The gesture was as innocent as a child’s. The mud on his hands wound up on his face.

“Hehe! Dear, now you’ve got mud on your face.”

“Oh! Have I, now?” The man kept smiling.

The woman, who appeared to be his wife, was wearing a plain but clean outfit. It seemed she had not been engaged in outdoor work. Most likely, she had come from town to see her husband home. A wife who would come all the way out to meet her partner was rare indeed; it spoke to what a happy couple they were.

They were still young, in their early twenties. As they walked, an odd distance could be sensed between them—a sort of mutual hesitance toward each other. They would need time yet before they could intuit each other’s thoughts. Most likely, they hadn’t been together for very long.

“Thanks for taking the trouble to come out and meet me every day.”

“Don’t worry. I enjoy it.”

“And that lunch you packed me—delicious!”

“Really? I’m so glad to hear it.”

“You came all the way out to give it to me. I could hardly complain about it, could I?”

“Well, everything tastes better fresh.”

Perhaps they still found it somewhat awkward to walk along together in silence, because the man kept up a steady stream of chatter. The touch of overeagerness in his tone was innocent and sweet.

It seemed the woman didn’t just come out to meet him at twilight; she

brought him lunch during the day, too. She appeared to see this as a wife's duty—or perhaps it was simply an excuse to see the man.

"Today we, ah, we worked on the irrigation ditch and the new fields Lord Yukinari suggested."

"Oh, did you?" So far the woman had simply nodded along with what the man was saying, but now she asked a question of her own. "I've never met Lord Yukinari myself... What's he like?"

"Lord Yukinari?!" the man said, his eyes aglow. "He's a wonderful person. He's taught us how to widen rivers and even change their paths! He suggested new fields and even fertilizer. I was worried when our previous erdgod passed, but I don't think we need to be concerned about this autumn's harvest at all!"

The man seemed more than a little excited. Apparently, he really did venerate Yukinari.

"Wow, really? Have you seen Lord Yukinari do one of his mighty works?"

"One of his mighty works? Yes!" the man replied excitedly. "Yes, I have! Oh, how I've seen it! Once, there was a boulder practically the size of our house. And he just touched it—his hand glowed, and a second later the whole thing turned to dust!"

He was quite enraptured by Yukinari—by Friedland's new god. He happily answered all his wife's questions about "Lord Yukinari." He talked about the girls Berta and Dasa, who were always by Yukinari's side; he told the story of how Yukinari himself had gone to Rostruch to initiate trade; and then he recounted the recent battle with the knights of the Missionary Order...

"Wow, really? What about Lady Ulrike, then?"

"Lady Ulrike? Ah, the child-goddess who's with Lord Yukinari? She's quite pleasant, that erdgod of Rostruch... In fact, I'm impressed you know her name," he said, blinking. "In fact... Wait..."

"Yes? Is something wrong?"

"Now that I think about it, didn't you... Didn't you meet Lord Yukinari when he took off those things the missionaries had put on us? The Holy Mark?"

When the Missionary Order had first come to Friedland, they had deceived the townsfolk with their words and yoked the majority of them with the Holy Mark, a collar not unlike that which might be used on livestock. The symbol inscribed on it was indeed that of the True Church of Harris, but it was possible for the missionary knights to heat these collars, burning any townsperson who dared to go against them. And of course, the Marks could not be removed by the townspeople.

Yet Yukinari had removed them with nothing more than a touch of his hand. This was the first “mighty work” of his that many of the townspeople saw.

“H-Hey...” The man gave his wife a suspicious look; she hadn’t answered his question, but had fallen silent. “Why’re you so interested in Lord Yukinari, anyway...?”

The woman still didn’t respond, but only gave the man a gentle smile. The man blinked repeatedly at his wife.

“Wait... What the... You’re you, but... are you?” He was very confused. He didn’t quite understand why this all felt so wrong to him. Wasn’t that his wife’s face he was looking at? And yet... “...You... You...”

Humans judge other humans by more than just their most obvious facial features. Subtle changes of expression, posture, gesture, the way someone walks or even breathes—there are infinite combinations of these things, and together they mark out a unique individual. It might be possible to replicate each one, yet taken together, they might still look not quite right.

“Are you really... *you*?” The man felt like he was beginning to doubt his own sanity. But on the other hand, it was in some sense a display of how much he loved his wife. Even if he couldn’t put his finger on the tiny differences, he knew her so well that he could perceive them.

There was no one else around but the two of them. So there was no one to laugh at the man’s ridiculous question.

Even the woman in front of him stayed silent.

“It’s... It’s almost as if you’re...”

...someone else.

That was probably what he had intended to say. But what came out of his mouth next was not words, but blood.

“Hrggh—?”

The man looked at his own chest in surprise. When had it happened? It had occurred so suddenly, his astonishment was understandable. But now a long, thin sword was piercing him through. The blade had gone all the way into him, through his heart, and out his back. And his wife was holding the grip.

No. No she wasn’t. This woman wasn’t his wife.

The man dropped his hoe with a clatter.

“Wh— y— ...?”

He could form no more words.

The woman let go of the sword and the man fell to his knees, his blood dribbling down his chest, then fell farther to one side. The woman looked at him quietly for a moment. Then she murmured, “Oops, you found me out. Did I get too greedy?”

But the man on the ground couldn’t answer her. He had lost copious amounts of blood, and his death throes had begun; maybe he couldn’t even hear her. But if he could have, he would have realized his suspicions had been right: the woman’s voice was different from before, no longer that of his wife.

●

It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon. Fiona had been called out to a humble home on the outskirts of Friedland. This wasn’t a personal visit; it was a request to the deputy mayor from the community watch, which was charged with preserving public safety.

“I’m sorry to bother you when you’re so busy, Deputy Mayor,” said a middle-aged man, a manager in the community watch. He had a square face framed by his hair and a full beard. Combined with his large frame, he looked a bit like a bear standing on its hind legs. His name was Hans Cutel. His family had been leaders of the community watch for three generations.

“Not at all,” Fiona replied. “You said something about a strange

happening...?”

“Yes. Let’s talk inside.” Hans nodded and gestured into the house.

As she walked along behind him, Fiona said, “I believe I heard someone died in this incident...”

“Yes, ma’am. If it were any normal death, we wouldn’t have to bother the deputy mayor with it. But in this case...”

As noted, Hans’s family had been part of the community watch since his grandfather’s time and had been involved in many of the goings-on in Friedland. They had encountered more than a few dead bodies and several murders in their work. They knew perfectly well how to deal with these cases, and a simple murder wouldn’t have required Fiona’s attention. The community watch could simply have dealt with everything itself. They would have submitted a report, and that would have been that.

“Ugh...”

No sooner had she entered the building than Fiona put a hand to her mouth. The air inside was thick, and—

“I’m sorry. We tried to get the air moving, but the smell won’t go away.” Hans didn’t seem especially bothered by it; perhaps he was already used to it.

“No, it’s all right. Don’t worry about it.” Fiona steeled herself and headed farther inside.

It was unmistakably the smell of death that pervaded the house—the smell of rotting flesh.

This was a fairly standard Friedlandian private dwelling. It contained all the things one would have seen in any house in the town, and nothing one wouldn’t. It was normalcy itself. Perhaps the furniture was on the new side. From what Fiona had heard on her way over, the house had belonged to a young married couple.

“Over here.”

She followed Hans’s guidance to a bedroom. On the bed in the center of the room lay a single corpse. The stench of rot was practically visible now; Fiona

squinted. She had seen many things as the deputy mayor, and this was not her first corpse, but she had never seen one so thoroughly decomposed.

Decomposition was to be expected when someone died in the mountains or drowned in a river—someplace where it might take time for the body to be discovered. But right here in town, in the person's own house—it was very strange.

Fiona found it difficult to want to get close enough to examine the particulars of the corpse. From what she could see, though, the chest area was especially dark. The color didn't suggest decomposition so much as a large amount of dried blood.

Had the person vomited blood? Or...

"Did they die of illness? Or was it murder...?"

It was hard to imagine someone dying accidentally while lying in bed. Friedland was a comparatively peaceful town, but anywhere there were large gatherings of humans, it would be impossible to avoid serious arguments. And unfortunately, it would be impossible to go without the sort of fighting that sometimes led to killing.

"Murder," Hans confirmed. "There's an external wound—looks like a bladed weapon. On the left side of the chest. One thrust, straight through the heart." He pointed at his own chest.

Hans must have brought Fiona to this room because he wanted her to see the body for herself. Seeing that it might be too hard for her to stay any longer, he ushered her back out of the bedroom.

"The body is that of the man who lived in this house."

"So he was killed in his own home."

"That's still under investigation, ma'am. There are some traces of blood in the hallway, so it's possible he was killed somewhere else and then moved here." Hans sounded calm, practically dispassionate. So he and his people had already examined not just the corpse, but the inside of the house. "He was recently married. And speaking of his wife—"

“Let me guess. Missing?”

“As you surmise,” Hans nodded.

If his wife had been around, the body might have been noticed sooner.

“Meaning there’s some chance she was abducted?” Fiona said.

“No, ma’am. That would certainly make things simpler.” Hans frowned with his bearded face. “As it happens, this man was working on the development of one of our new fields outside town. Apparently, he failed to show up for work several days in a row.”

The other people working on the same project had become concerned about the man’s absence, and had gone to his house to check on him. As Hans told it, this had been seven days earlier.

“When they showed up, his wife came to the door and said her husband was indisposed, had a cold.”

Fiona had a bad feeling as she listened to Hans’s story. Seven days ago. Not ten or even twelve.

“I’m no specialist,” Fiona said, trying not to vomit at the stench even as she spoke. “But I would have sworn that body had been there at least ten days...”

“We thought the very same, Deputy Mayor. And it so happens that the man’s unexplained absences from work began exactly ten days ago.”

Fiona didn’t say anything. In other words, if this man had died ten days earlier, and seven days earlier his wife had met the visiting villagers, then she knew of the man’s death and lied to them. Or, wait. If the man had been killed somewhere else and brought to his house only later, it was possible the woman didn’t know about her husband’s death when she spoke to his coworkers. But if so, he would still have been missing for three days at that point. And yet she told them he had a cold.

The lie had been enough to get the man’s colleagues to go on their way. But when he still hadn’t shown up for work four days later, they began to get suspicious. If his cold wasn’t getting any better, he might at least send word. They worried that perhaps the illness had spread to his wife and that both of

them were indisposed, so the colleagues went back to the man's house.

This time, however, neither the man nor his wife came to the door. It was locked soundly, but a neighbor said they had seen the man's wife leaving the house that morning.

Still not knowing what had happened, the man's colleagues left again.

"It was another three days after that," Hans said as he led Fiona out of the house. "In other words, today. The men came back one more time. They said they could smell the stench of death the moment they got to the door."

In other words, the stink of the decaying corpse had well and truly permeated the entire house. The door was still firmly locked, but the smell leaked out even through the door and windows. Now sure that something was amiss, the fellow workers enlisted a neighbor's help to break the door open, and when they got inside, they had discovered the body.

"The most obvious theory is that there was some kind of trouble between the two of them, and the wife ended up killing her husband. After that, she tried to throw off his coworkers by saying he was ill."

"Yes, that makes sense."

"That means that in the most obvious theory, the wife is the murderer. But the strange thing about that would be that she then lived with the body for several days."

"Hmm..."

True, that behavior didn't make a lot of sense. Had she wanted to hide the fact that she'd killed her husband? But it would have been obvious that she would be charged with murder, so why wouldn't she leave as quickly as possible? Friedland may have been a frontier town, but there were still plenty of places for a determined fugitive to hide. She could have bided her time and joined up with a merchant caravan heading to another town when the opportunity arose.

There was an eerie quality to all this that Fiona couldn't quite put her finger on. Had the wife gone mad after she killed her husband?

“We don’t know what something like this might lead to,” Hans said in a subdued tone. “The community watch will go on the alert, but... perhaps, as the deputy mayor, you could make sure that Friedland as a whole is closely guarded?”

“Right.”

It still wasn’t certain that the woman was the killer, so it wouldn’t do to carelessly make the incident public. But there were people and organizations besides the community watch that contributed to public safety. It would, she supposed, be possible to at least consult with them. Yukinari in particular—he didn’t just have immense power, but was pretty intelligent. He might be able not only to come up with a good way of keeping the town safe; he might even be able to solve the case—notice something that Fiona and the others had missed, perhaps.

“All right. I’ll talk to some people I think can help us.”

“Good. Thank you,” Hans said with a bow.

Fiona offered some encouraging words to members of the community watch waiting outside, then began walking back to her mansion.

●

Yukinari was Friedland’s god.

Fiona and the residents of the town had looked to him to replace their erdgod, whom Yukinari, as it happened, had killed. And part of being their deity was protecting the town and its environs.

An erdgod was an animal who, for one reason or another, had become intelligent and begun to raise its spiritual power, finally forming a spiritual bond with the land that was its territory. As a result, erdgods were immensely powerful and effectively immortal, and they could manipulate the land they were bonded to almost like a part of themselves.

Even a relatively fallow place could be made somewhat more fertile, less prone to disaster, by being joined with an erdgod. That was why humans worshipped these creatures as “gods of the land,” or erdgods. These entities did things that were beyond human power. An erdgod could make an area

habitable for humans.

However, being joined to the land also meant that an erdgod would be absorbed by its territory. In order to control its own massive “body,” an erdgod’s consciousness gradually got spread thinner and thinner, becoming a part of the land. Eventually its own existence began to fade as the erdgod became unable to hold onto the thoughts and feelings that made it itself.

In order to prevent this dissipation, erdgods sought to preserve their spiritual power, their intelligence. There were several ways to do this, but the simplest and most effective was to eat another intelligent creature. And there was one creature with both the most innate spiritual power and the largest numbers: humans.

For this reason, erdgods would demand living sacrifices from those who lived in their territory. And in order to ensure a steady supply of these sacrifices, the deity would protect its humans from attacks by other monsters, specifically xenobeasts and the demigods. It would attack any such creature that got near its land.

Yukinari had killed one of these erdgods.

The natural result was that all the xenobeasts and demigods that had previously been kept out by the erdgod now flooded Friedland. If a xenobeast ate enough humans and increased its spiritual power enough, it could become one of the more powerful demigods; after reaching the status of demigod, it could seek to become an erdgod.

But there were no guarantees that the next erdgod would be anything like the previous one. Maybe it would have a more voracious appetite, demand five or ten times as many sacrifices as the old deity. Rather than make such a dangerous gamble, Fiona and the townspeople considered it wiser to worship Yukinari as their new god and ask him to assume the role of erdgod.

So it was that Yukinari guarded Friedland and drove away or destroyed any xenobeasts or demigods that dared to attack.

“Why, you—!”

Yukinari made a sideward sweep with Durandall—his Winchester M92 Randall

Custom, a carbine modified to include a sword. But his opponent was quicker and nimbler than they appeared, dodging his attack. The enemy leaped backward, opening up space.

“Looks like this is a bigger fish than I realized,” Yukinari muttered, glancing down at where his shirt had been torn by the creature’s claws.

At the moment, Yukinari was at a bit of a distance from Friedland. He was patrolling around the outside of the fields, which ran around the outskirts of the town. He was riding on the two-wheeled—or rather, four-wheeled vehicle he had created, Sleipnir.

Despite its large size, Sleipnir was really modeled on a motorcycle and could not seat more than two people, so only Dasa was with Yukinari.

And on this patrol, the two of them had discovered a xenobeast.

It was a four-legged creature covered in black fur. Perhaps it had been a wolf at one point. It was hard to tell now, because it was close to twice the size of an ordinary wolf. In addition, its head was no longer wolf-like, having become something that would allow it to open its mouth wider, perhaps so it could eat more prey more efficiently. Snakes sometimes eat things many times larger than themselves; in the same way, this monster looked like it could swallow a small human whole.

Yet despite how bizarre it was, it also somehow looked... almost human. Not quite the way a werewolf did; it was a sort of man-beast.

A more hideous creature could hardly have been found. Anybody in their right mind who saw it might well have fainted clean away. But this did not mean that Yukinari necessarily found it an intimidating opponent.

Durandall was chambered with .44 Magnum rounds with special heads designed for hunting. He could also have used overloaded shells for extra piercing power, but only if he was prepared to damage the gun in the process. Long-distance sniping was of course impossible, but he did have a way of attacking the beast without having to go toe-to-toe with it.

But today, Yukinari’s response had been too late; the monster had jumped on him from the treetops. Hence he had found his shirt torn and scratches left on

his shoulder before he could even get off a shot.

“Yuki...!” Dasa exclaimed, shocked.

Yukinari stopped Sleipnir and dismounted.

“Stay there,” he ordered. Dasa gave a small nod.

Perhaps the xenobeast intended to use hit-and-run tactics, because it had already distanced itself from Yukinari and Dasa, hiding once more amongst the vegetation. But that didn’t mean it had run away. The sound of crunching leaves was still close.

It hadn’t given up on eating them.

Yukinari moved forward, Durandall in hand.

“Come on out. I’m right here,” he said to the bushes.

An instant later—

Rrroowr!

There was a sharp, short howl, and the xenobeast jumped out of the underbrush. Yukinari brought up his empty left hand. The xenobeast opened its gaping maw to eat him. Its fangs tore his sleeve; it swallowed his fist, then his elbow, and then its jaws were about to close...

“...Hey.”

They never got the chance.

Yukinari’s hand, now deep down the monster’s throat, had a firm grip on something inside the beast. The monster shook with surprise and went stiff.

They say that if you stick your arm in a dog’s mouth and grab its tongue, its whole body becomes unable to move. The xenobeast was rather doglike. Yukinari didn’t know whether that meant it would have a similar weak point, but he figured it wouldn’t enjoy having someone’s arm down its gullet, grabbing some internal organ in any case.

In general, xenobeasts were formed of animals that had been drawn to a single core creature. Thus, like worms and some reptiles, they could split themselves apart; this meant the xenobeast could break itself up in order to run from Yukinari.

Yukinari, of course, was not about to let it do that.

Yukinari brought Durandall to bear, stabbing it into the creature. When he was sure it was mostly buried in the xenobeast, he fired again.

There was a roar.

A .44 Magnum round hit the xenobeast from closer than point-blank range. But one shot wasn't enough. Yukinari let go of Durandall's grip for a moment, pulling the loading lever and firing five more rounds into his enemy.

Vrrahhh!

This evidently had some effect, or perhaps he had landed a lucky shot on the core creature. The xenobeast lost strength and began to twitch. Yukinari pulled his left arm out of the creature's mouth—but then frowned.

"Yuki, are you... okay?"

Dasa had Red Chili in one hand. She must have meant to back him up if the need arose.

"Sure. I guess I don't smell so great now," he said, looking down at his arm.

"Yuki, you mustn't let... down your guard."

"Yeah, maybe I was a little rash," he said with a grimace.

It was more than six months now since he'd come to Friedland. Maybe it was the fact that he went on these patrols every day, but he couldn't deny he had relaxed a little too much.

Suddenly, though, Yukinari went quiet.

"Yuki? What's wrong?"

“Hang on a second.” He was studying the xenobeast intently where it lay on the ground. This was itself a matter of not letting his guard down. Wild animals’ survival instinct sometimes outdo human intelligence. Some animals are known to play dead, making it hard to tell at a glance whether they are really gone or not.

Yukinari stabbed Durandall into his opponent again, but there was no response. He doubted even an animal pretending to be dead could dampen its reactions that much. He scratched the monster’s skin, but the blood was slow to come out. Proof the heart had stopped.

“Oh...” Dasa said.

The source of her surprise was the gentle *wumph* as the body collapsed. With the spiritual bond broken, it divided back into its constituent animals. Yukinari jabbed each one with Durandall, to be sure the core animal was really dead, but there was no reaction from any of them.

Only then did Yukinari finally set his weapon on top of Sleipnir. He kneeled down by the largest corpse and used both hands to pry its jaws open.

“I thought so,” he nodded. He pulled out whatever it was he had apparently expected.

“An armband...?” Dasa looked at it. It was covered in the xenobeast’s saliva. Made of pebbles and metal, it had been stuck between the monster’s teeth.

“I felt it when I had my arm in there,” Yukinari said.



“It belonged to someone... he ate...?”

“Probably.” Yukinari frowned. “Maybe someone just dropped it, but I can’t imagine a xenobeast going out of its way to eat an armband off the ground.”

“That’s true.”

“In other words, there’s a good chance that it ate the owner of this band while he or she was wearing it.” The band got stuck in its teeth and avoided being digested.

After a moment’s silence, Yukinari said, “I’m not really looking forward to this, but...” Then, he grabbed Durandall again and plunged it into the monster’s belly. “Since it’s already dead, I don’t think there should be any spray of blood or anything, but stand back. Just in case.”

“Mn...”

Dasa obediently retreated and watched as Yukinari opened the monster’s stomach with his weapon. When the tear was wide enough, he set the gun aside once more and began feeling in the opening with his hands.

“Ugh...” His face contorted at the ripe stench that emerged from the creature’s stomach as his fingers sought something within. He found what he was looking for, cut it out with Durandall, and finally produced precisely what he expected: a human skull, or at least part of one.

“Is it someone from Friedland...?” Dasa asked from her spot a few paces away.

“We don’t know exactly what this guy’s territory was, but I have to think any bones would have been completely digested in the time it took him to come from another town or village.”

Truth be told, even the skull wasn’t all there. An inventory of the rest of the stomach’s contents revealed pieces of a pelvic bone and a femur, relatively sturdy bones. Everything else appeared to have been digested already. Yukinari suspected that the process would have taken more than a day or two...

“What’s this? A ring...?” There was something else left along with the bones; maybe it had survived because it was made of metal. “Maybe these two things

will be enough to identify the owner.”

It wasn’t a mass-produced item, and close inspection revealed what appeared to be a name carved on the inside. It was extremely dirty, hard to make out at the moment, but a bit of cleaning would make it legible. And once they knew who the items belonged to, perhaps the effects could be returned to their family.

“If they’re from Friedland, I’m responsible,” Yukinari murmured.

Obviously, he couldn’t patrol everything outside the town and the fields, nor could he look out for every single person who might carelessly wander away to some dangerous place. And yet he couldn’t help thinking that if he had been stronger, strong enough that the xenobeasts and demigods knew to stay away from his territory, he might have prevented this person from becoming a victim.

“It’s not your... fault, Yuki.”

“...Thanks.”

He wiped off his left arm with a cloth and then remounted Sleipnir.

●

When he got back to Friedland, Yukinari went straight to the Schillings residence.

This was actually his normal procedure. Yukinari was Friedland’s god, and with his unusual hair and eye color, along with his rather unique style of dress, he tended to stand out. Or rather, he naturally drew the attention of the townspeople. The citizens were apt to think that any time their god went out, it was for some important reason; anticipation and anxiety would spread among them. Even if Yukinari felt he was simply going for a walk, the people of the town would assume there was some deep meaning to his excursion.

And so he had come to begin and end his trips at Fiona’s mansion, as a way of telling people that this was just a normal patrol. Since arriving in Friedland, Yukinari had realized that even gods had problems of their own.

Of course...

“There’s this thing, too,” he muttered as he parked Sleipnir in front of the

mansion and hopped off, intensely aware of the small leather pouch at his hip. It contained, of course, the armband and ring he had recovered from the xenobeast. The leftover bones he had wrapped separately and loaded on Sleipnir. He figured he would have them interred at Friedland's cemetery later.

Fiona was the town's deputy mayor. Information naturally came to her. She might not know all the details, but if someone had gone missing in town, she should have at least gotten a report about it. It might give Yukinari the hint he needed to figure out who owned this jewelry.

He greeted the servant easily, as he always did when entering the Schillings mansion.

"Hm?"

In the living room, he found Berta and Ulrike. Berta, he assumed, was once more there to take care of Angela, who was still in the underground room, and Ulrike must have accompanied her from the sanctuary as a guard. So it wasn't necessarily surprising to see them both there, but Fiona was in the room, too, and seemed to be conferring with them about something.

"What's going on? Something wrong?" Yukinari asked, perplexed by the somber atmosphere.

Fiona looked up, apparently startled by his voice. "Yukinari, perfect timing," she said.

"It is?" These visits to the mansion were, as mentioned, completely routine. "Did something happen?"

"Yes, that's what—" Fiona gave a small shake of her head. "I'm sorry. First, tell us about your patrol."

Evidently she assumed he would give his typical report of "nothing unusual." She could have easily asked him to put it off; that she didn't was a sign of the deputy mayor's methodical nature.

"I found something a little strange myself," Yukinari said. Feeling almost apologetic, he produced the armband and ring from his pouch and set them on the table.

“What’s this?” Fiona asked. “It looks like... an armband and... a ring?”

“Yeah. Actually...” And Yukinari went on to give them the short version of events. How he had been attacked by a xenobeast. How he had defeated the monster without trouble but found bones inside it that appeared to be human. How these accessories had also been in there. His guess from the condition of the bones and ornaments was that the victim had not been very far away when they were eaten. In other words, that there was a good chance it was someone from Friedland.

Fiona listened to him with a pained expression on her face—but when Yukinari told her the name carved into the ring, she blanched.

“Yukinari. Are you sure about that?”

“Er... Yeah. I suspect it’s... the name of whoever owned this ring. I can’t be certain, though.” Somewhat intimidated by Fiona’s reaction, Yukinari picked up the ring and handed it to her. He had already washed off the xenobeast’s saliva and dried the ring, so it no longer looked repulsively dirty.

Fiona studied the inscription on the inside of the ring.

“What’s going on?” Yukinari asked.

“I never expected to get the proof from inside of a monster,” Fiona muttered after a minute. Then she looked at Yukinari as if just remembering he was there. “I’ve actually been looking for this woman myself. The issue I wanted to address has to do with her...”

“I knew it. Missing? Her family must be worried.” Yukinari felt a stab of guilt.

But Fiona said, “No, they’re not.”

“Say what...?”

What could it be, then?

“Actually, something strange is happening in town,” Fiona said. “Or I should say, happened in town.” She related how a man’s rotting corpse had been found in a certain home, and the man’s wife might be the killer. “So hypothetically, if she is the killer, we thought it would be more dangerous to leave someone who would do such a strange thing at large.”

And Yukinari, through sheer chance, had discovered what seemed to be the remains of the same woman.

“So maybe that xenobeast attacked her while she was trying to flee. Either way, she won’t be able to cause any more harm.” There was just a hint of relief on Fiona’s face.

She had wanted to talk to Yukinari precisely about the search for this woman and the possibility of strengthening the town’s safety measures. But with the suspect deceased, there would be no more need for concern. And yet...

“Wait, hang on,” Yukinari said with a frown. “All we’re sure about is the name on the ring. We don’t know whether the bones I found in that monster belong to the woman or not.”

He was thinking back to the detective novels he had read in his previous world, when he had been a normal high schooler. This could be misdirection, a deliberate attempt to send an investigation off in the wrong direction. The body and the personal effects were ultimately separate things. Just because they’d been found together didn’t mean the remains belonged to the woman in question. Maybe the woman had been trying to throw off her pursuers by dressing some body in her own clothes and feeding it to the xenobeast.

And then there was...

“The date.”

The mutter came not from Yukinari but from Dasa.

“What about the date?” Fiona asked.

“The man was killed ten... days ago,” Dasa said. “The woman received... visitors seven days ago. And she was last seen three days ago.” She calmly laid out the facts. “But the remains... we found in that xenobeast must... be at least seven days old.”

“Oh!” Fiona exclaimed. “Are you sure about that, though?”

“Seven days at the very least,” Dasa said. “Perhaps more than ten days. Bones... are remarkably hard to digest. In my sister’s... laboratory, we learned that when we had to dispose of... the bodies we used in our experiments.”

According to Dasa, the alchemist Jirina had created several homunculi, artificial humans, before Yukinari. But although they were physically similar to humans, they lacked any spiritual power or sense of self; in addition, their hearts did not beat on their own. They were, practically speaking, corpses—and because they were of no use, the Church secretly ordered them disposed of.

But because chopping them up or burning them would attract too much attention, Jirina chose to dissolve the bodies in acid. It was almost as if the corpses were being digested in an artificial stomach. Even so, it took more than ten days before everything was gone.

Nobody knew if a xenobeast's stomach contained exactly the same chemicals, so it was impossible to say for certain, but it seemed unlikely that the creature's stomach acid would be more powerful than the agent Jirina used. Meaning...

"It doesn't add up," Fiona muttered.

The man had been killed about ten days earlier. Seven days earlier, his wife had appeared at the door of their house and told visitors the man was indisposed with a cold; that was why she was a suspect to begin with. And finally, an eyewitness had last seen her three days prior. Yet it seemed that at least seven days had passed since the owner of the ring had been eaten by the xenobeast.

So who was the woman the eyewitness had seen?

For that matter, if the remains did belong to the woman, and if she had been eaten by the xenobeast more than ten days ago, that would mean she was already dead when her husband was killed.

"C-Could she have been... a ghost...?" Berta asked fearfully.

I guess even in a world where monsters literally walk the earth, ghosts are still scary, Yukinari thought. But maybe monsters and ghosts were scary for different reasons. The terror of xenobeasts and demigods and erdgods was an instinctive response rooted in the desire to avoid death. But the fear of ghosts was something more intellectual—they defied normal expectations about the world, made people question their own place. Life and death. Existence and nonexistence. Ghosts made even these baseline assumptions seem questionable.

“I don’t personally believe in ghosts, but let’s say for the sake of argument that they exist,” Yukinari said. Fiona, Dasa, Berta and Ulrike all looked at him. “I mean, maybe she would be less a ghost than the living dead...”

“The living... dead...?” Dasa asked, mystified.

Of all those present, Dasa was the most versed in this kind of rare knowledge, but even she didn’t seem to know what a zombie was.

“Sorry. It’s, uh... It’s when a living thing dies, but then... somehow starts to move again...” It turned out to be surprisingly difficult to explain.

In this world, where medical science and the like were not much advanced, even the definition of death itself was somewhat ambiguous. Even in Yukinari’s previous world, there had been debate about whether it was brain death or the stoppage of the heart that constituted true death, and even once brain waves ceased or the heart was no longer beating, the cells of the body survived a short while longer. If those cells were quickly transferred to another living person, they could even go on without dying.

Obviously, none of that would mean anything to the people in this room. If they didn’t understand when he called it a “moving corpse,” what more could he say? But then—

“It is something like me!” Ulrike broke in. She seemed oddly proud of this conclusion. “I am deceased as a living thing, but as a plant I continue to live and move!”

“Er— well— yeah, I guess that’s true...”

“Moving corpse” wasn’t exactly a compliment, but Ulrike looked so pleased that Yukinari refrained from pointing this out. He decided they had gotten too far into the weeds; it was time to move the conversation along.

“But anyway,” he said, “where would the remains have been?”

“Where...? Oh!” Berta seemed to grasp what he was getting at. Until that morning, the remains with the ring had been digesting inside a xenobeast’s stomach. Even if the corpse had gotten up and walked around, even if it had been able to speak—even if any of this were possible or had happened, it still couldn’t be the woman in question.

Well then, what about a mass of spiritual power? In essence, the ghost question again.

But typically, spiritual power couldn't exist on its own. It required some vessel, and if it were to overflow that vessel, it would soon dissipate. The vessel was a living body, along with the red liquid—Holy Oil—used by the True Church of Harris. Spiritual power was a real and recognized phenomenon in this world, but it wasn't exactly the same as a ghost.

Even if, hypothetically, spiritual power could have appeared as a ghost under some particular circumstances, how could it have killed the husband? And even if that were possible, it was hard to imagine the ghost would simply run him through once with something sharp. It would have been incorporeal precisely because it had no living vessel.

"And that means..." Fiona murmured, cocking her head, "it's not her...?"

"That seems like the best explanation," Yukinari said.

The wife had put her ring on someone else and fed them to the xenobeast. After that, she killed her husband and disappeared—this at least would explain the things people had seen and heard.

"I just don't know why," Yukinari went on.

Why go to all that trouble? After all, it was sheer dumb luck that Yukinari had defeated the xenobeast and noticed that it had eaten someone. Misdirection didn't work if nobody ever noticed it. If she'd only wanted to hide her husband's death, why feed someone else to the monster? Why not just give it her husband?

So were these just the inexplicable actions of a disturbed individual? Or...

Yukinari didn't say anything. He couldn't think of anything else. With no one able to come up with an explanation that made any real sense, a chill and unnatural silence settled over the living area of the Schillings mansion.

Chapter Two: Amano Yukinari

Four men were walking along the main street that ran from north to south through Friedland.

Of course, there were plenty of people walking along that street, but these four stood out. They were wearing full suits of armor and had swords at their hips. Any one of them would have drawn attention; all four together couldn't fail to get noticed.

Friedland was not in a state of war, so they had their visors up, but even so they were quite intimidating. Their armor bore pockmarks and dirt, but when one considered that these showed the men had been in battle, even these details were unsettling.

Leading the four was a golden-haired young man. His neat facial features always seemed to bear a somewhat imperious expression—he didn't come across as especially approachable.

His name was Arlen Lansdowne.

Originally, he had been a missionary knight of the True Church of Harris who had come to convert the people of Friedland to his religion. Actually, "originally" was the wrong word. If you asked him, even now he would say he was a missionary knight of the Church. Indeed, his armor still bore the Church's emblem.

But as far as Friedland was concerned, the Church was their enemy. Arlen's unit had failed to convert the town and had even lost the statue of the guardian saint, which was supposed to be a civilizing expedition's trump card. They and their statue had been defeated by Yukinari, Friedland's own guardian.

Hence, one would not normally expect them to be walking freely through town. But Yukinari and Fiona had come up with a plan that had won them over. If the unit had reported to headquarters that they had failed in their mission, they would certainly be disgraced. Hence Arlen and the others reported that

they had succeeded in converting Friedland and would garrison the town with Yukinari and Fiona as their subordinates.

Arlen and the other defeated soldiers had few options. In the time since the plan had been proposed, the knights and the Friedlanders had come to a strange kind of coexistence. When a demigod attacked while Yukinari was away, Arlen had fought to protect the town—and he had done so again when Angela Jindel and her forces assaulted his new home. As a result, Arlen and several of the knights close to him had been given back their weapons and equipment and charged with protecting Friedland, as well as escorting the trade caravans to Rostruch. Within the boundaries of these responsibilities, they were given free reign.

But Arlen could feel the townspeople watching him as he walked along, and see their various reactions. Many of them scuttled away as the knights drew near, and more than a few looked deeply anxious. Yukinari and Fiona had made it clear that they felt indebted to Arlen, so there was no longer open hostility toward him. But many of the Friedlanders still seemed afraid of him, or at least of the way he presented himself. After all, they weren't very experienced with armored knights.

Most of the work Arlen and his companions did took place outside the town walls—patrolling the fields and looking after trade. It was unusual for them to walk the city streets in full regalia. Public safety and order was primarily the responsibility of the community watch, and Arlen's group generally left them to it. Generally.

There was one other thing. Some of the villagers' anxiousness could be attributed to the strange goings-on of late. That was, again, supposed to be the purview of the community watch, but as they were unable to figure out what was happening, these armored knights had begun patrolling the town streets. It was as good as telling people that the community watch could no longer handle things on its own, and that naturally made people wary.

"Captain!" From across the street, a knight who was supposed to be in a different group called out and came over.

"What is it?" Arlen asked, intensely aware of the stares of everyone around.

He gestured the knight closer.

The other man got so close their helmets could have touched, then whispered, “They found another body. A house on the eastern outskirts this time.”

“Another one? How many does this make?” Arlen frowned.

It was a series of murders. When a man who had been working on the new fields was found dead, his wife had been suspected as the killer. But before they had managed to crack that case, another one had occurred. New victims continued to appear every three to five days. The modus operandi was always the same: the heart pierced by a single blow from a thin blade.

Whether or not the first victim’s wife was the killer, this clearly went beyond a minor conjugal dispute. They had never announced the details of the first victim’s death, so it was unlikely that these were copycat crimes perpetrated by someone else. Most likely, they were all the work of the same person.

But why? The MO made this look like the work of a serial killer, but the victims didn’t appear to have anything in common. Gender, age, occupation, where they lived—not one of these things was common to all of them. And that left everyone in the dark as to who could possibly be doing this and why.

Perhaps the one thing that could be said of all the victims was that they were residents of Friedland. That meant the next target was likely to be located in the town as well.

“Sir knight.”

Arlen turned, surprised at the voice. He found a strange-looking middle-aged man standing behind him. From the neck down he looked perfectly ordinary, but his head was clearly different from that of a human. He had green hair and horns bearing a striped pattern.

He was a familiar of Yggdra, the erdgod who watched over the neighboring town of Rostruch. In that area, they took the elderly, injured, and ill who had no hope of recovery and offered them to Yggdra as living sacrifices. Unlike animal-based erdgods, Yggdra did not eat them as such, but planted sprouts in them and made them familiars, like branches that had been grafted onto her.

Ulrike was her representative here, but at the moment there were several of Yggdra's familiars visiting Friedland. They were helpers sent at Yukinari's request.

"Another victim has been found?" the familiar asked.

"So it seems," Arlen said with a grimace. He found Yggdra's familiars made him uncomfortable in a number of ways, but this was no time to be worried about trivial personal preferences. "I'm going to visit the scene now," he said. "Perhaps you could be so kind as to let the deputy mayor know?"

"Understood," the middle-aged man said with an exaggerated nod—and the next instant, he had set off running at a fantastic speed. It was not the way a human would run; no one could go flat-out like that for very long, but the man showed no sign of slowing down. These familiars generally retained their human appearance, but their human lives were long over. Now they were animated by Yggdra's spiritual power, like dolls. They were no longer subject to things like physical exhaustion.

Arlen found it profoundly strange to have creatures like that wandering openly around town. It made a few knights in armor seem unremarkable.

He turned to the men with him and said, "Let's go." Then he set off for the site of the murder at a quick clip.

●

"So we're up to six now." At the Schillings mansion, Yukinari sighed when the familiar brought him the report.

It had been perhaps twenty days since he had found the ring and armband inside the xenobeast. But the case had gone unsolved, the body count was mounting, and time was dragging on. Fiona and Yukinari were working with the community watch, Arlen and his companions, and Yggdra's familiars to make the town as secure as possible, but even so these cases kept multiplying.

The specific details of the incidents had been kept from the townspeople, but there was a palpable unease all the same. Yukinari came to town nearly every day, but generally slept at his sanctuary, so it took him several days to notice the change in the atmosphere.

“This is bad...”

“That’s for sure,” Fiona said. “We can’t find any commonalities in the victims or in the frequency with which the murders occur. We’re completely on the back foot here.” She and Yukinari were in the living area, along with Dasa, Berta, Ulrike, and the middle-aged familiar. It was he who had brought them the report of this sixth death.

“Maybe we’re making some kind of mistake?” Yukinari said, sinking into the sofa and staring up at the ceiling.

At first, he had thought perhaps the wife of the first victim was continuing to kill. But the fact that the murders had gone on so long without them being able to do anything suggested they were missing something—perhaps even investigating the wrong things.

“The dead body was just left there, right?”

“Yes. That much is the same. And I have heard that there were no injuries to the body other than the chest wound.”

“Meaning we’re not dealing with the work of a demigod or xenobeast, here...”

Demigods and xenobeasts would eat highly intelligent creatures to increase their own intelligence and spiritual power. But the other side of the coin was that this was the only reason they had for attacking humans. Since the brains—the seat of intelligence and spiritual power—were left undisturbed, it was hard to imagine this was the doing of some demigod or xenobeast who had snuck into town.

“So is it the work of some outsider...?” he muttered.

“I kind of doubt it,” Fiona said. Very few visitors came to Friedland. If anything, a stranger walking along the road would be noticed immediately. Friedland was not such a minor settlement that every single person knew every other person’s face, but still, there was a good sense of who was and wasn’t familiar. If any strangers had been seen, rumors would have spread. But then who was perpetrating these incidents?

“There’s even some superstitious talk that it’s a ghost stalking the town and

killing people.”

“Superstition, right...” Given that Yukinari was now an actual god, he thought maybe it wouldn’t be right to smirk at the mention of folk beliefs.

Whatever the case, a killer with no name and no face could cause untold trouble. It only started with the actual murders. It continued with the fear and unrest this would sow among the townspeople. If things went on and these feelings got out of control, the people could easily begin to doubt and suspect each other.

Were we wrong to ask Arlen and his knights for help? Yukinari thought suddenly.

If a spirit of suspicion took hold, its first targets would be the people’s former enemies. They were patrolling the town in full armor for safety, but if people began to think of them as missionary knights of the True Church of Harris, an unfavorable reaction could soon ensue.

He had considered that scenario before asking for their help, but simple necessity had dictated his priorities—there were simply not enough people to keep everyone safe.

Anyway, with everything that’s happened, they’ve turned pretty friendly...

If anyone said it to his face, Arlen would probably have spit and cursed and denied it, but he had gotten rather used to the routines of life in Friedland. When the flying demigod had attacked, he was the one who had fought to protect the children from the orphanage, making him a particular favorite among Berta’s younger sisters. Yukinari had even heard rumors that when Arlen was done with his duties, he would go to the orphanage of his own volition to help with any physical labor that needed doing. He seemed to be taking his current patrol responsibilities very seriously, as well. He still loved to act haughty, but Yukinari had begun to suspect that this was a way of covering for a certain shyness on his part.

However, Arlen’s change of heart was probably not reflected in all of the missionary knights. Those who had been “domesticated” by the Friedlanders accounted for no more than half of the missionaries who had first come to the town. The remaining number still considered Yukinari and Friedland to be their

enemies and were still imprisoned in a warehouse on the outskirts of town.

Then there was the possibility that some of the knights were outwardly cooperating, but still harbored ill motives in their hearts. In fact, Yukinari suspected they were the majority, and he suspected the townspeople knew it, too. If the people started to suspect them, there would be no way to keep the discord from spreading.

Yukinari and Fiona, as the town's god and deputy mayor respectively, might have declared Arlen and his companions innocent of wrongdoing, but that was hardly going to be enough to allay suspicion. After all, they could only make that declaration because they were in positions of power.

If things went wrong, Friedland might start to destroy itself from the inside. And that would be bad. Very bad.

"Have we told everyone to make sure they lock their doors at night and don't go out when the sun is down?"

"Yes, we've done that."

Yukinari could remember in his previous world, in Japan, hearing that out in the country, there were some people who didn't even lock their doors when they went to sleep at night. Everyone in these little villages knew each other, and being overly cautious was actually seen as rude. Or something like that. There were some villages where pretty much everyone was more or less closely related, making the entire place feel like one extended family.

Yukinari, thinking the same might be true of Friedland, had recently suggested to Fiona that they recommend that people lock their doors at night and avoid going out when the sun was down. But this wasn't something that would have a dramatic effect on safety, and now another incident had occurred regardless.

"Also, and this is only a way of treating the symptoms, but I thought we could move over here from the sanctuary and stay in Friedland. We could help with security. I don't know how much, but..."

Yukinari normally stayed at the sanctuary on the outskirts of town because it was a geographically convenient place from which to protect the village from xenobeasts and demigods. But of late he had only encountered the one

xenobeast, and it was now dead; there didn't seem to be much external danger. If anything did show up, assuming he was careful and prepared, he could deal with it even while based in town.

"I think it would help," Fiona said. "I'd appreciate it."

"And in town, I can be even quicker to get Yukinari information," Ulrike said, looking at Yggdra's other familiar.

Friedland, of course, didn't have anything in the way of telegraphs or telephones. Sending information required a messenger. But because Ulrike was connected to Yggdra's other familiars via a sort of spiritual net, she was able to send information "wirelessly." The familiars made excellent messengers, and with everyone on high alert, information would travel even more quickly.

"If need be, I could bring several more familiars here."

"No, I think we're fine for now," Yukinari said. "Just make sure you're keeping a careful eye on Rostruch. Until we know what's going on, we don't know it won't happen there, too."

"In Rostruch... too?" Dasa said, cocking her head. "Yuki, you mean—"

"Do you mean you think the Missionary Order might be behind this?" Fiona said, picking up on Dasa's hesitant words.

"I don't have any proof. But we can't discount the possibility. That's all."

"But Arlen—"

"No, no," Yukinari said, shaking his head quickly. Fiona seemed to think he suspected Arlen, but Yukinari was concerned about a completely different unit of the Missionary Order. "We didn't finish off all of Angela Jindel's followers. They could be hiding out in the wilderness, exacting their revenge. Admittedly, it's not a very strong possibility."

The members of the Ninth Missionary Brigade had abandoned most of their equipment and provisions when they fled. But if they had gone into the mountains, they might be able to subsist on fruit and nuts, or maybe hunt small animals. It wasn't yet getting so cold at night that anyone would freeze to death. These were trained warriors; they might not last against a demigod, but

there was a chance they could take down a xenobeast. Ambush was a possibility.

But then again, Yukinari was making periodic patrols to ensure that no demigods or xenobeasts were anywhere around town. He was not, of course, specifically looking for human remnants, but it still seemed likely that if they had spent long in the wilderness, he would have found some trace—the ashes of a campfire or something.

“With everything that’s been going on, I’ve been putting it off,” Yukinari said, sinking into the sofa. “But I need to try to interrogate Angela Jindel again.”

●

When he descended the stairs to the basement storeroom, he found himself face-to-face with the guard—Veronika.

“Well, well. What brings you here?” the mercenary said with an air of irony.

Perhaps her smirk had to do with how long the interrogation of Angela had been delayed. Maybe she thought that Yukinari shied away from the idea of having to face someone who deliberately tried to anger him. She wasn’t entirely wrong about that.

The other part of it was that the serial murders had kept not just Yukinari, but many of them horrendously busy, and there hadn’t been time to interrogate their prisoner. Incidentally, the reason Veronika hadn’t been put on guard duty in town was because they had needed somebody with strong fighting skills to keep an eye on Angela. On the off chance she tried to escape, only Yukinari or Veronika would be likely to match her. Such was the judgment of Yukinari and Fiona, and so Veronika had found herself cooped up in the Schillings residence, watching Angela closely.

“I’m here to interrogate Angela Jindel.”

Veronika nodded and opened the door, and she and Yukinari stepped inside.

“I could do it for you, if you tell me what you’re trying to find out,” she said.

“No, it’s all right. Well... If I snap again, stop me.” There was a bit of a smirk in Yukinari’s voice as well. “Or... when.”

“When. Sure.”

The exchange made clear what Yukinari had in mind.

The underground room was surprisingly large. Angela was in the far corner. The two of them made no effort to hide their footsteps as they entered, and they heard a rattling from her direction. What was she doing? They glanced at each other, then came farther into the room, where they found Angela with her back to the wall, watching them alertly.

“And how are we doing today? Not well, I suppose,” Yukinari said, walking up to Angela.

It might have been wiser, normally, to keep some distance. The door of the underground storeroom was so sturdy that they hadn’t bothered to manacle Angela’s arms or legs. If she’d had a mind to, she could have attacked him barehanded. But instead...

“Of course not,” she said, glaring at Yukinari. “But it doesn’t matter. Why are you here? Come to have your way with me?”

“Have my way...?” Yukinari repeated in annoyance. “Huh. Well, I guess that depends on you.”

Angela shivered. In anyone else he might have taken it for fear, but Yukinari could see her eyes shining with excitement. Assuming he wasn’t just imagining it, then Veronika must have been right—the girl had some strange tastes.

“There’s something I want to ask you.” He briefly explained the situation in Friedland. And then he said, “Is there any possibility Harris Church people are involved in this?”

His question was simplicity itself. But such typical tactics were unlikely to work on a girl like Angela.

“And if I don’t answer, what do you have for me?” she said, staring up at him. “Another slap...?” A mocking smile played across her lips. She probably imagined this would provoke Yukinari. “You enjoy beating defenseless women, don’t you! You’re just a fallen angel, you show the influence of that contemptible alchemist who created you. You’re twisted inside—”

Yukinari kneeled in front of Angela, looking directly into her eyes. Silent. Expressionless. Nothing more.

“Twisted and... and...”

Angela opened and closed her mouth, finally frozen in place by Yukinari’s stare. He looked at her a moment longer before he said, “What’s the matter, you insect?”

“I—Insect!”

“Nothing else to say? Is that all your empty little head can come up with? I guess a good brain really does go to waste if you don’t use it. You missionaries really have it easy, you know? Don’t wonder, don’t think, just invoke the name of God over and over like a yapping dog. It’s so simple, even a bug like you can do it.”

This time it was Angela’s turn to fall silent.

But Yukinari insisted, “Say something!” And then he slapped her face again. The dry sound echoed around the basement room.

Angela’s head snapped to the side with the force of the blow; then she turned back toward him, amazement on her face.

“Wh—What the...”

He grabbed her head, pulled her face close to his.

“Looks like you were right. I will slap you if you don’t answer me. ...Well?”

He let go of her and then delivered another blow, this time backhanded, in the other direction.

“Ah... ahhh...”

“But I guess I would’ve hit you anyway.”

“...oww... ahh...”

“You should learn your place, you insect. But since you don’t seem to know it, I’ll teach you. It’s under my heel.”

“Wh-Who are you calling an insect...”

“You,” he whispered into the missionary’s ear. “You, Angela Jindel. Admit it: you are nothing more than a worm, than a fly. Have you learned that yet?”

“H-How dare you—”

“No? That’s what comes of having a bug-sized brain.”

Another strike.

Then, wordlessly, Angela looked at Yukinari. She was shaking. Were her cheeks red because he had hit her? Or...?

“Hm?” Yukinari noticed that Angela, still kneeling, was moving her knees a little. He studied her lower body. “Had a little accident, have we, Angela?”

“What?! N-No...”

“Am I wrong? If you haven’t sprung a little leak, then what *has* happened? Answer me!”

“This... is...”

He was silent.

“This... It’s...”

“...I see.” Yukinari nodded and stood. She was keeping her thighs together, trying to hide her crotch. He looked down at her coldly. “Well, fine. I didn’t expect an insect to be able to answer my questions. It was a waste of effort.”

“You all right with that?” The question came from Veronika, who had been watching the exchange silently until that moment.

“Yes, I am. I have no more interest in Angela Jindel. I’m leaving.”

Angela’s face snapped up. “W-Wait right there!” she practically shouted. “H-How can you humiliate me like this and then just—”

Yukinari kept his back to her, silent. He took a step, was about to leave, but Angela shouted from behind him:

“V-Very well, let me t-tell you a secret!” She was practically groaning. Yukinari ignored her; he began to walk out without even turning around. “Hold it! Wait, I tell you! I thought you wanted to know if the Missionary Order was behind what’s happening in your town!”

Yukinari resisted the urge to turn around; he stopped where he was.

Whatever Angela made of this gesture, her breath grew harsher, and she went on. “These incidents are trivial—they are meaningless—how could knights of the Missionary Order ever concern themselves with something so small? If they have the time to play these little pranks, they should return to Aldreil and summon reinforcements!”

Yukinari was silent.

“The Missionary Order may be invincible, undefeated, but even we know that sometimes we may be forced to make a temporary withdrawal because of some underhanded tactic! I promise you, the surviving missionaries have gone back to Aldreil! In fact, even if some derelict has remained, he would be far too proud to haunt a town of ignorant cultists, picking them off one by one!”

Angela’s voice was so high it was beginning to crack, but she hardly seemed to notice.

“The True Church of Harris is righteous! And we are the agents of its justice! Why should we hide? Instead, we walk the true path boldly, sweeping away the barbarians before us! We will point out your foolishness to your faces, and if you lack the intelligence to listen to us, we will exhaust every measure to correct you by force. All who attempt to interfere will be dispensed with. That’s all there is to it!”

Now, at last, Yukinari looked back over his shoulder at Angela. The knight’s face was shining. She believed her shouting had stopped him, made an impression on him.

“You’re awfully noisy, insect.”

Angela’s breath caught in her throat.

“But I like the noise you made. Maybe later I’ll get you out of this hole and let you see the sun. Collared, of course.”

“C-Collared...?” Angela clutched herself with both arms as if shocked. Yukinari spared a glance at her as he and Veronika left the room.

●

“Now, that was an interrogation,” Veronika said with a smirk when they had ascended the stairs.

She had promised to stop Yukinari “when he snapped,” but in the end she had never intervened. It wasn’t that she had betrayed her promise; rather, she knew that Yukinari had been under control the entire time.

Yukinari let out a long sigh and leaned on the wall. “That really took it out of me...”

“I bet.”

“I know maybe it looks like I’m not one to talk right now, but I hate violence. Whether that means hurting someone with my words, or actually raising a hand against them.”

“I know that,” Veronika said, leaning against the wall next to Yukinari. “But you had to do something, or you would never have gotten through to that girl. Frankly, it was what she wanted.”

“I guess... I guess you’re right about that.”

Masochism.

It wasn’t clear whether she herself knew it, but Angela had clearly been excited to be slapped and verbally abused by Yukinari. The way she had brought her thighs together a little too tightly in an effort to hide something was most likely, as she had said, not because she had wet herself.

“She wants someone to be her master,” Veronika insisted. “She’s so strong and proud herself. She wants someone to walk all over her, treat her really savagely. You did great, Yukinari. As an observer, I was pretty impressed how you managed to come right up to the line. I guess that girl really is a good judge of people—or gods.”

“Please, stop it already,” Yukinari groaned, looking up at the ceiling.

The reason he had struck Angela, called her an insect and those other vile things, was because he wanted to see if they were right about her fetish and perhaps drag some information out of her as well. The saying goes, “If pushing doesn’t work, try pulling,” but on the assumption that neither physical nor

verbal abuse alone would work, Yukinari modulated his approach, checking Angela's reactions, figuring out exactly what kind of person she was looking for and then playing that part.



“You almost had her,” Veronika said, shooting a glance in the direction of the basement.

“What do you mean? Almost had her what?”

He had been able to get the information he wanted; he doubted Angela was in a state to lie.

“Falling from grace.”

He said nothing.

“Whenever you get an extremist believer—not just in religion—it’s possible that they’ll change who or what it is they worship. It can be pretty dangerous.” Veronika had crossed her arms and seemed to be remembering something. “People always want someone supporting them.”

“Even you, Veronika?”

“Good question,” she said with a wry smile. “Probably.”

People can’t endure absolute freedom or equality. It would be the same thing as leaving them naked in a barren field. They need something to cling to, they want someone who will grab them by the collar and say, “Look at me.” If all people are equal in the state of nothingness called freedom, then responsibility for every decision redounds upon the one who made it. But people are all too aware that they are neither all-powerful, nor absolute, nor omniscient; they know how frequently they make mistakes.

Hence, they are anxious. They seek something that will tell them what is right, something that will absolve them of responsibility for their thoughts and actions. It may be their parents, their rulers, or their gods, among other things, but when confronted by an existence overwhelmingly greater than themselves, people come to reverence and worship it. By abandoning choice and decision-making to these entities, they find relief from their anxiety, and life becomes easier.

In short, self-interest is at the center of it all.

So if they find some object that will make their lives even easier, they may switch allegiances. Yukinari understood this psychology, albeit dimly. After all,

in his previous world he had lived with the dictionary definition of it.

“You’ve got to admit you’re a pretty imposing presence, Yukinari. When she saw you in that armor with those wings, maybe you already had her even then.”

“Ugh,” Yukinari grunted.

It was true that the body of the Bluesteel Blasphemer was one that had been intended to do “miracles” for the Church in order to more efficiently convert people to the faith. It looked very intimidating and seemed altogether inhuman—or so he gathered. Yukinari himself wasn’t really sure one way or the other, but that was what Berta and Fiona told him.

And on top of that, Angela had seen him fight. She had seen with her own eyes just how powerful he was. As Veronika suggested, if Yukinari had delivered that first slap in the form of the Bluesteel Blasphemer, she might have immediately converted to his worship.

“We’re expecting to have it out with the other Missionary Brigade from Aldreil, right? We could do with anyone at all on our side who had information about the enemy...”

“On our side, huh...?” He remembered a manga he had read in his previous world, where two men had started out fighting each other, but had ended up the best of friends.

“You’re a god, aren’t you, Yukinari?” Veronika was looking at him. “A god has to at least be able to watch his followers throw themselves into the flames while chanting his name, or he’s not much of a deity.”

“Is that how it works?”

So that was why she thought he should just convert Angela. Yukinari let out another long sigh, and then he and Veronika headed for the living area.

●

Yukinari looked up when he heard the sound of rushing footsteps, and the Schillings’s butler calling out for someone to halt.

He and the others had been continuing their discussion, still in the mansion. As he had suggested earlier, Yukinari, Dasa, and Ulrike would move into the

Schillings residence for the time being. They needed to talk about how rooms and food would be handled, among other matters. It wasn't something he'd had in mind when he left the sanctuary that morning, so they had come without any provisions or supplies. It turns out that humans need a surprisingly large number of things for their everyday lives. The group was also talking about what they would have to get from the sanctuary and what supplies were already available at the mansion.

Incidentally, because Berta had been living at the household already to look after Angela, she would simply continue to use the room she was already in.

"Another one!"

The pounding footsteps carried Arlen into the living room. He was in his armor and still carried his sword. The butler must have been trying to reprimand him on the grounds that this was not good etiquette. No doubt Arlen had not wanted to spare the time to remove his equipment.

"Fiona Schillings! There's another one!" he shouted the moment he entered the room.

"Arlen," she said with just a hint of exasperation. "First of all, calm down."

"There's no time to be calm! There's— Hm?"

It was only then that he noticed Yukinari and Dasa in the room. He frowned. Cooperative he might have been, but he still didn't seem especially fond of Yukinari and his friends on a personal level.

"Now, Arlen, there's another what?"

"Another victim of the serial killer!" His tone suggested she should hardly need to ask.

According to Arlen, the scene of the crime was close to the orphanage where Berta had been raised. He had left two knights at the scene and come to inform Fiona as quickly as he could. He must have really been running, because a close look revealed that he was sweating under his armor.

"We only had time for a glance, but it looked like the victim died not that long ago. I left two of my subordinates there with orders to keep the townspeople

away. Another one has gone to tell the community watch.”

“Good thinking. What do you make of this, Yukinari?”

“I’m not sure. Let’s go have a look.”

If it hadn’t been that long since the murder occurred, there was a good chance they could gain some useful clue by visiting the scene of the crime themselves.

“Dasa, will you come with me?”

“Of course.” She nodded, patting the bag she always carried. As the former assistant to an alchemist, she had a good knowledge of chemistry. It might not amount to scientific investigation or observation, but if there was anything left at the scene, she might be able to analyze it.

“And Ulrike, you too.”

“I understand,” Yggdra’s familiar said.

She had a perspective rather different from the average human. It was possible she would notice something that Arlen or the community watch had missed.

“Berta...”

He hesitated to bring her along; she wasn’t accustomed to blood and death. He’d figured he would have her stay at the mansion, but before he could say as much, Berta was on her feet.

“If you’ll allow it, I’d like to go, too. As much as possible, I want to be by your side.”

“Oh... Uh, sure...”

She looked so serious, it threw Yukinari off. Her attitude toward him had clearly changed since the battle with the Missionary Order—she had begun to take matters more into her own hands. These days he almost felt he sensed a rivalry in her; if Dasa and Ulrike went somewhere, Berta wanted to come, too. But perhaps he was just imagining it.

He felt a significant gaze from Dasa, but now was not the time to worry about

these things.

“Cute little arguments later! Crime scene investigation now!” Arlen said, sounding annoyed.

“You’re right,” Yukinari said, “let’s go.” And then they followed after Arlen, who was already headed for the exit.

●

The victim this time was found in a little-traveled alleyway. It was the first time one of the bodies had been found outside.

The stiff was a man in his twenties. Hans Cutel and the community watch were examining the body, and Yukinari asked that he and his companions be allowed to join in. Of course, Hans was not about to refuse a request from Friedland’s guardian deity.

Still, whatever they might have known about science, forensic investigation as such was still new to Yukinari and Dasa. For the most part, they observed from the sidelines as Hans and the watch did their work.

The corpse had already been brought in from the street and set on a cart. Part of Yukinari felt the scene should have been preserved, but it seemed the watch was unwilling to leave the body where it lay. It was only understandable that they should want to bury it as soon as possible.

“One stab through the heart, just like the others,” Yukinari said.

“From directly in front of him, no less,” Hans said, looking at the corpse’s bloody shirt.

“Do we know what weapon was used?”

“A rapier of some description, most likely.”

“A rapier...? Not a dagger or some kind of sharpened stick?”

“Well, there’s an exit wound, meaning the weapon had to be fairly long. And on the wall behind the body, there are some marks that we believe were left by the point of the weapon. A sort of distorted diamond shape. It suggests a thin sword of some type.”

Hans went on to explain that without being at least as long as a grown man's arm—about 60 centimeters, Yukinari supposed—it wouldn't have been possible to leave a mark on the wall.

"It's very strange," Yukinari said.

"What is?" Fiona asked.

"All these deaths, all the warnings from us, even the townspeople on edge. Don't you think people would be careful not to get too close to anyone walking around with a sword? And I assume that alleyway is narrow. It wouldn't be easy to stab someone there."

"You... might be right about that."

"Any signs of a struggle?" Yukinari asked.

"None," Hans replied.

Yukinari figured that the alley where the murder was believed to have taken place was just a little more than one meter wide. Enough for two people to pass by each other, but rather tight for someone to draw a sword and bring it to bear. If you weren't careful, it would simply hit the wall.

"That at least is a commonality," Hans went on. "The victims didn't fight back."

All the other victims had been found indoors. It obviously hadn't been possible to glean too much from the heavily decomposed corpse of the first victim, but all of the bodies found after that had been examined, and none of them showed any sign of a fight. They had been taken completely unawares by their murderer.

"There have been no reports of shouts or screams in any of the cases thus far."

"In other words, they didn't know what was happening until the moment they were killed," Yukinari said, crossing his arms. "If all of these murders have been committed by the same person, how are they getting close to their victims? Every single one of these people was killed when they seemed to least expect it."

“Maybe they’re... invisible?” Dasa said.

“How?” Yukinari asked. “People can’t just disappear whenever they want, can they?”

Admittedly, in his previous life Yukinari had seen a movie about aliens from outer space who used invisibility technology to attack humans. But he very much doubted such devices existed in this world. Even alchemy wasn’t that powerful.

“Maybe they use smoke...”

In other words, they didn’t turn themselves invisible, but hid themselves long enough to commit a crime. It was possible.

“I don’t know. That might work outside, but I don’t think it would be feasible indoors.”

Wouldn’t smoke make people think fire, and wouldn’t fire make them call out or try to run? They wouldn’t just wait around for the killer to get close to them.

“Mn,” Dasa grunted, and frowned.

“It would make the most sense if the killer was someone they already knew... Is there any single person known to all of the victims? Someone they wouldn’t suspect?”

Fiona and Hans looked at each other. Then they both looked at Yukinari.

“What?” he asked. “Think of someone?”

“There is someone who might fit the description,” Fiona said.

“Who?” he pressed her.

She hesitated for a moment, then replied, “You, Yukinari.”

Yukinari said nothing, lost for words. Now that he thought about it, she was right. Just about everyone in Friedland knew his face. And they certainly would never expect him to harm them in any way.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Fiona said. “Trust me, I’m not suggesting you’re the culprit. I said ‘someone’ fits that description, but the same is true of me and Ulrike.”

“I guess you’re right,” Yukinari said. Fiona and Ulrike were also both well known to the people of Friedland. And, again, unlikely to be suspected of any malicious intent.

“Yukinari,” a voice called, drawing closer to the cart. It was Ulrike herself.

“Ulrike. Find anything?”

“We familiars are patrolling the area on the assumption that the ne’er-do-well may yet be nearby.”

“Have you seen anyone suspicious?”

“Mm. We attempted to ask the villagers if they’d seen anyone unfamiliar or strange lately... But we were told, ‘I would have to say you’re pretty strange.’”

“I guess they’re not wrong...”

Ulrike, who was so frequently seen with Yukinari, might be an exception, but the other familiars didn’t usually appear in town. The people of Friedland could see them as strangers, obviously unusual creatures. It was understandable if the villagers considered the familiars bizarre.

“I am sorry,” Ulrike said.

“No, it’s all right,” Yukinari answered, looking around and climbing down off the cart. He thought there might be more to learn from investigating the scene of the crime than the body itself. “Keep the other familiars watching the area for the time being.”

Yggdra’s familiars might not be able to catch the criminal outright, but their presence in town was hard to miss. With them around, maybe the killer would feel compelled to lie low. That, Yukinari hoped, might at least keep the immediate area—which included the orphanage—safe.

“I do not know how much good it will do,” Ulrike was saying, “but we will try.”

“Yeah, please d—”

Yukinari stopped in midsentence as he came out into the street. Something utterly unexpected filled his vision. He stood there, frozen—yet he was the only one who noticed it.

“Yuki...?” Dasa came up to him, no doubt having seen that he seemed upset. “What’s wr...ong?”

Yukinari couldn’t answer. He simply couldn’t find the words.

This is unbelievable...

Dasa followed Yukinari’s gaze. But even when she saw it, she could only blink in incomprehension. She didn’t know what it was that had shocked Yukinari so much.

Of course she didn’t. She couldn’t.

Was this... carved with the tip of a sword?

Hans had said there was some sort of scoring on the wall that appeared to have been left by a rapier. A series of spidering lines all connected together in a very small space. Up, down, sideways. There didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason at first glance, but in fact there was a logic to the scratches. They formed four kanji characters.

Had the criminal done this? If so, this could be a hugely important clue, but it was the clue itself, the four characters, that had pinned Yukinari in place. They said:

Amano Yukinari.

It was his own name, written in four Japanese kanji.

Nothing else. No other words or explanation. But this was obviously not a matter of chance. This was Yukinari’s name as it had been in his previous world. Other than he himself, no one in this world should have known how to write it.

●

In the end, Yukinari and the others decided not to go back to the sanctuary to retrieve their things. They wanted to be ready to help keep Friedland safe at every possible moment. Fiona would find something appropriate in terms of changes of clothes and other necessities. Yukinari also made plenty of extra bullets for the Durandalls he’d given to the community watch. Durandall and Red Chili used the same ammunition, .44 Magnum rounds, so this was easy enough, and if they started to run low it was just a matter of Yukinari making

more. He could also produce accessories for Red Chili and more bullets for Derrringer if the need arose.

Ulrike was also quite capable of taking care of herself. Yukinari gave her a stern warning to do her morning photosynthesis somewhere people wouldn't see her. He wondered how exactly she had been handling it in Rostruch.

No matter. They quickly concluded their discussions in the Schillings mansion, and Yukinari went back out into town. He couldn't bear to sit still; he wanted to check every corner of the village with his own eyes.

Dasa had insisted she would accompany him, but Yukinari had told her that he needed to do some serious thinking and left her at the mansion.

"It's Lord Yukinari!"

"Lord Yukinari!"

As he walked around town, the Friedlanders gave him smiles of relief. Yukinari had been trying to keep mum about the murders, but people will talk. So many deaths had led to dark rumors, such as that of a disembodied killer ghost stalking the streets.

Yukinari waved and tried to force a smile onto his face. It wouldn't get him any closer to catching the killer, but anything he could do to ease people's fears, he would. Even as he smiled at them, though, he was ruminating anxiously.

How could someone from this world have written in kanji? Written my name?

He couldn't get the image of the crime scene out of his head. He considered the possibility that he had simply misunderstood what he was seeing. If it had been some simple character like the kanji for "one," which was just one stroke, or "ten," which was just two, then it might have been possible that some errant scratch simply happened to look like the character in question. But the kanji in Yukinari's name were very complex, and it was unlikely that they were there by chance.

There was no such thing as kanji in this world, or if there was, Yukinari had never seen it. An old saying went that monkeys at typewriters, given an infinite amount of time, could produce the works of Shakespeare—which was about as likely as someone in this world accidentally producing the four characters of

Yukinari's name all in a row in this place at this time. Practically speaking, the odds were zero.

In other words, this was not an accident. It was a deliberate act by someone—most likely, someone who came from the same "previous world" as Yukinari did. Someone who knew him.

Yukinari might have been overjoyed at this—if the words hadn't been carved into a murder scene. Yukinari was now surrounded by friends and comrades: Dasa, Berta, Fiona, Veronika, Ulrike, the children from the orphanage, and all the people of Friedland. It hardly left him with time to feel lonely. And yet, the fact that he had come from another world entirely was always in the corner of his mind.

It was his experiences in that other world that had forged his personality. He could never forget them. It had not been the best possible life, yet he looked back on it fondly. If there was someone else in this world who felt the same way as he did, that should have been a comfort to him.

But what if that person was a murderer? What if they were...

"Dammit." Yukinari finished his circuit of the town, having come up with nothing of any real importance, and turned back toward the Schillings mansion. "I can't believe this..."

He knew. Deep inside, he knew. But it was a conclusion he desperately didn't want to draw, so he carefully kept his distance from it. He had left Dasa behind because he had been afraid that the perceptive young woman might come up with the answer herself.

"Hatsune..."

She had died in the same fire that led to Yukinari ending up here. What if a ritual much like the one Jirina had performed had caught Hatsune's soul, or whatever it was, and brought it here, just like Yukinari's? What if it had been given flesh?

When he had first awoken in this new world, Yukinari had asked Jirina and Dasa whether his older sister was with him. They had died together; it wasn't so surprising to think they might have been reincarnated together as well. She

would know Japanese, and could certainly write Yukinari's name.

"I'm back," he said to the butler as he entered the mansion. The man responded by informing Yukinari that the guest room on the far end of the second floor had been set aside for him. "Thanks," Yukinari said and went up the stairs, heading for the room at the far end of the hall.

When he got inside, he tossed himself on the bed without even lighting a lamp. He lay there in silence.

Set aside the question of whether or not his older sister was here. Why had those characters been carved at the crime scene? He was the only one who could read them; they practically begged him to come looking for someone else who had been reincarnated from Japan. But if that was the intent, why not put them somewhere more conspicuous?

Either way, there was no reason the person had to write "Amano Yukinari." The words had been left there by someone who knew he was in this town. Why? Was it a challenge? Or—

Suddenly, a knock came at the door. "Lord Yukinari? Are you awake?"

The reluctant tone suggested it was Berta. "I'm awake," he said, almost sighing. "The door's open."

"Okay. I'm... I'm coming in."

Berta wasn't the only one who came through the open door. Dasa and Ulrike were with her.

"What's wrong? Did anything happen?" For a moment, he was anxious: surely they hadn't discovered yet another new victim?

But Berta shook her head. "No. Lady Dasa..."

"Dasa? What about her?" Yukinari looked at the girl, who uncharacteristically seemed to be trying to hide behind Berta. Dasa focused on the ground, refusing to look at Yukinari. She was as expressionless as ever, but seemed unusually depressed.

"She... She thinks you're acting rather strangely, Lord Yukinari."

"I am? She does?"

“Ever since this morning...”

He didn’t respond immediately. In other words, ever since he had seen his name at that crime scene.

Well, he figured, she was right. At the same time, her unusually retiring attitude suggested she suspected something. Most likely it had begun when he told her not to follow him. He had been too preoccupied to think much about it, but it wouldn’t have been lost on her. He didn’t yell or make a big deal about it, but it had probably left more of an impression on her than he had realized.

Ever since Jirina’s death, Yukinari and Dasa had always been together. It was not an exaggeration to say that they had hardly been apart for a moment. He never left her behind, and she was always at his side. It was because of a promise he had made to Jirina: that he would take care of Dasa. That was why he always tried to put her first.

But ever since he had seen those words on the wall, they had been all he could think about.

“Dasa,” he said gently. Her shoulders slumped and she trembled a little. “I’m sorry. I haven’t been deliberately ignoring you. I’ve just... had a lot to think about.”

“Yuki,” Dasa said, looking up.

“Ahem.” Ulrike, who had been quiet until that moment, spoke up. She crossed her arms. “On that note, if you have concerns, you should speak to us about them. Berta thought perhaps you were depressed, and that the three of us should visit you.”

“Is that right?” Yukinari said, smiling dryly.

Had it been so obvious that he was upset? If anyone would have noticed, it would be the girls that he spent all his time with.

“Drawing on the knowledge of other familiars, I see that when a human male is unhappy, it is often of comfort to him to have a female offer him her body. Concretely speaking, to perform a reproductive act with him.”

“...Guh?” Where on earth did the plant-girl come up with these things?

“It was Berta’s considered opinion that if she were to offer you her body now, it would both make you feel better as well as gratify her own hopes. ‘Two birds with one stone,’ I believe you humans say.”

“Wha? No, I—” Berta was flustered to have the conversation suddenly turn to her. “I just—”

“Berta, you’re... very calculating.”

“Y-You too, Lady Dasa?! I wasn’t trying to—”

The fact that she couldn’t bring herself to utter the lie—*I wasn’t trying to do that* or the like—spoke to the girl’s personality. For better or for worse, she simply couldn’t say something untrue.

In many cases, people lie in order to protect themselves. But Berta, who had been raised her whole life to be a living sacrifice, had scant impulse to self-preservation.

“Hey, sorry,” Yukinari said with a smile. “I didn’t mean to worry you. I’m okay. This is plenty.” The knowledge that these girls were so concerned about him was comfort enough.

“Yuki,” Dasa said, blinking behind her glasses.

“Hrm? What, are you better already?” This came from Ulrike, sounding a bit annoyed. “Is your recovery not rather sudden?”

“Gee, sorry.”

“I thought I might have a chance to observe human reproduction up close.” Ulrike had always seemed inordinately interested in how humans continued their species.

“Go watch some cows do it or something,” Yukinari said.

“That will not do. I am given to understand that human sexual relations are rather different from those of other animals.” She looked doubtful. “I was curious to test whether this body, Ulrike, could engage in the activity. I have found that the stamens of my male familiars refuse to—”

“I get it! Don’t finish that sentence! Just... stop talking,” Yukinari said insistently. It made him feel a bit dirty just listening to Ulrike—who was little

more than a child—say such things. She was asking not because of her own sex drive, but out of sheer curiosity. It made sense that her male familiars couldn't reproduce. There was no sex drive powering them.

After all, Yggdra, the creature behind Ulrike, was an erdgod. As something that was effectively immortal so long as she was not actually killed, it was only natural that her attitude toward reproduction would be relaxed. But still...

"Pardon me, Yukinari," the girl went on, "but could I bother you to become depressed again?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You shall become depressed, and *voila*! I shall comfort you!"

"Seriously. What. The. Hell."

He wasn't sure Ulrike herself understood what she was saying, or asking for. And why did she look so pleased about it?

"I must be prepared to take advantage of any opportunity," she said, and then she began assiduously removing her clothing.

"Hey, leave that on."

"Hm? Ah, yes. Only your stamen and my pistil need be exposed."

"That's not what I meant! Berta? Berta, stop that!" Yukinari said desperately. The other girl had begun to copy Ulrike.

"He is right," Ulrike said. "I shall be first."

But then she fell silent. Her face was the first thing to change. It stopped moving, frozen. It looked less as though she had decided to hold still and more as though time had stopped for her and her alone.

"What's going on?" Yukinari wondered if this was some fresh prank, but then it occurred to him that Ulrike rarely joked. She always spoke seriously. That was what made it so difficult to handle the way she talked about sex—but leaving that aside.

"Hey..." Something was wrong. Yukinari frowned and started to reach out to her, but as he did so, Ulrike fell to the ground, as stiff as a board. "Ulrike?!"

Berta stood shocked, hardly able to process what had happened, but Dasa rushed over and kneeled by Ulrike. She touched her wrist, her neck, her chest, and then her face.

“Yuki,” she said.

“What is it? What’s wrong with Ulrike?”

“She’s dead.”

“...Huh?!” For an instant, he didn’t understand what she meant. “How... How can she be dead...?”

Yukinari looked at the face of the girl who had been Yggdra’s familiar. It was pale and pretty, and now its eyes were open wide. They reflected nothing, but only stared blankly.

●



Beyond the outskirts of Friedland, past the newly cultivated fields, there was a wasteland that had yet to be developed. And in it stood a girl.

“.....Hm.”

Her pale skin and white hair shone in the moonlight, making her seem to shimmer despite the darkness. Hers was an unearthly beauty, seemingly untouched by the vulgarities of the fleshly world.

She was dressed lightly, as if she were going for a walk in town. Yet this was neither a time nor a place that a young woman should be out on her own. It made the moment seem all the more unreal.

“Perhaps... this will do.”

The girl clutched a rapier in her hand. There was no telling where it had come from, for she wore no scabbard. The thin sword had a hilt and guard emblazoned with roses. Their red color stood out; they almost seemed to move like living things. Thin red lines, like veins, spread out from them, running up onto the blade.

What kind of sword was this?

What was more, when she stabbed it into the ground at her feet, the earth began to twist, and then the rapier sank down as if it were burying itself, until it had disappeared under the surface.

There was a tremble in the air, as though this very land was flinching, afraid of something.

“This ought to keep those meddlesome familiars from interfering,” the girl said, and turned around. There, on the ground, lay an old woman with horns like a deer and green hair. One of Yggdra’s familiars. Her body showed no wounds, but she was still, like a puppet with its strings cut.

●

An unusual tension filled the living area of the Schillings mansion. A cloth had been laid out on the floor, and atop it were ten people, old and young, men and women alike. None of them moved at all; they looked as if they were dead. In fact, although none had any external injuries, they could be said to be corpses.

“Another one is being brought here,” said the butler. Yukinari and the others nodded. The butler backed out of the room; in his place, some young men from the community watch carried in a new body. This one was a middle-aged man. The same one who had reported one of the murders to Yukinari, right here at the mansion.

In fact, all of those laid out in front of them were familiars. On the far end lay Ulrike. At first they had propped her up on the sofa, but as one fallen familiar after another arrived, they spread out a cloth so that everyone could be set on the floor.

“This man’s dead, too!” one of the men from the community watch announced as they carried in the new familiar.

“I know... Please, calm down,” Fiona said, a strained expression on her face. “He was already dead. Er, what I mean is, he may not be permanently gone, so try to calm down. Leave everything to us.”

“Y— Yeah, sure...” The young men didn’t fully understand what she was talking about, but with the words coming directly from the deputy mayor, and with Yukinari nodding along beside her, they decided to defer to her judgment. They left the mansion, still looking rather disturbed.

When they had gone, Fiona turned to the erdgod, now looking anxious herself. “Yukinari...”

“I know. I already had Dasa look into it. She says they’re not necessarily completely dead. You could say they’re... only mostly dead. Their heartbeats and breathing are extremely slow, though.”

He could already tell what was going on: all of Yggdra’s familiars in Friedland were being put out of commission.

Strange though these people may have looked, they were the familiars of the erdgod of Rostruch, a town Friedland was engaged in trade with. The townspeople weren’t quite sure how to handle the bodies, so Fiona announced that she would collect them all at her mansion.

According to those who brought the bodies in, the familiars all collapsed at about the same time Ulrike had; in other words, the previous night. Yukinari

and the others hadn't slept a wink since then, wanting to keep an eye on what was happening.

It turned out Dasa's pronouncement of "She's dead" on her initial examination of Ulrike had been mistaken. Yes, her breathing and pulse had been impossible to detect at the time Dasa had examined her, but as Yukinari had just said, they had simply gotten very, very slow. The only thing remotely similar in Yukinari's experience was hibernation, or perhaps "playing dead."

The familiars' body temperatures had fallen until they were close to the ambient. Although these familiars had been joined with a plant, their basic human anatomy hadn't changed. They still relied on their hearts to pump blood, still needed a skeleton to support their bodies, and muscles to move. And of course, they still produced body heat, if somewhat less than the average human.

The only difference seemed to be that Yggdra was somehow involved in their brains and nervous systems; the familiars in general had no sense of individuality. Everything their bodies did was controlled by, or at least connected to, Yggdra.

The familiars had begun as living sacrifices offered to Yggdra—or rather, they were the elderly and the ill too weak to ever recover. Rostruch's medicine could not save them, so they were given to the erdgod instead. All this meant that the familiars had already died once.

Yggdra would plant a seed in the dead person, plant cells to support the body and eliminate whatever had killed it. The nervous and circulatory systems began working again, and a familiar was born. So when Fiona said that these familiars were already dead, she was right. They could only move because Yggdra was controlling them.

Silently, Berta put a blanket over the newly arrived familiar. It didn't mean much. They no longer felt things like cold. As strange as it sounded, they were in a "vegetative state" in the most literal sense.

"Um, Lord Yukinari..."

"Aren't you tired, Berta? And you too, Dasa. You should go rest for a while."

Despite Yukinari's suggestion, both girls shook their heads.

"If you can't rest, Lord Yukinari, then neither will I."

"I'll go to sleep when you do, Yuki."

This was actually the third time they'd had this conversation.

"All right. But this could turn into a real endurance test. If you reach your limits, you should rest. No, wait—rest. That's a command."

"Okay," Dasa said, nodding. "But you mustn't overwork yourself, either, Yuki. That's a... command, too."

"Right," Yukinari said after a long moment, and smiled.

He had actually been planning to take a break before much longer. According to what Ulrike had told him, at present there were twelve familiars in Friedland besides her. By his count, all of them were now lying in this room. There was no way around it: all of Yggdra's familiars were down for the count.

"What in the world is going on...?" Fiona said, looking down at the bodies.

"Every familiar in town seems to have stopped moving at the exact same time, so it's hard to believe something happened to each of them individually. Especially not Ulrike. I was watching her when she collapsed."

"Yes, that's what you said." Fiona nodded.

"I guess the most straightforward possibility is that something happened to Yggdra."

"To Rostruch's erdgod?"

"Yeah. It would be almost impossible to do something to a whole bunch of familiars simultaneously. Unless you were to think about how they aren't really a bunch of individuals, but are all linked to one single entity..."

"*Familiars*," Fiona muttered, seeming to reconsider the meaning of the word.

"It's easy to forget when you're focusing on just one of them, like Ulrike, but they're basically the hands and feet of the plant erdgod Yggdra. To put it even more simply, they're a part of Yggdra."

"A part of her..."

“They’re connected by threads of spiritual power, even though you can’t see it.”

“Yes, I remember you mentioning that before, but...”

But really, she found it hard to understand. People in this world had no concept of radio waves or infrared communication, so it was difficult to explain the concept of a wireless network. It might have been possible to demonstrate by showing how tuning forks resonate with each other, but Yukinari didn’t have the time at the moment.

“The point is, even if you can’t see how they’re connected, the familiars are Yggdra’s terminals. Her leaves, to use a plant term. It would be hard to cut off a whole bunch of leaves at once, but if you struck at the root of the tree, you could get rid of all the leaves.”

“That makes sense...” Fiona still looked a little bit uncertain, but it seemed like she was beginning to grasp the point.

But now Dasa voiced a new doubt. “Someone defeated... that?”

Of all those in the room, only Dasa and Yukinari had actually gone to Rostruch and met Yggdra’s “main body.” They had even fought her. They knew from experience how powerful the erdgod was. Hence they found it difficult to believe that someone had killed her.

The tree was something altogether more fearsome than even her familiars. Xenobeasts and demigods would come to attack her, only to find themselves deliberately pulled toward her roots, where they were strangled to death and then consumed for their nutrients and spiritual power.

“Even you couldn’t defeat her, Yuki.”

“That’s true,” he said. When Yukinari had done battle with Ulrike, he hadn’t been able to win. He had only been able to bring her to the negotiating table when he had threatened to blow up Yggdra’s entire mountainside.

“Is she really that powerful?” Fiona asked.

“Yeah,” Yukinari said. “But she’s still a living thing.” And anything that lived could be killed. With enough people—a large assembly of missionary knights,

for example—it might be possible to surround Yggdra and simply set fire to the area. Yggdra was huge, but immobile; she was a tree, after all. Attack relentlessly enough, and it might be possible to prevail against her.

“And if so,” Fiona said, “is it really possible that Yggdra being destroyed and the things that are happening in Friedland are unconnected...?”

If he could trust what Angela had said, the missionaries were apparently not involved in what was going on in Yukinari’s town. The frequency of the incidents and the way they were carried out didn’t point to a group action, either. If anything, it seemed like the doing of a rogue individual...

In contrast, if Yggdra had been defeated, and if that was in any way related to the events in Friedland—well, the only group with the power to do it would have to be the True Church of Harris. Yukinari sincerely doubted that any xenobeasts or demigods had joined forces.

So: were the two things related or not? It was impossible to decide with the information they had.

“Yuki,” Dasa said, apparently having thought of something. “Could something have been... severed?”

“What do you mean?”

“I remem...ber a tool my sister used for alchemy,” Dasa said, nodding gently. She didn’t sound very certain, but she went on, “It was used to fill several... vials at once. There was a lid over each... vial, but you could also... block the flow before the device split off... toward the different vials.”

“I see... Yeah. That makes sense.” Yukinari smiled grimly to realize that he hadn’t considered the possibility himself. If a router breaks, a wireless network will cease to function. Yggdra’s main body was connected to Ulrike and her other familiars in Friedland via a chain of familiars at set intervals between here and Rostruch. If those familiars were to be killed, or blocked from communicating with each other in some way, it would cut the lines of communication between Yggdra and Ulrike.

“So what does that mean, then...?” Fiona asked. Only Yukinari and Dasa had understood. Berta and even the deputy mayor continued to look mystified.

“To put it simply,” Yukinari said, turning toward Ulrike and the other sleeping familiars, “Yggdra may still be all right. But the connection between her and her familiars has been cut off. If we could get Ulrike and the others back to Rostruch, the connection could probably be reestablished.”

“I see,” Fiona said. “That doesn’t sound easy, though.”

She was right. They already needed more people than they had to help guard against a faceless killer. Arlen and his friends, who normally escorted the trade caravans to Rostruch, were taking shifts to patrol Friedland. They simply couldn’t spare anyone to take the familiars back to their hometown.

If they aren’t really dead, Yukinari thought, *then maybe we could just leave them like this for the time being...?*

Nothing suggested that it was urgent that Ulrike and the others be returned to Rostruch. Would it do them any harm to remain like this? And if it was Friedland’s killer who had cut Yggdra off from her familiars, what was the motivation? For that matter, why did the person go on killing?

Yukinari was silent. The smiling face of his sister flashed through his mind.

He couldn’t worry Dasa and the others again. He pushed the pain aside, hiding it in his heart, and breathed a soft sigh.

Chapter Three: The Girl Who Crossed the Darkness

Rumors of a disembodied killer, although unsubstantiated, continued to spread throughout Friedland. Neither Fiona nor the community watch had publicly acknowledged the string of murders, but it was now regarded by most residents as an established fact. Yukinari continued to remain in Friedland, not returning to his sanctuary, while the community watch along with Arlen and his knights beefed up their patrols. For better or for worse, all of this was plainly visible to the townspeople, and it had allowed them to keep their heads—but only just.

Everyone was tormented by fear. The people of Friedland didn't really believe in invisible monsters—and the monsters they could see, such as xenobeasts and demigods, weren't given to using swords. The only ones who used weapons in this world were humans. That meant this was the work of someone hiding somewhere in town. That was clear enough to everyone.

But then who was the criminal? Suspicion and mistrust had begun to spread among the populace. They were reaching their limits. It would only take a small number of further victims, perhaps two or three, before they could take no more and their fear gave way to violence.

Yukinari wanted to do something as quickly as possible.

It's... It's about me...

On top of that, he was probably the only one to have grasped the import of the killer's clues. The community watch recognized that the same "symbols" or "characters" were being left at each of the crime scenes, but of course they didn't know what they meant. Yukinari alone understood.

And yet, he could tell no one. He couldn't reveal that the murderer might be his own sister, Amano Hatsune.

It seemed very likely, but he was loath to admit it. If he carelessly let something slip about his sister, he worried that everyone else, groping for an

answer, would jump on the possibility, assuming his sister was the criminal without giving it due consideration.

But then, everyone's at their breaking point.

Even Yukinari, the guardian deity of Friedland, found himself cornered. With his back against the wall, he was left with no choice but to consider the possibilities.

Let's say, hypothetically, that Hatsune really is the killer. If she came to this world just like I did...

It implied that she might have been brought here the same way Yukinari had. In other words, as an angel.

In order to win people to the faith, the True Church of Harris had created homunculi that they called angels to perform miracles. These were very similar to humans, but rather than being born from the loving union of a man and a woman, they were artificial life forms, conceived in cold glass test tubes.

Angels had the power of physical reconstitution. They couldn't create something from nothing, but they could produce bread from stones, or wine from water. They could even produce something as complex as a gun, if they understood how the object was constructed.

If there was something that could sever the spiritual link between Yggdra and her familiars like Ulrike, someone with such a power could create it, and put it between Friedland and Rostruch.

We call it spiritual power, but it feels an awful lot like the electricity of my former world.

So what if spiritual power was transmitted in pulses or waves the way electricity was? If you were to take some material that was a good conductor of spiritual energy and place it in the path of those pulses, maybe it would naturally distort or absorb the unstable spiritual energy. And Yukinari knew of one material that was an excellent conductor of spiritual energy.

Holy oil.

Holy oil looked like blood; it was what made the statues of the guardian saint

move, and it was what flowed through Yukinari's own body. It was the fuel that powered everything the Church did.

The True Church of Harris wants to expand its influence in the remote regions—out here on the frontier. The fact that they had begun sending units of missionary knights to the area was proof enough of that. They were investing in technology that would allow them to forcibly convert the people in these areas. Of course, the Church had several alchemists besides Jirina, and they were worked like slaves, forced to develop new technologies. It wouldn't have surprised Yukinari to learn that they had developed some device that could interrupt the connection between an erdgod and the land.

If he knew what such a device was and how it was made, Yukinari would have been able to make one, too.

I suppose something similar could be said of becoming disembodied. But invisibility seemed unlikely from a number of angles. So the criminal wasn't invisible. Most likely, they could be seen. But if people didn't recognize them as the culprit, then it would be almost the same as being invisible.

Sort of like... the way I change my entire body when I become the Bluesteel Blasphemer.

This was a particular transformation Yukinari performed in order to take full advantage of his powers of physical reconstitution. When he used his powers to their utmost, it was possible for him to neglect to maintain of his own body, so he first surrounded himself in armor like a carapace, much like an insect, in order to prevent himself from coming apart.

To change his face, or the length of an arm or leg, was not difficult for him. The only concern was that he might get confused—for example, wearing taller shoes than he was used to, he would find his vision elevated a little, and that small change could make it difficult for him to walk. Or if he thoughtlessly changed his face, his smile might appear fake. Unnatural.

Yet if he didn't need to maintain the appearance for very long, it might be enough to fool someone. To take them by surprise. It was the ultimate quick-change act.

So it's not a killer without a face...

The people of Friedland were afraid of a murderer who couldn't be seen. But they had seen the killer. By wearing familiar faces, the criminal was able to walk unmolested through town. Yukinari was starting to connect the dots.

He considered hiding his suspicions about his sister, telling the townspeople only of the possibility that an angel was involved. But that was no good, either. That would only deepen the spirit of suspicion. And the first person they would suspect was likely to be Yukinari himself. Plus—

I have to wonder... Is Hatsune still... Hatsune?

Angels required a soul in order to "activate" them. However much a homunculus might look like a human being, that wasn't enough for it to function like one, or so Jirina had explained to him. Hence a ritual was performed to capture a soul from another world that had been separated from its body—in other words, the spirit of a dead person. The soul was channeled into a vessel in this world; i.e., a homunculus, and then sealed inside to give it life.

But this was only the beginning. As tools of the Church, it was better that the angels have no sense of self. Free will would only get in the way. So once it was confirmed that a homunculus was working properly, the information inside its brain was wiped clean. Then, it was given the ability to carry out only the most basic orders, so it could be controlled like a puppet.

When Jirina had brought Yukinari to this world, however, she hadn't done that. Yukinari had been born here with his original personality and memories completely intact. It was probably a first in the history of the Church's creation of the angels, and it was certainly the worst thing that could have happened for them.

Yukinari didn't know why Jirina had done what she did. Perhaps she had hoped to use him as a weapon to help her and Dasa escape captivity. Whatever the case, Jirina was considered a rebel against the Church and was killed. It spoke to how serious a crime the Church leaders considered it to create an angel with self-awareness.

Suppose, then, that the Church decided to create a new angel. And suppose the soul they captured to activate it was that of Amano Hatsune. What would

they do then?

Normally, they would wipe the angel's memories, get rid of its personality, and turn it into a puppet. But if they had done that to Hatsune, she would never have been able to leave Yukinari's name at the crime scenes. Or perhaps they had left her only the knowledge of his name and gotten rid of everything else?

No. They wouldn't do that. The Church alchemists didn't know that people in Yukinari and Hatsune's world used kanji. They had no way of knowing, so it wouldn't occur to them to leave only part of her knowledge like that.

Chances were, Hatsune still had her memories of their previous world. She was an exception to the angelic rule, just like Yukinari. That made the most sense.

But in that case, what was her objective? It was fairly obvious that the Church wanted Yukinari dead. To that end, they'd produced another angel with the same qualities as him. It was logical. The average mindless angel stood no chance against Yukinari. If one were put into battle against him, it would have to receive its orders, absorb them, and then act, in that order. It would be incapable of acting on its own, and that would make it fatally slower than Yukinari. In a straight fight, Yukinari could hardly fail to defeat it.

Now, if the angel were to ambush him, he might not have the same advantage—but this was no ambush. Someone was deliberately killing innocent people and leaving kanji characters at the scenes of the crimes as if begging Yukinari to notice them. That was not the way to set up a surprise attack.

Why, then? Assuming Hatsune had been allowed self-awareness by the Church, why was she acting this way?

She was always so kind...

Amano Hatsune had indeed always been kind. And Yukinari—Yukinari had loved her. And so...

"...Yukinari."

A voice interrupted his thoughts. He looked around, blinking. Yukinari and his usual friends had come to the plaza in the center of town. Streets radiated away from the circular area. The plaza was surrounded by relatively tall buildings, so

it almost gave the sense of being at the bottom of a hole. Admittedly, a very wide and shallow one.

“Is this about right?” Fiona was pointing to a sign set up in the very center of the public plaza. It was just a board stuck to a post. It had been put up by the community watch at Fiona’s behest, but it was Yukinari who had prepared the sign itself.

“Yeah, that’s perfect.”

The location at the very center of the plaza meant this sign was in the most conspicuous place in town. It didn’t have much written on it. Just four characters:

Amano Hatsune.

Nothing more. It wasn’t even a full sentence.

“What kind of charm is this?” asked Hans, who was accompanying them. “I’ve seen similar—letters? Or patterns?—at the crime scenes we’ve investigated.”

“*Are* they letters?” Fiona asked.

Yukinari was silent for a moment, trying to decide how to explain this.

“Dasa?” Fiona turned to the young woman.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Yuki won’t tell... me.” She sounded a little annoyed.

“Sorry,” Yukinari said, mussing her hair. She blinked and looked up at him, but he said, “I just... can’t say anything yet. I’m sorry about that.”

“...Mn.” Dasa blushed a little.

“If you say so, who am I to contradict you?” Fiona sighed.

He was telling the truth: he couldn’t say it. Until he was absolutely sure it was his sister, he didn’t want to speak his awful suspicions aloud. It was almost as if saying it would make it true.

Regardless, his friends didn’t press the matter. In fact, they were helping him. For that, Yukinari was deeply grateful.

●

It was evening. Berta was in the main plaza, everything around her bathed in crimson light.

Actually, she wasn't exactly in the main plaza. She was just nearby, in the belltower of a building that was tall by Friedland's standards. She was, however, looking directly at the main plaza from her perch. It was the focus of all her attention.

Berta. Yukinari. And Dasa. These three were up on the roof. Yukinari held Durandall and Dasa had Red Chili, as always. In addition, Dasa and Berta each had a sniper weapon—Derrringer.

Berta was watching the plaza through the weapon's scope. Derrringer had a long barrel. She had asked Yukinari once why it was so long, but his explanation didn't make complete sense to her—whatever the case, it wasn't something you would normally just walk around with. Berta actually had a special Derrringer that Yukinari had given her for her use, but this was a different gun, one of the weapons Yukinari had lent to Fiona and the community watch. Berta and Dasa both had Derrringers back at the sanctuary, but Yukinari wasn't willing to spare the time to go get them.

Berta didn't understand what it was that had him so worried, but she trusted him from the bottom of her heart. Anything he wanted her to do, she would do it. Anything he asked her to do would not be mistaken. She wasn't especially bright, so she would just do as he asked—that was what she had decided.

"If anyone down there has a strange response, shoot them," Yukinari said.

Berta didn't have any trouble with the actual shooting. She was quite used to Derrringer. It was highly accurate, and the distance between the belltower and the plaza wasn't that great. Trying to hit one small, specific spot amid the hustle and bustle would be a very difficult shot—but just to land a round anywhere on a target the size of a human wouldn't be so hard. She might even be able to deliberately miss any vital points, which soothed her resistance to killing things.

But there was still a problem.

"A strange response, my lord...?" She didn't understand what he meant by that. "I'm sorry, but... what kind of response would be a... a strange one?" She thought it would be quite difficult to decide what was strange and what wasn't.

For example, right at that moment, she could see two friends at one edge of the plaza, leaning toward each other and laughing about something. It made them stand out from the crowd; it was a little unusual. But they weren't causing any trouble, and most people just passed them by. Surely he didn't mean for her to shoot those two?

Berta hated how poor her judgment was. But...

"Um... hmm." Yukinari frowned for a moment, perhaps realizing that his instructions had lacked a certain specificity. Finally he said, "Let me make the call." He looked through his binoculars again. "Sorry, I know it doesn't make a lot of sense."

"No, it's all right..." Berta shook her head. "I'll just do what you say, Lord Yukinari." She didn't understand why he had ordered her to do this, but clearly, something was worrying him. Not that he had deigned to tell her what it was. That irked her. But still...

"Yuki..." Dasa spoke up suddenly. "He's unsure."

"What...?"

Dasa was doing an inspection of her own sniper rifle. It was basically the same gun as the one back at the sanctuary, but she was making sure that everything was in good condition.

"Do you know what's going on, Lady Dasa?" Berta felt a short-lived flash of something she thought was jealousy. Perhaps there was something Yukinari had told Dasa, but no one else. She knew the two of them had been together for a long time before they arrived in Friedland, so perhaps Yukinari could say things to Dasa that he couldn't say to anyone else.

Berta noticed her own envy, her own jealousy, and realized how shallow she was; it sent her into a spiral of self-recrimination.

But it was Yukinari himself who asked, "What are you talking about?"

Perhaps that meant this wasn't some secret between the two of them.

Dasa methodically laid out her reasoning. "You're staking out that... signboard, Yuki. And you've written... letters on it. Yet no one but... you... can

read them. I think the letters are from... your home. And if you're putting up a... sign with words no one else can read, it means there's someone... else who can. Someone besides you. The words are like the ones at the crime scenes. And you're watching them with a... gun, which means you expect to fight whoever... can read them."

"Is it really someone from your... your home, Lord Yukinari?"

"I don't know the details," Dasa went on. "But I can guess that it's someone who is... like you, Yuki."

Yukinari was silent.

"In other words, someone else from the same place as you, whose soul... was used by the Church to make an... angel."

Still he said nothing. He and Berta were both dumbfounded. Partly they were just surprised to hear the normally taciturn Dasa expound such a lengthy series of deductions—but even Berta could tell from the look on Yukinari's face that Dasa's guess was basically correct.

So we're looking for someone from Lord Yukinari's hometown...?

Berta didn't know where Yukinari came from. But if someone he once knew had become an agent of the Church, that would certainly be very painful. Berta didn't quite know what it would actually feel like, but she could understand that it wouldn't be pleasant. She knew, for example, that if one of the other girls from her orphanage were to become her enemy, it would make her very sad.

"You're right, more or less. Nice detective work," Yukinari said.

Dasa nodded, a look of triumph passing briefly over her face. "It's because we've been... together for so lo...ng, Yuki." She almost seemed to be trying to make the point to Berta. Things that Berta couldn't figure out, Dasa could. But considering the difference in the amount of knowledge each had, this was only natural.

Still, Berta had decided not long ago to stop acting as though this gap were something to resign herself to. It was something she had learned from the female mercenary, Veronika: not to give up, not to tell herself she could never win against Dasa. Even if she still sometimes felt hesitation.

Whatever the case, Yukinari said, “Anyway... To put it briefly, if the killer is one of the Church’s angels, I expect them to have some reaction to those words. People might be surprised at the sign, or laugh, or just look kind of suspicious about it. But if they do anything else, you can pull the trigger.

“We have to keep a constant watch on that sign,” he went on. “Including me, we have three snipers, so we’ll pull guard duty in three shifts. We leave two of the rifles here—one to use and one for backup, in case we have any problems with the first one.”

“Okay,” Berta nodded. Then she looked at Dasa. “Lady Dasa, you can feel free to rest for now!”

“Huh? Oh... All right.” Dasa blinked, uncharacteristically surprised, then nodded. “But—”

“Don’t worry,” Berta said. “I’ve got things covered here.” This seemed to be enough to cow Dasa into silence.

“First shift’s all yours, then,” Yukinari said.

“Yes, sir,” Berta answered. “You can count on me!”

●

In the Great Cathedral of the True Church of Harris. This was the most holy place for Harris believers. It was a temple so large it rivaled the royal castle itself for sheer size, and its main hall had room for tens of thousands of worshippers. The upkeep of the Cathedral naturally required a great many hands, and there were normally dozens of Church initiates to be found in the place at any time of the day or night. It seemed likely that the Cathedral had not been completely empty even once since it was built.

Still, it was quieter at night than it was during the day. Several knights patrolled the building to help keep it secure, but even they were careful to step as quietly as they could so as not to disturb the tranquility of this holy space.

Somewhere deep in the Cathedral, in a place few entered—indeed, that few even knew existed—a man and a woman were speaking together.

“And what progress has been made?” the man asked. He was just on the cusp

of old age. His face was thin, and the clean white of his robes gave an impression of meticulousness. The embroidery on the mantle draped over his robes indicated his station as Dominus Doctrinae of the True Church of Harris.

This was Justin Chambers, the highest authority in the True Church of Harris. It wouldn't have been too much to say that he embodied the Church.

The woman across from him was the exact opposite. The opposite sex, obviously, but she was also young—only in her mid-twenties—and she somehow exuded an air of eroticism. Her eyes, her gestures, her voice, her tone: all of it would make any man, regardless of his usual "type," want to dominate her. And perhaps she was intentionally inviting as much.

A glance was more than enough to reveal that she was no priestess of the Church. She was different from the other adherents of the faith. Her outfit was mostly black, and the neckline revealed her generous bosom. She wore long white gloves that came up to her elbows, the palms of which were inscribed with circles full of complicated symbols.

The circles were the proof that she was an alchemist. Alchemists were widely reviled by the True Church of Harris as heretics. They were not allowed to set foot in the Great Cathedral, and they were certainly not allowed a face-to-face audience with the Dominus Doctrinae. At least not officially.

The woman's name was Yaroslava Bernak, and she was very close to Justin—in fact, she was (unofficially, of course) his personal alchemist.

The room where the two stood was something else that shouldn't have existed within the Great Cathedral. It was full of devices that looked very alchemical, and pipes crawled across the walls as if the building itself had veins.

Understandably, the vast majority of believers knew nothing of this room. Nor did they know that most of the "miracles" perpetrated by the True Church of Harris were the result of tools and even living things produced by alchemists the Church had kept captive through the generations. And they most certainly didn't know that alchemists had then been publicly declared heretics by the Church so that the true faith could have a monopoly on such miracles.

"Progress? What do you mean?" Yaroslava looked genuinely puzzled.

“I mean, have there been no further reports since then?” Justin’s voice was calm. It was a voice the faithful were accustomed to hearing each day, expounding upon Church teachings. Now there was just a touch of annoyance in it. Only the slightest hint, such that even if someone else had been present, they might not have noticed it. Only Yaroslava detected it. Both of them knew perfectly well why he was upset.

It had to do with the “Blue Angel.”

The thirteenth angel, unlike his predecessors, had been born with his personality and memories intact. To their shock, he had gone on a rampage through the capital, devastating the area, and then vanished. Among his victims had been the previous Dominus, as well as the captain of the Missionary Order and many missionary knights. Yet despite all the wounded and dead, they hadn’t succeeded in even capturing him, let alone killing him.

It was a tremendous scandal for the Church. They had been able to hide it from the rank and file believers, but such a lopsided mauling would surely damage the Church’s authority. They weren’t able to send out large search parties, but behind the scenes the Church continued to look for the Blue Angel. Not long ago, they had found him.

He was in a small frontier city called Friedland. Not only that, but he had effectively destroyed two entire units of a Missionary Order civilizing expedition that had moved against him. If it was at all possible, the Church wanted this angel dead.

To merely bring more force to bear against him, however, would be foolish. The very existence of this creature was a black mark upon the Church, and committing four or five missionary units to a single small town would only fan the rumors of the angel’s existence.

What was needed here was not simply overwhelming power. Instead, a surgical strike was called for, an elite assassin—working alone, if possible. That was what had been in Justin’s mind when he had ordered Yaroslava to create just such an assassin. Specifically, he wanted another being with the same capabilities as the Blue Angel.

And so a fourteenth angel was made, the first born by Yaroslava’s hand. But

she had had to move quickly, forcing her to work according to the research notes left by the Church's most recent alchemist, Jirina Urban.

Thus the fourteenth angel was sent off to kill. But she had certain instabilities—she seemed almost lost—and she showed no sign of sending reports back to Justin and Yaroslava. Horses and carriages had been readied for her, so she should have been in the area of Friedland for quite some time now, but she had sent no word.

This new angel retained her personality so that she would be able to go toe-to-toe with her target, but it also made her difficult to handle. She generally did as Justin and Yaroslava asked, but it was sometimes impossible to tell what she was thinking.

It was the retention of its personality that had caused the thirteenth angel to go berserk, so it was only natural that Justin be somewhat concerned the fourteenth angel might do the same. If she were, say, to join forces with the Blue Angel in Friedland, the result would be catastrophic.

All the more reason Justin had told Church operatives in the area to keep an eye on her. But...

"I ordered the Missionary Order units operating near Friedland to see what she was up to, but after the recent defeat they have their hands full with their own patrols, nor can they spare many people from Aldreil."

And that was why he was here, inquiring whether Yaroslava had heard anything from her new creation.

"No, milord, nothing."

Justin looked a bit sullen and sighed. "And does this not worry you?"

"Worry me? Why should it?" Yaroslava almost seemed to be teasing him. "What is it you think I have to worry about? I don't believe anything has happened to warrant concern."

Justin was silent for a moment. Yaroslava seemed awfully sure of herself. What gave her the confidence to be so calm?

Finally Justin said, "We spoke of assassination, but he and she have equal

capabilities as angels. If so, there's no guarantee that she will be victorious. Indeed, I know full well that there is no guaranteed triumph on the battlefield. So where does this nonchalance of yours come from?"

According to the missionary unit that had done battle in Friedland, the villagers had some kind of mysterious and terrible weapon that could pierce even metal shields. Anyone facing the Blue Angel, who now stood in the place of Friedland's erdgod, might well find themselves faced by Friedlanders wielding such weapons as well—so perhaps it was not entirely true to say the two were evenly matched.

"Comparative strength in battle has little to do with ambush and assassination. Rather, they were created as tactics to overcome a superior military force. The fourteenth angel was sent to deal personally with the Blue Angel, and as far as that goes, there will be no problem."

"I suppose..." It was true enough.

"What's more, it would be hard to believe the people of some frontier burg have developed such a weapon themselves. Most likely, it was brought into this world by the angel's powers. They are, after all, the powers of creation, to be frank." Yaroslava was practically singing the words. "Assuming there's no major difference in their actual abilities, it simply comes down to which of them knows about more weapons and can use them more effectively."

Justin didn't speak. Theoretically, at least, the two angels should have been capable of producing the same weapons. Perhaps, by using a soul from the same world as the Blue Angel, their new creation would know of the same weapons.

Yaroslava went on. "I also made sure her memories included every anti-erdgod tactic in the Church's arsenal, including the most cutting-edge weapons and techniques. There may be only one of her, and she may have to do everything herself, but she has as many weapons at her disposal as several contingents of missionary knights, joined to the freedom of mobility one can only have when acting alone. It makes a targeted assassination so much easier. I really think her chances are quite good."

Justin still said nothing. Again, her logic made sense.

“But if so,” he finally said, “if one was so good, shouldn’t we have made two and sent them both?” He conjectured that this would have made them twice as likely to kill the Bluesteel Blasphemer. They couldn’t have sent five or ten angels; it would have been too conspicuous. But one more wouldn’t have hurt, surely?

“Well...” For the first time, Yaroslava looked troubled. “She refused.”

“Refused?”

“She looked as if she might decide to go on a rampage then and there if I insisted on creating an additional angel, so I yielded to her.”

After a long moment, Justin murmured, “A troublesome child indeed.” Self-awareness meant there were no promises that she would obey their orders absolutely. But there was something more on his mind. “If she’s so close to open rebellion, what’s to stop her from turning on us?”

That. That was the real problem. The chances might have been slim, but what if the fourteenth angel arrived at her destination and then decided to betray them, to join forces with the Blue Angel? Then they would be in twice as much danger as they already were, or perhaps more.

“Rebellion...?” Yaroslava gave a portentous smile and ran her pointer finger along her cheek. She almost seemed to be enjoying this, to be happy. She seemed to have something up her sleeve, a secret, and she was savoring the decision of whether to unveil it here and now.

“Yaroslava.” Justin narrowed his eyes and glared at the alchemist.

“Don’t worry, Your Holiness. Such concerns are utterly... utterly without merit.”

“I suppose you have some proof of that.”

“She is a weapon made to kill the Blue Angel. That is her only purpose.” Yaroslava licked her lips. The gesture reminded Justin of a snake; her smile was like that of a viper. “I’m an alchemist. Did you think I would slavishly follow Urban’s research to create my own angel? I put something special inside her, even before I inserted the soul to activate her.”

“And what would that be?”

“Poison.” Now Yaroslava was smiling openly.

“Poison... Slow-acting, I presume.”

“But of course.”

It would be meaningless if the fourteenth angel were to die before she completed her mission. So the poison would be slow enough to allow her to do her work, but then end her life before she could rebel against the Church.

“At most, I would say she has six months,” Yaroslava said. “At that time, the fourteenth angel will be destroyed, rendered back into her constituent parts. It’s all part of my plan. As I said, Your Holiness, you have no need to worry.”

Then she gave that smile again, like a snake about to strike.

It had been five days since they had started staking out the sign in the plaza. Yukinari and the others continued their observation day and night, but they didn’t see anyone who looked like an assassin. Sometimes townspeople would stop and stare curiously at the board, but they showed no more interest than that. No one so far had reacted strangely.

There hadn’t been any guarantees with this plan. But at the moment, they had no other options, and all they could do was continue their overwatch.

That, at least, was what Yukinari thought. But it had been four days already, and now the fifth was drawing to a close. The languid yellow light stretched out as if to mock their fruitless efforts, the shadow of the sign growing longer and longer in the plaza.

But then...

“Yukinari!”

Yukinari looked up, thinking it was time to switch shifts. But the voice was Arlen, shouting as he came up the stairs.

“Hey, quiet,” Yukinari said. “I thought I asked everyone to steer clear of this place.” If the killer knew they were being watched, all this would be for nothing.

But Arlen shot back, “Quiet, yourself! I’m not one of your lackeys! You are an

utterly hopeless man! I might at least expect a little thanks for coming to call you."

"Call me?" Yukinari frowned and exchanged glances with Dasa and Berta.

"Yes! They've found another victim!"

"Damn! Another one...?"

Had the killer not noticed Yukinari's sign? Or had he been wrong in his supposition that the words "Amano Hatsune" would have some effect? Could it be that the criminal was not Yukinari's older sister after all? Or...

"Just come with me already," Arlen said in annoyance. "Fiona is asking for you! Sheesh. Spending all day staring at a sign at a time like this... I don't know what the lot of you are thinking. We need every hand available to watch the area!"

"Well, I—"

It was true, Yukinari hadn't explained much about this sign to Fiona, and certainly not to Arlen. It was hard to blame the young man for being upset. But still...

"Come *on*!"

Still, they couldn't leave the watch unattended. What if the killer came through the plaza while Yukinari and the others were away? What if they showed some reaction to the sign? Even if the watcher wasn't able to snipe the person, they might at least get a sense of who they were.

"Dasa, you come with me," Yukinari said. "Berta—I'm sorry, but I need you to stay here. I'll come back and switch with you as soon as I can."

"I understand."

"I know you might not be sure who you should shoot, but if you see anyone acting strangely, at least take note of what they look like and where they go."

"Yes, sir. I can do that."

With that, Yukinari and Dasa rushed down the belltower stairs after Arlen. Yukinari, however, stopped and looked back at Berta.

“Don’t do anything crazy!” he called to her.

“No, sir!” she replied. And then Yukinari was off again.

●

After Yukinari and the others left, silence returned to the tower. Berta watched the plaza, Derrringer at the ready. She had only looked away for a second, but now she scanned the area to see if anything had changed. Derrringer’s scope afforded an exceedingly narrow field of view, so until she was actually ready to shoot, Berta took her eye away from it and simply looked down at the plaza.

There was no wind. The sky was patchy with clouds. Ideal conditions for both observation and sniping. If it had been too sunny, the light might have reflected off white walls or water in barrels, making it hard to see. And if the eyes became too accustomed to bright light, it became harder to see into the shadows or notice when they were moving.

Berta made no sound. As far as she could tell, everything in town was still the same. Aside from a few human figures, nothing moved in the plaza.

Berta examined the faces of those in the area one by one, using the scope to get a close look at them. They all seemed totally normal, yet a close look revealed a certain stiffness, a darkness in each expression. They were all scared, afraid of the invisible killer.

Nobody knew who the murderer was, nor where they might be. That made it impossible to relax. But neither was this an excuse to stop going about their daily lives. Anxiety must have been squeezing at the people’s hearts—Berta knew, because she felt it, too. So long as she was with Yukinari, she didn’t worry that she might become a victim, but the thought that someone else might, perhaps someone close to her, left her with a constant tension. This was a different kind of anxiety from what she had felt when the Missionary Order had attacked. It was shapeless, hard to grasp.

She looked back at the sign. Or rather, at the area around the sign. For the first day or two, people had been quite interested in the unusual board, some stopping to stare at it, but now no one paid it any mind. Everyone knew that Yukinari himself had put it up, and they probably thought it was some sort of

charm or invocation on the part of their god. Now they all passed by without a hint of interest, or at least without anything that would qualify as a “strange reaction.”

But what is *a strange reaction?* Berta wondered. *Maybe looking very surprised and freezing in place in front of the sign...?*

This part of the assignment still didn’t make much sense to her. Maybe Yukinari himself wasn’t sure enough to say for certain what they were looking for. Essentially, they wanted someone who reacted differently from the majority of Friedlanders—but responses to the sign were so diverse that it was hard to say what such a reaction would be. It might be easier to tell now that most people had lost interest in the sign.

Maybe if they get angry and smash the sign, or look terrified and run away. Lady Dasa said this person was an angel, but what did she mean...?

Yukinari was the only angel Berta knew personally. She tried to picture what another angel might look like based on her knowledge of him, but she simply couldn’t imagine Yukinari looking terrified and running away. After all, when suddenly confronted with an erdgod, he hadn’t panicked but had simply killed it.

At length...

“...Ah...”

Berta suddenly noticed a lone young woman standing in front of the sign. She could only see the person’s back, but she had black hair and looked like she was probably a few years younger than Berta—in other words, still just a girl. It wasn’t her size, but her long black hair and her clothing that made it clear she was female.

She’s looking at it...

Just childish curiosity? The girl’s head was tilted in bemusement. Given how little interest anyone else showed in the sign, this might qualify as a strange reaction.

Maybe she’s just confused by the letters?

Berta had been told that the sign bore letters used in the world Yukinari had once been in. It wouldn't be anything anyone from Friedland could read. Fiona was exceptionally well-educated by Friedland's standards, able to read and write, and even she didn't know what the sign said. The average adult had no hope of understanding it, and once they realized that, they quickly lost interest.

But children might not react in quite the same way. They might think it was pictures, not letters, on the sign. Berta thought of her little sisters at the orphanage, whose childlike imaginations allowed them to see faces or shapes in rocks and trees. It wouldn't be strange if a child treated these letters the same way.

Even as these thoughts went through her mind, Berta put her eye to the scope with the intention of taking close note of the girl's behavior.

That was when it happened.

The girl began to shake. Was she afraid? No, that wasn't it. Her body bent slightly, and both her hands came up in front of her face. Was she putting her hands to her mouth? Laughter—was that what this was? She was laughing out loud. Berta saw one of the adults walking by frown at the girl in puzzlement.

That's her, Berta thought instinctively.

The inability to understand what was on the sign made some people angry. Others were surprised or suspicious. A few simply looked mystified. But no one would look at an incomprehensible series of letters and burst out laughing so hard their shoulders shook.

Berta, of course, didn't know what Yukinari had written any more than anyone else did. Yet that girl could read the words, knew what they meant. Perhaps she even understood his plan.

Someone else from Lord Yukinari's home...

An "angel" who had come from the same place as him. That was why she could read the words. That was why she was laughing.

The girl—I have to keep an eye on her!

Berta was terrified of even the smallest chance of being wrong, which was

why she hesitated to shoot the girl from behind. But she had to remember the child's face. The girl couldn't stand there with her back to Berta forever. Eventually, she would have to turn and walk off somewhere. Then Berta would at least see her face in profile—at least see where she went, what kind of clothes she was wearing, and she could tell it all to Yukinari. If the girl went into a building, she would tell him which building, too.

Feeling the adrenaline begin to flow, Berta focused all her attention on the girl in her sights. At last, the shaking stopped. Was she done laughing?

Berta started as the girl abruptly turned around. This should have been convenient for her, because she wanted to see the child's face. But the girl's purple eyes seemed to stare straight back through the scope, directly at Berta.

"Wha...?" She found herself speaking without meaning to.

There was distance between them. Berta was on top of the belltower, lying on the balcony with Derrringer. No one should have been able to look directly at her without knowing she was there. Yet the girl was staring straight at Berta. She obviously knew where the sniper was.

And then, to Berta's shock and alarm, a smile began to spread across the girl's lips. Berta let out a little gasp and jumped away from Derrringer, leaving the rifle where it lay. Berta was much higher up than the girl; if she could back up far enough, the child would no longer be able to see her.

"I... I..."

Her breath was ragged and she had broken out in a cold sweat all over her body. She put a hand to her chest and could feel her heart pounding.

I—I've got to calm down... I've got to calm down... She repeated the phrase to herself, trying to think. *She can't possibly see me... I think... She only just happened to look this way...*

Yes, that had to be it. She had only seemed to look in Berta's direction. It had been coincidence.

"I've got to... get a good look..."

All she could remember were the purple eyes. The girl's face, what she was

wearing—Berta could recall none of it. She had to remember so she could tell Yukinari.

Berta, her voice still stuck in her throat, crawled back to where Derrringer sat and hesitantly put her eye to the scope. Only to find...

“...She’s gone...?”

The girl was nowhere to be seen—not just in front of the sign, but anywhere in the plaza.

Berta found herself letting out a long sigh. It was partly relief, and partly frustration.

“Just when I could have done something to help Lord Yukinari...”

She hadn’t seen the moment the girl disappeared. Didn’t know which building she had gone into, or which direction she had walked away in. She didn’t even remember the child’s face clearly. All she remembered was the long black hair, and people with black hair weren’t especially unusual in Friedland.

Berta resolved to have another look. She took her eye from Derrringer’s scope and began to gaze around the town below. Slowly, carefully. Checking the shadows. But still she didn’t see the girl anywhere. It was no good. She was gone.

Berta was distraught.

She jumped as someone put a hand on her shoulder. She shook with the surprise, but she knew it was just Yukinari getting back.

She turned around to find a figure with the sun at its back, the light making it impossible to see the person’s face. But...



“Y-You’re...!”

Two purple eyes, the same ones that had looked up at her as she stared through the scope, now gazed at her from only inches away.

●

A crowd had already assembled at the crime scene by the time Yukinari arrived. It was located just a short distance outside of one of Friedland’s gates, just beyond one of the newly dug irrigation ditches. This was one of the first such ditches that had been dug, and it was rare now for Friedlanders to come near it. The only visitors were periodic patrols checking on the ditch’s condition.

Fiona and the community watch were shouting at the assembled townspeople, “Keep back! Keep back! Keep your distance!” But their injunctions didn’t appear to be very effective. Everyone was so afraid; this couldn’t help but draw interest. The victim lying on the ground could have been any of them.

“Excuse me, out of the way please,” Yukinari said, working his way toward where Fiona and the others stood.

“It’s Lord Yukinari.”

“Lord Yukinari—”

As the people realized who had arrived, they parted to make way for him. As he got closer, Yukinari saw Fiona and the watch were standing by the body, a man in work clothes. Judging by his outfit, he was probably one of the fieldworkers. Most likely, he had been out here checking on the irrigation canal.

As usual, the cause of death was a single stab to the heart.

For several seconds, Yukinari stared silently at the corpse. But then he started walking, thinking that it was not so much the body as the surroundings he should be looking at.

“Hey, Yukinari! What are you—” Arlen shouted angrily, perhaps feeling that Yukinari didn’t seem to be taking this seriously, but Yukinari had no interest in going over the details with him. He interrupted Arlen with a wave of his hand.

“Trust me. You do your investigation, I’ll do mine.”

“Yuki...” Dasa, walking beside him, spoke up. “Are... you looking for... *that*?”

She seemed to have a good idea of what he expected to find. It was only natural that she should. She had seen the words “Amano Yukinari” carved into the earlier crime scene. She knew that a similar inscription had been left at nearly every killing.

“Yeah. I didn’t notice it the first time... Or rather, somebody probably just thought they were meaningless scratches, thought nothing of them...”

Chances were that his name had been written at every crime scene. But the people of this world couldn’t read kanji, and it was likely that the community watch, unaware of what they were doing, had simply wiped the inscriptions away. In some cases, they might have moved the bodies, separating them from where the words were written. Now that Yukinari was spending all his time in town, he arrived at the crime scenes much sooner, meaning there was no time for anything to be tampered with.

There they were. The two words: “Amano Yukinari.”

This has to be aimed at me, right...?

But why? If the words were being left by a Church angel who had come to kill him, why not attack him directly? There had been plenty of chances.

And if it is Hatsune...

What was the point of writing his name at each crime scene, as if it were the last testament of every victim? Maybe there was no point. They had yet to see anyone react strangely to the sign in the plaza. Did that mean the killer wasn’t his sister? Or did it mean...

No, wait. These characters...

Was this about being sure? In the same way Yukinari had put up the sign in the square, maybe the killer wanted to know whether Yukinari was really the reincarnation of Amano Yukinari. If that was the case, maybe the killer was watching even now to see what reaction Yukinari would have to the inscription.

Just like Yukinari had been watching the sign.

It came suddenly.

Yukinari jumped as he heard a crack like a thunderclap.

It was a gunshot. From the direction of Friedland's gates, no less.

"What was that?!" Fiona and the community watch looked around, thinking there must have been a wild horse or the like nearby. But a few people must have realized that it was a gunshot. That somebody had fired a gun.

Arlen and the other former missionary knights, as well as the members of the community watch, had all been provided with guns. Some of them may even have used them when they ran into demigods or xenobeasts on their patrols. Certainly they would have heard them fired in practice. But the first person Yukinari thought of was the girl he had left on the belltower back in town—Berta.

"I'm sorry—you'll have to take care of things here!" he said, and then he set off running as fast as he could. Dasa followed him, presumably having come to the same conclusion.

"Yuki..."

"Dasa," he said, reaching out to her, pulling her up as he ran. As if she had known he would do this, Dasa jumped, ending up in his arms. It was a near-telepathic move that could only have come from long, long acquaintance.

Yukinari held Dasa in his arms and kept running. It was quicker to carry her than to have her run alongside.

"Yuki..." The note of anxiety in her voice might have been because she had a guess at who the serial killer was.

"It's okay."

If the gunshot was from Berta's Derrringer, if she had fired because she saw someone she thought was the killer, that meant that when they arrived Yukinari might well be face-to-face with the criminal.

In other words, with...

“It’s okay,” Yukinari repeated, less to Dasa than to himself.

●

Yukinari ran as fast as he was able, Dasa in his arms. As an angel, his body was capable of superhuman feats of mobility and endurance, even without taking on the form known as the Bluesteel Blasphemer. A normal person could keep up a real full-tilt run for only ten seconds or so at most, but Yukinari could easily go for an entire minute. And that was while carrying another person.

Hence, he arrived at the belltower not long after hearing the shot.

“Yuki, put me down,” Dasa said before they began climbing the staircase. They would ultimately need to use a ladder to get to the rooftop, so even Yukinari couldn’t have reached the lookout with Dasa in his arms.

Yukinari set the girl down and began bounding up the belltower stairs. Anxiety and panic swirled in his mind. He knew how reluctant Berta would have been to shoot anyone, even someone who appeared to be their mysterious killer. True, in the battle with the Missionary Order, she had managed to shoot one Church person, but only with a great deal of reluctance.

What was more, this time she would have been picking her target out of a crowd, which made the technical difficulty of the shot much greater. No matter how talented she was, Berta hadn’t spent more than a month with her gun; predicting how people would move and then finding a space for the shot—essentially, seeing the future—would be tremendously hard for her.

That was why Yukinari had felt it would be enough if she could confirm that someone had had a strange reaction to the sign. And yet, there had been a gunshot. He was sure it had been Derrringer, and that it had come from the direction of the belltower. It was almost certainly Berta.

I hate to think it, but...

In all his time in this world, Yukinari had never dealt with anyone who knew what a gun was. Neither the humans nor the xenobeasts and demigods recognized the weapons. They certainly had no concept of long-distance sniping. No one knew that an attack might come from much farther away than was possible with a bow and arrow, or that a scope might enable such an attack

to be very accurate.

So it was possible Berta had forgotten to be careful. Careful of the angle of the sun—or more precisely, the reflection of the light in the scope's lens.

Nobody in this world would have seen the gleam of something on a rooftop and thought "sniper's scope." But if the killer was his older sister Hatsune, and if she knew that Yukinari had introduced guns to this world...

In deference to Yukinari's interests, Hatsune had frequently watched action movies with him. Westerns, in particular, often had scenes where the hero would notice a sniper drawing a bead on him because of the reflection from a scope.

"Berta!" Yukinari powered his way up the ladder with such force that it seemed he might break the thing. He feared the worst—that Berta had been drawn into a one-on-one confrontation with the killer. They already knew that the criminal used something like a rapier in their attacks. If this person had gotten close enough to strike, then Berta, with her big, heavy gun, would be at a severe disadvantage. The belltower didn't provide good footing, either.

"Berta—"

As he reached the top of the ladder, Yukinari saw a lone figure on the roof.

"Was that you who fired? What hap—"

His first thought was that he needn't have worried. But he realized with a twisting in his stomach that the light had made it hard to see what was in front of him; he saw now that his first impression had been wrong.

There only appeared to be one figure because both people on the rooftop were in profile, so that their silhouettes overlapped from where Yukinari watched. Berta was there, along with someone else, a girl.

Yukinari immediately moved to get closer, but he noticed his feet slipping. He didn't want to look away from the two people in front of him, but just for an instant, he glanced down. He saw a rivulet of blood at his feet. He followed it back, back to Berta and the girl.

With the sun at her back, the girl's face appeared to be stained black—but her

purple eyes were looking straight at him.

Calm down...!

He tried to talk himself down, and meanwhile he moved to one side, hoping to get a better look at what was going on. The movement changed the angle of the sun relative to where he was standing, stripping away some of the shadows that had ensconced the two women in the belltower.

Berta appeared limp, all but leaning on the young woman. The other girl was shorter than Berta, yet her hands were not up very high. She was clearly using some kind of tool. But what? Was that a stick? No...

“Bertaaaa!” Yukinari howled. Her generous chest had been pierced through by the rapier the girl was holding. And then...

“My dear Yuki...”

With the twilight sun behind her, the girl’s face was awash in shadows. The face of...

“Hatsune... Is that you...?”

My dear Yuki.

That was what she always used to call him. For as long as he could remember, she was the only one who ever called him that. And yet...

Her face... But of course it’s not like I remember. They gave her a new body when she came here.

It was an utterly ordinary face. It looked almost as if it had been designed not to leave an impression; it was pleasant enough, but confoundingly indistinct. It wasn’t the face Yukinari remembered his sister having.

Was this face the result of the preferences of the person who had created this angel, or had it been done deliberately to make her a better assassin? He had no idea. And the girl was so clearly young. Hatsune had been older than Yukinari. The last time he had seen her, when they both died when their house burned down, she had been eighteen. Yet this girl was obviously in her early teens. She was smaller and younger even than Berta and Dasa.

Yet the girl said, “My dear Yuki... Have you forgotten what I look like?” With

the palm of her left hand—the one not holding the rapier—she began to rub her face. He could see a bluish-white light leak out from behind her hand, the light of physical reconstitution. The pale fingers moved as if stirring a soup, and the girl's face changed completely.

Now it was the face he remembered. It looked somewhat like Dasa—yet not exactly. It was a face he knew much better than Dasa's, one he could never forget. One familiar and beloved to him.

A face sweet and lovely. But to see that kind, gentle smile against this blood-soaked scene was completely bizarre. The feeling was only intensified by the spatter of red against the white hair and white clothes. The blood must have come out of Berta's mouth when some internal organ had been ruptured by the rapier. The girl appeared unfazed.

It was unmistakably Amano Hatsune. But no—she was no longer human. She wasn't even Japanese. Rather, like Yukinari, she was a soul sealed inside an angel's body. Perhaps it was more appropriate to think of her as Hatsune Amano.

"Hrgh..." Yukinari put a hand to his chest, which was in agony, as if he were having a heart attack. He had expected this, but he had wished desperately to be wrong. His sister—his dear, sweet sister, the sibling he adored—was the killer, his enemy.

Time and time again he had suspected this, then tried to overcome his doubts, only to be filled with them again, the repetition of it all like a prayer. But now all that was over. There could be no more question.

"Why? *Why*...?" he groaned. "Are you acting on orders from the True Church of Harris?! If so, sister, then they're deceiving you!"

The members of the True Church of Harris had ample reason to want to kill both Yukinari and the people of Friedland. But Hatsune didn't. And if Hatsune had really come to this world with her memories intact, just like Yukinari, then she should have realized that she had no reason to fight him or to let the Church use her as its pawn. She ought to have refused.

So they must have tricked her. He didn't know how, but they must have done it. It didn't make any sense otherwise. How could his kind, loving sister do such

things?

She cocked her head, the picture of innocence. “Deceiving me? I wonder. I don’t particularly think I’m being deceived.”

“So you mean—you mean to say that killing all those people in Friedland... Killing Berta... You did all that because you *wanted* to?!”

“Yes,” she said, her voice distinct but surprisingly quiet. “I think you’re the one who’s being deceived, my dear Yuki.”

“Me...?”

“You’re all I have, and I’m all you have,” she said, almost as if she were humming the words. “We were always together, weren’t we? Just two of us.”

“That’s—”

“We were going to be together all our lives, isn’t that what we said? After all, you were all I had, and I was all you had. You always said you would never leave me alone, my dear Yuki.”

What she was saying was true. With their mother lost in religion and their father lost in his work, the two siblings had grown up without any adults to look after them, and so had faced life together. Both of them had failed to build the bonds of love between parent and child that should have been primary in their lives; instead, they had clung to each other.

To each other, they had been parents, friends, and... lovers. Yukinari and Hatsune had each been every possible thing to the other. A parent should support a child from early on in life, yet in this both of them had been betrayed, and so they were reluctant—indeed, afraid—to form bonds with other people.

“And yet you, my dear Yuki...” Hatsune pursed her lips like a pouting child. Almost as if she were jealous. “The moment I’m not right next to you anymore, you forget all about me and go making friends with someone else.”

“No, I—”

“But my dear Yuki. Remember. No one else ever did anything for you, did they? Everyone who ever had anything to do with us did it because they had to, or because it was their job—always for their own purposes. There was no one

who did anything because they cared about us, was there? No one who loved us.” The small smile remained on her face as she spoke. “The people of this town are the same way. They’re just using you, my dear Yuki. Deceiving you. They don’t love you. You’re strong, you possess great power, and that benefits them, so they’re using you.”

He didn’t speak. Yes, there was an element of that. The people of Friedland venerated Yukinari as the town’s guardian deity; nobody specifically liked him for himself. Or perhaps some did, but they were overwhelmingly few. Yukinari knew all this as well as anyone. And yet, somehow, he didn’t mind; it was only natural to him.

Love with no price? He recoiled at the thought. It was something his mother had often spoken of, yet she had disappeared into religion and never spared her family a backward glance.

Jirina, who had created Yukinari’s body, had told him that something could not be made from nothing.

“A price is always required in order to create something,” she had said. “Alchemy isn’t magic. An angel’s powers function on that same understanding. When you get something for nothing—well, that’s called a miracle.”

This was a world where people’s faith, the spiritual power of their intense devotion, could be stored up in Holy Oil or Spirit Oil. Jirina told him all this as if it were the most natural thing in the world. But that was all the more reason...

“They’re in the way,” Hatsune said. Her eyes were cloudy, as if she were dreaming. “The people of this town. They’re standing between you and me being together, just the two of us, like we used to be. You’re being deceived, my dear Yuki. I thought you might at least come to your senses, but you don’t understand anything at all.”

“You killed them...” To Yukinari, his voice sounded as if it were someone else speaking. “...because they were *in the way*?”

“That’s right.”

“And you thought I would figure out what you were doing? That you would keep murdering them until I decided to join you...?!”

Here he had thought someone was trying to sow chaos in Friedland, or perhaps cause the villagers to mistrust each other. But it hadn't even been anything as devious as that. Hatsune had been thinking of nothing but Yukinari, and to her the people of Friedland were like insects—less than insects, in fact; they were no more than background clutter.

This wasn't about brutality. She didn't see killing them as an act of cruelty. She was just utterly uninterested in anyone but Yukinari.

"And you don't need *this*, either," Hatsune said.

It took Yukinari a moment to figure out what she was referring to. That's why he was slow to react. That was why he failed to stop Hatsune from moving her left hand, turning the rapier over so that Berta would slide off the end.

Under the force of gravity, the body freed itself from the sword and dropped onto the roof. It rolled like an inanimate object; Hatsune had literally thrown Berta away.

"Hrgh..."

But as she tumbled, there was the smallest sound.

"Berta!"

She was still alive. Or was that merely air escaping from her lungs under the impact of the fall? It didn't matter. Yukinari rushed across the rooftop and caught Berta in his arms.

He had no time to transform. Instead, he grasped Berta with his left arm, thrusting out his right arm and digging into the wall of the belltower with his fingers.

"Gah...!"

However strong his angel body might have been, he felt pain more or less like a normal human. He dug his fingers into the small cracks and undulations in the wall, and the friction burned his fingers, tearing away skin and flesh. But it was all in the name of slowing Berta's momentum. He could only grit his teeth and endure the pain that lanced through his hand. Finally, he used the soles of his feet to soften the impact of the landing as much as he could.

“Ergh...!”

A severe shock ran through all the bones in his body, but he somehow managed to stop Berta from hitting the ground.

“Berta!”

He tried to get a sense of how she was doing. The actual piercing wound in her chest was small, and blood was only dribbling from it. But that fact was actually a bad sign. It meant her blood pressure was low—that her heart was near to stopping.

“Dammit! You can’t die yet!” He tore open her shirt, pressing his right hand to her exposed breast. “It’s too soon! You have to live, Berta!”

This wasn’t like when he had lost Jirina. Now he knew how to use his angel powers, and he had his memories from his previous world. He should be able to fix this. The heart was a bundle of muscle, and it had only been pierced by a rapier. If something as complicated as a heart had been totally destroyed, it would have been beyond even Yukinari to do anything about it. But a small wound? Surely he could cure that. Surely.

“Don’t you die, Berta!” As he shouted, Yukinari tried to use physical reconstitution to heal her heart. He could replenish some of the blood she had lost. Even if he managed to repair her heart, low blood pressure would mean she might go into shock and die from lack of blood flow and poor oxygenation.

A voice spoke from above him. “You mustn’t, my dear Yuki.”

He looked up. Hatsune was gazing down at him from atop the tower. “You mustn’t do that.” She sounded like an older sister gently chiding a disobedient younger brother. The rapier was still in her hand.

This was bad. If she attacked him now, he would have no way to resist. She probably wouldn’t even need her sword. She could just jump down on top of them. If Yukinari stopped his healing work now, Berta would die, no question.

Yukinari crouched protectively over Berta. He had to keep working on her, but as much as he could, he would defend her while doing so.

Then came the gunshot, a roar that split the air. Then a second, then a third.

Fanning. Using the left hand to work the hammer while the trigger remained pulled, a way of firing a machine gun-like volley with a single-action revolver.



Bits came flying off of the railing of the belltower where Hatsune was standing. Yukinari's sister looked about to lose her balance, but instead she kicked off of what was left of the tower. Her gossamer appearance belied her acrobatic strength; she jumped over and landed on the roof of the next building. But three more bullets followed her, pressing the attack. Hatsune jumped backward across the roof.

Dasa...!

She, of course, must have been the origin of the gunshots. But her revolver, Red Chili, carried only six rounds. On top of that, it was a single-action weapon. It would take time to reload. The hammer had to be half-cocked, the loading gate opened, and the spent shells ejected, only after which could new bullets be loaded in. In other words, having spent her six shots, Dasa would be defenseless.

Hatsune crouched on the rooftop. Maybe she was planning to jump back to the belltower and kill Dasa.

"Hatsune! Dasa!" Yukinari shouted.

And then—there was another gunshot.

Yukinari started. The report was far louder than that of Red Chili; it belonged to Derrringer. Perhaps Dasa had picked up the gun Berta had dropped when she got stabbed.

"Hrgh?!" The shot must have landed, because Hatsune was thrown backward off the roof and vanished from view.

"Yuki!" Dasa peeked out from the edge of the belltower. Just as Yukinari had thought, she was holding Derrringer.

"Don't let down your guard!" he called. "Reload while you can!" He pushed down on Berta's chest, practically hard enough to break her ribs, trying to start the heart that lay still just beneath her breast.

If Hatsune had taken a bullet to the head, that was one thing, but if it had landed in one of her limbs—even if an arm or leg were blown off, an angel could regrow it.

“It’s okay,” Dasa said, not letting go of Derrringer. “I saw... her run away.”

Yukinari was silent. From her vantage point atop the belltower, Dasa must have been able to see where Hatsune had fallen, been able to watch her flee. Hatsune must have decided that Dasa was stronger than she looked and that a temporary retreat was called for.

“How’s... Berta?” Dasa asked, looking slightly unsettled.

Yukinari felt the girl’s heart begin to beat under his palm. “I think... I think she’ll make it, somehow...”

●

Chapter Four: Yukinari Amano

When he came to, Yukinari was indoors. He thought he recognized the room, but it took him a moment to realize that it was one of the rooms in the Schillings mansion.

“I...”

He turned to one side, where a window revealed that it was completely dark outside; the room was filled with the soft glow of lamplight. Yukinari seemed to have been put to bed.

“You awake?”

At the sound of the voice, Yukinari grunted and sat up, but it made him a little dizzy, as if he were anemic. “Veronika...?”

The female mercenary was sitting with her back to him. But she wasn’t there just to keep an eye on him. This room had two beds in it, and she was sitting on the one next to his.

She didn’t speak immediately. He could see someone lying in the bed Veronika was sitting on. It was—

“Berta!” Yukinari jumped up as soon as he realized who the occupant of the other bed was. The sudden movement caused a wave of dizziness, but he didn’t have time to care. “Is Berta—”

Veronika still didn’t answer; she still didn’t turn toward him. Yukinari put a hand on the wall to steady himself as he climbed out of bed. He looked down at Berta where she lay. The shrine maiden, the girl who had been offered to Yukinari, was sleeping. Or... unconscious, rather. Her eyes were closed, her lips hanging slightly open. Her face was pale; maybe she still didn’t have enough blood. It would have been easy to take her for dead.

“Is Berta all right?” he asked, a touch of annoyance entering his voice at Veronika’s persistent silence.

“Well, she’s alive.” The mercenary said no more than that. In other words, Berta had remained unconscious the whole time Yukinari had been out.

“I cured her... I’m sure I did,” he murmured, but his voice shook as if he knew it was a lie. Yes, he had tended to her wounds. He had felt her heart start beating again. Those things, he remembered. And he remembered Dasa asking how Berta was doing—but he recalled nothing else.

“Sounds like you collapsed, yourself. I only know about what happened after I carried you here. Dasa was here until just a moment ago.” Veronika glanced in the direction of the door. “Until I chased her out of here to get a little rest. We can’t have all of you giving out at once.”

“I see...” Yukinari had thought he must only have been out for two or three hours, but it seemed to have been closer to an entire day. He had used his angel powers of physical reconstitution—in essence, almost of creation—to their limit in his attempt to save Berta. He wasn’t working with that much material, but it was far more demanding to work with the constituent elements of a living being, muscle and flesh and blood, than it was to produce a ball of steel or some water.

What was more, when using his powers to constitute something, Yukinari consumed spiritual power; that was, a specific amount of information. Normally he would first take the information from something else, reducing some object to sand or dust before using that information to produce something new. But he had spent so much time worrying about the serial killer lately that he hadn’t saved up much information in advance, and now he was paying the price.

The overuse of his powers had led to him consuming information from his own self, and that was what had caused him to lose consciousness. He seemed to be suffering from a touch of amnesia, but he didn’t have time right now to track down every last memory.

Veronika finally turned to him. “And what about you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a little anemic.”

“I can’t fault you for that. But still—”

“Berta is who I’m really worried about,” Yukinari said, placing two fingers just

below the unconscious girl's chin. He could feel a pulse.

"She's not coming around," Veronika said. "The doctors don't seem to know what's wrong with her."

"Because I fixed all her superficial wounds..." It was understandable that this might confuse the doctors. If he hadn't done it, though, she would never have survived long enough to be taken to the Schillings home. In fact, it was almost a miracle that she hadn't immediately died from being stabbed through the heart.

When I showed up, Berta had already been stabbed. How long had it been since she sustained the wound?

He was confident that the gunshot he and the others had heard had come from Berta's Derrringer. From the time he had heard it until the moment he arrived at the scene... He didn't know exactly how long it had been, but he thought not a full three minutes. How long had it taken, then, before he had been able to start treating her?

Humans can survive if blood is cut off to an arm or a leg. But the brain is different. It requires constant oxygen and nutrients to be brought to it by the blood. Just five minutes without blood flow can be enough to do irreversible damage to the brain. After ten minutes, the chance of death skyrockets.

Damn it all!

When Yukinari first saw Berta with the sword through her torso, he had thought she was already dead. But in fact, she had been alive. He shouldn't have talked with Hatsune, should have ignored her so he could get to Berta as quickly as possible. The thought sent an unbearable feeling of shame through him.

Is she still unconscious... because of brain damage...?

Medicine in this world had no way of evaluating the status of the brain. And Yukinari didn't have neuro-surgical knowledge. In principle, it was possible to create microscopic structures and revive cells using the powers of an angel, but to do so Yukinari would have had to understand their physical construction. It wasn't like building a gun. The slightest wrong move could make things

immeasurably worse.

In other words—even if Berta's brain had been damaged by lack of blood flow, there was nothing he could do about it. The most he could do now was pray she would heal under her own power.

He didn't speak.

"Don't fret too much about it," Veronika said. "It's not your fault. Whether someone lives or dies isn't anyone's fault. Everyone has to take responsibility for their own survival." Perhaps that was how Veronika felt, as a mercenary who had seen life and death up close. But...

"No." Yukinari shook his head with a sigh. "I'm supposed to be her god."

"...Oh yeah." Veronika's shoulders slumped.

Granted, he hadn't taken on the role voluntarily, but Yukinari was the deity worshipped by Berta and everyone in Friedland. He had responsibilities. It was, one might say, his duty to take on those responsibilities given all the trust that had been placed in him. And on top of that...

Hatsune...!

It was not some faceless, anonymous criminal who had done this to Berta. It was Yukinari's own older sister, Hatsune Amano.

She had killed more than ten people in this town. She had paralyzed Ulrike and Yggdra's other familiars. And now she had put Berta in a coma from which she might never wake up.

Was there something more he could have done? Even when he suspected the killer's true identity, he hadn't made the information public; he had tried to solve the case with just himself and his close friends. He had even tried to ignore the possibility that Hatsune was the killer. If he'd been willing to face reality sooner, maybe he could have prevented some of the harm she'd done.

How very, very foolish he was.

"Damn it..."

Yukinari bit his lip, hard enough to draw blood.

●

Angela heard a key turning in the lock. She nearly looked up, but then thought better of it. She wasn't even sure what her face looked like these days. What if they saw it and there was some pathetic expression of hope on it?

In the more than ten days since her capture, Angela had had ample time for introspection. For better and for worse, she was an intelligent person. It allowed her to analyze herself. She had never done so before—partly because she hadn't had time, and partly because she hadn't felt it was necessary.

But now she knew what kind of person she was. She felt she had worked herself out in the broadest terms, and she thought she knew herself better than anyone. But...

"Angela Jindel."

When that voice echoed through her basement cell, Angela trembled. She looked up before she knew what she was doing. Maybe her face was contorted with her disgusting desires, but it didn't matter to her. In fact, she wanted him to see it. She wanted him to see those desires and despise her for them. She had never known anyone before in a position to scorn her—as much abuse as she had heaped upon others, there had been none who could heap it upon her.

"Yukinari... Amano..."

He stood before her now, this man with his incredible power. She wanted him to crush her, to control her. All her life she had been unfettered, free to do exactly as she wished, but as a result she was terribly lonely. Nobody ever criticized her; no one ever confronted her about anything. The view from the top of the mountain was spectacular, but she was alone there. There was no one she could cling to.

And so Angela sought a god who could rule over her. Something she could bow before, something even higher than the mountain's peak. Something utterly, irrefutably stronger than her.

She had found some relief in the True Church of Harris. Their God filled that space above her, and absorption into the ranks of the Missionary Order allowed her to accept how she was. Or so she had thought, until she met Yukinari

Amano.

The moment she had found herself close to this superhuman creature, this thing that looked like a man but possessed power greater than any person, she began to see how insubstantial and fanciful the things she had thought of as “God” had been.

Yes: God. Yukinari was a god. A god with flesh. A god with fists. He was more than just some ineffable force of fortune; he could intervene directly, an incarnate god who fought his own battles.

And she, who was just a human, deserved to be beaten by him. Trampled. Controlled, domesticated. Then she could finally be at peace. She would finally know she was not alone.

She wanted a collar, an unmistakable sign of her subservience. The thought was so intense it pained her. And that was why—

“Come out. I want to talk to you.”

—when Yukinari pulled out a chain connected to an iron ring, Angela thought she might burst with joy.

He understood. He would give her what she wanted. This man—this god—was the one she must worship.

“Yes—!”

As she went to him, she blushed like the maiden she was.

●

Yukinari was in the reception room of the Schillings mansion with a group of people he had personally chosen. Dasa, Fiona, Veronika, Arlen—and Angela.

Yukinari had decided that, with respect to Angela, he would have to act as a tyrant toward her. That seemed the best way to keep her from being troublesome; it appeared to cause her to do as he said. So when he brought her here, he did so not in manacles, but in an iron collar he had created for her.

Truth be told, he found this tyrant act immensely draining, but as it seemed to make Angela more willing to give him information, perhaps it would be worth it in the end. When he had gone to fetch her from the basement room, she had

looked like a young woman receiving an engagement ring from her lover. All Yukinari could do was sigh internally.

It didn't matter. He didn't have time to fret about the little things.

"All right." Yukinari looked around at his gathered companions. He had brought them all here so that everyone could get on the same page when it came to what they knew.

There had been more than ten victims, and Friedland was paralyzed with fear. Ulrike and the other familiars were no longer active, and Berta was unconscious, her recovery questionable. There was no more time to hesitate. Yukinari had to set aside his personal feelings or nothing would ever change. If Berta never regained consciousness, it would be his fault, for refusing to act despite his strong suspicion about the culprit.

"I've called you all here today because I want all of you to know what I know about the killer stalking Friedland."

"Yukinari, have you learned something?!" Fiona looked anxious and excited. Yukinari found it painful; her expression showed an immense confidence in him. But he deserved no praise.

Dasa, and Dasa only, was looking at the ground. She probably had a good guess as to what Yukinari was going to say. For that matter, having heard the conversation between him and Hatsune, she probably knew perfectly well who the killer was. Dasa, of course, knew all about how angels were made.

"To begin with, our killer is in fact an angel."

"An angel..." Angela whispered. Everyone else was simply struck dumb.

Fiona in particular seemed shocked by this. When she heard the word "angel," she thought not of the miracle-working puppets created by the True Church of Harris, but of Yukinari. She knew firsthand how powerful Yukinari's abilities were, how much they had contributed to Friedland. So something inside her resisted the notion that their enemy could be cut from the same cloth.

"Let's be clear," Yukinari said, glancing at Arlen and Angela. "Angels are created by alchemy."

The Church taught that angels were the messengers of God, given flesh in rituals of fervent prayer; alchemy certainly had nothing to do with it. But in reality, the angels were homunculi, artificial life forms created by alchemists. The Church had hunted down the alchemists as heretics, and for generations they had been forced to work in complete secrecy, creating tools that would do miracles for their kidnappers.

Alchemy was responsible for a great many things in the Church. Angels, holy oil. Most likely, the statues of the guardian saint, as well.

Neither Arlen nor Angela looked pleased about this, but they didn't try to shout Yukinari down, either. Both of them had parted ways with Church headquarters, met Yukinari, and spent time here in Friedland—perhaps they had come to harbor their own suspicions.

"What I'm going to say next is secondhand knowledge from the alchemist who made me—or more precisely, made my current body."

He proceeded to give them a brief explanation of the way angels, or rather homunculi, were created. How a lump of flesh was given life by summoning a soul from another world. How a homunculus with a sense of self would be difficult to use as a tool—too much risk of rebellion or flight—so the Church ensured that once the homunculus was activated, its memories and personality were wiped out, leaving only a living puppet behind.

Fiona looked closely at Yukinari. "But that means... That means that after they breathe life into it using the soul of someone who already died once, they kill them again."

"If you consider the erasure of personality and memories to be murder, then yes," Yukinari nodded.

"That's awful..."

"B-But they're already dead, so you can't really kill them a second time..." A glare from Fiona silenced Arlen's attempt to defend the Church.

"We can argue about that later," Yukinari said, and looked around again. "Whatever the case, that's how angels are made. I died in an accident in my previous world. My soul left that body behind and was used to activate this one

—I guess. The difference is, Jirina didn't eliminate my personality or memories after that, so I've continued to exist as myself."

Then, the Church had killed Jirina for the crime of creating a self-aware angel. Yukinari, enraged, had slaughtered everyone who had carried out the execution, everyone who had ordered it, as well as anyone related to the Church who happened to be in his vicinity at the time. The Harris Church, naturally, deployed angels to try to stop him, but because they lacked Yukinari's self-awareness, they couldn't act autonomously. They were literally nothing more than puppets, and in a one-on-one battle their reactions were always going to be slower than Yukinari's. In addition, the Church used the angels to perform miracles, not fight battles, so they had neither experience with nor strategies for this situation.

As a result, Yukinari perpetrated a mass slaughter, then fled the capital with Dasa in tow, neither the royal army nor the shattered Church able to pursue him.

"Now... here's the problem. I mentioned I died in an accident. Well, my older sister died with me."

"You had an older sister, Yukinari?" Fiona asked in surprise.

"Yeah. Hatsune Amano."

As he spoke the name, Yukinari unrolled a piece of paper on the table in the middle of the room. On it, he had written *Amano Hatsune* and *Amano Yukinari* in kanji.

Arlen leaned over the paper, blinking. "We saw this at those crime scenes..."

"This is how we wrote things in my previous world. This is my name, and this is my sister's."

"No..." Fiona was always a quick study, and she immediately seemed to grasp what Yukinari was getting at.

"I'm afraid so," he said, trying to ignore the ache in his heart. "The angel attacking our town is my... my sister."

"Yuki..." He felt Dasa's fingers brush his own. He was seized by the desire to

take her hand, but he pushed the feeling away. This was no time to be leaning on her kindness.

“When Berta was attacked, I met her, however briefly, and confirmed all of this.”

“Your sister...” Fiona whispered, her hand to her mouth. “But then, why...? If you really talked to her, that means she still has her memories and personality too, doesn’t it? So why would she see you as an enemy? And after what happened with you, why would the Church make another angel with its personality intact?”

Angela, who had been silent until then, spoke up. “In that case...” Everyone turned to look at her, which caused her to frown and fall silent again. But at an encouraging nod from Yukinari, she blushed happily and continued. “Could this be an angel created by some force other than the Harris Church?”

“It’s true, my sister—Hatsune—never said anything about coming here on the orders of the Church. But she didn’t say she didn’t, either. In theory, I suppose there could be some enclave of alchemists outside the True Church of Harris, making their own homunculi, but...”

But if so, it begged the question of why they would have made Hatsune.

“I still think it makes more sense to think that the Church created another self-aware angel so they would have a better chance of disposing of me. My existence is a scandal they want to wipe out at any cost.”

Angela went quiet, but she didn’t seem too upset to have her opinion shot down. If anything, she looked rather pleased. The thought crossed Yukinari’s mind: could it be that her masochism extended even to intellectual matters?

“In any event.” He thought back to his conversation with Hatsune. “We still don’t know exactly why she’s doing this.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dasa look up at him with a hint of surprise.

“But we know for a fact that the killer is my older sister. She admitted as much herself.”

“So we know what’s going on now.” Fiona nodded, but then she looked at the paper on the tabletop. “But Yukinari... This would mean that when you put that sign up, you already thought it might be her. Could you really not have told us any sooner?!”

Yukinari couldn’t answer.

“I know it would have been painful to admit the possibility that it was your own sister who was the killer. But people were dying!”

“Yes,” Yukinari said with a sigh, “that’s part of it. But in my former world, we had something called witch hunts.”

“Witch hunts?” Fiona asked, the words unfamiliar in her mouth.

“Yeah. Something that took place in a particular part of a particular country. People started to think that there were women among them who could use magic. But it was just superstition.”

“Magic... Superstition...?”

“Yes. Superstition,” Yukinari said emphatically. “But in that country, people believed that if you could use magic, it meant you were a servant of the devil, and so they had to kill anyone suspected of doing it.”

“Well, that only makes sense,” offered Angela. “If someone is gaining power from an evil source—”

“Maybe I’m not being clear enough,” Yukinari said, interrupting her. “It was a mistake. These were actually just people who did things a little differently, or maybe had slightly unusual habits. Sometimes it was just bad luck. Think about my Durandall, or Dasa’s Red Chili. Fiona, when you and the others first saw them, didn’t it look like magic? But they’re really just tools, tools anyone can use if they know how.”

“That’s... That’s true.”

“The people in those witch hunts couldn’t use magic, either. They were perfectly normal. But they ended up being labeled witches.”

“If the accusation was false, then they should have simply cleared it up,” Angela said.

“Sometimes it’s not possible to clear up. Sometimes people don’t *want* it to be.”

As if she had begun to understand what Yukinari was trying to say, Angela went quiet, her expression somewhere between fear and pleasure.

“The people in that area fell into a panic,” Yukinari went on. “A religious organization much like the True Church of Harris... they backed up these witch hunts, gave them a sort of approval. So no one could stop them, and soon enough, no one could think clearly, either.”

Fiona took a deep breath. “There are some similarities with faith in the erdgod there, too.”

When a majority of people believe something to be true, it often becomes widely accepted without serious investigation into its actual veracity. In fact, to doubt such “facts,” and therefore upset the status quo, can become a sin in itself. Thus minority opinions become marginalized, and the majority run amok.

“You can’t find what’s not there, but when they didn’t find anything, they just said it had been carefully hidden. People would point the finger at anyone who seemed the least bit suspicious, and they would be tortured, killed. The belief was that if you were a witch, you wouldn’t die. A normal human would die, but while the flesh might be destroyed, the soul would be cleared of doubt and find salvation—that was the logic they used.”

Angela trembled silently. Maybe she remembered that she had used a similar logic while piling abuse on Jirina in front of Yukinari. She was afraid—and eager—that Yukinari might still be angry about those words, might strike her again.

“Apparently, they used some pretty gruesome tortures. I guess it just shows there’s no length humans won’t go to when they can claim that there are ‘others’ among them who have supernatural powers. The fear of those others, the desire to escape from them, is the perfect excuse.”

“But what does all this have to do with your sister?” Fiona asked.

“Using the powers of an angel, you can make yourself look like a completely different person.”

The others all looked at each other, startled. Yukinari heaved a sigh and went

on.

“You didn’t realize because I’ve never done it. And if you put me on the spot and asked me to do it, I would probably find it pretty difficult. Let’s see...”

He placed his hand on the unfurled sheet of lambskin paper. The bluish-white light of physical reconstitution glowed under his palm, and the paper began to change.

“You could even do something like this.”

There was a collective gasp. Fiona, Veronika, Dasa, and Angela were all staring at the tabletop, then looking at Arlen. For a second, Arlen blinked, unsure what was going on, but an instant later it finally dawned on him that Yukinari had changed the paper to resemble a face. Arlen’s face.

“Wh-What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Arlen asked, panic entering his voice. “That’s m-my face!”

Excepting narcissists who constantly look at themselves in the mirror, it takes most people a second to recognize themselves when presented with their own face.

“Think of it as a mask,” Yukinari said. “If I did the same thing to my own face, instead of this piece of paper, I could change myself into Arlen.”

“So the reason we haven’t found the murderer yet...”

“...is because she’s been changing her face. Making herself look like people from this town. She’s probably impersonating someone right now. She could be standing in this very room.”

Fiona and the others looked like they might be sick. But then the deputy mayor said, “I see what you’re getting at.”

“Right. If someone you know could be the murderer, and you could be the next person they kill—that’s a recipe for Friedland’s very own witch hunts. If someone thinks you’re acting the least bit strangely, next comes the accusation that you might be the murderer. They torture you to make you confess, or maybe just kill you before you can kill them. And given that we don’t have any way of seeing through this disguise, pretty soon the terror spreads to the whole

town...”

If this were just about the killer changing their clothes or hair to look like someone else, there might be a way to find them, or at least to prove one’s own innocence. But with a murderer who could literally change their own body, it was almost impossible to be certain who might be innocent or guilty.

Fiona seemed to be voicing the anxieties of the entire group as she said, “So what do you propose we do next...?”

Yukinari, of course, had something in mind. He had brought them all there to let them in on it—so that they wouldn’t interfere once he put his plan in motion.

“I’m going to strike her down in one fell swoop.”

“You are?!” Fiona half stood. “What if that’s just what she wants?”

“Maybe it is.”

“I thought we talked about this! I told you, you have to stop trying to do everything on your own!”

“Strictly speaking... I won’t exactly be on my own.” He shrugged. “I’m taking Angela with me.”

“M-Me?!” Angela exclaimed. “But why?”

“As bait.” He gave a firm tug on her leash as he spoke. “If Hatsune really is being deceived by the True Church of Harris and acting on their orders, then you’re an ally of hers, someone she should want to rescue. I guess she might just ignore you, but I plan to use you as a bargaining chip. To get her to show herself when and where I want.”

“Y-You could just as well use Arlen Lansdowne for that!”

“There’s a good chance Arlen was witnessed fighting on Friedland’s side in the last battle. If I give her the chance, Hatsune might kill him.”

Angela fell silent. She seemed to have grasped why Yukinari had brought her, still a nominal enemy, to this meeting—in a collar, no less.

Veronika, who had been silent until that moment, spoke up. “If the Church

girl is only coming with you as bait, that means you *do* plan to fight alone. I agree with the deputy mayor: it's a bad habit."

"I appreciate your concern," Yukinari said, shaking his head. "But this isn't about Yukinari Amano, the god. It's... well, let's call it unfinished business from my human life. It's something I believe I have to take care of myself."

He realized that this was selfish on some level. More than ten people had been murdered; Yukinari needed to put aside personal feelings and come up with a serious plan to deal with the situation. However terrible it might have been, he should have prepared a fighting force that could definitively best his sister.

Veronika eyed him. "Can you swear it's not because you feel responsible for what happened to Berta?"

Yukinari hadn't expected this, and he couldn't immediately deny it. "...It's appropriate that an angel should fight an angel, right?" he said. "Strategically. It's not like we can muster an army right now, anyway."

If they brought their full strength to bear on Hatsune, it would open a hole in Friedland's defenses that could easily be exploited by a unit of the Missionary Order, or perhaps other angels.

"I just... don't like it," Veronika half-sighed, but she didn't pursue the matter.

"The point is," Yukinari said, "I'm going to take care of this. The rest of you, just hold back and focus on keeping the town safe." He wanted to make sure they all got the message.

●

After he left the Schillings mansion, the first place Yukinari went was the town's central plaza. The first step in his plan would be to let Hatsune know what he had in mind.

It would be best if they faced off somewhere outside Friedland. Somewhere near the sanctuary might be good, if he could convince Hatsune to go there. Yukinari knew the geography intimately. Besides, if two angels fought each other to the limits of their strength, the chances of collateral damage were high. Fighting in the middle of Friedland was out of the question.

Yukinari stood in front of his sign and looked at it for a moment. Berta had been attacked by Hatsune, most likely, because she had been staking out this sign. Which meant Hatsune had seen it—had taken notice of it.

“Yukinari?” The speaker sounded somewhat dubious. It was Angela, whom Yukinari had along with him.

The female knight was the only person Yukinari had wanted to accompany him when he left the mansion. As he had explained to Fiona and the others, Angela was to serve as bait. Which was, perhaps, just another way of saying that he didn’t know how else to draw Hatsune out.

“What are you doing?” Angela asked.

“I’m trying to decide how to draw out my sister,” Yukinari said with a yank on the chain he was holding. The chain rattled, and Angela, entrapped by the collar on the other end, was pulled closer to him.

“Stay closer to me when we walk,” he said. “Unless you *want* everyone in Friedland to see you collared like livestock.”

He had thought this might anger her, but instead Angela blushed and obediently came closer to him. Sometimes Yukinari wasn’t sure whether the girl actually understood that she was a masochist.

“Now, then.” He sighed once and reached out toward the sign. For a second, he wished he had brought something to write with; then it occurred to him that, as an angel, he could just create whatever he wanted. With the power of physical reconstitution, Yukinari focused heat into the pointer finger of his right hand and used it to burn letters into the sign:

I’ll be waiting at the sanctuary with the captured Harris missionary girl.

He noticed Angela swallowing anxiously beside him, perhaps because she had never seen him use his powers this way before.

Announcing where he would be carried the risk that Hatsune might head him off or ambush him, but Yukinari was the one who knew the area around the sanctuary better. He was hoping that knowledge would help neutralize any danger he might put himself in.

He finished writing—or burning—his message on the sign, then looked back over his work. He hadn't made any mistakes.

"And," Yukinari said then, turning around. "What do you think you're doing here?"

Dasa was standing there. He had noticed her following them all the way from the Schillings mansion. She was the only one among his little group who wouldn't listen to what he said to do.

"Dasa, go back to Fiona and the—"

"Yuki. I'm going to help you." Dasa was never very expressive, but now she had the slightest pout, as though she were concerned or perhaps unhappy. There was a hint of red in her pale cheeks.

"You can't. Go back."

"No." Dasa glared at him.

"I'm going to go fight my sister alone—"

"You have *her* with you. You're not... alone." She referred, of course, to Angela.

"Look, I told you—"

"I'm the one who should be by... your side, Yuki." Then she walked up to him, inserting herself between Yukinari and Angela. "I don't in...tend to give... up my place."

Yukinari was silent for a moment, then let out a long sigh. Angela had a blank look on her face.

"Dasa..."

"Yuki, you... promised Jirina. Promised you would protect me. That you would be at... my side. Keep... your promise."

Still expressionless and still stubborn, she took Yukinari's hand.

●

The air in the sanctuary felt almost freezing. The night wasn't unusually cold. Yukinari figured it was his own emotions that were the problem. This was the

chill of a place that had long gone unoccupied. They had only been away for a month, yet it felt almost like an abandoned building.

He was used to having Berta there, having Ulrike there. Without them, there just seemed to be too much space.

Incidentally, Angela wasn't in the room. Trying to entertain her constantly—trying to maintain the tyrannical front that made her pliant and malleable—was immensely tiring, so Yukinari had confined her to a different room and used physical reconstitution to weld the end of the chain to a wall so she could never escape under her own power.

"Dammit," Yukinari muttered. It was the realization that he felt lonely that brought the word to his lips.

He was actually surprised to realize he was still capable of feeling lonely. For as long as he could remember, he and his older sister had been together. As she'd said, he'd had her and she'd had him. They were an entire world to each other. Neither of them had many friends or acquaintances, so they were never left feeling lonely. They were used to having only each other.

But now Yukinari felt terribly alone. Since he had come to this world, he had met a wide variety of people, created relationships and made friends. Perhaps he had only been trying to fill the hole in his heart left by the loss of his sister, but all the same, before he knew it Yukinari found himself with more close friends than he could count on one hand. And now, that was what he was used to.

That was why he felt lonely now. As for Hatsune, who felt this was a betrayal... He could understand.

"Oh, my sister..."

But if Yukinari had changed, Hatsune seemed to have changed even more. Yes, she could be surprisingly childlike, but he remembered her as a basically kind girl. She had doted on her little brother, Yukinari. She had always been gentle to everyone; he had never seen her yell at or mock anybody.

He wondered what could have happened to make her the way she was now. Had something changed when she had been reincarnated? Or... maybe she

hadn’t changed. Maybe Yukinari was only just now seeing something that had been there all along.

“I...”

He thought back to their life together. From a rational point of view, they were two children who had been neglected by their parents; conventional wisdom might have taken them to be completely unhappy. Yet when it came to the relationship between just Yukinari and his sister, they were totally fulfilled.

“Yuki...”

He looked up when he heard his name. Dasa was standing in the doorway. She was dressed in her usual outfit, but in her right hand she held Derrringer, while in her left was a box of extra bullets. Both were things Yukinari had made and then left at the sanctuary.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah... I’m fine.” He made himself smile.

Dasa came over to the bench where Yukinari was sitting. She rested the sniper rifle against the wall, set the bullets on the ground, and sat down next to him.

“Ah...” Dasa blinked as if she had just thought of something. “The password...”

“Uh-huh.” Yukinari smiled ruefully.

On the way to the sanctuary Yukinari, Dasa, and Angela had settled on a password. Hatsune could turn into anyone at any time. Not just her face, but even her clothes and body. Someone they thought was an ally might be their enemy in disguise.

“I guess just bringing it up proves you’re all right, though.”

If the girl in front of him was just Hatsune in disguise, she wouldn’t even have known about the password. There was always the possibility that she had secretly substituted herself for Dasa immediately after they left the Schillings mansion, before they arrived at the plaza.

“I won’t forget Jirina’s pain,” Dasa said without hesitation.

“Red hot chili pepper,” Yukinari said, responding to the password.

Now they each knew that the other was who they claimed to be. And yet, an unnatural silence fell between them. Neither spoke.

Seated side by side on the bench, they looked not at each other but at the same little bit of the wall. Now that the weapons were ready, there was nothing for them to do but wait for Hatsune to arrive.

Then...

“Yuki...” Dasa, perhaps tired of the strange silence, sounded almost as if she had just thought of something. “I want to talk a little. May I?”

“Er, sure. Of course you can,” he answered, feeling Dasa’s hand edge closer to his own.

What am I acting so awkward about at this late date?

He and Dasa had often touched each other before. They would join hands on their travels, or he would embrace her when they slept under the same blanket. Yukinari saw Dasa as Jirina’s little sister, indeed as almost his own little sister. But this...

“And, uh, what did you want to talk about?”

“About the... world you come from... Yuki.”

This seemed very sudden. He and Dasa had never talked about this sort of thing before. Partly that was because they hadn’t had the chance, but maybe they had been subconsciously avoiding it. What good would it do now to think about his previous life? He couldn’t go back, and he couldn’t forget it, so in some ways it was best just not to think about it...

“What kind of world were you in, Yuki?”

“That’s a tough question...”

Now that the subject had come up, he found it difficult to explain. He knew he couldn’t just say that everything had been average, normal, but he didn’t think he had been a strange enough human being to warrant special attention, either. At least, that was how people around him had seen him—both him and Hatsune.

“Were you and... your sister... Hatsune... Were you good... friends?”

He didn’t say anything immediately. It was like she had seen straight through him. “Hatsune and I were...” A wide range of different words went through his mind, but none of them quite seemed appropriate. “My family... My mom got drawn into this weird religion, and my dad hardly ever came home from work. Looking back on it now... What happened to mom probably really hurt him.”

“Your... mother...?”

“Yeah. You already understand it from seeing the True Church of Harris, right? Religion itself isn’t inherently bad, but it can drive people insane if they’re not careful.”

“Yes...” Dasa nodded.

The True Church of Harris preached the love of God to the masses, but in secret they hunted down and captured the alchemists and forced them to help the Church do miracles. Those in positions of worldly power were framed for crimes they hadn’t committed, allowing the Church to expand its influence. Dasa was among those who had lost her family to religion.

“In our case,” Yukinari said, “nobody was killing anybody. But it got to where she only ever thought about the teachings of her religion and hardly ever came home. She would go to her church building and we wouldn’t see her or Dad for days at a time.”

This left Dasa silent.

“So... Well, Hatsune and I sort of became each other’s only family.”

They grew close to each other... Very close. Their family had become a mere shell; they had to hold each other up lest their hearts become as empty as their home.

“Yuki, did... you love your older... sister?”

“I loved her. Sure I did.” The words came easily to his lips. “She was my family, and you love your family.”

It couldn’t be said that he had hated his mother or his father. But then again, it couldn’t really be said that he had loved them, either.

Even though they were his family.

“No.” Dasa looked somewhat perturbed. “I mean... as a woman. Did you love your... sister as... a woman?”

Yukinari was lost for words. He wanted to laugh it off, asked how she could be so silly—but he couldn’t.

Yukinari and Hatsune: two children abandoned by their parents, who were the entire world to each other. She had been his sister, and he her brother. They had been parent and child to each other, they had been friends, they had been teacher and pupil—and they had been lovers. Yukinari and Hatsune knew that if they had each other, they had everything they needed.

And that was why...

That was why Hatsune and I...

“You’ve always abided by Jirina’s... wishes. Is it because... she was an older sister, too?”

Yukinari didn’t answer. How could he possibly? Maybe he had been trying not to think about it.

For a time, Dasa looked at him from behind her glasses.

“I loved my older sister,” she said. “And respected... her. But there was one... thing I always... resented.”

“You, Dasa? You resented Jirina?”

It was a sudden and altogether unexpected confession. As far as Yukinari knew, Dasa had revered Jirina. The two sisters didn’t always seem very similar, but perhaps that was all the more reason they were so close.

“You can never be better than... the dead,” Dasa said flatly.

“Better?” Had Dasa and Jirina been in some kind of competition?

“When my sister... died, she became something absolute within... you, Yuki.”

He said nothing.

“And you can’t overcome the... absolute.”

“That’s...”

They say memory is a beautifying force. People naturally want to forget what is painful or unpleasant. So when we look back on those who have died, we recall only the best things about them. Forgetfulness shaves away their rough edges, until the person becomes more pure in our memory than they ever were in life. They become ever more favorable to the person thinking back on them—indeed, they do become something absolute.

“If even my sister,” Dasa said, still holding Yukinari’s hand, “if even she was just a replacement for your Hatsune...”

“What...?”

“Then I was never even... in the fight.”

“No, that’s—”

—*not true*, he wanted to say, but couldn’t.

He couldn’t deny categorically that just behind Jirina had lurked the image of Amano Hatsune, whom he had loved most in the world. Throughout his previous life she had been the ideal woman to him, and he had never loved anyone else.

Yukinari had believed that his feelings for Jirina weren’t those of a man for a woman, but were merely gratitude for the life she had given him. But was that only because Hatsune had remained in some corner of his mind? Trying to salve the grief of losing her, had he sought and pursued someone who reminded him of her? But then, learning that that woman was not Hatsune, did he find that he could love no one more than his former sister? Perhaps that had led him to cut off all feeling for the opposite sex.

“But... I am... now.”

“Come again?”

“I can fight now. Fight with Hatsune Amano.”

“You can’t just—”

“Yuki.”

Dasa reached out, her warm little hands enclosing his cheeks. She was still just a young woman; if he had wanted to break out of her grip, he had the strength. Yet he found he couldn't move an inch.

First, the rim of her glasses bumped against his forehead.

And then her lips met his.

".....Mn." Somewhere in the back of her throat, Dasa made a sound, not quite a grunt and not quite a groan. Neither of them did anything else, simply feeling each other's lips and the warmth of their bodies pressed close to each other. The kiss was sudden, almost like an accident.

It really lasted only a few seconds. Maybe Dasa had been holding her breath with nervousness, because when she pulled her lips away, she almost bent double, pressing her hand to her chest and breathing deeply. It made her look more alluring than she ever had before—was it just that the kiss had shaken Yukinari that deeply? Or...

"Dasa..."

"I feel bad... doing that while Berta isn't... here. It feels unfair. But..." She sounded almost apologetic, not lifting her eyes. "But I'll fight. Not for your sake. For my own reasons, I'll fight with your sister. So you don't have to worry about... me. You don't have to... be concerned. I have a rival... in love, and I will... kill her. I have... my own... reasons... I'll steal... you from... her..."

Yukinari didn't speak.

"So, Yuki, you don't... have to... worry about me."

Then she said nothing more, but her breath remained ragged and quick. She seemed confused, as if even she didn't know what she was saying.

"I'll see you later," she said at last, standing from the bench. Maybe she now regretted saying all that she had said. Without a word, though, Yukinari reached out as Dasa left—almost fled—the room, and caught her hand. He pulled her back, rather forcefully. Dasa stumbled into Yukinari's chest.

"Yuki?"

He reached out, took the glasses off the perplexed young woman's face.

“Oh...”

She blinked in surprise. He put his hands on her cheeks to keep her from running again—and this time it was Yukinari who pressed his lips to hers.



●

She had known where the sanctuary was from the day she arrived in Friedland, but this was her first time visiting it. It had been rebuilt for Yukinari's use, but apparently it was the place where young women used to be offered up as living sacrifices to the erdgod.

Hatsune had carefully avoided going anywhere near it, lest she inadvertently run into Yukinari.

It was hardly that she didn't want to see him. In fact, it was the opposite. She longed to be reunited with her beloved younger brother, to embrace him. But now, so it seemed, he was worshipped as the local deity, surrounded by servants and sycophants. Hatsune hoped to meet him only after she had eliminated these vulgar distractions to the extent that she could.

She had hoped that by leaving his name in kanji at the scenes of her murders, she might startle him into voluntarily leaving behind all the evil people around him. But he had done just the opposite, basing himself in Friedland and trying desperately to protect its inhabitants.

And so she had decided to punish him. It had been so long since she had scolded her younger brother. Dear, sweet Yukinari. They had promised to live their lives together, and only together. Hatsune had poured all her love into him, and yet the moment he was out of her sight he forgot all about his older sister and went making friends with the people of this other world. This did not make her happy.

And thus she had decided to pick one of those who were relatively close to Yukinari and kill them.

She knew how kind he was, and how much pain this would cause him. She had seen how deeply shaken he appeared when she killed the girl with the gun the day before. He was so troubled, in fact, that he didn't even spare a hug for the sister with whom he was finally reunited, but only dove after the girl's body, as if to pick up some trash she had thrown away.

That only meant she would have to kill more of them. That, at least, was Hatsune's opinion. She would kill and kill and then kill some more. The thought

brought a smile to her face.

Yukinari would blame himself, no doubt. He would lament that he could not save them. He would be deeply wounded; he would suffer. And then, she was sure, he would turn to his dear older sister to escape the pain. Then, at last, she could hold him again. Her dear, sweet younger brother...

When she finally arrived at the sanctuary, she found it a rather unimposing place despite its name. It was large, yes, but it didn't look much different from your average warehouse. It didn't seem ornamented to look intimidating, nor was the architecture very complicated. There might, she supposed, be booby traps inside.

Hatsune, however, felt as happy as if she had come to some amusement park. She stood in the middle of the road that stretched out to the sanctuary and called in a singsong tone, "Yuki! My dear Yuuuki!"

She sounded like a child engaged in some delightful game.

"Your big sister has come to you, just like you asked!" She spread her arms out to her sides as she spoke. "Haven't I always done everything you've asked, my dear Yuki, ever since we were small? So come out, Yuki! Come out and see your big sister."

She was sure he could hear her, and so she waited. At length...

"...Hatsune."

Yukinari appeared from the sanctuary. Armed and ready.

He was carrying Durandall, of which she'd heard rumors in Friedland: a carbine with a bayonet. He must have created it using his angel powers. She had seen one once, when she'd caught and killed a member of the community watch unawares. The gun was obviously the product of Yukinari's particular interests; it made Hatsune smile even as she recoiled at the ugliness of the weapon.

Yes—now that she thought about it, Yukinari had had a model gun just like Durandall. She thought it was from some Western. She remembered the movie; they had gone to a theater together to see it. She had found the show a bit boring, but Yukinari—who had only been in elementary school at the time—had

been enraptured.

What does he mean, carrying around a toy like that?

Did he think he could kill her with it? A pitying smile flitted across Hatsune's face—but it vanished when a girl appeared behind Yukinari.

She was a small woman with silver hair. In fact, her hair was the same color as Hatsune's. Indeed, the set of her features even looked a little bit like that of Yukinari's sister. That must be the girl Dasa, the one who had drifted into Friedland at Yukinari's side.

"Ah... Now I see." Hatsune nodded to herself in recognition.

So that was who he'd traded her for. Looking to ease the disappointment of losing his beloved sister, Yukinari had found a girl who vaguely resembled her to keep around instead. That was all she was.

The girl herself, however, didn't seem to grasp that. She kept looking at Hatsune with a challenging glare. She had a gun in her hand, and she was poised for a fight. How impudent of her. A replacement ought to know her place.

"I'll have to kill her, just for good measure."

She didn't recall raising a younger brother who could be satisfied with some pale imitation. Now that the two of them were back together, Yukinari had no need of a replacement for her. At least, he shouldn't. She was confident that if she killed the girl, he would come to his senses.

"...Hatsune."

Yukinari muttered her name, coming closer. When he got about four meters away from Hatsune, he stopped. They couldn't have touched even if they had both stretched out their arms. It was more than close enough, however, for each to perceive the small changes in the other's face.

Hatsune found this vexing. It seemed to represent the relationship between them at that moment.

"I guess... it would be strange to say it's been a while," Yukinari said, his voice hesitant.

“Not at all. It has been a while, my dear Yuki.” She gave him a broad smile. “I so wanted to see you. For so long, I wanted to...”

“Me too,” he said, almost reflexively, but then he shook his head. “But given how things have turned out, I wish I’d never seen you again.”

“Why, what are you saying, my dear Yuki?” She looked at him quizzically. “Did you decide you don’t want to see your big sister anymore? But you’re the one who called me here. You’re so selfish...”

Yukinari opened his mouth to say something—but then he closed it again, looking somehow disappointed. She thought he looked distinctly unhappy. Was he really that sad about this?

Yukinari stood silently for a time, searching desperately for the right words. But finally, all he could come up with was:

“You said you would kill everyone, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Just because I made some friends without you?”

“Yes.”

She nodded, smiling. But Yukinari, in fact, seemed upset by this.

“Please, stop, Hatsune. Please—I’m begging you. It doesn’t matter how many people I have around me. My big sister is the most important thing in the world to me.” Then he looked at the ground. “...*Was* the most important thing.”

“Past tense?”

He didn’t answer, so Hatsune decided to take this in the way she found most convenient.

“That makes me very happy. You’re more important than anything in the world to me, too, my dear Yuki.”

“In that case—”

“So let’s—just the two of us, together—die again.” Her smile as she spoke was so sweet and bright.

After a very long time, Yukinari said, “What...?” He had a completely

dumbfounded look on his face; she took it for surprise. “H-Hatsune...?” He spoke as if he couldn’t believe the words coming out of his own mouth. “What do you mean... again?”

Apparently he hadn’t understood yet. That disappointed Hatsune very much. Perhaps dying had robbed Yukinari of his perspicacity. How much a person could change in such a short time. She concluded that the people of this world had been a very bad influence on Yukinari.

“No... You mean that fire...”

“Did you really do not know, my sweet Yuki?”

She looked at him as closely as she could. He looked like he might burst into tears at any moment.

“I set that fire.”

“Why?!” Yukinari’s voice was nearly a scream. “Why would you—”

“We were siblings. There was nowhere in that world that we could be happy, was there?”

However much, however deeply, they loved each other, society would never accept them. They would forever be branded aberrant. Especially when—

“I kept it a secret, but I... I was carrying your child, Yuki.”

“Wha—?!”

“When I realized that, I thought... You and me, and that child—there was nowhere on earth we could be truly happy. So I thought perhaps we could at least all die together. Then we could enter eternity together. We would never have to be apart. It’s true... That’s what I believed.”

Yukinari had frozen, his face pale. Hatsune smiled at him.

“Yes. It really was that simple. I wonder how you could have not noticed.”

He reflected on how foolish he had been. It was so simple...

“So, my dear Yuki, let’s die together. Once we stop time, we’ll be together forever. Our feelings won’t ever have to change. No one will have to come between us. We’ll be invincible. We’ll be two invincible lovers.”

Yukinari said nothing.

“But in order to do that, we have to get rid of the people who are too close to you. We mustn’t besmirch our eternity with impure things. If there’s someone around you, they might take you from me. So let’s die, somewhere where there’s no one else.”

Then Hatsune raised her right hand. A rapier emerged from her palm: first the tip, then the blade, and finally the hilt, which she grasped in her thin, white fingers.

“Our two spirals of time will come together into eternity. Like two cranes flying side by side, or two trees whose branches have grown together.”

Cranes were said never to part from each other once they had mated, and the image of the two trees was likewise a traditional expression for devoted lovers. Things which were two, but one. Phrases that referred to a man and woman whose love would endure forever. When she had first heard the expressions, Hatsune felt that a fog had lifted; it was as if the words had been created for her and Yukinari.

“Hatsune...” Yukinari was nearly groaning. “We’ve already died once. We aren’t siblings connected by blood in this world. We don’t need death to tie us together...”

In Hatsune’s estimation, this thinking was naïve in the extreme.

“But if we stay alive we might change our minds, or someone might come between us, right?”

In fact, just such a group of people had coalesced around Yukinari in this world. Even though he didn’t need anyone around him but her, nor she anyone but him.

“I’m telling you, that’s just—”

“If we die together, we don’t have to worry about that... right?”

She looked at her beloved brother, who seemed so at a loss, and smiled sweetly.

●

Yukinari found himself worried.

He had to bring down Hatsune. He knew that. Ever since he'd seen her stab Berta with his own eyes, there had been no more room for doubt. Hatsune was their killer. If he didn't do something about her, who knew how many more victims there would be?

And yet... Yet.

Hatsune was Yukinari's beloved older sister. And she was, most likely, the only other of "his kind" to be found in this world. The only other person possessing the powers of an angel but with their memories and sense of self intact. She had been his family; she shared his previous world.

So Yukinari worried whether, at the last extremity, his resolve would hold. He wondered, when he looked his sister in the eye, if he would be able to do what had to be done.

"Hatsune..."

He had loved her. As family. As a sibling. And as a woman.

He knew it had been a bad thing, and yet he didn't want to use the word "mistake." Hatsune had been the sole light in a life beset with a tormenting darkness, and he suspected he had been the same for her. But then the tenuous balance between them suddenly broke.

Amano Hatsune became pregnant.

It's said that the hormonal changes that occur when a woman becomes pregnant can drastically affect her personality. It's also said that young women are free to dream, but mothers must have their feet on the ground. Yukinari, as a man, obviously could not experience these psychological changes for himself. But finally their blaspheming of morals had led to the end of Yukinari and Hatsune's honeymoon.

The sin of a blood brother loving his blood sister: that was what Hatsune was so desperate to purge, in the form of a lovers' suicide.

Such, at least, was what Yukinari suspected.

"Dammit... Dammit!"

Was the abuse directed at his sister, or himself? It was certainly warranted, regardless. But—

“Hatsune!”

There was no going back now. There was no going home. He understood that with aching clarity.

Even as he pulled Durandall from his back, he moved toward Hatsune until he was at the most advantageous distance.

He just had to be careful not to get too close. Hatsune was using a sword. If he was near enough to use Durandall’s blade, he would be within range of her weapon as well. And Durandall was a gun—specifically, a carbine. It had a short barrel; it wasn’t accurate over long distances. It was chiefly designed to be easy to use, and it was unsuited to careful aiming.

Durandall’s strength as a weapon was that it could be utilized as a gun at any time. It had tactical flexibility. If he came too close, the gun part of the weapon would become ineffective. If they got close enough for their blades to meet, Yukinari would be at a disadvantage.

Confronted with this, Hatsune said, “What’s this? Dear Yuki.” She raised her arms as if she might give him a hug. She already held a rapier in her right hand; now her left palm glowed bluish-white, and soon she was holding another in that hand.

He was facing two rapiers.

What is she planning...?

Based on what he remembered from his previous world, rapiers were thin blades light enough to wield with a single hand, better for stabbing than cutting. Attacks with them were less a line than a point, and that left the user open when attacking. In order to guard against this vulnerability, fencing had developed an opening stance in which the body was held behind the sword while closing distance, leading into a lunge. Holding the sword in one hand and stretching the body out as far as possible was fundamental to this approach.

If a weapon was to be held in the off hand, it was usually a parrying dagger, or a small but tough blade called a main-gauche—something that would allow the

fighter to intercept the enemy's sword. It might be small, but it would be wide and difficult to break. Some even had special blades designed to entrap the opponent's weapon. A few such devices even appeared to have fangs.

It didn't matter. Holding a rapier in both hands was not very practical.

Or, it shouldn't have been.

Is it because she's an amateur fighter? But...

Hatsune was quite smart. She should have realized quickly how pointless it was to have a rapier in each hand.

And the distance...

Yes, and the distance. While Yukinari was carefully making sure he was at the optimal range, Hatsune had simply produced a couple of swords. She was watching Yukinari's movements, but not making any attempt to get closer to him.

Maybe an amateur was an amateur, even with angel powers.

For better or for worse, Yukinari had experienced real battle in this world—contests to the death—again and again. In kendo, you could get your black belt if you could defeat someone in combat. From that perspective, Yukinari was a very high-level fighter. A master among masters.

"In that case, I might as well finish this as quick as I can!"

Finish this absurd fight between brother and sister.

Hatsune's inexperience left Yukinari the possibility that he might overpower her without having to kill her, or so he hoped.

He took a step forward and cut with Durandall, throwing all his weight into the motion.

"Hrk!"

But Hatsune easily repelled the blow with the rapier in her left hand. The surprise threw Yukinari off-balance. Partly he was shocked by the strength with which she had met his attack, but he was also taken aback to see that the thin blade didn't crack under the assault from Durandall.

Maybe it was made of more than just tempered steel.

“My dear Yuki.” Hatsune closed the distance immediately, stabbing with the sword in her right hand. She was aiming for his heart, but Yukinari dodged. The tip of the rapier grazed his shirt; he stumbled back at the sensation of it.

Yukinari took deep breaths, trying to calm his pulse and breathing, which were both fast with astonishment and agitation. She was no beginner. Or, rather, although Hatsune’s attacks were simple, they were blindingly fast. Yukinari realized now that his sister, who had spent so long changing her face, might well be better than he was at using the power of physical reconstitution to alter her own body. Muscular strength. Nerve enhancement. Improved perception. She showed the ineconomy of movement of an inexperienced fighter, but even a beginner, with enough basic power, could rise to challenge a master. Even the most talented karate fighter couldn’t take on a bear or a tiger barehanded and hope to win.

And she’s got other advantages...

Hatsune was physically small. Most of Yukinari’s opponents had been at least as large as he was or larger—some had even been giant. Erdgods. Demigods. Xenobeasts. The missionary knights. And of course, the statues of the guardian saint. He could attack blindly and still bank on hitting something.

But Hatsune, in the body of a young woman, was a head shorter than Yukinari. He found it surprisingly difficult to fight someone who was noticeably smaller than himself. He could hardly hope to fight from his knees.

“Sweet, sweet Yuki.”

As Yukinari stood trying to size up their respective advantages, Hatsune closed in and struck again.

She was so fast. But her attacks were basic.

“I can dodge you when I know what’s coming!” Yukinari shouted as he evaded three successive blows.

“Is that so?” She looked quizzical. The words showed that she was nowhere near her limit. Yukinari’s shout had been something of a show, an attempt to encourage himself, but Hatsune spoke as casually as if they were chatting over

tea.

He couldn’t lose focus for a second. If he let his attention lapse for an instant, she might strike the fatal blow.

Yukinari grunted as he took the fourth strike. He raised his left hand and deliberately let the rapier stab it.

There was the pain, the shock, of having his hand pierced by steel. But Yukinari ignored it, pushing his left hand to the side. It took the sword with it, throwing Hatsune off her stance. That was Yukinari’s chance to strike with Durandall.

He felt something under the weapon. Probably her left shoulder, or thereabouts. The cut wasn’t deep enough to strike bone, but he felt it work through the flesh. This would prevent Hatsune from using her left arm...

“Why, my dear Yuki, that hurts.” As she spoke, Hatsune tossed aside the rapier in her right hand and clamped it over the wound in her shoulder. A bluish-white light, and the wound closed like a tear in some fabric.

“I see now...”

This was the first time he had fought another self-aware angel, and it made him realize just how inhuman, just how monstrous, he and his sister were. They could come back from nearly anything that didn’t kill them at a stroke. Cut off a hand or a leg, and they could simply regrow it. They could kill and kill and it would never end, could never end, an endless hell for the two of them alone. And what was more...

“My dear Yuki.” Hatsune produced a new rapier and began to attack again. She mostly stabbed at him, but sometimes, almost randomly, she would slice as well, so he couldn’t let his guard down. It was like a machine gun spitting a hail of bullets at him.

Yukinari didn’t sustain any serious injuries, but she grazed him repeatedly. And then, to his immense surprise, he felt his knees give out.

Somehow, he managed not to tumble to the ground.

“Wh-What the hell?!”

What had suddenly caused him to go so limp? He forced off a shot from Durandall to keep Hatsune at bay, then he retreated and tried to get a look at his body. Something strange had happened, there was no doubt. What in the world had it been?

He gasped. His wounds weren't healed. They had stopped bleeding, but they should have repaired themselves—yet there they were. He had been focused on Hatsune, not paying much attention to his healing processes, so he hadn't noticed.

What did this mean?

Hatsune stopped and spoke. "Oh, you've noticed?"

"What do you mean, noticed? Hatsune, what have you—" *Was this some trap?* "What have you done to me?"

"Oh, now I can't just go giving it away." She sounded as if she were chiding him for asking for the answers to his homework. "Try using your head."

"You've... You've interrupted my powers somehow."

"Certainly," Hatsune said with a nod. "Just like those people with the horns that I found in Friedland. I stopped them from moving the same way. There was some strange power controlling them."

"Horns—?"

She had to mean Ulrike and Yggdra's other familiars. *She'd stopped them from moving.* Ulrike and the others were in something like a coma—so that had been Hatsune's doing as well. But again, how...

"Is it... that sword?"

"Correct!" Hatsune said with a happy smile.

He had thought it was strange. She had to know Yukinari had a gun, and that she would need one, too, if she were going to fight him. Of course, unlike Yukinari, who had obsessively disassembled and reassembled his model guns, Hatsune didn't know much about the construction of such weapons. She wasn't likely to suddenly produce a Durandall or a Red Chili. But it was possible to make a single-shot weapon with nothing but a barrel and a firing device. An

angel could easily produce a series of such disposable weapons. It wouldn't exactly be a machine gun, but it would in practice be possible to fire successive shots.

And yet Hatsune hadn't done it. She knew Yukinari would have a gun, and yet she had deliberately confronted him with a sword.

That suggested her sword was special.

"I call it the Blood Rose," she said.

Now that she said the name, he noticed that, indeed, the hilt of the sword, which looked like a white cross, was worked with a pattern of roses red as blood. He had thought they were mere decoration, but he was wrong. They served some sort of purpose. Whatever they were, they could stop an angel's powers from functioning, and sever the connection between Ulrike and Yggdra.

Angels and familiars had something in common—spiritual power. Most likely, the sword was capable of doing violence to the places of spiritual power in anyone it struck. Or perhaps absorbing the spiritual power of its victims.

Blood Rose... blood... Holy Oil... I get it!

The crimson alchemical liquid was capable of absorbing and storing spiritual power. It also served as the angels' "blood." If it could be quickly cycled, it would absorb unstable spiritual power, causing changes in the waves and concentrations of such power.

Meaning, if he were struck with this blade, Yukinari wouldn't be able to heal himself as usual. Really, it would only slow down the function of his healing, but in light of the fact that Hatsune, also an angel, was capable of healing instantaneously, it could be the decisive difference.

Perhaps this was the great anti-erdgod weapon the True Church of Harris had ordered the alchemists to create. The problem of an opponent's speed and sheer physical strength would remain, but with that weapon a single person could potentially face down a xenobeast or a demigod.

"My dear Yuki..." Hatsune jumped at him, as sure a strike as if she had transformed into an arrow. Yukinari twisted out of the way, but the rapier stabbed him in his foot, which he hadn't been able to move in time.

“Hrgh...!”

“Dear, dear Yuki. You mustn’t lose your focus,” Hatsune said, smiling sweetly.

Yukinari reeled backward, and although he had escaped from the rapier, no matter how hard he concentrated, his wounds didn’t seem to heal. His powers were agonizingly slow to activate. It was all he could do to stop the bleeding.

This was bad. This was very bad.

“Dammit...!”

He hopped backward, opening distance. Yukinari was hard-pressed; he had been fighting a singularly defensive battle for some time now. If Hatsune had been more interested in finishing the fight, he might already be dead. It looked like Hatsune was still enjoying her long-awaited reunion with her brother.

“Sweet Yuki. I do love you,” Hatsune said placatingly as she came closer. She stabbed repeatedly with the rapier, left and right, almost like a hail of bullets. “With all my heart. Won’t you die with me?”

“Grrh! You—!”

He swept the strikes away and fired Durandall. He didn’t have time to aim carefully, but given the close range he was still able to plant the .44 Magnum bullet square in Hatsune’s chest.

She stumbled back, and a large red splotch like a blossoming flower appeared on her white dress.

But an instant later, like a clockwork doll, she sprang forward as quickly as she had retreated. Her dress was torn and stained with blood—no, with Holy Oil—but there was no sign of a wound on her exposed skin. It had vanished almost instantaneously.

“Hrk...”

The rain of blows began again. He couldn’t forestall her movements. He was somehow able to avoid taking any strikes to his heart, his neck, his head, or his other most vital places, but shallow gouges appeared in his arms and legs. His movements slowed, making it all the more difficult to respond to the continued attacks.

The gun wasn't having much effect. It would be one thing if he'd had an anti-personnel rifle that could shred a person to pieces from point-blank range, but even his Magnum was ultimately a handgun—it barely had the energy to blow Hatsune back, and her injuries healed immediately. Yukinari could see that it would hardly be useful even to buy him time.

Yukinari's weapon allowed him to both shoot and cut, and that should have given him more strategic options and with them the advantage—but things were not turning out the way he'd expected.

"My dear Yuki. Dear, sweet Yuki," Hatsune chanted, like a lullaby, like a spell, always attacking. Yukinari was on the back foot now; he had no opportunity to use either his gun or his blade. The two rapiers that he had dismissed as an amateur mistake early on now made terrifying sense. Hatsune didn't need to repel her enemy's attacks; hence a main-gauche or other defensive accessory was unnecessary. Neither did she need to reach in from outside her opponent's range to strike. Simply by lashing out with the Blood Roses, wounding her opponent a little bit at a time, she would ultimately emerge victorious.

All she needed to do was harry her enemy, and that was what the second rapier was for.

"Hrr... Gah..."

Slowly, oh so slowly, the swords chipped away at Yukinari. Several times he tried to force an opening for his gun, but either his shots went wide, or they landed and Hatsune immediately healed herself. Durandall's magazine was soon exhausted, and of course there was no time to reload.

Finally Yukinari could hardly hold himself up any longer; his legs gave out, and he collapsed where he was.

"Giving up already?" Hatsune asked, cocking her head quizzically. "In that case, I'm going to cut off your limbs, okay, Yuki?"

Her kindly-older-sister smile didn't slip for an instant as she spoke.

"Otherwise, you're just going to get violent again, aren't you? We really have to be *together* when we die this time, so I'm going to pierce us both through the head with the Blood Rose."

Logically, she was right. The brain was what allowed an angel to control its powers; stab it through with a sword that was specifically created to suppress those powers, and even an angel would certainly die.

“My dear Yuki. I love you,” Hatsune said, and raised her rapier.

This was bad. She was going to kill him.

But even as the thought occurred to him...

Boom.

“...What?” This time Hatsune was the one to sound uncomprehending. A second later, Yukinari’s vision was drenched with dripping blood—no, Holy Oil. He saw Hatsune collapse even as he rose to his feet.

“Hatsune...” Yukinari blinked. Then he turned around—and there was Dasa, Red Chili in hand.

●

Dasa rushed toward them.

She was carrying Red Chili. She had prepared Derrringer as well, but presumably the shot had come from this “sniper handgun.” Derrringer was powerful, and accurate over long distances, but it wasn’t built to track a moving enemy at close range.

Yukinari and Hatsune’s hand-to-hand battle had probably left Dasa without a shot until that moment. But then Yukinari had fallen down, and Hatsune had stopped moving. It wasn’t what Yukinari had wanted, but it gave Dasa an opening.

“Yuki... Are you all right...?!” She came to his side and reached out to help him up.

“Yeah... Mostly. I think.”

The wounds caused by the Blood Rose were slow to heal, but even so, they got better much faster than those of a normal human. At least, so he expected

—he would have to use his angel powers again to be sure.

“You saved my neck. I was hoping to finish things by myself, but...”

“S...orry,” Dasa said, eyes downcast.

“Don’t apologize. You really saved me. I appreciate it.” Without Dasa’s sharpshooting, Yukinari would probably be dead right now.

“Hatsune...” He turned to the shattered shell of his sister. He had made Dasa shoot her. He had made Dasa kill her. That much, he deeply regretted.

Dasa had declared that she would kill Hatsune for her own reasons, but Yukinari presumed she had said this in part so that she couldn’t go back on her word. By saying it to him, she firmed up her own resolve. In a different sense, Dasa probably didn’t hate Hatsune enough to genuinely want to kill her.

Dasa wasn’t very expressive, nor always socially adroit—but she was kind at heart. Yukinari knew that well.

Yukinari had said that he would be the one to kill his sister, but when it came to it, he couldn’t deny that he had felt some hesitation. As flawed as Hatsune’s logic had clearly been, she was still his sister and had still loved him—enough to want to die with him.

But that was all the more reason why it should have been Yukinari who finished her off.

After all, Yukinari had been part of the reason Hatsune broke. He had loved her as well, so much so that it wasn’t clear which of them had sought the other first, and once he had accepted that they were something more than brother and sister to each other, Yukinari bore at least half the blame. It should have been his to finish what he had started.

And he had left Dasa to do it. It was pathetic, and he felt terrible.

“Is it... over?” Dasa asked, looking at the fallen Hatsune.

“Yeah. A shot through the brainpan? I’m pretty sure...”

Unlike a sword, a wound from a bullet did more than simply disrupt bodily systems with a foreign object. Particularly with the sort of soft-point rounds loaded into Red Chili, the bullet dispersed its kinetic energy by shattering. The

tip of the bullet was hardly larger than the tip of a pinky finger, but a direct hit to the skull could effectively produce a fist-sized hole. It would be more than enough to shred the brain within, leaving nothing intact to direct the body.

“Oh, hey. I guess Angela’s still chained up, isn’t she?” Yukinari said. He needed something else to think about right now, desperately, or he would only sink deeper into depression.

He held Dasa’s shoulder—or rather, leaned on her for support as they returned to the sanctuary.

“Let’s grab her and go home. Friedland’s waiting for—”

That was as far as he got.

He thought he saw something move at the edges of his vision, but when he glanced over his shoulder, he didn’t see anything in particular. There was nothing there.

There was nothing there.

Including Hatsune’s body.

“H-Hatsune...?”

“Are you surprised?” she asked. She was sitting amongst the branches of a large tree nearby.

She was no dream and no illusion. Her plain dress was spattered with blood—or rather, Holy Oil. Dasa’s shot had obviously landed. In the head, most likely. Otherwise, why would she have collapsed?

Yukinari gulped. Hatsune’s face—there was a gunshot wound in her forehead. It was unmistakable. There were even traces of Holy Oil dribbling from it. And yet Hatsune was alive. She was moving and talking.

What was going on here...?

“I knew you use guns, my dear Yuki.” Hatsune smiled as if she were revealing how to do a magic trick. “So I replaced the bones in my head with titanium.”

“Defensive plates...?”

Titanium alloy was a metal originally prized for its superb defensive

properties. It was light, resistant to damage, and due to its combination of rigidity and viscosity as a metal, it did well dispersing the impact from gunshots.

It was unlikely that Hatsune was aware of the precise protective qualities of titanium, but its lightness and ability to endure harsh environments led to its frequent use in strengthening human internals—for example, in the form of pins used to hold together broken bones. Perhaps she had figured that if it was good enough for a bone, it was good enough for an entire skull.

Yukinari really had been naïve. His opponent was the same as he was, in every possible way. Her abilities as an angel, her knowledge from their previous world—Yukinari and Hatsune had no equals except each other. In other words, the superiority Yukinari had possessed before was now gone.

But...

“Here,” Hatsune said. “You should have aimed here.” She was pointing at her eye. She was right: a bullet to the eye would have had a good chance of destroying the soft flesh and reaching the brain behind it.

“You’re right,” Yukinari said. He gave a little push, hefting himself off Dasa’s shoulder. He took a wide stance as he looked up at Hatsune. “I was naïve. I underestimated you.”

“Yuki? What’s wrong, dear brother?”

“On top of that, I let Dasa do my dirty work.”

“Yuki...?” Dasa looked at him in surprise, but he was focused entirely on Hatsune.

“This time I’m coming at you with everything I’ve got. Get ready, *dear sister*.”

Yukinari stepped forward and focused his concentration. Perhaps the effects of the Blood Rose were wearing off, because other than a moment’s hesitation in a corner of his heart, the transformation went smoothly. With every step he took, the light covered more and more of him, enveloping his body. From his toes to his knees. From his knees to his waist. From his waist to his chest, and then to his head, the blue steel armor covered him, until finally a line ran across his back and wings with feathers like crystal appeared. The heat produced by physical reconstitution radiated from him in a haze.

The Bluesteel Blasphemer.

Nightmare of the Harris Church, protector of Friedland.

A superhuman capable of bringing down even the gods.

“Is this the famous ‘Blue Angel’?”

“Yeah. I’ll be able to use my full power this way.”

By enclosing himself in a sort of “mold,” Yukinari could focus all his spiritual power on physical reconstitution without having to worry about retaining his own form. The armor also provided a boost to his defense in hand-to-hand combat and would help him resist the Blood Rose.

He should have assumed this form to begin with. Even if it meant meeting his sister in an inhuman form—he should have ignored his qualms and fought with everything he had.

I assume Hatsune can do the same thing, though...

So he had no time to waste. Yukinari dropped to one knee, planting his right hand on the ground.

Physical reconstitution. He was creating something he had already made once, so it was easy.

Hatsune looked startled.

Yukinari plunged his fingers into the earth, seeking sediment with which to build before withdrawing the completed object and setting it at his feet. It was long and thick—an anti-armor rocket. He had used one to defeat the statue of the guardian saint that Arlen’s unit had brought.

Hatsune was capable of healing herself. Yukinari had no equivalent to the Blood Rose—so his only option was to extinguish her in a single fell swoop. This was not the sort of weapon one would normally use against an individual opponent, but against an angel who could continually heal herself so long as she had spiritual power remaining, there was no such thing as overkill.

“Okay, Hatsune, get r—”

“Yuki? Sweetheart?” Hatsune, still smiling, was looking at him in mild

puzzlement from the tree. Her whole body began to exude a bluish-white light. All of it. Chances were that she, like Yukinari, was abandoning her human form in search of something better to fight with.

But...

“You know... This body. It was created in order to defeat you, my dear Yuki. So the True Church of Harris showed me a number of different weapons. There were no guns, but there really was quite a range. They showed me how they were built, too.”

The light spread to tree she was sitting on. No—more than that. Even the earth around its roots was caught up in a vortex of the light of transmutation, gathering around Hatsune. This was no simple physical reconstitution. She must be—

“Hatsune...!”

The earth itself gave a great roar. Hatsune’s act of reconstitution spared not even the sky in its lust for material. Yukinari quickly tried to fire the rocket he had created, but the earth blocked his vision, and the whirling air kept him from taking careful aim.

The world turned gray. He could see a bizarre silhouette looming behind the curtain of dust.

Yukinari reeled. The storm ceased as suddenly as it had started. And then...

“I’m ready now, my dear Yuki.”

It was no longer Hatsune who was speaking to him. It was something in a humanoid shape with metal skin. As far as it went, that made it similar to Yukinari’s Bluesteel Blasphemer form. But Hatsune’s transformation went beyond mere armor.

She had changed her entire body. She was five—no, maybe six meters tall. Perhaps it was all the earth she had consumed in this transformation that accounted for the crater more than ten meters in diameter that surrounded her. The metal giant stood at the bottom of it.

“A guardian saint statue...?!”

Or rather, a variant of one—an evolution. The basic design was much the same as the statues; the biggest change was from the chest upward. It didn't have the statues' normal head, but rather a profusion of steel pipes folding into a ball, at the center of which was Hatsune's face. The appearance was as if the giant had swallowed her.

No, wait... This is...

It might have been made of metal, but it looked very much like an erdgod or demigod. One that had grown exponentially in size. Hatsune was presumably controlling it as the core.

Hatsune's face began to sink into the giant, replaced by yet more armor. But as she disappeared, she said:

"Now, my dear Yuki, let's continue."

"Hrgh...!" Yukinari didn't wait another second before firing his rocket. But the metal giant dodged with an agility out of all proportion to its size. In fact, it reached out its hand and pressed the cannon against its palm.

There was a great crunching of steel on steel as the front half of the barrel crumpled. It was a disposable weapon good for only one shot, but Hatsune didn't know that; she wanted to make sure he couldn't use it again.

"Whoa!" Yukinari tossed the cannon aside and scrambled backward, trying to escape the giant's hand as it grabbed at him. The palm, several times larger than a human being, could practically have passed for heavy machinery by itself. Just to be grabbed by it would have been enough to crush a normal human. Even in his Bluesteel Blasphemer form, he wasn't sure he could withstand it.

There was a roar of splitting air as the massive hand closed on nothing. Yukinari tried to put more distance between himself and his opponent, but the giant pursued him with remarkable speed. Yukinari danced through the air, but he was unable to evade the huge hand.

In a flash, he produced gunpowder on his palm. He faced the incoming appendage with his right hand outstretched, using his left to keep the gunpowder in place. The moment the metal hand touched him, he detonated it.

There was an explosion, his hand and the giant's blown apart from each other. It was explosive reactive armor: the force of the blast helped blunt the impact of the giant's hand while at the same time allowing him to get some space. The idea had come to him in a rush, but it seemed to have worked.

"She's so fast..."

Because of the giant's appearance, he had mistakenly assumed that its movements would be like those of a statue of the guardian saint. But this was something entirely different.

Guardian saint statues made very quick individual movements, but it wasn't possible to connect them smoothly. Each movement was sent to the tuning forks on the statue's back via control melodies, agitating the Holy Oil within the statue and causing it to move. It was like a puppet controlled with sound instead of strings.

Movements that had been determined ahead of time could be executed readily, but once a statue had to react to a changing situation, the time it took to decide on the orders, translate them into sound, communicate them, and then for the statue to react made it a much more tenuous process.

But Hatsune's metal giant lacked any of those flaws. Hatsune was its brain, controlling the huge body directly. Yukinari didn't know exactly how the thing moved, but it seemed to be somehow directly related to Hatsune's movements, like a sort of powered exoskeleton.

"That ain't very fair!" It was huge, powerful—and yet fast. It didn't seem to provide him any opening.

Yukinari tried to get some distance, but with its massive stride, the giant could catch him up easily. He tried to zig and zag, using nearby plants for cover, but it didn't bother the giant. Any trees in its way it broke in half—or simply dissolved.

Yes: the giant could use Hatsune's powers. That meant it could heal most damage that was done to it, or produce a sword or spear should the mood take it.

Maybe I could use physical reconstitution to make a pit or something? No, it's no use.

When Angela's missionary unit had attacked Friedland, Yukinari had found a pit trap to be useful against a statue of the guardian saint. But that had been exactly because it was no more than a puppet being controlled from afar. With Hatsune, he could dig a five-meter pit and she would probably just climb out of it. It might buy him a modicum of time... but he would have to stop moving in order to prepare it, and could well be attacked in the meantime.

What do I do, then...?

An instant's hesitation—a catastrophic mistake. The gigantic metal hand grabbed him.

"Gaahh!"

The armor in which he had encased himself gave an ear-splitting screech; he could feel the hand pressing down even from within his suit. He thought he could hear his own bones creaking.

This was bad. If he were to be crushed, it would take a very long time to heal himself. More than enough opportunity for Hatsune to stab him through the head with the Blood Rose.

"Yuki...!" Dasa fired Red Chili, but against the metal armor the handgun meant nothing. It left a small scuff, barely. If she had been using Derrringer, which had been designed to deal with armored opponents—the statues of the guardian saint, specifically—then things might have been at least a little different. Unfortunately, Dasa had no time to go back and fetch her Derrringer from the sanctuary.

She let off six shots in the blink of an eye, an expression of despair coming over her face. She fished extra rounds out of her pocket, but it spoke to how panicked she was that she could hardly load them, instead dropping them on the ground.

"Yuki... Yuki...!"

"Get... Get away!" Yukinari shouted, but Dasa didn't listen. Instead she ran toward the giant's foot and flung Red Chili aside. She began beating on the foot with her fists. Obviously, she couldn't so much as scratch the metal that way. She had gone half mad seeing Yukinari about to be killed.

“Excuse me? You’re in the way.” The giant kicked its foot in annoyance, sending Dasa flying through space.

“Dasaaaaa!”

The blow carried her several meters, until she landed among the branches of some nearby trees. She appeared to be alive—because she had been so close to the foot, it was less like being kicked and more like being thrown—but all she could do was tremble amongst the branches, unable to move.

“You need to die first,” Hatsune said. “I won’t let you die together with my dear Yuki.” Then she raised the giant’s right hand. A single strike from it would surely kill the other girl.

“Stop! Stop, Hatsune! Dasa isn’t—”

“Hush. You need only have eyes for me, sweet Yuki.” She was smiling as she spoke.

And then—

A gunshot rang out.

At the same time, sparks exploded from the giant’s shoulder.

Dasa hadn’t fired, nor had the bullet come from Red Chili.

It was a Derrringer.

And the line of fire... seemed to come from the direction of Friedland.

“It can’t be...” Immediately, Yukinari looked toward the observation platform.

His sanctuary sat in the place that was once home to the ritual, the ceremony in which living sacrifices were offered up to the erdgod. An observation platform had been built not far away so the priests could make sure everything went off smoothly. That was where the shot had come from.

He looked, his vision enhanced by his Bluesteel Blasphemer form, and he could just barely make out a familiar shape.

“Arlen?!”

He could see Fiona beside Arlen, as well. She must have been there to help him, because she appeared to be holding an extra Derrringer.

It looked like there were two more people who weren’t going to listen to what he said...

I’m not one of your believers, so I don’t have to follow your orders!

He could practically hear Arlen’s words in his ears.

Arlen couldn’t shoot nearly as well as Berta, of course. But for better or for worse, there was no missing a target this big. Arlen planted another round into the giant’s shoulder, and then Fiona handed him the second gun.

Maybe it was because he kept shifting position, but his aim wasn’t very consistent; he would hit the creature in the head, then the shoulder. Then he would miss with a shot...

But no matter. He had stopped Hatsune from crushing Dasa. In fact, Hatsune kept having to move right and left to dodge the bullets, using her left arm to cover her chest and then her head—in other words, the places where the machine was joined to her body. It seemed like it was causing her great deal of trouble.

She might have been able to ignore Dasa’s Red Chili, even from close range, but Derrringer’s sniper rounds appeared to nettle her. She was taking care to evade or defend against them.

“No way...”

Still clutched in her right hand, Yukinari focused on the sparks. Suddenly, he realized he could see tiny holes in the armor all around the giant’s body.

Derrringer uses armor-piercing rounds. That’s why...

As we’ve said, Derrringer was originally designed to counter the statues of the guardian saint; hence it was created with anti-armor properties. Due to the

extremely long barrel, the explosive power from the charge could be converted into muzzle velocity without any waste, and the tips of the bullets also had a pointed, armor-piercing shape and smooth surface. Thus, they were capable of making holes in the giant's armor even from a great distance.

Arlen tenaciously continued sniping. At a glance, it looked like he was merely making sparks fly off the giant's armor, but in fact he was slowly but surely producing a series of tiny holes. And since Hatsune had to defend against the assault, she had to put off killing Dasa or Yukinari.

It was unlikely that the giant was equipped with any long-range weaponry. So even if the sniper shots weren't doing serious damage, her armor was exposed to a unilateral attack.

Not all of the sniper shots pierced the giant's armor. Some came in at too shallow an angle and simply bounced off. Others only scratched the surface.

But this giant, mobile humanoid contraption that it was, did not have perfectly uniform armor. There were presumably places that could be destroyed by Derrringer, such as the joints, or the organs that were cycling Holy Oil to help it move. Weak or vital points. Hatsune certainly wouldn't want any of those to be damaged. Yukinari assumed she could repair them, but she would be vulnerable while doing so.

This turned out to be a spectacular way of stopping Hatsune cold despite her having the powers of an angel, which should have made her more potent than any human being. No matter how large something was, the person controlling it could only focus on one thing at a time.

"Well, all right then." Yukinari twisted around, placing a hand on one of the giant's fingers.

He used physical reconstitution—or rather, simple dissolution.

The finger went limp, its joints destroyed. Yukinari forced his way out of the hand's grip. He moved to the arm, then grabbed onto the giant's chest. He dissolved the top layer of armor there as a starting point, then went on breaking things down. Hatsune immediately tried to repair herself, but with Arlen peppering her with sniper rounds, she couldn't muster enough focus to stop Yukinari.

Using his powers of physical reconstitution, Yukinari began to bore into the metal giant. The creature twisted, attempting to pluck him out, plunging its hand into its own wound, but the metal monster lacked the flexibility of living flesh. Its hand got caught on its own armor and couldn't reach him.

What a strange feeling, Yukinari reflected briefly. He was practically among the monster's organs. He was literally inside Hatsune's body.

If Hatsune were to use all her angel powers in reverse—essentially, to focus everything she had on dissolution—then she and Yukinari both would be turned to dust.

That meant he had to end this before the idea occurred to her. At length...

"Hatsune."

The feel of the "digging" changed. Yukinari forced himself into the space his hand had found—and there was Hatsune's face. Her body was all but buried in a mess of metal pipes, several of which pierced her flesh. Perhaps, by sharing Holy Oil with this beast, she was able to extend her senses to the giant itself.

She was utterly unable to resist. The structure she had created to control the giant was also her cage. Of course, she could attempt to remove her arms and legs from the giant by force, but at this range Yukinari would never allow her to do it.

"Hatsune..." Yukinari reached out and brushed aside her bangs, her forehead slick with sweat. It was an achingly familiar face; his sister as she had looked when they were young. He stroked her lovely cheeks and forehead tenderly—and then he brought up the Red Chili he had formed in his left hand and pressed the barrel to Hatsune's head.

The chamber was loaded with an armor-piercing round. He had triple-charged the shot, using three times as much gunpowder as normal. This bullet would cut through anything, titanium or not. Even if the bullet was somehow stopped, the shockwave wouldn't be.

He cocked the hammer.

"Hatsune... I'm sorry."

He wanted those to be his last words to her. But then...

“...Mn. Thank you.”

She spoke at the same instant that the hammer was coming down, that the gun was firing.

Yukinari was shocked. Why had she said that? But his question could not stop the gun.

The gunshot roared inside the metal giant, reverberating from every surface. At the same instant as blood sprayed out of the back of Hatsune’s head, the giant went limp, slowly collapsing to its knees before it began to fall apart piece by piece.

With a series of great crashes, its armor came off and its structure began to disintegrate, the pieces of it falling apart around Yukinari’s ears. He dragged Hatsune out from her place at the heart of the giant machine, and atop what was now a mountain of metal junk, he asked: “Why? Why...? Why would you say thank you? I knew you must have been brainwashed...”



“Who... me...? Of course not...” The words dripped hesitantly from her lips, along with blood-like Holy Oil. The red liquid leaking from her eyes, ears, nose, and mouth was a sign of how severely she had been injured by the shockwave as it passed through her—but miraculously, she still retained a measure of consciousness.

“I just had... poison... in me...”

“What...?”

“My life in this world... was only ever going to be... six months or so.”

She had made her decision to die once—but then she had been brought back to life in this world. Ordered to kill her beloved brother, and with only six months to live at that. And so...

“I thought it might be nice... if we could die together...”

Was she talking about their previous world? Or this one?

“You could have just neutralized it with your angel powers!”

“I couldn’t... It was mixed into the Holy Oil... flowing through my body...”

“No...”

“Don’t make... that face.” Hatsune smiled, her features covered in blood. “The best thing for me... would have been to die with you, my dear Yuki... But if that’s not possible... then, at least to die by your hand...”

“That’s ridiculous...”

“Yes... I suppose it is...”

Hatsune convulsed. Or was that laughter?

“Sweet Yuki... I died in that world... and only my soul came here, right? I was reborn into a new body, wasn’t I...?”

“Yeah. That’s what it sounds like.”

“What about my baby...?”

“What?”

“Our child... I wasn’t able to give birth to it, but do you suppose... it’s been

reborn here... too...?”

Yukinari found himself unable to speak. He had never even considered it. But if babies—if fetuses—had souls, too...

“If it... has... then, Yuki... If you find that child... make it happy... the way you made... me happy.”

“Hatsune—”

“Tell it... its mother says... sorry.”

There was nothing more Yukinari could say. He hated himself for not having known. He was angry at himself for having been unable to do anything.

“My dear Yuki... My dear, sweet... Yuki...”

It seemed the miraculous time they had been granted was almost up; Hatsune’s voice was fading.

“A sister...” A soft voice spoke suddenly. “...ought to be separated from her brother one day.”

“Dasa...”

The girl with the glasses looked expressionlessly down at Hatsune—at the angel who looked so much like her. Her words may have sounded ruthless, but — “You’re... right. I’ll... sleep, now...” For some reason, Hatsune was smiling. “I’m sorry.”

Those were the last words she spoke. Just as she had said she would, she closed her eyes as if sleeping, and then ceased to move. Even through his armor, Yukinari could feel the warmth seeping out of her, her spiritual power dispersing.

“Dammit...”

This word of regret was the only one he could summon. What Hatsune had done was unforgivable, and her logic was something he could never accept. And yet, she had been his family, the person he had loved most, and the only other one like him in this world. How could his heart not ache to have her torn away from him again?

Why hadn’t they been able to speak differently in this brief life she’d been given here? Why hadn’t they been able to live differently?

Wracked with regret, all Yukinari could do was weep.

●

It was two days later that Berta regained consciousness. Ulrike and the other familiars of Yggdra, whether because Hatsune was now dead or because the effect had a built-in time limit, also began moving again.

The murder victims, though—the townspeople Hatsune had killed. They, of course, didn’t come back. Hatsune was buried by the sanctuary, as a nightmarish killer, the people of the town never learning the truth. The story Yukinari told the civilians was that he had used his glory as a god to “seal” her away so that the awful murderer would never return.

It took time, but Friedland slowly returned to normal. And then, three days later...

“I’m sorry for calling you all here so suddenly.”

Yukinari was in the reception room of the Schillings mansion, surrounded by familiar faces. Dasa, Berta, Fiona, Veronika, Arlen, Hans of the community watch—and now Angela, who had begun to obey what Yukinari told her to do. He looked around at all of them before he spoke again: “I’m going to fight the True Church of Harris.”

Fiona and the others looked at each other.

“Fight?” the deputy mayor asked on behalf of the group. “You mean... do more than you have so far, just rebuffing them when they attack?”

“That’s right. I’m not saying I’m going to run off and attack the capital or anything. But I am going to do more than just turtle down. I’m going to gather the power to purposefully resist the Church, and when the opportunity presents itself, I’m going to fight them.”

“And what’s brought about this change of heart?”

“Revenge. Or, well... I just want to hit back,” he said firmly.

“Yukinari...” Fiona looked weary. To the people in this room, unlike to the rest

of the villagers, Yukinari had explained, sparing no detail, the connection between himself and Hatsune and what had really happened in that last battle. So on the one hand, it was easy enough for them to imagine what might motivate him to revenge.

“That’s not true. Yuki made this decision for everyone’s sake,” Dasa said.

“Dasa,” Yukinari said.

“It’s a bad habit of his.” She looked up at him. “He’s only trying... To make it easier to let... you go.”

“What...?” asked Berta, surprised.

Dasa looked around again, then went on. “If he claims he’s doing this for his own revenge, he can go... without any of you getting... involved.”

“I kind of figured as much.” Veronika sighed and shook her head. “If there’s one thing this incident makes clear, it’s that the Harris Church isn’t going to hold back trying to kill you, Yukinari. It’s not like it was with you, Arlen Lansdowne, or you, Angela Jindel. Even the people of Friedland are going to be considered expendable from here on out.”

“That’s...” Arlen and Angela looked at each other.

The Missionary Order had ultimately come to this town in order to convert its populace—to make them into followers of the True Church of Harris. They had not tolerated any resistance, but neither had they been eager to murder civilians.

“The teachings of the True Church of Harris might be perfectly valid,” Arlen said. “But the church that’s been built upon them—the people who run it—they end up making decisions that kill people.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Yukinari said with a sad smile. “I don’t know what the latest Dominus Doctrinae is like, but I don’t think he has the right to teach anybody or offer anyone salvation. That’s my take, anyway.”

If the True Church of Harris had been a real religion—teaching people the right way to live, holding out a hand to help them to salvation—if that had been their real mission, then they should have saved Hatsune. Should have told her

to abandon her fixations from her previous world and live in peace. Yet, though they saw that there was a sick soul before them, instead of trying to save her, they tried to take advantage of her.

And such people controlled this world's largest religious organization. That had to be dangerous. Who knew what merciless and underhanded things they might do next in their attempts to stop Yukinari, to say nothing of his supporters in Friedland? Yukinari didn't intend to simply roll over and let them have their way.

Then there was the possibility that similar things would happen in other towns where erdgods were venerated. In order to bolster its prestige and increase the number of its followers, the True Church of Harris was prepared to arm itself and to send that armed force wherever it could. Surely other towns would resist, as Friedland and Rostruch had done.

Yukinari didn't want to let any more Friedlandians die.

It wasn't just Friedland: he didn't want to see any more people killed on account of the Church. But no matter how hard he tried to protect everyone, he had no way of defending against attacks like the one the Church had launched with Hatsune. That was why...

"As long as we're fighting an organization, the resistance needs to be organized as well," Veronika said.

"You're right," said Yukinari. "That's why I'm going to go from area to area raising forces, and then I'll try to resist the capital. It's also true, though, that it was the events with Hatsune that gave me the idea. So this is a private battle, too, spurred on by personal enmity. You all know that, so you all—especially you, Arlen and Angela, because you're knights of the Missionary Order—have the right to ignore what I say. Fiona, if you don't want the people of this town to get caught up in my little war, feel free to refuse."

"Is that what you've been thinking?" Fiona nodded, as if it finally made sense to her.

"If we're going to make our move, we should do it as soon as possible. I'm sorry to hurry you," he said to the collected audience, "but I'd appreciate if you could tell me by tomorrow morning whether you're going to join me in this or

stay out.” Then he left the room.

As he walked down the hallway, cold air and twilight filtering in through the window, Yukinari let out a small sigh.

“Yuki.”

He turned to see Dasa leaving the room behind him and coming his way.

“Dasa... I’m sorry.” He looked vacantly out the window as he spoke.

“Yuki...?”

“In the end, I’m putting my own emotions ahead of protecting you.”

Protecting Dasa: it was supposed to be the one and only thing guiding Yukinari’s actions in this world. But now he was placing the protection of many over the protection of this one.

“Yuki...” Dasa came up to stand beside him and reached out her hand.

“Dasa.”

“Yuki. I love you.” She stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him.

They stayed like that for a long moment. Then she said, “I’m... happy. If I can help with what you want... to do, that makes me... happy.” She backed away from him again and went on: “Yuki. I’m not... your little sister. I’m not just a child who always needs... your protection. I will help you... for my own reasons... For my own happiness. If you want to care... for me, if you want to make me happy... then let me help you.”

She seemed to be declaring that they were partners, equals. That she no longer needed him to watch over her constantly.

For a time, Yukinari looked into Dasa’s eyes. Then:

“Sounds good. The two of us together. Until death do we part—no.” He laughed a little and corrected himself. “Even when we part at death, we’ll be together.”

“...Mn.” Dasa nodded, blushing ever so slightly.

They had no way of knowing how things would be twenty years from that night.

How the Frontier Alliance, led by Yukinari, at the end of a grueling war with the royal army, which was completely under the thumb of the True Church of Harris, would finally reach accord and peace.

How at that time, the alchemists and the existence of the Founder, the first homunculus, would come to light, sending shockwaves throughout the world. How Yukinari and Dasa would be responsible for a wholesale change in this world's values.

No, they couldn't know yet. All that was in the future.



Afterword

Hello there! Light novelist Sakaki, at your service.

Today I bring you Volume Four of *Bluesteel Blasphemer*.

.....

.....Um.

What with this and that, we rather suddenly decided to call a halt to the series with this volume (sweats). That meant strong-arming the story a little bit... I hope you'll forgive me.

Please don't ask for details. I might cry. Me! A grown man!

But setting that aside.

Major spoilers below! I recommend you stay away until you've finished the book.

Whenever you're doing a series like this, you keep one eye on public opinion (i.e., the readers) as well as the various people involved in the books, and massage the setting and story based on their reactions. For better or for worse, with a light novel series that's going to span several volumes and be published over the course of more than a year, if you determine things too strictly in advance, you can end up tying your own hands and not leaving yourself a way out.

To be very blunt, if a series sells well, you can easily run to ten or twenty volumes—and if it doesn't, in the worst-case scenario you can wind up with

things ending after the first volume. I've been in the light novel business for over fifteen years now, and I've seen it happen plenty of times. Heck, I've seen it happen to *me* plenty of times.

Under the circumstances, there are a few things that I deliberately left vague. One of them is, in fact, Dasa's past (?).

As far as Yukinari's older sister, Hatsune, I had always planned for her to be essentially the final hurdle before the "last boss." That's one reason why the prefatory scene of Yukinari's death was not the traffic accident so beloved of Other World Reincarnation Cheat Harem stories.

Incidentally, I've occasionally had readers say, "Dasa is obviously the reincarnated Hatsune, right?" To which the series' poor author (namely me) can only reply, "Huh? Really?"

When it comes to Dasa, I didn't start out with a very clear idea of her past; truth be told, at first I barely even knew what she looked like other than that she was a "*meganekko*," or girl with glasses. I vaguely recall that I imagined her to look "plain," and that at one point she was going to have brown hair.

Then I got the character designs, and wouldn't you know it, Dasa had the same silver hair as Yukinari.

I suppose some authors might have gotten upset that the design was different from their imagination, but the illustrator knows what "pops" in an image better than I do, and when I receive suggestions like this, I usually follow the artist (unless, of course, something about the art hopelessly conflicts with some plan I have for the story).

So I basically thought, *Ooh, cute!* and bam. Dasa had silver hair.

But then, so did Yukinari. That seemed to make readers suspect that silver

hair was the proof someone was a homunculus. I suspect that's where the "Dasa = Hatsune" theory started.

Well! At first I thought to myself, *How about we run with that?* Dasa's past was already sort of a blank slate, so I played around with it a bit. But I eventually realized that if Yukinari's older sister was supposed to be very nearly the last boss, then "Dasa = Hatsune" presented some problems.

What to do, then? After much thought, I decided to take the risk of deliberately not spelling it out.

I wonder what my readers' reactions will be.

Ichirou Sakaki 2016/4/6



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Bluesteel Blasphemer Volume 4

by Ichirou Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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