

NOVEL 12

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FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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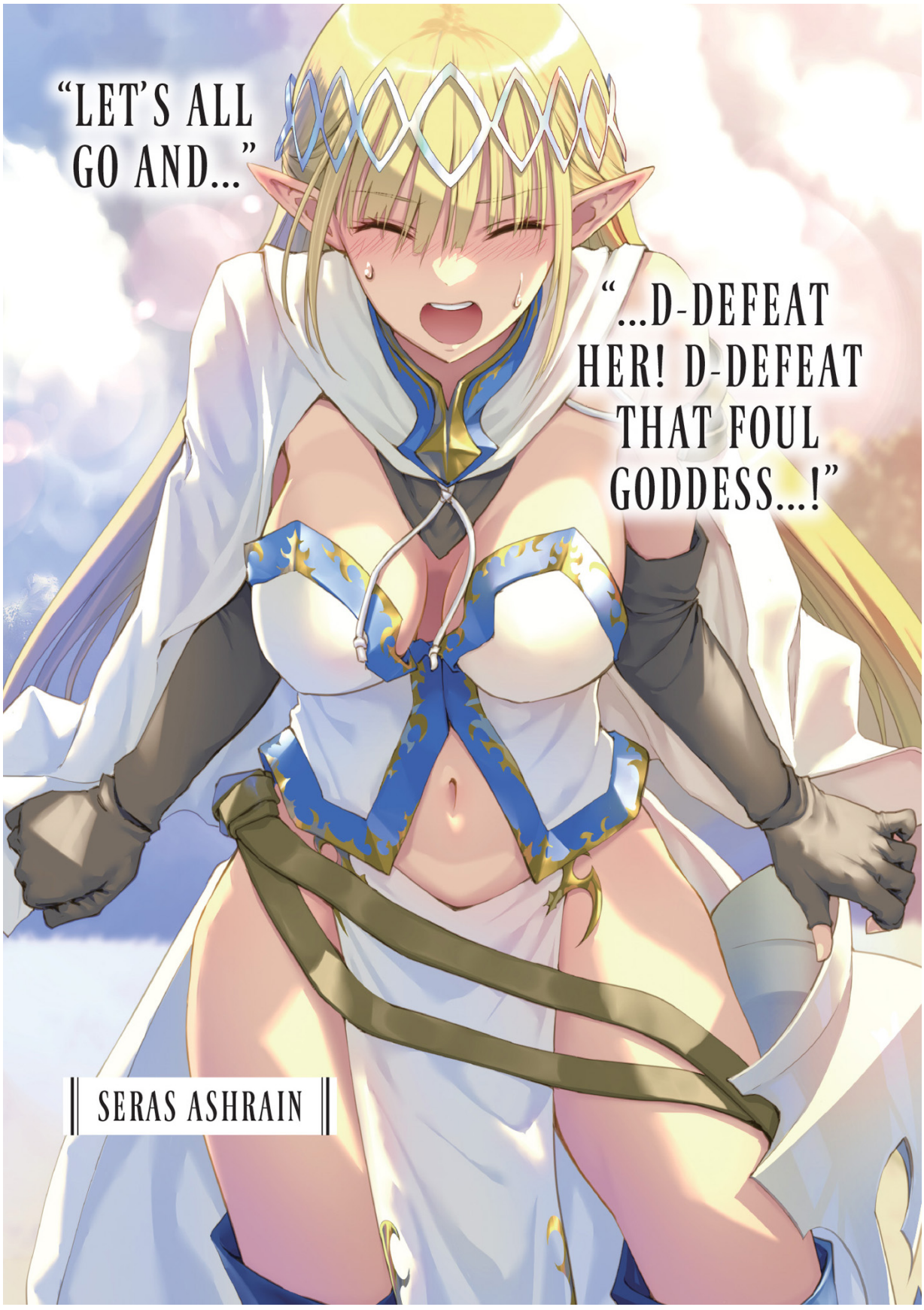
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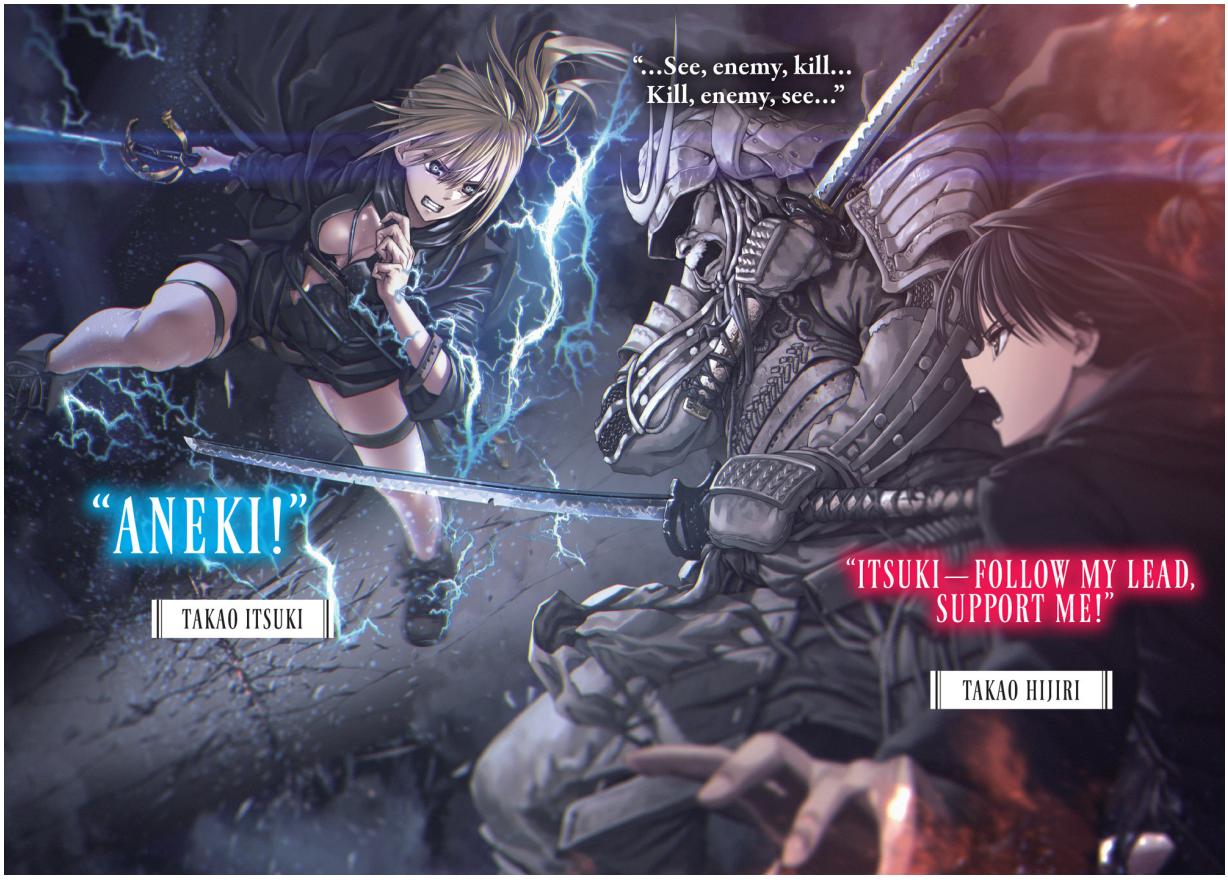
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"LET'S ALL GO AND..."
"...D-DEFEAT HER! D-DEFEAT THAT FOUL GODDESS...!"
SERAS ASHRAIN


"...See, enemy, kill...
Kill, enemy, see..."
"ANEKI!"
TAKAO ITSUKI
"ITSUKI—FOLLOW MY LEAD, SUPPORT ME!"
TAKAO HIJIRI


WORMGANDR
the Fallen God
ARS
the First Hero
YOMIBITO
the Hollow Man

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NOVEL 12

WRITTEN BY
KAORU SHINOZAKI

ILLUSTRATED BY
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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 12

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Illustrations by KWKM

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Prologue

YASU TOMOHIRO and the rest of his party continued on to northern Yonato, stopping by a small village to rest on their journey. There were no villagers to speak of—unsurprising, given how desolate the place looked. It seemed likely that nobody had lived there in over six months.

The party was still in the territory of the Empire of Mira, but they were finally coming up on the Yonato border. A dozen other travelers were also staying in the abandoned village with Yasu and his companions.

"There are golden-eyed monsters on the main road north," the others told him, explaining that they had given up on making it to Yonato before turning back to find shelter. Everyone in the village found themselves stuck in the same bind—Yasu and his companions included.

It was during their conversation that Yasu heard one of the travelers speak a familiar name. Apparently, the armies of Mira had been winning their war against Alion—but a single hero had taken the battlefield and completely overturned the Miran advance. The hero of Alion's name was Ayaka Sogou.

"Heard that hero takin' the field turned the whole war in Alion's favor," said one of the men that Yasu was traveling with. "They've pushed Mira all the way back to the border with Ulza. They might even start attacking the Miran homeland next… Maybe we were smart

to evacuate to Yonato, eh?”Yasu’s objective was to meet Ayaka—and to apologize to her. He had intended to take the route north, traveling through Yonato and Magnar, then south through Alion, thinking Ayaka and the other heroes would make their path to northern Magnar. But it seemed that Ayaka was traveling to Mira—the place where Yasu’s present journey had begun. Taking his planned route through Magnar would mean a long delay in finding her.

It was a difficult decision to make, but in the end, Yasu decided to return to Mira.

Yasu went to speak with their group leader, Rinji, who had halted their carriage on the outskirts of the village. He explained his situation, being a little vague on some of the facts.

“Hmm… I see. So you’ve got word that this missing person of yours is in Mira, then, eh?”

“I’m sorry…”

Whomp!

Rinji clapped him heartily on the back.

“Hey, kid, what’re you apologizing for? Ain’t it good news that you know where to find ’em now? Looks like this is where we part ways, though, eh? Hey, Oulu!”

Oulu nodded and left them for a while, returning a few minutes later while leading one of the horses behind him. The horse was saddled, but Yasu noticed there was something a little different about the reins and stirrups.

"You can't use that hand of yours, can you, kid?" said Rinji, gesturing to the horse with his thumb. "Rigged this one up so you can steer with one hand. Should make it easier, at least. …You *can* ride, right?"

"Er…"

"Don't worry about the horse. I had a feelin' something like this might happen on the road, so I brought along two extra mounts."

"But still…" Yasu protested.

"Besides, we picked that mount up during all the chaos when that White Army attacked… Ain't like we paid for it. You mind keepin' that between us, though?" said Rinji, lowering his voice and shooting Yasu a wink.

"…" Yasu was hesitant to receive the horse without payment.

But…it's not just that. This emotion I'm feeling is something else entirely.

"Thank you…"

He was leaving the party for his own personal reasons, but they'd still readied a mount for him. And that wasn't all—they'd even altered the reins to make it easier for him to ride with one hand. Yasu was confused by this overwhelming display of kindness.

Why… Why are they doing this? I don't deserve any of it.

"Are you going away, Big Bro?" Yuri came walking toward him. She was shy but had gotten a bit more used to being around Yasu after offering him some bread on their carriage ride.

Yuri's mother placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "There's someone important that he needs to go and find…and it turns out that they're in Mira," she explained to her daughter.

"Someone important?" She turned her big eyes to look up innocently at Yasu.

…Someone important, eh?

He gave a wry smile. "Yeah… Someone who's important to me, that's right…"

"Right," mumbled Yuri to herself, and turned to look at her mother. It looked as if she was *searching* for something as she gazed into her mother's eyes. It seemed she found what she was looking for, for she nodded when turning back to Yasu.

"All right, then, I guess you have to go!" She tottered toward him and held her hands out. "Big Bro."

Yasu understood that she wanted something, as her little arms strained up toward him. He had almost no strength left in his mangled hand—but he gently took her palms in his and squeezed.

"We haven't been together for long, but…" Yasu smiled. "I'm glad I got to travel with you, Yuri-chan… Everyone else too. Thank you."

"Yuri too… Thank you. Thank you, thank you!" said the little girl. Yuri grinned at him and giggled a little, baring a set of healthy white teeth.

When Yasu looked up, he saw others had come out to see him off with kind expressions on their faces.

I bet most of those smiles are for Yuri—for her innocence and joy.

And yet, nobody seemed to feel negatively about Yasu leaving their party. They did seem concerned and worried for him, though. Even so, all he saw in their eyes was pure kindness.

They really saved me, thought Yasu, believing it from the bottom of his heart. *I'm so glad I met all of these people.*

For a few brief seconds, he closed his eyes, trying to fight back the emotions swirling in his chest.

I'm so happy I met these people…

Yuri's mother smiled. "I heard what you said. Please take care on the road. And…thank you so much for playing with Yuri."

"Ah… No, I should be thanking you."

He expressed his gratitude and looked them all in the eye, not looking away for a second.

I'm actually grateful*… I'm capable of that now… And that, too, is all thanks to them.*

Yasu turned to the other travelers.

"Thank you so much, everyone." He bowed deeply, then turned south, heading back to Mira to meet with Sogou Ayaka.

Chapter 1:
The Choice of the Fake, He Who Cannot Change

ONCE THE YOUNG BOY in black departed, Rinji and his party left the desolate village in their two carriages, bound for Yonato. Other new travelers had come to the village just after the boy had left. They claimed to be from the north, on their way to check in on relatives who lived in Mira following the White Army invasion.

"There's a forest road just west of here—that's how we made it south," they explained, adding that the path was big enough for a carriage to pass.

Rinji knew that road would not be as well maintained as the highway and could be rough in places. But it was a way into Yonato—a path that avoided the golden-eyed monsters swarming the highway. It was dangerous to linger too long in the village, as those same monsters might simply attack them there during the night.

The group debated over whether to turn back to Mira or continue on to Yonato…

And then another group of travelers arrived.

"The monsters on the highway to Yonato in the north… Some of them are starting to make their way south."

This group had also come from the north and escaped the monsters before arriving at the abandoned village. Even if they retreated south, the monsters from the north might still overtake and attack Rinji's group.

That worried the party, but they couldn't just sit around. After some discussion, they agreed to take the western forest road to Yonato…and take the other waylaid travelers with them. Some of the travelers had mercenary experience, so their presence also helped to strengthen the group.

The western road wasn't as rugged as they imagined. It was dense with thick trees on both sides, and the thin leaves on the layers of branches let narrow beams of sunlight shine through the canopy. The visibility *was* worse than Rinji had anticipated, even if the undergrowth wasn't as thick as a real forest's. The tall scrub brush was claustrophobic…

But I suppose that's not the only way to think about it. The brush hides us from view on both sides—and that might not be a bad thing.

Evening grew close.

It was the time for darkness and hushed footsteps, as everything around them fell silent. There were no birds chirping, no breeze. It would take the party a day and a half on the forest road to enter Yonato territory.

"*Please allow us to reach our destination safely*," everyone prayed.

The two carriages rushed down the road with desperate speed. Their wheels leaped into the air when they struck rocks along the path, causing the vehicles to jerk at uncomfortable angles. Yuri was terrified whenever their carriage jumped, shutting her eyes tightly and

clinging to her mother. The carriages furiously picked up speed as they raced onward. The hooves beat the earth like a heart beating out of control, pushing too hard and too fast.

Several hours ago…

"Go! We'll catch up with you later!" screamed Rinji, staying behind with a few of the other mercenaries and sending the carriages on ahead.

They were being attacked by golden-eyed monsters. The monsters had been waiting in ambush, concealing themselves quietly in the brush. Rinji hadn't noticed a thing when they started on the road, so the monsters waited patiently for their prey to come. The party thought that the swarm of monsters had left the forest road and gone east toward the northern highway…And it was true that the travelers from Yonato had taken this road and arrived safely in Mira. It should have been safe.

But the Yonato travelers had taken the road over half a day earlier. And it had taken Rinji and his party another half-day to get here. That meant it had been over a day since anyone had been down the road. Some of the monsters that were in the east had returned to the west in the intervening time—at least that was the most likely scenario.

Now the golden-eyed monsters were closing in. They were fast—too fast for two carriages to outpace.

"We'll draw them away from you—don't worry," Rinji had told them. "I reckon we can take them out, but not while protecting the

carriages. Don't worry, we'll survive this and catch up with you…no matter what happens."

Rinji's wife and son, knowing his resolve, bid him and his mercenaries goodbye while holding back tears. They had once been members of a famous mercenary band—veterans and talented warriors even among their peers. They were skilled fighters, even if they were past their prime. That's why everyone trusted Rinji and his men…why they believed that everything would be okay.

Now there were only four fighters left in the carriages as they hurried onward, throwing stones as they pounded the road beneath them—

Bang!

The lead carriage overturned, and there was a colossal crash as the rear carriage collided with it.

"Kyaaa—h!"

The vehicle broke apart, and several of the people inside were thrown out onto the ground. Yuri and her mother were among them.

"Are you okay, Yuri?!" Yuri's mother rushed to her side as she lay in the road.

"…Nh," the little girl managed softly. It seemed like, in all the chaos, she didn't yet understand what was happening. One of the mercenaries rushed over to check on her.

"Are you okay?! Ah—the wheel, it's…" Then that the man saw it.

A boulder was lying in the road, about three times the size of a human head. It was the rock that destroyed the front carriage's wheel

and sent the vehicle flying onto its side. The mercenary looked to his companion, who had been sitting in the driver's seat. The man was lying on the ground writhing in pain, as if he'd hit his head in the crash. There was no way that a boulder of such size shouldn't have been visible in the road… Someone—or some*thing*—must have tossed it at the carriage from the forest.

Then there was a great rustling of leaves.

"Ah!"

A humanoid monster emerged from the brush. The beast, which was covered in gray fur, looked like a monkey with massively overgrown ears at first glance. Muscular and stocky, it stood a little higher than the party's carriages. The giant-eared monkey scratched a little at its furry chest.

"A g-golden-eyed monster…"

"Obhuaah."

"Ahh…!"

Hanging from the monster's neck was a chain of human skulls, resting on its brawny chest as a grisly necklace. It had earrings of dried-up human tongues, as if to match. The creature looked down at Yuri and her mother and grinned.

"Ah, ah…"

There was an older woman lying beside them, trembling and ashen.

A mercenary turned to face the beast, sword in hand. "You bastard… You were lying in wait for us… You damned—uh?!"

…Rustle… Rustle…

More rustling came from the trees as a group of golden-eyed monsters stepped out of the brush.

The mercenary scanned the area in front of him.

"There are four… No, six… We can do this!" He called out orders to the other mercenaries. One jumped on top of the overturned carriage with a magical staff in hand, while another took up position to defend the other carriage.

"Everyone, put your backs to the overturned carriage!"

Trusting in the mercenaries, the rest of the party assembled near the carriage. Those who fell were helped to their feet and still managed to make it into formation. The golden-eyed monsters, armed with stone axes, laughed mockingly at the mercenaries' swords.

"Don't underestimate us…! Let me show you why we're in charge here." With an opening feint, the mercenary seized the opportunity and swiftly dashed forward. The beast he assaulted swung its stone axe down, straight at his head… But the man made a risky dodge and avoided it, leaving the creature stunned and confused. Not letting the momentum from his dodge go to waste, the mercenary calmly swung at the monster's neck, still lowered to the ground after its attack. There was a sharp flash as the blade flew.

"Gyah!" Blood spurted from the golden-eyed monster's neck.

"Whoa! Shoulda known you could do it, Moil!" Another mercenary cheered him on from atop the carriage before sending out a magical attack with his staff.

"Geh!" Another monkey, moving in to support the one that Moil had sliced open, was struck in the shoulder by the magical attack. The magic user atop the carriage was another skilled veteran and had anticipated the beast would try to dodge. Moil regained his footing and waited for an opportunity to deal a finishing blow.

"Steady as we go… We can do this… Haahh…" Moil calmed his breathing, trying to focus.

If I watch this thing's movements, I can handle it. It's bigger than me, but this isn't a hopeless situation.

"Gh-gh-gh-gh…" The golden-eyed monster with the sliced throat placed a hand over the wound. A vein popped in its temple as it glared at Moil. "Gyaaah!"

The monkey howled, a battle cry so high-pitched, it gave the mercenaries chills. A chorus resounded from the brush—cries of reply as more came rustling toward their party, surrounding the motionless carriage.

Moil couldn't believe his eyes. "Wha—"

Those with their backs to the overturned carriage gave out shrieks of terror. There were almost thirty of the golden-eyed monsters now.

"Gh…"

One of the monkeys was a good deal bigger than the others. It was tall…almost as tall as the trees around them. The great monkey looked groggy, as if it had just been roused from sleep.

That must've been why we couldn't see it until now.

A storm of leaves floated up into the air behind the beast.

Swoosh!

The monkey tossed a rock that was about the size of a human head toward them, landing a direct hit on the mercenary standing atop the carriage.

"Arrgh!" With a coarse groan, the man fell to the ground. Two nearby monkeys swarmed him at once, as if they'd been waiting. The man cried out in terror between spurts of vomited blood, but the moment Moil went to run over to help, he felt…*it*. Another chill ran through him, piercing Moil from his back to the base of his skull. A great muscular arm swung at him—knocking him off his feet.

It's fast. I couldn't defend myself in time.

There was another monkey with black fur and golden eyes on the edge of his vision—a moment too late, he understood it was that monster that had struck him.

That black-furred one's strong, too.

The monkey with the sliced throat stood beside the black one, grinning as he glared at Moil, as if to say revenge was being served.

"Gh Gh Gh Gh! ♪"

"Ugh…!" A blow sent Moil flying into the side of one of the carriages. He tried to stand, his knees trembling from the impact, and somehow managed to rise once more. He found himself facing down the golden-eyed monster with a bloody hand pressed to its neck. The evening sun was behind it, causing the monster to glow faintly. It

looked as if the bleeding had stopped. The creature hefted a stone axe in its other hand and a split second later, it attacked.

"What?!"

"Gh Gh. ♪"

"Hngh!"

The monkey grabbed Moil by the arm as he was caught off balance and yanked the mercenary toward it.

"Waaaah?!"

"Ah—M-Moil! S-someone, help!"

Moil's cries of pain gradually faded to whimpers as his arm was reduced to a bloody mess. The arm, still holding the sword that had sliced through the golden-eyed monster's throat, was being crushed and squelched into a pulp by the monster's stone axe. Soon, there was nothing left.

Moil's cries had been forceful at first, but now he looked lifeless. The monkey seemed unsatisfied and yanked on Moil's limp arm—causing him to wail and shriek in agony. The monkey cackled in delight.

"Gyaaah!"

Meanwhile, the mercenary who had fallen from the carriage was having his left ear ripped off. Whenever one of the humans cried, the monkeys clapped their hands above their heads in a show of joyous applause. The other mercenaries were being held down and played with like toys… Tormented. Not even allowed to die.

Those who had gathered with their backs to the carriage were motionless. They wanted to run—to *escape*—but couldn't move with the monsters surrounding them. Some sank to the ground in despair, while the rest could do nothing but embrace each other, lost in the terror. Witnessing their talented soldiers reduced to playthings, they knew that it was almost hopeless. They couldn't even escape if they all ran together.

But one hope remained. If Rinji and the others might catch up to their carriages…his men were their only solace. They were strong enough to clear up the monsters on the forest road in no time. Then they would come to save them… The people were sure that they would come.

"…Ah!"

But it did not take long for the monkeys to grow bored and turn their attention away from the mercenaries to the *others*. One of the monkeys locked eyes with Yuri.

"Waah, w-waaahh…" Her face screwed up in tears, crying even harder. Her mother hugged her close to her chest and glared at the monster.

"…"

She reached for the short sword in the pouch at her waist and slowly drew it from its scabbard. She gripped it firmly by the hilt. She felt as if all the blood was being drained from her. Her hands felt weak, fingers trembling as she tightened her grip, trying to stop herself from shaking.

—I'm scared. But I have to protect her… Protect Yuri…

To save her, I…

I have to kill her.

With my own two hands.

Yuri's mother understood what was happening. The golden-eyed monsters enjoyed torturing humans while they lived. It seemed to entertain them.

It would be better to…avoid that long, drawn out suffering. Can I send her to the afterlife quickly? Then if there is time after…myself as well.

Yuri sobbed uncontrollably, face buried in her mother's chest.

"I'm so scaaared…!"

"…It's okay—look, it's okay Yuri…"

She took her hands from the sword, and softly placed them on her daughter's shoulders. Then, slowly, she peeled Yuri away from her chest so that they could look into each other's eyes.

"M-m—mom…"

"I'm always telling you, aren't I? Remember?"

"Huh?"

"When you're scared, who do you look at?"

"…*Sob*. Same as always?"

"Yes, same as always Yuri."

Her smile…

"The smile magic. Ah…"

"Look, see? Mom's smiling, right?"

"…Yeah."

"So you've got to smile too, Yuri… See? That's it…"

Tell her she'll be okay.

"You'll be okay."

Tell her it's okay.

"It's okay."

Tell her don't be scared.

"Don't be scared."

Tell her don't be scared.

"Don't be scared, Yuri."

I can't let my smile fade. Never.

No matter how scared I am, no matter how hard this is.

I can't ever let this magic fade.

I have to keep it up to the very end—for Yuri.

The footsteps grew louder as the golden-eyed monster approached.

I'm so scared… So scared…

But I have to do this.

I have to.

Yuri's mother placed her hand back into her pouch and tightened her grip on the short sword—holding it with the blade toward her child.

One strike. So she doesn't suffer. I have to be precise.

…Goodbye.

… I'm sorry—I'm so sorry, Yuri.

"Yuri, It's okay… It'll be okay. Just look at Mom like always."

I can't mess this up.

"…Mom?"

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"The magic…"

"Heh heh, yes Yuri… The magic."

"…But…"

"Eh?"

"Why?"

"Eh?"

Yuri's expression faltered as tears began flowing down her cheeks. "Why are you crying, Mom?"

"Lævateinn"

Dark flames ripped the twilight in two.

"Gyeeeh?!"

Something burned behind Yuri's mother's back.

A lone steed leaped over the overturned carriage as a figure jumped from its back and onto the ground. It was then that Yuri's

mother saw him.

"…It's y-you."

He stood between the people huddled by the carriage and the monsters—as if forming a barrier between them and the horror. It was the boy that had left them at the abandoned village who now stood before them. The creature writhed in agony as its upper body was engulfed in black flame. Pillars of black flame rose into the air, then spread out into a wall of fire—encircling the fallen carriage.

"You won't touching them anymore… I w-won't let you…"

His voice sounded strained and trembled as he spoke—but his words were filled with determination and readiness.

"Not…one finger…"

Black flames erupted as if from nowhere, winding like jet-black snakes around his arms.

He shook his arms as if warding off an invisible…*something*, and…

Roooaaar!

The black flames on his arms flowed outward, creating waves in the air.

"Not one finger…"

Yasu Tomohiro

AFTER DEPARTING the abandoned village and leaving Rinji and his party behind, Yasu Tomohiro began to make his way south. After some time on the road, he took a break and opened his map.

Should I head west to try and get back to the main highway? I've got a map, but it doesn't have much detail on the hills and valleys, and I'm not familiar with this area. It might be easier on my mount if I follow the main road and have a better idea of where I'm going.



After some thought, Yasu decided to take the main highway, directing his horse to the west. On his way, he met a small band of merchants who claimed to have come from the north.

"Buncha golden-eyes swarmin' up north… Didn't figure we'd be able ta make it through, so we turned back."

They were on their way to the highway as well, heading south for one of the fortress cities in northern Mira.

"If we're on your way, how 'bout you join us?"

Yasu gently refused the offer. There would have been advantages to traveling with the group, he knew…but he couldn't join them. Something the man said made Yasu feel uneasy inside.

Rinji and the others are going to Yonato. I know they heard the northern highway could take them there…but have they really taken the main road? If so, then won't that horde of golden-eyed monsters in the north threaten their journey? …No. They're strong. Am I just worrying too much? How much use would I be to them? What would I do after returning to them? I said my goodbyes, we left on good terms… No.

Yasu raised his head.

What does that matter now?

In the back of his mind, he pictured Rinji, Yuri, and her mother.

"…"

But what if they really are in danger? Would I regret not going back to help them so much I'd wish I were dead? If I'm worrying over

nothing, then fine. I'll check that they're okay from a distance, then I'll be back my way.

He wanted to apologize to Sogou Ayaka…but in that moment, knowing that Rinji and the others were safe was more important to Yasu Tomohiro.

—I'm going back.

His mind made up, Yasu spurred his mount to race north. Arriving quite some time later, at the abandoned village where they had parted, there was no sign of the party.

Have they gone north by the main road after all?

He noticed footprints and carriage tracks in the dirt, leading away from the village.

He examined the tracks.

I think these are still fresh. From these carriage tracks, it almost looks like…

He checked his map.

They aren't going north…

Yasu mounted his horse and followed the tracks.

They went west into the forest…?

As Yasu followed, the traces of Rinji's carriages led into a forest road.

The day was growing late.

It might be dangerous traveling through the forest at night, and there's no guarantee that I'll be able to catch up with them. There's

something about this place, though… Something about this forest that reminds me of the forest where the Sixth Order…put me in my place.

Yasu trembled at the memory.

I want to see them. I want to know. Even if I can't join them, I want to know that they're okay, just to quiet this unease that's been building in my chest.

Yasu pushed his mount onward down the forest road, the sunset's thin beams of orange light peeking in through the gaps in the trees. As he rode, he heard something up ahead.

Voices… Monsters… And…someone's fighting up ahead?

Yasu raced even faster down the road.

The voices were those of Rinji and his men, fighting a group of golden-eyed monsters. The carriages were nowhere to be seen.

It looks like… Did Rinji draw the golden-eyed monsters to attack him and his men, sending their carriages on ahead? I don't know. In any case, it looks like they're losing this fight.

Yasu didn't hesitate. He dismounted before attacking, worried that his unique skill might frighten his horse. A few golden-eyes noticed Yasu approaching…and a moment later, Rinji did, too.

"Wh-what are you doing here, kid?!"

"I-I came to help…!"

"W-well, I sure appreciate the thought… Y'only have a short sword in your pack though, right? …Bah! Someone toss the kid a real sword!"

"Lævateinn."

Almost all of the golden-eyes were consumed by Yasu's black flames. They were soon surrounded by the upturned bodies of monsters turned to ash.

Yasu's skill was convenient. He could control the flames at will to keep them from setting fire to the forest, which also meant there was no danger of him burning non-targets like Rinji and his men. Only two of Rinji's men were injured, and neither of them were in danger of dying.

"Th-that sure was a surprise…" said Rinji, looking dumbfounded.

"Sorry… I…"

Suddenly Rinji's eyes shifted, his expression stern. It looked in that moment as if he had just remembered the most pressing thing in the world.

"N-no time for that! We can still fight, but those golden-eyes scattered all of our horses! Your mount's the only one we've got left! I hope they're safe, but…if the carriages we sent ahead are under attack by those damn golden-eyes, then you're the only one who can protect them!" Rinji's eyes were desperate. "You're the only one who has the power, kid."

Rinji explained that he and his men were strong when they fought together in formation against groups of enemies. That was why they'd taken so few injuries. But a single mercenary alone could do little against a group of golden-eyed monsters.

"Even if it turns out they're okay, we'd feel much better with you going on ahead to check on them, kid. I don't know what that power of yours was…but do you mind looking out for them? Please…" Rinji

grabbed Yasu by the shoulders and bowed his head. “Maybe this is my fault. Maybe we’re here because I made the wrong call… Please!”

It looked as if Rinji were blaming himself as he hung his head. Yasu felt strange.

These people have done so much for me. More than I could ever repay. But they aren’t ordering me—they’re asking…

More than that, Yasu felt relieved he had come back—happy that the worst had been averted.

“Understood.” He mounted his horse and sped off down the forest road.

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Now Yasu Tomohiro faced off against the golden-eyed monsters, placing himself squarely between the flaming beast and Yuri and her mother. The black-furred monkey was wailing furiously as it watched the other monster burn.

Roooar!

Black flames arched from Yasu’s shoulders, opening up behind him like dark wings. The wings spread, casting their dark fire onto the monkeys that were within Yasu’s ring of flame, inundating as they wailed. Soon their cries ceased and the charred monsters fell face-forward to the ground, vanishing into piles of blackened ash.

“Big b-b-…” Yuri’s voice trembled as she tried to speak. Yasu turned and smiled at her reassuringly.

"It's going to be okay… Leave these bad monkeys to me."

"…O-… Okay!" she said firmly, holding back tears.

"Ah…!" called Yuri's mother. She was on her knees, clinging to her daughter, the short blade on the ground by her side.

"Look after Yuri for me," said Yasu, nodding at her.

He turned to the monkeys that stood outside of his ring of fire. They were clearly set on fighting him, their murderous intent laid bare. One stood much taller than the others, looking to Yasu like a giant.

"Booohhn, bohbohn." The giant monkey looked calm and unfazed. Not in the least bit scared of Yasu's fire.

Crack, rip…

The great monster tore a nearby tree from the ground, roots and all. In its other hand, it held two rocks, these also about human skull-sized. It looked to be comparing their sizes. It selected one of the rocks, then turned to Yasu and gave him a self-satisfied grin.

You can't burn rock, it seemed to say.

—I'm scared.

Yasu only now realized how weak in the knees he felt. The great monkey was laughing at him, as was the black-furred one.

I think they can sense it in me… They see my fear.

With a jerk, Yasu crumpled to the ground on one knee. He placed one hand on the dirt to hold himself up.

I…

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Nothing's changed.

I'm a coward.

Worthless.

I haven't changed—I'm just right back where I started.

The Sixth Order tortured me, tormenting my body and mind…

With none of my bluffs to hide behind, this is all I am.

Suddenly, an image of the Lord of the Flies, Belzegea, floated into Yasu's mind.

He is bold. Filled with self-confidence. Never scared. I'm sure he would handle all of this in a much smarter way than I ever could. Yes… It's just like I confessed to him in the Country at the End of the World. I want to be like him. If only I had it in me…

I never worked for this power of mine. It's just borrowed from someone else. I can't be proud of this. I don't even know if my flames will work against that thing. I'm terrified.

My legs are weak. I'm scared…

When I saw those mercenaries being toyed with by those monkeys, it was like being there again… I saw myself being tortured by the Sixth Order.

The monkeys seemed to merge in his memory with the Sixth Order of Alion. The trembling spread from his legs, crawling all the

way up his neck.

…It turns out I'm just the same I've always been.

"People can change."

Someone might encourage me with those words. And maybe some *people can change who they are…but me? I don't believe that's possible.*

In the end, this is who I am. The things that scare me will always scare me. I'm not turning into some saint overnight. I'm not going to change…but I can still choose. I'm a coward who's been brought low, and I can't change that. I can only ever be who I am… but I decided to protect these people.

I wanted to protect them.

"…Tomohiro Yasu—f-former hero."

Those were the words I spoke when I shook Belzegea's hand. I'll never be like Kirihara Takuto or Takao Hijiri or Sogou Ayaka. They're proper heroes. They've got what it takes to defeat the Demon King. I'll never be like them. But back when I was sitting up in bed and talking to Belzegea, I still remember what I said.

"I want to learn to like myself, if I can. Even just a little. Then I want to apologize to everyone. And go out and find those who need my help."

I want to help people.

That, to Yasu Tomohiro, was what it meant to be a hero.

Someone who can be heroic*. Muster up their courage and fight for another. It doesn't matter if I'm bluffing. If that will drive the fear*

away—even for a moment—just this once, I'll be a hero.

***

Hand to the ground and sweat pouring from his face—Yasu glared at the monkey.

Don't let them intimidate you. You can't lose heart. It doesn't matter how much courage I can muster or how I manage it—I just need to do it.

"…My name is Tomohiro Yasu… H-Hero from Another World. Listen up…y-you damn monsters. These people… Evil creatures like you don't get to lay their hands on people like them. No more. If you touch these humans one more time…your lives are forfeit."

No matter how much of an act this is… Just a little courage—whatever I can manage.

"If you don't retreat, then I—The Hero of Black Inferno—I'll use my jet-black flames to incinerate you!"

This isn't courage for me—it's for someone else.

Yasu watched the monkeys closely. Something had changed in them. They almost seemed to relax, as if they had sensed Yasu's fear.

"…You aren't g-going to retreat, then. Very well…" Yasu swallowed hard. He could sense how shallow his breathing was.

The great monkey threw the rock. The flame wings that shot from Yasu's shoulders snaked up toward the stone like giant serpents…and completely incinerated it.

"Buaaah!" The giant monkey cried out in frustration and squatted down to the ground.

It's trying to leap over the wall of flames.

"Gyeeeh?!" But the giant monkey began to burn, flames licking at its feet. "Eeeh?!"

The other golden-eyed monsters looked up at their giant companion in shock. Yasu had shot out lines of fire ahead of time, sending them crawling through the ground when he pressed his hand to the dirt. The flames had burrowed through the dirt as he guided them to where the giant monkey was standing. He had manipulated the underground flames slowly and carefully, so it had taken time to move them into position.

But I made it in time.

"Gh-gh-gh-gh… Kyaaah!"

From the moment that Yasu had incinerated the first monkey, the black-furred beast had been growing angrier and angrier. It let out a piercing shriek and jabbed its finger at Yasu, as if to say, *"Kill him!"* The rage of the other monkeys boiled over.

I see. I understand.

They thought I was weaker than they are. They don't want to turn tail and run—not against me. I used to have the same stupid pride that they do. I know how they feel. Now they think I might be more powerful than they are, but their pride won't let them back down.

I was just the same when I went for Sogou Ayaka and Kirihara Takuto. That stupid pride… It always keeps me from what's really important. But now I can't back down. That's not an option. If only they had lost their will to fight when I took down the giant boss monkey…

Yasu had to consciously control his flames. He couldn't send them out to attack the monkeys of their own accord.

If they all leap toward me, surrounding me on all sides… Would I be able to handle them?

…I have to. If they come for me, all I can do is fight.

He steadied his breathing, one knee still pressed into the ground as cold sweat clung to his forehead. Yasu looked straight ahead at the black-furred monkey, its burning rage backlit by the giant monkey inferno behind it. Their eyes locked.

"Haah—hah… Haaah, haaah…" Yasu tried to take longer breaths, gradually calming himself.

Calm down. Calm down and deal with this…

Protect them… I have to protect them.

The black fire wings at Yasu's back flared to new life.

"Haaah… Haaah… Haaah…"

Now his breathing was steady.

"Come…"

The party proceeded down the dark forest road with their one remaining carriage. The elderly and the children were riding—the rest were either mounted or walking alongside. Those who could fight escorted the carriage—Yasu among them.

"Never expected you'd be a Hero from Another World, kid…" mused Rinji, rubbing his beard in reflection.

Yasu had taken out the remaining monkeys with his unique skill. He hadn't let them lay another finger on the party, just as he promised. He then used some healing skills on the injured mercenaries while they waited for Rinji and his men. Rinji and the others caught up with them just as sun set and the forest grew dark, moving toward the light of the torches the rest of the party had lit as a signal. There was a risk that their lights might draw more golden-eyes, but they'd decided that signaling their location to Rinji was more important. The mercenaries who protected the carriage were sure that Yasu could deal with any golden-eyed monsters that came their way.

"I-I'm sorry I didn't tell you…"

"Heh, you shy or somethin'? Uh, what was your name again…?"

"It's Big Bro Tomohiro!" said Yuri, hugging Yasu's waist as she walked alongside him.

"I do apologize. Thank you," said Yuri's mother with a slight smile, before retreating into the carriage and leaving her daughter with Yasu.

"Right, right, Tomohiro… Come ta think of it, I'd never actually asked your name, eh?!"

Rinji might say that…but I get the feeling he chose *not to ask. Thinking back, he's never asked me anything about where I came from during our whole time on the road. I bet that was him being considerate.*

"Hey, look, I'm sorry… Mighta been the right call to head back to Mira from that abandoned village after all. This all happened 'cause I led us up here…"

"Couldn't be helped, eh?" Oulu chimed in. "We heard it's the Sabre-toothed Tigers that are leadin' the White Army that overrun Mira, after all…"

"…Guess not," Rinji replied awkwardly.

Yasu hadn't expected to hear the familiar name. Oulu seemed to sense his confusion.

"Me, Rinji, the other men… We're former Sabre-toothed Tigers," Oulu explained.

"Eh, really?"

"But hey, I guess you could say we betrayed them by leavin'…"

I see… That might be why they don't want to return south to Mira. Their history as members of the Sabre-toothed Tigers might cause problems for them there.

"I bet Guavan is really pissed… I reckon we'd be in real trouble if the Sabre-toothed Tigers ever caught up with us and figured out who we really are."

"But Rinji…it's his daughter running the show now. The girl—Riri or something? Ain't she their leader now?"

"Sure, but what if that bastard Guavan's given her the order to smash our faces in the moment she finds us?"

The Sabre-toothed Tigers…

I saw them countless times back when we were all training in Alion. I remember they seemed like good people, but Rinji and the others must have had their own personal reasons for leaving.

They hadn't pried into his past, so Yasu decided not to ask too many questions about theirs.

"But hey, when everyone in town said that they were coming with me… Minds made up and everythin'… Well, that sure is a lot of pressure to carry on your back."

"They like you 'cause you're here actually *doing* what you said you would, Rinji. Everyone trusts you. Hey, we're all basically family now anyway, ain't we?"

"Guess you're right there." Rinji gave him a wry smile. "Anyway, we've come this far now. Nothin' for it but to keep this up all the way to Yonato!"

"Heck, we even got a Hero from Another World on our side now!"

Yasu returned their smiles, a little embarrassed.

The way I spoke to those golden-eyed monkeys, putting on a show—it seems like I had an audience who liked what they heard. Maybe it's just because of the situation we're in, but none of them made fun of me for talking that way. They admire me for it. I've always wanted to be admired like that. More than anything in the

world. Maybe the past me would have been proud of all this—now it just sort of embarrasses me.

"If we keep going a bit further once we're out of this forest, we'll be in Yonato."

…I'm not giving up on meeting Sogou Ayaka. I want to meet her. I want to apologize. I want to help her, too. But first…I want to get these people somewhere safe. Even if this strength of mine is only borrowed from someone else, I want to protect them.

So, for now…I'm going north to Yonato.

Chapter 2:
The Heroes and the Anti-Goddess Alliance

"THE EUCHARIST army is closing in."

The report estimated that our forces would come to blows in roughly half a day. Preparations for the battle were almost complete, with only the finer details left to be decided before the fighting began.

I stood within the walls of a tented enclosure, wearing my new Lord of the Flies gear. With Cattlea Straumms's forces folded into ours, and the Miran army, we had renamed our force the Anti-Goddess Alliance. In practice, our forces had two supreme commanders—Cattlea and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. At first, it was suggested that Liselotte Onik from the Country at the End of the World might be included as a third, but at Lise's request, the people of her nation were placed under the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's command instead.

"I do not have much experience with real combat and have never commanded an army of such scale before. Such matters should be entrusted to those most suited to command," Lise had said.

The armies of Alion and Ulza had been placed under the banner of the combined forces which continued to serve under Cattlea's command.

It'll be easiest for them to follow the command structure they've grown used to in the field.

The heroes were ostensibly placed under the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's command.

It feels like Asagi's group are wildcards, even under the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's command. In reality, though…

"I will leave the movements of our heroes up to you, Too-ka. Say the word, and I will pass on your orders," the Emperor had said.

I can give orders to the heroes at my own discretion.

Nyantan had been folded into the forces of the Country at the End of the World.

…Well, it's probably best that she's with Nyaki.

As for the Lord of the Flies Brigade… We're going to be a commando unit, moving freely around the battlefield like we always do.

"From the reports, it sounds like this is going to be a large-scale battle—are you sure you wish us to remain on standby?" asked Takao Hijiri, who was standing beside me. Her twin sister, Takao Itsuki, was with her. Both were wearing their Fly Swordsman gear but were maskless within the tented enclosure.

"I want to keep your survival a secret for as long as I can," I explained.

Itsuki snickered, baring her teeth. "Not sure about me, but I reckon *she* totally thinks Aneki's dead right now!"

She means that foul Goddess.

It's possible we might use the Takao sisters in this fight, depending on how strong the eucharist army is…but there's a good chance that their identities will be revealed the moment either of them use their unique skills. A report might make it back to Vicius by

magical war pigeon. Knowing Vicius, she might even have another way of using some special eucharists to deliver her messages.

"Dead people won't figure into her calculations—and that's a huge advantage we'll have when laying traps for her. If we can make proper use of this, I feel like we could really mess with her plans…"

It's been much *easier for me to do everything I've done as a dead man.*

Hijiri shot me a sideways glance, then fixed her eyes straight ahead once more.

"You have some clear and distinct reason for keeping us in reserve, I take it?"

"Yeah," I answered. "From what Lokiella's told me, Vicius has a trio of tough customers on her side."

"I heard about them," replied Hijiri. "These new Disciples of Vicius who contain her element?"

At that moment, Lokiella was with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Cattlea to give information on the eucharists as they discussed military matters. Seras was with them, too. The meeting was to confirm troop placements and movements—*Seras is more suited to handling matters of grand military strategy than I am.*

"Actually… I was thinking about saving you and Itsuki for the final confrontation against the Goddess," I said.

"That is when you intend on revealing us?"

"Yeah. But now… Sounds like these three disciple things are going to really give us trouble."

"You want me and my sister to defeat these disciples, I take it?"

I paused for a moment.

"Yeah."

From what Lokiella's told me, these disciples are going to be a tough fight.

"If I can use my skills to defeat them, so much the better. But if that doesn't work, it'll come down to brawn. Pure physical combat."

"Lokiella seemed to suggest that Vicius was incapable of casting her Dispel Bubble upon disciples who contain her element, did she not? She cannot protect them as she did Kirihara-kun."

I had gotten the same answer out of Lokiella a few hours ago—but she had qualified her statement.

"That's what she's usually *capable of, see? But those three felt sort of special… I wouldn't be all that surprised if she's found some way to cast her Dispel bubble on them. You should consider it a possibility."*

"If it turns out the Goddess can cast Dispel Bubble on them, then my skills aren't going to work until Munin's disabled it."

"If all three come at us at the same time, you may be taken out before your unique skills can find their marks. This plan also entails protecting Munin during the battle—a very different fight," said Hijiri.

"Hmmhmm, I see… I *see*," mused Itsuki, sounding a little lost for what to say. It was hard to tell if she was keeping up with our conversation.

"Setting curveballs like me and our other concerns aside for a minute… Let's consider our raw combat strength. Seems obvious that Sogou's the strongest player on our team."

"I am in agreement."

"As for the second…"

"In terms of raw combat ability, Seras might be the second-most-powerful. Perhaps it might be most accurate to place her and Sogou-san on the same level."

The Takao sisters had sparred with Seras in camp once, as the army continued its march toward Alion. Itsuki placed a hand to her chin, looking conflicted. "Never thought that Seras would be *that* strong, y'know… She even got the best of Aneki."

"With sword alone, I might be able to pick up one match in every ten against her," Hijiri had claimed, after fighting Seras without the use of her unique skills.

Makes sense, I suppose. I was a little surprised to see that Itsuki fared better than her older sister, though. It looked like she might be able to pick up three matches in every ten.

"But you could've drawn even with her if you'd used your skills, right?" I asked.

"Sure, but…" Itsuki scratched her head. "Seras didn't use her own secret weapon either. That Prime Armor stuff."

She's right—Seras only used her Spirit Armor in the fight. She has to pay a heavy price to use her Prime Armor. It's not the kind of thing she can whip out in every fight.

It sounded like Itsuki's older sister was of the same mind.

"I only managed to beat her once I began using my skills, but if Seras elected to use her Prime Armor in battle, I imagine the results would be much different. I still appreciate that I was given the chance to experience Seras's strength firsthand. In light of our encounter, I must say, I believe she is the only one in this camp capable of opposing Sogou-san in single combat."

Hijiri let out a faint sigh of admiration. "There's her skill with a sword, but she's also got a knack for battlefield strategy. Before I fought Seras, I thought Sogou-san was the only one capable of ascending to such heights."

If this is Takao Hijiri's analysis, it should be pretty accurate.

"Sogou and Seras are our dynamic duo, then… Our top two players," I noted.

"I get it—they're our mascots, right?!"

"…I don't believe that's quite what he is getting at, Itsuki," Hijiri interjected with a straight face.

Hard even for me to tell whether she's joking or not at times like these, to be honest. In any case, if we're going by what Seras said in the past… Sogou Ayaka on attack and Seras Ashrain on defense. That's how this is going to work.

"Then there are the others…"

There are powerful players on our side besides those two… Geo Shadowblade and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. We could count on them for their strength in battle, but both will be serving as

commanders in the fight to come and might not have time for single combat.

"From the Country at the End of the World, we've also got Kil, Gratrah, then Amia and the hellhound Loa, who leads the monsters. The last two will catch up with us later. Then there's Nyaki's older sister, Nyantan Kikipat. There's also Gus Dolnfedd from the Black Dragon Knights."

It's public knowledge that the Lord of the Flies Brigade, former members of Ashint, are the ones who defeated the Elite Five of the Black Dragon Knights… But from what I saw when I met with Gus earlier, it doesn't seem as if he bears much ill will toward me.

"The Dragonslayer isn't going to be able to fight in his current condition, huh?"

The divine Lokiella also seems to have lost almost all of her power.

"Sorry. Doesn't seem like I can fight," she had said.

Munin can fight, but it's not like she's especially strong in combat.

"What about Queen Cattlea?" asked Itsuki, like she'd just suddenly remembered.

"Seras says she knows her way around an army, but she isn't really all that much for combat itself."

The queen's talents are as a leader. Lise's a tactician too…she isn't all that physically strong.

Hijiri looked over in the direction of Sogou and her other classmates.

"There aren't many heroes who could do battle with Vicius's disciples."

"You're right there," I replied.

"Bringing back one of those wildcards—it seems like Asagi-san's group may have a certain *giant slayer* talent to lean on."

"They did beat the banished emperor, I guess…but setting aside whether we can trust them, Asagi's unique skill is of limited use on a battlefield."

She fights like I do—can't land her skills without underhanded tricks. I feel like we'd need to put her life in danger out there to get results.

"Compared to the other types of raw strength at our disposal, her power looks unstable. There are too many unknowns," said Hijiri.

"Yeah."

…There's actually another elite hero on the board—the A-class Yasu Tomohiro. I wonder what he's doing right now? If he's on his way to meet up with Sogou, then he might be on his way here. It would be risky for us to rely on his help, though. It's too much of a gamble to count on forces that might not even materialize.

I hear the other heroes have gotten stronger, and there are B-class heroes among the members of 2-C that are here. But there's way too big a gulf in power between them and the upper tier heroes. They'll probably be of use in team combat, but not against disciples.

I could say the same about the Band of the Sun from Mira or their Reserves Brigade…and all of the monsters and orders of the Country at the End of the World. The same goes for the armies of the former combined forces. They're powerful in groups—but if we're going to make use of their strength, we'll need individual fighters capable of facing down the disciples.

"They won't just be sending out disciples on their own. They'll have their eucharists too. We'll need individuals on the battlefield who can take on the disciples, one –on one."

"In large-scale battles, cutting the enemy's most towering foes down to size will be the difference between victory and defeat. I am sure there are millions of examples throughout history to prove that true."

Speaking in soccer terms, we need to keep tabs on their star player.

"If we let those disciples run wild, they'll chip away at our formations."

"That is why we require people to engage those disciples and contain unnecessary casualties…" Hijiri unfolded her arms and raised three fingers without turning to look in my direction. "And three of them."

"Yeah."

Takao Hijiri's an S-class and Takao Itsuki's an A-class. Both have a lot of raw strength.

"If we're discounting all the unknowns and unreliable elements, I think the only unit we have that can fight on the level of Sogou and Seras are the Takao sisters… That's just my opinion," I said.

Seras spoke highly of Hijiri too, after their sparring—that's part of what I'm basing my judgment on.

"So once the disciples appear, if you judge that you're needed in the battle…you're free to participate too, if you choose."

"To wrap this up…" Hijiri began. "You intended on using me and my sister—considered *dead* and *missing*—as your secret weapon in the final fight against Vicius. Given the present situation, however, you believe it may be unavoidable that we reveal our identity in combat. Am I correct?"

Using their unique skills could lead to their identities being exposed, but…

"None of this matters if we never make it to that foul Goddess," I said. "Holding back now might lead us to lose so many of our forces that we don't have enough strength left for the final battle—and that is what we must avoid."

It's important to keep casualties to a minimum before the Vicius fight.

"Understood," Hijiri answered. "I will participate in the battle if it seems necessary—though, of course, I pray that everything will go according to your original plan."

"My job is to plan for the fight against Vicius that's likely to come. If the Goddess ends up finding out you're still alive, I'll just

have to come up with some other strategy for facing her."

"That's reassuring to hear. *This* Mimori-kun would make a good class representative."

"*This* Takao Hijiri probably would too, wouldn't she?"

"…You are joking, of course?"

"Nope. You've got your lie detector, don't you?"

Hijiri placed a hand to her cheek and tilted her head just a little to the side. "I wonder if you're right," she said in puzzlement.

"Aneki as the class rep, huh… Yeah, I could see that…" said Itsuki, her mouth set in a grin as she lost herself in the fantasy.

…She really does love her big sister, huh.

I walked alone through the crowd of soldiers as they hurried in preparation for battle. Our present camp was located just behind the royal capital of the Holy Empire of Neah, and we had received considerable supplies from Neah, just as we had as we had as we passed through Mira and Ulza on our march.

Doesn't seem like we're going to have any logistical issues to speak of… And here, there's no risk here of our army being taken from behind.

The eucharist army to our northeast was reported to be marching directly toward us on the main road. The black dragon scouts of Bakoss had reported that their army was massive.

"Pretty convenient to have the black dragons on *our* side."

Golden-eyed monsters were always shot down by the Holy Eye of Yonato when they reached a certain altitude, but the black dragons of Bakoss were regular monsters. As non-golden-eyes, they could fly far, far higher than golden-eyed monsters could without fear of being struck down by the Holy Eye.

Of course, when they go too high into the air, they start to run into problems with lack of oxygen, though.

"Hey."

"…"

"…Hey."

"…"

"H-hey?!"

"What? What is it, Lise?"

It was the prime minister of the Country at the End of the World, the arachne Liselotte Onik.

I did notice she was there of course, but…she was talking to me?

"I was trying to get your attention! Why were you ignoring me?!"

Well…you weren't looking in my direction for one thing.

"I'm not exactly sure how to answer that… Anyway, what is it you're here for?"

Lise's mouth twitched into a smile. "It's *just* like you to try to change the subject with an *anyway,* isn't it…! Hmph!" She folded her

arms and threw her head back (though she was still a head shorter than I was). “W-well, I *suppose* I could answer you!”

“Don’t push yourself. I’ll catch you later.”

“Hey… W-wait right there! Stop, I say…!”

Lise ran after me in a panic as I made to leave, but I stopped after a few paces and turned to face her.

“I was joking.”

“Y-you…! Why are you always so mean? Hmph!”

Lise looked very upset, squaring her shoulders and sulking at me—though I did see a flash of a smile there too.

She’s really not that difficult to read…

“We’re headed into a big battle, but I’m glad to see you don’t look that worked up about it,” I said as Lise caught up with me.

“I *am* nervous, you know? But well, you’re here.”

“You don’t get worked up when I’m here?”

“You… Well, you don’t pick fights that you can’t win, right? That’s how I feel about this battle too.”

“It’s an honor to hear that from the prime minister of the Country at the End of the World.”

“Hmph… It doesn’t sound like you think it’s an honor, you know? Would it hurt you to be a little more serious?”

“Seriously, I’m happy to hear you say that.”

“Ahh… I told you to stop surprising me like that! What’s the matter with you?!”

…She really is an open book.



"Do you think you'll be able to work with the other members of the alliance?" I asked.

The question had been on my mind.

The Country at the End of the World's forces aren't used to the outside world. They haven't been here long, so fighting shoulder to shoulder with outsiders might result in problems in the field. If that does end up happening, I should get involved to try to smooth things over.

"Let's see… I feel less like *I* am doing much more now that Emperor of Mira and the Queen of Neah are making adjustments to allow demi-humans and monsters to easily assimilate into their ranks. They have been considerate in their troop placements to allow us to operate more freely. …Oh, and before I forget, I'm off now to visit the reserves brigade."

The reserves brigade were a group formed of demi-humans that came from the western parts of Mira. Lise scratched at the bridge of her nose a little awkwardly.

"Well…I don't know how they're going to feel about us, given how long the Country at the End of the World has lived in hiding. But we're going to be fighting together, so I think it would be good for both of us to clear the air."

"So you're off to sound out how they feel about you, eh?"

There was a tinge of resignation to Lise's expression. "If it turns out they detest us, I don't intend to force them to march alongside

our people. If they appear hostile, I'll consult with the Emperor of Mira and consider having our troops separated on the field."

…Hmm.

She's changed, too. She used to always want to talk, never abandoning a position in hopes that she could come to an understanding with others, no matter who they were. But it seems like she's done with that. If this isn't going to work, she's willing to adjust her plan to mitigate any adverse effects. It seems like she's capable of that now.

Lise gave a faint shrug.

"I'm going to take Geo and Kil with me when I go to meet with their representative. I get worked up and can snap at times—much as I hate to admit it—but Geo can be surprisingly composed. I think he'll hold me back when I get too excited. Kil also has a tendency to lighten the mood, and I think she'll be better at winning them over than I will be. She will be good to have at the negotiating table, no?"

"Hmm…" I mused. "So you understand yourself, and you're relying on others around you…"

Lise blushed, averting her eyes and rubbing her cheek with a fingertip.

"W-well, yes… I am, aren't I? O-oh, also…" Lise averted her eyes and completely changed the topic of conversation to hide her embarrassment. "The *key* you acquired for us arrived safe and sound!"

Key?

"…Ah, right. The one from the Great Vault of Mira."

After the defeat of the Thirteen Orders of Alion, we held negotiations with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, during which we had been given a list of all the items contained within the Great Vault of Mira. Lise had seen the list and asked for something from it—an item that had then been carried by Mira's couriers all the way to the Country at the End of the World.

"There's an armory in our castle that no one has ever been able to open. Many have tried to open it, but without the key, none have succeeded. I even tried myself and failed. We do have an old scroll with a picture of a key that seems to match the lock on the armory door, but were never able to locate it within our nation's borders."

The scroll also detailed what was behind the door. Lise had good reason to call the room an *armory*.

"So you found something that looked like that key on the emperor's list?"

"Yes."

Lise was not certain—only hopeful—that the key might open their armory. Acting on that cautious optimism, she had asked for the item.

Didn't look much like a key to me anyway—it was shaped like a sphere.

"So that thing opened your armory?"

"It did!"

Lise looked very proud of her accomplishment, smugly puffing out her chest and snorting through her nose.

"There were old weapons and magical devices inside, but only half of them were still usable. Oh, and there were some suspicious looking bottles of liquid…elixirs maybe? But well, ahem…given how long they had been there, I would be hesitant to drink them. They had labels that claimed that their contents would not spoil, but still… It was a bit much."

Lise gave me a wry smile.

Well, it does sound like those things were pretty old… Can't blame anyone for not wanting to down them.

"Come to think of it…one of the bottles had a piece of parchment attached to it that claimed to be the blood of a dragon or something. Niko looked at the bottle for me, then fell into a long spell of thinking and growling over it. Do you think that might have had something to do with her being a dragonkin?"

The dragonkin Cocoroniko Doran—Niko. She's staying behind in the Country at the End of the World this time around. Speaking of dragons, there's the Dragonslayer Banewolf, too… He's got the ability to turn himself into a dragonman, right? In any case, it doesn't seem like either he or Niko are going to be part of the final fight against Vicius.

"Oh, and there was this powerful magical device that could shoot offensive spells! Kil found herself an ancient magical bow too! Oh, and Geo found two old katanas to go with the two he already has. So now he's walking around with four at his waist!"

Lise puffed out her chest again, as if she felt all of it was her doing. But a moment later, she snapped back to reality. The arachne prime minister cleared her throat to return us to the topic at hand.

"I-in any case… I just wanted to let you know that we've become more powerful and should be of some assistance to you in this battle. That's all."

"I'm happy to hear this armory's resources were worth the trouble, but I was counting on you whether you had those weapons or not. Not to mention…"

Geo's said this before, but…

"This is an important battle for all of you."

A fight for the future of the Country at the End of the World.

"You're right. The way that we monsters and demi-humans conduct ourselves throughout this battle—it will be the first impression we make on anyone outside the Country at the End of the World, and it will likely decide how people view us."

"You've been swinging by the Miran camp and those of the other nations ever since you got here, eh?"

"Wh-what…? How did you know that…?"

"I hear things through the grapevine."

"Well, yes." Lise's expression turned more serious. "I'm not much for combat, so the best I can do when the fighting starts is to rack my brains and give orders from the rear. I'm barely in any danger compared to my comrades out on the front lines. They're out there risking their lives in dangerous situations… So, I must do everything in

my power to support them. Really give it my all. That's my responsibility. The less I can contribute in combat strength, the more I have to do to compensate."

"You've grown."

"…Thanks to you."

Apparently, Lise hadn't intended me to hear that last line, but her mumbling came through loud and clear.

I'll pretend I didn't hear that, to be considerate.

"Nh? You say something?"

"N-no! It's nothing! Hmph! You're always so condescending!"

"Sorry about that. I dunno… I feel like I'm watching my daughter growing up."

"Who do you think you're talking to?! Don't treat me like a child!"

"Nah, forget it—you're already more than grown up enough now, I reckon."

Liselotte Onik opened her eyes wide in shock, then turned bright red.

"Wh-what are you saying?! I mean y— A-anyway… Th-that new Lord of the Flies outfit really is something!" she stammered, changing the topic to hide her embarrassment.

Our camp was set up atop a modest hill. Seras and I stood side by side, looking out as the black dragon soared through the blue sky

before us.

"They're finally here," said Seras.

The writhing mass of the White Army—the eucharists—were now close enough that they were visible out there in the distance. They weren't mounted but seemed to move quite fast.

"Some of them are larger than the others," I noted.

There were mid-sized and larger eucharists—the easiest ones to pick out at a distance. Below our hill were the Miran soldiers far beyond us, lying in wait. Their front lines were made up of shield-bearers, with archers behind them and magical attack soldiers at the very back. Once the first engagement had taken place, the cavalry would charge and the foot soldiers sortie.

The frontal attack—standard operating procedure.

Cattlea's combined forces were on standby in a different location, waiting until the enemy's actions were better known.

For now, the eucharist army is just headed straight toward us.

There had been no reports of strange activity from the lookouts. It just looked like the White Army was making a beeline for us. There was no sign that they were planning an ambush so far. There had also been no sign of any individuals resembling Vicius's disciples.

As far as new intel goes, I guess now we know that there are humans riding with that army.

Several reports had come in of people that looked to be leading the eucharists, in groups of around ten scattered throughout the White Army.

According to what Lokiella and the Sabre-toothed Tigers have told us, those humans are there to give orders. They're either nobles who are still sucking up to Vicius, or they're fanatical believers in that foul Goddess.

"If there are humans in her army… It might actually be a good sign that this is what she has stooped to," Lokiella had told me. *"She must have some sort of control mechanism installed in those eucharists, you know? Once they get too far away from her it becomes difficult to properly give them detailed instructions. The further the eucharists are from Vicius, the more she has to rely on others to tell them what to do in the field."*

So those humans are there to give orders, huh? It also sounds like the eucharists are stronger when they're subjected to Vicius's control mechanism. We might be able to weaken them by severing that tie.

"Lokiella," I said. She had just returned and was sitting on my shoulder. "Reports are that Vicius has armed her eucharists, then?"

"So it seems," Lokiella replied.

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's impression was that there were more armed combatants in the White Army than there had been during the banished emperor's attack on the capital of Mira.

"The banished emperor was just a disciple whom Vicius gave some of her power to, after all. The eucharists he created would have been much weaker than the real things," said Lokiella. "It also takes a long, long time for her to make her disciples powerful. The banished emperor was from a century or two ago, but from a divine

perspective, he was a recent addition. Maybe you should keep in mind that he was one of the *weaker* of her disciples."

Meaning…

"It's almost certain that the three disciples we'll have to face are going to be stronger than the banished emperor."

"At the very least, yes. Wormgandr's going to be very tricky to deal with—he's always been hard to read. He may seem casual and laid back, never getting openly angry. But he does *whatever* he needs to do to win. That's just who he is."

"What about the other two?" I asked.

"I don't know much… But there's something mysterious about them as well. Vicius sure has created some troublesome foes for you to handle."

I looked out at the approaching White Army.

"The battle that's almost upon us… How do you see it?"

Lokiella thought for a moment.

Not that this matters… But those gestures really make her look like a tiny mascot character now that she's so small.

"Can't say anything until we get going, really. I think there's a possibility that the disciples might show up here, but I don't think Vicius is anywhere in that horde…"

That's the question—whether the disciples are in there or not, and whether Vicius is here on the front lines. We still don't know the answer to either of those questions. It's unlikely that Erika's in any

state to operate her familiars right now. Meanwhile, reports from the Miran spies in the capital of Alion have dried up too.

It wasn't that all the spies of Mira had left Eno after Nyantan and the heroes' escape—some stayed in the capital to continue to inform on the state of the city.

"All contact from Eno has ceased. It's possible that with the escape of the former Disciple of Vicius Nyantan, that our spies have been rooted out and destroyed…" said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

If that's true, then we'll have no way of getting up to date reports on what's happening in Eno. …Including whether Vicius and her disciples are still in the city or not.

"We've made preparations for Vicius and her disciples being here," I said.

"You're never sloppy when it comes to making preparations, eh?" said Lokiella, poking the side of my mask with her index finger. "I'll be counting on you, little Lord of the Flies. ♪"

A little distance behind Seras and I stood Munin and Slei in her third stage of transformation—as well as the Holy Knights of Neah. Not all of their order were present, as their captain Makia Renaufia and some of her knights were by the queen's side. The remainder had been assigned to Seras on Cattlea's orders and placed under the unrestricted command of the Lord of the Flies Brigade—and the knights she had sent were some of her best. Cattlea was in charge of commanding the entirety of the former combined forces and wouldn't have much time to give proper instruction to her elites—which was

one more reason that she had entrusted most of her personal forces to Seras.

Well, they're just about the right size for a group under our control.

"Sir Too-ka," said Seras. "It's starting."

"Get ready. We'll move out when we're needed."

"Understood."

"Squee!"

"Whoaa?! Oh wow, that surprised me!" Lokiella soared straight up into the air above me as Piggymaru squeaked its way out of my robes.

…I did already tell her about Piggymaru, for what it's worth.

"Squee…"

"Sorry, my bad… You just startled me is all… I-I'm fine! I'm all right, Piggymaru!"

I had also created a little pocket space for Lokiella to store herself, so the two of them were pocket buddies.

Right, then. The Lord of the Flies Brigade and the heroes are about to join this battle, but…

"When you defeat those golden-eyes, you heroes can enhance yourselves by sucking out their soul power, right?" asked Lokiella.

"Maybe," I responded.

"Nh?"

"Vicius knows that heroes get stronger as we level up—but she's still sending that huge army of monsters at us. There's a chance we might level up when we defeat them, but…"

She can't see what's right in front of her, but that awful Goddess always has cunning to spare.

"There's a chance she's *improved* them so that we can't gain experience from killing them."

"Mm-hmm… That might be possible, I suppose… Wait. You haven't seen Vicius since the she summoned you, have you Too-ka?!"

"Nope."

"It's impressive you have such a grasp on her character…"

"I guess when you really hate someone, you become a bit of an expert."

As we spoke, the eucharist army drew just moments away from a direct confrontation with the Miran lines. The earth trembled beneath my feet as the white wave approached. The army of Mira was clad in white too, lined up in beautiful formation. Taking their command was Chester Ord—successor to the Princeps Elector House of Ord, and the man who had served as general commander of the Ulza invasion. He had been restrained by Sogou Ayaka during that battle and taken captive, but now he stood on the front lines once more, taking command of his army.



"Archers! Draw!"

At Chester's orders, his archers pulled their heavy bows back as far as they could go and pointed their arrows up into the sky. Chester waited until the right moment, and then…

"Fiiire!"

The sky filled with arrows, like countless birds soaring up into the air. The hail of sharp blades cut through the firmament, never deviating from their path. The eucharists with shields in their hands raised them into the air without slowing their marching pace for a moment. The wave of arrows curved down toward the earth like a raging blizzard and fell upon the horde of eucharists. Those that were skewered shed white blood.

If our intel is correct, they should be capable of bleeding out, just like humans are. We know they're dead when…

Flap!

One of the eucharists that was badly hit by the arrows staggered a few steps backward. *Wings* sprouted from the creature's eyes.

Eucharists sprout white wings from their eyes when they die. That's the sign that they're finished.

The dying eucharist reached out, trying to join hands with its comrades before it passed.

"Perhaps they are trying to become one again," Takao Hijiri had speculated, upon hearing that intel. The skewered eucharist rolled to

the ground, and the others crushed it underfoot.

"Second line—fiiire!"

A second row of archers behind the first loosed their arrows and another deadly rain of fire fell upon the eucharists, piercing their white bodies again. This second wave blunted the momentum of the eucharist front lines somewhat, but could not stop them entirely. The unarmed eucharists took the armor and weapons from the dying and continued onward. They stomped over those that had fallen, continuing their march.

That won't be enough to stop them.

The white horde continued, snapping the arrows that had missed their mark like twigs under their feet.

They aren't immortal. It's easy to tell when they're dead. We should be prepared for traps if they try to play dead…but the soldiers of this world can fight this enemy.

"Magical unit, fire as one!"

The magical unit was the next to ready their attacks. They thrust their channeling crystal-tipped staves into the air in unison. Pointed shards of ice began to form at their tips and once the ice blades were big enough to form spears, they fired together on the same trajectory. The ice spears descended like hail upon the eucharists, piercing them as they fell.

Meanwhile, far ahead of the eucharists who were under ice attack—the first wave had made it through the rain of arrows and assaulted the shield-bearers that stood ready for them. The hard

sound of metal on flesh filled the air, as the shield unit's captain cried out over the noise.

"Hooold!"

The shield-bearers knelt in unison and bore the eucharists' charge. They then began to use the swords in their hands to stab at their enemy through the gaps in their shields.

Thrust! Thrust! Thrust!

One by one, the soldiers skewered the eucharists in silence, as if performing some routine task that needed to be finished in a hurry. Spurts of white blood coated their shields, and the sound of white wings sprouting from the eucharists' eyes filled the air as they perished. The archers and magical attack unit used the opportunity to fall back.

"Shield-bearers, withdraw!"

At Chester's order, the shield-bearers slowly began to step backward, splitting off to the northern and southern flanks as they did so. In doing so, they opened up a path in their ranks. Chester, mounted on horseback, drew his sword and directed the tip of his blade at the oncoming eucharists.

"Run them dooown!"

The armored horses brayed in response to Chester's deployment of the cavalry. Leaving his military advisors behind, Chester shot toward the enemy on his steed at the head of the charge. His mount galloped beneath him, hooves pounding the hard dirt. The cavalry followed, picking up momentum as they came. The sound of their

hooves on the dirt was a surge of rumbling, pounding the earth like war drums to battle. As the shield-bearers withdrew, a front of eucharists came into view at the end of the path they had formed for the cavalry's passing. The cavalry flowed over them like an avalanche, cutting down the eucharists from horseback and stabbing them with their spears. The fearless eucharists stood their ground against the mounted cavalry—but on foot they were at a disadvantage. One by one wings shot from their eyes.

"That's…"

Suddenly, a second line of enemy eucharists formed up, and counter-charged…and this time, the sound of hooves came from the enemy's side. They tossed spears as they charged.

"Shields up! If you can strike those things down with your swords, do it!"

When Nyantan and the heroes had made their escape from the capital of Alion, they had been pursued by eucharists that had the lower bodies of horses.

Centaur eucharists, I think she called them. Somehow, I get the feeling that Kil and the other centaurs would be really bothered if they saw these things.

The enemy spears shot toward the Miran soldiers. Some managed to parry them with incredible skill, but others…

"Gyah!"

A number of the cavalry were skewered by the oncoming missiles and fell from their mounts. I could see other eucharists on

the field with spears sticking out of them, too. It seemed that they had no concept of friendly fire.

Most humans would be careful not to hit their comrades in a fight. It doesn't look like eucharists feel that way.

"Some of those centaur eucharists look bigger than the others," I noted.

"The Miran cavalry are doing well out there," said Lokiella from my shoulder.

She's right, they're holding their own. But…

"Here comes the third wave."

Another wave of foot soldier eucharists reached the front lines where the hand-to-hand fighting was taking place. It was time for the Miran foot soldiers to take the field to counter them.

"We're moving in! Advance!" called one of the generals.

A group of foot soldiers charged forward in formation. Then, as if in coordination with the men on the ground, several black shadows shot past like bullets. Even the Miran troops looked shocked for a brief moment, but the shadows passed harmlessly through their ranks. They were clearly much faster than the other soldiers.

Those things might even be faster than the mounted cavalry…

The shadows kept low as they raced through the bewildered lines of Miran soldiers. They were the black leopardman warriors of the Country at the End of the World.

Geo Shadowblade's Band of the Shining Leopard had taken to the battlefield. I remembered how Geo had come to me the other

day…

"You want to be a part of the first army?"

*"Well, we came here to be reinforcements, but we ain't got much to brag about out here in the big wide world…*yet*."*

"So you want to prove yourselves right off the bat? Show that the Country at the End of the World can fight?"

"There's that. I figure we might get treated better down the line if we work hard here. That's part of it, but…I want to show everyone that we ain't just here as guests or anything like that. I want to show everyone we're one of them. Fightin' shoulder to shoulder. And it's been a lot easier gettin' through to them at the top, thanks to you, Lord of the Flies."

Geo Shadowblade led the Band of the Shining Leopard into battle, demonstrating to all of his subordinates that he was willing to take to the front lines. His unit was exposed to the furious attacks of the enemies as the battle descended into chaos. One of the larger centaur eucharists was wielding a great war hammer like it weighed nothing at all, sweeping away Miran soldiers who stood in its path. The monster was unique on the front lines—and made a fine target for Geo.

The twin-bladed black leopardman leaped, but the centaur eucharist seemed to have noticed Geo closing in. It was quick to counter his attack, keeping its war hammer in its right hand as it drew a double-edged scimitar from a scabbard with its left. It swung the blade at Geo as he was in midair. Geo parried the blow with the black blade in his right hand, angling his sword to dissipate the strength

behind the blow. Metal clashed with metal in intense strikes that sent sparks into the air. Geo slashed with the black blade in his left hand—bringing it down upon the centaur eucharist's head. The creature seemed to hesitate for a moment.

It's too fast—I won't be able to parry with my war hammer at that speed, the creature seemed to decide. It dropped its war hammer and tried to guard itself with its arm instead, turning the silver bracer on its forearm toward the attack.

Slash!

The centaur eucharist was severed in two from head to hooves. Geo landed softly on the ground, a feat completely at odds with the daring attack he had just landed. The tip of his black blade had reached the end of its swing just barely above the ground. He had cut through the eucharist as it tried to guard itself—a fearsome slash that no bracers could have prevented.

Not to mention, he'd done it one-handed.

The Miran soldiers around Geo saw what happened and looked utterly stunned. The eucharists, seeming to judge Geo as someone to be wary of, kept their distance from him. Then the wave of leopardmen piled onto the field, overtaking Geo and moving to support the Miran soldiers around them.

"Go!" cried Geo, tightening his grip on the two black blades in his hands as he stood. The leopardmen rallied at the sound of their leader and engaged in combat with the eucharists. Inspired by their actions, the Miran soldiers fought harder too.

"W-we ain't losing to no leopardmen! We got to prove the worth of the Miran army to His Majesty right now! Go!"

War cries went up, just as the soldiers of Mira arrived on the field a little after the leopardmen, forcing the eucharists to retreat.

"I should have expected as much from Sir Geo and the Band of the Shining Leopard," said Seras, watching it all unfold.

"Yeah."

Yet there was no sign that the horde of advancing eucharists would ever end. Facing down an endless white waves of soldiers which only seemed to swell with each passing moment, the Miran army reinforced their flanks to continue engaging the enemy.

If this keeps up, they're going to be swallowed up to the north and south.

Suddenly the sound of thunderous hooves drew near. An army was charging straight toward the northern flank of the eucharist army. It was Cattlea and her combined forces, who had been lying low behind a small ridge to the north of the battlefield. The army poured into the wave of eucharists like an avalanche. The enemy saw the army coming and tried to form ranks, but the cavalry charge hit them before they could react, cutting down some of the eucharists' momentum in the north.

"That was the perfect timing for a blow to their side," I said.

"I expected nothing less of the princess," said Seras. I could hear the trust she placed in Cattlea in her voice. "If I were the enemy…that would have been terrible timing to suffer such a blow."

Looks like we were right to leave Cattlea in charge of the north. As for the eucharists spreading around Mira's southern flank…

"The southern flank's made up of the Miran army, the forces of the Country at the End of the World, and the Reserves Brigade."

Count Rohm's part of that unit too—the man I met at that fortress in northern Ulza.

One of the commanders on the southern flank was Liselotte Onik.

The Reserves Brigade are made up of demi-humans who sided with Mira… Demi-humans who hid themselves away from the world, and those who stayed on the outside fighting together. Lise was worried about whether the two sides would be able to get along.

Just then, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor rode up to us on his white steed.

"The spider…the prime minister of the Country at the End of the World," he said. "It seems that she has been successful in her attempt to win over the hearts of the Reserves Brigades. My army also appears to be coordinating well with the forces of the Country at the End of the World."

"I am sure their discipline reflects the depth of trust that they have in you, Your Majesty. I think their faith has much to do with that—but Lise has let nothing of those advantages go to waste, and in that respect, I also credit her abilities."

"She's changed since we last met. Seeing her now, I feel confident in her future as a leader."

Messengers came to give reports to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. Our reports weren't just being delivered by mounted couriers, but by black dragons and harpies too.

It sure helps that they can fly.

Nyaki was also delivering messages, mounted on the back of a great wolf—a position she had requested personally.

"Nyaki wants to help out too! Nyaki wants to do something, even if it isn't meow-ch!"

Still, I'm keeping her away from the dangerous front lines just in case. Nyaki's learned the basics of how to fight from Geo and the others. She's also got her older sister, Nyantan, riding with her, so she shouldn't be in any real danger. Not to mention that the great wolf she's riding is faster than any horse, so she's really making herself useful as a courier.

I watched as the monsters of the Country at the End of the World rampaged through the enemy's southern flank.

I'm glad we're only up against eucharists—makes it easy to see exactly who's on which side. It might be a little tough to distinguish friend from foe based on whether their eyes are golden or not, especially in that chaos. It can be easy to mistake who you're fighting against with adrenaline running through you. Those people are fighting for their lives, so friendly fire accidents might happen—but on this battlefield, telling friend from foe just means checking whether what you're swinging at is a eucharist or not. The humans can fight with the knowledge that every non-eucharist monster is from the Country at the End of the World, and therefore firmly on their side.

"I felt a similar way during the fight against the Thirteen Orders of Alion… But I never thought a day would come that we would fight alongside monsters," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

Among the monsters, the hellhound Loa was especially effective. He was the commander of the monster forces and while the monster battalion was officially a part of the Band of the Shining Dragon that was guarding the Country at the End of the World, Loa and the other monsters had been allowed to join the present fight. Those monsters now stood bravely on the front lines, fearlessly fighting the eucharists. Kil's Band of the Shining Horse also seemed to be coordinating their fighting well, and Gratrah's harpy division was with them.

"When do we deploy the rest…"

I was paying attention to the whole battlefield, but in general, I had left the big decisions to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Cattlea.

Large-scale battles aren't really my thing.

The three things I have direct control over are: The Lord of the Flies Brigade. The Holy Knights of Neah that Cattlea has given me. And finally, the heroes.

"The real problem here is that we've gotten no more reports in from Eno."

Reports from the spies of Mira had long since dried up, and no contact had come in from Erika's familiars either.

Do I send out the heroes now or not? Are those disciples here? Is Vicius here?

"Come to think of it, part of your body is still in the capital of Alion, isn't it?" I asked Lokiella, searching for a way to resolve the situation. "Well, um… You don't think you could get in touch with it to get us some intel, do you?"

Lokiella shook her head.

"Right now, the part of me that's left there is…how should I put this? My head is in a sort of independent self-sustaining state. I can't connect with it from here, and if I tried to draw forth whatever remnant of power is left inside it, I think it'll just die. I don't even know if it's properly conscious anymore…"

Never hurts to ask—but hey, that makes sense. If it were possible, Lokiella probably would've done it a long time ago.

"…"

What worries me is the possibility that Vicius is here with all three of her disciples. I'm sending Sogou Ayaka and the Takao sisters out against the three disciples if they do show up. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Geo were options too, but I want to prioritize making use of their abilities as commanders—especially the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. We've got me, Piggymaru, Seras, and Munin to face Vicius. I want Asagi and her group to move independently of the rest.

Which makes hard to deploy any heroes now. I need to keep them on standby for the bosses. The problem is MP. Unique skills use up a large amount of MP, and I don't want anyone getting low on mana or running out before we fight the disciples. There are two ways to recover your MP, leveling up and sleeping, but—

"Report!"

It was a courier from the center of the front line. A short while earlier, Mira's Band of the Sun had joined the fray and were operating alongside Asagi's group—and I had asked them to test something for me on the battlefield.

"Allow Asagi's group to land the finishing blows on those eucharists as often as possible," I'd requested—and the courier was now here to deliver a report on the experiment's results.

"As ordered, the heroes have been granted as many killing blows as feasible during the fighting, but…"

Doesn't look like this is going to be the result I was looking for. I can see it already written on the man's face.

"At present… None of the heroes have leveled up as a result."

"Understood. I'll be counting on you for further updates."

The courier retreated.

Turns out, my bad feeling was right.

"We can safely assume that Vicius has made it so her eucharists don't grant experience points," I said to Lokiella.

"So it would appear…"

There's a possibility that the heroes are still receiving a very small amount of EXP, in which case, killing a massive number of those things might trigger a level up. Using up all that MP on the off chance that might happen would be too much of a risk, though. We should work under the assumption that the mana we spend isn't coming back during this fight—not unless we sleep, at least. It'll be hard for the

heroes to use their unique skills on this battlefield. Fighting without unique skills will also tire them out. They'd need to rest before continuing.

"It's not clear how many reinforcements the enemy has at its disposal. I want to keep soldier casualties to an absolute minimum, so our numbers don't dwindle."

"If you want to keep your soldiers alive, sending in the heroes might be the most effective way to do that," said Lokiella.

"Especially Hijiri and Sogou, given that their skills can take out enemies in a large area," I agreed. "The S-class abilities would also be effective against the bigger eucharists, I bet… Well, I suppose I could step in as well."

"But in fights against whole armies…"

"Yeah, my status-effect skills won't be as effective against large groups."

…The white waves kept coming.

Then I saw it. Off in the distance, the shadow of a giant eucharist.

I might have to be the one to stop that thing. Luckily, my status-effect skills barely consume any MP when I use them, and I'm not that worn out right now. But…what if that giant eucharist is bait? What if Vicius is concealing herself inside of it, waiting for an opening to strike me?

There are several possibilities to consider:

One, Vicius is here on this battlefield.

Two, Vicius isn't here, but she's heading for Yonato instead.

Three, Vicius is still in Alion—in the capital of Eno.

In terms of odds… I reckon that the third possibility is the most likely one.

I had talked through all of this with Lokiella before the battle began.

"The position where she opened that gate… She shouldn't be able to change its location from where it's set, right above Eno. Or at least, it should take her six months to change it. If she's going to open that gate again once the Holy Eye of Yonato's been destroyed, she'll need to stay in Eno to be the one to activate it. That means, if she intends to run off with her winnings like I think she's going to, there wouldn't be much point to her leaving Eno. If she's gone to Yonato in person…that would leave the anti-divine eucharist army she's created completely undefended in the capital. There'd be no point to destroying the Holy Eye if it would cost her the army she intends on using to invade the heavens. And if she went all the way to Yonato, she'd have to come all the way back to Eno to open the gate. That seems like an inefficient use of time."

Lokiella's speculation sounded reasonable to me, but it was also possible that Vicius had stayed put and sent her disciples out to fight us. She could also have split them between here and Yonato, or, well, kept all three in Eno. She might even have some completely unknown strategy coming out of left field to outwit us, such as leaving Eno and coming right here in person to crush us.

Maybe she wasn't even thinking about opening that gate immediately after destroying the Holy Eye. Maybe she just wanted to finish this. It was possible.

She might intend on wearing down the heroes with her eucharists, then showing up to kill them in person. I don't think that's a possibility—but maybe that's why it's something she'd try. Something to outwit us. What we need is solid information… Anything provable. The greatest thing that we could know for certain is whether Vicius is currently in the capital of Alion or not. If only we had some solid intel. If I could just know that, I could send out our heroes without worrying so much about their safety in the field.

"There's no end to this wave of eucharists," said Lokiella. "There are more and more enemies arriving at the front lines. Vicius… Do you think she'll come here to finish the job? Or…"

Lokiella doesn't know either.

I fixed my gloves.

"Well, I suppose I can launch some attacks. If we're trying to conserve the other heroes' MP, then it's best I be the one to go out there, given how little MP my skills cost. I'll start by taking out the big guy."

Are Vicius and her disciples here or not? I've got to get Sogou and the others ready too, I guess.

…Hmm?

"Ahem. Sir Too-ka." Seras had noticed something—as had I. There was a single crow flying toward us.

"You don't think that's a familiar, do you?"

The crow's caw was sounding out a code—one of Erika's signals. The bird landed right in front of us and began to flap its wings in a sort of Morse code pattern.

There's no doubt about it. This crow's a familiar.

"Erika's recovered, then, eh?"

I always kept my Ouija board close at hand in case a familiar arrived. Seras brought it over and laid it on the ground. The crow began hopping across its letters as I watched, ready to take notes.

"…"

"Is something wrong, Sir Too-ka?"

"Back when we went to clear those humanoid types out of the War Citadel of Protection of in the west… We left Erika's familiar with Rohm, didn't we? He should still have the bird with him."

"Ah? Yes…"

"Rohm should have a guard posted beside the birdcage for when Erika enters her familiar to deliver us a message… He would be here already if that bird was giving signals."

"Ah… You're correct."

"But Erika's not using the familiar we *have.* She's chosen to use this one… Meaning?"

There might be some other reason that she's done this… But wait—is this crow even one of Erika's?

"Sorry," I said, stopping the crow as it hopped across the board. "Is that you, Erika?"

After a brief pause, the crow hopped over to *no*—then started spelling out something else. Its next word was only three letters long.

"Lis."

Familiars are convenient to have around, but Vicius doesn't use them. Or rather, according to Erika…she can't.

"I think I'm the only one on the continent that even knows how to make them anymore," she said to me once. An ancient technique that Erika has adapted and also one that she made conditional. Thanks to her, only dark elves can use familiars. That's why Vicius can't use them. Nor can humans or any of the other divines. But a dark elf studying under Erika Anaorbael herself… They could become a second user of this secret technique.

Seras called to the familiar, sounding a little overcome with emotion as she said the name. "Lis!"

The crow nodded, then hopped restlessly around the Ouija board to write out its message.

"My apologies. I would like to omit the process by which I arrived here, and move directly to…"

"Lis," I said, stopping the crow amid its flurry of letters. "You can cut the formalities. No need for apologies—that's an order from your captain."

The familiar froze, then nodded and began moving once more.

Lis has also never seen me in this particular Lord of the Flies outfit. It seems like she's relaxed a little, more certain that it's me under this mask after hearing my voice.

She used not just her movements, but her beak and the tips of her wings to indicate letters on the board.

"Do you need intel on Eno? Is there any other information you want first?"

"We need intel on Eno, yes. We want to know if Vicius and her disciples are still in the city. Do you understand?" I asked.

The familiar indicated *yes*.

I've already told Erika that I want regular reports on whether Vicius is in the capital or not. I expect Erika has passed those orders on to Lis, and that's why she knows it's valuable intel.

"No wonder that foul Goddess wanted you gone, Erika."

We have the same target, seeking the same revenge…but even so, I need to find a way to pay Erika back once all this is over. If only that leather pouch of mine would deliver more of the good stuff.

In any case—familiars are serving an important role for us right now. Their users can switch between them—between the one with us and the one in Eno, for instance. That's a huge advantage. It lets us check on things a great distance away with almost no time lag. A magical war pigeon might be able to tell me that Vicius is in Eno at a certain time, but she might already have left and be almost at the battlefield by the time that intel reached me. Especially if she used one of her magical war horses. Magical war pigeons have to physically

fly through the sky to get back to us, but a familiar can give us intel that's only a few minutes old.

Everyone waited with bated breath for the familiar's next message. And then our answer came.

It could have easily been "I don't know. I can't see her." Thankfully, that wasn't the answer we got.

"They're in Eno," came the familiar's reply.

I went ahead and told Lis what the disciples of Vicius looked like just in case, with Lokiella on my shoulder, who got a firsthand look at them to verify the details. Everything matched up*…*

"Vicius isn't here, and her disciples aren't either," I said.

My prediction was right. They're all in Eno. They aren't heading to Yonato.

"Is Vicius preparing for a siege, perhaps?" said Lokiella.

"You mean…"

"Yes." Lokiella sounded like she was speaking as much to herself as to me. "She needs to buy time."

The longer she stalls us, the better things are for her… Or maybe there's something specifically about the capital that makes it an advantageous place for a siege.

I turned to Lis's familiar.

"You've really helped us, Lis. If possible I'd like you to check on a few more things, but…are you feeling all right?"

The crow nodded. Switching between familiars too often wasn't recommended—Erika had mentioned that attuning your consciousness to a new creature, then tearing it away, could be an exhausting process.

I can't push Lis too hard and have her collapse on me—and on a personal level, I don't want to tire her out. I know I might be a little soft on Lis and Nyaki, but I just don't want them to exert themselves too hard. They're like me, after all—Mimori Toukas who have the chance to grow up right, without needing to lie to themselves every day about who they really are. I've got to protect them. I really do. It's like an instinct on my part.

"I'm grateful we've got a Lord of the Flies Brigade veteran helping us out, but you make sure to rest when you need to, okay? Got that, Lis?"

It might have just been my imagination—but for a moment, I thought I saw the crow smile. The bird indicated *yes* with its wing.

"All right, then."

So far so good…

"Lokiella."

"Yes?"

"You know more about this divine stuff than any of us. Vicius is choosing to stay in the capital… Could you try and think why? I've got my own suspicions, but I want a second opinion to shore them up."

"Okay."

"As for us…" I turned to Seras and the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. "Let's mop up this eucharist army."

Vicius is trying to buy time. I can't be certain, but that's where the evidence points. We need to press on as fast as we can.

I looked out over the battlefield. The giant eucharist was drawing closer.

It's still far from our position, but it'll crash into our front lines soon enough. We should always try and expect the unexpected…but I shouldn't overthink things so much that I can't act. All I can do is prepare for various scenarios and adapt on the fly to what happens out there.

"Get a message to Sogou Ayaka," I said to one of Cattlea's Holy Knights.

I spoke briefly with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and sent out a few additional orders. I also got extra information from Lis.

"I'll switch out with Sogou at some point. We're making our move."

Sogou Ayaka

SOGOU AYAKA adjusted her hair band—a replacement for her old circlet, now broken. A message from Mimori Touka had just arrived via a young girl named Nyaki, who rode with Nyantan. Ayaka's

orders were to ride out. She picked up her spear. The sky was clear and blue above her.

"Sogou-san," said Suou Kayako.

"I'm leaving, Suou-san."

"Ah…"

"Look after everyone for me."

Suou Kayako, Murota Erii, and Nihei Yukitaka were all still on standby with the groups of heroes that they led. Sogou Ayaka would be riding out alone. She expected that Touka foresaw the issue with sending them all to the front lines together—that fighting while worrying for the safety of her classmates would dull Ayaka's abilities in combat.

"…Leave it to me, Sogou-san."

"Suou-san, once again…"

"Yes?"

"Thank you so much for joining my group. You've been so much help… Thank you."

"You've helped me too," replied Kayako, folding her arms over her chest. She paused for moment, like she was gathering strength to say her next few words. "I…I joined because it was *you*, Sogou-san."

It was a strange way of putting it, but Ayaka understood what Kayako was trying to say.

Suou Kayako… She truly cares for me.

Kayako sighed, trying to calm her emotions. “This is all I can do right now.”

Ayaka smiled, laughing a little.

“It’s okay. You guys are the only reason I’m as strong as I am.”

I’ve caused so many problems for everyone…but I’m still their class representative. I’m not shameless enough to say that out loud, though.

“Suou-san.” Ayaka thrust her fist out toward Suou. “Let’s go home—back to the world where we belong.”

Kayako blushed a little, then put her own hand forward to bump fists with Ayaka. The corners of her mouth softened into a rare smile.

“I thought it was only boys that did fist bumps.”

“R-really?”

“No… It suits you.”

“Eh?”

“You’re wonderful, Sogou-san—much more than any boy I know.”

Ayaka rode her mount toward the northern flank. She eventually came upon the Queen of Neah, Cattlea—who was in command there.

“Cattlea-san.”

“You’ve come then, Ayaka Sogou,” Cattlea said, turning her eyes back to the front lines some distance away, where the giant eucharist was approaching. “To be frank with you, I do not know if our army

here on the northern flank can face down that giant. Even if we could defeat it, we would wear ourselves down in the process, and we might lose our strength to combat the remaining eucharists horde on the field. It would be very helpful if you could take care of that monster for us."

"Leave it to me. If possible, I would like you to capt—to *take care* of the Alionese nobles who are giving these eucharists their orders," replied Ayaka.

She had almost said "capture," but she corrected herself, recalling Touka's orders.

"Whether they are killed or not is up to you."

Capturing them alive could allow us to interrogate them for information…but if killing them would greatly weaken this eucharist army, then that is what we should do. Weakening the eucharists will limit the casualties we suffer and prevent the deaths of our allies. She has entrusted me with the scales of life.

"That giant eucharist is still quite far… Could I have a moment?" asked Cattlea, gazing at the creature off in the distance. "I want you to fight as you wish on this battlefield, Ayaka."

"I…"

I suppose someone has told her about me, then.

When the Alionese knights had ridden out against Nyantan and her escape party, Ayaka had struck down every last eucharist they had brought with them.

But I…

Once their eucharists were gone, the men began to beg for their lives.

When I saw them…I tried to tighten my grip on the unique skill sword in my hands. Then Nyantan took a knife to the knights' throats and slit them all.

I just stood there and watched. Back then, I…I think I was going to kill them too. I knew if I let them go that they would take information back to Alion and put my classmates in danger all over again. I had to do it. I'd made up my mind. I'd decided, and yet…

"You've only just reunited with these heroes. We don't need to let them see you become a murderer," Nyantan had said.

She was being considerate.

But in the fight against Mira, I killed people with my own hands. I did everything I could to reduce the number of casualties. I tried, at least. But I'm sure that some of those I came upon on the battlefield were dead, whether by my hand or indirectly.

"I fought alongside you in the war against Mira. I know you had no love for needless slaughter there," said Cattlea, bringing her horse level with Ayaka's. "I imagine that is precisely why the soldiers of Mira have been so willing to fight by your side. The successor to the House of Ord, who is presently engaged in combat in the center of our lines, was captured by you…but you did not kill him. Now Chester Ord has returned to battle, and you stand by his side as an ally to our cause. The man is loved by his men. They would never have forgiven you for killing him."

Cattlea smiled at her encouragingly.

"Do you understand? Yesterday's enemy is today's friend. But this can never be true when you kill your enemies."

"…"

"There are times when being merciless can prove effective. But in your case, I believe the results you have demonstrated on the battlefield speak for themselves. You have been fighting well enough, no?"

"But I…"

"I also hear that you have repented and wish to improve yourself. You have the courage to blame yourself. I believe that is precisely what it takes to be a hero."

"A h-hero…?"

"Nobody in this world is perfect. People make mistakes. I have. What is important is how we confront our mistakes. You didn't run from yours—you faced them head on and suffered long and hard as a result. That is nothing to be ashamed of. You are courageous for being able to learn from your missteps."

"…Thank you."

Cattlea laughed, then placed a gloved hand to her mouth and smiled gracefully.

"You should think for yourself and fight according to your own beliefs. After all—I believe Too-ka Mimori has a plan for what is to come. He has very much taken into account your thoughts and actions in particular."

…She's right.

When I thought I was about to break, he had Hijiri ready for me. He knew she would work best against me… Thinking back on all the problems I've caused, maybe I have no right to so say this now, but… I, Sogou Ayaka…should be grateful that he's a member of 2-C.

"That sensible streak of yours… You remind me of *her* a little. She was always sticking her nose into other people's business. Oh—I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

"In the war against Mira…" Cattlea began, her gaze slightly dropped. "I sensed what was within you, but I did nothing to intervene. I feel awful for doing so. At that time, it was difficult to determine your condition. I was scared to reach out to you. Well, that was part of it, but…I also knew it would put our combined forces at a disadvantage in that war if I tried to make contact with you. If I said the wrong thing and broke the spell of your battle frenzy… Well, such were my thoughts at the time. It was callous of me. So you see, I made a mistake of sorts, too. I am sorry."

"No…I was so worked up back then that… You need not feel responsible for that, Cattlea-san."

Cattlea sighed and looked up at the heavens.

"Yes… You really do remind me of her…"

She looked back to the front lines.

"But you'll be okay now. Dance on the palm of that Lord of the Flies, and you will not fall so far again, I expect."

"Yes. I think you're right," replied Ayaka. She tightened her grip on the spear in her hands. "I should be going," she said, gazing off toward the giant eucharist that was approaching. "I'll be back."

She dismounted from her horse—a regular one, as she wasn't mounted on one of her unique skill's silver mounts yet.

Now is when I begin consuming MP. I have to repay those that have helped me and to atone. If I can, I want to eliminate every last eucharist on this battlefield.

With those feelings in her heart, Sogou Ayaka kicked hard off the ground as she launched into a charge.

I have to believe that there's something after this—a shimmering world that waits for us.

"Silver World."

The northern flank was engaged in a melee battle with the eucharists. They were not weakened against these monsters, as they had been by essence during the Demon King's invasion. That was a part of why they seemed to be holding their own. The northern flank was made up of the combined forces, incorporating the Alionese army led by Baron Pollary. Many of his men were veterans of the intense battle at the White Citadel of Protection. As Baron Pollary cut down a eucharist from the back of his horse, a knight formed up by his side in support.

"Baron! Fall back a little, please!"

The Baron skewered an eucharist's face with his spear.

"They aren't all that much on their own…but there's no end to the blasted waves of them!"

The enemy pushed onward toward them, never ceasing their advance. Their army's formation had started to crumble, and eucharists were closing in on the gaps in their defenses. Those gaps were slowly being pushed open, and eucharists and soldiers alike jostled with each other in combat.

Skewered by the baron's spear, the eucharist's white blood splattered to the earth. It fizzled and bubbled as it faded away, as if it were evaporating. Baron Pollary spun his spear around his head.

"Baron, that mid-sized eucharist is—"

He changed direction and skewered another nearby eucharist.

"Those are the tough ones! Then there's—"

Baron Pollary ground his teeth.

"…Gah!" He looked up at the eucharist that was approaching—a giant.

"Magical attack units, crossbows…get ready to face that thing! Form a ring to protect our ranged units!"

"Baron! There!" A knight was pointing in *her* direction. "Isn't that—L-Lady Ayaka!"

Sogou Ayaka closed in on the front lines, riding her silver steed. First, she raced toward the soldiers that were struggling in their fight against the mid-sized eucharists.

"Lady Ayaka! You must be careful against those! They use different weapon types, and some can be much stronger than the

rest!”

“Thank you for letting me know, Pollary-san!” Ayaka shouted her thanks as she passed him by.

She tossed her spear up for a moment to change her grip, catching it again on the overhand…

Whoosh!

She hurled it full force ahead of her. The spear roared through the air toward the mid-sized eucharist, who struck it down with a battle axe. But the attack had been meant to stop the monster from attacking the soldiers around it…

Above Ayaka’s head, the silver sphere of her “Silver World” appeared. The sphere swelled, growing and growing in size until it burst open. Ayaka created floating weapons around her as the creatures of her unique skill—her silver knights—began falling from the sky.

Sogou Ayaka rode out ahead of them all, floating weapons around her and 200 silver knights following her charge, swords in their hands. The mid-sized eucharist switched its focus to Ayaka, knocking Alionese troops away as it charged at her, arms out and ready to fight.

Ayaka didn’t slow down for a second as she gripped a silver unique skill sword in her hand. The other eucharists pushed their way through her allies to close in on her, but Ayaka didn’t let them get anywhere near. Normal eucharists were no obstacle to her.

Her steed's hooves pounded the earth, sending clods of hard dirt flying up behind her. Her allies noticed her approach and opened a path. The eucharists within range of her flying weapons fled at their approach.

She slowly drew breath—*I'm within range now.*

She pointed the tip of her sword at the mid-sized eucharist. The flying weapons about her launched furiously forward. The eucharist tried desperately to swat them away. There was strength in her numbers though, a violent majority vote. The mid-sized eucharist was torn asunder.

Then Ayaka sent her flying weapons out to all the other eucharists within range.

The silver knights arrived just a little later than she had. They prioritized supporting her allies, cutting down attacking eucharists one by one.

"Next."

Ayaka fixed eyes on her new target—the giant. It was close now, and allied soldiers were starting to retreat from its advance.

It looks 30 meters tall, or close to it. But that won't be a problem.

She set her silver steed galloping toward it, the opposite direction to her allies' slow retreat. The lone hero was resolute and unflinching as she rode at the giant eucharist. Voices called out to her, cheering her on.

"Lady Ayaka! Lady Ayaka has come!"

"Hero!"

"Don't let these smaller ones get in her way!"

"All right! We're going in too!"

I'll protect them. I'll protect all of them.

Thud!

As Ayaka's silver steed kicked hard off the ground with its hind legs, the sound had power to it. She leaped into the air, heading straight for the giant eucharist. The giant swung a great flail at her, trying to strike her down as she approached.

Whoosh!

Ayaka's sword grew massive in her hands and she swung sideways at the eucharist—flail and all—slicing it in two. She kicked off against the body of her mount and soared into the air. From there, she sliced down upon the eucharist's head in a flash, like she was chopping a log of firewood in two. As she pulled her sword back, wings appeared in the giant's eyes and its body peeled in two halves, its bisected head hanging below its waist. The vertical slash had gone all the way through, and with a great crash, the four parts of the eucharist crumpled to the ground.

Thuddd!

Smoke rising from its body, the creature began to break apart. A few seconds passed, and then Ayaka heard the roar of cheers from behind her.

"I knew you could do it, Lady Ayaka!"

“Of course! She can even take on humanoid types without breaking a sweat!”

“We can do this… With her on our side, we can win! No matter what comes our way!”

“And she’s super cute!”



Cries of admiration surged forth from all directions. Her back to the voices, she started walking. There was guilt—but there was embarrassment too.

Ever since I went to stop Mimori Touka and Kirihara Takuto from fighting… Thinking about the path I've taken to get back on my feet. I don't deserve their praise.

But…

Just then, Ayaka stopped thinking.

Her eyes saw something that she was looking for as she raced across the battlefield atop her mount.

"Found you."

The eucharists were closely packed together in a certain area of the horde, forming a circle of protection.

There's likely a human giving orders to these monsters at the center of that knot.

From the center of the horde, she heard a flustered voice.

"A-Ayaka Sogou has come after all! Gah! Come now, eucharists! Protect me! Buy us more time! Retreat!"

Ayaka easily swept the eucharists away and found the group of humans inside, riding on the backs of centaur eucharists and wearing noble-looking armor.

They're the ones controlling these creatures—nobles of Alion who sided with the Goddess.

Picking up speed with her mount, Ayaka closed in. A female noble appeared to be the highest in station, but she fell into complete

panic the moment she turned and saw Ayaka.

"Gyaaah! She's here! The mooonster—! G-guh?!"

Ayaka paid her no heed, knocking the woman on the head with a blunted flying weapon before doing the same to all the other knights that were guarding her. She killed the centaur eucharists for good measure.

I think the humans are all unconscious, knocked from their… horses. I suppose if the Goddess Vicius is in Eno, then she can't give precise orders to eucharists here in the field. Perhaps that's why she sent these nobles to serve as their commanders. Neutralizing them will disrupt the enemy ranks and weaken them, but they are protected by a thick wall of eucharists… Taking them out is my job.

Ayaka lifted the unconscious female commander and had her silver knights load up the woman's guards. She went back to her allies for a moment.

"We may be able to get some intel from them. Please take care of them for me," she said, leaving them with a group of allied soldiers before returning to the front lines. She rode with her silver knights at her back, weapons floating by her side as she sped across the battlefield.

Humans are more difficult than monsters.

Another giant eucharist came into view.

How did the Goddess even make that giant set of full-plate armor that it's wearing? That is preventing our archers and magical attack units from doing any real damage to it.

The giant monster was throwing iron balls down on their army, scattering the projectiles that were about the size of soccer balls. Ayaka transformed her floating weapons into a shield and did her best to protect her allies from the attack. As she deployed the shield, she transformed the weapon in her hands into a morning star, then urged her silver steed on faster. She swung the spiked iron ball at the end of the chain.

Whoosh… Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh…

The force of her swing grew stronger as stronger as she approached the fully armored giant. It began to throw a torrential rain of iron balls upon her. She knocked all of them aside with her floating weapons.

"…!"

The fully armored giant almost looked surprised.

Whumph!

The sound of the morning star slicing through the air grew louder, as it swelled in size and the chain grew long enough to combat the giant fully armored eucharist. With a great clang of metal on metal, Ayaka burst the giant eucharist open, armor and all. Wings sprouted from the creature's eyes, and a white rain began to fall. Ayaka passed underneath the monster, racing for the human commander and riding down a fearsome mid-sized eucharist in the process. Her silver knights moved in to support her allies.

I have to protect them. Take down the enemies that might threaten them. That is what I'm here to do.

The voices of appreciation from behind her grew stronger still.

"We can't let her take all the glory! Follow the hero Ayakaaa!"

"Graaah!"

My power can be of use to others. I can save them. I can inspire them… Just like I am now.

Back when I first came to this world, summoned as one of its heroes, it made me think about what a hero really was. I just didn't like something about the way it sounded. It had a ring to it, like we were being forced *to be heroic. A magic word to seal off our escape. That's how I used to feel…but not anymore.*

"You have the courage to blame yourself. I believe that is precisely what it takes to be a hero." That's what Cattlea said to me.

No… I don't think that's me. But just for now, I want to be the hero that everyone wants me to be. I want this, right now. At least until this battle is over.

***

What is a hero, anyway?

That's surprisingly easy to answer. The simplest answer is the right one, I imagine. Heroes are meant to be…

"Those who give courage to others."

Mimori Touka

WITH SOGOU AYAKA'S deployment to the northern flank, the course of our battle flipped in an instant.

To be honest, she did even more than I expected. I suppose I've never actually seen her in the midst of a real battle before, just that short exchange between her and Seras after we beat Kirihara. I have a fair idea of what her skills do, but…

"Lady Ayaka appears to be moving from the northern flank into the center!" came a message from one of our couriers.

I suppose that means that she's done basically all she needed to up north, eh? From our other reports, it sounds like the eucharist ranks there have mostly collapsed. Their numbers are down, but the biggest factor is that we've taken out their command structure. Sogou's been faithfully carrying out my orders.

"Amazing… Should've expected as much from the highest-ranked hero," said Lokiella in amazement.

The highest rank… S-class.

All three S-class heroes have abilities befitting their powerful position. Takao Hijiri can do a lot with her abilities. In terms of raw combat strength, she might be considered a little weaker than the other two. But her abilities are far more flexible and widely applicable.

Kirihara Takuto's abilities really are powerful… Controlling highly potent attack energy at will and using that energy to speed up his own movements. He can also produce smaller golden dragons to protect himself against attacks. Then there's his ability to enslave

golden-eyed monsters, which even lets him turn humanoid monsters into his servants. That's how he created his golden-eyed army. If those abilities had been granted to someone else instead, there might be an entirely different fight for this world taking place right now.

Then there's Sogou Ayaka.

Compared to the other two, her abilities are completely geared for combat. She was already much more powerful in battle than any of her classmates before she became an S-class. I don't really understand how it works, but apparently, she uses a technique called kyokugen *to strengthen herself—something completely unrelated to this other world that she learned from her grandmother in the old one. A kind of ancient martial arts, I think?*

There's something different about Sogou Ayaka. There has been right from the start. She can turn the tide of a battle on her own, first against Mira, and now here…to say nothing of her abilities in single combat. There's something terrifying about being on the same battlefield as she is.

She's an anomaly. Completely out of the norm.

"…"

It seems like she took out those giant eucharists on the northern flank one by one, then went on to capture the eucharist commanders and deliver them back to our lines. Sogou's silver army has been slowly chipping away at the eucharists' zone of control. They're still out there now in the fight. She still has the MP to keep fighting, too. Nothing can escape her.

I thought I had an idea of what she could do after hearing the reports, but this is…

"I never expected this."

"Sir Too-ka, I am ready to leave at any time," said Seras.

I looked at her over my shoulder—the Holy Knights of Neah were at her back. I turned Slei in the direction of our army's southern flank. I'd made the call to enter the battle after seeing Sogou's results in the field, leaving Lokiella behind for the time being. There was no need for her to join us.

"I leave the rest to you, Your Majesty," I said to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

"Of course. Ride out, and fight without fear."

Commanding this army is the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's role, anyway—we're a commando unit.

I placed a hand to my Lord of the Flies mask to adjust it slightly.

"Let's go."

I raced toward the southern flank. Slei was so much faster than other mounts that I started to leave Seras and the others behind, but I'd accounted for that in my plans. I'd instructed them to catch up with me when they could. According to our reports, the giant eucharists were taking longer to reach our southern flank, which was part of the reason I deployed Sogou to the north.

But now the giant eucharists are finally getting to the south.

I charged into the melee on the front lines.

"You've come then, Lord of the Flies," came a familiar voice—the hellhound, Loa.

"Looks like you and your monster unit are having some trouble," I said.

"We are trying our best," said Loa, scorching an attacking eucharist to death with his flame breath. It had been his right head that shot out the fire. "But against an enemy like *that* one… I know not what we can do."

Loa was looking up at the giant eucharist. I laid a hand on the great beast's leg.

"Leave it to me."

I set Slei running again, blowing through any eucharist that stood before us. Keeping an eye on my target limit, I scattered a few of my status-effect skills on the enemies to clear a path, leaving a trail for Seras and the others to follow. I held a longsword in my hand—a weapon of Piggymaru's creation.

A slime weapon, I guess you could call it. This was a trick the little guy picked up after its third stage of transformation.

I swung it from Slei's back as we raced past the horde of eucharists, slicing at their throats.

"Hey, Piggymaru."

"Squee?"

"You know you didn't have to color this thing too, right?"

"Squee! Squee-ee!"

"'But it looks so much cooler that way,' huh?"

I grinned and snorted at that. "Well, if you say so, little buddy—I guess you're right."

The double-edged longsword was black, featuring a dark red groove that ran down its center. The tip of the blade was lightly curved—a bit like a scimitar—and there were also peaks and dips along the edges. The peaks weren't small ones like the blade of a saw, but serrated like an offensive swordbreaker.

In any case, this thing's terrifying to behold. This must be what Piggymaru was going for, eh?

I had shown the slime pictures of books with illustrations of weapons before. Apparently, it had tried to make something that would suit me.

…Well, I guess I did leave the shape and color up to Piggymaru. In the end this might be the perfect weapon for the final form Lord of the Flies to wield in battle.

I swung my blade, a sweeping motion that reaped white life from the eucharists around me. The sword was strong and had more than enough of an edge to get the job done.

It's probably thanks to my stat modifiers, but Piggymaru's sword seems surprisingly light, given how heavily it strikes. The sword techniques I learned from Seras and Eve are paying off.

The white blood of the eucharists that clung to my blade fizzed away into nothingness. Then it felt like I had suddenly entered the

shade. I looked up at the shadow that loomed in the sky above me, enveloping me whole. The giant had the sun at its back.

…Hey there.

I stuck my hand up toward the giant.

"—Paralyze."

The great eucharist froze mid-swing, its giant sword hanging in the air above me.

All right, then.

That Goddess's Dispel Bubble came to mind for a moment…but my status-effect skills do work against these massive things.

I fired off Berserk against the giant monster as I passed. It exploded—dropping its giant sword to the ground and crushing several of the smaller eucharists below. Slei galloped onward, sending eucharists fleeing from her charge. I switched my grip on my blade, so its tip was pointed to the ground. Then I fixed my gaze on another of the giant eucharists, killing the smaller ones as I traveled.

"—Next."

I focused on the giant eucharist targets, killing them one by one. Eventually, Seras and the other caught up with me.

"Alda, move in to support the men who are being surrounded! My unit will continue to follow Sir Too-ka and provide cover! Dorothy, the rest of our knights are with you. Understood?!" said Seras, raising her sword as she called out orders.

The stocky female knight named Alda smiled. "Heh heh… We'd gotten used to seeing Lady Makia as our captain. But being led by you

once more, Lady Seras… It truly is stimulating."

The knight's name was Esmeralda—Alda for short. She was a veteran of the Holy Knights, and I'd been told that she and Seras had a long history together.

"Yeah—this sure takes me back," the knight named Dorothy chimed in. She was also one of the older core members of the Holy Knights, and from what I had heard, had a similar relationship to Seras as Alda. She was also quite the prankster.

The Holy Knights of Neah were swift and precise. Seras had commanded the forces of the Country at the End of the World once before, but her knights clearly moved differently when she was the one giving the orders. She never faltered for a moment on the battlefield.

Seras fixed her aim on our human enemies, deftly taking out the eucharist commanders where possible while keeping a calm, open eye on the battle at large. Where our allies were struggling, she quickly sent her knights to reinforce. They certainly weren't lacking in battle power—or at least, they were strong enough to control the battlefield on which they found themselves.

"Sir Too-ka!" Seras called out when she saw me. "Please focus on the largest ones, and do not worry about anything else! We will handle all of the mid-sized eucharists!"

She was in the process of putting down a mid-sized eucharist as she called to me, clad in her spirit armor.

"Do not worry about positioning either—go where you please! We will find you and follow!"

I answered with a gesture as I fired off a flurry of my status-effect skills. Seras was taking down tough-looking mid-sized eucharists like they were barely a threat.

She's not using her prime armor yet. She doesn't need it. The way she's fighting on this field, it's as if she can see a few seconds into the future. At least, that's how at ease she seems to me. She's the only one that could go up against Sogou Ayaka one on one on our side. It's so reassuring to have her here.

I set sights on my next target and spurred Slei onward. I fired off status-effect skills, swinging my diabolical fly-colored weapon, reaping the lives of the servants of the Goddess as I went.

Sir Too-ka.

On this battlefield—in the midst of this advance, that's the name I ordered her to call me. I've been asking the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and others to call me by that name for a while now too.

Foul Goddess…

…If you've got some way of knowing what's happening on this battlefield, then so be it.

The Lord of the Flies is Too-ka Mimori.

It's good that you know. It's been obvious for a long time, so perhaps it's only to be expected that you'd know. Revealing my identity here is a preparation for what's to come. This final form of the Lord of the Flies outfit was also chosen to make me stand out. That's also why I'm using my skills in this battle.

I've given orders that some of the enemy human commanders should be allowed to escape this battle if possible, so they can bring the intel about me back to Alion. It's all part of my plan. I don't know if any of this will bear fruit, but I'm planting the seeds while I can. Who knows when and where they might sprout.

…This isn't just about one battle.

Oh, and… Vicius?

My precautions are in place…

The information war has already begun.

The enemy waves were almost endless and continued to advance on us for nearly three days. In the end, the three-day battle was a victory for our side.

Well—all thanks to Sogou Ayaka, I guess. That's one way of looking at it.

Sogou had charged into combat solo against the eucharists toward the back of their army, monsters which hadn't even reached our lines yet. The charge didn't look reckless—it had been a preemptive strike, made after confirming the location of her allies in the field. Sogou consistently faced down the giant and mid-sized eucharists, as well as the human commanders that Vicius had sent into the battle, defeating them one by one. She also filled gaps in allied lines with her silver knights.

Thanks to her, our army was able to focus on the pure numbers battle at hand. I was doing almost the exact same thing on the

southern flank—although not as successfully as Sogou. I mean, she even came over to the southern flank toward the end. Her ability to just keep fighting made her the MVP of this battle. This battle was three days long, though… Apparently, leveling up in the past has brought down the mana cost of her abilities.

We cycled out soldiers from our reserves as we fought the battle—not even Sogou Ayaka could fight three days straight with no breaks. I used Sleep to help her get some rest. We weren't able to gain EXP during the fight and level up, meaning that sleep was the only form of mana restoration available to us.

Not to mention that, with a skill like Sleep, it doesn't matter if you're too wired or restless—I could put an insomniac to bed with my skill if I wanted to. It doesn't matter what you've got coming up tomorrow, or how awake you're feeling. Sleep can let you get a deep night's rest without the need for pills. I feel like some people would love to have this skill back in the old world.

…Anyway.

While Sogou was asleep, I handled most of the giant eucharists as Seras and her Holy Knights took down the smaller and mid-sized ones nearby. We didn't have the same kind of impact that Sogou did, but I was confident that I had the staying power to keep fighting.

I mean, Paralyze and Berserk only consume 20 MP total. That's nothing compared to my total MP. It wasn't as if I was the only one who secured this victory, either—the strength of our allies was crucial to winning this three-day fight. Some additional forces from the

Country at the End of the World also arrived on the last day, meaning Amia and her Lamia knights could be immediately put into our lines.

On the third day, it had been clear that our soldiers were getting tired, so it was a relief to see reinforcements arrive. Sogou took short naps when she could, so we sometimes went back onto the front lines to replace her.

In the end, we didn't need the Takao sisters for the fight.

They did ask to be sent out around noon on the second day…but I insisted that they only go out if it looked like we were losing the fight. I left the choice up to them, of course, on the condition that they needed to use their discretion and evaluate my condition. And once I'd made that call, the sisters pulled back. Should've expected that level of understanding from Takao Hijiri.

In any case, the first battle of the Anti-Goddess Alliance ended in victory.

I sent out black dragons and harpies to scout the area from our location to the borders of Alion once the eucharist army was destroyed—but none of them detected any more enemies in our path. The day was drawing to an end after the battle. Dissolving eucharists were scattered across the highway and the surrounding plains, their fading bodies tinged orange by the glow of the evening sun.

"They attacked for almost three days and nights… And it really didn't feel like they were holding anything back."

"Might have been that Vicius just wanted to throw all of the giant and mid-sized monsters into the fight to overwhelm us with numbers," replied Lokiella from atop my shoulder. "I think she wanted

to crush us with her most murderous horde. But I suppose it was a bad move to clump them all together in one place."

"Because of Sogou, huh?"

"Yes," Lokiella replied. "To be honest, I think that even if Vicius knew that Ayaka was on our side, she never thought that she'd be capable of taking on a large army like this on her own. Maybe she thought we'd suffer more casualties…enough to make us reconsider whether this war was worth fighting. But even setting Ayaka aside, it seems like our soldiers are more than strong enough to fight this war… You in particular."

"Still, I didn't do as much to win this as Sogou did."

"Hmph, what are you saying, Lord of the Flies? Everyone watched you tirelessly charge off into the battle whenever Ayaka was resting, you know? You're the one who made sure this massive battle went off without a hitch."

Hmph. I snorted. "I guess so."

"*Hmmmph!* It's that modest part of your character that I quite like, you know? Not bad, human."

"…You goddesses are weird, aren't you?"

"Hey! You just lumped me in with Vicius?! Rude!"

"Squee."

"Waaah?! Don't pop up out of nowhere like that, Piggymaru! You scared me! I-I mean it, give me some warning! Oh…that gave me such a fright…"

"Seems like you and Piggymaru are getting along."

"Better than I get along with Vicius, sure!"

"Squee! ♪"

Let's get back to the subject at hand…

"Come to think of it…" began Lokiella, looking as if she'd just remembered something. "There weren't any flying eucharists. Perhaps she put only made sure the anti-divine monsters could fly? Hmm… I imagine she wouldn't be able to make flying monsters in bulk."

So, there's a chance that she didn't send her most valuable eucharists our way, huh…?

"You think the eucharists we've been fighting might not have been her strongest ones, then?"

According to Lis, Vicius and her disciples are in the capital.

Lokiella started kicking her legs as she sat on my shoulder. "… Maybe not, since there's no question she's spent the most time on the creation of her anti-divine eucharists. They aren't meant for you, and that's why she hasn't sent them out against you. She's not fighting with her full strength. Meaning…"

She folded her arms behind her head, leaning back to look up at the sky. "These monsters that Vicius sent… Maybe to her, they were just the rejects."

"They were extras that she just flung at us?"

If she'd decided to pour all of her strength into creating eucharists to annihilate every last person that lives on this continent instead… Well, there's a good chance this battle wouldn't have gone well for us.

Lokiella sprang back into a sitting position and sighed.

"The rejects, but still… There's a good chance that she has an army much stronger than that one in reserve. We might have another, tougher eucharist army fight ahead of us."

We had already questioned the Alion nobles we'd captured alive, but none of them had much intel, aside from what they knew about the forces that they'd ridden into battle.

Didn't get much useful about Vicius or the disciples, either—but with Seras's lie detector, at least what we did get was reliable. We still don't have a clear picture of the Goddess's overall strength, though.

"If they keep on us day after day with this kind of strength, that might be a problem," I said, but Lokiella didn't look convinced.

"I wonder if she's been keeping some of her forces behind. Maybe the eucharist army's real goal isn't us, but *them*…"

Back when Lis's familiar had first arrived—just after I gave the order for Sogou to deploy to the battlefield—I spoke with Lis for a few more moments before heading out myself. I stayed so that I could confirm something, a certain piece of information.

"A large army of eucharists heading north from the capital of Alion, huh."

They're going in the opposite direction from us, meaning…

"It's likely they're on their way to the capital of Yonato, to the Holy Eye."

I looked up at the evening sky—the same sky that had been lit up with a flash just days ago as a great laser destroyed Vicius's gate.

"It's just as you predicted, Lokiella."

It happened just as she said it would. The news turned her speculation into solid conviction. Just as Vicius sent her army to confront us in the west, she was deploying another to the north, bound for Yonato.

"Once she's disabled the Holy Eye—and I mean the *moment* it's gone—she's going to try to open that gate again."

"Then she'll pour all of her anti-divine eucharists and disciples into the heavens," I said.

"Yeah. She should be able to check whether the Holy Eye is operational using a divine device, like I did."

We need to move as quickly as we can then—within reason.

The look on Lokiella's face grew more serious. "Given what that little familiar told us, it sounds like there are more giant and mid-sized eucharists on the march north. Even if they're the dregs of her forces and some of them aren't worth much, some of them can *really* fight. She probably sent the weaker of her two armies in our direction."

"We're lucky there's a long way between Alion and Yonato. Even once they reach the northern border, they'll still have to cross that large expanse of Magnar territory. And if they decided to take a shortcut through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, that's still a long distance between Alion and Yonato. It should take them several days. Given the terrain, I don't think the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters would be a good place to try marching an army through."

According to the intel in Lis's report, given the position of their northern army and its marching speed… We should have more than enough leeway.

"The Wildly Beautiful Emperor has sent some reinforcements up to Yonato, hasn't he?"

"Yeah, the Miran soldiers he left in defense of the imperial capital should be on their way up there now, led by one of his older brothers. Given the speed the enemy's moving, they should make it there in time."

If all goes well, we could have the White Wolf King up there rallying forces from Magnar too—and the Sabre-toothed Tigers. We should gather all the strength we can get.

"For now, I've reached out to everyone I could think of for support. The problem's Yonato, really. It all depends on whether their queen has seen the proof we sent her on that smartphone and understands that the Goddess is her enemy…"

Everything depends on that. If it ends up taking us longer than expected to reach Eno, we'll need everyone in Yonato to protect the Holy Eye. They'll need to buy us time, at least. The moment the Holy Eye is destroyed, Vicius will open her gate and send those anti-divine eucharists through it. She could even refuse to fight us, taking her disciples and escaping into the heavens. From Vicius's perspective, I guess that'd be quitting while she's ahead.

On the other hand—this means that, until she destroys the Holy Eye, she can't make any moves. The fact that she's still holed up in Eno is proof of that. Buying time until the Holy Eye has been

destroyed is the optimal strategy for her right now. According to Lokiella, Eno's the place she's got to deal with to open that gate now. And she can't leave the capital alone, as that would risk our army destroying her anti-divine eucharists—the all-important troops she needs to invade the heavens. If we arrive in Eno while the Holy Eye of Yonato is still active, Vicius will have no choice but to try to exterminate us.

The Queen of Yonato

THE QUEEN OF YONATO, Alma Saintnokia, sat reading the letter that had arrived from Vicius. It contained orders to disable the Holy Eye, with the reason given being "the protection of this world."

Not long ago the eye launched a holy strike toward Alion… Is that what this is about?

Alma was confused. The Holy Eye was the guardian deity of her nation. It had never been shut off since it was first activated.

What is happening?

If asked whether she trusted the Goddess of Alion—Alma would have answered no. But she was also aware of the fact that only the Goddess's power could combat the Root of All Evil. She had no love for the Sacred Alliance but was willing to cooperate with them nonetheless. The Goddess interfered little with the state of Yonato, compared to the others. Alma was not sure why, but she was aware that the Goddess meddled with the other nations on the continent.

Perhaps it is because of the Holy Eye, the queen used to think. *Perhaps that is why, even with Alion as top dog, Yonato is allowed a degree of freedom and peace.*

One day, however, Alma received a magical war pigeon from Mira. That message changed everything. The Miran bird was carrying an ancient device named a *smartphone*—and through it, Alma was able to listen to a recording of the Goddess's voice. The machine was rectangular, operated through a…small pane of glass? From within, the Goddess's ecstatic voice emerged.

The Goddess sometimes lacked manners, or could behave oddly… *But I never thought she would try to destroy the people of this continent. It cannot be… She is an evil god, then. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's rebellion was not begun as a result of some crazed rage after all. Now Neah and the Black Dragon Knights of Bakoss are on the emperor's side. Part of the Alionese army has joined them, and even some Ulzan troops… To say nothing of their strongest new addition, the Lord of the Flies Brigade.*

Have the Heroes from Another World truly turned on Vicius too?

A memory floated into Alma's mind—a bitter one. She caught herself thinking of someone she found quite difficult to deal with.

That unsettling young girl…Asagi Ikusaba has turned on the Goddess as well?

No… I do not want to think of that—to think of her*.*

Alma read over the message from Mira once more, trying to clear her head. The White Wolf King of Magnar had turned against the Goddess upon learning the truth, it said. The Emperor had sent

magical war pigeons to the people of his nation, trying to gather forces to Yonato for the defense of the Holy Eye.

Luheit Mira was also on his way north, at the head of the army that had been defending the imperial capital of Mira. They were gathering most of the forces that remained in northern Mira for the fight.

According to the message from Mira, the Sabre-toothed Tigers were riding with them. They had fought in Yonato against the Demon King's great invasion and were truly reliable allies. There were also reports that a nation of demi-humans known as the Country at the End of the World would be lending forces to the fight. Zect, a man claiming to be their country's leader, had offered his aid…

Vicius's army…? Are they really coming to destroy it? This capital city of ours, Azziz… Will they break our Holy Eye?

Alma considered the Holy Eye to be an extension of herself, a *part* of her. Shutting down or destroying the eye would be tantamount to stopping her own heart.

"…"

Yonato suffered considerable casualties during the great invasion. We're doing our best to rapidly reinforce our defenses, but they're not at full capacity. We can no longer rely on our Four Holy Elders. Our Holy Priest Curia is miraculously on the road to recovery, but she will be not able to fight…

Alma started to feel dizzy but stayed on her feet, trying to hold on.

Who do I believe? That's obvious. Those who have given me proof. This might be an ancient magical device, but I heard its evidence with my own ears and seen it with my own eyes. I saw that evil. If the White Wolf King opposes the Goddess, then I can place my faith in him too. He is a man worthy of my trust.

No… Most importantly of all, I cannot allow the Holy Eye's operation to be halted. I could never do that. I will not let it happen.

Alma was not aware of the extent to which her ancestors, the Saintnokia of past generations, shared her beliefs. But Vicius had underestimated the present Queen of Yonato's devotion. Her absolute loyalty was to the Holy Eye—not to the Goddess.

She felt like she had been betrayed. It was an unpleasant feeling.

White light streamed into the queen's audience chambers. Alma leaned forward in her throne.

"Viciusss…" She crumpled the letter the Goddess had sent her in her hands, hatred in her every movement. "Just who do you think you are?!"

Yasu Tomohiro

YASU TOMOHIRO entered Yonato territory with Rinji and his party. He began to take notice of more of the people they passed on

the road—many loaded with heavy bags and packed carriages. Their presence allowed Rinji's large group to blend naturally into the crowd.

Oulu looked back from his seat at the head of the carriage. His eyes were fixed on a vehicle they had just passed, which was heading in the direction of Mira.

"So Rinji…which way do we go? Turning back to Mira from here feels a bit…"

Rinji had also been looking back but turned to face the road.

"From what I've heard, there are more people goin' to western Yonato than down into Mira. There's those golden-eyes to worry about in northern Mira, after all…the ones that got us."

Rinji had warned the party that was heading south, but the strangers pressed on regardless.

What are they heading to Mira for, anyway? To get away from something?

Rinji and his men had asked them, but in truth, they already knew the answer. There was a great battle brewing in Yonato. An evil army led by the guardian deity of their world was on its way to destroy the Holy Eye of Yonato, or so they said.

That was what was driving many of the people of Yonato to evacuate to the west—though there were apparently some who fled to the Yonato capital of Azziz for refuge instead.

Rinji sighed, roughly scratching at the back of his head. "I don't know if she's gone mad or what, but it turns out the Goddess of Alion is trying to destroy everyone on the continent. Not to mention they're

sayin' that whole White Army business was her doing too, right? Got the proof and everything—tch, what's the world coming to? I don't get a damn thing."

Rinji looked up at the sky.

"Sounds like the Holy Eye's some kinda problem for the Goddess. Means she can't destroy us… Y'think it's got something to do with that holy beam of light in the sky?" he mumbled.

Oulu just shrugged. "If she's really tryna kill every human on the continent, it ain't gonna matter where we run."

"Guess not…"

"What do you think, Tomohiro?" asked Oulu.

Yasu had revealed to them all that he was a Hero from Another World. They also knew that heroes were summoned by the Goddess herself. It was only natural that they might assume he'd know more than they did.

"Oulu. C'mon…"

"Ah—right. Sorry, Tomohiro. Forget I said anything."

Rinji was trying to be considerate—but Yasu still answered the question.

"…I think it's possible."

Possible—yes. Rinji and the others don't know Vicius…but I've enough experience with her to believe what those rumors are saying.

"I see," said Rinji after a short pause, narrowing his eyes. He looked back at the carriage, which contained his wife and young son. "Our world's in danger, eh…?"

After a short discussion, the party decided to continue as planned into western Yonato to meet up with an acquaintance that one of them knew. They no longer had the food or supplies to turn back, and many of their party's members were starting to tire, losing the will and the stamina to go on much further. The decision to turn back would likely sap much of their willpower, but reaching western Yonato might afford them time to rest and recuperate.

On their way north they stopped by one of the trading cities of southern Yonato. They came into the city through the main gate and found themselves on the road that ran the city's length. The street split into several paths, a sort of transit point for travelers. There was a large square that might have had shop stalls open at more regular hours and a little stage off to one side.

Rinji put a hand to his brow to block out the sun and whistled. "Whoa, that's a lotta people."

The square was packed with crowds, and Rinji's party decided to rest a little away from all the noise. Yuri and her mother descended from their carriage and stretched their backs. Yuri seemed to be imitating her mother's movements. It made Yasu smile as he watched them stretch in sync. A few of their party headed toward the great city gate to see what supplies they could find. After a short while, Oulu and the rest of the mercenaries returned to the carriage.

"That's the road—that'll take us northwest and up into western Yonato. That one goes toward the capital, to Azziz and the Holy Eye."

From what they'd heard, refugees were flooding out of Azziz, making their way south to escape it. There were also lots of other

people coming into a trade city from the northwest. There were two groups, in order words—those who were choosing to escape, and those heading to the capital to fight.

Just then, they heard a raised voice.

"Everyone, please! Listen to me!"

Somebody was standing on the stage, shouting at the crowd in the square. Their voices quietened somewhat to listen to him, and attention focused on the man atop the stage. His voice was clear, and he was dressed like a knight. Judging by the crest on his armor, a knight of Yonato…

So…this crowd…

Looking around the assembled mass of people, Yasu had a thought.

We *came here by chance, but maybe there was some sort of call that gathered everyone else in this place?*

With the square a little quieter, the man in knight's armor began to address the crowd. "I'm sure many of you already know, but the Holy Eye of Yonato—nay, this whole continent and all who live upon it—are under threat!"

A wave of whispers ran through the listeners—it appeared that many had not yet heard of Vicius's madness. The knight continued his clear address to the crowd.

"Vicius intends to annihilate every last person living on this continent."

That line greatly disturbed the crowd. Most of the first half of the man's speech contained news that was known to Yasu and his party, matching what they had heard from others on the road. The latter half, however, was new to them.

"The Wildly Beautiful Emperor of Mira was one of the first to catch on to Vicius's plans! He is currently leading an Anti-Goddess Alliance of Neahan, Bakossi, and Ulzan forces—not to mention elements of the army of Alion that have come to their senses and now recognize the Goddess's true nature! They march on the capital of Alion to defeat her!"

The murmurs grew louder, a commotion.

"The White Wolf King of Magnar, once missing in action, is alive and well! He marches with an army of Miran soldiers led by Luheit Mira, who are on their way here to Yonato as we speak!"

The crowd was completely stunned.

"Huh? Then… All the other nations have turned against the Goddess?!"

"B-but…she's really trying to destroy us, then…! L-like, *really*? Ah—b-but! How are we s'posed to defeat the Root of All Evil without her?! We won't be able to summon more heroes if she gets defeated…"

"Do not fear!" cried the knight in reply. "Another divine has descended upon our world and asked for our cooperation in the fight against the evil Vicius! That is precisely why the Wildly Beautiful Emperor has made his move! You need not worry about the Root of

All Evil! Another divine will take over the role of summoning heroes to combat them!"

"Th-then that solves that… S-so this means…even the other gods have realized Vicius is evil? S-so, like…we wouldn't be rebellin' against the gods if we went to war against her…"

Rinji pushed a thumb to his lips as he watched from the sidelines. "Hmm…"

"Ahem… Is something wrong?" asked Yasu in a whisper.

"Mm? Ah, nothing… I just thought that was a real good question from that heckler just now, that's all."

Yasu understood what Rinji was trying to say.

The man might be a plant—working with that knight up on the stage.

But Rinji looked more impressed than suspicious. "Fine strategy… Effective at gettin' rid of his listeners' doubts so that he can really get through to them with what counts."

"The Sabre-toothed Tigers are also on the march with Luheit Mira's army!" the knight continued. Listening carefully with his arms folded, Rinji raised his eyebrows at that. He looked a little surprised.

"The Sabre-toothed Tigers are the lot that led the White Army against Mira, ain't they?!" came a voice from the crowd.

"But they're on our side now? The Goddess tricked them too, jus' like everyone else! They switched sides when they learned the truth… Somethin' like that?"

"Huh? Then all that stuff 'bout them bein' executed was just rumors?"

"The Sabre-toothed Tigers are our allies anyway! They fought with the Holy Order of the Purge to protect Yonato in the great invasion!"

"Th-that's right! I dunno what's goin' on down in Mira, but they ain't done nothin' to us! I'd be happy to have 'em on our side!"

"Rinji," said Oulu, looking over at him—his tone questioning. Rinji's gaze was fixed on the man in knight's armor, who was standing on the stage. "…The Sabre-toothed Tigers, eh?"

Yasu didn't have close ties to the group, but he was familiar with them and had met them before. They had been the ones who trained Ikusaba Asagi's group. Yasu looked up at the sky from within the crowd of onlookers.

The ones who trained us. I feel bad about what happened to Banewolf, too. He reached out a hand to me. I should have learned everything I could from him, but instead, I brushed his hand away. How many times have I turned down the kindness of others? All for my stupid, no-good, worthless pride.

…I brushed off Sogou-san's help, too.

Suddenly, a memory floated into the back of his mind—a memory of the old world.

Mimori-kun… Him too. What I hate most is that this stupid conceit and cowardice of mine hasn't completely left me yet. People

can't change that easily. That's why we have to face up to what we are, rather than try to run. That's what I decided to do…

Yasu raised his head once more. The man up on the stage began speaking again once the crowd had quietened down.

"A group of individuals who have long lived in hiding, in a place known as the Country at the End of the World, are also joining the fight!"

"…!" Yasu's heart skipped a beat.

"They have long known the secret to defeating Vicius, and so have had no choice but to live in hiding from her! More shocking, they are demi-humans… And they have monsters on their side who have souls, creatures who are not subject to the golden-eyed madness! They are fighting alongside the Wildly Beautiful Emperor even as we speak!"

Yasu gently placed a hand to the bandages that still covered his wounds.

The Country at the End of the World—those people saved me.

"In addition!" cried the man in knight's armor, appealing to the crowd with a grand sweep of his arm as he spoke his next line. "The Lord of the Flies Brigade, who defeated an Inner Circle demon at the Battle for the White Citadel, are currently fighting under the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's command!"

"Belzegea too…!"

Belzegea… Seras Ashrain…

I… I owe them my life.

A hand shot up from within the crowd. “Ahem! Wh-what about the heroes?!”

Waves of further commotion spread through the listeners, and some began to draw those at their sides closer, to whisper among themselves on the topic.

“Yeah… Some of the Heroes from Another World still stand on Vicius’s side…”

“One of ’em they got is Ayaka Sogou. She’s strong enough to sway the whole course of a battle on her own, far as I heard. I’d be terrified to make an enemy of her…”

That’s right… What about Sogou-san, and my other classmates?

“I heard that the hero Ayaka took down the Demon King…”

“Huh? Wasn’t it the other super strong one that did that? What was his name again? The one who was on the eastern front during the great invasion…”

“The Something sisters, right… The older one? S’posed to be real pretty…”

“Huh? You sure? I thought I heard the hero that killed the Demon King was a guy…”

“A-anyway!” shouted the man who had raised his hand to ask about the heroes first. He looked terrified as he addressed the man in knightly garb. “How are we supposed to beat Vicius when she’s got a monster like *that* on her side?!”

“Do not fear! All the heroes who can fight have learned the truth and have joined the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his Anti-Goddess

Alliance!” called the knight. The crowd quietened, and then after a brief pause, ripples of calm spread through the crowd.

“Whoa… Y-y’know, they do say that Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s a charmer…”

“But hey, ain’t this just ’cause some other god has come down to punish the Goddess? Otherwise, there’s no way they’d defy her, right?”

Yasu’s good hand clenched into a fist.

What is this feeling… Relief?

There was something emboldening in it too—it felt like a hand upon his back.

It’s Sogou-san, after all… I bet she’s the one keeping everyone together. I’m sure Nihei Yukitaka’s helping, too. He used to be in my group.

“Vicius intends to annihilate every last person living on this continent.”

Sogou Ayaka’s not the kind of person who would support the Goddess if she’s doing something like that. But what about the Takao sisters? I don’t feel like they’d stay on Vicius’s side. And come to think of it, is Kirihara-kun in this fight? He might be with Sogou Ayaka right now, fighting shoulder to shoulder. What about Oyamada Shougo? Has he recovered? Is he fighting on Sogou Ayaka’s side? Anyway—everyone’s out there fighting. The people of the Country at the End of the World, Belzegea, Seras, Sogou-san…

It sounds like they're going to Alion—to Eno, where we were first summoned. That's where they plan on fighting Vicius. If they're the ones attacking Eno, then we're on defense here. I don't know all the details, but this Holy Eye thing seems to be a problem for Vicius. It might even determine the whole course of this war. If protecting the Holy Eye of Yonato will help them, then…

"…"

And I…

Yuri walked over to Yasu. Grabbing at the hem of his shirt with her little hands, she looked uneasily up at him.

"The scary things…are they all the Goddess's fault? The Goddess…does she hate us now? That man just said everyone might die… Yuri might die, Mom might die, Big Bro and Rinji too… Is everyone going to die? Are they going to die? Is this goodbye?" Yuri looked on the verge of tears. "I'm so scared…"

Yasu crouched down to her level and looked her in the eyes. "It's okay."

"Big Brooo…" Yuri's hands were trembling.

Yasu placed his good hand over hers in a gentle embrace.

"I…I know. There are lots of strong people on this continent. From all the different countries… There's the Lord of the Flies Brigade, and there are heroes too. You know about them, don't you?"

"…Y-yeah. You're a hero, Big Bro."

"I am, but…there are others who are much stronger than I am who are all working together right now to stop the Goddess from

doing her scary things."

"You, and…the other heroes?" asked Yuri.

In the first place, I…

"We… We all came to this world to save the people who live here, Yuri."

"Hero."

The word's meant to describe people who save the world. It gets used a lot to ridicule people lately, but heroes are actually strong people—and they're really kind, too. People like Sogou-san, for instance. The people of the Country at the End of the World, too. Belzegea, Seras, Rinji and his men. By that definition, I'm sure all of them are heroes.

He looked into Yuri's eyes, and tried his best to give her a warm smile.

…I feel like I've learned how to look people straight in the eye now.

"So as a hero, I think… I'm going to try to fight."

I don't know if my smile is heroic enough—but I tried, at least.

"I'll try to take this world back… Make it so you don't need to be scared anymore, Yuri."

Right now, I…I have a reason to fight.

I'm fighting for someone.

"Big Bro."

"No… I'll take this world back, I promise. So…you don't need to be scared, Yuri. It's okay. Leave it to us heroes, won't you?"

Yuri leaped at him. He felt her little arms hugging him just as tightly as they could.

"Okay," she said quietly. She wasn't trembling any longer.

Huh? That's a…

There was something in the hand of the man who was up on stage—something completely at odds with the knightly armor he was wearing. He described it as an ancient magical device, but…

That's a smartphone.

The man began to display proof of Vicius's evil deeds—those in the front row who could were in view of the screen were shocked by the evidence that they saw.

"Th-that's… It's the Goddess, no two ways about it!"

"I've heard her voice once before! That's her for sure!"

"The Goddess—she really is trying to destroy us after all!"

Yasu understood what was happening.

One of the heroes probably recorded her on their phone. But who? Takao Hijiri, maybe? When I think smart, I think of her. She might have been able to charge her phone, using her skill.

Rinji glanced at the man in knight's armor, who was busy recruiting men for the defense of the Holy Eye.

"It's up to you, but if you want to defend the Holy Eye it looks like that's the place to sign up. They're askin' for proof of your identity when you sign up—saying if you die in battle, Mira'll feed any family you leave behind. Far as they're able to, at least…"

Rinji looked again at the registry table.

"We're going to Azziz too."

"Rinji…"

"I don't really get what's happening. But this fight to defend the Holy Eye seems like it's gonna be a fight to save this world—and that's a fight to save *them*." Rinji was looking at his wife and son. "I've got a connection to the Sabre-toothed Tigers. Their captain, well… She's sorta like family to me."

Rinji pointed to his wife.

"With the way things are, I can't just stay quiet and let the captain die out there. Tch. This is a weird twist, ain't it? We come north to escape the Sabre-toothed Tigers, only to head out to save them now we're here."

Rinji grinned sarcastically, just as Oulu finished getting their bags ready and walked over to him.

"Y'never know, Guavan might even forgive us now, eh?" Oulu said lightly.

Guavan… Riri Adamantine's father. They've never talked about what happened in detail, but I know Rinji and his men have a complicated relationship with the Sabre-toothed Tigers.

Rinji nodded to the carriage that Yuri and the others rode in.

"Us former Tigers are going to Azziz. You're coming too, kid. The rest of our party will keep on west to my friend in Yonato. They might not be former Tigers, but they'll still have fighters with them for the journey. Who knows what could happen on the road."

Yasu breathed a sigh of relief. "Right. I see."

The party went ahead and said their goodbyes. Yasu bade farewell to Yuri and her mother once more.

"…"

To be honest, I never thought anyone would feel reluctant to part from me. I'm sorry to be leaving, but I hope we can meet again once this is over.

The group that would be heading to Azziz walked to the horses they'd tied up for travel. It seemed Rinji was considerately keeping the fact that Yasu was a Hero from Another World a secret.

Yasu felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Rinji. His hand was heavy—or at least, it felt that way to Yasu.

"I'm counting on you, kid," he said. His voice was deadly sincere, as if he were entrusting his life to Yasu.

"I'm counting on you too, Rinji. You and everyone else," Yasu replied, eyes ahead.

Rinji looked a little surprised at that.

Alone, I… I would never have made it this far.

I would never have come to feel this way.

After a few seconds, Rinji was back to his cheerful old self. He snorted through his nose and smiled as if understood exactly what

Yasu was trying to say. “Sure.”

My fire hasn’t been extinguished just yet.

I still have it.

It’s right here.

Chapter 3:
Homecoming

THE BATTLE WAS OVER—and while I wanted us to immediately rush onward to Alion, things weren't that simple. The fighting had raged for three days. We could have continued onward, letting some soldiers sleep in our carriages, if the skirmish had been more limited. But as things were, our soldiers all needed rest.

It's unclear how much strength our enemy has left. There are limits to how much information a familiar can get their hands on, so we can't see everything that Vicius has got. We also need to sort through our casualties, because not everyone is going to be able to return to battle. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and Cattlea have been taking care of that, sending the badly injured to fortresses and cities behind our lines. Cattlea's ensured that Neah accepts our injured without complaint, and given how the people of Ulza have forsaken their king, they've been willing to aid our casualties too.

There was another problem, though. It was first discovered just as night was falling over our camp. A report arrived as Lokiella, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, and the other leaders were discussing plans for what would come next. Seras carried it into the tent, crouching by where I sat to whisper in my ear.

"…What?" I said, turning to face her. Seras just nodded silently. "The reinforcements from the Country at the End of the World have come with the Forbidden Words Clan… The Kurosaga?"

"Eh?!" cried Lise, completely shocked by the news.

If Lise didn't know about this, then the Kurosaga must have joined up with the reinforcements from the Country at the End of the World in secret after Lise left them?

Seras leaned in closer.

"Apparently Lady Amia and some of the other Lamia were aware that they were traveling with the Kurosaga. They were told that the Forbidden Words Clan would be targeted by Vicius. That is why they hid themselves on the road."

I excused myself and made to leave Lokiella and the others in the tent, but Lise stood up and tried to follow me. I stopped her with a wave of my hand.

"Geo and Kil are with them, they'll be fine. You stay here for the military council."

Lise returned to her seat as asked, folding her arms. "Well, all right, then… I'll leave this to you."

Seras and I left together, making our way through the bonfire-lit camp.

"Is Munin's daughter here, too? Fugi?" I asked.

"Yes," Seras answered.

Fugi's the only one who can use Forbidden Magic, except for Munin—the only other mark-bearer of her clan.

"Does Munin know?"

"I have not confirmed it as yet, but I believe someone will have

informed her."

I remembered Munin's words… *"But she is ready. If my blade should fail to reach the Goddess and I should fall on my path… She will risk her life in my stead."*

"Well…we'd have had to tell her either way."

We arrived in the camp of the Country at the End of the World, where their troops were resting. There was already a ring of people there. Geo looked to be toward the center of the crowd, standing head and shoulders above everyone else. He noticed me and waved me over. The crowd parted to let us through, and we found Geo, Kil, and Amia waiting—as well as a silver-haired young girl with cat-like eyes and a vacant expression on her face.

"Lord of the Flies?" asked Fugi.

"You came, then, eh?"

"That's the Lord of the Flies' voice. But…"

"Ah, right… I guess I'm dressed differently now, eh? My old outfit was pretty beat up, so I had a new one made."

"I see."

"You didn't stay in the Country at the End of the World, then?"

Fugi looked up at me and nodded. "I didn't."

I looked at the black-winged group assembled at Fugi's back—the rest of the Kurosaga.

"Neither did everyone else," she said flatly.

"Could I ask why you d—"

"Fugi!"

My question was interrupted by a cry, and Fugi poked her head over my shoulder to look in the direction of the voice. Munin was charging at her. Fugi's mouth softened into a faint smile at the sight of her.

"Mom."

The harpy Gratrah was behind Munin. *She must have been the one that went to tell her the news.*

Munin stood facing Fugi directly, both her hands on the girl's shoulders—she was panting and out of breath.

"*Haah, haah*… Wh-why are you here?!"

"I thought it over," said Fugi, looking straight up into her mother's eyes. "Not just me. We all decided together."

"…All of you?"

Munin looked up, and now saw the rest of the Kurosaga standing behind Fugi. One of the Kurosaga men stepped forward.

"Chief, we can't let you carry this burden alone. It's not right. Let us join you in battle too. We're ready…" The man pounded his chest. "We can fight."

"But I… I can't put all of your lives in danger…"

"Mom."

Munin looked down at Fugi, hesitation still lingering on her face.

"If we lose this fight… There'd be no point in the rest of our clan surviving anyway."

"But that's not what this is about…" Munin tried to protest.

"No. It is."

I get what she's trying to say. It's just…

"…"

Geo and the others just watched.

This is for the Kurosaga to decide. Our opinions have no place in the argument, huh? I'm guessing that's what he's thinking.



The Kurosaga man who had just pounded his chest now threw his arms open wide. “What would happen if this war were lost while we remained in the Country at the End of the World? We wouldn’t be able to stay locked up in there forever. We’d never be able to resolve the issue of our food shortages without the outside world. Isn’t that obvious?”

Another Kurosaga stepped forward—a woman this time. “Those who couldn’t fight—the pregnant ones—we left them behind when we came. It’s okay. Even if all of us should die in battle, the Kurosaga have a future.”

“If we win, then…” said Fugi, picking up where the woman left off. “There’ll be no *need* for our line to continue.”

I understand what she’s getting at. There won’t be any need for a mark-bearer to exist.

“Then I think we should do everything we can to improve our chances of victory, even if it’s just a little. If I’m here with you, then…” Fugi looked to me. “That’s one more Forbidden Magic user that he has access to in battle.”

“…”

Fugi stared at me intently. I didn’t respond. Munin tightened her grip on her shoulders.

“Ahem… Listen to me carefully, Fugi.”

Her daughter turned to look back at Munin.

…The look in Munin’s eyes right now. It’s hard to notice when we’re traveling together on the road, but the way she speaks… She

really is a mother.

"What I'm saying is…it's not about whether the Kurosaga's line of mark-bearers can continue. Well, I suppose that does have something to do with it, but…it's more that, if something were to… If you were to die… I…"

"But it's okay if it's *you*, then?"

She's saying, "You might die, Munin. Is that fine?"

At Fugi's question, Munin's gray eyes began to tremble.

"I-I… I am the chief of the Kurosaga, and as such…"

Fugi's lips twisted up with emotion, trying to hold back what was welling up inside of her.

"Ngh!" But Fugi couldn't keep it in. "There's no point! I feel the same as you do… If you died, Munin, I…there'd be no point to any of this!"

"Fugi… You…"

Fugi was crying.

She always seemed so calm, collected, and expressionless. According to Munin, that's just how she's always been. That explains why her mom looks so surprised. Fugi isn't the kind to get this openly emotional.

…She doesn't look good when she cries—I guess she's not used to it.

"You might die too, and I… I—I can't bear to think about that…"

"Fugi…"

"No, I…I can't take it."

Fugi embraced Munin and clung to her.

"If I'm going to die…then I want to be here at your side for just a little longer! If I can be the one to defeat the Goddess, then I want to help out too! I want to help, *Mom*! The way we said goodbye, I…I couldn't bear to let that be it!"

It sounds like she hasn't raised her voice in years. It might be the first time she's ever had her emotions explode out like this.

Fugi sobbed into Munin's chest.

"Oh… You really are just so…" Munin squeezed Fugi tight with one arm, putting her other hand over her mouth. She was crying too.

"Chief," uthe Kurosaga man said, his voice trembling at the sight of his leader in tears. "Even if you did win this war for us… Saved our country and lived to tell the tale… We could never tell that to the next generation of Kurosaga. Could never admit to them that we sent our chief out there alone into battle. Those that can't march are a different story, but…we can fight! Can't we, Kurosaga?!"

The Kurosaga behind him sent up a forceful cry in response.

"And the other people of the Country at the End of the World are risking their lives out here too, aren't they?! I know you asked us to stay behind but… We couldn't just sit there!"

"We…" The Kurosaga woman stepped forward again. "It's okay. We understand that we might die in this war, but we want to claim victory here. Seize it with our own hands. We want to know we did

this for ourselves, even if we do end up falling on the path. Fighting for what we believe in…that's how we want to live."

Over the woman's shoulder, the Kurosaga man nodded his agreement. It was clear from their expressions that the others were of the same mind too.

…Maybe the Kurosaga have changed. Maybe they're ready for this. Their history of being targeted for extermination by the Goddess probably has something to do with their…

"…Determination," I mumbled to myself.

They've managed to survive and protected their ties to one another, all the way down the generations to this present moment.

"You're all…" began Munin.

"We're all family, right? So come on…let's fight, Munin," said Fugi —her face still buried in Munin's chest. "Together."

Munin bit her lip.

I could tell her heart was leaning toward a conclusion, but she was still conflicted. She kept her hands on Fugi's shoulders, but it was me who she looked to next. The others also looked lost—turning to me like they were seeking an answer.

But this isn't my call.

"This isn't my decision… It's yours, Munin."

The expression on her face told me she knew what my answer would be. I saw no shock in her eyes.

"But, well…you don't need to decide all of this right now, do you? There's no rush. Even if you do end up deciding no, it's going to

be hard to say that when you're under this much pressure."

I looked around at the crowd.

"Calm down and talk this through. Luckily, we've still got time for that. It doesn't matter to me which path you choose—I'll accept either outcome."

"Ahem," Munin began. She glanced down at Fugi, then looked to me. "This war against the Goddess… If Fugi were to come with us, would that raise our odds of victory?"

"No."

Maybe that's the answer I should give her here.

"It wouldn't change a thing."

Perhaps that lie would keep Fugi away from our showdown with the Goddess.

"…No matter what you choose, I'll do my best to see this through. I'll put everything I have into making it happen. I'll rethink our plans if I need to. I promise you that. I never did factor Fugi into our current strategy. It's just that…"

It's just…

"There's a chance the enemy could have powers we don't know about yet. A hidden source of strength. Without a clear picture of what our foes are capable of, it's best that we have every possible option at our disposal. That much is true."

It's true. All I've done is tell the truth. What Munin wants right now isn't for me to sugarcoat the situation. At least, that's what my gut tell me.

"But let me say one more thing—again, this is ultimately your decision, Munin. You get to decide. I said it's best that we have all options available to us, but in this matter, I'll respect whatever you choose."

"In this matter…" said Munin, sighing. "Thank you, Too-ka."

What was that for? Was it for giving her the choice, or was it for something else?

In that moment, I didn't know.

Munin turned back to Fugi. "Let me sleep on it."

Early the next morning, Munin visited me in my tent. Her eyes were puffy and red as she told me her decision.

"Understood," I replied.

I sat in a chair, looking up at the roof of my tent. Silence fell over the room.

"Munin. It's difficult, I know."

"Yes."

That's right…

"Feelings can be difficult at times. They can be troublesome."

But that's exactly why they're so important.

The Anti-Goddess Alliance finally crossed the border into Alion. I had confirmed ahead of time with Lis's familiars that Vicius and her disciples hadn't moved from the city of Eno. There were, however,

reports of armed eucharists gathering outside the capital—though none yet on the road that lay before us.

Could she still have a demonic device hidden in some fortress somewhere? Is she going to activate it to call a horde of golden-eyed monsters and humanoid types to us?

No, that doesn't seem likely. She doesn't want to strengthen our heroes any more than she already has. Sending golden-eyes and humanoid types our way would only give us EXP for defeating them. She can't underestimate our forces anymore, now that we've made it this far. She'll want to prevent us from leveling up. Or at least, that's what I'd do if I were her. We've ventured surprisingly safely into Alion. So smoothly, in fact, that it makes me suspect that she might be laying a trap for us.

"Seems like…she might've been trying to finish us off with that eucharist army attack."

I'll be happy if that turns out to be true. If she has more and more waves of eucharists to throw at us, that would be a pain.

Also…this is a bit of a tangent, but something interesting has happened.

*The Empire of Bakoss is to the southeast of Alion. We're currently marching with the Black Dragon Knights, but it seems the Bakossi homeland hasn't been able to decide what side it's on for a while now. Geographically, they're close to Alion. I imagine that makes it hard for them to declare their allegiance. They might've been overrun by an army of eucharists before we even arrived in Alion if they'd joined us too early. But now—*finally*—they've started sending*

out reinforcements in earnest. They were watching our Anti-Goddess Alliance closely to see where this might end up.

"Perhaps they intended to shield themselves if the Goddess won this war—claiming the Black Dragon Knights and parts of their army in the west acted without their knowledge or instruction in answering Cattlea's call," the Wildly Beautiful Emperor had surmised.

Well, that does seem like a smart way to do it. It's cunning, I suppose. There's also the possibility that the voice recording and video we sent them has changed their mind. Personally, I think that's more likely…but either way, what matters now is how Yonato responds.

The White Wolf King—Magnar—is on our side. A magical war pigeon from the imperial capital of Mira has already confirmed that. The time lag in receiving info via magical war pigeon can be a problem. We can't get the kind of immediate confirmation that a phone call or messaging app would provide. Can't exactly make radio waves with our skills either, I suppose…

We can achieve something close to that using familiars, but it'd be difficult for them to keep track of what's going on in both Yonato and Mira right now. Lis can only control two familiars. One is traveling with us, and the other is in Eno, keeping an eye on Vicius. Those two familiars are vital to keeping tabs on her movements, so we can't move either of them. The familiar that's watching Vicius detected the eucharist army heading north, but it couldn't follow them all the way to the state of Yonato.

…Speaking of Lis's familiars.

I looked out over the lightly rain-soaked plain as I sat astride Slei.

The course our army is on now… The road we're taking is the western one that Lis recommended we take to get to the capital. This route is the shortest path to Eno. Apparently, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor always intended to take this route—but Lis also chose it as our best option.

A messenger came.

"Excuse me, Lord of the Flies."

This messenger… He's the one who comes when the reports aren't vitally important.

"There is a strange woman who is asking for an audience with you…"

"With me?"

There were hardy merchants who sometimes came by to sell their wares during the war, and others who wanted to offer up their towns to allow the emperor and his soldiers to rest.

There have been requests to meet our leaders as we've traveled the road…but no one has asked for an audience with the "Lord of the Flies" without even identifying themselves.

"Did they say who they were?"

"Astorva, the Second of the sworn swords of the Lord of the Flies, Belzegea… She stated that you would understand," said the messenger, sounding wholly unconvinced.

…What?

"Astorva?"

There's a name I've heard before…

"She also stated that an audience with either Lady Seras Ashrain or Lady Makia Renaufia would be sufficient to prove her identity…"

The messenger went on to describe the strange woman's appearance.

But what is she doing here…? How did she get out of there? Well, I guess Lis appearing as a familiar was unexpected, too. There was always a possibility that she might show up. Ah… Right. Now I see why Lis wanted us to take this route.

"Understood," I said. "Bring her to me."

Her mouth curled into a smile when she saw me.

"Heh heh—that's quite the grand outfit you wear now, my master."

"Glad you're well," I said, removing my Lord of the Flies mask as I spoke her name. "Eve."

"I'm happy to see you're in good health too, Too-ka," replied Eve Speed. She had been in her human form from the moment she entered my tent, and she seemed to anticipate that I might have some questions about that. "Erika invented a magical device that can condense large amounts of mana and store it for periods of time. That device is allowing me to maintain this form on my own," she said, puffing out her chest proudly.

…Not that I'm well versed in this stuff, but that invention has huge consequences for this world, right?

"Squee. ♪"

Piggymaru snaked out of of my pocket.

"Hmh? Oh, it's you, Piggymaru. You've gotten good at concealing your presence."

"Squee! ♪ Squuuh~."

"Piggymaru says it's been too long. It wants to jump over," I explained.

I held out my arm, and the little slime hopped onto Eve's shoulder.

"Squeee~! ♪" Piggymaru happily rubbed its cheek (?) against Eve.

"Heh heh… I'm happy to see you again too, Piggymaru."

"You did well to make it here through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters."

"Hmph," Eve nodded, folding her arms and looking even *more* proud of herself. "I had a few advantages."

She grinned, showing me a flash of white teeth. "After you left in that war chariot, Erika got right to building herself another one. A one-seater this time, though. I suppose it was less of a chariot, and more like a magical creature shaped like a horse…"

"Eh? She can just make things like that? I feel like it wasn't quite so simple, last I heard…"

Based on what Erika said, the awareness blocking spell on our war chariot was sort of a unique deal.

"Hmph. That's where the mana storage device I mentioned comes in."

"Hm? Sorry, I'm not really seeing how those two things are connected…"

"Erika's a researcher, right? She's been running tests on awareness blocking devices for years now."

"So you're saying she had some convenient eureka moment, and now she can construct them herself?"

"In a way, yes."

"…Is this Hijiri's doing?" The thought struck me suddenly.

Ah, right. Eve is probably here because of something to do with…

"Heh heh. I should have known you'd realize, Too-ka." Eve uncrossed her arms and placed her large backpack on the ground before her. She wasn't wearing her fly swordsman outfit, as she usually did, but a set of regular-looking clothes that she'd gotten from Erika. "Bit of a tangent, but has Hijiri told you about this yet?"

"Yeah."

I pulled up my memories of the Takao sisters.

"Erika has been researching for a long time, trying to create magical items to oppose the Goddess."

"She said that she might be able to create an item that can

inhibit, just a little, the powers of a divine."

"Aneki said something to her, and it was like Erika'd found the missing piece of a puzzle the moment she heard it! One of them eureka things, right?"

An item that might inhibit the powers of a divine. I'd been torn about whether to go into the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters to retrieve it when I first heard those words. In the end, I made the decision to stay. Leaving this army for several days just to retrieve an item would be too arduous. I'd considered sending the Takao sisters, but back then, I didn't know if we could afford to do without them in battle. Especially on the weak promise of something that Erika might possibly be able to create…

But now…

"She's made it—and you've brought it here, then, eh?"

"That's right," Eve replied.

"Getting back on track… This hint that Hijiri gave Erika didn't just extend to her creating this magical device that might be able to interfere with the power of a divine. It also helped Erika to come up with a mana storage device and a new awareness blocking tool?"

That all sounds awfully convenient…

"She's lived so long that her thinking was all rigid. She was stuck in a rut—or so she said. It's not like living a long life necessarily makes you a genius, according to her."

She does have a point there. There were tons of teenage geniuses in the old world who were capable of getting way better

results than their elders ever could.

"It might seem simple, but it can be really hard to realize your way of thinking has gotten stale without some outside catalyst. Impossible, even. I can see that happening."

"Hijiri also said that her *Intelligence* stat modifier might have something to do with it, I think. By the way…" Eve squinted, her expression uneasy as she continued. "She said that her increased Intelligence might let her calm her brain and concentrate for long periods of time. Something like that? That stat modifier allowed her to compute and multitask in a way that didn't compromise her abilities, raising her information and situational processing abilities…I think? I didn't really get what she was saying…"

It can be hard to tell how stat modifiers actually affect us heroes. Vicius told us it varied from person to person, which is barely an explanation at all. But hey, it is just like Hijiri to come up with a convincing explanation after all that analysis. That being said, I don't feel like I've gotten way smarter…but maybe my improved instincts and perception might have something to do with my Intelligence stat.

The smile faded from Eve's face. In its place was not sternness but a caring look.

"As for me…" she began. "I think the completion of these magical devices came as the result of Erika's tireless efforts to make them happen. She's the one who built the foundation and brought them almost to the edge of completion. It might've been Hijiri's advice that got them over the finish line, but they'd never have been

completed with no foundation to work from. That's what I think, at least."

"She had faith, huh? She kept toiling away on her inventions."

All alone. All so that one day, she could take revenge upon Vicius. So that she could be ready whenever an avenger appeared.

"Maybe meeting you on your journey to get revenge on Vicius gave her hope. After you left, she kept on working hard at her research and crafting. Heh heh… She was working *so hard*… I was glad Lis and I stayed behind to help her out around the house." Eve smiled, remembering something. "There was this phrase she'd always say while she worked, wiping the sweat from her forehead. Sounded like a mantra more than anything else…"

I'm going to smile someday—no matter what.

Erika had forbidden herself from smiling until the Goddess was defeated.

"I think she just wanted to help you somehow, even if she is still bound to that place," said Eve.

"I'm sure glad the Forbidden Witch turned out to be her."

"Hmph. I expect Erika is also grateful for our assistance."

…We need to win this to give Erika back her smile.

"So the awareness-blocking device that Erika made lasted all the way from her place to the border of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters?" I asked.

Eve shook her head. "Just like your war chariot, it made it out of the thick of it but didn't last the whole way."

It also sounds like the blocking was only limited to golden-eyes. And with limited time and materials, Erika was only able to make one. Unfortunately, these things won't be able to factor into our showdown with Vicius.

"But you made it through the rest of the way alone?"

"You're right to be doubtful," Eve replied.

Didn't she say once that the monsters might see her as one of their own? Maybe that's why they don't attack her…?

"I went east through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. Well, I was tacking south a little, so I suppose you could call it southeast…" Eve went on to explain that she barely came across any monsters in her path. "I can think of a few different reasons that might explain why. The first being the mistake I made that time I drew a large number of golden-eyed monsters to my position."

"Back when Piggymaru and I rode around on Slei as a decoy, right?"

"Hmph. In that battle, you defeated loads of humanoid types and strong golden-eyed monsters near Erika's domain. I believe you might have drawn out the ones by the border."

I thinned their numbers, huh.

"After we left Ulza the first time, we went in from the south," I said.

Back then, I was killing the golden-eyes for EXP. Then there's the fight Eve just mentioned, which thinned their numbers even further. Kirihara must have also taken quite a few of them from the

northern reaches as he traveled south to where we met him. Seras and I also fought them at that fortress in northern Ulza. The Goddess used a demonic lure that looked like some weird mouth to bring them there. There's a high possibility that that thing brought all the golden-eyes in the southeast to our location.

"But there were golden-eyes once you got out of the depths, right?"

"Well… Hijiri said the heroes once went to the eastern parts of that land to hunt for experience points," Eve replied.

I see. So that's what happened to those monsters on the outskirts.

"Also—did you hear that Hijiri was poisoned by Vicius, and made her way to Erika's domain from the capital of Alion?"

"…Did she?"

Those two sisters are S- and A-class heroes. It sounds like Hijiri was still fighting the effects of the poison all the way up until they hit the depths. So back then…

"The two of them killed golden-eyed monsters as they went."

Those monsters probably thought they'd found a new home in the east—only to find themselves being slain, instead. That must have made other monsters think the east was too dangerous and that they should keep clear of the area…

It's ironic. The southeast is a dangerous place, swarming with golden-eyed monsters…but now it's gotten so dangerous that even they are avoiding it.

"That allowed me to head toward Alion while hardly encountering any of them. It might also have helped that I was on my own."

I guess she had Lis with her the first time she ventured into that place… And Lis makes an easy target, given how she looks. Maybe what Eve said about her being considered a monster wasn't a joke after all.

"I also surveyed my path ahead of time, using Lis's familiar to take a look," Eve explained.

"So, you used them as scouts to find a safe route, eh?"

Then Lis's familiar came here, once Eve was safely out of the forest.

"It seems like Lis has been busy ever since Erika collapsed while supporting you."

At least now I understand how Eve made it out of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters alone.

"Still, y'know Eve…"

"Hmph?"

"You could have asked Lis's familiar to let us know you were coming ahead of time. But, well…" I looked down at the backpack that Eve had placed on the ground before me. "…I can guess why you didn't."

"Heh heh, always consider the worst-case scenario. You're the one of the people who taught me the importance of that."

This anti-Vicius magical device might play a big role in defeating her. And who knows where her eyes and ears might be.

"I decided to keep this quiet. Even the fact I was on my way here was a secret…until we could actually meet, of course. We decided to keep this between the three of us—me, Erika, and Lis. Erika said that if you found out I was coming, you might try to come and meet me halfway, and I didn't want to risk that. And we won't be able to tell whether this magical device is actually going to have the intended effect on Vicius until we try it out."

No divines to test it out on in Erika's domain, I suppose.

"So, you were thinking about me… Didn't want me to worry about this device, since it isn't a sure thing…"

Man…how considerate is that dark elf?

"Eve."

"Hmph."

"You had no guarantee that you'd make it through alive, did you?"

"Maybe I didn't…"

"But you rushed to support us, even so."

So, well…

"How'd I put this… Thanks?"

Eve returned her hands to her hips and gave me a self-satisfied smile.

"Don't worry about it. This is a fight for the future of this world—a fight to protect the place where Lis is going to live. It'll be a lot easier on her with Vicius gone. And hey, I'm still a veteran of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, you know?" There was fierce determination behind her eyes as Eve grinned at me. "If you're going to march off to a showdown, you're going to have to give your subordinates a cut of the glory."

Now I remember. Maybe it's because Eve's one of the first members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, but…

"Hmph? What is it, Too-ka?"

"You sure are easy to talk to."

"I'm ready to go, Too-ka."

"Sure."

I poured mana into Eve's changing bracelet. The light faded, and Eve was a leopardman again.

"I passed loads of humans on my way here…" said Eve, testing that her old muscles still worked. "I really stand out in this form, but being a human let me blend into the crowd. There were still some people who looked at me, the same way they did when the two of us walked together outside the White Citadel of Protection…but they weren't the looks you'd give a leopardman."

I bet they just thought you looked attractive by human standards.

"These clothes are a little uncomfortable when I'm in my true form," Eve mumbled. "But now that I'm here, I imagine I can stay a

leopardman. I'm sure you remember that I'm a little more athletic when I'm in this form. It doesn't seem like I'll need to hide the fact that I'm Eve Speed here, either."

She went on to explain the functioning of the anti-Vicius magical device that she'd brought with her.

The Anti-Goddess Alliance were preparing to leave, but it would take another two hours before everyone was ready.

We still have time.

I called for Seras, for Slei, and for Lis's familiar.

"—Eve!"

"Hmph… Long time no see, Seras."

Slei happily trotted up to Eve and rose up on her hind legs. "Pakyureeh!"

"Heh heh, you're as energetic as always, Slei."

"Pakyuuhn! ♪"

"It really has been…too long." Seras took Eve by the hands.

"I am glad to see you're well…" Eve replied. "Not to mention that enchanting beauty of yours hasn't faded a bit."

"Pakyuu~hn… ♪" Slei nuzzled Eve's leg with her nose.

"Heh heh, and you're still a sweetheart. Lis, you did well to make it here."

We went on to confirm a few more pieces of intel with Lis's familiar, then I called for the Takao sisters to join us. Eve and the

sisters were clearly very happy to see each other again—Itsuki especially so. I'd also gone ahead and invited the Wildly Beautiful Emperor to join us, since he was in command of our whole operation.

Cattlea, Makia, and the others—I guess they can wait until there's time. There's also no reason that I'd need to introduce Eve to Sogou and the other heroes really. I'll make time later to have her meet Munin though.

There is one person… One that can't wait to meet Eve…

I had called him too. He entered the tent, and when the brief introduction was over, Geo Shadowblade was staring straight at Eve.

"So… You're of the Speed Clan, then," he said slowly.

"Hmph," she replied, looking back at him. "Too-ka told me about you. You're the leader of the leopardmen in the Country at the End of the World? I'm Eve Speed, a leopardman, just like you."

Geo just observed Eve in silence for a few moments, then gestured with his thumb to the entrance of the tent. "Do you mind if we talk alone?" he asked.

Eve looked at me.

"I think that should be fine. He can be snappish at times, but he's got the good sense not to try anything," I answered.

"Hmph… If you say so, Too-ka. I expect I will be okay."

"Come find me if you do have any problems."

"Understood," said Eve, turning back to face Geo. "Well, then. Let's go."

Eve returned thirty minutes later. Our tent had been disassembled and was being packed up for the journey to come.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"I have no memory of hearing stories about the Shadowblade Clan from my parents… It is possible that my parents never knew such stories to begin with. Talk of the Shadowblades may have faded over the generations… Or perhaps they had their reasons for not passing on the tales."

Did the stories fade over time, or was there a conscious choice made to stop talking about them? Given there are no written records, it might well be the latter. But nobody in this world can know for sure.

Eve looked back in the direction she had come.

"But it seems that his people did tell stories of the Speed Clan. They said that we were foolish… That things wouldn't have ended the way they did for our people if we had just come with them to the Country at the End of the World."

Eve growled softly, a sarcastic smile on her lips.

"And…he said the Country at the End of the World would welcome me. That the Speed Clan still lived on in me."

"That sounds like him."

Eve turned back to me.

"He is a good man. He cares so much for his wife. She's currently with child."

"He can be real blunt, but he's a good guy."

Eve fell suddenly silent. "I'm justifying this after the fact, of course, but…it was only because the Speed Clan chose to stay in the outside world that I was able to guide you to Erika. For that, well… I think maybe there was a reason to our clan's decision to remain out here…"

Or so she was trying to convince herself, at least.

"I can't exactly be *grateful* for their decision, considering the tragedy that befell the Speed Clan. I can't be happy about what happened."

The Sword of Courage were the ones who massacred the Speed Clan, but I still haven't told Eve that I killed them. Eve Speed is moving on with her life, looking ahead. She's not like me. That's why I'm not telling her.

"Heh heh," Eve chuckled. "Maybe you and Geo are a bit similar."

"I'm like him?"

"Surprisingly considerate," said Eve.

I snorted at that. "You aren't getting anything for complimenting me."

Eve burst out laughing.

"What?"

"Geo said the same thing."

"What?"

Eve grinned at me. "When I told him he was a thoughtful guy—Geo said the exact same thing."

Before we departed, I managed to have Eve meet with the people she really needed to see. I also asked Lokiella what she thought of the Anti-Vicius magical device that Eve had brought us.

"Hmm… I can't really say what this thing will do before we actually use it," Lokiella had said when she saw the device. "*There's no testing it either, so we've only got one chance. What I can tell is that this device is terrifyingly complex. It'd take more than just a few years to thread circuits like these… I mean, just pulling this off is a feat in and of itself. Hm? You want to know if it might affect me? Well, right now I can barely use any of my old divine abilities, anyway. My mind is all I have left, so I don't think it would pose much of a problem to me? Probably not, anyway…"*

Eve seemed very interested in Lokiella when the two met.

"Hmph. O this is a divine."

"I'm not usually this small." Lokiella had shrugged.

Come to think of it, Eve has never seen Vicius before, has she?

Now, with all our preparations for departure completed…

"These are more or less the original members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, right? Been a while since we were all in one place."

Our lineup back then was me, Piggymaru, Seras, Eve, Lis, and Slei. Lis is here in the form of a familiar, hence the "more or less."

We were all standing in a circle together.

"I hope we can all get together again once this battle is over—with you joining us in person, Lis," said Seras.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Squee!"

"Pakyuh!"

Being with this crew lets me like I feel like I can really relax. Seras is kind of similar to my foster mother. Eve is kind of similar to my foster father. Lis is kind of like the way I used to be. I guess that's a part of it…but that's not all. Even setting all of that stuff aside, Piggymaru, Seras, Eve, Lis, and Slei are…

"Too-ka."

Eve put her fist out into the middle of our circle.

"Itsuki taught me this when we were at Erika's. Before an important fight, you're supposed to put your fists into the middle of the circle like this to get everyone working together, right?"

…How did Itsuki get to talking about that with Eve, I wonder.

"Well, sure… Since we're here, I guess."

I put my fist into the middle of the circle, my hand touching Eve's. Seras's eyes relaxed, and her soft lips eased into a smile. She put her fist out into the circle too, just as Eve and I had. Lis's familiar perched on top of Eve's hand, placing one tip of its wing on the leopardman's fist. Piggymaru, who was around my neck, slithered up my arm and made a little fist shape at the tip of one of its tentacles. It moved its semi-transparent fist over to line up next to mine. Then everyone crouched down a little and Slei stood up on her hind legs to rest one of her hooves beside Seras's fist.

"…?"

Everyone's looking at me. Are they waiting for me to say something? That's not really my style…

I looked down at the fists in the middle of our circle.

"I'm grateful to all of you for coming this far with me. Truly, from the bottom of my heart."

Mimori Touka came from bad blood and awful parents—a scumbag born of scumbags. In the old world, my foster parents brought me back from the edge so I never became like them. It turns out I needed that bad blood in this world. But the reason that evil hasn't swallowed me up in this world… That's not just down to my foster parents anymore.

It's because I have them.

I looked up.

"Thank you."

Seras looked taken aback—like something had taken her completely by surprise. The reaction lasted only for a moment, though. Her smile deepened.

"Sir Too-ka… Everybody here feels the same gratitude toward you."

Lis's familiar nodded its head.

"Heh heh… We wouldn't have come this far if we didn't," said Eve.

"Squee!"

"Pakyuuhn!" cried Slei in agreement.

"Sir Too-ka," said Seras, looking straight at me. "This battle… Let us win it, no matter what. Let's all meet again, just like this, at Erika's place. S-so… All of us, we…"

For some reason, Seras's face was flushed red, all the way up to her ears—though she looked deadly serious about what she was saying.

"Let's all go and…"

Seras stood resolute, raising her voice in determination…

"D-defeat her! D-defeat that foul Goddess…!"

It was my turn to be shocked. My eyes went wide as I stared curiously at her rare and completely natural reaction. A passing soldier turned to look at us in confusion.

It's like…at the end there, Seras just sort of sounded pissed off. Well… I guess she was trying her best to raise our spirits.

As for Seras, she had her hands already covering her mouth after the outburst. "Ah…s-sorry… Ahem… That wasn't very *knightly* of me… I may have been somewhat ill-mannered in my ch-choice of words…"

"…Pfft." I couldn't help but laugh. "That's the spirit, Seras Ashrain." I stood up straight.

"Ah…"

There was just a hint of a tear in the corner of Seras's eye, her face still flushed and hot—but she slowly started to smile, opening up like a flower in bloom.

Eve stood.

"I've never seen you smile like that before, Too-ka," she said, putting a hand on Seras's back. "I guess you're an interesting high elf now after all, eh?"

Seras looked down, so embarrassed that there might as well have been steam rising from her face. "Th-that wasn't what I was trying to…"

She looked around.

I guess it's about time I said something.

I put my Lord of the Flies mask back on and went to leave, then stopped.

"Come on, Seras." I turned and looked back at her over my shoulder. "We're off to beat that *foul Goddess*."

She froze with her mouth open for a second, then did a happy little jog toward me to catch up.

"Understood!"

I went with Seras and the others to the carriages that had been prepared for our departure. Eve noticed two others who were waiting for us there.

"Hmph?"

"Ah! They're here, *meow*!"

"They are indeed."

Nyaki waved her hand back and forth over her head, while Munin gave us a little wave. I raised my hand a bit to greet them.

*The two members of the Lord of the Flies Brigade that we picked up after leaving Erika's domain. Late additions, you might say. I guess the Takao sisters are the latest…*hires*? I suppose Lise is a member too, isn't she…*

I introduced Eve to the two of them.

"This is Nyaki, and that's Munin. I told you about them earlier."

"Nyaki, that's *me-ow*!"

"I'm Eve Speed."

Munin bowed to her. "I am Munin of the Forbidden Words Clan—chief of the Kurosaga."

Eve introduced herself to Munin in turn.

This is the first opportunity these two have had to talk to Eve.

"I have heard much about the two of you. Can I call you Munin?"

"Of course. I too have heard many stories about you from Too-ka, Eve."

"Hmph? What has he been saying about me?" Eve raised an eyebrow at me.

"Nothing weird. Just that you're a really good person," I explained, protesting my innocence.

"I also heard that Too-ka and his Scrolls of Forbidden Magic only managed to make it to the Kurosaga because of your assistance." Munin went to shake Eve's hand, and Eve accepted.

"But it would all have been for nothing if you hadn't agreed to help Too-ka. It was his tenacity that brought you together, I think."

"I am fighting in this war as a user of Forbidden Magic. I have heard that you are a powerful warrior, Eve…and that you have brought us a secret weapon that might be useful against Vicius. Thank you so much for lending us your strength in this battle."

"I fight because I want to. And because I owe so much to Too-ka and the others here."

"You've repaid me several times over," I said, and Eve shot me a glance.

"That's the kind of man he is. And that's why I want to help him."

"Heh heh, I think I know how you feel."

"Still…you aren't quite how I pictured you," said Eve.

Munin looked confused, tilting her head to the side.

"Based on what Too-ka told me, I was expecting someone a little more…mischievous," said Eve.

"Oh my…" Munin put her hands to her cheeks, blushing red. "Wh-what exactly has he said about me? Oh dear…"

She puffed out her cheeks, pouting and looking in my direction with a little reproach in her eyes.

Hmm… There's not much motherliness on show when she's acting like this. She looks nothing like she did earlier with Fugi.

"And you're Nyaki, then, are you?"

"Y-yes *meow*! Nyaki's so honored to meet you Eve! You're Nyaki's senior in the Lord of the Flies Brigade!"

"It sounds like you've had a rough road. I'm glad you've reunited with your older sister."

Nyantan—the older sister in question—was off looking after their other little sisters.

"That's all thanks to Too-ka and the others, *meow*!" Nyaki lowered her eyebrows and poked the tips of her fingers together, smiling uncomfortably. "Nyaki wants to pay back Too-ka and the others for everything they've done. That's why Nyaki's here! But maybe Nyaki's not being very useful… *Myah hah hah*."

"You've been rushing around delivering messages, haven't you? That sure helped *me* out, at the very least," I reminded her.

"M-Mr. Too-ka…"

Eve gave a low-pitched laugh at our back and forth.

"…I get it now. You're a big part of the reason that Too-ka is fighting."

"Meow?"

Eve grinned at Nyaki.

"I'm saying that you're more than useful to Too-ka."

Eve saw the way I acted around Lis. I bet she feels there's something similar about those two. She knows I'm watching out for Nyaki.

Seras seemed to understand what Eve was saying too.

"Really?" asked Nyaki, looking up at me quizzically. "Nyaki is… Nyaki's *useful*, Mr. Too-ka?"

"Yeah, it sure looks that way."

Nyaki heaved a great sigh of relief at that. "Nyaki doesn't really know why, but that's a relief… Nyaki's going to keep working hard~!" She did a little pose to pump herself up.

"I'll be counting on you when this battle is over too, Nyaki," I said, looking at the crow that was perched on Eve's shoulder—Lis's familiar. The familiar looked a little sheepish. I had Nyaki and Lis meet while we were on the road just the once—though as Lis was talking through her familiar's letter board, the encounter was only a short one. Nyaki's eyes glimmered as she looked at the crow.

"Ah—so she's in here right now?!"

I imagine she's asking if Lis's consciousness is in the bird.

The crow nodded, and Eve brought the familiar down onto her arm.

"Ah-ahem…" Nyaki began to talk to the familiar with upturned eyes. "Lis… *Meow-ow*~… L-Lis!"

Lis cawed at her, as an embarrassed Nyaki tried to say her name.

"When we meet in person, Nyaki…" she opened her eyes wide, determined to get the words out. "N-Nyaki wants to be your friend…!"

"Caaaw!"

Lis gave a loud squawk, then put one of her wings forward as if she were going in for a handshake. Nyaki gently took the tip of the

familiar's wing with two of her fingers.

"*Meow… Meow-ow~…*"

Nyaki still looked sheepish, but a happy smile had now spread across her face. A sparkle of tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

"Too-ka—we might be at the end of your journey for revenge," said Eve, looking at Nyaki and the familiar with a gentle smile. "But… threads of your own kindness are sewn into the cloth of the story you've woven. You might try to deny it, but that's what it is."

"I always tell you I'm a kind person at heart, don't I?"

The familiar hopped onto Nyaki's shoulder, and Eve put her hands on her knees to slowly rise to her feet.

"Heh heh… I can't tell if you're being serious or not anymore."

"*Meoow…*" Nyaki began to cry, overwhelmed by emotion. She kept pawing at the tears that wet her cheeks—like she was trying to collect them—to keep them from falling. Seras and Munin rushed to her side with handkerchiefs to wipe Nyaki's tears at almost the exact same moment, and Lis tried to dry them with her feathers. Piggymaru had been wobbling from side to side on my shoulder for some time, then seemed to run out of patience.

"Boiii-ng!"

The slime leaped from my shoulder onto Slei's back.

"Pyureeh~! Pakyuu~hn!" Slei charged in to look after Nyaki too. Eve stood by my side watching it all, deeply moved by the sight.

"This group's sure gotten bigger… The Lord of the Flies Brigade."

The Anti-Goddess Alliance set off for Eno. I lay on my back in one of our carriages—Seras had ordered me there to get some rest.

"You may act as if your fatigue does not affect you, but I see that you're tired. Please, I'd like you to rest for a while."

I've built up some fatigue, eh? I only realized that when Seras mentioned it. I've been thinking over so many plans, holding it all in my head at once, breaking down my strategies at times and reformulating them… Giving orders, explaining my thoughts to others, running around that battlefield…

"You're too good an actor," Seras had said with a wry smile. *"I can hardly blame the others for not noticing, as they are not always with you. I believe they are under the impression that you are getting enough rest… But even if I were not always at your side, I would notice this. Yet…"*

I remembered her smile—ephemeral yet brimming with warmth.

"Perhaps it is because I am always with you that I have noticed."

Then I remembered the last thing she said.

"Perhaps others have noticed your fatigue and are choosing not to mention it. But I…I had to say something. It may be selfish of me, but I thought that I should be the one to say this to you. Please get some rest, Sir Too-ka."

…Now I'm on my back, I'm realizing just how tired I actually was. Maybe Seras is watching me way more closely than I thought. Not just watching, but…

"Caring."

I had taken off my imposing cape and Lord of the Flies mask, using my arms as a pillow as I stared at the roof of the carriage above me.

"I wonder where I'd be right now without Seras."

I turned to the side.

Speaking of people I can't live without…

"What would I ever do without you, eh?"

This little guy…

"Squu—h?"

Piggymaru. The first friend I found in this world.

I put my arms back behind my head, and looked up at the underside of the carriage roof.

"Piggymaru."

"Squ?"

"I know I've told you this so many times… But I'm glad you're my partner."

"Squee-ee. ♪"

"…Hey, you remember?"

"Sque?"

"The day we met… When we first became buddies?"

"Squee. ♪"

"If you hadn't tried to tag along, who knows where I'd be right now."

Looking back on this journey of revenge—everything we've been through—would I really have been able to overcome it all without Piggymaru? There are so many situations I can think of where I just don't know. I met this little slime right after leaving the Ruins of Disposal. Piggymaru was my first partner.

"You've always worked so hard to help me. You've been *too* devoted, if anything."

"Squee."

"…Sometimes I wonder how I could ever repay you. Y'know?"

"Squee!"

Piggymaru's cry was a *no*—as if the little slime were saying, *"You've nothing to repay me for!"* At least, that's what it sounded like to me.

"…Well. I guess I saved you back when we first met…but why are you always doing so much for me?"

"Squee!"

Piggymaru squeaked once, then wobbled over to beside my cheek. The little slime leaned in and stuck to the side of my face.

"Piggymaru…?"

"…S-Squee."

—Because we're friends.—

"Wha?"

What was that*?!*

"Squuee… Squee… Squ-uu-ee… Squee… Squuuh…"

—I was always alone, but then I made my first friend…—

—You saved me, so I…I want to help you… We're friends…—

—Helping your friends, treasuring them… That's only natural…—

—I'm really happy… Happy to have a wonderful friend…—

—I'm just a worthless little slime… But you…you called me your partner…—

"Squuuh… Squuuh… Squuuh… Squeee…"

—At times I've been nervous, but…—

—I was always with you so…I was never scared…—

—There were so many more fun things too… Traveling with you…—

—I was so happy…I…—

"Squee…Squee!"

—I love you…Too-ka—

"…"

…I'm probably just imagining things, but…I think I just heard Piggymaru's voice?

And it's not just Piggymaru. I feel like I can sense what monsters are thinking now. Ever since I left the Ruins of Disposal, I've been "engaging" with golden-eyed monsters in all kinds of extreme situations. It would make sense if I was starting to get a handle on the way monsters think. Or maybe it's some weird reaction caused by my Intelligence stat. Thanks to Piggymaru, I know monsters can

understand me. This little guy gives me yes and no answers—so I know I'm getting through.

I've always been able to understand them, but…what happened just now… I heard Piggymaru's voice clearer than I've ever heard it before. It was much too distinct for me to be imagining it.

No… Who cares about that now?

I closed my eyes and smiled. "Right," I said. "I love you too, Piggymaru."

I gently stroked the little slime.

"Squee… Squeee…"

"You're…"



My partner.

"…The best partner in the world."

"Squee… Squee…"

Piggymaru dozed at my side—waiting ever so quietly beside me until I drifted off to sleep.

The Goddess Vicius

VICIUS WAS EATING in the throne room, its great windows opened wide to let the white light of the sun shine in. A few steps down from the throne, in the center of the room, was the king's table, passed down through the Alion royal family from generation to generation. Atop it was spread an opulent feast consisting of sumptuous dishes and silver cups filled to the brim with expensive wine. The sound of silver cutlery shuffling and clinking echoed through the otherwise silent room.

Vicius brought a fork to her mouth with a piece of meat upon it and began to chew. Next, she took up her cup and swilled the wine within it. Ever since the destruction of the gate several days prior, she'd been opening her precious bottles of wine one after another. The liquid was blood red as it circled Vicius's cup.

"It might be worth leaving a few humans who can ferment grapes, I suppose. A few who can cook…and those to provide the

ingredients, perhaps. *Munch*… What a marvelous breakfast to get me going in the morning. ♪"

She placed the cup back on the table and elegantly wiped her lips with a handkerchief.

"Come to think of it, I was rather surprised that Sogou wasn't completely broken," she mused with a wry grin.

Vicius wasn't sitting on the throne, but on a chair made of human bones.

Now that I need pay no mind to the interference rate, I may do as I please.

Several of the bones were still covered with a thin, fresh covering of peach-colored blood—some from the Miran *rats* that the Goddess had discovered sniffing around the capital.

"Ugh… It was Minamino and those other *faints* that prevented her from breaking… Oh, and *her*…what was her name again? She's such a hanger-on I can barely remember what she's called… Suou, that's right. I recall her now. Hmm…perhaps I should have killed her sooner. If Suou is still alive… I have heard no further reports from Nyantan, so it seems fair to assume that those Knights of Alion have failed me. *Oh hoh hoh*… They were completely worthless, just like that Wise King of Alion. My, my, what scum."

Vicius directed her fork at Wormgandr, who was sitting on the opposite side of the table.

"Are you listening to me? Scum are scum, and behave like the scum they are. They must lead scummy lives, since being scum, they

can do nothing else. Yet they moan and release more scum into the world, doing scummy things as if they don't understand their scummy nature. And ultimately, they die as scum. Why, you may ask? Because they are *scum*." Vicius set down her fork and began neatly folding her handkerchief.

Wormgandr placed his hands on the dining table and twiddled his thumbs. He looked down at them, stopped, then smiled. "I know they weren't the important ones or nothin', but…that whole anti-divine force you raised up and sent west got wiped out?"

"Yes. There wasn't much we could do about that, you see? The heroes appear to be much more powerful now than expected, and that ingrate Sogou has not just refused to break, she appears to have gone and betrayed me entirely. Perhaps she was only pretending to be broken… Oh, how utterly disgusting. She was an irritating brat right to the very end…"

"You reckon it mighta been that Lord of the Flies that brought her around? Sounds like he's quite the talker, y'know."

Vicius stopped folding, her hands frozen in place.

"Too-ka Mimori… Hmm, I wonder? Ah… He might be keeping Sogou broken so that he can use her, come to think of it. That one's cunning, from what I gather. *Hah*… He betrayed me too, you know? I'm the one who summoned him. This is all… It's just too cruel! *Sob sob*… Nhh… Perhaps I was wrong to send him to the Ruins of Disposal in the first place."

Sending a hero to be disposed of sends a message… Making an example of one of them gives the rest the impression that they have

been chosen. Low-ranked heroes have caused problems in the past, after all. And so the act of disposal in itself is correct, I think…

But my elimination of Too-ka Mimori… Thinking back, perhaps I was repulsed by him on some subconscious level. No, my instincts were correct. I did not expect him to survive, that is all. The issue is in how much of an unexpected nuisance he has become since I disposed of him.

"If I had known it would come to this… I might have used some other method to kill him. Something more certain."

But in that moment—could I have even conceived of it? An ordinary, uninteresting brat managing to escape the Ruins of Disposal…

Vicius was almost done folding her napkin but ripped the corner at the last moment.

"Oh dear, I've gone and torn it…"

"What do we do now?" asked Wormgandr.

Vicius rummaged around for the divine device and checked on the status of the Holy Eye.

It still remains operational.

Given the time that has passed since my message…

"It appears the Queen of Yonato has betrayed me as well. *Hah*… I am finished with these humans. All of them are traitors. Oh, they are being so ungrateful. Not to mention…"

Vicius turned in her chair to look behind her. The crystal-shaped divine device was placed on a pedestal just in front of the throne,

sitting atop the carpeted floor. The throne room provided the strongest connection to her eucharists in the whole castle, meaning that she could reinforce the eucharists that she had sent to Yonato. The carpeted floor also concealed a divine carving underneath it—a powerful engraved seal which had taken the Goddess years to complete.

There are limits to how long this seal's effect last, but it will hold out until the Holy Eye has been destroyed, I expect.

The seal became more powerful when Vicius herself was standing over it. That limited her to its physical location, but in turn made it incredibly easy to imbue with power. While above it, Vicius could enhance her own abilities to a terrifying degree…and enhance her eucharists in turn. She focused her power on her army in the north, the eucharists marching to destroy the Holy Eye of Yonato. She poured her strength into increasing their speed, advancing them at a much faster pace toward the city of Azziz than would usually be possible.

"That ingrate scum queen may have betrayed me, but Yonato barely has any strength left to oppose me now. I want my army sent there at once to destroy that Holy Eye—don't you agree?!"

Her last three words were shouted, as she flipped back around in her chair to face the table once more.

"Well, it *is* just a matter of time."

She took one of the fruits from the heaped platter on the table, and nibbled at it.

"It would be perfect if I could see through those eucharists' eyes…but in the end, I was never able to establish a visual connection. Woe is me. It does irritate me that we must rely on magical war pigeons when they take so long and there is so much that they cannot ascertain. Perhaps I should have sent one of you, my disciples, with them after all… *Hah*… If only I could use familiars, but such techniques were lost in ancient times. Oh, it makes me terribly anxious. I hate to be unable to do as I please. It is *ever* so dull."

Puffing out her cheeks, Vicius threw the piece of fruit she had taken a single bite from across the room and propped her head up with a hand on her cheek and her elbow on the table.

"Yet…according to the reports that are coming in, those foul flies and their cretinous lot are unflinching. How vexing… *Hah*… What are that ragtag group of rabble rousers even trying to achieve? Ahh, they disgust me. The way they play nice is so off-putting. Worm…do you see the way these humans are—"

Wormgandr froze, just as he was pinching a thick slice of meat between his fingers and carrying to his mouth.

"Nh? Somethin's 'ere."

"Hey, we got a guest!"

It was one of Vicius's disciples, Ars, who announced them. He was only capable of speaking in quotes, recalling lines from his past when he was still human. He had no mouth but spoke in an echo from the dark black cross in his helm. When he did *speak*, his words reverberated out like they came directly from the underworld itself.

"Oh my my my! You're here! Welcome, welcome! Now then, right this way~! ♪"

A serving girl entered the throne room with a silver tray in her hands. Ars and the other disciples stood some distance from the dining table where Wormgandr sat, observing quietly. The serving girl was trembling, pale white like she might faint at any moment.

"G-Goddess V-Vicius… A-ahm… H-here…" The girl's hands were shaking as she held the tray. Atop it was the severed head of the Wise King of Alion.

"Just what I ordered! ♪ Thank you ever so much. ♪ Go on, then…" Vicius put her elbows on the table, and placed her hands under her chin, looking at the serving girl expectantly. "Tell me exactly how he died."

"Ah… Ah…"

She was one of the girls who had served the Wise King of Alion.

"Quickly."

"Ah…"

"Now."

"Y-yes! J-just as you ordered… W-we all went to his b-bedside and…h-held his m-majesty down…"

"Hm-hmm, and *then*?"

"While he was still alive… W-with meat knives from the kitchen… His head… We…"

"My my! ♪ How did his majesty respond, might I ask?"

"H-his voice was so weak… He sounded in pain… 'It hurts… It hurts…' he said…"

"Ohoh! ♪ How awful for him. ♪ Do you mind giving me a little more realism? Come on, give me some *emotion*… Some *poetry*."

"Eh…?"

"…"

"Hyah?! O-of course! Ahem… His majesty didn't seem to know what was happening, and… He was just struggling like a little child… His movements were weak, and he just kept saying how much it hurt…" said the serving girl.

Vicius closed her eyes and smiled.

"Ahh… I can picture it now… How pitiful. No dignity. Nothing."

"E-eventually h-he… He stopped speaking, and… There was just this muffled moaning noise for a while, and… Th-there was so much blood, then… He stopped making sounds…"

"Was it hard to cut off his head?"

"Ah… Y-yes…"

"Are you going to remember it when you lay down to sleep for the rest of your life?"

"Eh? I-I d-don't know…"

"*Hoh hoh*. ♪ Don't worry now, I'm *positive* you will! ♪ Don't fret about that. ♪"

Wormgandr shook his head from side to side in exasperation.

"Well, then, you are to dispose of his majesty's head and other remains by feeding them to the castle livestock."

"Eh?"

"What do you mean by *'eh?'* You don't mean to complain, do you? You do understand we cannot waste food? Quite so. How about I take you and the rest of your family to the stables instead? ♪"

"Hyaah?! N-no…! I understand! I-I will do as you ask and…"

"Ah, I wish to add his bones to my chair, so do leave those for me. You see the gaps? I also intend on filling them with that blasted fly, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, those other hero scum, and representatives from every nation on the continent. ♪ Let's all do our best, shall we? ♪"

"O-of cou—w-wah?!"

Nervous and shaking, the serving girl let the king's severed head slide from her tray and sent it rolling across the throne room carpet.

"Oh dear! This will never do!"

Vicius stood and went over to stand by the serving girl's side, as she frantically tried to place the head back on its tray.

"Well go on then, pick it up! Quickly now! Oh, how terrible! That's the *king's head*, you are aware?!"

"Ahh, ahhhh…"

The serving girl fell into a complete panic at being rushed to pick up the severed head and tried everything she could to get it back on the tray—but with her hands shaking and weak, she dropped it several more times in the attempt.

"Ahh, ahhh… Ahhhhh…!"

The more Vicius rushed her, the more panicked the girl became.

"Oh, Your Majesty! How awful it is to see you like this…! To see the king of a nation rolling about on the carpet! Ah, come now! Girl! Hold it properly! Curses, what are you doing?! Calm down! Get a firm grip! You can do this! Get serious! Try your utmost now! *Ahah hah hah hah hah!*♪ Come now, what's the matter?! Are you quite well?! Are you?! Are you?! *Ahah hah hah hah hah hah hah!*"

Still unsteady on her feet, the serving girl left the throne room and Vicius sat back down on her chair.

"Haah, that was ever so enjoyable. ♪ This is all it amounts to—the history and dignity of the human race! ♪ What a shame. ♪ It all fades so easily, and is ever so easily lost! ♪"

"…"

"Oh? Is something wrong, Worm?"

"No? Nothin' really."

"You're sure? You can of course speak your mind if you have something to say."

Wormgandr's mouth was always open, like he was constantly wearing a thin half smile. His golden eyes twinkled in the dark, cave-like recesses of his face like two tiny full moons.

He is of my element, but I do not know what he is truly thinking. The same goes for Ars and Yomibito. They are separate beings—a consequence of imparting to them my own ego during their creation.

Wormgandr tilted the large plate in his hands, allowing the exquisite spread of carefully prepared food to slide into his mouth all at once.

"You were 'bout to say somethin', weren't you? Before you had the head brought in—somethin' about them blasted humans," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his arm.

"Ah, that's right—I was talking about playwriting."

"Playwritin'?"

"You know what a play is, don't you? They're supposed to have an introduction, a development, a twist, and a conclusion—turns in the story that please the audience. They always follow a pattern is what I'm saying, and the popular ones always take the path most trodden! That's right! I've seen lots of plays, and there are ever so many that really start building up once the story begins racing to its conclusion."

Wormgandr rubbed his belly and burped, letting out a coarse sigh—Vicius frowned at him, but elected not to scold him for it.

"A certain play I used to go and see was ever so popular, and *always* being performed somewhere… It was a great success the day I saw it too! The performers were all very popular actors in their own rights."

Vicius flicked her silver cup with the back of her nail, making a dull ringing sound.

"The audience…they were ever so excited, you know? Everything was heating up, running full tilt toward the climax, the

happy ending that everybody was waiting for…but there was no happy ending that day."

Wormgandr listened in silence.

"It happened at the culmination of the performance. The lead actor was stabbed to death by a member of the crowd who charged onto the stage."

"…That's messed up."

"Well, I *was* the one who planned it, I suppose."

"You put 'em up to it, eh?"

Vicius trembled as the memory came rushing back to her.

"You see… At that point I had watched that same play so many times, and whenever it came to the city, it always made me think… How might the audience react were I to completely crush the resolution that they were all hoping for? *Hoh hoh*. Perhaps in my repeat viewings, I came to sympathize with the mighty noble who was always overthrown at the climax."

It grated upon me too, perhaps… The role of the lead actor, and those companions that flocked to his side.

"To give you a brief overview… The play features a powerful and evil noble who tortures their subjects and is finally brought down by a humble country blacksmith and his friends… That is about the shape of it, though in the end it's revealed that the blacksmith is in fact the son of an exiled noble who was once the swordplay instructor of the royal house. But well, hmm…how should I put this…" Vicius pushed her thumb hard into one of the pieces of cold meat on her plate,

pressing it almost flat. “The way in which all the blacksmith’s companions rally to his side—the whole *‘we can defeat that noble if we just work together!’* tripe—personally, I just don’t like it. Things just don’t work out like that in the real world, you know? Let’s all keep our eyes on reality, shall we? But every time the play was on, the audience would get swept up in that *‘you can do it!’* fervor. Terrifying, don’t you think? They know the way the story ends, yet still they grow so emotional.”

Vicius licked the fat from the thick piece of meat on her finger. A thin strand of it remained on her lips as she continued.

“It was just *perfect*. The way the audience looked when it happened… I think that’s what humans are really useful for. From the bottom of my heart, truly, deeply, I do.”

Wormgandr tossed a clean handkerchief to Vicius.

“So you’re sayin’ the anti-Vicius crowd are like the audience of that old play, huh?” he asked.

Vicius caught the handkerchief, wiped off her fingers, and looked at him with a troubled expression on her face.

“Yes, quite so. Everyone’s joining hands, making friends… They operate under the illusion that they’re on top of the world now, I think. A misunderstanding. Those brats have gotten it wrong. I’m sure that, buoyed by their solidarity and sense of morale, they now believe that they can win this war… But reality is not so kind as to allow this *hopeful* nonsense to go unchecked. They are not *children* anymore… don’t you agree? So, well…”

Vicius tossed away her handkerchief.

"I won't let this go the way they wish it to. As a god, I must set these humans right."

"…*Muah hah hah*. You're a real one—a true human-hater, eh?"

"Hm? Oh, I love them? That's why I embrace them…even as I thrust the dagger in." Vicius raised her silver cup of wine, and overturned it, sending the precious liquid spilling like blood over the pure white dining table. "Humans must never forget their chronic condition—that they are all *creations*. They must never lose sight of that fact. They must hold it in their hearts forever that they are inferior beings to the gods. I suppose I will accept a little arrogance at times, a little spice to enhance the tragedy that will eventually come. But I will not allow them to become too big for their boots! I truly detest inferior beings that do not understand their place. They are a blot upon this world—vain, self-important eyesores."

"*Hyeh hyeh hyeh*, you're one scary Goddess."

"Do not laugh in that condescending manner."

"Hyeh, hyeh! Hyeh, Hyuh hyuh hyeh!"

"Hah. You have always been this way, Worm… You never listen. I'm tired of telling you…*sob, sob*…It makes me so sad… Waaah."

"Heck…" said Wormgandr. "On the whole I don't think them humans are all that great. I'm down with what you're sayin' about them bein' inferior too, y'know? But the chief deity and Lokiella… they're standin' in our damn way of gettin' our opinions through."

"I will annihilate the chief deity, and gain control of all of the heavens' *resources*. Then our plan can move on to its next stage," said

Vicius.

"Eh? Next stage?"

"The world that those Heroes from Another World came from… Doesn't it interest you?"

"*Hyeh, hyeh*, seriously? You're gonna send our stuff over there? Ain't nobody in the heavens has ever managed to do that before."

"Well, that is why *I* am doing it." Vicius arched her mouth into a smile—but her eyes weren't smiling. Wormgandr put his arms on the dining table, entwined his hands together, and began playing with his thumbs.

"*Muah hah*… Then let's get back to the near future, eh? What's next?"

"Ohoh hoh, nothing much. Soon the Holy Eye will be destroyed, and we will use that gate to enter the heavens—that is all. Simple, no? Are you intelligent enough to comprehend what I am saying?"

"What happens if the blacksmith and his buddies make it here before the eye goes down?"

"Then I destroy their play—ruin the way it is *supposed* to end."

"They're humans. We're designed to fight *divines*, ain't we?"

"Oh? Are you suggesting you might lose? You may be more suited for combat with a divine, but even so—they should pose no threat."

"Sure. Maybe… But I wonder. That Lord o' the Flies—"

Craaash—!

With a lightning-fast swing, Vicius destroyed the dining table, splitting the antique passed down from generation to generation of Alion royalty into two splintered halves. Thick chunks of table flew into the air, elegant cutlery and plates were bent and broken, and finely prepared platters of highly technically complex dishes were overturned onto the carpet, soaking into the floor with the rest of the wine.

Vicius put a hand on each side of her head.

"Oh nooo! The precious table of Alion royalty, passed down from generation to generation! This was my favorite table! Gyaaah!"

She slipped her hands behind her back, folded them together, then leaned forward and began to hum. Where she had been pale and screaming a moment ago, she now wore a joyous smile.

"Hmm, hmm, hmm. ♪ Hmm-hmm, hmm. ♪ Hm-hm-hmm! ♪ Hm-hmm and a hmm. ♪"

She paced around, suddenly carefree—hopping like a stone skimming the surface of a calm river. She might have been dancing, careful to avoid the fragments of table, plates, and puddles of wine as she made her way over to Wormgandr.

"Hmm hmm. ♪ Hmm-mm. ♪ Hmm. ♪ Hm-hm-hm-hmmm. ♪ Hmm, hmm, hmm—there we go!"

Vicius spread her arms wide, as if she had just hopped a river and made it to the other side. She stood directly in front of the chair in which Wormgandr was sitting.

"Can we be done with talk of him now, Worm? That foul fly? I *will* kill you."

"…"

"The Holy Eye will have been destroyed by the time of his arrival, in any case. The blacksmith and his pitiful friends will arrive to find this castle completely deserted, and will no doubt stamp their feet in impotent rage."

Vicius checked her device again, confirming that the Holy Eye was still operational.

"…Tch." She softly clicked her tongue.

My northern eucharist army is moving slower than I'd anticipated. Good grief, what are they playing at?

But Vicius plastered another smile upon her face.

"Well, even if they *do* arrive before the eye is destroyed, all we need do is buy time. What can Yonato do to oppose us, after all? We need only to remain holed up in this castle and wait for the Holy Eye's eventual demise. *Ohoh hoh*… I do like to prepare, so I have made arrangements to delay them here, of course. Oh, and on the off-chance that Nyantan has leaked the existence of my underground anti-divine eucharist army or the gate activation machine… Well, as long as I am safe, the device's destruction will pose no issue at all. I have made certain of that. How many years do you think I have spent preparing for this day, exactly? Yes, everything is proceeding exactly as planned. And so, you see—"

Wormgandr gave her a deep grin.

"Can I remind you not to bring up unpleasant topics that are likely to upset me?"

"*Hyeh hyeh*… *Hyeh*, how did'ya know what I was gonna say, Goddess?"

"Nevertheless… All the more unfortunate for them if they do manage to make it here."

Vicius narrowed her eyes.

"In the unlikely event that we do come to blows…I wonder how many will die? I should like to have as many as possible captured alive so that I might play with them, torturing them and forcing them to kill each other, but I expect a great deal would die in battle… My, my. I would have let them live *much* longer if they'd only obeyed me. How sorry I feel for them now! It would be a blessing to them if we manage to make it up into the heavens before their arrival, I hope they understand! They are being ever so foolish."

I hope they wail when their time comes. I hope they are tormented by the death of their companions.

"How many corpses would be added to the pile in such a meaningless battle? Oh, I cannot wait to start counting. ♪ Don't you agree?"

Vicius walked past Wormgandr, placing a hand on his massive arm as she passed by.

Wormgandr—the Fallen God.

She walked toward her two other disciples, who had been watching in silence.

Ars—the First Hero.

As a hero, Ars had sought power and power alone, pursued it to the very end. Not all knew of him, but the name of the first hero was still spoken across the continent, and some mothers chose to name their children after him. *The late captain of the Twelfth Order of Alion shared his name, if I recall correctly.*

The Heroes from Another World were special—and at the time of his summoning, Vicius had measured all the other heroes by Ars' strength.

But he was not like them. He always stood out.

The first hero ever summoned was cast from a different mold.

Yomibito—the Hollow Man.

He was another anomaly. Yomibito had lost the majority of his memories from the time of his summoning.

I remember…another of the heroes was very different that time, too.

He had, in fact, been special.

"He may be from a different time," the other heroes had said when they saw him… They proceeded to investigate his origins, if I recall. Musashi, Oda… Those were the other heroes' names, I believe. Kenshin, Shingen…Kojiro? Yagyu? Ittosai? Amakusa? Tadakatsu? Sanada? Date? Yoshitsune?

In any case, they were names from their world.

"Perhaps he came from the realm of Yomi?" one of the boys speculated.

Since he didn't remember his own name, the hero came to be known as "Yomibito"—though some also referred to him by the strange, questioning nickname of "Yomibitoshirazu." In any case—Yomibito was strong. In his own time, he defeated the Demon King alone, while the other heroes died prematurely in battle.

They were not weak, by any means. But the Demon King and his army back then were incredibly strong…though not quite as powerful as the incarnation that appeared this time around. Even I was troubled by his strength and for the first time considered defeat might be a possibility.

She had never expected Yomibito to finish the job completely on his own.

Vicius forced an elegant smile.

"I'm quite sure we'll be okay… But if any of those blacksmiths do manage to make it here, I should like you to deal with them. *Hoh hoh*… I am counting on you three, you know?"

She narrowed her eyes at one of her disciples.

"Especially you."

Lisbeth

THE AIR TREMBLED, reverberations running through the ground below as if the whole world was shaking.

A moment later—a flash of white light swallowed everything.

The light was so bright that Lis thought her eyes might be done for. But after some time, the light faded and her vision slowly returned.

What was that…?

The crow familiar—Lisbeth—was confused.

Hm? I was perched in a tree, in the castle grounds… No… This branch under my feet is the same one I was sitting on. Then I…I haven't moved? But then this is…

The royal castle had transformed completely. When Lis looked up, she could no longer see the clouds—only a white ceiling above her where the sky should be.

What… H-happened?

Lisbeth had been watching Vicius and her disciples until just moments earlier when the earth had trembled, and a great flash of light had spread out before her.

Stay calm… Stay calm…

She refocused her attention on the link she maintained to the crow familiar.

I have to see what's happening. I have to report this.

Looking closer, she saw that the shape of the castle remained.

It's less that the place has been transformed, and more like it's been haphazardly merged with something else entirely.

Lis saw white walls and membranes fused with parts of the building. She felt almost like she was in the belly of some giant

creature. Regaining some of her composure, Lisbeth decided to try and fly up a little higher.

What is all this?!

The city was covered by a white wall that completely obscured it from view. She could only see a short distance in front of her, blocked by the white walls and ceiling above.

Is the whole castle surrounded by this whiteness? Am I'm trapped?

But scanning the area, Lis found several holes that offered a way out.

Will I be able to get out through one of those?

She flew in another circle, taking a look at the air around her. There were other crows in the sky with her too.

Then not all life has gone from this place.

Then she had a thought.

But…where are Vicius's disciples? I need to tell Too-ka and the others that something strange is happening. That white light might have made Vicius and her disciples disappear. They could even have teleported away somewhere. I've been told it's very, very important in this war that we know where Vicius is.

Lisbeth turned back, returning to the tree she had been sitting in when the flash came. The perch gave her a view into the throne room. She was also not the only crow present. The birds had lived in Eno for some time and had been increasing in number of late, perhaps due to the city's deteriorating sanitation. Lisbeth also saw a

great many flies. She had never liked flies—they had always swarmed the garbage pails at the White Leg Tavern where she once worked.

But now…it's strange, but whenever I see a fly, I feel somewhat reassured. Is it because they make me think of him, perhaps?

I'm going to try my best… For the one who saved me too… Who rescued me and Big Sis from that place—

"…!"

Vicius left the throne room. One of her disciples, Wormgandr, followed as she made her way down the castle hallway, disappearing and reappearing as the pillars blocked Lis's view.

This castle's transformation… What is happening?

Lisbeth concentrated solely on considering her next course of action.

…Huh?

Vicius passed behind one of the hallway pillars, but had yet to emerge from the other side. Lis scanned the other windows, but Wormgandr was the only disciple she could see.

Where did Vicius g—

"It's you, then."

Two eyes appeared before her—black as night, dark as a bottomless swamp.

—Splat—

There was an awful sound of meat and bone softly crunching together—then Lis's vision went black.

Lis opened her eyes with a start, suddenly returning to her own consciousness.

"Ah! Aah, Aah…!"

She desperately inhaled oxygen like she'd just returned from the dead, trying to rapidly bring her new consciousness into focus.

"Haah, ah… Haah, haah…"

She had screamed when the connection with her familiar had been cut—or so she thought. *I don't exactly remember…but it appears as if I screamed, fell down, then lost consciousness…*

This place… I'm in the house of Erika Anaorbael.

A shiver ran through her tiny frame, making her tremble.

The chill of the void…complete nothingness. Was that…death? Is that what I just felt? A sort of dying? I'm scared. It was scary. The way Vicius looked when she appeared before me… She was smiling, but…she wasn't. She was cold, yet burning with an endless anger. It was nothingness, but…overflowing with evil.

…I'm scared.

The thought of connecting with a familiar scared Lis.

I might go experience that fear all over again…

"…"

Lisbeth swayed as she got to her feet. Her head was pounding, throbbing with pain. Her body felt heavy, like she was walking under water. The fatigue of delivering so many reports and messages had built up inside of her. Sweat dripped down her backbone and it felt terribly cold. She wrapped her thin arms around her little body as if to

protect herself from the cold and returned to the connection crystal. Erika didn't require the use of one, but Lis wasn't able to connect to a familiar without hers yet.

I'm scared. So scared… But…I'm more scared of losing Big Sis, and everybody else. Everyone's out there fighting against her. Fighting that. So I…I have to tell Mr. Too-ka… I have to tell him everything I've heard—all that I've seen. Now that Erika can't move, I'm the only one that can do this.

She felt the cold sweat on her face, and on the rest of her body.

Maybe the sweat is a warning sign…a physical reaction to what I'm making myself do.

Lis placed a hand to the carved wooden necklace that Eve had given her so long ago and squeezed it tight.

We decided together… Decided that we would become strong. I've always been weak. But maybe now…maybe just a little, I…

She closed her eyes and placed her still trembling hands on the crystal.

…Hey. Big Sis…do you think I…

"Do you think I've gotten a little stronger?"

Lisbeth once again established a connection with one of her familiars.

Mimori Touka

A HEAVY RAIN FELL overnight. In the morning, the clouds remained as the rain stopped. The morning dew glistened in the light of the sun as it clung to the undergrowth of the plain. The breeze was cool and refreshing on my skin.

In the crisp, clear morning air, a messenger came to me with a report.

"The Band of the Sun are engaging with the eucharist army on our northern flank!"

We were close to the city of Eno and the eucharist army deployed outside of the capital had begun their attack upon us a few hours before. Our Anti-Goddess Alliance had marched out to meet and defeat them in the field.

"The way they're deploying, and their numbers…" said Lokiella, giving her analysis. "I don't think they're fighting to win this battle. I mean, there are some anti-divine eucharists mixed in with the army out there, right?"

"They're buying time then."

"From what I'm seeing, yeah. I hope we can just push them all the way back to the capital…"

"We've had no reports of any disciples in the field yet. Vicius and her elites want a siege, then…"

I could see the outer walls that protected Eno off in the distance. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor stood beside me firing off orders. There was a whirlwind of messengers running about, voices

raised as reports flew in from all directions. I recalled the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's proposal for the battle to come.

"With Eno before us, I believe we should conserve the mana of our heroes by not allowing them to participate in the coming skirmishes. They should only be deployed once Vicius or her disciples are located. Let the soldiers of this world serve as the opening act."

Luckily for us, there seemed to be no giant eucharists in the field.

"Given how short-handed they seem to be… They must have sent their main force of eucharists north to destroy the Holy Eye of Yonato."

Perhaps because of our days of fighting together, the Anti-Goddess Alliance was working together much better than it had during its first combat. The army was tired from its march, but morale among the troops was much higher than could have been hoped for.

If Vicius is holing up inside of her castle, we should be able to conserve our heroes' mana for now. That's good news.

Roughly an hour passed since the beginning of the battle—and it appeared that it was already coming to an end. The Anti-Goddess Alliance won a crushing victory and was now annihilating what eucharists were left.

We managed to fight this battle without the heroes—they haven't used up a drop of MP or stamina yet. The fact that we managed this without them might turn out to be a big deal. The Anti-Goddess Alliance really fought hard for us.

It was as we were preparing to enter the capital itself that it happened.

"…What?!"

A shockwave ran through the air.

"!"

A moment later, a white beam of light enveloped the capital. When it faded…

"The city…" murmured Seras beside me.

A giant white dome… I guess that's the only way to describe it.

The *thing* suddenly appeared in Eno. The half-spherical dome was covered in an outer shell of white, like a giant white pupa or some sort.

"Pff…"

Lokiella was trembling where she sat on my shoulder. Finally, she snapped.

"Is she stuuupid?! That d-damned *idiot* Goddess!" She snapped. "What's she doing manifesting one of *those* here of all places?! It's so damned big! Does she have any idea how much energy Thesis is going to have to expend to fix that much dimension warping?! No—she *does* know and she's *still* gone ahead and done it! That… Big dummy! Dummy dummy dummy! Is she a genuine idiot or what?! You've got to be kidding me! Vicius is such a damn *halfwit*!"

Most of us in camp were stunned—although whether they were reacting to the change that had come across the city of Eno or to Lokiella's furious outburst, I couldn't tell. In any case, I calmed

Lokiella down before she overheated and started to question her once she had cooled off enough to speak.

"Sounds like you know what that thing is."

"That's… I'm pretty sure it's a *Divine Labyrinth*. Damn it."

"A Divine Labyrinth?"

"It's a kind of conception magic that we divines use in our games…but you've got to attach them to a divine carving, and really grow it over time. Look…I'll spare you the details, but it takes ages to set one of those up! I can't believe it. That thing *shouldn't be here*." Lokiella ground her teeth like she was fighting off a headache. "They're only supposed to be able to manifest in special places in the heavens—playgrounds that have the right divine seals in place. It shouldn't be possible here, but she's done it! I never thought she could—but *that damned Vicius* has really gone and done it now."

Lokiella muttered that she might be about to rupture a blood vessel before continuing.

"I don't know how she looks to you, but Vicius isn't a divine who's particularly well-suited to combat. She's more of a researcher—and not even a *good* one by heavens' standards! That's how we think of her up there! But…damn it! Has she been hiding her true abilities this whole time?! Waiting for this moment?! Just how patient has she been?!"

"So, what is that thing she's made?" I asked.

"It's *exactly* what she needs for a siege…is what it is," replied Lokiella.

"I see."

"…I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"I should have considered this possibility when I saw how much she wanted to stay in Eno. I never considered that she might have a divine carving hidden in that castle ready to activate. I thought she might have one hidden somewhere to cover a large area and improve her divine powers, sure… But I never imagined it possible to manifest something like that here on the ground."

There's something important I need to ask, then.

"You're saying we have no chance of beating that thing?"

"Uuugh…" moaned Lokiella, switching gears. She shook her head. "…Maybe."

"Then we've still got a chance, right?" I asked again.

Lokiella looked up at me, the flash of a fleeting smile on her face.

"You…you want to keep going, don't you?"

"If there's still a chance of winning this war, I'm going to press on. I'll do everything in my power to increase the odds that we do come out on top." *Even risking my life at times.* "Same as I've always done."

Lokiella slapped herself on the cheeks as if in self-reproach.

"I'm sorry. I'm just in shock. I never expected Vicius to do all this."

I snorted at her in response.

"Think about it this way—she's so scared of us, she's had no choice but to use *that*."

Lokiella glanced in the direction of the white dome.

"Yeah… You might be right. No, I'm sure you're right. She didn't use it while we were on the road to Eno, so I don't think she wanted to do this if she didn't have to. Maybe Vicius has been so surprised that we've forced her to use her secret weapon…"

Lokiella inspected the corpses of a few eucharists that were in the process of melting away a few minutes later. According to her, they had quite a few anti-divine features.

"It might be proof that she's feeling cornered that she's sent these things out against us."

I sent a message to the Wildly Beautiful Emperor that the change that had come over the capital of Alion did not impact our march, and had his forces continue to clear up the remaining eucharists. I also had messages sent out to all of our forces to reassure them, sending the same message to the heroes too.

To any who were worried about the situation, I explained that the city's transformation wasn't an issue and that it wouldn't change our plans in any way.

In times like these, the worst thing me or the Wildly Beautiful Emperor could do is panic, given our position.

"The eucharist fight should be over soon," I said to Lokiella. "In the meantime, I want you to tell me as much as you can about that

Divine Labyrinth."

"Yeah—all right." Lokiella kneaded her cheeks with the flat of her hands. "Calm down… Cool it, Lokiella," she said to herself. Once her breathing was under control, she began her explanation. "It's a kind of conception magic originally used to train divines."

"Divines need training, huh?" I asked.

"Well, the labyrinth can be more of a game than a trial. I don't know how you see us, but we divines aren't all that different from you, really. Hmm. I mean, I suppose we're just calling ourselves *gods* at the end of the day, right? In any case, the gods that the people of this world believe in and divines are entirely different things."

Come to think of it, I've heard terms like cursed god *and* war god *on my travels.*

"But that's beside the point. Divine Labyrinth is a magic spell that manifests a labyrinth-like space with a start and an end point. Conception magic is sort of like a primordial kind of spell, I suppose—no, that doesn't really matter to you so I'm skipping that part. What you've really got to know about a Divine Labyrinth is—" Lokiella went on to explain the spell to me.

As she came to the end of her explanation, I received a report that the eucharist army surrounding the capital city had been annihilated. We decided to head straight for Eno as planned. As I walked, I began to formulate my next moves now that this new Divine Labyrinth element was in play.

"We just received a magical war pigeon from Yonato," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, riding up on his white steed. "The Queen of

Yonato is prepared to defend her Holy Eye to the very end, no matter what it takes."

All right. Now it's almost a guarantee that Yonato is on our side.

"She wrote that she would concentrate the forces of her neighboring nations, including Luheit and his men, at Azziz. There she will do everything in her power to defend the Holy Eye. Considering the time it took for this bird to reach us, the eucharist army in the north may well have already begun engaging her forces in battle."

"Too-ka!" It was Eve who came to me next. "Lis's familiar has activated! She has something urgent to tell you!"

I took out the Ouija board and went with Eve to one of the carriages to hear Lis's report.

"Sounds like Vicius and her disciples want to hide in that labyrinth to buy themselves time after all."

From what Lis just said, it seems all of the disciples are still at Vicius's side. None of them were sent to Yonato. I'm not sure if that's a blessing or a curse yet.

"Anyway… Are you all right, Lis?" I asked.

Her familiar in Eno was discovered by Vicius, and killed… That must have been a real shock to her system.

However, Lis told me through her familiar that she was fine. Eve stroked the bird's head.

"Before I tell you not to push yourself so hard—well done, Lis."

The little familiar looked happy. Lis had overheard the Goddess speaking with her disciples, and getting that close was quite an

achievement.

"It seems that Vicius's victory condition right now is destroying that Holy Eye."

Lokiella frowned, looking thoughtful. "Maybe the army she sent to Azziz to destroy the eye hasn't arrived yet? Or the allies we have in Azziz are putting up a much better fight than expected…" She nodded to herself. "Now we've got solid proof, based on the information your familiar overheard, Lis… Vicius really does intend on opening that gate again and fleeing into the heavens as soon as the Holy Eye has been destroyed."

There's one thing that bothers me, though.

"If that conception magic has transformed parts of the city too, and not just the Castle of Alion… What happened to that gate opening device and the army of anti-divine eucharists she's got stored somewhere under the city?"

"The activator of the Divine Labyrinth can control its structure, to a certain extent. I expect she's sealed them off nice and tight so that we can't get anywhere near them," replied Lokiella.

Then we won't be able to destroy that device or the army… She'll have incorporated both into her massive labyrinth.

Lokiella also explained that the labyrinth's membrane, created by conception magic, was indestructible, as destroying or breaking through the membrane walls of the labyrinth would be against its *conceptual rules.*

"That spell won't be deactivated until someone makes it through to the goal on the other side—the one that was designated when the conception magic was first cast. It can't be taken out by any other means."

On the flip side, there's a definite goal to aim for. A labyrinth doesn't properly exist as a concept without an entrance and an exit—those two things have to exist with a route that connects them. In other words, it won't be a maze with nothing but dead ends. That wouldn't qualify as a labyrinth. And the end goal of the labyrinth can't be changed, now that the spell has been cast.

"Well…I can hardly be surprised anymore, so there's a possibility that she's done something to her conception magic to change that. But once we arrive at the labyrinth, I'll be able to lay hands on it and tell you if it's been messed with in any way. I can't imagine even Vicius would be capable of altering a *conception magic* spell. But…"

I wish she'd stop jinxing us like that.

There had been an ongoing exodus of citizens from the royal capital happening for some time. I had received reports that many had chosen to escape the city after the Miran rebellion began, but Vicius hadn't taken the citizens of Alion to task for their actions as normally she would.

Maybe she was focused on other things, and just didn't have the time…or decided not to bother because she knew they were all going to die, no matter where they ran to.

Even so, there were still some citizens that remained in the city.

That creepy white dome appearing above their heads has got to have them worried now.

"It looks like there might be citizens of Alion inside that Divine Labyrinth…" I noted.

"You can't save them all."

Even so… Will Sogou and the others want to try? I have to keep that in mind.

I decided to leave the task of guiding the evacuees away from the city to Cattlea, instructing her to carefully keep them away from our main army as they fled.

There's a chance that Vicius might try to conceal some of her pawns among the Eno refugees.

And so, we finally arrived at the gates of Eno, the capital of Alion. Gates which had long since been flung open wide by the fleeing citizens. We charged into the city with the knights taking the lead to serve as scouts, the hooves of our mounts furiously pounding the dirt below us. Above us in the sky were our black dragon scouts and the harpies too. Down the main street, I saw the Divine Labyrinth just ahead.

"A damn long time coming…"

"If I ever make it back alive, you'd better be ready."

"If you ever make it back? Ha, you're quite the jester! A last gasp befitting a disposable wretch."

But just as I promised…

"I'm back, Vicius."



Chapter 4:
The Divine Labyrinth / Divine Tomb

REPORTS FROM our scouts indicated that there were no eucharists or other enemies outside of the labyrinth and that entering through the city's underground sewers wasn't an option. The labyrinth had seeped its membrane into the ground, completely sealing off all routes in. We decided to split our forces into those that would remain on standby outside the capital, and those who would advance into the city to take on Vicius—the heroes included. Cattlea was placed in charge of the large group of soldiers who were to remain outside of Eno. I went with Lokiella to the side of the labyrinth to get a look at it.

"It's so weird how quiet the city is," I said.

It seemed that almost all the citizens who had been on the outside of the labyrinth when it formed had fled through the outer gates. The small number that remained were in the process of being safely evacuated by our forces.

"Doesn't seem like there are any traps being laid for us yet. Well… The labyrinth itself is designed to disappear completely once its caster leaves, so there should be no danger of Vicius coming out to say hello. As for those disciples…who knows. I can't imagine she'd send them out here and sacrifice her advantage when she's so clearly luring us inside that labyrinth… Not to mention…"

Before arriving, we'd considered the possibility that Vicius might launch a surprise attack the moment we arrived in the city.

"With the scale of this labyrinth… I think this is the range of her divine carving's effect. I can feel something active inside, but there's nothing like that on the outside of the membrane."

In other words, she's only got her buffs so long as she's in there—meaning there's even less advantage to venturing out.

"So what do you think?" I asked, as Lokiella placed a palm to the side of the labyrinth membrane.

"Yep, it doesn't seem like even Vicius has been able to pull off manipulating a conception magic spell. She hasn't tampered with it. It operates within the bounds of all the rules I explained."

There are lots of possibilities that having Lokiella around lets me discount entirely… And the fewer maybes, the better.

We returned to the entrance of the labyrinth.

"Looks like everybody's here."

Everyone who would be heading inside had gathered there, at the only entrance. Lokiella had just determined that there was only one entrance. The entrance was shaped like a half-moon—simple and lacking grandeur. There was a white space just over the threshold, a little bigger than a six-tatami mat room. The room was separated from us by a thin, semi-transparent membrane. According to Lokiella, the barrier could be penetrated by anyone.

But first…

"Let me go over the details. We can only enter one by one," I said, explaining to everyone the news that Lokiella had given me.

"Once you're through that membrane, you'll be transported somewhere within the labyrinth."

The location an entrant would be sent to was apparently random, but the faster someone followed another entrant in, the more likely the two of them would be sent somewhere close to the same location.

That should make it easier for us to regroup once we're in there. The problem is that none of this is guaranteed. Some of our group might get teleported somewhere far away from the rest.

I remembered the way that Lokiella had explained it to me.

"It's meant to make it hard to know who you'll encounter during your training. The system makes it easy to team up with the divines you're interested in grouping with if you enter right after they do, raising your odds of winning the game. It also lets you reduce the chances of meeting someone you want to avoid by entering much later than them. The important thing, though, is that none of this is guaranteed—it's all down to luck. Reality doesn't always go the way you want it. This training's meant to teach us that lesson, and how messy and unclear reality can be."

So this competition's about chance encounters too. And that's why sound is made to travel so poorly in the labyrinth. Generally speaking, you'll only be able to hear whatever's near you once you're in there. The white walls absorb most of the noise. I wish we could use those sound spheres to mark our locations, like we did in our fight against the Thirteen Orders of Alion…but that tactic isn't going to fly

in this Divine Labyrinth. Unless you're in close proximity to someone else, you won't know who's nearby.

There are going to be a lot of random encounters in there. Lokiella said that was what made it so interesting as a training exercise…

There was also a limit to how many people could enter—a number anywhere from 50 to 100.

"The caster and any enemies inside like eucharists and disciples won't be counted as part of that number, though. It only counts new entrants from the outside," Lokiella had explained.

But we can't be sure what that upper limit is either. According to Lokiella, it's random, determined at the time the labyrinth is activated. Sometimes the number of possible entrants can surpass 100, and sometimes it can be only 50.

That was the reason I'd left most of our army outside of the city walls. I also decided to take all those who weren't suited to single combat out of the running. In the end, the party that would be heading into the labyrinth were:

Seras Ashrain.

Eve Speed.

Munin.

Sogou Ayaka.

The Takao sisters.

Ikusaba Asagi.

Geo Shadowblade.

Amia Plum Lynx.

Kil Mail.

Loa.

Nyantan Kikipat.

Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah, Makia Renaufia.

Holy Knight of Neah, Esmeralda Nedith.

Leader of the Black Dragon Knights, Gus Dolnfedd.

Chester Ord, of the Princeps Elector House of Ord.

Selected members of the Holy Knights of Neah.

Selected members of the Black Dragon Knights.

Selected members of the Band of the Sun.

Selected members of the Monster Slayer Knights.

Selected members of the Alionese army.

Selected members of the Country at the End of the World—including members of the Kurosaga clan.

Then there's me, Piggymaru, and Lokiella.

There are likely going to be eucharists in the labyrinth, not just the disciples. If it turns out there are a lot of them, it's going to be important that we don't use up our strength. Vicius knows all about our MP and will try to whittle it down. We need to send all these people in so that we don't get overwhelmed by their numbers while we're inside. Of course, there's another reason for having this many of

us in there too—making sure that I can get to Vicius while I'm still in good condition to fight. It's possible my status-effect skills might be able to kill these disciples with minimal MP cost. The best-case scenario would be me taking them all out so that we can preserve the rest of our strength.

The Black Dragon Knights wouldn't be taking their dragons into the labyrinth. It wasn't an environment suited to flight, so they wouldn't be capable of using the air to their advantage. A dragon would also take up the spot of a person who could otherwise join us. Gratrah and her harpies were left behind for the same reason—they would be unable to fly. Nyaki, Lise, and Banewolf were also going to remain outside, as they lacked the combat strength to join us. I decided Slei would stay behind too, as would Fugi of the Kurosaga.

Many of the heroes offered to join us, but Sogou asked me to refuse them. I turned them all down.

Her goal is protecting her classmates… Well, no. Now, I suppose, it's to protect those that need her protection. In any case, all the heroes except for Sogou Ayaka, the Takao sisters, and Ikusaba Asagi were left outside. The chance of death is an unavoidable consequence of entering this labyrinth. Some of these people might even encounter a disciple the moment they're teleported in there. My main priority is making sure that Sogou can move freely, without worrying about the safety of the other heroes. In terms of combat ability, it'd be hard for me to send most of the heroes in there, anyway—I don't want them dragging Sogou down once they're on the inside.

That said, the Takao sisters are definitely coming in with us. Not even Sogou has any objection to those two S and A-class heroes joining us.

"Once we're in there, the top priority for most of you will be to group up. But you three—Sogou, Hijiri, Itsuki—should make your own decisions and prioritize achieving our objectives as you need to."

Sogou nodded. The Takao sisters—dressed in their Fly Swordsman outfits—nodded too.

I've already given orders to the Lord of the Flies Brigade. First up, we need to find Munin. That's our top priority. We also need to find Lokiella and Piggymaru. The two of them don't really have the strength to fight through that labyrinth on their own… But Piggymaru greatly enhances what I'm able to do in combat and Lokiella knows how to fight divines—I'm going to need them both. We also need to prioritize getting me, Seras, and Eve together. We absolutely need Munin for our fight against Vicius, so we have to do everything we can to avoid losing her.

I had also asked Sogou and the Takao sisters to try their best to find Munin and keep her safe.

"Oh, and…" I looked at Asagi. "Prioritize finding Ikusaba Asagi, too."

Asagi isn't that strong in single combat either.

I'd talked to her in camp and heard that she dealt the finishing blow to an Inner Circle demon once—the Third of the Sworn.

"So I was s'posed to get a ton of EXP from that, but my stats barely moved at all, see? I was like, lol whut? I was like, seriously about to message a GM for how buggy it was. But then just as I was wonderin' where to submit the report I got the message that I'd acquired Queen Bee! ♪"

This, Asagi explained, was what finally made her understand.

"Like, I'm meant to be an actual queen bee, sendin' out all my drone soldiers that are stronger than me. It was like, the moment I figured out that's what this game is about."

Asagi's unique skill gives her the ability to tear down the gods and give special buffs to her allies.

"Thanks Mimori-kun! ♪ You're so sweet!" she replied, sounding emotional as she clasped her hands together. Sogou had wanted to leave Asagi behind too, but Asagi had brought up the time when Sogou had rampaged across the continent and quite easily won that argument.

Well, I'd planned on taking her along regardless. To be honest, I'm counting on Asagi as my back up, but she is who she is. There is one doubt in my mind about Ikusaba Asagi. My gut tells me she might really try and kill Vicius once she's in there. Asagi herself is a creature of impulse, moving without thinking. In some ways, she's predictable. But if it turns out that this feeling I get from her is just another part of her act… Then actor to actor, I'll have to admit that Ikusaba Asagi has me beat.

"If you encounter a disciple while you're in there," I said, addressing everyone now. "Avoid single combat with them as long as

you're able, unless you're Sogou Ayaka or Seras Ashrain. If you have to fight—then give it everything you've got."

The moment I said the word *disciple*, the mood became a little more tense. Only Lokiella and Nyantan had ever seen the three of them in person before, but everyone sensed that they were true monsters.

Who encounters the disciples and when…that just comes down to luck. As for Vicius herself? Who knows?

"I think she'll send out her disciples here," had been Lokiella's analysis when we'd talked the situation over. *"Why do you think Vicius prepared this Divine Labyrinth in the first place? I don't think it was to buy time."*

"…You think she wants to take us one by one?"

"Yes. She thinks your strength is in numbers, I think. Meaning that Vicius thinks you'll be a threat if you're all allowed to fight together against her. She's not wrong—it'd be hard for you to use your secret weapon against her in single combat, right?"

"Guess so."

"I hate to admit it, but she's really thought this through. This is an effective way to divide our strength."

"So you think to counter us better, she'll have her disciples wander the labyrinth and engage our people, increasing the possibility of chance encounters with them."

"I figure so. She wants to stop us from grouping up and take away any advantages we have. That's the plan, I bet."

"Still… If we wait until this Divine Labyrinth spell has reached its time limit, the Holy Eye of Yonato might be destroyed in the meantime, huh?"

…I suppose it's possible we could wait outside of the labyrinth for the moment that Vicius and her disciples emerge to open up that gate. Then we could take that opportunity to attack them all at once. But doing that would mean we'd have to wait for Azziz to fall, and for the eye to be destroyed. I just hate the idea of doing that.

"So we've got to launch ourselves at them, all the while keeping our eyes on the clock… Damn it… Vicius dividing us up with this Divine Labyrinth really was a brilliant move."

"That foul Goddess might seem a bit stupid at times, but she's cunning."

"Her using that labyrinth gives her ample opportunities to take out our people one by one… Damn it… So, this is what she's capable of when the tables are turned."

As I recalled my conversation with Lokiella, I continued to address the labyrinth entrants.

"From what our black dragon scouts have seen, this labyrinth is centered on the Castle of Alion—specifically, the throne room. Once you're all together and you think you're prepared to fight, make your way there."

Lokiella had explained where the goal of the labyrinth would be located—*it's always in the center.*

"Apparently, all the buildings in the city that were there when the labyrinth formed will still be inside it. This is a labyrinth…but I don't think you'll have that much trouble knowing where you are."

The buildings and roads of the city should serve as good signposts for how to get to the castle—we've also handed out maps of Eno just in case. According to Lokiella, a labyrinth's main feature is the surprise encounters it causes.

"I think Vicius's attempt to stall for time will affect the way the Divine Labyrinth is structured to some extent, but they're not fundamentally designed to be mazes—they can't be, actually," Lokiella had explained. *"Some of the divines are confused by the naming too. Like, 'Why's it called a labyrinth then?' Y'know… The number two divine is this super smart person called Thesis… And they said maybe the labyrinth is more about how it makes you* feel *lost, unlike an actual maze."*

You don't know whether the people you meet in there will be friend or foe… Who to fight, when, and how to beat them… What was the caster's intention in making the labyrinth? What will did they pour into it? I think that's what these labyrinths are about. It's how you're supposed to feel as you make your way through it. But in this game, all the entrants are on the same side. We aren't competing with each other. It makes it easier for us to be working together.

"Our ultimate goal is to take out Vicius, but the first step is surviving so we can make it that far. Focus on grouping up together, so we can create the right conditions to beat her."

The conditions needed to land a Forbidden Magic spell on Vicius. That requirement hasn't changed just because we have to go through a Divine Labyrinth now to get it done.

Elite representatives from countries across the continent were busy changing into old Fly Swordsman and Lord of the Flies outfits as they listened to me speak.

"Ahem…" Sogou raised her hand. "What should we do if we find citizens of the capital who are trapped in the labyrinth?"

"That's up to you," I answered immediately. "But be careful—they might not all be on our side. Some of those damn nobles might be thinking that Vicius will save them if they stick with her…and there's those Order of Vicius scumbag believers, too. Watch out for them."

"…U-understood." Sogou took a step back, as if swallowing what she'd been about to say.

It's a bad move to demoralize Sogou at a time like this, but I can't tell her this battle is about saving everyone… Sorry, Sogou. This is the best compromise I can manage.

"So about the order we go in there…"

Sogou Ayaka's first.

Sogou and Banewolf had just exchanged a few words, but now another came to see her.

"Sogou-san… Make sure you come back safe," said Suou Kayako, looking incredibly worried for her.

…I've never seen her make that face before.

"Ayaka-chan."

"Class rep!"

"Sogou-san!"

The rest of the heroes who would be remaining behind went over to Sogou to talk with her.

…To be honest, I want to get inside that labyrinth as fast as possible, but this stuff is important to some people. She might need to get her head straight first.

"…"

I considered the possibility that Vicius could have assembled a hundred or more of her own men and had them all charge into the labyrinth the moment it formed so that nobody else could get in—but according to Lokiella, that wouldn't work.

I recalled her explanation.

"Yeah, that's a good idea. There were divines in the past who thought of doing that, but it never worked. That labyrinth is alive, you see—it's got a will of its own. When the labyrinth detects cheating like that, it rejects it and stops it from working. The labyrinth is a reflection of its caster… That's because the spell is connected to the caster's intent. It can easily tell if its caster is trying to cheat. There's no hiding it. It's a bit like…the labyrinth itself takes pride in the concept of what it is, I suppose? It can be a bit unclear what it considers cheating…but that's just another thing that we divines find so interesting about labyrinths."

…I think I get it. It might be a good strategy to try and poke holes in these "anti-cheating" rules to see what we can get away with.

"Too-ka."

It was the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, who seemed to have been waiting for opportunity to speak with me.

"What can I do for you, Your Majesty?"

"I have decided that I will join you in the labyrinth."

"…Are you sure, Your Majesty?"

He's an emperor after all…

"Personally, I'd be very grateful if you would participate, Your Majesty… But haven't Lady Yoyo and the other nobles of Mira urged you to remain?"

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor had requested to join us at first, but had faced strong backlash from the Mira camp. Yoyo Ord had even offered that she would take the emperor's place, despite being in poor health. The current head of the Princeps Elector House of Ord had been taken off the list of labyrinth entrants, as she had caught a cold on the march to Alion and wasn't feeling well. She'd been ready to push through her fatigue, however, if that would allow her to take the Wildly Beautiful Emperor's place in the labyrinth.

Seems like the emperor is irreplaceable to the people of Mira. Don't tell me he's planning on entering in secret?

"I convinced her," he said in reply.

"…And the Mirans here have accepted your decision?" I asked with half-doubting eyes. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor smiled back at

me like a mischievous child.

"*Heh heh*… I believe they were shocked to see me being so *selfish* and forceful in my words. They had quite the looks on their faces." The Wildly Beautiful Emperor looked bright and cheerful. "Even if I should die, Luheit will serve as a fine successor to the throne of Mira. And given his recent growth, I suspect that Kaize would serve just as well. There are two fine replacements for my position as emperor. I intended on stepping down once I have taken my revenge upon Vicius, either way."

The emperor had already told me about his plan to resign.

"Your Majesty…"

"And what's more, I am done with *that*," he said.

"Hm?"

"Wherever I may be… I wish for people to speak with me as they would any other individual. This may be my last act in life, after all."

"…Then how should I address you? No. Sorry… What do you want me to call you?"

"*Heh*, Zine will suffice. Ah, but…I wish for you to allow me my own formalities. I have been speaking in this manner since before I can remember, and it has become a part of me."

I waited a moment.

"Are you okay, Zine?"

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor—Zine, that is, returned a thin smile and lowered his voice.

"I will enter close to Asagi in the order. I was the one who brought her to our side—and so I must be the one to see this through with her."

Be careful—I suppose I don't need to tell him that. Based on the way he worded that… It sounds like he already has suspicions of his own.

"So am I your first, then, Zine?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

I remembered what Kaize had told me about the emperor and his *friends*.

"Is Too-ka Mimori the first friend that Zine Mira has ever made?"

"…" A few moments passed, and then Zine smiled at me. "…Yes, I suppose—it appears so."

It's always when he smiles that the emperor looks his age.

"I'll be back soon, then," Sogou told the heroes who were remaining outside, picking up her backpack. "Once this battle is over, we can all go home—back to the old world. Together."

"Sogou-san," said Hijiri.

Sogou just nodded at her, a dependable expression on her face. She had a reassuring smile on her lips. I called to her as she made to walk toward the labyrinth entrance.

"I'm counting on you."

"Of course. Leave it to me." Sogou passed in front of me, stepping into the entrance of the labyrinth. In her backpack was the anti-Vicius magical device that Erika had given us. After some thought, I'd decided that she was the most likely of us to have the freedom to activate it on her own. I'd discussed the matter with Eve and Lokiella.

"Erika designed that thing to fit the entire city of Eno inside its effect radius, so it should cover the entire labyrinth," Eve had explained.

"It sounds like we can take weapons and luggage into the labyrinth—but do you think that, if we activate that device outside of the labyrinth, it'll still affect what's on the inside?" I had asked Lokiella.

"It's possible the effect might bounce off the outer membrane… You should activate it on the inside, just in case."

If we're going to activate it, the person who goes in first should do it—and so it should be given to someone who's almost definitely going to be able to manage that. I'd considered myself, Seras, or Takao Hijiri as candidates to hold it, but we settled on Sogou in the end. Sogou can buy time if she's immediately attacked by using her Silver Knights and floating weapons to protect herself. Having her enter first also makes it so those who go right after her will have a better chance of meeting up with her.

The teleportation chamber was filled with light—and when it faded, Sogou was gone.

It's begun at last.

The final battle.

We had to enter one by one. If someone was already inside the teleportation chamber, the semi-transparent membrane wouldn't allow the next person to enter. We decided to split our forces into an advance party, and a later party that would enter the labyrinth after some time had passed. The members of the advance party were mostly made up of those who could take on the disciples, while the later party was mostly composed of the representatives of the other nations who had volunteered for the mission.

We had good reasons… Most of the later party are individuals I'm expecting we'll need for the fight against Vicius herself. I want to avoid their numbers getting whittled down for no good reason by encountering the disciples. And so, even if it's just to give myself some peace of mind, I want the later party to enter a short time after the advance party. During that interval, the advance party will take down the disciples. That would be the best-case scenario.

"Here I go." The next to enter was Munin, sandwiched in between Sogou and Seras in the hopes that she would have the best odds of meeting up with one of our two best fighters. She stepped into the teleportation chamber.

"Munin," said Fugi. Munin smiled back at her.

"See you later, Fugi," she said, and was teleported away.

Seras is up next.

"I will see you inside, Sir Too-ka."

"See you there."

Just as I finished speaking those words, Seras was gone.

Next up—Piggymaru.

Slei raised her right foreleg, as if cheering the little slime on. "Pakyuun!"

"Sqyuu~h! Squee, squee!"

After their brief exchange, Piggymaru jumped into the teleportation chamber.

"See you soon," I said, raising my hand.

"Squee!"

Piggymaru was teleported away—and then it was my turn to enter.

After me comes Lokiella, then the Takao sisters. If all goes well, I can use my status-effect skills to take out those disciples without expending any of our stamina. The best-case scenario would be if I could take them out alone. That would let us preserve our resources for the coming fight against Vicius. Well…the best *case would be if I could finish Vicius quickly, I guess.*

I had Eve enter a little later, in order to take into account the random nature of the labyrinth's teleportation system.

You don't necessarily end up near the person you entered right after, so this distribution is in consideration of that.

I answered Slei's hooves cheering me on with a wave of my own —and then it happened. A noise, like a ringing in my ears—

…Reeeeee…

From the inside of the labyrinth—I felt something. The sound seemed to sparkle. For a moment, a look of concern flashed over Lokiella's face as she waited in line.

"Nh—ah, I see…"

I could see the outer wall of the labyrinth, even from inside the teleportation chamber. The air was sparkling—the last thing I saw were little particles of light falling like snow before my eyes. Aside from the ringing in my ears, I felt nothing strange.

"…"

I had teleported inside of the labyrinth. I saw a white passage in front of me with white walls. They were a little wider than the hallways of the academy we'd all attended back in the old world.

But sound—I can't hear a thing. It's so quiet. From the sound and the light, and the look I saw on Lokiella's face just before I was teleported in here…

"I see. So that must have been it."

Seems like Sogou's managed to activate the anti-Vicius magical device on the inside.

Kashima Kobato

"HUH? WHAT, seriously? You're comin' too, Pidgey? This ain't some sick joke?"

That was Ikusaba Asagi's reaction to Kashima Kobato explaining that she would be entering the labyrinth. Mimori Touka had already been transported inside. Takao Hijiri had been left to make decisions in his absence, but she had now been teleported away into the labyrinth too. Upon hearing that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor was next in command, Kobato had immediately gone to ask him for permission.

"When I spoke to His Majesty the emperor, he said it was okay… He agreed, when I explained, that my unique skill might be of use to you, Asagi-san. I've got permission to enter."

"Well it'd sure be convenient to have your management skill in there, Pidgey, so like, no notes, y'know?"

"For buffs, given that Mimori-kun, Sogou-san, and the Takao sisters will fighting in there. It would help to have my Disclose skill to manage their durations, right? Your buff skills are a little unique, after all."

Kobato had heard the word *buff* so many times that the once-unfamiliar term now felt natural to her. Asagi had given buffs to the heroes right before they entered the labyrinth.

"But if you come up on one 'o them eucharists alone in there, you're dead meat. Pidgey?"

"That's why I… I waited until Sogou-san and the Takao sisters left."

For once, Asagi looked genuinely surprised.

"Sogou-san, she… If I said I was going, she'd definitely be against it—well, no…but she'd be trying to protect me."

"…Look, that's fine. But what's this gross, weird little gung-ho vibe you're giving off? You thinking something like *It was already over for us young people back in Japan, so who really gives a damn if you die in this world* or somethin'?"

"No," said Kobato, shaking her head. "I just can't leave you alone."

"Huh? What… *Me*?"

"You."

"Man. That's dumb."

"*Hah*… I mean, you're always saying I'm an idiot though, right…?"

"…*So* dumb."

Asagi had talked the others into remaining outside the labyrinth. They believed that staying out there was for the best.

I don't understand it, but Asagi seems to think it's important that everyone in her group survives. But to Asagi—it's like I'm different. There's something there… I just don't know what that something is.

Kobato tried to smile but wasn't sure whether she'd pulled it off.

"I don't want you…getting lonely, Asagi-san."

"…You're gonna die in there."

There was no hint of a smile in Asagi's eyes.

I feel like I've started talking to her a little differently now. It's not because Sogou Ayaka might think that she's dangerous either… I don't really understand it myself, but…I just can't seem to leave her alone, for whatever reason.

"I believe you now," said Kobato with determination.

Asagi averted her eyes, clearly getting irritated. "You believe what?"

"I trust that you're going to help us defeat the Goddess and get us all back to the old world."

"…Whaaat~? *Me?* Pidgey I'm startin' to seriously get worried about you… You all right in the head? Like, whatcha doing still callin' Vicius-chin *the Goddess*, anyway?"

"If you really think I wouldn't be of any use, then I won't go… I'm scared… But…"

Kobato looked up at the Divine Labyrinth. "If me going in there with you will give you even just a slightly better chance of us winning, then…then it's worth it."

"…Yeesh, you're annoying."

"You can be annoying at times too, Asagi-san."

"Srsly?"

"Ah—s-sorry… I just…"

Asagi turned her back on Kobato in irritation. "…Yeesh, you're startin' to get on *all* of my nerves."

"It's almost time," said the Wildly Beautiful Emperor. He looked

at Kobato. “Kobato, is your mind unchanged?”

“Ah—yes.”

“You will enter between myself and Chester. Nyantan Kikipat will also be close to you in the order. Once you have been teleported inside, do your best to meet up with one of us.”

“O-okay… Thank you…” replied Kobato, her pulse racing.

Oh wow…

Getting to see the emperor up close, it almost seemed ridiculous to Kobato just how handsome he was. Her heart skipped a beat, as if she was looking at a sort of beautiful doll. Kobato experienced many of the same emotions whenever she looked at Seras Ashrain.

“You are also a classmate of Too-ka’s, no? We must protect you for his sake as well,” said the emperor.

Asagi narrowed her eyes and made a duck face.

“Mimori-kyun’s a smooth talker too, eh… Sure wish he woulda done something with those talents of his before we all got teleported to this world and he got thrown away!”

“Asagi,” said the emperor. “I believe that I was right to join forces with you.”

Asagi cheerfully raised a hand in response and waved it in the emperor’s direction. “Sure, sure. I got this~! Leave it t’ me~.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor set off walking in the direction of the labyrinth entrance.

“Let us go.”

They followed.

"…"

Asagi's true power doesn't only lie in Queen Bee… It wasn't that skill alone that defeated the banished emperor. If Vicius really is that strong, Asagi's unique buffs might be what makes the difference to defeating her? That's why I…I think I should go with her, so she can use those buffs to their fullest extent. Even though, well…there's just a feeling I have.

The two of them stopped in line, Asagi looking straight at the teleportation chamber.

"Kobato."

"Y-yeah?"

"There's no cure for stupid."

The Goddess Vicius

M*Y ORGAN is shut? That ringing in my ears… Those particles of light that began floating in the air a few moments ago, then vanished… It cannot be.*

Vicius held out her hand and furrowed her brow.

"I cannot use my divine magic."

I cannot even summon a Fireball. Have my divine powers been sealed? In any case, they've done something *to me. A trap of some sort. But this power to influence the divines…*

The crow that she had squished earlier drifted into the back of Vicius's mind and she ground her teeth.

"Anaorbael."

She was a talented dark elf, but could never quite divest herself of her feelings. If only we didn't think so differently—if only she hadn't been so pointlessly emotional—I would have made her one of my servants, a demi-god. She has a long lifespan, so I'd hoped she would have realized how worthless humans can be. I'd hoped she might have a change of heart.

I should have killed her when I had the chance.

"I see."

They are working with Anaorbael, then. The Forbidden Witch has been offering them her assistance from the shadows this whole time. Is she here now, somewhere inside the labyrinth?

I never anticipated that she would have the power to affect my divine organ. Has she made use of some ancient magical device that she has kept hidden away all this time, reluctant to part with it?

There is something strange about the way these worms are operating. They seem much more resolute than I expected. It is almost as if…they have borrowed the knowledge of the divines? It can't be… Are there other divines here? It wasn't just Lokiella and Vanargadia who came to this world? Is Thesis here? Or no…the chief deity, Origin? Was all that talk of quarreling in the heavens a lie after all?

No… The decision to send even two divines down here should have been a difficult one. If more were coming, why wouldn't they have arrived with Lokiella? There would be no sense to dividing their number. Then have they sent additional forces in such short order? Was there another scheduled to come? A late arrival? Is this sealing of my divine abilities their doing? Must I now work the presence of another divine into my plans?

"…"

No.

She ordered her thoughts.

An additional divine would pose no threat to me. Their presence would be an advantage, even—my anti-divine abilities are so advanced now that they will pose no threat whatsoever.

Vicius focused in on the sensations of her body once more. Her organ was closed, but it seemed that only her divine magic was unavailable to her. She scratched at the skin of her arm with one of her nails, which had been transformed into a sharp blade.

My body remains capable of changing shape and regenerating itself. I do feel as if my base strength has been somewhat diminished… It's at a nine out of ten, if I had to put a number on it.

But no matter.

Vicius finished confirming the state of her other abilities.

Yes. This will serve. I am unable to use my divine magic and my base strength has been lowered a very small amount.

She laid a hand on one of the white walls beside her.

It does not appear that this has affected the Divine Labyrinth…

She took a knee and touched the floor, closing her eyes as she checked on the carving that she had concealed within the capital.

It is active… Its effect is unchanged.

She stood.

"It seems they cannot affect a fully manifested conception magic spell, or interfere with my divine carving, eh…"

Vicius took the divine device from her pocket and looked at it again.

How many times have I checked this thing now?

The Holy Eye was still operational.

With a cold glare at the machine in her hands, Vicius put it away again.

"…"

She smiled.

"Damned scum."

This Divine Labyrinth. What is to take place here will be no lighthearted training exercise. The lives of those filthy creatures will be eradicated by me—by a god. This is no labyrinth—it is a divine tomb*.*

"*Hoh hoh, hoh hoh hoh hoh*… My, my… Out of the frying pan, straight into the fire, I see. ♪"

There is no need for any more of this tedium.

I do not like them. That is why I provoke them. Why I make them feel sorrow, hurt them, injure them.

I enjoy it. That is why I make them suffer, mock them, break them, bring them misfortune.

I hate them. I love hating them.

That is why I slaughter—slaughter human happiness.

Vicius swallowed the deep purple sphere that she held between her middle finger and thumb.

"I am committed."

That is why I will slaughter them.

"I will slaughter them."

Sogou Ayaka

AFTER ACTIVATING the anti-Vicius magical device, Sogou Ayaka looked down the passage before her.

It's so quiet… There's no sound…

A few moments earlier, she had tried to call out to someone—aware of the risks that shouting out might entail.

I might draw enemies to my location… But I can defeat them if they come my way. The danger of encountering anything in here concerns me less than finding my allies. In the best-case scenario, I will hopefully find Munin-san first… Though she won't necessarily have been teleported in anywhere nearby—that is the problem. Given this

soundproofing, there also seem no better options available than to just run around in the hopes of finding her.

Ayaka had followed Touka's orders in immediately destroying the anti-Vicius magical device after she had activated it. The activation itself had consumed no MP, as Ayaka had received a separate device containing stored mana for her to use during the activation.

For a time, Ayaka just ran.

I am not using my silver steed yet—my MP will be limited in this fight. I won't have any time to sleep and I have no other method of recovering mana. I must conserve it as much as possible.

A building came into view that Ayaka had seen before. *This is definitely Eno.*

The wax-like white membrane had split the house in two and covered about 80 percent of its walls. Ayaka had yet to see any people. The city street below her was cobblestone, replaced at times with a white covering like fallen snow. When her feet touched the white parts, she felt like she was stepping on hard wax, or perhaps bone. The passageways she ran through were of all different sizes. Some were wide with high ceilings. Some had open ceilings, and parts of the white walls that had warped into staircases. There were sometimes wide rooms between the passageways.

It is possible these rooms were used for the divines' training—for their fights.

With one hand on her trusty spear, Ayaka charged down the passages, looking up at the ceiling as she went. There was no sunlight in the labyrinth, but the interior was bright. She felt as if she was

sealed off from the outside by a membrane, but there was oxygen for her to breathe on the inside, and even a strange sensation of wind.

The mysterious white substance had consumed—or in some cases chaotically fused itself with—parts of the city of Eno. It looked like a half-complete transformation, like it had failed partway through and just been abandoned in place. After circling the nearby area, Ayaka looked in one direction.

The castle… It's over there.

The heroes had stayed in the royal capital of Alion for a long time after their summoning, and Ayaka was familiar with the buildings and streets that she was running down. She could manage well enough without her map. Everyone was under Touka's orders to head for the castle.

If we all head in that direction, we should start to group up without even trying to…

But then—

A eucharist…!

A mid-sized eucharist holding a lance emerged from a side passage. Ayaka killed it as an afterthought.

I could hear its footsteps once I was closer to it, but… I heard nothing at all until I was within a certain range…

None of the sounds of battle, and no amount of screaming would ever bring help running to her side. There was something about that fact that made Ayaka feel helpless. The lack of sound was much more isolating that she expected it would be.

But this is no time to give in to the isolation and curl up in sadness… It's just as Mimori-kun predicted. It's not just the disciples, there are eucharists wandering this labyrinth too…

Ayaka charged once more.

I need to find those of our allies who aren't suited to fighting, and…

"…Hmph?"

"Eh?"

There she was, just staring at Ayaka.

It appeared from her reaction that she hadn't been expecting this either. The woman was standing in one of the wider rooms, around the corner of a passage that Ayaka had just turned down.

*Wh-what is…*she *doing here?*

Ayaka gulped, trying to keep from panicking—but the confusion and anxiety washing over her ended up freezing her brain for a few moments. The woman she encountered was in the corner of the wider room, near to the wall. It looked as if she had been about to enter one of the nearby passages when Ayaka had encountered her. The woman who Ayaka saw standing before her looked back over her shoulder as if in shock. It was…

"V-Vicius…?"

"It just had to be *you* of all people…" Vicius replied.

Ayaka kicked her brain back into gear, pulling Touka's orders back into her mind.

"Sogou, Hijiri, Itsuki—make your own decisions once you're in there, and prioritize achieving our objectives if you need to."

I haven't met up with any of our allies yet. Should I pull back for now, and make finding them my priority? No… Even if I tried, would Vicius really let me go that easily? Or should I defeat her here on my own? Am I even capable of that? Defeating her? Vicius? What is she even doing here? This isn't right. It isn't supposed to be like this…

"…!"

Vicius leaped into the passageway beside her.

"Huh?"

She's running?

Sogou recalled Vicius's reaction upon their meeting. She had looked genuinely surprised.

But was that an act? A trap to lure me in? What do I do?

Sogou Ayaka…

"Silver—World."

…chose pursuit.

She leaped onto the Silver Steed that her unique skill created and galloped after the Goddess—activating her *kyokugen* ability as she rode. Spear in hand, head low, she plunged into the passage where Vicius had fled.

She's so fast?! But…!

Ayaka closed her eyes, concentrating all of her attention on her ears. She shut out the sound of the wind, and—*footsteps…! Her*

presence…it's faint, but at this distance I can still follow her!

Taking corners like she was drifting around them, she gave chase.

I can't tell exactly where she is, but somewhere near this alleyway just off the main road? I need to keep mind that this might be a trap she's luring me into!

"!"

Then she saw it—Vicius's back. It was just as she came out into a wider open space—*wasn't this the recreation plaza?* The fountain in the center was consumed by white, and the waterspout in its center had been blocked up.

Ayaka tossed her spear. Vicius turned, and in the same movement knocked the weapon away with her hand, which she had transformed into a whip. She then did a half-turn to face Ayaka and skidded to a stop with her hands against the ground. She stayed there, facing Ayaka down, ready to fight.

"Hoh hoh, well, well… If it isn't the traitor Sogou! You're doing much better than I expected you would—?!"

As Vicius faced her down, Ayaka was already circling around her —unique sword ready to strike her down at any moment. Vicius's eyes opened wide as she tried to turn and receive the blow.

"Wai—"

Ayaka had created floating weapons in front of Vicius. The goddess was surrounded by the weapons in front of her, to her left and right, and Ayaka behind.

I'm not letting you get awa—

Smaaash!

The sound of a great explosion shook Ayaka's eardrums like a strike of lightning.

"Eh!"

Something large, heavy, and substantial had collided with the ground between Ayaka and Vicius. The sound of rock on rock filled the air with a thunderous crack as it descended upon them with terrifying speed. The impact sent cobblestones flying up in all directions as if the ground had just exploded beneath their feet. Then a man appeared there between them… His arm extended, swung out in a hook that had been directed at Ayaka. The arm was white and thick, with deep black grooves all over its skin.

There was a presence that remained even after the strike, a pressure that hung uneasily in the air. It was like a summer haze that blurs the horizon on the hottest of days. Just as the man landed—no, the moment *before* he landed—he had aimed a powerful strike at Ayaka. She had just barely managed to dodge it with some swift footwork.

This huge frame… The way he looks…

Lokiella and Nyantan had seen them before… And the man that had fallen between Ayaka and Vicius matched the description well enough. The massive figure stood indifferently before her, his huge body seemingly crafted of wax.

"Ah, so you're the one eh? The S-class hero that was s'posed to have broken?"

Wormgandr.

"Ah, thank you ever so much for saving me, Worm~! I just knew you would come~! Thank you, thank you~!"

Vicius brought her hands together in thanks, tears in her eyes. She turned herself in the direction of another passage.

"Well… I'll be leaving this to you then! I don't want to have to deal with this treasonous scum. ♪ *Hoh hoh hoh!* You'll get yours, you bitch!"

With that parting shot, Vicius ran. Ayaka sent a few floating weapons in her direction, but the Goddess swept them all away.

It's not just their speed… My floating weapons also don't seem powerful enough to take her on.

Ayaka instinctively tried to follow Vicius, but almost her attention was immediately deflected by something else.

"…"

She couldn't take her eyes off the disciple who was standing in her path.

This man…he's nothing like the enemies I've faced before. He's completely different! I can't move… The moment he sees an opening…he'll kill me!

And before Ayaka could make a move, Vicius was gone.

This was a trap after all, then… Was she leading me to him…?

But the thought confused Ayaka.

Why doesn't Vicius fight me alongside her disciple? Wouldn't the two of them stand a better chance against me? Why has she chosen to run?

"*Hyeh hyeh*… Sounds like Vicius doesn't want to play with ya," laughed the disciple, as if sensing Ayaka's doubts.

It doesn't matter. I've got to deal with the disciple that stands before me. Wormgandr… Lokiella-san told me about him. Fighting him will be difficult. He was a divine himself once. I should be the one to face him. I have been told that as a divine, Vicius is not well-suited for combat…but Wormgandr is famed for his skills in battle.

"That Vicius must have been delighted to no end when she found Wormgandr right on the verge of fading away," Lokiella had told her. *"He makes up for her weaknesses."*

He is not an enemy I can treat lightly. The Demon King was still growing when I faced him, still a juvenile. He might have posed much more of a threat if our war had gone on much longer.

Wormgandr is different, though. He looks polished and perfect. He is already complete.

Ayaka inhaled slowly, using her own unique breathing methods to prepare for battle. The disciple turned away, but never gave her an opening as he scratched his forehead with his index finger.

Wormgandr's eyes bulged as he glared down at her, two golden balls gleaming in their jet-black sockets. His mouth retained its faint smile as the white disciple spoke. "So, like… *Hyeh, hyeh*… Are you

serious, or what? You're one o' them human Heroes from Another World, ya? You—"

"Monster!"

—*whoosh*—

The silent, swift swipe of Ayaka's unique skill sword came for Wormgandr, but…

Claaang!

He blocked her strike with his right arm.

It's so hard?!

"*Hyeh hyeh*—you can't even cut me?! I'm puttin' most of my strength into fighting them divines, and that's all you got?! Is this all you humans are capable of?" Wormgandr swung his arm, so large that Ayaka thought it might knock her off her feet. "This ain't even fun!"

Ayaka twisted backward to dodge and strengthened her unique skill sword's toughness to try and defend herself. The impact was intense. The same exploding sound that accompanied Wormgandr's landing now burst in midair. Ayaka had swiveled her hips just in case, ready to dodge if she really needed to.

If I make my sword as strong as it can be, then I can block this. We'll be evenly matched. I can do something about the size of this weapon by using my unique skill, too… I can draw even with him in this fight!

Ayaka created a number of floating weapons behind Wormgandr's back and began to use them to attack.

Clang!

The weapons were all repelled by Wormgandr's tough skin. He didn't even turn around to acknowledge their attacks, but simply turned his fist upon Ayaka and her unique skill sword.

…Gah! That fist—I won't be able to slice through it with my sword.

In an instant, Ayaka transformed her sword into a sledgehammer. She had to apply her strength differently to wield the new weapon, lowering her hips to the ground so it was easier to heft. The moment they made contact, Wormgandr's eyes opened wide in shock.

"Ohh?!"

The fist and the hammer collided with a dull yet high-pitched metallic ring that caused an invisible explosion. The wind battered them both as their weapons met. Ayaka's hair flew back as she tightened her grip on her sledgehammer and followed through with the strike, like a golf swing with a bit of a twist. It pushed Wormgandr back, and he went flying.

He crashed into a two-story brick house. The wall crumbled, sending dust flying into the air. Perhaps because the shattered pillars of the house had been load-bearing, the whole building collapsed.

Ayaka steadied her breathing.

"Haah… Haa-h… Ah."

With this enemy, I don't think the advantage I have in extending the reach of my weapons is going to be very effective. He likely knows

that I can instantaneously change the shape of my weapons at will…

I caught him by surprise that time, but from now on, it's more likely that changing the shape of my unique weapon will only present him with an opportunity to attack me.

With a rumble, a great silhouette rose from the dust of the crumbled house. Wormgandr brushed the debris from his arms, and emerged as the clouds began to clear.

"That ringin' sound is dullin' my moves a bit, then, eh? Closed off my organ and made it so I can't use my divine magic, have ya…? *Hyeh hyeh*, I bet Vicius is pissed at you." Wormgandr looked at his arms, then back to Ayaka.

"That strength o' yours… It ain't just the blessing, is it?"

Blessing…? He must be referring to my stat modifiers.

Ayaka steadied her breathing, wiping away the cold sweat that had run all the way down to her chin.

I need to figure out how to attack…

"Must be somethin' you were born with, then, eh? You're right up there at the top of the humans I've met. *Hyeh, hyeh*… Yo, Vicius? You go summonin' heroes with real talent, and *this* is how they end up? Man, there ain't even any evil in your eyes… They're all pure and clear, like. Bit o' danger in there, though. Y'could drown in that madness, *heh*… But it's the Goddess's role to make sure that don't happen, yeah? Dontcha think she coulda done a better job with you?" Wormgandr's mouth was always open—always smiling.

He never blinks, either. I can't use the moment he closes his eyes as an opening. Doing so might even backfire and give him the chance to get an attack in of his own. Against an enemy of this caliber, faking a blink myself might similarly give him an opening to strike. If I can jam my spear into his mouth… He wouldn't be able to harden himself against that attack, would he?

No… Perhaps that open mouth is a trick to lure me into attacking him there. There's no guarantee that such a strike could damage him. He might even be able to harden himself on the inside. Then there's nothing for it but to…

"You do exist then, huh… There are *good ones* left. But your whole human society's made to hurt the good ones. It's your destiny. Y'hear me, Vicius? Humans ain't all trash scum like y'said they are! It's just that *most* of 'em are. Problem is nobody goes sortin' through—pluckin' out the failures and findin' the pure ones before they get rotten. That's what gets 'em damaged. You humans ain't got no way to purge yourselves. Might sound paradoxical, but most of you humans value your own personal desires more than the needs of the whole. The more your civilization advances, the worse it gets. That's why the gods have gotta come and purify you, so you can make it to paradise. Get you all in order. I really wanted t'see paradise, y'know? A whole society of the *chosen ones*, reachin' its full potential at last."

The way he's speaking… Is he talking to himself? Addressing humans at large?

Wormgandr placed a hand on his shoulder, and swung his neck around, making a loud cracking sound.

"*Hyeh, hyeh*—ain't like Vicius will listen t'any of this now though. She friggin' *hates* humans, down to the bottom of her heart. She just says she loves you 'cause you're intelligent toys for her to play with."

"You…" began Ayaka.

"Hmm?"

"If you understand she's wrong—don't you ever think of trying to defeat her?"

"*Hyeh*… I'm already *dead*, by the way you'd reckon it. Just a creepy walkin' corpse. I'm of her element, so she dies and I disappear right along with her… And since she gave me her element, I can't defy Vicius's orders. Complainin's the best I can do."

"That's not what paradise is."

"Eh?"

"Humans…people, we…we create society of our own free will. We shape the world we live in. We seize it for ourselves and find the answers on our own. That's what human society is supposed to be. That's the world that we're meant to have. We don't need divine intervention. And…"

I believe this.

"People aren't as bad as you think they are."

Nobody is born evil. I'm sure they just take a wrong step somewhere along the way, for whatever reason. If we make society better—make the world a better place—then we should be able to reduce the number of people who do wrong. If we use our strength right.

"Those people that you call failures… They might not be failures forever."

I changed. I took the right path because they saved me. People… We save each other.

"We can reform and turn to the light—isn't that what you mean by *potential* in the first place?"

Wormgandr laughed. "I ain't gonna argue—but it's just theoretical."

In a single step, he closed the distance between them.

His steps are so light… I didn't know he was capable of this. There isn't even a print left in the soil where he stood. It's as if he teleported over here… But no, this isn't teleportation. His footwork is so incredibly light, and yet he's so fast!

"*Hyeh hyeh!* Who cares what I want? The dead don't get their damn wishes granted! All I gotta do is keep followin' Vicius… Get my revenge on them divines in the heavens! That'll do for me!"

He delivered a series of blows that Ayaka tried her hardest to deal with, redirecting their force as much she could.

But just parrying will make me too predictable.

She mixed in blocks too, waiting for an opening. Ayaka tried to use her silver knights to draw Wormgandr's attention, but they didn't have much effect, just as her floating weapons were ineffective. More importantly, using those abilities slightly dulled the strength of her unique skill sword. She focused all her power—everything the silver sphere had to offer—into the sword she held in her hands.

That's what's allowing me take blows from that hard fist of his and still hold my own. But my reflexes! Is this all I've got, even with Asagi-san's enhancing buffs to help me?! Gah… It's slow, but…I'm getting pushed back. If this fight goes on any longer, and Asagi-san's buffs wear off…

—Two threads.

I don't know if this is going to work, but… I don't have any other choice. I have to do this.

—Kyokugen, two threads—

As Ayaka and Wormgandr exchanged repeated attacks, she began to spin a second thread. It worked. Ayaka finished spinning the second thread of *kyokugen* within herself. She swung her unique skill sword.

—Whoosh—

"Oh?"

A thin line of fresh blood appeared on Wormgandr's arm, then spurted into the air.

…I made it through.

"*Hyeh hyeh!* You serious?! You made *me* bleed?! A *human*?"

Ayaka was certain now.

I knew it…

The first thing she had noticed was the sound. When her sword first struck Wormgandr and when her floating weapons were deflected

as they attacked his back, there had been something different about the sounds.

When my unique skill sword hit him, the sound was hard, heavy, and sharp. When the floating weapons hit him though, the blows sounded lighter. Are his arms harder than his back?

Ayaka had thought this at first—but during the battle, something else caused her concern. A part of Wormgandr's body looked slightly darker than the rest, a patch of his white skin turning gray at times. The patch of color seemed to move across his body.

It seems as if Wormgandr is only super-hardening parts of his body… Only the places where he's about to be struck, Ayaka speculated. *Like he's concentrating this hardness in a specific place, capable of moving it around to specific places on his body. It's strangely close to the way that my unique skill works… Concentrating my strength in certain places when I attack or enhancing and hardening my weapons to defend.*

But how do I fight this?

I need to distract him to create an opening, then attack before he can harden his skin. I also need to confirm if my theory is correct by landing an attack, even just a small one, to be sure I can make it through. But…

Ayaka hadn't been able to create any such openings. She'd never had the opportunity. Her enemy had been blocking her floating weapons from the rear without even turning to look back at them. Ayaka had tried to find an opportunity to strike while he talked, but it

was no use. She had thought to distract him by talking to him, but that had proved hopeless too.

Even if I can grasp how his skill works, it'll all be for nothing unless I can test out my theories. Well…If I can't distract him, I'll have to…

She decided to attack so fast that Wormgandr wouldn't have time to harden his skin in response—and for that, she needed to add a second thread to her *kyokugen* technique. She hadn't stopped at a single attack, launching immediately into another instead.

Her speculation had proved right. Her theory was correct, and it gave her a strategy for the fight.

Now I just need to make it through his defenses.

Ayaka rained down strikes upon Wormgandr, putting one foot in front of the other as she advanced. He knocked back her sword with his arm, parrying them—but something was different.

My slashes are starting to reach him now… I'm wounding him.

"Hyeh hyeh… How long's it been since a human made me bleed! This is it! The hidden potential of the humans, Vicius! You're gonna snuff 'em all though, aintcha?! Cut all their potential short? Right, then… It pains me, but I'll show you what a real snuffin' looks like! Sorry, just followin' orders! *Hyuh hyuh hyuh hyuh!*"

I can do this… No, I can't! My strikes are too shallow!

Wormgandr was choosing which injuries to let through. H*e can tell which ones won't be too deep, and he's letting them land. He's*

stopped trying to block them all. But I'm still the one pushing him back!

Pop!

"Ah!"

The deep black cracks that ran through Wormgandr's body began to pop like veins. A tingle ran down the back of Ayaka's neck. She felt certain of what was coming.

"You ain't the only one that's been holdin' back."

Ayaka couldn't believe her eyes.

Wormgandr shrank himself down in an instant, to roughly the size of the leopardman Geo. The disciple's unusually enlarged arms also shrank relative to his new size.

—Swing!

He's too fast! I'm not going to m— I have to guard… My head!

Ayaka's decision to defend her head was almost instantaneous, but…

No, he's not going for my head! N—

"You're an excellent warrior, sensitive to cues—but that's the kind of stuff that gets you killed."

The attack on her head had been a feint. Wormgandr had deliberately let her see him moving to strike her there. Ayaka was so sensitive to her opponent's movements, so observant, that her reflexive reaction had been used against her.

"Gahfhh—nh?!"

Wormgandr drove his fist into Ayaka's stomach. She went flying like a cannonball, her back colliding with one of the white walls of the labyrinth. She didn't even have time to roll with the blow. Worse still, she crashed straight into one of the labyrinth's unbreakable white walls, which had none of the minor cushioning that even a crumbling building might have offered. It was as if she had been thrown by a judo master onto a hard asphalt road instead of a soft tatami mat. And at the speed with which she was thrown, Ayaka had no time even to try to create a cushion for her landing using her unique skill.

"Gah! …Gh!" She leaned forward, trying to stay on her feet, but… "Gh, haah—oh… Huurgh…"

She vomited blood onto the ground.

I never expected he'd be able to… Change size like that…

"Haah, haah… Ghah… Ngh… Huurgh! Huurgghh!"

After she'd been knocked away, Ayaka had created a wall of silver knights to protect herself. Wormgandr followed, sweeping the knights away as he came. He was back to the size he had been earlier.

It doesn't seem like that's difficult for him to do then… What's happening…?

Everything feels like it's happening in slow motion…

"Haahh… Haahh…"

Breathe… I need air… It's just… He barely missed my heart.

The thought of what would have happened if Wormgandr had landed a direct hit on her chest sent chills through Ayaka. Even so,

she was badly hurt.

He's so strong. I can say it for certain now… He's the strongest enemy I have ever faced.

Ayaka understood why Vicius hadn't stayed to fight alongside her disciple now.

He can handle me alone. Wormgandr is enough.

Ayaka reached out into the air in front of her and formed a unique skill sword in her hand.

But…this fight… It's better this way. At least this time around—I'm not fighting one of my classmates. It felt so much harder to fight when Kirihara Takuto sided with the Demon King… When I had to do battle against someone I only wanted to protect. I can't help but think this is better.

It's just…Wormgandr has powered himself up. I used my second thread of kyokugen, my secret weapon, and he still reduced me to this. With his incredible power, how do I suppress him?

No. I have to do this. I don't know if I can win this fight, but if I can slow Wormgandr down here, even just a little…that'll help the others. It'll give them more time to group up. I…I might not be able to beat him, but I can at least keep him here. I can't set him free to roam this labyrinth. I can't let that happen.

"I h…have to p-protect…everyone…"

I…

"…"

Ayaka's vision began to blur as her consciousness faded.

H-huh?

…A chime…

…Are those… Wind chimes?

***

When is this memory even from? It must have been when I was still young.

It had been a summer day when Ayaka's grandmother had taken her to the place of her birth. Ayaka remembered that the summer hadn't been hot that year. They had been visiting their family grave plot for the first time in quite a while. Ayaka's parents were set to arrive a day later, as they had work to do.

The house where Ayaka's grandmother had been born was very old but still lovely. It was clean and well-maintained, and the refrigerator in the kitchen was brand new. Ayaka was told that someone from the local area was hired to keep the house clean throughout the year.

"Guess this is what they mean when they say y'should marry someone rich, eh?" said Ayaka's grandmother, lighting up a cigarette as she stared out across the rice fields.

"I'm heading out for a while," she said after the two of them had eaten lunch together. "I'll be close, though, don't you worry. I don't figure anyone's comin' by…but you holler nice and loud if anythin' happens okay? Your grandma'll come runnin'."

With that, she turned down the hall and disappeared in the direction of the front door. Ayaka sat alone on the porch and looked up at the cloudless sky above. She threw her legs out over the side and took off her shoes, lining them up neatly on the ground outside.

It was so quiet. She had thought there might be cicadas out in the countryside. But not only were there no insects, Ayaka couldn't even hear the birds singing. The only neighbor in sight had rice fields of their own and was quite a way down the road. Theirs was the only house in the area.

…Ding…

All she could hear were the wind chimes, ringing cooly as they hung above her. A light breeze gently flapped at the hem of the white dress that Ayaka's mother had bought her. For a while she just stared up absent-mindedly into the sky. Suddenly…

…Ding…

The wind chimes rung out once, and then…

All sound disappeared from the world.

The sound of the wind chimes vanished.

"…"

It was such a strange sensation. Ayaka felt as if she had become one with the sky and the earth, as if they were all mingled together as one being…

She felt something else, too. Felt that she was…just existing. She felt as if everything had dissolved into sheer clarity. Clear and

pure…and somewhat comforting.

"—Ayaka!"

She snapped back to reality.

…Ding…

"Ah… Grandma?"

"Are you okay? I was callin' for you for a while, you seemed spaced out… You sleepy?"

"Eh?"

That's strange, Ayaka thought. *I can remember her approaching me, calling my name… I wasn't asleep or unconscious. I remember recognizing her. I knew she was calling my name. I knew that I knew what was happening.*

…Huh? What am I thinking?

There must be something wrong with me. I don't understand.

"I knew that I knew?"

What am I saying, I sound like an eccentric fortune teller.

"C'mon now, you've even got drool on your chin!"

Ayaka thanked her grandmother for wiping her face with her handkerchief, then looked back up at the wind chimes.

…Ding…

The wind chimes…

The wind chimes are ringing.

***

Wormgandr charged at her, sweeping away her silver knights as he moved in for the finishing blow. Ayaka swung her unique skill sword.

—Whoosh—

Her blade made contact—gouging deep into Wormgandr's side.

"Huh?"

The wound sprang wide open, blood pouring from the disciple's side. Ayaka had known what would happen before she struck. She had imagined it, and it had happened just as she thought it would. It was there right in front of her, a reality, *just existing*.

"…*Hyu—hyahyahyahyahyahyahyah!* Are you freakin' serious?! Is this how far you've got?! Human?! Vicius—that damned idiot! She was totally right to try and break you—to try and bend ya to her will!"

Ayaka's second attack cut deep into the disciple's right shoulder, sending blood spurting out from the injury. Wormgandr leaped back in retreat.

"I get it. You've completely put yourself in a trance, free of all impurities… Then, from that state of complete and total concentration, you're sending out unconscious attacks, are ya?" Wormgandr cackled gleefully. "That's why I can't read your strikes, huh… *Hyah hyah*… Couldn't even hope ta."

Wormgandr scratched his chin.

"Right now… I reckon…you're sorta seein' the future in a way, eh? I gotta take that into account, huh?"

Ayaka noticed that all of the shallow cuts that she had made into her enemy's body had now faded completely.

"Oh, those?" Wormgandr laughed. "*Hyah hyah*… I've got the ability to regenerate, y'see? Don't worry, it ain't unlimited or nothin'. You're definitely wearin' me down."

Ayaka saw that the wounds in his side and on his shoulder had already begun to regenerate.

"Why did you tell me that?"

"Well…a reward, I s'pose? You did show me all this, after all. Didn't think I'd get to see such a bloom of potential before I went back up t' the heavens… I'm grateful."

There's a limit to his regeneration? Is he bluffing? No—it's slight, but I can sense that his movements have slowed. This is working.

"*Hyeh*… Anyway, I guess we've got a little change of plans here. You show me somethin' like this, then heck…I think I'm gettin' in the mood for a fight."



—Pop, pop—

The black veins that ran through Wormgandr's white body grew even more distended.

"Show me what you humans are capable of… Ayaka Sogou…!"

…Ding…

Sogou Ayaka fell once more into the sound.

Chapter 5:
No Alternative

TAKAO ITSUKI was covered in cold sweat.

"Seriously?!"

After she'd been teleported into the labyrinth, Itsuki's first goal was to find Hijiri. No—not just Hijiri, but anyone at all. Her priority was finding someone like Munin, or anyone else who had an important job to do. She'd been told that sound didn't travel far inside the labyrinth, but decided not to call out to test if that was true.

There's a good chance that one of those disciples might be nearby, or even that Vicius herself could be close.

Itsuki had been told that she and Hijiri could make their own decisions, but she had no confidence that she could face down this disciple without her sister's help.

"…Encounter, develop information, fly mask… …No intel, develop information, encounter…" it intoned.

That's why I wanted to avoid encountering one. Tch… This ain't the kind of enemy I can face without using my skills, first off…

"Lightning Shifter—"

—Crackle—

Itsuki already had Unlock One activated, raising her speed so that she could find the others faster. By leveling up her skills, she was now able to use Unlock to maintain a minimal level of electrification on

her person—meaning that she could leave it in a power-saving sort of standby mode, ready to activate at any time.

The armored warrior spread his hands wide, and two katanas materialized in each of his palms. The katanas were long—like odachi swords—and he gripped them tight.

"…See, enemy, kill… Kill, enemy, see…"

From the looks of him, and the way he's talking… This is the disciple they call Yomibito, huh. I only just got here, and I'm already facing a disciple? But like… I guess there's nothing I can do about that now.

Crackle!

Itsuki used her Unlock One acceleration to dash at the same time she sent an electric attack at Yomibito.

"Unlock Two."

She'd landed a direct hit. Itsuki saw that a part of the front of his helmet had cracked—although, as damage went, it barely counted.

That's all that Unlock Two can do against him?

Yomibito had shown no intent to dodge the blow.

Is he testing my strength…?

Keeping up her speed, she dashed into a nearby passage.

I sure wish I could meet one of my allies who can fight this thing… But if I came across someone who isn't great at fighting, I'll end up having to defend them as well as protecting myself.

She dashed through the passage, coming out into a larger room.

But alone, I can't do anything…

There was nobody else in the room.

I entered close to someone, but we might be further apart from each other than I thought. And running around might just take me further away from whoever's near. With almost no sound in this place, I need to decide whether to stay in the area or keep moving. That's a tough choice. Am I in the eastern district right now? Then like…the castle's over in that direction.

The room she had entered contained three passages leading from it.

"…!"

Yomibito appeared out of one of them.

"…Information confirmed, incantation, electric attack… Itsuki Takao, incantation, electric attack, information confirmed…"

He didn't follow me through the passage at my back…?! Then he circled around to get here?! How is he so fast?! The guy's huge!

Three meters to Itsuki's left and right, two pillars suddenly rose into the air, as if trying to pincer her. They were rounded and thick, shaped a bit like AA batteries. Then, as if they were drawn together by some electromagnetic attraction, the two pillars shot toward Itsuki —trying to crush her to death. The ends of the pillars collided with a hard thud.

Whack!

Itsuki had already escaped death using the speed of Unlock One. Electricity crackled at the soles of her feet as they brushed the

ground when she ran.

…I'd heard about that ability of his. There's no sign that it's coming, but if I'm paying attention, I can escape it with my speed before he crushes me. This could be seriously tricky to deal with, though. If he keeps it up…

The two floating pillars appeared in the air once more, and Itsuki made to dash out from between them—but…

Argh… I thought this might happen!

Itsuki escaped the pillars, only to find Yomibito waiting for her on the other side—prepared to strike.

Dodging those pillars means taking a certain path to get away from them…

Itsuki felt worry and doubt, heavy in the pit of her stomach.

I'm supposed to face his katana with my rapier? No, I should use my skills…

"…Shifter…Unlock Two…"

No, wait! Should I be using Lock End here?! If I want to finish him in one blow… But I don't have any way to beat him. I haven't even made an opening to strike.

Hijiri's words flashed back into her head.

"You have a bad habit of overthinking things, Itsuki."

Don't think. Just observe your enemy… Watch. Look at him. Yes, watch closely, and the best move will come to you…

Takao Itsuki threw her rapier at the disciple. She used Unlock Two on the weapon to speed it up, aiming it squarely at Yomibito's eyes. He swatted the rapier away with one of his katana—but the moment his weapon made contact with the rapier, a current of electricity ran through his body. Itsuki had compressed her electricity into the rapier with Unlock Two, then energized it. Yomibito's movements slowed just a little, giving her an opening to attack. The rapier she had thrown was now bent and broken…

But I can do this.

She created a small explosion with the electricity at her feet and forced herself to move, changing paths as if shifting train tracks.

I've managed to dodge him n—

"…Ridiculous…Ridiculous…"

He's so fast!

Yomibito had changed paths as well. And despite his huge frame, he closed in on her in an instant.

It's not just his reflexes that are incredible. His reaction time… His ability to make decisions on the fly… It all is so fast!

"Lightning Sh—"

Ah, no…! At this distance, Lock End won't make it in ti—

Itsuki was blown away but managed to stabilize herself before crashing into one of the labyrinth walls. She landed feet first upon it before jumping down to the ground.

"Haah… Haah…"

She had been blown across the labyrinth by a sudden gust of strong wind.

"I'm sorry. I was unsure if my Wind would be able to lift his weight, and so I elected to move you out of the way instead."

Only one person has Wind as their unique skill…

Itsuki felt like she was about to burst into tears.

"Aneki!"

A breeze coursed through Takao Itsuki now too, blowing away all of the negative emotions inside of her.

Yomibito

—Analysis—

Itsuki Takao—skill activated, identity match confirmed.

Vicius estimate—survival possible—rejoin impossible.

Vicius estimate—incorrect.

Hijiri Takao—high chance of match.

Vicius estimate—dead.

Vicius estimate—high chance of grave error.

Unforeseen, unforeseen, unforeseen.

…

***

Once he was summoned by Vicius, Yomibito and the other heroes set out to defeat the Demon King. First, they had to level up and hone their skills, using the blessings the Goddess had given them. It was a fine day, the sun shining brilliantly in the sky above them. It had been just after breakfast that Yomibito killed one of his fellow heroes, cutting them down. Just one. Not all.

Of course, he wished to continue with them on their journey—but they chose to return to Eno instead. The other heroes were unsure what problems Yomibito might go on to cause them on the road, and so they brought him before Vicius, as if to stand trial for what he had done. Yomibito didn't understand why he was being treated as he was.

"Ahem, why did you kill them then? From what I have heard, you had no particular reason to do so?"

"The sun," Yomibito answered.

"Excuse me?"

"The sun was too bright."

"Huh? …Eh? Don't tell me *that* is the reason why you murdered one of your fellow heroes!"

For reasons he did not comprehend, Yomibito couldn't travel with the other heroes any longer. He had no alternative but to set out on his own. He stayed at an inn while he was on the road. But the

light shining in through the windows the next morning was too bright, so he cut down the owner.

"Sorry for your loss," he said, trying to be kind as he spoke to the man's trembling wife and child. "Do not worry. I have no intention of laying hands upon you."

The owner's wife asked through tears why he had killed her husband.

What a strange question, Yomibito thought. *Vicius asked the same. What a courageous wife.*

Out of respect, he answered her plainly.

"The sun."

With no other options, he traveled alone. He heard rumors while on the road that the other heroes were about to face the forces of the Demon King.

They are good heroes. I want them to try their best.

On his travels, he cut down many of the people of his new world. It seemed as if they didn't understand why he did what he did —and that made Yomibito pity them. He did his best to mourn them and invoked the Buddha with what words he could remember of the incantation.

Ah, how such deaths must vex them.

Namu.

One day, he heard that all the other heroes had been wiped out. That made him feel sad for them. They had not been bad people. Yomibito felt very sorry that it had happened. A few days later, he was

summoned by Vicius, who wished for his help in defeating the Demon King.

Well, then, I suppose I have no choice. I am a hero, after all.

And so it was that Yomibito single-handedly defeated a Demon King. Vicius was ecstatic.

"You'll make quite the interesting *subject*, I'm sure."

***

All Yomibito could clearly remember were the flames. They burned so bright and high…

Was I lost in a fire? Incinerated for what I did? Perhaps the moment of some cremation has just burned itself onto my retinas.

Who am I? I know not who I was. Not even my own name. Am 1 from Yomi, after all? One who has passed, risen from the world of the dead?

Yomibito's memories were so fragmented that they held no meaning.

Nevertheless—appearances may change, but some things do not.

Yomibito continued to stare at the Takao sisters. They had strange masks upon their faces, but from their builds and the tone of their voices, Yomibito knew that the two of them were young girls.

Identification provisionally confirmed—Hijiri Takao.

Identification provisionally confirmed—Itsuki Takao.

Takao sisters—Vicius's plan—eliminate.

Yet—many errors in Vicius's intel.

Orders—worthy of my trust?

Missing—sun in this labyrinth.

Yet—so bright.

Shining suns stand before me—such dazzling sisters.

Takao Hijiri

***I** WAS LUCKY to find Itsuki in here—but I never expected she might be facing down a disciple when I found her. It does not look as if she has sustained serious damage. From the intel we were provided, that disciple must be Yomibito.*

The disciple stood between Hijiri and Itsuki, as if caught in a pincer movement.

"Aneki!"

Two floating pillars appeared on Hijiri's left and right.

With his hands still gripping the handle of his sword, Yomibito drew his index finger and thumb together.

"Itsuki—follow my lead, support me!"

Given the distance between them, Hijiri had to raise her voice a little to reach her sister. She charged herself up similarly to Itsuki's

Unlock One ability, using Thunder Wind to escape a direct hit from the pillars. Hijiri had also used Wind, which she had activated ahead of time, to create an area of hardened air around her. The extra resistance from the hardened air had slowed the pillars just a little, allowing her to safely escape being crushed.

Yomibito stopped moving entirely.

"Are you like, thinking about what to do next?"

The disciple didn't answer Itsuki's question—and with no conversation, Hijiri's lie-detecting abilities would be of no use.

Lokiella's intel was that we might not even be able to hold a real conversation with him. It appears it might be difficult for us to talk our way into a resolution to this fight. The issue is…how do we make a breakthrough that will lead us to victory?

As she considered him, Hijiri was creating blades of wind to surround Yomibito. The sharp blades scraped at the surface of the disciple's armor.

This is as powerful as I can make my wind blades, and that's all the damage they can do. He's not trying to evade them or even defend himself. He must think such attacks pose no threat to him.

The wild swipes of Hijiri's wind blades ceased.

…Crack, crack…

The surface of Yomibito's armor began to heal.

He believes the attacks are no threat to him because he has regenerative powers. That armor also appears to be a part of him, somehow. It might be better to think of it as a kind of outer shell.

Itsuki likely attacked him at some point too, but those wounds have now healed…

Hijiri understood how hard the disciple's armor was. It didn't seem like some parts of it were harder or stronger than other parts.

The attack patterns I am currently aware of are the crushing attack with those pillars and the two long katanas in his hands…

"Itsuki."

"Yep!"

The two of them quickly discarded their Fly Swordsman masks. The masks blocked their vision a little, and now that they had used their skills, they were aware that their identities would be known regardless.

"Itsuki, can you create an opening for one of my *decisive strikes*?"

"I'll give it a go!"

Itsuki understood and accepted.

Others might not have grasped my meaning, but Itsuki does. We don't need to say much to communicate. Itsuki often tells me she doesn't understand the things I say, but she is by no means stupid. She is quicker than the average person and an excellent student. It is just that metaphors, roundabout references, and figures of speech can be difficult for her. She can understand literary references, though, and those from popular manga.

It's just—Itsuki could grow so much if she could understand more complexity. She may even surpass me.

Hijiri often used figures of speech when talking to Itsuki, encouraging her to grow to understand them. She also got into the habit of using them in other situations.

I don't suppose what I'm doing is all that different from what Kirihara Takuto did. Perhaps that is why I was so quick to see through him.

Hijiri kept her distance from Yomibito, circling him as she thought about how to handle him. She decided to try another skill, using a different element. She conveyed to Itsuki through eye contact that she should wait and see, and Itsuki began circling Yomibito as well, keeping him in check. Hijiri tried attacking him with a different element attached to her Wind skill. She had thought that heat or cold might affect the inside of the disciple's armor—but it didn't work.

It seems that armor nullifies everything I throw at it. No… It appears as if his armor has no openings, but real armor always has weak spots where blades can penetrate. Even estern-style suits of armor have places at the moving joints where a sword could slide in. This looks like a full set of heavy plate, but it's not real armor. It's connected to him—part of him. There will be no openings to strike at the real him under there. All paths in are blocked off…except his eyes.

Hijiri continued to attack with various elements, mixing in strikes with her wind blades to reconfirm her suspicions. Gradually, the uneasy feeling that her first strike had given her turned into a firm conviction.

My blades of wind can't get through those openings. That must mean they aren't really openings at all.

Yomibito was only guarding the area around his eyes.

But with only one narrow place to strike, it's going to be very difficult to hit him. We might have no choice. Nothing more effective than strikes of pure destructive power… Brute force.

It was exactly as Lokiella had predicted.

She said that destroying what's on the inside was the key. She judged that that was how we could defeat him. As a divine, I suppose Lokiella is familiar with disciples, so operating under the assumption that she is correct seems prudent…

Yomibito closed in, picking Hijiri as his target. Itsuki's lightning pursued him, but the disciple was firm as he swung his katana at Hijiri.

For how massively Yomibito is built—he's fast.

Unsure whether she could dodge in time, Hijiri parried and deflected the blow with her longsword, then jumped back to put some distance between them.

"…"

My hand is cramping… No… It's numb? This isn't from Itsuki's electric attack; it's because I parried one of Yomibito's swings. This isn't going to work, Hijiri decided. *It would be reckless to go sword to sword with him.*

She looked down and saw that there was a crack in her longsword. It looked as if one more strike would destroy it entirely. Hijiri discarded her sword, letting the blade she had used for so long drop to the floor with a clang.

Once I've put a crack in that outer armor, I need to immediately follow up with a series of powerful skill attacks so I can open up another. I can't give him a moment to regenerate. That is what I just conveyed to Itsuki…

With her target able to regenerate, Hijiri knew that hit-and-run tactics wouldn't work. She chose instead to deliver a series of powerful attacks in a very short time frame to deal a finishing blow to Yomibito's insides.

It's simple, but that's my goal for now…

But Yomibito wasn't about to let Hijiri put two holes in his armor that easily.

How can I distract him enough to land that critical blow? How can I create an opening? That is what this fight has come down to, in the end. I do not currently know if I have the strength to make it through…or whether Lokiella's analysis of his abilities is accurate.

I need to keep testing… Act, gather intel, analyze, formulate a strategy for striking a decisive blow. Just like I did in the old world.

Hijiri made a move. Itsuki seemed to notice the change in her sister's patterns and adjusted her own movements to match. The two of them locked eyes for a moment. Itsuki was in position, catching Yomibito in a pincer move between Hijiri and herself. The pillar attacks continued, but the sisters evaded them.

Yomibito can see us, Hijiri concluded. She could no longer see the golden eyes within his sockets, but she could sense the way in which his eyes were following her.

The most effective way to create an opening will always be having one of us positioned at his back. I know what I need to do. All that remains is working out how to pull it off. Itsuki's Lock End skill consumes a huge amount of MP, but my Gungnir skill has a cooldown. If possible, we need to do this on the first try. Yomibito has probably heard about Gungnir and Lock End from Vicius. Even if the Goddess thinks that I'm no longer alive, she will have told him about my abilities…bragged about them, even. We can't rely on our skills surprising him.

Hijiri continued observing the disciple as she dodged his attacks.

Yomibito's movements… It doesn't look as if he's hurt by my wind blades chipping away at his armor. He isn't even flinching as the attacks hit him.

Most living beings would usually have *some* reaction to being struck, but as far as Hijiri could tell, Yomibito was completely unfazed. He didn't reacting at all to any of her strikes, except when she went for his eyes.

I suppose it's possible that he's so unaffected by these attacks that he just isn't paying them any mind, but…it's possible he doesn't feel anything at all. He didn't react to any of the hot or cold elements in my attacks. It's possible.

Hijiri concluded that her enemy had no sensation in his outer armored shell—but that he had a distinct *will* or *focus* that he could turn in certain directions. He also appeared to have the ability to process information and was capable of thought.

It's not just his lack of sensitivity to heat and pain, though. He seems to have a sort of sixth sense. The ability to detect danger… Maybe that's how he was able to judge so quickly that my wind blades aren't a threat to him. He's got good eyes too… I can see in the way he moves that he's watching. That sixth sense and keen vision give him an incredible ability to process information and react.

I need to throw him off balance and force him to open up. If he can think, then I should be able to take him by surprise. It's an attack he doesn't expect. He probably has information on the skills of ours that he might need to watch out for, Gungnir and Lock End…but that might limit what he anticipates that we'll do. If only there was something new we could pull out—something to create an opening.

Itsuki…

Hijiri shot a glance at her sister, and Itsuki looked back. Hijiri held her hand down and to the side, showing two fingers. Itsuki didn't even need to nod to show that she understood. She answered with her eyes in the affirmative.

I should've expected as much…

Hijiri was so proud of her little sister, her twin.

First—get close and create an opening.

"Blizzard Wind."

Hijiri created lumps of ice in the air, then exploded them. They burst around Yomibito, creating countless little shards of ice. The area around the disciple turned almost completely white, robbing Yomibito of his vision. Expecting him to be blinded, Hijiri dashed in—but as she

drew close, a katana blade lunged out from within the thick ice fog. Yomibito's strike was smooth, and he had completely concealed his presence before he attacked. Coating her legs in electricity with a technique similar to Itsuki's Unlock, Hijiri sped herself away from the attack and somehow managed to dodge it.

The ice fog dissipated. Yomibito observed Takao Hijiri—watching and thinking.

I can feel him trying to read my next move… And now I know it's possible to get in close to him.

Hijiri wasted no time in firing a fiery wind at Yomibito's face. At that exact same moment, rounded pillars appeared to Hijiri's left and right, but she dodged them using the same method as before previously. She then went straight into a compressed electrified wind attack at Yomibito. Her goal was to create enough noise to cover the noise of her younger sister's Unlock One skill approaching.

Yomibito directed one of his blades—the one he hadn't swung at Hijiri—behind him, but the swing went straight over Itsuki's head and found only air.

"—Shifter—Lock End."

Two pillars appeared in the air behind Yomibito, quickly clamping shut. Their aim didn't seem to be to crush his enemies, but to defend him instead.

So he can use them like that too…

The deafening sound of the massive, highly concentrated lightning strike tore through the pillars like they were puff pastry,

making contact with the white warrior.

"…"

It was the first time that Hijiri had seen Yomibito look something like *surprised* by an attack that made contact.

I expect he thought Lock End would be an area of effect type of attack, just like it was when we fought Vicius. A wide net of lightning to cover a large area. But back then, our aim was to slow Vicius down —that's why Itsuki used her Lock End skill to try and paralyze her. What Yomibito doesn't know is that Itsuki can concentrate her Lock End skill's power into a single concentrated attack too.

"…"

The disciple's armor had cracked on one side, but the inside wasn't visible yet.

Still, we chipped off a piece.

Hijiri directed another fiery wind at Yomibito's face.

I can only hit him because I'm so close. Even if this attack won't deal damage, it will interfere with his vision a little.

She used the force of her wind to dodge another of Yomibito's katana strikes and prepared to launch into a series of powerful attacks —to charge up Gungnir.

"—Lock End—"

"…!"

Yomibito looked completely stunned by Itsuki's attack.

That's right… She can activate Lock End over and over again, with no cooldown. With the second use, she also doesn't need to say "Lightning Shifter" before activation.

There were two finishing thunder tigers.

The hand signal, two fingers earlier, had been a signal to Itsuki for two attacks. Her sister had only gained the ability to use her Lock End skill multiple times in quick succession after leveling up in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, following the sisters' fight with Vicius.

Meaning that there's no way that the Goddess knows this about Lock End.

After the first attack, Yomibito had been wary of Hijiri, knowing that Gungnir might be coming. This meant the disciple was taken unaware by the second Lock End.

Crack… Boom!

His armor!

As Yomibito's armor cracked, Hijiri finally saw a lump of white flesh poking from inside.

It looks like he's really packed in there…

The flesh inside Yomibito's armor bulged out—and on its surface appeared a pair of golden eyes and a small mouth. The little mouth screamed—a wail of terror.

"…Gyeeeh!"

Itsuki created an opening! Yomibito's arms are both paralyzed right now by Lock End's effects. He won't be able to defend against

my attack in time. I won't let him!

This is our one chance…

—Crack—

The spear of wind that she had once directed at the Goddess in an attempt to destroy her…

It's name…

"—Gungnir—"

"…"

The strike should have been powerful enough to run Yomibito through.

But it just wasn't fast enough. I should have considered that there might be things that we don't know about Yomibito. No…I really don't know if I was capable of predicting this.

Yomibito's last-minute transformation had come with no warning. He stood with his back to the wall in retreat.

His armor is starting to heal… His arms too. He has four of them now. Four katanas too.

"Haah… Haah…"

Hijiri looked over to Itsuki.

We can't keep this up any longer. I can't use Gungnir again and Itsuki looks exhausted… Using Lock End twice in such quick succession must have taken a real toll on her. We need to try to escape, get back on our feet and…

Yomibito divided his pillars, warping them in the air as he sent them to block all three exits of the white room, as if he were filling the passages up with putty.

Did he sense that I was looking to escape? The moment I started to consider it, he blocked off our exits. I see. He's not letting us go, then…

Yomibito radiated murderous intent. He wasn't just obliged to kill the two of them—he *wanted* to. The substance that blocked the exits to the room turned a sinister black.

Is that another new power that the transformation has given him?

Hijiri tried to slice her way through the blocked passage with one of her wind blades, but it was no use.

It's so tough. I think only Gungnir could get through it…

The moment I struck him, I saw it happen. The arms shot from his body in the instant before Gungnir hit, both moving to protect his insides. Striking them would have been a fatal injury. He didn't want to die. I felt his desperation I felt. Lokiella was right. That's his core in there… The heart…

Gungnir had destroyed the two new arms that had moved in to guard Yomibito's heart. They hadn't been tough enough to withstand such an attack—though they had almost completely regenerated now. It seemed as if some damage had been dealt to Yomibito's heart, however. Hijiri had seen red blood dripping from inside the wound before it had been sealed up by the disciple's regenerating outer shell.

There was a red puddle on the ground, too, from where he had bled. Hijiri watched Yomibito closely as he stood motionless.

From his reaction, it almost looks as if even he didn't expect himself to transform like this. So it's not some secret weapon of his? Is it a sort of sudden evolution in response to the threat to his life? That would explain why I didn't see it coming. Not even Yomibito expected it to happen.

Hijiri composed herself, breathing steady once more. *Next time… I'll finish this for good.*

"Itsuki."

"Haah… Haah… —Yeah!"

"It's okay."

"…!"

All trace of concern vanished from Itsuki's eyes.

"It's too soon to give up. Don't think about anything that comes after this, though. I won't either. We're going to defeat this disciple. Right here. Together." Hijiri paused, then asked Itsuki a question. "Can you buy us twenty minutes until my next attack?"

"Haah… Haah… *Heh heh*, if you insist, Aneki. I'll do it… We're sisters, after all…"

"Thank you."

It's possible my attack was timed just a little too late… Oh my. I do always fail to follow through at times like these. Everybody thinks Takao Hijiri is so perfect, but unfortunately, that is not true. But here, in front of my little sister, at least…

Hijiri placed a hand to her stomach. The midsection of her Fly Swordsman outfit was torn, as it appeared that Yomibito's katana had grazed her when he attacked. When she laid a hand upon it, she felt the wound was shallow. There wasn't much blood.

"…"

When did this happen?

Hijiri looked down at the blood on her fingers.

Right… I was thinking about what comes after this fight, wasn't I? The battles to come. But it's okay, I've made up my mind. I don't need to think about anything that comes after this. She can make it through, I know she can. She'll make it. This fight… Everything within me is saying that I should keep her alive.

Takao Hijiri cloaked herself in wind once more, and then she silently yet determinedly glared at Yomibito.

"We'll fulfil our roles."

Takao Itsuki

ITSUKI KNEW THAT the cooldown time on her sister's Gungnir ability was ten minutes.

Aneki just said that to make Yomibito think it'd be another twenty minutes before our next attack. Vicius probably doesn't know the exact cooldown of Gungnir either, even after our fight with her.

Aneki knows that I know the cooldown time is really ten minutes, though…

Itsuki smiled.

She's always on top of everything, even the small stuff.

That was why Itsuki trusted her.

"Status Open."

She opened her stat window. As a rule, only the heroes themselves could see their own stats. The exceptions were Kashima Kobato, and one other—Vicius. As a disciple of Vicius's element, it was possible that Yomibito might be capable of seeing the heroes' stats, and so they did their best not to open them where possible.

But I have to check this. All right. I still have enough MP for two casts of Lock End. It's too soon to give up. If Aneki says so, then it's too soon. I'm not scared to fight this terrifying enemy, because Aneki's here fighting by my side. My job is to create an opening for her…to make Yomibito focus on me.

Itsuki closed her stat window and fired off an Unlock Two at Yomibito.

My electricity?!

Yomibito sliced through it with his katana.

Tch… How has that transformation made him so strong? Seems like even Lock End's paralysis has worn off. Damn it. I had to be careful of two swords before. Now we're up to four and I've still gotta match him? But I'm going to do this…

Itsuki accelerated herself with Unlock One—and in the same moment, Yomibito moved too.

He was being attacked in the back and shoulders by Hijiri's wind blades, but paid them no mind. He sliced at Itsuki, and she quickly corrected her course to escape him.

Should I keep running until Gungnir's ready, or is the best defense a good offense? Is Yomibito going to think to finish this quickly with swift attacks, assuming we can't do anything for the next twenty minutes? Or will he try and wear us down slowly, knowing he has time to spare?

Itsuki ran, Yomibito followed, and Hijiri pursued them both.

I have to do this… Me…

Hijiri was an S-class hero, but not a purely combat focused type like Sogou Ayaka. Her skills were flexible, allowing her to see through lies, and use additional aspects of her skills to her advantage in ways that the other heroes couldn't. She only had one finishing move skill, however—and Gungnir's cooldown meant it couldn't be cast multiple times in quick succession. Ayaka and Kirihara's skills, on the other hand, were both powerful and constantly available for repeated use. Hijiri's wind blades could be powered up with additional air pressure, but were best suited to large scale, area of effect style attacks. They had served Hijiri best when they had fought the Demon King's army on the eastern front.

She could have fought the creatures of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters without Gungnir, too. It was only Ayaka's incredible, attention-grabbing combat skills that made Hijiri look weaker by

comparison. Hijiri's other skills had more than enough firepower—the only question was which of them would be capable of dealing a finishing blow to a monster like Yomibito.

"Kirihara-kun shattered the measurement crystal, and when it measured Sogou-san, the it was reduced to a fine powder. When it measured me, the crystal glowed brightly but never broke… Perhaps those two are the only heroes who surpass the S-class category," Itsuki remembered her sister saying once. She respected her older sister's analysis—and as much as she wanted to dispute it, she had no intention of denying it.

But then, I…I have to make up the difference! I'm going to do this! I'll keep Yomibito focused on me, just like he's pursuing me now. Does he think I'm the easier target? Well, hey…I can't say he's wrong!

Three of Yomibito's four katana-wielding arms were focused squarely on Itsuki, but she felt there was something strangely honed about her senses that day. She could clearly see the distance between them—the length of his strikes.

"…?"

Aneki?

Hijiri should have dodged the blade, but a thin red line ran across her forehead.

The wound looks deep. It's okay—she dodged it.

"Itsuki! There's a part of that blade that you can't see!" Hijiri shouted at her as loud as she could—*she never shouts.*

Eh? Ah, no—

—Fwsh—

"—Ah!"

…Eh? M-my left eye… I…

I can't see?

Ah. Right. That slice hit my left eye.

"…Huh?"

Huh? Why am I thinking about the old world? When I get back… I'm thinking about what it's going to be like living with one eye?

Ah. I'm so scared.

Itsuki felt a chill run though her, her chest tightening.

No, no! Aneki almost died of that poison! That must have hurt much more! This is nothing! Well, I'm scared, but…the pain… The space where my left eye should be hurts so badly… There's going to be more pain… Even more…

"Ah…"

With one eye, I won't be able to judge distance…will I? How long can I keep evading his attacks?

"—tsuki!"

Eh? Onee-chan? What's she saying?

Ah… Am I doing it?

Am I…losing heart?

***

This was the first serious injury that Takao Itsuki had suffered since she was summoned to the new world. The experience was so fresh and novel that it shook her to her core. Worse still was the realization that Yomibito had an *invisible* blade. It was one of these sudden, unknown attacks that had caught her unaware.

Itsuki didn't have the mental fortitude that her sister did. She was still just a young and innocent teen, compared to her older sister. She could not help but feel panicked and confused, even terrified by what was happening around her.

But unconscious or no, the fact that she didn't stop moving was what saved her life.

***

Aneki would… She'd never give in like this! Nh… Damn it!

Calm down… Calm down, Itsuki!

Why am I getting so panicked about a little cut to my left eye?!

Calm down. Calm down… Calm down, calm down!

I-it hurts… The inside of my eye hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It really hurts… It hurts!

"Haah… Haah, haah… Haah…"

Finally, Itsuki stopped running. The fierce stabbing pain and the terror stopped her in her tracks. She couldn't help it.

Huh? Eh? No way? Wait… Move, damn it! Move! Move!

"Yomibito!"

Hijiri called out to the disciple as he lunged mercilessly toward Itsuki.

She's concentrating her air pressure around Yomibito… Drawing him backward?

It looked as if Yomibito was being dragged into a black hole, as the wind slowly pulled him back in Hijiri's direction.

"It seems like you've misunderstood something."

"… ?"

"Haven't you realized? Perhaps you think this fight is two against one…but ever since I arrived, this has been a one-on-one battle."

"…!"

One-on-one… A battle between Takao Hijiri and Yomibito. She's trying to draw his attention to her? I'm no good. I'm just getting in Onee-chan's way… Dragging her down.

"The two of us are as one. That's why this a one-on-one battle, you see. Nothing has changed. And we…are going to defeat you together."

"…"

Itsuki's right eye began to overflow with tears. The pain in her left was forgotten, along with her fear.

"…Aneki!"

She always does this… Always chases the bad away and makes me feel better. Like a cool, refreshing breeze.

"Itsuki, can you keep going?"

"…*Sob*… *Sniff*… O-of course! Hey, Aneki!"

Itsuki jerked the muscles in her face up into a smile.

"Thanks. That helped."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're the one who's helping me right now."

You're wrong. It's always you who comes to save me at times like these—my one and only Aneki.

Itsuki wasn't shaking any longer. Hearing her sister's words, she somehow managed to steel herself again an turned her body just a little to the side as she faced off against Yomibito. She wasn't sure, but it she felt like it might improve her depth perfection just a little.

I could be wrong, though…

Just as it seemed that Yomibito had stopped moving, he began to mumble to himself.

"…Joy, kill, how much brighter do you intend on shining, sun sisters, kill, joy…"

"Haaah… —Lightning—"

Seven minutes left…

So began seven minutes of hell for the sisters. The reach of Yomibito's four raging blades was long. The main problem was the invisible part of his blades and the fact that each of the four were of a

different length. Itsuki had to watch which arm was swinging to judge the reach. Yomibito tried to shuffle his katanas during his attacks, but Hijiri took the opportunity to launch a pressurized wind attack on him to interfere, and he seemed to give that up on that.

The lengths of his katanas all being different keeps me constantly on edge. I wouldn't be able to keep up if he shuffled them now. I knew Aneki could do it! But…damn it! Now he's focusing all of his attacks on her!

Yomibito was clearly concentrating on Hijiri, likely determining that she was the key to their battle.

Does he think that I won't be able to function without her? That if he crushes her, he wins? That bastard, underestimating us…

Itsuki sped herself up, launching a concentrated Unlock Two at the disciple to try and distract him.

But those invisible blades… They're tough to handle!

Yomibito was mainly attacking Hijiri, but hadn't let up on Itsuki either. He didn't use his pillar attack, perhaps because he was using them to block the doors—but their exchanges were slowly wearing away at Itsuki, fraying at her nerves. Beginning to think even breathing might present him with an opportunity, she started to hold her breath as she moved. It was suffocating to have to do so in the midst of a high-speed battle. She felt like she was fighting underwater.

Damn it! I need to get Yomibito to focus on me! I need him to consider me a threat.

There were small wounds all over Itsuki's abdomen, shoulders, arms, and legs. None of the cuts were as deep as the one to her eye, but she was continuing to take hits.

No. I'd rather be the one taking them.

"Over here, Yomibitooo!" she called—but the disciple didn't even turn to look at her. Yomibito roamed the room in pursuit of Hijiri, dealing wild and dangerous strikes. It was only Hijiri's ability to read his attacks that allowed her to avoid being fatally injured. Her expression was composed and unconcerned…but she was being hurt more and more as the fight went on. She continued to strike back, threading wind blade attacks with mixtures of different elements—but Yomibito seemed to be aware she couldn't deal him a finishing blow in her present condition. Itsuki, on the other hand, couldn't fire off more of her Lock End skill without running out of mana, as it used up much more MP than any of her other abilities.

I only have two uses left. How many minutes have passed?

Itsuki shot a glance down to the pocket watch in her hand.

Damn it… She thought, mentally clicking her tongue.

Five and half minutes to go… I can't believe only 90 seconds have passed. I feel like we've been fighting for six minutes already. This is stretching on so long—every moment is elongated, treading the fine line between death and life. I want to help Aneki more, but I might actually make things more dangerous for her if I leap in without a plan. And if I get injured any worse than just my eye—something that stops me from moving completely—I won't be able to help Aneki's Gungnir land when the time comes.

It's so frustrating! If only I were stronger, more of a threat to Yomibito…I'd be able to lure him toward me. The best that I can do is to support Aneki with bursts of Unlock Two when she's ready. She's so amazing. She isn't flinching, even with all of those injuries! Ah!

Two fingers sprang into the air. The ring and little finger on Hijiri's right hand had been severed and went flying.

"A-Aneki…"

Hijiri locked eyes with her, sending her a message.

"It's okay. I can keep going."

"…Kh."

I was so terrified when I lost my eye, but she… She's taking care to make sure I don't give in to panic again.

"Only… Four minutes… Thirty seconds left?"

Four whole minutes and thirty seconds?

Aneki…! Ah, damn it! Why am I so powerless?!

Suddenly, Itsuki's heart skipped a beat.

"Ah…"

Yomibito was so much faster after his transformation and was only picking up speed. Itsuki had increased the speed of her own Unlock One skill to compensate. Shehad done it almost unconsciously.

"S-Status…o-open…!"

It's gone!

I've used it up… I don't have enough MP left for two casts of Unlock Two! But wouldn't I have gotten hurt even worse if I hadn't

sped myself up? Was I doomed either way? I would have been injured if I'd tried to conserve my MP…but using Unlock One to dodge has made me run out of mana.

No, I'll be okay…I still have my own natural pool of MP left.

Stats were just modifiers—a hero's own personal MP pool was different, or so Hijiri had explained to her. All heroes had a black box of unknown reserve mana within them.

But I'll lose consciousness once that runs out…and your mind can grow clouded when that store of MP gets too low.

Itsuki opened her mouth, flapping it like a goldfish to try and get her message to Hijiri…but no words came out. Her sister seemed to understand at once what had happened, and smiled at her reassuringly.

"Leave it to me," said Hijiri wordlessly. She then raised her index finger. *"Just one is enough."*

Then, using eye contact and the movements of her mouth.

"Just one Lock End is enough. I'll handle the rest."

"Ah."

Itsuki remembered the forest—when Hijiri was on the verge of death in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. She felt something rapidly fading now, just as she did then.

A premonition…like I'm about to lose something. It's an awful sensation. Just like back then, when Aneki was ready to die. Maybe she's trying to trade something. Probably in exchange for her own ■■

(I don't even want to think of that word…)

Is she going to use that to make up the difference? To fill in the gap that my Lock End has left? W-wait—Aneki… You can't… I mean…

I…

Hijiri smiled, her glance sending Itsuki another message.

"I'm counting on you to handle what comes after this battle—Itsuki."

Then Itsuki saw her big sister's lips form these three words.

"I love you."

***

"Haah… Like, back when Vicius poisoned you, I really thought you were gonna die, Aneki… I felt like I was gonna drop dead…"

"Oh my, that again? Everyone dies eventually. In any case, didn't I tell you? We'll be together forever, even if we may someday be separated by death."

"Hey, Aneki… Is death, like, the end for humans?"

"A great many people have ventured opinions on that particular topic. I wonder… Perhaps an end is a beginning of sorts, no?"

"If we do get reincarnated, then, like, I sure hope I get born again as your little sister… Y'know? *Heh heh*."

"Whenever we speak of this, you never seem to want to be the big sister next time around, do you?"

"I'm always tellin' you, I don't think I could ever be a *big* sister!"

"We're are twins, so I don't think that's entirely true."

"B-but like…"

"Hm?"

"Well, I just don't want it to end. Like, yeah, I don't want this to be over. This life I have now…being with you, Aneki."

"…"

"I mean, c-c'mon! We're only teenagers! We've only just gotten started, yeah? We ain't meant to be thinkin' about *the end* at our age! Right?!"

"Oh my? I was under the impression that you were the one who broached the subject."

"Ah… Y-you're right…"

"But well, yes… In many ways, I suppose we are only just getting started."

***

No. Not here. I can't let Aneki die. There's so much I still want to do with her. I won't let it happen. I can't… I don't care what comes next, I just want power! Strength…! I'd give anything!

"…?"

A notification?

"Ah!"

Itsuki quickly scanned the window that popped up in front of her.

How was this triggered? Why now? Who cares?! I'll take any solution… I don't care if this is some dangerous power or if this is the end for me… If I can just save Aneki…!

***

There is always a beginning after the end has come.

But in this beginning, we need no prayers to celebrate some deity. No Unlock.

This is not the story of the gods, after all—but one of people.

Of people who come after the end and begin again.

It is a realm of the infinite—a realm of the null.

It is the final form upon which those shifters land.

Its name…

"Count Zero."

Yomibito

ITSUKI TAKAO is no threat.

That was how Yomibito saw Itsuki, and how he had analyzed the battle…at least until her transformation. He was confident that Hijiri Takao was the key to their battle. Sure of it.

Once the older one—the one who is planning their tactics—is dealt with, I should be able to easily kill the younger.

Yomibito also had another feeling, however.

Bravo, Hijiri Takao. Your expression remains almost unchanged, despite your many injuries. You are just as Vicius described you. You were also greatly injured in your fight against her, but she mentioned that almost none of it showed on your face.

"It looked as if she felt nothing at all," Vicius had said. *"I suppose she must have been using some trick or aspect of her skill to dull the pain."*

Vicius's analysis—incorrect.

Experience—Vicius's information lacks credibility.

It is not that Hijiri does not feel the pain.

Yomibito had good eyes—not just in terms of his eyesight but also his insight. Whenever his katana cut Hijiri, he saw an ever-so-slight twitch to her brow. Humans could never completely ignore the sensation of pain.

Pain is an instinct—a message to the body to warn that a being's life is in danger.

Yomibito, on the other hand, had not experienced pain since the day he became one of Vicius's disciples—and he had developed his sense for danger in order to compensate. He looked closely at Hijiri,

whose ear had just been sliced by one of his unseen blades. She had reacted when the tip made contact. She could not help it.

Hijiri is no exception. It is just that her responses to pain are so incredibly muted. Vicius can hardly be blamed for failing to notice them. What this means is that she has an extraordinarily strong force of will. She has incredible resilience and endurance and is very good at restraining her responses.

But with the pain, her movements are dulled, even if only for a moment. She might intend to disregard her own safety as she lunges for me, but her instinctual drive to avoid life-threatening danger is ordering her to retreat. She is trying to fight against those instincts, and that is how I am able to read her attacks. Hijiri believes that she is suppressing her reactions to the pain—but I see them. I detect those slight twinges and plan my moves accordingly. And yet…you fight well, Hijiri Takao. Despite the situation you are in, you have not yet given up. I see that. I have taken two of your fingers, but your silent will to fight has not dimmed. You are even caring for your sister during this battle, all the while trying to find your next move. It is your unrivalled resilience that makes it possible. I will see you through until your last moments, then. Out of respect for your rare resilience, I will not hold back. I am prepared to die here, too.

Ah, how bright… Ah… How marvelous… The blazing light of life…

Hijiri continued to collect cuts, but she just barely managed to avoid any fatal injuries. She also cauterized her wounds during the fight to reduce blood loss. When she burned her own skin, her

composed expression never changed, betraying no signs of anguish. She did not scream or falter…a true warrior.

Suddenly, Yomibito heard the words—the three that Hijiri spoke to her sister.

"I love you."

There was a determination to them… A power to the statement that ran through Yomibito.

She has not given up, but has decided to die. Here. Now. Very well. I accept your determination, and will strike you down w—

"—Count Zero—"

At that moment, all of the warning bells in Yomibito's body reacted to *the other* sister. The other Takao had transformed, his instincts told him, and now she was a threat. Yomibito couldn't understand what had happened. Itsuki was closing in on him, her arms and legs wrapped in electricity. She was crying.

"Aneki! My skill evolved! I can do this… I can still d-do this! *Sob*…! I'll do it! I'll do this! I'll do it, s-so…!"

Yomibito felt more pressure from the electricity that surrounded her than he had from any of her previous attacks.

"…"

Itsuki's stat window was still open. As a disciple of Vicius, Yomibito could see the heroes' stats, and while remaining careful of Hijiri's attacks, had checked on Itsuki's spirit power a few moments earlier.

Her spirit power—MP—it isn't decreasing. Is she not consuming it anymore?

What is this feeling…? Confusion?

How bright she looks… My instincts tell me that I should prioritize Itsuki. She is the threat.

Yomibito discarded his confusion and focused all his will on the fight once more. Slashing away his doubts, he turned to face down the threat, a true warrior in his own right. He did not neglect to cover Hijiri, however.

She has not given up yet. She might try something.

Keeping Hijiri constantly in the corner of his eye, he focused most of his danger-sensing instincts on to Itsuki, but her assault was relentless…

"I'm gonna beat you! Me! I still have a ton of stuff I want to do with Aneki! She's always helping me! So I…I want to be the one to help her this time! We're going home—together! I don't wanna go back on my own!"

"Itsuki…"

Meaningless words—talk—devoting some her limited resources to speech.

She has become emotional. This will make it harder for her to detect danger. Yet…she is getting faster, not slower… Her electricity is increasing in power as she charges. All the openings she presented before have vanished. I cannot understand this.

Itsuki launched a leaping slash at him.

Counterattack—no. Too dangerous.

Yomibito tried to put some distance between the two of them, but…

Boom!

The concentrated electricity crushed Yomibito's gauntlet—completely peeling away the armor. Three of Yomibito's four arms had turned to focus on fighting Itsuki.

But it would be too dangerous to let my guard slip against Hijiri. I must leave one of my arms to combat her.

It was then that Yomibito decided to harden himself. It was his first attempt at using the technique—one that had been Wormgandr's originally. Yomibito thought the ability was convenient but had never managed to pull it off.

But if I do not do it here…I might be defeated by this strike. I have no choice.

Yomibito focused all of his strength on hardening one part of his body and received Itsuki's electric strike there.

I did it. I blocked the attack.

—Bzzzt—

"…?! …"



He succeeded in blocking the attack but felt the electricity penetrate his armor nonetheless. It was a feeling quite unlike anything else he had experienced during his many battles.

I feel strange… Unwell? Nauseated… Am I sick? How long has it been since I last felt this way? No blow I have ever taken has made me feel like this.

With nowhere to run inside his outer shell, Yomibito began to feel worse and worse.

I cannot take more of these attacks… No, it is not that I cannot —I do not want to.

Yomibito finally began to feel true hatred for Itsuki… But still, he did not let his guard down against Hijiri.

She still has her Gungnir skill. To disregard her strength would be the height of stupidity.

"Aneki! I don't get why, but my MP isn't going down! So let's do this now! I'm going to beat him! I'm gonna beat this guy!"

Yomibito had to make a choice.

I cannot go on the attack now. I never imagined Itsuki might have such talent for battle within her. It is my opinion that this strength does not come solely from her skill. It is as if the warrior within her has been fully awakened, blooming out of season. In terms of raw power alone, she now far outstrips Hijiri.

To think my strikes would find so little purchase… She is a different person from who she was just moments ago.

But even so—Yomibito refused to leave himself vulnerable to Hijiri. The way in which Itsuki and Hijiri had worked together to attack him played over and over in his head.

They will use Gungnir to try to deal a finishing blow. Or Hijiri will use Gungnir to expose my core, and Itsuki will finish this with her Count Zero ability. All this means is that I cannot go on the attack—but can maintain the status quo by switching to a defensive stance. Wait—is that exactly what they want me to do? Are they trying to buy time? Are they waiting for something? Another use of Gungnir, I would assume. I am not gullible enough to believe the cooldown time she stated. She may use it at any time… And yet—

—Crackle crackle—

Itsuki's furious attacks continued, cloaked in lightning and exploding as she fought. The power, speed, and emotion behind her attacks—everything about them was extraordinary. She looked so fierce, as if she were burning her own life to fuel her attacks. There was something wondrous about her in this moment.

These sisters… For the sake of their other half, they are willing to risk their lives.

Itsuki continued to ramp up her fierce and relentless finishing move.

Boom!

Finally, the time came.

Itsuki ducked in through Yomibito's slashing strikes and leaped in close. Even without calling the two final thunder tigers or a single

blow from the beginning thunder bird…

She's going to destroy the armor around my abdomen and expose my core.

No.

Fearing for his life, Yomibito's survival instincts kicked into a higher gear. But his eyes continued to follow Hijiri.

No…no! Itsuki is capable of destroying my core with her own two hands!

In that moment, Yomibito recognized his own foolishness.

I have been too cautious of Hijiri.

I should have focused all of my energy on Itsuki. Will I make it in time? No. I will not.

Ah, they are so bright…

At that moment—improbable as it might seem—Yomibito began to evolve once more. Faced with the great existential threat that Itsuki Takao posed, he began to change.

The process began… Or was attempted, at least.

Squelch.

"…? …"

Something was at his outer shell, just to the rear of his abdomen, near his back.

Something is touching my core. Is this—a hand?

Suddenly Yomibito's mind shifted, his instincts cried out.

Danger! But why? What are you doing there? How are you…

…Touching my core?!

What of my armor? When was it broken? My instincts did not activate because I focused too much on Itsuki? But I should have seen it happen. I was watching.

How did this happen—when was the moment? It cannot b—

"Gung—"

***

Yomibito's evolution had begun in response to Itsuki's attack. No part of his body's instincts reaction anticipated what Hijiri was doing. His survival instincts quickly tried to shift focus to Hijiri but, in doing so, lost their momentum. The evolution missed its opportunity—the only one it had.

Yomibito's evolution was not stopped by the thunder bird of beginnings.

He was put down by the Spear of the Gods. By one who had once bared her fangs at the Goddess…

Takao Hijiri

TAKAO HIJIRI thought about the information that Vicius might have shared with Yomibito.

It is quite likely that she has told him something following our previous fight. She would have talked about me, even if she did presume I was dead… Talked about how she used her poison to eliminate a pathetic hero who rebelled against her, bragged about her accomplishments.

Hijiri had confirmed during their fight that Yomibito's eyesight was excellent and that his field of vision was surprisingly wide. She had moved to place him between herself and her sister precisely so that she could determine the extent of his vision. She also detected that he was adaptable enough to respond to threats that he couldn't see. It appeared that he could sense the presence of enemies behind him and the danger they posed before reacting accordingly.

Excellent sight and an instinctive sense for danger—Yomibito is equipped with both.

That was Hijiri's base premise.

Is it possible to create an opening, based on these assumptions?

As she thought the situation over, Hijiri came to a realization.

Yomibito's movements are precise. When that precision falters, an opening will be easier to find. Then how should I cause him to falter?

"He has good eyes."

The observation is not limited to just his eyesight and field of vision. Yomibito's reflexes, perception, and insight are all superb. Another way of looking at the situation… I can use those senses to feed him certain pieces of information.

Hijiri had elected to let him see her react slightly whenever his katana caught her. She always had advance notice of the injuries from the flow of the air around her, and she performed little twinges of pain whenever the strikes came. It seemed that Yomibito noticed—just as she had intended.

The body cannot completely resist reacting to pain. Even if one's fear has been conquered, the body will react of its own accord. There is nothing to be done about this, so long as the sensations exist. It is inevitable.

Hijiri understood this well. She had felt pain during her fight against Vicius, of course. She had just endured it.

When there is pain, there will always be an instinctive reaction to it. But what if I could eliminate my ability to feel pain? If every response I let him see were a lie? How would that be possible? My HP stat modifier reduces the amount of pain I feel, but it is not capable of eliminating it completely. Then how did I do it? Well…

"Ability buff skills that affect multiple targets, and single target debuff skills."

"A skill that, on touch, brings a target's stats down to be equal with the caster's."

Those are Ikusaba Asagi's unique skills…but she has one other. Back during the great invasion of the Demon King, it's said she used it on those who were injured in the battle to defend the capital of Yonato.

—Queen Bee: Pain Block—

Hijiri had heard about the unique skill and asked Asagi to cast it upon her before she entered the labyrinth.

"Take it that you askin' me for help means that you totes trust me-ow, Hijiri-tan?"

"As Mimori-kun has chosen you to be one of those who will be entering the labyrinth, I have no choice but to do so. In which case, I will take every advantage that you can offer me…if you are willing, of course?"

"I might turn it off just for the lols, y'know?"

"I will cross that bridge when I come to it. You need not do this if you don't want to. Let us both try our best in there. Goodbye."

"Hey, now, don't go trying to walk off all cool like Speedwagon-san or somethin'! Then like…can I ask you something? Asagi wants a bit of a treat for her help, y'know!"

"Go ahead."

"So like, Hijiri-chan, romantically speaking… Are you into guys at all?"

"Hm? Well… Yes, I suppose so?"

"Ah, really? Hmm…"

"Why ask me that now? It is quite a strange question too. You ask as if you assumed I only had interest in the other gender."

"But, like, you're totally an onee-sama type, Hijiri-paisen!"

"Well, I am a big sister, I suppose, although the two of us are technically twins. What does paisen *mean, in any case…?"*

"Are ya a bit of an airhead? Have I, like, totes misread your vibe? Eh, seriously? I thought you were perfect, but you've got this side to you too? For real~?"

Hijiri had endured that strange conversation, but Asagi had cast the buff upon her. As a result, during her battle, Hijiri felt no pain whatsoever. She listened to the wind around her, sensed the presence of the blade, and created a pretend response. It was, in a word, an *act*. Pretending to feel pain, however, was much more trying than Hijiri had imagined it might be. She had to not only dodge Yomibito's attacks but also line her reactions up with the moments at which she allowed her skin to be slashed, all the while avoiding any fatal blows. When her fingers were sliced off, Hijiri felt her blood freeze. It was so unexpected that she panicked a little, anxious that her reaction to the blow would come too late. She only just managed to respond in time.

It didn't seem as if Yomibito noticed that she felt no pain. His attacks were easier to dodge than she had expected, as the wind that surrounded her constantly provided her with information on the trajectory and range of the disciple's strikes. She was not *easily* dodging him by any means and had a number of close calls.

When Hijiri's longsword had blocked Yomibito's katana, she had felt a numbness in her hands—or at least *believed* that she did. She judged that the numbness must be pain, and that the sensation in her trembling yet sensation-less hands was the result.

But when Hijiri launched her final attack, she stopped lying. Stopped feeding Yomibito false reactions. He had been factoring her pain into his own movements and using them as cues to hone his

responses—and that was exactly how she threw him off balance. Yomibito expected a reaction and got none.

Hijiri considered what Yomibito must have thought in that last instant before she moved in for her final attack. He must have thought attacking her even as she struck at him would throw her off. He had succeeded in wounding her so many times throughout their fight. He must have thought the pain would delay her attack a moment, giving give him a little extra leeway to respond. He must have been more concerned with Takao Itsuki in that moment.

He made a judgment, realized that his timing was wrong…and knew that he had presented Hijiri with an opportunity, however slight. An opening to get in close to him.

Well, then, how was Yomibito's outer armor cracked?

Hijiri had used her wind blades like a drill to open up a hole just large enough for an arm to enter and had done it all as fast as she possibly could. She had been chipping away at Yomibito's armor during the fight.

As for why Yomibito's instincts for sensing danger didn't detect what was happening—he was ignoring the wind blades the whole time. They were attacking him almost continuously throughout the battle, but he paid them no mind. He must have been under the impression that he could regenerate any small chips to his armor in an instant, meaning such attacks would never have the power to make it through to his core. That must have been why he altered his perception of the fight. There was no sense in devoting attention to unnecessary things.

Hijiri realized that Yomibito fought logically, never letting any of his resources go to waste. She intentionally allowed Yomibito's attention to fade from her wind blades as he stopped seeing them as a threat.

"These are no danger to me."

Hijiri had already confirmed during their fight that Yomibito had no feeling in his armor. He had not reacted in any way to hot or cold temperatures. From his reactions when she struck him, Hijiri determined that he was not even aware that he was being attacked unless the strikes were of a certain level. That is why Yomibito was unable to detect Hijiri's wind blades drilling a hole into his armor. If he had had the opportunity to dodge, he might have thought it over and done so instead.

He might have considered that since Itsuki's Lock End was capable of concentrating its power into an enhanced attack, Hijiri's wind blades might also be capable of doing something similar. But all of this was just speculation on Hijiri's part, nothing more. It wasn't just their attacks that had allowed the sisters to create an opening—it was the fact that almost all of Yomibito's danger sensing abilities had been focused on Itsuki at the moment that Hijiri's attack came.

It goes without saying that Itsuki was the key to winning our fight. What was most unexpected was the evolution of her skill—the way in which she resolved her MP issues in the middle of combat. I believe she must have run out of mana for two casts of Lock End as we fought…

Hijiri had confirmed this with a glance at Itsuki and some speculation. It was in that moment that she decided to risk making up the difference of what one less Lock End would cost them.

I cannot blame Itsuki. She had to devote much of her MP to Unlock One just to evade Yomibito's attacks. In any case, that last minute evolution of his was completely unexpected. That evolution completely changed the nature of our fight, and that change delivered us this result. Itsuki's awakening caused our odds of winning the fight to soar.

Watching her little sister's charge, Hijiri became sure that she had been right all along. Itsuki's talent for battle far surpassed her own. Her sister engaged three of Yomibito's blades all by herself, while also occupying most of his danger sensing abilities.

I expect that previous double strike of Lock End stuck bitterly in Yomibito's mind. He was wary that Itsuki would once more blow a hole in his armor for my Gungnir to enter, or that I might open his armor with Gungnir to allow Itsuki's attacks to make it in. If Itsuki had not awakened, this would not have been possible. There was a much harder path awaiting us…a path in which I was prepared to sacrifice my life for this victory. But Itsuki—my twin sister—found us a new path to the for us, one that led to me landing this strike and abandoning my intent to die for it.

I am so very proud to have been born as your other half. Truly, it was a miracle that we came into this world together.

Now, then—with the strength of my skill, be vanquished.

"Gungnir."

Yomibito broke apart.

He exploded.

Parts of armor flew in all directions, followed by spurts of red blood. The white fleshy mass inside of him exploded too, flying through the air. His four arms tore off and fell limp to the floor. His waist and legs remained upright for a few moments, then crashed to the ground like a tower falling.

Yomibito began to dissolve, fumes rising from his body. It appeared that, unlike divines, disciples dissolved in the same way that eucharists did once they were dealt a fatal blow—a sign of death. The black pillars that blocked the three passages of the room also melted away.

We took no attacks from his pillars while those blockades were in place. Yomibito blocked off our retreat, even though it meant disabling one of his methods of attack. Was there some reason he could not let us get away from him? That much remains unclear…but it does seem evident that he removed his pillar attacks from the equation during our fight.

"W-we did it!" said Itsuki. She remained still for a few seconds, her arm outstretched where it had swung—though not for long. "Eh?! Aneki?! Your right arm!"

Hijiri's arm was missing below the elbow.

Did Yomibito's insides form a mouth to bite down upon my arm the moment I activated Gungnir? I feel no pain, so have no concept of what happened in there. My body, though…everything inside of me is screaming.

Hijiri's cheeks were soaked with sweat, and her hair was stuck to her face. She took a length of rope from the pocket of her Fly Swordsman outfit and tied it around the stump to stop the bleeding.

"It's okay… Luckily, I don't feel any pain…"

Hijiri had initially asked for one of Asagi's pain-blocking buffs for a slightly different reason.

To think it would prove so crucial to finding an opening to strike. This battle was the epitome of ferocious. Several light wounds, two fingers, and one arm is what it cost—but it might have been even dearer. My sister and I were not separated by death. We avoided that. That is enough.

"It's over, Itsuki."

"Y-yeah…"

Itsuki disabled Unlock One. Hijiri glanced down at Yomibito's head, which had been blown across the floor toward them.

"Well? How are you? Can you keep fighting…?"

"Ah—ehm…I don't think so. Actually my MP is…"

Itsuki's MP was zero.

Unlock One consumed no MP while the skill was active but took its cost once the ability was deactivated. It wasn't just MP—Itsuki herself was worn down.

"I, too, think this is as far as I can go in this battle…" Hijiri slumped to her knees.

"Aneki!" Itsuki ran toward her and caught her sister as she toppled forward. With both of them on their knees and Hijiri's full weight in her arms, Itsuki embraced her.

"We… This is as far as we go."

"We've done enough… Haven't we…?"

"If Yomibito didn't encounter anyone before he came upon us, then we saved the other entrants from running into a disciple and stopped him from finding anyone else in this labyrinth. Perhaps that alone is the best contribution we have made to this cause."

"Yeah—yeah."

But Mimori-kun or Sogou-san might have been able to defeat him much more easily than we did…

A flash of their faces appeared in Hijiri's mind. All that remained of Yomibito was a single golden eye, the triumphant twins reflected in the pupil…until finally that too dissolved into nothingness. As her body slumped forward, Hijiri wrapped her left arm around Itsuki's back.

"Once again… Well done, Itsuki. This battle… We won it because of you."

Itsuki hugged her back. "You've gotta be kidding me… We did this together! Both of us! You said it, right, Aneki? We're one and the same!"

"There you go crying again. But…fine. I'll agree with anything you say now…"

Itsuki burst into tears. With the two of them on their knees in each other's arms, Hijiri closed her eyes and gently patted Itsuki on the back.

"Once we're back in the old world…"

"Hm…yeah."

"We can really get started."

"Nh… Yeah!"

"Right, then… Let's just… Have a little rest for now."

Hijiri hugged her little sister until she had calmed down. They didn't move, still nestled in each other's arms. It was only a few minutes, or perhaps even less than that. The twin sisters drifted together in their embrace, eyes closed. This time was theirs and theirs alone.

"Ah-ehm—Aneki," said Itsuki hesitantly.

"Nh?"

"I couldn't, er… I didn't hear what you said earlier, so…" Itsuki looked a little embarrassed, mumbling the words. "I just, like, want to hear it for real… Er… Could you say it one more time?"

They were in sync. They each knew what the other wanted. Hijiri knew at once what her little sister was asking for. She understood.

Of course. There's nobody else in the whole world who could replace my twin sister.

Hijiri smiled as she said the words.

“I love you.”



Epilogue

THE PLACE WHERE Piggymaru was teleported into was a white space—white walls, white ceiling.

"Squee~?"

There's nobody around. No footsteps—I have to find someone to group up with.

Piggymaru began squelching through the labyrinth.

…I feel so lonely.

Ever since joining Too-ka on his journey, Piggymaru had almost always been with someone else. The little slime knew how much it was being protected by others.

Too-ka, Seras, Eve… Lis, Slei, Nyaki and Munin… Just being alone feels so different.

Piggymaru was lost in anxiety for a moment.

"Squee!"

No!

The slime shook off those feelings and tried to cheer itself up.

I have to be able to save someone!

Piggymaru thought about trying to cry out but stopped itself from doing so.

I might draw enemies to myself. I'm surrounded by white walls. There are cobblestones below me sometimes, but not all the time.

The buildings that used to be here are jutting out in weird ways. It looks like this used to be the middle of the city. Everyone should be heading for the castle, so I'm sure I'll meet one of them somewhere. I must go to the castle too. Before we all entered, someone showed me a map and explained the way.

Piggymaru changed course, heading in that direction.

That building is probably that big one, so…this way?

"Squuh~."

I'll just hide in a building or somewhere if an enemy comes. I don't think they'll find me; I'm very small.

Suddenly, Piggymaru heard footsteps. The walls of the labyrinth muffled most of the sound, but it seemed as if some things were still audible once they came close enough. Piggymaru got ready to hide.

"Squee?"

Isn't that…

Piggymaru called out to the person who had just appeared.

"Squeee!"

"Piggymaru?" It was Munin. Her face lit up. "Oh, thank heavens! I'm ever so glad to see someone! Are you well, Piggymaru?"

"Squee. ♪"

"Right, then, let's go together shall we? ♪ Come now."

After being invited to jump over, Piggymaru leaped into Munin's pocket.

"Squee~ ♪"

"*Heh heh*, are you happy to see me? I'm happy to see you too." Munin gave the little slime a wry smile. "I thought it might be safer if I turned into a crow, but after learning of what happened to Lis's familiar from Too-ka…I've begun to think that doing so might be more dangerous."

Vicius noticed Lis's crow familiar and killed it. Flying around as a crow might cause one of our enemies to mistake Munin for a familiar and kill her too. Being in crow form would also leave her much less able to protect herself… I see.

A sudden wave of relief washed over Piggymaru. It was so happy just to be by somebody's side again. Piggymaru poked its head out from Munin's pocket, and she stroked it with a smile.

"Let's go and look for everyone together, okay?"

"Squee~ ♪"

The two of them walked down the passage together, still keeping their guard up.

Unlike Too-ka and Seras, we aren't suited to combat. And Munin has something important to do in this battle. I have to protect her for Too-ka's sake.

Piggymaru also felt once more the barrier between it and other people.

I can't express myself to her as well as I can to Too-ka. When I speak to him, it's like if we're having a regular conversation. Too-ka is really special.

It was as the two of them cautiously proceeded down the passage that they encountered it.

"…! It appears it has noticed us," said Munin quietly, a grave look on her face. She tightened her grip on the staff in her hands—the weapon she was most used to wielding in battle.

The creature that stood before them was a mid-sized eucharist with an axe in one hand and a spear in the other. It seemed intent on blocking their path.

"Squee!" Piggymaru created a staff with one pointed end for stabbing, and Munin took that instead, thanking the little slime.

Whoosh!

The eucharist lunged at them with its spear. Munin watched the attack closely and deftly parried it with her staff.

"I didn't spend all that time learning how to fight with Seras for nothing!"

She spun her staff in her hands, then launched several stabbing attacks at the eucharist, which blocked them with the flat of its axe.

"Kh…!"

In the meantime, the eucharist's spear attacks kept coming. Piggymaru wrapped itself around Munin's arm and spread out to form a shield. By hardening itself, the slime could stop the spear attacks from getting to Munin.

It does hurt a little, though.

"P-Piggymaru… Thank you!"

Munin stood resolute as she readjusted her stance to face the eucharist.

Should I let Munin escape alone?

Should we defeat this eucharist together?

She can fight. I can be her shield and maybe even form into a spear to strike at times. Maybe we can beat th—

"Kyah?!"

Munin fell backward onto her behind.

"Squee?!"

"Gah… P-Piggymaru, are you okay?"

Munin and Piggymaru tried to fend off the eucharist's repeated attacks, but the monster was stronger and faster than both of them.

With that strength… I don't think Munin is powerful enough to beat it.

"Squee…"

We might not be able to win this fight. But Munin has an important role to play… So I… So it's come to this. I have to let her get away. I can make myself bigger and cling to that monster and buy time. Is that going to work?

No…I have to do this. This is for Munin and for him—the one who called me his partner.

The eucharist, which seemed to have been waiting for the right moment to strike, made its move.

…It's okay, Too-ka. I won't let Munin die. Not here. Not in a place like this. I'll protect her, even if it costs me everything.

…When we first met, you didn't just give me the courage to stand up to evil. You recognized the courage I already had inside of me. That's why you didn't make me your servant but your partner instead. That made me so happy. Really, so happy, Too-ka…

…I'm so glad I got to tell you that. So glad I got to tell my beloved partner…how grateful I am.

I've been so happy, and it's all because of you, Too-ka. So I…

"Paralyze."

The eucharist made to turn in the direction of the voice—then froze completely.

"Berserk."

As the eucharist burst, a man wearing a Lord of the Flies mask walked out from behind it.

"…Sorry I'm late."

If I could cry like a human, then I'm sure I would be crying now. I'm so happy to see him again. This person makes every part of me feel so at ease. He called me the best partner in the world…

"S-Squeee—!"

Too-ka!

***

Seems like Piggymaru and Munin encountered one of the mid-sized eucharists that were released into this labyrinth. It might have been tough for the two of them to handle it on their own. I'm just glad that I found them in time to head off the worst-case scenario. Being able to find these two so quickly is huge.

"Squeee~!" Piggymaru cried once it was all over. The slime jumped from Munin's shoulder over to me and settled into its usual space.

Seems like the little guy could use some love. Piggymaru must've been worried, huh? It did a great job trying to protect Munin.

I praised Piggymaru for its actions, and the slime seemed even happier than usual to receive the compliment.

Not just happy… Emotional.

"Squee…♪"

"I feel so relaxed when you're here~" I could almost hear the slime say.

We got back on the move.

"Thank you for your help, Too-ka," said Munin as she walked beside me.

"The biggest worry I had about this labyrinth was that I might not be able to find the people I needed… It really is a relief that I found you and Piggymaru so quickly."

Lokiella doesn't think this is likely…but if she's wrong and Vicius really has managed to cast Dispel Bubble on her disciples, having

Munin of the Kurosaga Clan at my side, with her Forbidden Magic, will be a crucial advantage.

"Where is Lokiella?" asked Munin.

"I haven't found her yet."

Munin and Piggymaru hadn't seen Sogou or the Takao sisters either.

At least the three of us have found each other for now.

"The closer you are to someone in the entry order, the more likely you are to end up somewhere near them."

Maybe that really is what happened…but it's not guaranteed. Those are just the odds. None of this is certain. Sogou and the Takao sisters might be a long way away from us… And Lokiella and Seras might be too.

We walked through one of the labyrinth passageways.

I don't sense anyone else. No—wait.

"Something's coming."

I ducked into a different passage from the one in which I'd felt the approaching presence.

"Keep an eye on what's behind us, Piggymaru."

I had Munin hide herself, staying quiet and low behind me.

…Should I activate Slow to prevent an ambush? That's an option, but given my limited mana pool, I'd rather use the usual MP-saving combo to take care of this.

I stayed hidden, waiting to see what would emerge from the passage in front of me. Then it appeared.

A mid-sized eucharist. I should count myself lucky it's not a disciple, I guess? Or would I rather have had the opportunity to take one of them out here?

What—is that more beings I sense?

One by one, the eucharists emerged, a line of them marching through the labyrinth.

Seems like we've come upon a cluster of them. It's kinda like one of those hordes you see in zombie movies. But even in these numbers, my status-effect skills can deal with them.

"Tch."

More of them are entering through another passage. Don't tell me they're rolling through this labyrinth in waves, trying to take us out one by one?

Piggymaru poked at the back of my neck with a tentacle. The eucharists were gathering in the passage behind us too. The room ahead of us was connected to three paths—all of them now blocked off by the flow of incoming eucharists.

Do I link up to Piggymaru to deal with them all?

Should I really use that now?

The moment I start fighting, they're going to focus on me and attack from three directions at once. I'm confident I could take them on my own, but…

I looked over at Munin. She had her staff gripped tightly in both hands as she returned my glance and nodded.

I'll fight too, her nod seemed to say.

…The problem with a horde is that each of these monsters have varying degrees of strength. I just want to make sure Munin doesn't get hit while I'm not paying attention to her side of the battle.

"As soon as I sense danger, I'll use Slow to help us escape—or I could defend you as we go in search of a place that will be easier for you to fight. There should be a building or something around. But if more of those damn eucharists come piling in from behind us…they might just be able to get to you through sheer strength in numbers."

There's almost no way for me to restore my own MP in this labyrinth. That's why I want to avoid using Slow if possible, given how much mana the skill consumes. I can't risk holding back now and losing Munin as a result, though.

Having her turn herself into a crow is an option, I suppose, but…

I looked up for a moment, only to see the sky blocked off by a white ceiling above me.

With no way to escape, that doesn't seem like a great option. I suppose finding a building somewhere and having her hide herself as a crow in there might work…although that depends on the eucharists not seeing her transform and then tracking her movements. Anyway, we need to move.

"Piggymaru, I need the Blade of the Lord of the Flies."

"Squee!"

Piggymaru created the sword for me, and I took the slime weapon in hand. It was the same red-grooved black blade as last time, but now double-edged and simpler in design, without the serrations.

"First, we need to break through that group that are approaching us from behind. Then we'll find a position where it'll be easier for me to fight while protecting you, Munin. Piggymaru, harden yourself to protect Munin if she looks to be in danger. Munin—focus on protecting yourself."

"Understood."

"Let's move."

I used Paralyze on the eucharists that were approaching our rear and charged toward them, cutting the motionless creatures down with my Lord of the Flies blade.

The eucharists in here are twice as large as they usually are… The most I can take down with a single slash is two. This blade might lose its edge if I try and extend it any further. When I took two of them down with that last strike, it felt like my swing could keep going —Piggymaru's adjusted this sword to be just right.

"…Here they come."

The eucharists from the other passages seemed to have noticed me. When I turned to look over my shoulder, I saw them closing in.

I don't know if they know the range of my skills—but some of them are holding bows, ready to fire from just out of range.

"Leave them to me!" Piggymaru squeaked, as soon as the slime saw them. The eucharists fired their arrows at Munin, but Piggymaru hardened to shield her from the attacks.

That enhanced toughness from Piggymaru's third stage of enhancement is really coming in handy.

I continued to cut down eucharists, mixing in the Paralyze/Berserk combo as we rushed down the passage. I also mixed in Sleep and scattered some Poison just in case.

I can take on a few of them at a time like this. I can manage, but…these numbers. Because of how big they are, I can't cut them down in one swipe. They might start to pile up and surround me. If they all come rushing in at once, there's a danger I might hit my target limit when dealing with them.

That's especially true when it comes to Paralyze. There's nothing lethal about paralysis, unless the targets decide to kill themselves by struggling against it… Those eucharists just sitting there without moving are going to eat into my target limit. I need to kill the targets that I paralyze and reduce their numbers.

"Paralyze."

It's times like these I really realize how important having a front-line fighter on my side is… Someone to fight beside me.

"Squee!"

Piggymaru noticed the reinforcements massing in the direction I was heading—a horde of them at the end of the passage.

They're trying to crush me with numbers, then. I can't underestimate their combined strength. They divide us with this labyrinth, then send in powerful disciples and hordes of eucharists to crush us in here. This strategy makes good use of the Divine Labyrinth the Goddess has created. These eucharists aren't worth much when our whole army is together as one—we demonstrated that to Vicius on the road to Eno. Our enemy knows that, too. They've laid a trap to sap us of our strength before they crush us all.

This makes me a bit more worried about the others who are in here. But, well, I guess it just means that Vicius knows her eucharists could be easily taken out one by one, so there's not much point in scattering them at random through the labyrinth. If it turns out her monsters are only moving in hordes, then taking this group out here will make it easier for our side to get around.

"Too-ka," said Munin. "You don't need to trouble yourself with defending me. We anticipated that such a situation might arise and Seras has taught me how to fight. I trained so hard… And Piggymaru is taking care of me too. So please… Don't hold back on my account, Too-ka!"

"…Sure. You're right."

But still…if any more of these eucharists show up to block the passage, I'll have to use Paralyze to make a wall of them, just like I did back in the Ruins of Disposal. I sure hope that tactic works with these things.

"Squee?"

I looked back in the direction we had just come. It was still faint… But over the horde of advancing eucharists, I heard a sound growing closer. The noise increased as it approached at incredible speed, slashes and strikes ringing through the air as the mass of monsters was gradually mown down.

That must be…

"Sir Too-ka!"

…Jeez.

I couldn't help but smile.

"Couldn't have asked for better timing for you to show up."

Slicing through the eucharists like she was cutting through tofu, the Princess Knight—Seras Ashrain—advanced toward us.

"Seras!"

Munin's expression flushed with relief. It looked as if Seras had only transformed her sword into its Prime Armor form. The blade of light increased the range of her strikes and made it almost certain she hit her mark.

I didn't know she could use her armor like that… I guess she's only using her sword so that she can conserve her energy for the fight to come. She must've made the call that she doesn't need to use her armor here.

It's no use. The level she's fighting on is just way beyond anything I'm capable of.

With Seras in overdrive like this, it took her no time at all to catch up with us. We stood back to back in the passage.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting."

"Perfect timing. You got here just as I was thinking how nice it'd be to have you around."

"Squee~!"

With Seras here—I can fight while keeping an eye on Munin.

"Sir Too-ka."

"Yeah," I said.

First…

"Let's take them out, Seras."

It didn't feel like the process took ten minutes. I used Paralyze to freeze the eucharists in place, then Seras cut them down. The eucharists could do nothing to combat Seras, and they died without even coming close to touching her. She let the light fade from her sword, one eye turned to the dissolving eucharists to her side.

"Seras!" cried Munin as she embraced her.

"I am happy to see that you are uninjured," Seras replied with a smile.

She turned in my direction and explained how she had come upon us.

"I was running through the labyrinth, searching for our allies, and found that marching horde of eucharists. I thought that there might be someone fighting them at the end of the passage, so I decided to follow the flow."

"You haven't seen any disciples yet, then."

"I have not. I met with many eucharists in this labyrinth, but none that I struggled to defeat."

I don't know what kind of monster would even pose a challenge to Seras right now—but putting that aside, it sounds like she hasn't found any of the other entrants. Sogou and the Takao sisters entered close to us in the order, but we haven't found them.

"Any citizens of the capital?"

"No."

No citizens either. Maybe there weren't as many people left living in Eno as we thought… Or…it would also make sense for them to be hiding in the buildings somewhere. I guess we can mostly forget about them for now.

"In any case… It's lucky we were all able to regroup unharmed."

"Speaking of those who entered close in the order, Lady Lokiella…"

I'd like to find her as soon as we can.

I brought up a mental picture of the map of Eno in my head and looked at the buildings and signs around us—then looked in the direction of the castle.

"As you all know, I've told everyone to head for the castle gates unless there are other considerations that require their attention. If everyone's on their way to the castle at the center of the labyrinth, it should help us to group up and prevent us from getting caught wherever we teleported to."

If Lokiella's analysis and the intel that Lis fought to get is accurate… Then there's a very low chance that Vicius is going to leave the castle itself. We already know that her best course of action is waiting until the Holy Eye has been destroyed. And then there's the divine carving that ties its activator to a certain spot, enhancing their power. If that carving of hers is somewhere near our goal, then she should want to stay as close to it as possible. Apparently, that enhancement of hers is also powering up the eucharists that are on their way to destroy the Holy Eye of Yonato, after all. If her goal is to destroy that eye as fast as possible before escaping into the heavens, then waiting near the end of this labyrinth gives her the best odds of victory.

Of course, it would also be dangerous to feel too certain she'll be there. It's possible she might decide to come out into the labyrinth precisely because she knows we won't expect her to.

I've made all the preparations I could. Gathered all the allies I possibly can. I've drawn together all the threads I could grasp and woven their potential into a path to victory. But there are still unknown variables at play. Anything could happen. So now that we've come this far…we need to react to the situation as it develops and doing the very best we can.

"We're headed to the castle."

But no matter what…

"This is where we finish this, Vicius."

Afterword

IN THIS VOLUME of the final arc, Too-ka returns to the capital of Alion. Does it feel as if the final showdown is drawing near? Since we're getting to the end, there are lots of illustrations of different characters popping up in each other's company. With everyone getting together again, it's starting to feel like an all-star team. And the enemies have taken the field, too—I decided to paint the three disciples a little differently from the other villains that have appeared in this series, so I hope they do well in their role as the bad guys.

As I was writing the scenes in the Divine Labyrinth, I pictured what was happening in there like a manga (which might be the reason I changed POV in shorter bursts, as, in my head, it was structured like the pages of a manga). At the same time, I think this volume is filled with the kind of description that only novels can provide. I hope that the writing added flavor to the experience.

I'd like to move on to some acknowledgments. To my editor O-sama, I know I have much to learn as an author, but thank you for your continued support. KWKM-sama, your hard work continues to capture the charms of the characters you've drawn for this volume. I'd like to thank you not just for your work on this book, but all the illustration work you have contributed to this series.

Uchiuchi Keyaki-sama, Uyoshi Sho-sama, I'm so happy that, thanks to your work, I can now read so many past scenes in manga form (and I'm so excited to read the new chapters too). I'd also like to

give my thanks to everyone who has contributed to the publication of this work, and the many staff who have been involved with the production of the anime adaptation. Thank you so much for everything you have done.

Thank you to all of the online readers who have continued to support this series over its many years of publication. Thank you for choosing to buy this book and continuing to support the series. I'd appreciate if you could stay with us for just a little longer to see Too-ka and the others through to the end of their story.

Well, then, I hope we can meet again in the next volume. *"Now that I've come this far, I suppose I've just got to do it,"* I say, as we launch determinedly into the final (planned) showdown. Well, then, goodbye.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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