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2
HOW I BECAME KING BY EATING MONSTERS

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How I Became King by Eating Monsters Volume 2

Daken

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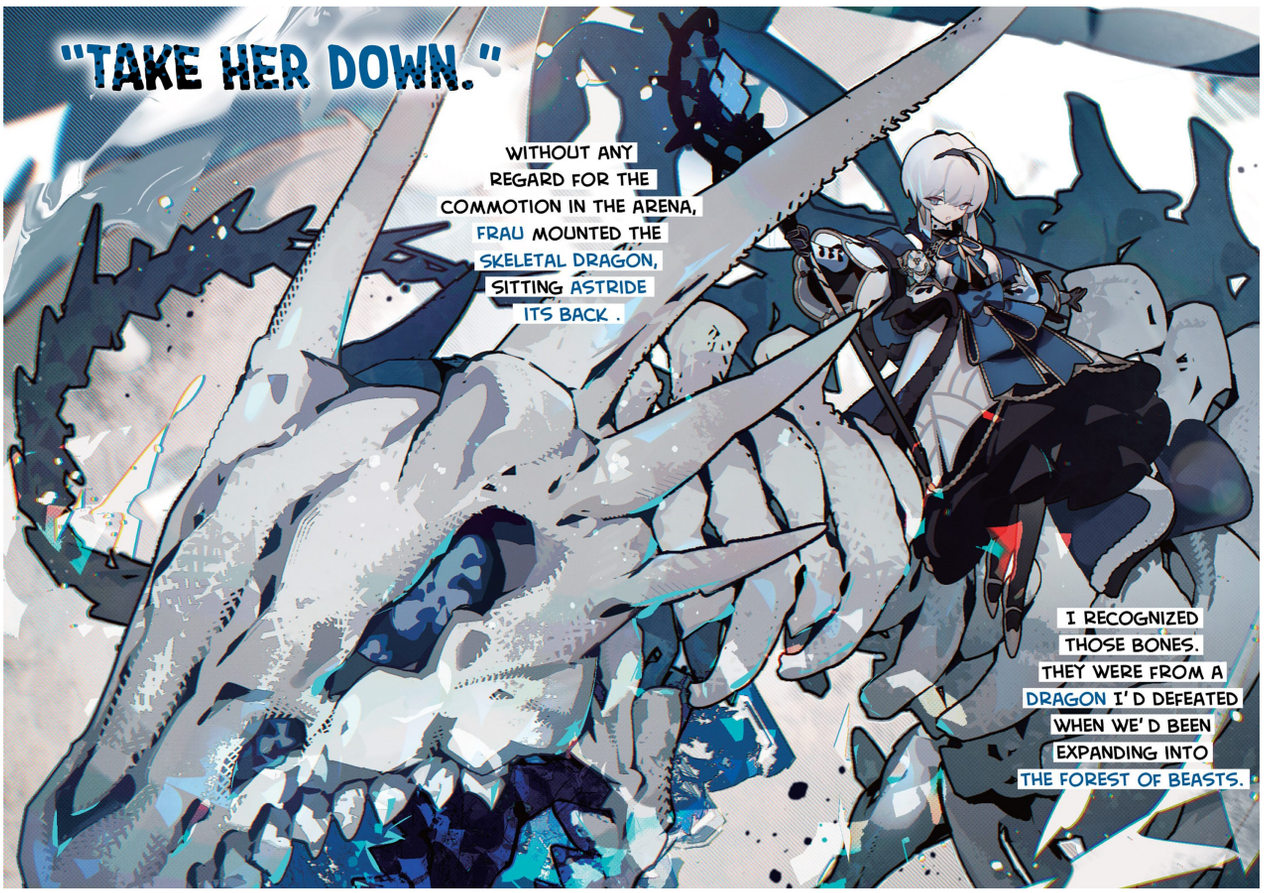
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II


"TAKE HER DOWN."
WITHOUT ANY REGARD FOR THE COMMOTION IN THE ARENA, FRAU MOUNTED THE SKELETAL DRAGON, SITTING ASTRIDE ITS BACK .
I RECOGNIZED THOSE BONES. THEY WERE FROM A DRAGON I'D DEFEATED WHEN WE'D BEEN EXPANDING INTO THE FOREST OF BEASTS.


AS SOON AS I SAW HER, A CHILL RAN DOWN MY SPINE.
THE MASKED WOMAN NOTICED ME, AND CASUALLY RAISED HER HAND IN GREETING.
...YEAH, THAT'S DEFINITELY MY MASTER.

Prologue

THE white carriage's luxurious ornamentation glinted brightly in the scorching rays of the afternoon sun. Each of the carriage's four corners were carved into intricate designs and decorated with gemstones. The top of the carriage was shaped like an arch, and another complicated carving adorned the roof. A powerful, imposing horse with a slick, sparkling coat pulled the carriage. The internal compartment and seating, separated from the driver by an expensive silk curtain, was covered in a fine carpet of rich crimson. Even the driver sat on a soft cushion embroidered with gold thread.

It was obviously excessive. Even royalty would balk at riding in such a flashy carriage. The common people would be liable to resent them for their extravagant spending, and more importantly, it was so gaudy as to be embarrassing.

But the owner of this particular carriage was relaxing inside the spacious vehicle without a care in the world for what others might say. She was currently traveling down a mostly deserted highway, but her attitude would probably have been no different if she'd been in the middle of a crowded city street.

The woman had long, wavy violet hair and clear, deep blue eyes. Her white dress offered alluring glimpses of her porcelain skin. She was unquestionably beautiful—and yet, there was something about her that disquieted all those who laid eyes on her.

Her handmaiden, sitting next to her, was slowly fanning her with a feather fan.

"How dull," the woman said, and her handmaiden startled.

The handmaiden couldn't decide how best to respond. If she said something without thinking, she might worsen her mistress's mood, and she had no idea what sort of punishment would be waiting for her if that happened.

"Perhaps I should have come alone?" the woman continued without waiting for an answer.

If only you had, the handmaiden thought bitterly. As soon as her mistress had returned to her estate from the castle, she had suddenly said, “I’m going to Farune.” Naturally, her servants and handmaidens hadn’t been at all prepared. However, the woman had paid them no mind, insisting that she depart right away. Her behavior was outrageous. But the handmaiden had known that if she didn’t do exactly as the woman said, she’d be harshly punished. So, with no other choice, she had gathered up and packed everything that seemed necessary into the two carriages that were following behind them. This included a wide array of outfits, makeup, jewelry, and so on—none of which seemed essential for such an impromptu trip—but it was clear as day that the woman would get angry if the handmaiden didn’t pack them. And that woman’s anger was the most terrifying thing of all.

The woman was one of Dorssen’s five vaunted Champions, and her name was Carmilla. It was rumored that she had the ability to behead someone with a twitch of her finger. And in fact, Carmilla freely made demonstrations of that power, so the handmaiden knew the rumor to be true. Of course, she’d never witnessed someone actually being *beheaded*, but it was common enough for Carmilla to slash things up in her mansion to amuse herself. Carmilla may have been her mistress, but the handmaiden had no desire to associate with her beyond what was absolutely necessary.

“Hey, do you know what kind of place Farune is?” Carmilla asked her handmaiden, finally tired of feeling bored.

“Well,” the handmaiden began, “it is rumored that their king, Zero, usurped the throne by force.”

“Isn’t it only natural for those with power to rule?” Carmilla smiled bewitchingly.

The handmaiden knew that Carmilla was implying that she, too, had that power, and that natural ability to rule. “Indeed, mistress,” she said after a pause.

“Anything else?” Carmilla asked.

“They say there is a group of powerful warriors in Farune known as the Hundred. I have heard that they spend their days fighting one another in the arena, and in battle, they all madly rush in and rampage indiscriminately around the battlefield. And,

in the recent war with our country, a single one of them was able to hold his own against countless soldiers…”

“That’s nothing more than the ravings of sore losers,” Carmilla spat, a cold look in her eyes. The handmaiden shrunk back, thinking that perhaps she had irritated her mistress. “There’s no way a bunch of hooligans that fight for wagers in an arena are that strong. If people just used their heads a little, they’d see how nonsensical it all is.”

“I wholeheartedly agree, but they did cause our army to suffer a crushing defeat at Brix, which is why the public speaks about them so. After all, the Champions, Lord Matheus and Lord Dante, did perish in battle against them.”

“Don’t you think they just couldn’t keep up the act anymore?” Carmilla said. These were the deaths of her former comrades she was talking about, but she laughed mockingly. “They were only Champions because no one else was fit for the position, and they died because they forgot their place. They always tried to pretend to be more than they really were.”

“Yes, it is exactly as you say, Lady Carmilla…” Despite what the handmaiden said, though, she secretly regretted that Matheus and Dante had died. They were both considered gallant knights, and had enjoyed widespread popularity—especially Matheus, who had been known for his handsome looks and impeccable conduct. Women all over the kingdom had pined for him. Comparatively, Carmilla was practically despised.

Yes, she was exceptionally and famously beautiful, but she was more infamous for her nasty temperament, which drove away any man who might otherwise have been interested. She was also known for her strength, but in the sense that she was viewed as a tyrant. If anything, she was seen as more monster than human. Nearly all the citizens of Dorssen probably wished it had been Carmilla who had fought at the Battle of Brix, rather than Matheus and Dante—and not because they wished she was dead. They actually believed that they would have won if she’d been there.

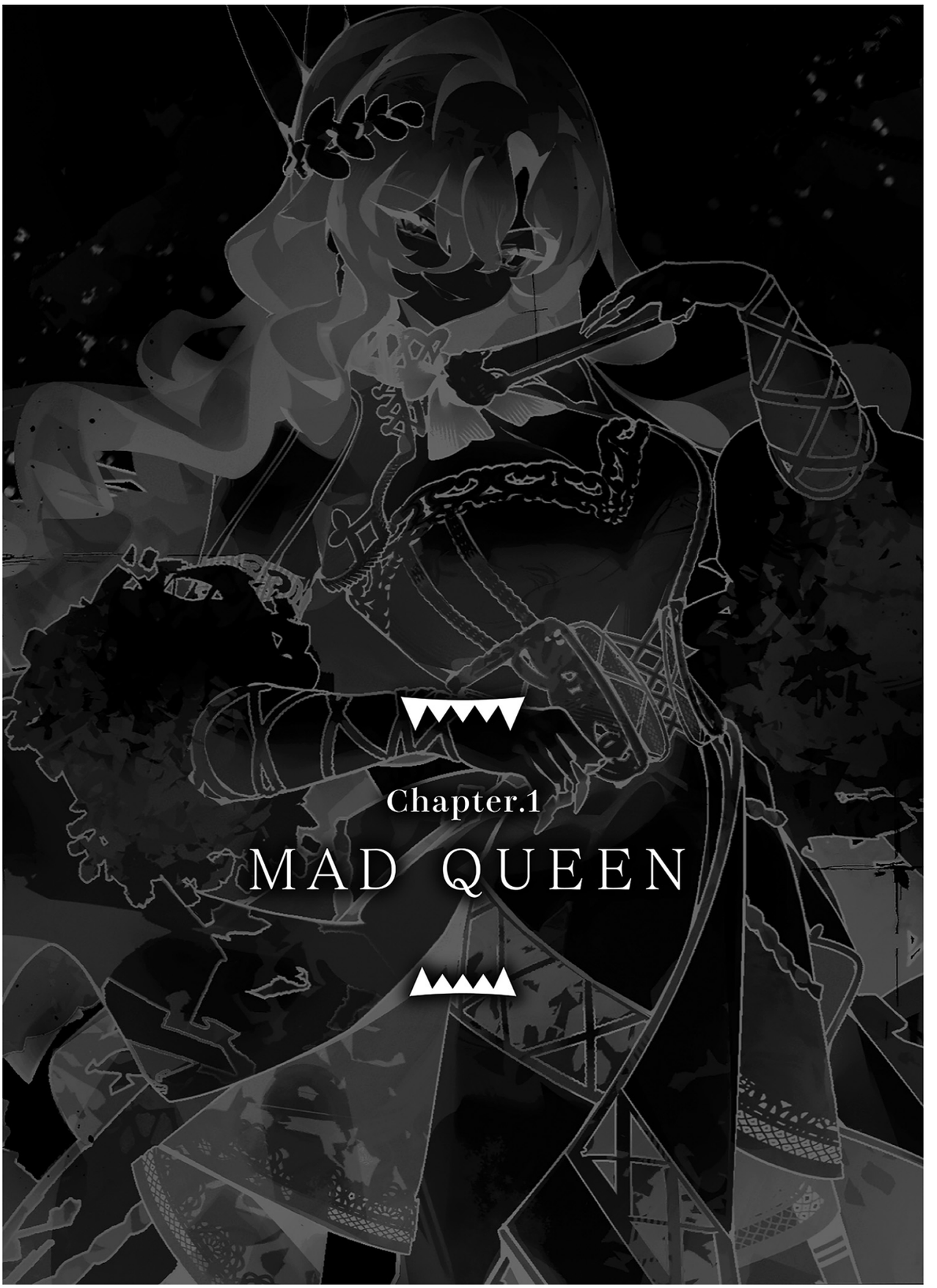
“Um…there are also rumors that the king of Farune gains strength by eating the meat of monsters, and that the Hundred, too, may have achieved their demonic power that way…” The handmaiden didn’t place much stock in those rumors herself, but she wanted to defend Matheus’s honor as much as she could.

“How foolish,” Carmilla said, laughing scornfully. “No one would need to put in the work training if it were possible to grow stronger by eating monster meat. Do I make myself clear? Power comes from proper lineage, first and foremost. A bunch of commoner nobodies who aren’t even knights will only make themselves sick if they eat that poison.” She paused for a moment, considering. “They’re probably just driving themselves into a frenzy by consuming so much poison, and that’s why they’re fighting so recklessly. Warriors with no regard for their own lives can be trouble, but it won’t work against me.” Clearly, Carmilla looked down on the Hundred as a group of backwater brutes.

“You are quite correct,” the handmaiden agreed. “There is no one who can defeat you, Lady Carmilla.” The handmaiden did have confidence in her mistress—or at least, she had confidence in her strength. No one was more violent than she was, at any rate.

This servile reply improved Carmilla’s mood, and she looked out at the scenery through a gap in the curtain. She could see a gigantic structure in the distance. *That must be Farune’s arena I’ve heard so much about*, she thought. “What a tasteless building,” she said, squinting.

The carriage continued along the highway, advancing on the road to Farune.



Chapter.1

MAD QUEEN

THERE was a man named Yamato in the Hundred. At around thirty years old, he was older than the five founders, which made him one of the group's most senior members. He had black hair that he always wore tied back and soft features. Overall, his looks were nothing to write home about.

In the past, he'd run a martial arts hall in a rural Farunian town, where he'd taught swordsmanship. Rumors about the Hundred had piqued his interest, so he'd traveled to the capital city and joined the organization. Perhaps because of his age, it took some time for his body to adapt to eating monster meat. However, with extraordinary effort, he cleared that hurdle, and over time, he gradually raised his ranking in the Hundred. Currently, he was ranked fourth.

Because of his history as a teacher, Yamato possessed a deep knowledge of sword techniques, and everyone—including himself—considered him to be a swordsmanship fanatic. He was good-natured and taught swordsmanship to anyone who asked, so his friends affectionately called him "Master."

Yamato's physical abilities weren't all that impressive, but he did possess one extraordinary gift: he could acquire any sword technique he saw. This ability had revealed itself after Mars exhibited the Sonic Blade technique in a ranking match. Some time later, Yamato was fighting in a ranking match of his own, and was able to replicate the technique in battle. Sonic Blade was a highly difficult sword technique, sometimes referred to as the "swordmaster's technique," so Yamato's use of it surprised everyone there. And because Yamato was such a good teacher, he was also able to impart the skill to others. However, Sonic Blade was a highly demanding skill, so only a few top-ranked members of the Hundred could use it. Either way, Yamato's unusual and surprising talent had given Mars a high opinion of him—and after Mars's takeover of the kingdom of Farune, he had officially appointed Yamato as the royal sword instructor.

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ONE day, Yamato received a summons from Mars. But he hadn't been called to the throne room; they were at the castle training ground.



“SO, were you able to acquire the Champions’ techniques?” I asked Yamato, who stood stiffly in front of me. We were in the castle’s training facility, and instead of armor, we were both wearing simple attire that was easy to move around in.

“Yes, I was, Your Majesty,” Yamato replied, making a quick bow. “I am certain that the sword techniques they employed were Mirage Sword and Earth Break.”

As always, he was polite and modest. He was one of the few among the rough crowd that made up the Hundred who actually gave a favorable impression. His teaching experience had made him an expert in sword techniques, and his knowledge had grown exponentially since I had let him borrow books on sword fighting from the castle’s collection.

“Mirage Sword and Earth Break, huh?” I considered. “What kind of techniques are they?”

“Mirage Sword intensifies the user’s heart rate, allowing them to wield their sword with astounding speed for a short period of time,” Yamato explained. “However, while it increases speed, it doesn’t increase strength. As such, the technique isn’t that impressive if one doesn’t also alter their sword to make it lighter, or if one isn’t already quite powerful to begin with.”

I see. That must be why Matheus was using such a slender sword.

“What about Earth Break?”

“It is a technique that combines physical strength and mana,” Yamato began. “The books say it gets its name from its power to split the ground open. It relies heavily on visualization, so a user with already-tremendous strength uses mana to amplify it, and then is able to produce a shockwave by swinging their sword. The shockwave has a short range, and it can’t be used like Sonic Blade. However, as long as it’s at very close range, I think it can be considered a powerful threat.”

So visualization is important? That must be why Dante was using a greatsword.

“Now, how about you show it to me in action?” I said, drawing my longsword, getting ready to block his technique. “Come at me.”

“Certainly, Your Majesty.” Yamato drew his own sword, a two-handed longsword like mine. “Let us begin.” He held his sword at

the ready, then activated Mirage Sword. His blade left behind an afterimage as he moved it. It looked like he was slashing multiple times in a single instant.

Oh, look at that, it's exactly the same, I thought. I was surprised, but I blocked all of Yamato's attacks. It took less movement to defend than to attack, and I had the edge in terms of ability.

"That was wonderful, Your Majesty! I would expect nothing less from you!" Yamato said reverently.

I felt a bit bad about blocking the technique he had spent all that time learning, but he didn't seem to mind at all.

"Next, I'll use Earth Break." Yamato held his sword aloft, then brought it down with all his might. *"Yah!"* At his shout, mana cloaked his sword, and his downward slash was accompanied by a shockwave.

Instead of blocking his attack, I jumped backward to dodge it. There was a dull crashing sound as the earth rumbled and the shockwave left an indentation in the ground. It wasn't as powerful as when Dante had used it, but Yamato seemed to have replicated it more or less.

"That one looks like it takes a lot of mana," I remarked. It seemed Yamato's mana had had more of an effect than Dante's had.

"Indeed," Yamato agreed. "With more natural strength, mana isn't as necessary, because a person's mana only supports that base strength. However, I'm not as strong as Dante, so I had to use quite a bit of mana."

"So as long as you've got strength, you don't need mana," I considered. "Does that mean it's possible to use the technique without strength, as long as you have the mana to make up for it?"

"I imagine that a certain level of strength and ability with a sword is required. At the very least, it isn't the kind of technique that a wizard could easily perform."

I imagined a wizard holding up his staff and trying to use Earth Break. *Yeah, that seems like it would be pretty weak.*

"I see. All right, why don't you teach me those techniques now?" I asked. "I'll give you an additional reward."

At that, Yamato shrunk back, looking embarrassed. "Why, I could never accept payment, Your Majesty! It is already the

greatest honor imaginable for a lowly person such as myself to be granted the opportunity to learn such legendary techniques! I would never have been able to use them without the strength Your Majesty bestowed upon me!”

He meant that his strength was the result of eating monster meat. Apparently, back when he was still running his sword school, he had learned that acquiring techniques beyond a certain level required a requisite amount of strength and mana, which he had realized he lacked. But then, he’d heard the rumor that it was possible to increase a person’s strength by eating monster meat, so he had joined the Hundred in the pursuit of pushing past his own limits. To support his incredible obsession with sword techniques, he consumed large quantities of that disgusting monster meat, and eventually overcame his limitations, though not without ruining his own health several times in the process.

Over time and thanks to continual harsh training, he was able to acquire highly complex techniques. I’d heard that tears had streamed down his cheeks the first time he managed to replicate Sonic Blade. Because I was the one who had given him the opportunity to change himself, he felt a great deal of gratitude toward me. In fact, he was so grateful that, after I demonstrated Sonic Blade in a ranking match, he had thrown himself to the ground before me and sworn his undying loyalty. Then, he cried again when I appointed him to the position of sword instructor, and was deeply moved when I granted him access to the castle’s collection of books about swordsmanship.

In reality, I had only given him the books because I didn’t feel like studying sword techniques myself. And I had only made him sword instructor because personally, I had a hard time acquiring techniques on my own. Yamato seemed like he didn’t think particularly highly of himself, but being able to learn sword techniques just from seeing them was an incredible talent. He would probably have been paid better in another country, but he seemed perfectly satisfied with his current position.

“Is…that so?” I replied. “Well, I’ll be counting on you next time there’s the chance to learn a new technique.”

I had given Yamato the duty of observing the two Champions as they fought during the recent war, with the instructions to learn their techniques. He seemed to have been delighted to take on

the task, and after the battle was over, he began passionately pontificating about how incredible the fight had been from a technical standpoint. He went on for so long that it was actually a bit off-putting.

“Please, leave it to me, Your Majesty!” Yamato’s eyes were sparkling. “My life is in your hands!”

What’s that supposed to mean? Take better care of your life!



SWORD techniques are skills that combine swordsmanship and mana. I was knowledgeable and skilled with a sword. However, I, Yamato, previously lacked the stamina and the mana to use sword techniques. Actually, no; though I only had a semblance of real skill, the problem was that I was unable to fully give up on my desire to acquire sword techniques. It isn’t very widely known, but both mana and physical strength are matters of inborn talent, and they greatly depend on heredity. There is a limit to how much stronger a person can grow just through training, and I came up against that limit early, when I was still young.

Even though I’m better than anyone, in terms of what I can do with it…

That thought constantly smoldered in the back of my mind, but, unable to do anything about it, I scraped by on the meager income I earned teaching swordsmanship in rural Farune. Then, one day, I heard a rumor about an organization known as the Hundred. Apparently, they spent all their time hunting monsters and fighting each other, and if a person joined, they could acquire strength that surpassed their ordinary limits. Hearing that gave me a dim glimmer of hope, and I made the decision to join.

When I did, I came close to death again and again as I hunted powerful monsters, consumed their poisonous meat, and engaged in all-out brawls against the other members. If a hell really existed, then the Hundred had to be the place that was closest to it. However, by surviving that hell, I underwent a dramatic rebirth. Yes, all I had to do to surpass my limits was to force myself to train in a way that pushed me beyond them. And oh, how wonderful it was!

The man who invented this inhuman system, King Zero, was practically a god to me. The countless techniques I wanted to employ, but couldn't, became simple for me to use. When I acquired Sonic Blade in particular, I thought I might go mad from joy. There were more than a few times during my days in the Hundred when I'd mentally prepared myself for death, but all the pain in the world was nothing to me. Because what was the purpose of a life without being strong?

On one particular day, His Majesty graciously allowed me to teach him Mirage Sword and Earth Break. I only had to show him the essentials before he easily mastered both—and the techniques were more powerful in his hands than in those of the original users, the Champions. When King Zero used Mirage Sword, his entire body—not just his sword—left behind an afterimage, and with Earth Break, he actually split the earth apart.

If I had tried to block his Earth Break, I would probably have been flattened along with my sword and my armor. He was probably using the true, intended form of the techniques. When ordinary mortals like the rest of us employed them, we were just children playing pretend; only when someone truly talented like His Majesty used the techniques did they reveal their genuine power.

And what a delight it was to see him using those true techniques up close! Was there any pleasure greater than this?

His Majesty held my abilities in high esteem, but my sword techniques were nothing more than cheap parlor tricks, nowhere close to reaching their full potential. His Majesty was probably the only person in existence at whose hands the techniques could manifest in their truest form.

The position of sword instructor was my calling. My dream was for His Majesty to master each and every sword technique, and become the world's greatest swordsman.



However, to acquire every technique, I would have to learn those from other countries, and sword techniques were tantamount to national secrets. What would be the best way to learn them?

Of course, Farune just had to conquer every other country! Luckily, His Majesty had already set his sights on the unification of the entire continent of Ares—how magnificent. I hoped His Majesty would conquer the world as soon as possible, so he could acquire every last sword technique there was.

II: Carmilla

A woman gracefully walked down the street while humming a tune, her high heels clicking against the paving stones. She was wearing a showy, stylish white dress and cooling her face with a handheld fan. She seemed to be a woman of high status—a rare sight in Farune's capital city as of late. Since Zero's coup, hardly any nobles could be seen out and about, and this was especially true of women in fancy attire, who had completely vanished. Of course, even before the coup, upper-class women had rarely walked down the street so casually.

For all these reasons, the capital's residents beheld the woman with bafflement. She had attractive features and a well-proportioned, alluring body, but everyone's suspicions won out, and the feeling that was in the forefront of their minds was confusion as to what she was doing in a place like this. The woman, meanwhile, didn't spare a single thought for their gazes, and instead proceeded onward, heading to the castle.

There, at the entrance to the castle, the Blue Knights were on guard. Unlike the Black Knights and the Red Knights, who had distinguished themselves in the recent war with Dorssen, the Blue Knights were mainly entrusted with the defense of the capital city, so they hadn't made many contributions of note. However, almost all the members of the order also belonged to the Hundred, and they were in every respect equal in strength to the other knightly orders.

The two knights on guard duty had a bad feeling as they watched the woman in the white dress slowly approach.

“Hey, that woman isn’t going to try and come into the castle, is she?” one of the knights said to his partner. As part of their job, they knew the faces of nearly everyone who regularly frequented the castle, and they could tell that the woman in question didn’t have any business being there.

“Don’t be so sure,” the other guard replied. “Just look at how she’s walking. There’s no hesitation there.”

“You ever seen her before?”

“’Course not. I’ve never seen a woman dressed like that come walking into the castle off the street even once, and not when the nobility was still around either.”

The nobility had despised walking around outside. If at all possible, they always used carriages to get around, and this tendency was especially pronounced in noblewomen. Their dresses and shoes were a far cry from anything resembling functionality, which made walking tiresome for them.

“Do you think maybe she’s from a brothel, and she’s just wearing a noble outfit? I hear there are some guys who like that stuff.”

“Maybe. She could be trying to come to the castle to settle some sort of lovers’ quarrel in person.”

“That could be it. The man involved has got to be someone like Lord Chrom, or Lord Warren, I bet.”

Since their younger days, the captains of the Black Knights and the Red Knights had been known as playboys, and it was rumored that they regularly took advantage of the freedom their bachelorhood provided by frequenting the capital’s red-light district. Still, they were sensible enough not to do anything that would bring someone marching into the castle after them, so the guard’s guess was incorrect.

“Well, I know it’s not *our* captain.”

“That’s for sure.”

The captain of the Blue Knights, Bledd, was a model knight who conducted himself with utmost integrity. During the coup, he had only betrayed the former regime and sided with Mars because he had been concerned about corruption in the kingdom. He was a sincere and earnest person to the core.

As the two guards chatted, the woman in the white dress finally reached the gate.

“Excuse me, but would you mind giving me your name? What is your business in the castle?” one of the Blue Knights asked politely. The woman was as suspicious as could be, but the knight couldn’t completely rule out the slim possibility that she was connected with someone authorized to enter. She didn’t look like the type to try and forcefully push her way in, either.

“Oh my, and here I was, thinking I was famous,” the woman said. “I suppose I’m not known all the way out here. How troublesome.” But she didn’t look at all troubled as she covered her mouth with her fan and smiled.

“You’re…famous?”

“Yes, I am. Back home, at least, I’m famous enough that no one would dare stand in my way.”

Is she a foreign noble? the guards wondered, exchanging glances. They hadn’t been told anything about expecting a visit.

“With whom are you planning to meet? I can go confirm with them.”

“Oh, I’m not expected,” she said. “I just…there’s someone I’d like to meet: King Zero. You see, I’m afraid he may be the victim of a misunderstanding. It would upset me personally if he were to look down on the Champions after defeating those two weaklings, and it would be quite lamentable for Dorssen as well.” She fluttered her fan idly as she spoke. “I believe that, as one of the five Champions, I might be able to lend my country a helping hand. I’ve traveled here in secret, and even His Majesty doesn’t know I’ve come. Now, after walking on your poor provincial roads, I’m exhausted, so would you mind letting me in?”

The two Blue Knights were at a loss.

“You’re one of Dorssen’s champions? In that outfit?”

“My name is Carmilla. Oh, but please, don’t treat me the same as Matheus and Dante—those two were Champions merely to keep the seats warm.” The woman lightly fanned her face and gave another bewitching smile. No matter how the guards looked at her, her appearance was closer to that of a high-class lady of the night than that of a knight, and they didn’t really get the feeling she was one of the Champions.

“…For now, would you mind leaving? Champion or not, we cannot simply allow a Dorssenian into the castle.”

“How unaccommodating,” Carmilla said with a giggle. Then she pointed her fan at the two guards and softly waved it, releasing a faint puff of air that quickly turned into an intense gale and blew the two knights away. As they flew through the air, they smacked against the gate, and with a loud noise, it opened.

“Ah, and you’ve opened the gate for me. What helpful guards.”

With a sidelong glance at the two unmoving knights, Carmilla entered the castle. Inside, the other Blue Knights on guard who had heard the noise immediately rushed up to her. Without paying them a moment’s notice, she advanced. Her shoes made a clicking noise as she walked.

“Hey, lady! Who the hell are you?!”

Several knights blocked Carmilla’s path. Again, she waved her fan at them, and its breeze changed into a wave of energy that sent them flying. Some of the knights she knocked over started throwing up blood from the impact they had sustained.

“What was that just now?” someone yelled. “Magic? Surround her and take her down! Don’t let her get any further!”

More knights tried to surround Carmilla, but she snapped the fingers on her right hand, the one that wasn’t holding the fan. The snap generated the usual sound, along with a blade of air from the tips of her fingers, and it cut down one of the knights, piercing right through his armor.

“Is that Sonic Blade?!”

A wave of agitation rippled through the knights. Sonic Blade was a sword technique, not a spell. And on top of that, there wasn’t any indication that Carmilla had even voiced an incantation. But if she wasn’t a wizard, then just what was she?

Carmilla kept snapping her fingers, and every time she did, the knight on the receiving end of her attack was blown back and left covered in blood. Several knights tried slashing at her from her blind spots, and though she wasn’t visibly dodging them, none of the attacks made contact. After their blades cut nothing but air, the knights were brought down by a point-blank counterattack from Carmilla.

And so, Farune’s royal castle was steadily dyed red with blood.



WITH the corridor empty of any who would block her path, Carmilla continued ahead. Most of the castle's civil servants and handmaidens had already fled because of the commotion. Carmilla didn't lay a hand on the ones she did encounter, instead heading straight for the throne room.

"Halt." A man wielding a sword and a shield stood in her way. He was wearing the blue armor that indicated he was one of the Blue Knights. "I am Bledd," he said, "the captain of the Blue Knights. It looks like you've taken down my subordinates, so I ask: who are you?"

Bledd had short, slightly unruly hair in a light shade of brown that matched his eyes. His face was dignified, yet stubborn. He held up his shield, waiting for his opponent's next move.

Carmilla sighed, then irritably replied, "I suppose I must respond in kind, now that you've introduced yourself. I'm Carmilla, and I am the third of Dorssen's five Champions," she said. "Would you mind stopping your pointless resistance and getting out of my way? My business is with King Zero."

"So you're number three, huh? I'm tenth in the Hundred, myself. Don't think you'll have an easy time defeating me."

"You're awfully stuck up, for being number ten in a minor knightly order in a backwater kingdom in the middle of nowhere," Carmilla said. Then, she snapped her fingers.

Bledd's shield made a shrill noise as it blocked the blade of wind.

"...Sonic Blade?!" he exclaimed. "You can fire it off with a snap?!" He was surprised, but remained conscientious in his examination of the distance between them.

"Oh, you blocked my attack? Could your shield be made of mithril, perhaps?" Carmilla looked surprised, too.

"His Majesty bestowed this shield upon me. Attacks like that won't work against it!"

Bledd's shield was round, and not particularly large, but it was made of mithril and had magic applied to it, which made it a powerful piece of defensive equipment. Mars had found it in the Forest of Beasts, but both he and the majority of the Hundred focused exclusively on offense, so there were few among them who used shields. Bledd happened to be skilled with shields, so Mars had given it to him. Even though it had only been because

Mars didn’t need it himself, Bledd had been overjoyed at the gift. Since then, it had been his favorite shield. He treated it as nothing less than a new family heirloom.

For her next attack, Carmilla waved her fan, striking Bledd with a blast of air, but he blocked that with his shield too.

“What a bothersome shield,” Carmilla said.

As Bledd blocked her attacks, he closed the distance between them, then swung his sword at her. In response, Carmilla sprang backward, then snapped several times in a row, firing off multiple blades of air—which Bledd continued to block with precision. Consistent defense was Captain Bledd’s trademark. With his understated-yet-solid fighting style, he was rated highly by some of the more discerning arena aficionados.

“You won’t win if you just keep defending,” Carmilla taunted. She attacked without a moment’s rest, weaving together blades of wind from her fingers and shockwaves from her fan.

As Bledd continued defending, he lowered his stance, dropping his weight and putting power into his legs. Then, still holding up his shield, he leaped at Carmilla. “I’m not just defending!”

This was a technique, one that unified both attack and defense, called Shield Bash. It was basically a body slam, but honed into a powerful ramming attack that entailed charging in with a shield while infusing one’s entire body with mana. However, it didn’t hit Carmilla. Bledd passed right by her.

“I’m not done yet!”

As soon as Bledd landed, he took advantage of the rebound and activated Shield Bash a second time. This chain attack was Bledd’s trademark special move, and with it he had defeated many of his opponents in the arena. He used the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling to bounce around like a rubber ball and repeatedly attempt Shield Bash, but the attack never even grazed Carmilla. “Why isn’t it working?!” Bledd shouted, bewildered.

“Such a modest man. Do you perhaps find it embarrassing to touch a woman?” Carmilla jeered. “But I’m bored. I can appreciate your simple straightforwardness, but you’re missing something.”

“Wha—” Having been told something similar before in his private life, Bledd was momentarily at a loss for words, and he came to a stop.

Carmilla’s form wavered, as if surrounded by a haze of hot air. “You lack experience.” Her voice came from behind Bledd. She had used an afterimage to move at high speed.

Bledd turned around, trying instantly to put space between them, but with another snap, his body was slashed apart.

III: The Frenzied Princess

EVEN as Carmilla’s Sonic Blade sliced up his body, Bledd endured it, managing to put distance between them. However, he had taken serious damage. He was covered in blood, only barely managing to stay on his feet by using his sword to support himself.

“You sure are annoyingly tough, to be able to take that and survive,” Carmilla said, looking exasperated.

With effort, Bledd spoke. “None in the Hundred would die from an attack like that.”

“But I killed many of your subordinates on the way here, don’t you know?” Carmilla had, in fact, taken down the Blue Knights who’d confronted her, leaving their bodies scattered all over the castle’s entrance hall.

“They aren’t dead. Their training prepares them better than that. If they could die from that attack, they would never have survived being in the Hundred.” Bledd was panting, but a faint smile crept onto his face.

The members of the Hundred ate a wide variety of different types of monster meat every day, but all meat from monsters improved a person’s vitality. The vitality of monsters far surpassed that of humans, but humans could absorb it from monsters, and thanks to that, the Hundred were able to engage in near-death combat almost every day. The Blue Knights that counted themselves among the Hundred’s membership were no exception.

Carmilla sighed loudly. “How impressive—your bluff, that is. Even though you and your subordinates are risking your lives in such a pointless fight.” She prepared to snap her fingers, but then, a man appeared behind Bledd.

“Actually, it wasn’t pointless at all. Thanks to their stalling, I made it in time.”

“...And who are you?” Carmilla asked.

The man had tied-back black hair and an unusual style of dress, wearing a robe held up at the waist by a sash. He had a soft and unremarkable face. In his left hand, he was holding a longsword in its scabbard, and a single armlet adorned his wrist.

“I am number four in the Hundred, and my name is Yamato. I serve as Farune’s sword instructor.” He bowed slightly, keeping his eyes locked on Carmilla the entire time.

“Master…” Bledd looked at Yamato, and relief appeared on his face.

“You’re a sword instructor? You don’t really look all that strong. I am—”

“Yes, I know who you are. You are Lady Carmilla. Dorssen’s famous ‘Frenzied Princess,’ yes?”

“Huh?” Carmilla’s expression suddenly froze.

“Ah, pardon me. After your older brother became king, you were demoted from royalty to the position of Champion, am I right?”

Carmilla didn’t reply.

“We don’t get much foreign news in Farune, so the others may not have known who you are,” Yamato continued, “but I used to run a sword school, so I often heard about these kinds of things. Who’s strong, where they’re from, and so on. I’ve known about you for quite some time. I’ve always wanted to get the chance to meet you. And you really are famous, Lady Carmilla. The stories are endless. The youngest daughter of the previous king of Dorssen, strongly manifesting the blood of the royal family, and powerful, both as a knight and as a mage. People expected great things from you, as someone who might continue the family lineage, if not for your pride and wanton selfishness. Your epithet, ‘Frenzied Princess,’ comes from the fact that you kill anyone you don’t like on a whim. You’re so infamous that the king of Dorssen couldn’t find any marriage candidates for you among either foreign royalty or his vassals, so, without any other option, he installed you as one of the Champions. Am I right?”

Carmilla was still silent.

“I even hear that, after shirking your training, both as a mage *and* as a knight, you’ve ended up unable to use spells, even though you have plenty of mana, and without knowledge of swordsmanship, even though you have talent. So, you call yourself

a spellsword, and you're in a halfway position where you're no expert at either. But still, they say you're strong, despite all that, and impossible to deal with. Ahh, I'm looking forward to this. What sorts of techniques are you going to employ?"

Carmilla's expression had darkened, and she was trembling slightly.

"Is something the matter? Are you cold?"

"Master," Bledd said uncomfortably, "I think she might be angry..." Unable to withstand the alarming change in mood, he had backed up quite a distance away from both of them.

"Die," Carmilla finally said. Then she let mana flow out from her entire body, and violently snapped her fingers. A barrage of wind blades shot toward Yamato—much larger than the previous Sonic Blades, and with clearly visible shapes thanks to Carmilla's mana.

Yamato drew his longsword from its scabbard in an instant, then slashed every one of the blades of wind out of the air so quickly that it was impossible to follow the movement.

"My, now that's incredible!" he exclaimed. "That was Sonic Blade, heavily lopsided toward mana! Was its source the sound waves your fingers made as you snapped? So you used mana to forcibly amplify those sound waves, cobbling it together into Sonic Blade, even though it's lacking in base physical strength. I wouldn't have expected anything less from you." Yamato paused thoughtfully. "However, I also think that, in terms of power, incanting a spell might be more efficient. You're only wasting mana the way you do it. Actually, I guess it doesn't take very much movement to prepare, and not requiring a magic incantation is an advantage, right? Your technique comes from you relying on talent alone and resting on your laurels. In a certain sense, it's the ultimate form of laziness." Yamato tilted his head to one side as he continued thinking out loud.

"I'll kill you!" Carmilla shouted, enraged. "I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do!" The graceful demeanor she'd maintained while fighting the Blue Knights and Bledd had vanished. Winding up, she lifted her fan aloft and created a breeze that turned into several powerful waves of air she then fired off at the same time.

Yamato didn't block the waves, instead simply dodging them by jumping out of their way repeatedly. The stone wall and pillars

behind him took the waves head-on, and were promptly pulverized. Behind Yamato, Bledd frantically used his shield to block the secondary shockwaves created by the impacts.

"This attack resembles Earth Break," Yamato said, analyzing Carmilla's attacks as he jumped. "Are you coating the wind from your fan with mana and turning it into a shockwave? I see. Now I understand why the Blue Knights were taken out."

"Actually, Master, it wasn't this bad," Bledd corrected him. The attacks the Blue Knights had dealt with hadn't been so strong.

"You bastard!" Carmilla shouted. "No one's ever insulted me so much in my life! And what's this about 'the Frenzied Princess'?! That's the first time I've ever heard such a ridiculous name!"

Carmilla continued to fire off Sonic Blade with her right hand, and shockwaves with the fan in her left hand. Meanwhile, Yamato was weathering her attacks, slashing his sword to nullify the Sonic Blades while he dodged the shockwaves.

"Oh, I wasn't the one who said it. It's what the general public thinks of you."

"That's even worse!"

Perhaps thinking that her current attacks were getting her nowhere, Carmilla folded up her fan and grasped it tightly in her hand. A line of light extended out from the tip, almost exactly as long as the blade of a sword.

"Amazing!" Yamato cried out. "That's a Magic Sword! I've only heard rumors about them! It uses mana to create a blade, and it's used as a replacement for a regular sword. I see! Are there spells written on the fan, so you can use it as a substitute for a staff?" Yamato was unable to hide his joy at seeing such a feat for the first time.

Meanwhile, Carmilla's eyes—which had been blue—turned crimson.

As he was watching the fight from behind Yamato, Bledd noticed something had changed. "My body...feels heavier?"

"No way, are those...Magic Eyes?" Yamato asked. Naturally, he had noticed the change in his own weight as well, and had clocked Carmilla's eyes as its source.

"I must applaud you for pushing me this far," Carmilla said. "About the only other person who's seen my Magic Eyes and lived

is the head of the Champions. Though, both of *you* are going to die shortly."

Why am I being dragged into this? Bledd thought.

"Is that Gravity? Its effect must be around two times," Yamato said, impressed. He had taken a knee, unable to support his own weight.

"That's right. Magic Eyes may not be as impressive as they sound, but they're fatal for a swordsman. After all, now you can't move as you normally would."

"That appears to be the case. This certainly is quite punishing." As he spoke, Yamato removed his armlet from his wrist. It was a type of armlet intended for use on prisoners.

"Now, perish," Carmilla commanded. Then she raised her Magic Sword, and her body wavered as if viewed through a haze of heat. The very next moment, she appeared at Yamato's side and brought her Magic Sword down on his neck.

Yamato blocked it with his own sword, then, turning his body to the side, used the recoil from his block to spin his sword around and slash back at Carmilla. But his blade passed through Carmilla's body as if she was made of air.

"...I missed?" he said.

"Why are you still moving?!" Carmilla shouted. Surprised by Yamato's counterattack, she made her body shimmer and waver again, putting some distance between the two of them in an instant.

"Now you are just incredible, Lady Carmilla!" Yamato praised. "That was a technique that combined an illusion spell with a movement skill, making it look exactly like you'd moved instantaneously! Wonderful! When I heard you were a spellsword, I suspected you'd be much closer to a wizard, but that just now was a sequence befitting a swordswoman!"

"I don't want to hear any praise from the likes of you," Carmilla responded. "But more importantly, why aren't your movements any slower, even though you've seen my Magic Eyes? Answer me!"

Carmilla took a tone typical of noble haughtiness, but Yamato was unbothered, and simply replied, "Well, I took off my armlet."

"Your armlet? That thing?" Carmilla glanced at the armlet on the floor next to him.

“Yes, that. It’s an armlet that prisoners wear, and it doubles the effect of gravity on anyone who wears it,” Yamato explained. “This, combined with your Magic Eyes, amplified my gravity by four times, which, naturally, was quite tough on my body. But now that I’ve removed it, there’s no problem.”

Carmilla didn’t speak for a moment. “An armlet prisoners wear?”

“Yes. It’s a training method practiced by King Zero, and most of the top-ranking members of the Hundred wear one. As for His Majesty, he wears one with an even greater effect, which just goes to show how truly mighty he is.” Yamato had a spellbound expression on his face that gave Carmilla a glimpse of his fanatical devotion to his lord.

“You all go about your daily life wearing prisoner’s armlets?”

“Yes, isn’t it wonderful? No matter what we do, our bodies are constantly exerting themselves.”

“Are you crazy? There must be something wrong with you!”

At that moment, Carmilla finally realized how abnormal these men were. They were tough enough to survive a direct hit from Sonic Blade, and they walked around every day wearing armlets meant for prisoners. Their behavior was completely alien to common sense in Dorssen—no, to common sense in general!

“We live by the sword, which I suppose makes us unusual,” Yamato mused. “However, this is the life we have chosen to pursue. Strength is everything. King Zero stands at the very pinnacle of it. I’m sorry to say, but someone like you doesn’t have a chance against him. By the way, he’s not at the castle right now.”

“...He’s not?”

“That’s right. His Majesty is currently at the arena, along with the top-ranking members of the Hundred. You’re lucky, Lady Carmilla. If His Majesty or Lord Ogma and the others were here, you might’ve died, you know. They’re not as kind as I am.”

“If that’s true, then why did you all get in my way?!” Carmilla asked, pointing at Bledd.

“It’s obvious!” Bledd said, glaring at her. “As those entrusted with looking after the castle during His Majesty’s absence, and as knights, allowing an intruder to trespass would be the height of dishonor!”

Carmilla sighed again. “I feel like a fool. I suppose I’ll leave, then.” She had lost much of her will to fight.

“Oh, I’m not going to let you go,” Yamato said, raising his sword again.

“Huh?”

“Prime Minister Gamarath has instructed me to arrest you. He knows who you are, so he instantly knew you were an invader. But it would cause problems for us to kill a royal such as yourself, so he ordered me to capture you alive.”

“Oh, really? You’re going to capture *me* alive? Who do you think I am? As you can see, there isn’t a scratch on me.” Carmilla smiled sweetly. Internally, though, she had broken into a cold sweat. The Hundred, and the man named Yamato standing before her, possessed an untold strength.

“Indeed, there isn’t. I was surprised after my last attack. It was supposed to hit, but curiously enough, it passed right through you. So, well…” Yamato readied his sword. “For the sake of my own honor, I don’t think I can afford to let you go either.”

IV: An Unexpected Reception

EVER since the day of her birth, Carmilla had always been one of a chosen few. She may have been the youngest daughter in her family, but she was still royalty, and blessed with a talent for magic and swordsmanship—and Magic Eyes. By the time she was old enough to speak in complete sentences, Carmilla was more powerful than the adults around her, which meant she had no interest in listening to what anyone else had to say. And as she grew older, she realized she was stronger than her parents and her older brothers too, and she grew to be even more full of herself, believing she was the one most fit to rule Dorssen.

Because of her remarkable talent, Carmilla also participated in her first battle when she was still young, and went on to accumulate many achievements on the battlefield. She could wipe out a hundred enemy soldiers on her own, and she was viewed with fear and awe by her enemies and allies alike.

But she never listened to her commanding officers. So, after repeatedly acting against orders and massacring enemy soldiers indiscriminately, she came to be called the “Frenzied Princess.” She

never learned of the nickname, though, because it was impossible to know what she might do to someone who called her that to her face.

Putting aside more turbulent eras of history, what was demanded of a ruler at the relatively stable present moment was political acumen. Carmilla was strong, but that was all, and her poor character and inability to listen meant there was no way she would inherit the throne. In the end, her eldest brother unceremoniously took his place as heir. Then, when he became king, he stripped away Carmilla's royal status and installed her as the third Champion instead. This measure was a punishment—she had practically threatened him and their father into handing the crown to her—but diluted by his self-interested desire to continue using her as a vital military asset.

Needless to say, Carmilla was displeased, but without any popularity whatsoever, no one would take her side and she couldn't do anything about it. If she'd had any deeper knack for military matters, the army might have backed her, but she was only talented at fighting on her own, and she never made any effort to understand tactics or strategy, so the soldiers didn't like her any more than anyone else.

It was at this time that the Battle of Brix took place. Dorssen declared war on Farune to check the country's rapid expansion only to suffer a massive, unprecedented defeat. And Carmilla rejoiced. The man who had valued her the least among Dorssen's military leaders, General Kimbrey, had died in battle, and Matheus and Dante, who were both Champions and treated like they were on her level despite being weaker than her by far, were both killed. Of course she was thrilled.

According to reports, there was an organization in Farune called the Hundred, where a person's rank was directly determined by their strength, and the country's king, King Zero, ruled from the top of that organization. It occurred to Carmilla that, if that was true, she'd be able to become queen of Farune if she defeated Zero and took over his top spot in the Hundred. Queen Carmilla—now that would be a fitting title for her.

Besides that, if she could take over Farune, which had defeated Dorssen, then the people of Dorssen would certainly start singing her praises. She even fantasized that maybe, she'd be

able to become ruler of Dorssen as well, making her the queen of three countries, including Cadonia. And because her initiative was unnecessarily high, she decided to turn her fantasies into action. Ignoring everyone around her who tried to stand in her way, she came to Farune and marched right into the castle.



AND so, in the present moment, a man named Yamato stood before Carmilla, blocking her way. He was a daunting opponent. He had blocked every single one of her attacks, and on top of that, he had gradually forced her into revealing even her lesser-known skills. This was an extremely dicey situation.

Carmilla was the type of person to completely ignore any and all advice and to act with flagrant disregard for others, but she trusted her own intuition. She had made it through several truly dangerous situations by listening to her gut. And now, her gut was telling her: *this man is dangerous*.

None of my attacks are working against him. What am I supposed to do? she wondered. As she faced Yamato, she realized she was starting to panic. It was the first time since she had fought the head of the Champions for his position that she had felt this way.

“Well then, I shall begin,” Yamato said.

With his sword at the ready, he moved. Carmilla’s heels clicked against the floor as she stepped back, holding up her Magic Sword. Yamato smoothly closed the gap between them without a moment to spare, simultaneously swinging his sword in a single stroke that went from her shoulder down to her opposite side.

This was an unavoidable, certain-death attack. However, it didn’t hit. Carmilla slipped past it, then tried counterattacking with her Magic Sword. Yamato effortlessly blocked her, then instantly shifted back to the offensive, repeatedly swinging his sword. His blade left behind an afterimage as he made several cuts in a single instant—this was Mirage Sword.

Every one of Yamato’s attacks should have landed, but for some reason, his sword didn’t so much as graze Carmilla. Still, her dodging was starting to look frantic. Her high heels clicked against

the stone floor several times, making an unusually high-pitched noise as they did so. Then, Carmilla swung her Magic Sword and fired off a wave at Yamato, allowing her to finally put some significant distance between them.

“I see, I see, I get it now,” Yamato said.

Carmilla’s expression clouded over.

“I *thought* that white dress was inappropriate attire for a battlefield, but I see now that it inhibits visual cognition,” Yamato remarked. “I remember—there was a passage in an old volume about a dress that protects against assassination. It said the dress had a kind of magic barrier that beguiles sight. However, that alone would not be enough to defend against my attacks so flawlessly.”

Carmilla swallowed audibly. Yamato was right on the mark.

“It’s that noise your shoes make. For the entire time, I’ve felt that there was something strangely off about that sound—now I see your shoes are magic items as well. The sound must have an effect on my hearing and mess with my sense of balance, causing my visual measurements to be incorrect. Thus, by combining the shoes and the dress, your invisible defense is complete, am I right?”

He had seen through everything, including the additional effect of the dress and heels to cause her opponents to mentally let their guards down.

“You Farunians are so boorish, exposing a lady’s secrets like that,” Carmilla said, stubbornly trying to maintain her calm. “But knowing won’t do anything to defend against them. Can you fight without using your eyes and your ears? You aren’t a mage who can use area-of-effect spells—do you perhaps believe that a knight like you can defeat me, when all you’re good for is swinging a sword around?”

“Well actually, I *can* fight without my eyes and ears,” Yamato replied calmly.

Carmilla was silent for a moment. “Huh?”

“There’s a secret technique, called ‘grasping intention.’ It’s a skill King Zero has mastered,” Yamato said proudly. “Sustaining fatal attacks countless times hones one’s instincts, and eventually, a person becomes able to trace an opponent’s presence. To put it another way, it’s also possible to sense one’s opponent and go on

the attack. The technique's only flaw is that its user must come close to dying many times in order to learn it, but, well, that's nothing, if it means acquiring such a powerful technique."

"Come again? You've almost died countless times to acquire a technique to stop yourself from dying? Do you see the flaw in your logic?"

"There's nothing logical about it. It is all in service of one purpose: the pursuit of strength. If it leads to strength, we balk at nothing, even death. That is who we are."

Carmilla felt fear. *I can't do this,* she thought. *These people are beyond hope. They're missing something important, as humans. The Hundred are a bunch of lunatics. I never should've gotten involved with a place like Farune... It was wrong of me to come here at all—and if things keep going like this, I'll be killed*.

"Wait. Are you going to kill me? I'm Dorssenian royalty! Commoners like you have no business laying your hands—"

"As I previously stated, I have no intention of killing you. Prime Minister Gamarath has ordered me to capture you alive. However..." Yamato maintained his kindly expression as he spoke. "I've never had to hold myself back enough to capture someone alive before, so if I'm unable to control myself and end up killing you, I apologize."

"An apology won't cut it!" Carmilla screamed.

Taking no notice of her protest, Yamato quietly closed his eyes, then, grasping Carmilla's presence, calmly swung his sword.

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WHEN I returned to the castle from the arena, the walls, floors, and pillars were all smashed to pieces. In the throne room, a woman was lying on the floor, tied up with a rope and gagged—and, for some reason, barefoot. When I took a closer look, I saw that she was quite beautiful.

"...Who's she?" I asked a smiling Gamarath and Yamato. Bledd, who was standing next to them, had his eyes cast down.

"She's a guest. She's here on business with you, Your Majesty," Gamarath cheerily replied.

"Did I have something like that planned?" I asked. My match in the arena should have been the only thing on my schedule for

today. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that I hardly ever had any visitors in the first place.

"No. She came unannounced."

"So, who is she?"

"This is Lady Carmilla, the former imperial princess of Dorssen. Currently, she's positioned third out of Dorssen's five Champions."

Oh, yeah, I've heard of her. She's the notorious 'Frenzied Princess,' right? She and Frau used to be compared as contenders for the next generation of heroes, but supposedly she has such a nasty personality that no one was willing to marry her. Now, they apparently call her 'Dorssen's bad debt.'

"What'd she come here for?" I asked.

"Well, to put it simply, she seemed to want to defeat Your Majesty, take over the Hundred, and become queen of Farune," Gamarath replied.

...That's not a visit, that's a surprise attack.

"So what happened?"

"Sir, after receiving the order from Prime Minister Gamarath, I took the liberty of greeting her myself," said Yamato, quietly bowing his head.

Is tying her up and leaving her on the floor your idea of a friendly reception? Well, it seems like she was up to no good anyway, so whatever.

Gagged as she was, Carmilla was looking in my direction and grunting. *Is she angry? Just as the rumors say, she does seem pretty defiant.*

"What are you going to do with her?" I asked. Dealing with foreign nobles was tricky. *It would save me a lot of effort if they would just ship her back to Dorssen. Or does Gamarath want to take her as a hostage?*

"I would like to train her," Yamato replied with a brilliant smile.

"Huh?"

"Up until now, Lady Carmilla has relied completely on her talent, and neglected her training," he said. "It's a waste, an incomparable loss. If we thoroughly train her in the Hundred, she will assuredly grow even stronger. Fortunately, her challenge of Your Majesty for the top spot in the Hundred means that in her

heart, she has already joined. I believe that I may be of service by having her diligently train under me."

No, she definitely hasn't already joined.

Carmilla was vehemently shaking her head while going, "Mmm, mmm!"

"I think first," Yamato continued, "I'll start with getting her accustomed to eating monster meat, and when that's done, I'll leave her stranded deep in the Forest of Beasts, and wait for her to return alive."

Are you sure you aren't confusing training with torture? The depths of the Forest of Beasts were so hellish that only high-ranking members of the Hundred could hope to survive there. As Carmilla heard about this training—which was really more akin to exile—her eyes widened. Bledd watched her with pity.

"But training her won't change the fact that she's a member of an enemy country's royalty," I said. "What's the point of purposely making someone who might turn against us stronger?"

"Every one of us in the Hundred, without exception, has enthusiastically sworn their loyalty to Your Majesty. In other words, once someone joins the Hundred, they learn of Your Majesty's greatness and automatically come to admire you. I imagine that even Lady Carmilla will be the same. There is nothing to be concerned about."

There's no way that's true! Is the Hundred brainwashing people or something? As Yamato stared at me with eyes unclouded by hate, I felt a prickle of fear.

"Gamarath, what do you think?" I decided to get the opinion of someone who wasn't in the Hundred.

"Sir, I believe that, even putting aside Lord Yamato's claims, it may be best for us to apprehend Lady Carmilla and keep her in Farune."

"Why's that?"

"Currently, Dorssen is our enemy. If we let her return alive, she may become a military threat to us. And yet, while her royal status has been stripped from her, she is a relative of their king, so it may also be an issue if we kill her. As such, if we keep her in our custody, she will strengthen our military while also serving as a check against Dorssen."

Is that how it is? Well, at least that's more reasonable than what Yamato was saying.

Still on the floor, Carmilla was wriggling around violently like an overexcited worm, no doubt in protest against the conversation that was proceeding against her will.

I can understand how she feels. No one here ever listens to what anyone has to say.

"You said we'd take her into our custody, but what specifically will you do with her once she's here? Keep her as a hostage?" I asked Gamarath.

"Actually, Your Majesty simply has to take her as your wife."

What?!

V: The Fight for the Queenship

ME? *Marry Carmilla? Dorssen's bad debt*?

I made eye contact with Carmilla, and she looked reluctant. *Well, I bet I'm making a similar expression*.

"You know, I'm already married," I said.

"As king, Your Majesty may take as many wives as you wish," Gamarath replied.

Yeah. I thought you'd say that.

"But Frau is the daughter of one of my subjects, while Carmilla is a royal princess from another kingdom," I said. "Things would be unbalanced if Frau remained queen consort. But I have no intention of demoting Frau to second consort."

Frau had been of great service, both before and after I became king, so she wasn't someone I could slight. And personally as well, despite her various character flaws, it was difficult for me to accept the idea of removing her from the position of queen. While everyone else had all sorts of mistaken ideas about me, she was the one and only person who understood me fully and stayed by my side anyway.

Of course, she's never not magically surveilling me, so there's no way she wouldn't *understand me.*

"I don't believe that'll be an issue," Gamarath said confidently. "Dorssen hasn't known what to do with Lady Carmilla either, and we did win in our war against them, so I imagine her home

country will be open to making a certain number of concessions. They may even thank us for taking their ‘bad debt’ off their hands.”

Just then, Carmilla’s eyes literally went red with anger, and she glared at Gamarath. When he met her eyes, Gamarath collapsed to the floor onto his hands and knees, his expression pained.

Huh? Was her gaze really that forceful?

“Ah, oh dear. I forgot about her Magic Eyes,” Yamato said. Then he took out a long strip of cloth and wrapped it around Carmilla’s head, concealing her eyes, at which point Gamarath slowly got to his feet, panting.

“What was that just now?” I asked.

“Sir, Lady Carmilla possesses Magic Eyes, and can place anyone she looks at under the effect of Gravity,” Yamato answered.

Wait, really? And I have to get married to a dangerous woman like that?

“Don’t you think it’s a little risky for me to take a woman with Magic Eyes who came storming into the castle as my consort?” I said.

“It’ll be all right,” Yamato said confidently.

“Remember, Lady Frau is the current queen, Your Majesty,” Gamarath added. “There’s nothing she won’t do for the sake of furthering her magic, regardless of any consideration for humanity, so compared to her, Lady Carmilla shouldn’t be an issue in the slightest.”

Oh, yeah. You’re right.

“Excuse me for earlier,” Gamarath said to Carmilla as she lay on the floor and he brushed the dirt from his clothes. “That was in error, Lady Carmilla. Apologies for the insolent remark.”

Umm, can you apologize to Frau too? Despite anything, she’s your queen, you know? Gamarath didn’t notice my look of disapproval, and he continued.

“There are other merits to this arrangement as well. Currently, Dorssen is our enemy, but the situation is undesirable for both countries. With their defeat, they lost manpower, leaving them without any troops to spare for their southern region,” Gamarath explained. “From our perspective as well, it would be unwise to cause any needless trouble until Cadonia regains stability. According to the information I’ve gathered, the king of

Dorssen wishes to reconcile with Farune. However, paying war reparations to do so is unbecoming of a great power, so it's taking longer than expected for him to get his domestic affairs in order. As such, if Your Majesty and Lady Carmilla marry, then the funds can take the form of a dowry, which would keep up appearances and make it easier to pay reparations. Also, Your Majesty and the king of Dorssen would become brothers-in-law, allowing tensions between our countries to thaw."

"I see." It wasn't a bad idea. I didn't really want to go to war again, and the only country we currently shared a border with was Dorssen, so if we could establish friendly relations, we could live peacefully.

"Additionally, there arises the possibility that, if Your Highness and Lady Carmilla have a son, he could inherit Dorssen's throne. I believe this could be strategically advantageous in the future."

Carmilla reacted when she heard that. Perhaps she was attracted to the idea of her child potentially becoming the king of Dorssen. Personally, I didn't care about that. But still, I could see that Farune could benefit from the marriage in other ways. Now, the only issue was whether the king of Dorssen would actually accept it—and, before anything else, there was something else I had to do.

"I want to talk to Frau about the marriage first," I said. Maybe I didn't need to, technically, but I was reluctant to take another wife without at least mentioning it to her.

Then, just after I spoke, the empty space before me shone with light, and Frau appeared there. Carmilla, still lying on the floor, widened her eyes in surprise. *I can understand why. After all, hardly anyone in their right mind would ever think to transport themselves with magic so freely.*



“I was listening,” Frau said. As always, she was aloof and unemotional.

Was she eavesdropping on us through the Contract Seal? You know, maybe there was never any need for me to worry about the feelings of someone with such a disregard for other people’s privacy.

“There’s no issue,” Frau continued, readily accepting my marriage with Carmilla.

You know, that makes me feel a bit lonely, in its own way. I wish she got a bit more jealous, or something. Anyway, now all that’s left is to ask Carmilla herself.

“I’m going to ask Carmilla what she wants. Undo her restraints,” I said. Political marriages were a fact of life for royalty, but I wasn’t too fond of the idea of forcing her into it. I wanted to know what she thought.

“Yes, sir,” Yamato said briskly. He drew his sword, then cut Carmilla’s gag, ropes, and blindfold in a single instant before returning the sword to its scabbard with a click.

Very impressive, but isn’t that dangerous? Come on, why not just untie her with your hands?

Freed from her restraints, Carmilla took a moment to fret over the marks the ropes had left on her wrists, then she turned to me.

Seeing her properly, I could tell how beautiful she really was; she had long, wavy violent hair, porcelain skin, and cute eyes that were slightly downturned. She was captivating to look at, and had an attractive figure to boot.

“You were listening; what do you think?” I asked her with no preamble.

“If the king of Dorssen approves it, then as his subject, it is my duty to follow,” Carmilla replied, a surprisingly amenable response. “However, I do have one condition.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to be below anyone weaker than I am.”

“Oh?”

Does this mean she wants to have a match against me after all?

“Therefore, I’d like to have a match with Lady Frau for the position of queen consort.” Carmilla glared at Frau.

“Come again?” I asked. *Why does there have to be a fight? What kind of place does she think Farune is? We’re a peaceful country, a full-*

fledged constitutional monarchy! There's no way a lawless insult like, say, determining one's status via fighting, would ever be tolerated here.

"Hold on, Carmilla. Do you know what you're saying? In our kingdom, something like that—"

"Everything is decided based on strength, is it not?"

Sorry?

"I've heard that, in Farune, strength is everything."

Of course it isn't! You may be from the center of the continent, but don't think that gives you the right to look down on us out here. I looked at Gamarath. He had spent his entire life pushing for legal reform, and he was the one who had given Farune its advanced system of government, one just as modern as those of the central continent. I was sure he would correct Carmilla's mistaken assumptions…

"Gamarath, don't you have something to say?"

"Yes, sir, I believe that what Lady Carmilla said is completely reasonable."

"Huh?"

…But he accepted her proposal without a moment's hesitation.

"Your Majesty's martial valor is the linchpin of Farune," he continued. "I enact laws, and I strive to establish the rule of law, but that can only exist because it is backed by Your Majesty's might. None would obey laws without any power behind them. However—and with all due respect—Your Majesty is not immortal. The day will eventually come when you pass away. It is inevitable that strength will also be demanded of the next king. I believe that it is preferable for the queen to possess great strength as well."

"Hey, but you were just saying that Frau could remain—"

"Yes, sir, I apologize for not noticing Your Majesty's true intentions. You clearly wanted to say that you have no intention of demoting Lady Frau to second consort *because of her status*. In other words, you intend to decide everything based on strength."

How'd you twist my words to reach that conclusion?! Don't translate my thoughts into whatever is convenient for you! You've totally misinterpreted them! I looked to Yamato and Bledd for help. Among the meatheads who made up the Hundred, they belonged

to the small group of members with good sense. Surely they, at least, would say something reasonable.

"Yamato, Bledd, why don't you tell me what you think?"

"With all due respect, Your Majesty," Yamato began reverently, "while Lady Frau is certainly a powerful wizard, she is no warrior. On the other hand, Lady Carmilla is strong as both a wizard and a warrior. A child born from the union of you and Lady Carmilla could turn out to be an outstanding warrior. I believe that it is not a bad idea to take that possibility into consideration, and give her a chance."

What do you think my children are? You know you aren't talking about horse pedigrees, right? And that intensely earnest look in your eyes is creeping me out.

"Your Majesty," Bledd said, kneeling. "Strength is everything. I have accepted that as the foundational principle of the Hundred. I have no mind to oppose it by insisting on common sense, not after all this time. Everyone is in agreement that everything Your Majesty does is without reproach. So please, do as you wish."

Ahh, they're useless. They're so earnest that they're taking the Hundred's insane ideology seriously.

Finally, I met Frau's gaze. *I'm begging you, can't you say something sensible and oppose this?*

"I'll do my best in the match," she said.

...Yeah, I thought she'd say that. Frau was as expressionless as ever, but I could somehow tell she was happy. *In a sense, she's even more like a member of the Hundred than anyone actually* in *the Hundred.*



AND with that, everyone besides me was in agreement, and it was decided that for some reason Frau and Carmilla would fight to determine who would be queen consort. This was all without anyone asking what I, the king, thought about it. However, Frau did add one condition: if Carmilla lost, she would have to respectfully refer to Frau as her elder sister.

Why that? I wondered. I didn't really get it. Apparently, it wasn't even that Frau, an only child, had ever wanted a little sister; instead, she just wanted the experience of another woman

needing to answer to her, and she was using their match as an excuse to try and put Carmilla in a little sister role for that purpose. It seemed Frau had a human side to her after all.

It had turned into a strange situation, in several ways, but Gamarath swiftly and professionally organized everything on the spot, then moved on to negotiations with Dorssen. First, he put feelers out to the Dorssenian side via magic transmission, and as he had predicted, they seemed to be open to the idea of the marriage. Apparently, their reaction had actually been something like, “Really? You’ll take her off our hands?”

However, Gamarath did face some difficulty getting Dorssen on the same page about the planned match between Frau and Carmilla. In the end, they politely said something along the lines of, “I don’t really understand what you’re saying, but by all means, do as you wish,” and agreed to the marriage. Then they readily accepted the reconciliatory aspects of the marriage through official diplomatic channels, and the marriage was set to go ahead.

Gamarath proposed that the fight be given the title, “The Ultimate Match for the Queenship: The Lightning Empress versus the Frenzied Princess,” and be held in the arena. Naturally, I had numerous questions about this, but when Gamarath insisted, saying it would fill up the treasury, I reluctantly agreed. It was hard to argue when he brought up money.

For her part, Carmilla got in touch with some people back home, and had them bring all sorts of weaponry and equipment for her to use, probably including items specifically for fighting against mages. She was putting her all into the match. Then, together with handmaidens she’d brought from Dorssen, she took a large apartment in the castle, remodeled it as she pleased, and began lounging about like she owned the place. She was quite shameless.

Personally, I prefer women who are a bit more humble…



“WILL it be all right?” I asked Frau. It was the day before the match, and we were alone in our bedroom for the first time that evening.

“I’m excited,” she replied.

Her expression was unchanging as usual, like a doll’s, but her face was slightly flushed, which probably meant she was actually excited. Though I had some trouble understanding why.

“I’m only saying this as a precaution, but just so you know, you can’t kill her, okay?”

It wasn’t that I had asked Frau about the match because I was worried about her, or anything like that. I had asked because I was worried about Carmilla. Based on what Yamato had told me, Carmilla was a fairly skilled fighter, so Frau wouldn’t have been able to get away with killing her simply by saying she had misjudged her own strength. If that happened, there would be another war with Dorssen. As a pacifist, I wanted to avoid that possibility.

“It’ll be all right,” Frau said. “I’ll make her my little sister.”

You don’t mean you’re going to use magic to brainwash her or something, right? …Well, whatever. As long as you don’t kill her.



AND so, the day of the duel between Frau and Carmilla arrived. For the first time since the arena had opened, it was packed with more spectators than it could handle—and because the match was, in a way, considered a part of the marriage festivities, the king of Dorssen had been invited. It was arranged so he and I would sit and spectate together in the seats reserved for noble viewers.

The king of Dorssen resembled his sister; he had the same violet hair, and his eyes were also slightly downturned. However, he was nearly ten years older than Carmilla and I, and he had the dignified features and impressive facial hair to show for it.

He looks very kingly. And hey, I guess he’s going to be my brother-in-law.

The king of Dorssen had brought the head of the Champions, Sigmund, as his escort. Sigmund looked to be in his thirties and had a big scar on his face. On his back, he carried a greatsword. He was a famous former S-rank adventurer who had been known by the name “Dragonslayer.” He was scanning over me and the members of the Hundred, evaluating our strength.

As soon as the king of Dorssen and I had met, he had derisively remarked to me that, “Farune’s culture exceeds the bounds of what we’d consider common sense.” He had to have been referring to the day’s duel.

In front of my subjects, it was hard to reply, “I think so too.”

Actually, Carmilla had been the one to suggest the duel in the first place, but admittedly, we had been the ones to decide the match would be held on a grand scale in the arena, and we had allowed people to bet on it. Because of all that, I had just smiled and shaken the king’s hand, glossing over his comment.

The total sum of money staked on the outcome of today’s matches was the highest it had been since the opening of the arena. Frau had been given superior odds, but it was set up so the bookies would profit no matter who ended up winning. Gamarath had a self-satisfied look on his face. With his shrewdness, there was no way he was going to make Frau and Carmilla fight right away; instead, he had arranged several matches before the main event. For some reason, I was set to appear in one of them.

Thinking about it logically, it really is weird, isn’t it? Why do I have to fight in front of a state guest, who’s also going to be my brother-in-law? Not only that, but it’s also a prelude to a duel between his younger sister and my wife. Won’t this give him the impression that Farune is a country full of idiots who decide everything based on strength? I should cancel my match to preserve the kingdom of Farune’s reputation as a proper, reasonable country.

With that thought in my mind, I looked around for Gamarath, but he seemed incredibly busy. I usually didn’t do any work around the castle myself, so I didn’t want to interrupt him. In the end, as I was hesitating, the first match began.

Facing each other in the center of the arena were Wan Hu and Juza. Wan Hu was a giant, bald man and one of the most senior members of the Hundred, consistently maintaining a ranking of around twentieth. He used a unique staff called the Bloody Rod as his weapon. Juza, meanwhile, was a promising young member of the Hundred whose rank had been rapidly rising of late. He had a rather conventional fighting style, using one or both hands to wield a sword, but he fought quickly and flexibly.

As their match unfolded, Juza took advantage of his trademark agility to inflict damage little by little while Wan Hu endured it, aiming to land one big hit.

“That young warrior is quite skilled,” the king of Dorssen remarked to Sigmund.

“Indeed,” Sigmund replied. “I believe him to be rather formidable, if only in terms of agility. He is a good match against that giant warrior.”

It seemed Sigmund rated Juza fairly highly. But still, Wan Hu was no fool. He had experienced this type of fighting style countless times. He wasn’t cowed by minor wounds, and he was gradually beginning to get a handle on Juza using his Bloody Rod. People often made assumptions based on how he looked, but Wan Hu was by no means slow. His skills were certainly weighted toward strength, but he could move well enough, and he was quite deft with his staff. He looked like he wasn’t moving very much for the moment, but that was because he was preserving his stamina. The Bloody Rod also absorbed blood and used it to heal injuries—and could even absorb blood from Wan Hu’s own wounds to heal him, which meant that while he may have appeared injured, he was actually almost completely undamaged.

From that perspective, Wan Hu seems almost as inhuman as his appearance.

“What level would those two be in our country?” the king of Dorssen asked Sigmund. He was fascinated by the fight, and watching it with great interest.

“They could perhaps be candidates to be one of the five Champions. That would make them among the top ten ranked warriors in the country.”

“Lord Mars,” the king of Dorssen said, turning to look at me. “In Farune, how do those two rank?”

“I think around twentieth or thirtieth,” I replied. They were ranked that way in the Hundred, so their national ranking would have been the same.

“Hmph, sounds like you’re getting a little competitive, Lord Mars. Surely they must be Farune’s two greatest heroes.” The king of Dorssen shrugged, looking exasperated.

What the heck is he talking about?

As for the match, Juza was gradually slowing down. He had been moving around constantly, which meant he was probably nearing the limit of his endurance. Also, even though Juza's attacks were hitting, Wan Hu didn't seem to have taken any damage at all, which had to have been mentally stressful. In the beginning, Juza had probably been thinking something like, *I can do this!* which would have made him feel all the more exhausted now that it was seeming less and less true. That sort of thing was common in fights with powerful monsters, too.

Wan Hu could see how tired Juza was. His long history of fighting in the Hundred wasn't for nothing—without hurrying, and without panicking, he deliberately cornered his prey, both mentally and physically. And with his Bloody Rod, he was beginning to subdue Juza. His heavy attacks were hard to block or parry, and he slowly but surely wore his opponent's stamina down.

Finally, unable to completely block one of Wan Hu's attacks, Juza staggered. Wan Hu swiftly swung his weapon. Juza tried to defend using his sword, but it was knocked from his hands and sent flying, and his body made a clean arc as it, too, was sent soaring through the air. It looked truly painful.

"Did that just kill him?!" the king of Dorssen exclaimed, sounding put off by the sight.

"In all likelihood, yes, it did," Sigmund said. He was somewhat calmer than the king, but even he had partially risen to his feet, his eyes fixed on Juza's form where it lay sprawled on the ground.

"There's no need for worry," I reassured them. "He's alive." I would have felt bad if I'd shocked them too much, so I tried to tell them Juza was all right, but alas, they just looked at me like I was crazy. Certainly, Juza's body was bent into a bit of an irregular shape, and he was vomiting up quite a lot of blood, but those were common sights in the arena.

After Wan Hu's victory was declared, the priestess, Luida, immediately rushed into the arena and began to recite a restoration spell. No matter how many people there were in the world, I was sure that Luida was probably the only one who could perform divine miracles one after the other, as if working as part of an assembly line. Juza's distorted body was shrouded in the light of the spell, and then he instantly returned to normal. Healed

enough to be able to get to his feet, Juza pulled a gold coin from his breast pocket and handed it to Luida.

The spectators cheered loudly at the scene—by now, Luida's restoration magic was just another part of the spectacle. She was also decently pretty, so she had many fans herself, who enthusiastically threw presents at her from the stands. Many of these gifts were quite valuable.

The king of Dorssen and Sigmund watched it all in blank amazement.

"Lord Mars," the king of Dorssen said finally. He paused for a moment, then continued. "Is that priestess a saint?"

I've never heard of a saint being that greedy.

"No, she's a former member of an A-rank adventurer party," I explained. "She was hired by Gamarath to take my life, so I defeated her, and then I gave her a job in the arena, that's all. If I had to put a label on her, I'd say she's sort of an unexpectedly lucky find."

The king of Dorssen blinked, astonished. "Sigmund. Are priest adventurers usually able to use such incredible restoration magic?

"Not at all." Sigmund shook his head. "Even S-rank priests couldn't perform divine miracles like that. She is truly a formidable caster. It is as you say, Your Majesty: I believe her to be a saint-class user of restoration magic."

Huh? I don't think she's quite that *impressive. I mean her nickname is like 'madam,' or something.*

"I see. So you fancy yourself a comedian, Lord Mars. That priestess must be another one of Farune's secret weapons." The king of Dorssen made an expression like he was satisfied with his own explanation.

Um, I'm not joking, it's all the truth. And besides, what's this about a secret weapon? Really, I just happened to hire her, that's all. I guess she is pretty useful though.



THE second match was between Ogma and Yamato. The two of them had been waiting in the nobility seating area until just a bit ago, and now, they were standing in the center of the arena. Ogma was ranked first in the Hundred, and Yamato was ranked

fourth. With the appearance of these top-ranking warriors, the spectators were cheering wildly.

“Those two warriors seem extremely popular, but are they really that skilled?” the king of Dorssen asked me, looking out over the arena as it boiled over with excitement.

“They are,” I replied. “They’re both among my country’s five strongest warriors.”

“Oho, I see. So they’re more powerful by far than the last two, then? I’m looking forward to seeing how skilled they really are.” The king of Dorssen’s composure had slipped since earlier, and his tone had turned serious.

As a warrior, Ogma was balanced in every respect. He wielded a two-handed greatsword, so people had a tendency to assume he placed an emphasis on power, but in reality, his strength, speed, stamina, and technique were all at high levels. There was a reason he had maintained his first-place position in the Hundred for so long. Oh, and he was also a total meathead.

On the other hand, Yamato specialized entirely in technique. He was fairly quick, but he didn’t possess all that much strength or stamina. He hadn’t had very high physical strength to start with, so he had forced himself to get stronger by eating monster meat, which put him in a questionable spot as one of the Hundred’s top-ranking members. However, none could match his refined sword techniques. He had devoted everything he had to developing his ample talent in that area, which made it quite difficult for anyone to outshine him there.

As the two of them faced off in the arena, Ogma shouldered his greatsword, and Yamato gripped his longsword in his right hand, adopting a relaxed stance. Both of them had taken off the prisoner armlets they usually wore, displaying their intent to fight using everything they had.

A nervous tension filled the arena.

“Now, begin!”

With the starting signal, Yamato disappeared. No, it only looked that way—in an instant, he circled around behind Ogma, then slashed at his back.

“Whoa there,” Ogma said. Without even looking at the attack, he twisted his greatsword around behind him and cleanly blocked.

Then, in the same motion, he swiveled like a top, striking at Yamato with a simple but blindingly fast horizontal sweep.

Yamato dodged with a high jump. Ogma's attack sent a Sonic Blade—actually, a wave that was even stronger than that—all the way to the wall of the arena, leaving a big crack. The nearby spectators screamed.

"What was that just now?!" the king of Dorssen shouted after watching the instantaneous exchange. He wasn't the only one who was surprised.

"They're monsters! Why does Farune have warriors like them?" Sigmund said. He wasn't raising his voice, but his eyes were wide with shock.

Needless to say, the fight continued unabated while they spoke.

After his leap, Yamato kicked off from an empty spot in midair, gaining propulsion, then pressed Ogma again. This was a sword technique that channeled mana to create a barrier to use as footing.

Ogma defended with his sword, but then Yamato, who had landed simultaneously, swung his sword from a low stance, aiming for Ogma's legs—a difficult attack to dodge.

"Tch!" Ogma scoffed as he sprung backward, and Yamato kept right on him, smoothly combining multiple sword techniques, swiftly sending one attack after another without giving his opponent any time to breathe. First from head-on, then from the side, from behind, from above, and finally from below; several from Yamato's array of slashes grazed Ogma's body, steadily and increasingly wounding him. A cheer rose up from the arena at Yamato's countless magnificent techniques.

"What a swordsman. So this is what a top-ranking member of the Hundred looks like…" Sigmund gulped. He must have previously looked down on Yamato, thinking that he seemed unimpressive.

But you know, Yamato's a heretic in the Hundred, I thought. The Hundred wasn't a place to pursue technical skill. It was for those who sought something more primitive—strength. Ogma was a fine embodiment of that ideal. Right now, though, Ogma was being pressed, and it looked like he was unable to use his

greatsword's long reach effectively, and was one-sidedly defending instead.

Ah, Yamato's caught him with a diagonal slash, I thought, but just as I did, Ogma landed a kick to Yamato's stomach. As Ogma's shoulder was being brutally slashed open, he had managed to land a single, powerful blow. His kick threw Yamato's body slightly into the air.

"Guh…" Yamato let out a dull grunt that sounded like he might vomit up the contents of his stomach.

"Haaah!" Ogma roared. He dropped his greatsword and clobbered Yamato's face with a right hook, then, even though his left shoulder was cut up, dealt him a left hook too, before finally raining a series of empty-handed blows on him. Ogma had officially well and thoroughly beaten Yamato. The spectators were going wild.

"What are you showing us? Wasn't this supposed to be a swordfight?" The king of Dorssen gasped, his voice pained.

This was the style of fighting I had learned under the influence of my master: anything goes, as long as you win. Ogma and most of the rest of the Hundred, under my influence, had ended up with a similar style.

"The victory goes to Ogma!" said the announcer.

Yamato was in an awful state after taking a series of consecutive hits while in midair, but Ogma, whose blood was flowing from his left shoulder like a waterfall, was seriously injured as well. Luida swiftly healed both of them.

"When you have that priestess, human lives seem a little less valuable," Sigmund remarked with a sigh.

"Oh, that? Those wounds would heal on their own over time anyway. The only difference is whether they heal quickly or slowly," I said. Both the king of Dorssen and Sigmund looked disgusted.

What? Did I say something strange? I sustained way worse injuries than that when I was training with my master, and they healed eventually. Isn't that just normal?



THE king of Dorssen could not believe what he was seeing with his own eyes. Certainly, Dorssen had sustained a massive defeat

against Farune in the Battle of Brix, so the king had believed that he understood the fact that Farune possessed powerful warriors. However, now that he had seen them in person, he realized that their strength was beyond the bounds of normal.

Rather than being as strong as knights, or as warriors, the members of the Hundred exuded strength on a biological level. It was impossible to see them as mere human beings. He didn't think all of Dorssen's knights together could beat them. He could see now why Kimbrey had lost.

The spectators in the arena were worked up into a frenzy as they watched the Hundred fight. If he hadn't been a king, the king of Dorssen could have been carefree enough to enjoy it himself, too. However, he *was* a king, and he had the destiny of his country in his hands.

These are no easy foes, he thought. If they had to fight, it would be poor planning to challenge them openly. He would have to target their weaknesses. *I know, maybe we could cast, say, Gravity, over a large area to restrict their army's movements, or poison their drinking water...*

As the king of Dorssen considered possible strategies that might have been effective against Farune, the venue erupted in cheers. At some point, Mars, in his suit of black armor, had appeared in the center of the arena. He was raising his arms in response to the audience's shouts, then he removed an armlet and a ring he was wearing, placing them on a tray held by an attendant.

"What's he doing?" the king of Dorssen asked Gamarath, who was acting as host in Mars's stead.

"He's removing his ring of poison and gravity armlet to show that he is using his full strength," Gamarath replied with a smile.

"A ring of poison? And a gravity armlet? What are those? Do they give him a resistance to poison and gravity?"

"The opposite. Wearing the ring of poison puts him in a constant state of being poisoned by a deadly toxin, and the armlet makes it so he is always under the effect of a strong gravity spell."

The king of Dorssen was silent for a moment, then said, "What sort of bluff is that? Is it to show off for your citizens? There's no way they actually have those effects, right?" He didn't believe it one bit. No, he didn't *want* to believe it. What Mars was

doing was not befitting of a king—actually, it wasn't even befitting of a human. It was suicidal, plain and simple.

"No, it's true. In fact, I attempted to poison His Majesty many times myself, but I failed every time. And I once tried to kill him after first sealing his movements with Gravity, but it ended up being completely pointless. I tried every possible method to assassinate him, but they all ended in failure." Gamarath happily spoke about his past attempts to kill his current lord—and if what he was saying was true, it would mean that neither magic nor poison worked on Mars.

The king of Dorssen paused. "Why did he forgive you?" Why would Mars have pardoned someone who had tried to kill him?

"Why, isn't it obvious?" With his eyes brimming with tears, Gamarath spread his arms wide, as if to represent Mars's greatness. "My king is magnificent!" He reminded the king of Dorssen of a fanatical cult follower.

This is pointless, the king of Dorssen thought. *Their prime minister's also crazy*. He exchanged looks with Sigmund, and they both shook their heads.

"Ah, by the way, the Hundred's top rankers aren't on the same level as His Majesty, but they're all wearing gravity armlets too. They also eat monster meat regularly, so they have a resistance to poison as well." Gamarath's voice had returned to its previous state of calm. "If I were you, I wouldn't want to make them my enemies ever again."

The implication put the king of Dorssen in a dismal mood. Winning had never been a possibility, not against these monsters.



THE warriors who were to be Mars's opponents entered the arena—ten of them in all.

"He doesn't have just one opponent?" the king of Dorssen asked Sigmund. He no longer felt like talking to Gamarath.

"I have heard that the king of Farune fights many foes at once in the arena. However, I thought it was nothing more than a rumor, so I paid it no mind…"

"Are those warriors weak?"

“They aren’t as strong as Ogma or Yamato, but they seem to be about as skilled as the two who fought in the first match.”

That meant they were plenty strong. The king of Dorssen wondered if, to make a demonstration of his worthiness as king, Mars was holding a fixed match. Actually, he prayed that was the case.

Before the fight began, Mars equipped his black helmet. He had the face of a typical young nobleman, but when it was covered, his whole aura became ominous. Then, for some reason, wizards appeared on top of the arena wall and began reciting a spell.

“What are they doing?” the king of Dorssen asked.

“It appears to be a physical barrier spell,” Sigmund replied.

“Really? But what for?”

“I’m not sure. I cannot ascertain their intentions.”

The match was about to start. There were ten ranked members of the Hundred, each holding various weapons—such as swords, spears, and axes—and surrounding Mars. They didn’t move to attack right away; instead, they bided their time, waiting for the right moment. It seemed clear as day to them that if they didn’t challenge Mars in perfect sync with one another, they were going to be instantly defeated.

Meanwhile, Mars was just casually letting his black-bladed longsword hang loosely from his right hand, and he hadn’t even adopted a fighting stance. Time gradually passed, and tension filled the venue as Mars’s opponents slowly but steadily closed in, until they were practically within arm’s reach.

Someone exhaled loudly. Actually, it hadn’t been that loud, but the oppressive atmosphere made it sound all that much louder. That was the signal for the Hundred’s top-ranking warriors to spring into motion all at once. But before they could, the man holding a sword and standing directly in front of Mars was sent flying. Mars had slashed at him faster than a gust of wind. The man just barely managed to defend against the attack, but its remarkable power broke through his defense like it was nothing, launching him through the air and smashing him against the barrier around the stands.

“What was that just now?!” the king of Dorssen shouted, instinctively standing up from his seat. His body was trembling.

Everything about Mars was on a completely different level. His power easily surpassed both Ogma's and Yamato's, whom the king of Dorssen had thought were Farune's strongest warriors just moments earlier. Next to him, Sigmund's mouth hung open in blank amazement.

Mars was like a raging storm, a bolt of lightning, a fierce dragon.



Cloaked in the darkness of his fighting spirit, Mars assailed his foes with the inevitability of a natural disaster, instantly defeating them one after another. When any of them defended against even a single one of his attacks, it was enough to make the venue erupt with cheers. A few of the spectators who were especially familiar with the ins and outs of the Hundred had appraising looks on their faces as if to say, “Hey, that one’s gotten better lately.” To them, Mars’s victory was assured, and all that was left was to pay attention to how long the rankers could last before they folded.

Before long, the fight was declared over. Mars had systematically sent each of his opponents flying, claiming victory in the blink of an eye while the spectators excitedly chanted, “Zero! Zero! Zero!” Taken together, the sight offered a glimpse into their strong sense of identification with their country and their king.

The king of Dorssen sat down hard in his luxurious seat. *I’m glad I was able to see this with my own eyes,* he thought. He felt fortunate that he had come here himself. If he hadn’t seen it in person, if he’d only heard reports of it, he probably would have chalked it up to rumors and exaggeration. But now that he had witnessed the strength of Mars and the Hundred, he had completely lost any will whatsoever to fight against Farune.

The king of Dorssen didn’t know what the Demon King was like, if there was such an entity. But if he really did exist, the king had to imagine he was probably like Mars—someone who must never be fought head-on.



WHEN I returned to the nobility seating after finishing my duty, the king of Dorssen greeted me with a smile. “Lord Mars,” he said, “that was a wonderful fight!”

He was acting differently from before. He had probably watched me fighting and thought I looked cool or something. As a king, it was embarrassing to fight like a gladiator in the arena, but if it made him happy, then all was well that ended well.

After I sat down in my seat, the sound of a voice from a magic megaphone announcing the main event filled the venue, and the excitement in the arena climbed another few notches.

“Today, challenging the queen of Farune for her title,” echoed the voice, “it’s the third of Dorssen’s Champions, the spellsword, the famous Frenzied Princess, Lady Carmilla!”

At the announcement, Carmilla appeared at one entrance to the arena wearing a black dress and holding what looked to be a black parasol. As she gracefully walked to the center of the arena, she looked like nothing more than a young noble lady out enjoying a stroll in her garden. She didn’t seem at all like she was about to be in a fight, and both her out-of-place noble attire and her beauty caused a stir in the crowd.

“I wonder what’s up with those clothes,” I wondered aloud to Yamato, who was standing by my side. He had sustained quite a few injuries in the second match, but he was already completely healed thanks to Luida’s restorative magic.

“That is unmistakably anti-mage equipment,” Yamato said. “I’m especially interested in that parasol. It seems to be densely packed with magic formulas. The dress also seems to possess anti-magic effects. Of course, I would expect brilliant technical prowess from Dorssenian magical items.”

The king of Dorssen looked somewhat pleased to hear Yamato’s praise of his country.

“Next, it’s the woman who loves magic, and who is loved by magic,” continued the announcer. “She uses lightning to annihilate anyone in her way, and she’s supported His Majesty, not with love, but with mana, it’s the current queen of Farune, the Lightning Empress, Lady Frau!”

Frau appeared from another entrance, wearing the same mage robes she always wore and holding a large staff. She walked slowly, her face as expressionless as always. Because of her small build, she might otherwise have been confused for a child, but the people of Farune knew her by sight, and cheers of, “You can do it, Queen Frau!” could be heard coming from the stands.

When Frau and Carmilla arrived at their spots, there was another announcement.

“The match for the position of queen consort of Farune between Lady Frau and Lady Carmilla will be starting shortly. The outcome will be decided once one competitor is knocked out of the fight, or once one competitor admits defeat. Do you agree?”

Both women gave slight nods.

“Then, begin!”

At the exact same moment the announcer finished speaking, Carmilla snapped her fingers and fired off a Sonic Blade. Frau silently deployed a barrier and defended against the attack, then magically soared up into the air and began to recite an incantation—simple spells could be activated without an incantation, but spells beyond a certain rank required one.

In response, Carmilla pulled out a concealed dagger from one of her sleeves and sliced at the air, creating a powerful Sonic Blade many times larger than the one she had made with her fingers. Perhaps judging it too strong to block with a barrier, Frau used her flying magic to dodge instead.

“That Sonic Blade was quite mighty,” Yamato remarked. “The dagger she’s using must be a powerful Magic Sword as well. She used the handheld fan last time because she expected a close-range fight with a knight, so she must have brought that dagger this time because she was expecting a long-range fight with a mage.”

In line with Yamato’s explanation, the Sonic Blades produced by the dagger retained their power even at range, and cut through magic barriers. Frau was avoiding direct hits, but she had been grazed several times, resulting in a few light injuries. However, she didn’t seem to mind at all.

In the meantime, Frau finished reciting her spell, and her counterattack began. Countless orbs appeared around her in the air, then they all burst open at once, turning into arrows of light that rained down on Carmilla. This was Lightning, Frau’s specialty spell. She had honed both its precision and power to the very limit.

Carmilla held up her black parasol as a shield, in position to defend. A pattern emerged on the parasol, and its formula was deployed. When Frau’s Lightning crashed into it, a large booming sound filled the arena as a heavy cloud of dust kicked up from the ground.

“An interesting formula,” Frau muttered. Carmilla was unscathed, having completely defended against her Lightning.

“Oh, it’s interesting, is it?” Carmilla taunted. “You’re quite calm. The formula is of my own design, and it isn’t just defensive, you know.” She pointed the tip of the parasol at Frau, then smiled

sweetly. “It’s an absorption formula. It sucks in the spells it blocks, then sends them right back—like this.”

Carmilla reactivated her parasol’s formula, and its tip glowed with mana before rapidly firing off a series of Lightning spells at Frau, the same ones Carmilla had defended against earlier.

Frau’s personality meant she wasn’t quite as good with defensive magic as she was with offensive. Her barrier was unable to fully block the Lightning she had fired earlier, and after taking several direct hits, she came plummeting down from the sky.

VI: A Merciless Woman

WHEN they saw Frau fall, the crowd screamed. And even while Frau was still in midair, Carmilla followed up by showering her with yet more Lightning spells. She wasn’t called the Frenzied Princess for nothing; she was merciless.

Just before Frau hit the ground, she spun around, reorienting herself, then landed. Carmilla seemed to have run out of absorbed spells, because she closed her parasol, then, grasping it in her hands like a sword, she sprinted at Frau. Her parasol was infused with mana, so it probably functioned equally as well as a physical weapon.

Frau pulled out several objects from her sleeve that looked like white fangs, then scattered them over the ground, where they expanded in size and took human form, turning into skeletal knights. These were Dragonfang Soldiers, magic servants created by applying magic to a dragon’s fangs. It was said they were stronger than the average knight, and high-level wizards liked to use them as guards. Frau’s five Dragonfang Soldiers emerged holding swords and shields, and they obstructed Carmilla’s path, protecting their creator.

“Get crushed!” Carmilla shouted, holding her parasol aloft, and she struck one of the soldiers. Like a skilled warrior, it moved fluidly, using its shield to try and defend, but Carmilla’s parasol smashed both soldier and shield together. She possessed abnormal destructive power.

“I wonder how that parasol works,” Yamato said. “Is she treating it like a giant club, using mana to increase its mass? It’s quite interesting. Does Dorssen have many of those types of

magic items?" There seemed to be no end to Yamato's interest in Carmilla's equipment.

"Are you asking whether fans and parasols are used as weapons in Dorssen?" the king of Dorssen asked.

Maybe Dorssen isn't as safe as I thought.

"They're not," he continued. "That's just what she prefers to use. She's always made other people create strange magic items for her, but she's the only one who can actually use them, so they're utterly useless in general."

"But what incredible talent!" Yamato remarked.

The king of Dorssen didn't reply; he just made a sour expression. Maybe he regretted that he hadn't been able to take better advantage of his sister's talent for the good of his country.

Carmilla gracefully wielded her parasol to defeat the remaining four Dragonfang Soldiers, but at the same time, Frau had flown back up into the air and deployed another barrier spell. Then, she went on the attack, continually firing off low-powered Lightning attacks without an incantation, not giving Carmilla a chance to open her parasol. Numerous lightning bolts struck Carmilla, but she appeared unperturbed. In fact, she was smiling confidently.

"This dress is dyed with magic-resistant dragon's blood, *and* woven with anti-magic formulas," she said. "Weak spells like those are just pointless against me."

Dragon's blood was exorbitantly expensive. I had no clue how much it would cost to completely dye a dress with it. She was clearly called "Dorssen's bad debt" for good reason—she was anything but thrifty.

"Continuing to fight is just pointless," Carmilla continued. "I acquired a perfect set of anti-mage equipment specifically for this fight. Please, don't think ill of me, but matches start before the fighting begins, and one's preparation is really what decides the outcome." She put a hand to her mouth and let out an elegant laugh, certain of her victory.

"Preparation is important," Frau muttered from where she floated in midair. "I agree."

"Are you feeling remorse now? Will you accept your defeat?"

Frau quickly shook her head. "I prepared too."

“Oh, you did? Are you referring to those Dragonfang Soldiers? They certainly did shield you, but other than that—”

“Something I buried last night,” Frau said. “The soldiers were a catalyst.” Then, she began reciting a spell. At the same time, a magic circle appeared, encompassing the entire field. The remains of the shattered Dragonfang Soldiers were caught up in a whirlwind and began collecting in the center of the arena.

“That’s a magic circle! How is it so big?!” Carmilla cried out, stunned by the giant, eerily gleaming magic circle at her feet.

Then, right at the spot in the center of the arena where the remains of the Dragonfang Soldiers had accumulated, the ground swelled dramatically, and an entire dragon made of bones emerged.

“What in the world is that?!” the king of Dorssen shouted. He was once again leaning forward in his seat, staring intently at the monster. The spectators, too, reacted with panic at the appearance of the massive dragon.

“Now that’s a Skeletal Dragon,” Sigmund said, looking just as surprised. “It’s the skeleton of a dead dragon, turned undead. They’re very dangerous monsters, even occasionally stronger than the original dragon.”

Skeletal Dragons were powerful monsters that could be commanded using necromancy. They didn’t often appear naturally, so I’d never fought one myself—but I recognized those bones. They were from a dragon I’d defeated when we’d been expanding into the Forest of Beasts. I had given its bones to Frau because she’d wanted to use them in magical experiments, but I hadn’t expected her to use them for something like this.

Without any regard for the commotion in the arena, Frau mounted the Skeletal Dragon, sitting astride its back. “Take her down,” she said, pointing at her foe with her staff. The Skeletal Dragon reared its head, then opened its mouth wide and exhaled a blue breath of flames that didn’t burn their target, but rather rotted it.

Carmilla took a big leap to avoid a direct hit.

“But I haven’t done anything to defend against breath attacks!” she complained, running around the Skeletal Dragon. If she stopped even once, she would end up right in its crosshairs.

Finally, she found a gap in the dragon's defenses and closed in. "Shatter!" she shouted. Then she raised her parasol and landed a powerful hit on one of the dragon's back legs.

Several of the Skeletal Dragon's bones were smashed, but it used its front legs and tail to counterattack with enough force to leave long gouges in the ground. Carmilla avoided the attack, once again putting distance between herself and the dragon, but during that short time the dragon's shattered leg bones regenerated.

"Remind me, can the undead always regenerate that easily?" I asked Yamato.

"I imagine Lady Frau is probably channeling mana to make it regenerate," he replied.

I see. Just like how the strength of an undead servant depends on the caster. Incidentally, as they watched the fight, Sigmund's and the king of Dorssen's faces had entirely drained of color.

"Take this!" Carmilla activated her Magic Eyes. When the Skeletal Dragon stopped moving, she held her parasol in both hands and made a horizontal swing, firing off a massive Sonic Blade.

"Whoa, even I can't do that," I said. My Sonic Blades never got nearly that big.

"That's almost entirely magic," Yamato said, similarly surprised. "Human beings with low levels of mana can't hope to accomplish a feat like that."

The massive Sonic Blade divided the immobilized dragon in two, and, unable to maintain the structure of its body, it loudly crumbled to the ground. Given time, it still might have regenerated, but Carmilla raised her parasol and leaped at it, totally pulverizing the dragon's head.

"I see. The head must be where the catalyst is. Destroying it means the dragon can't regenerate anymore. That was a good move," Yamato praised Carmilla.

The crowd, thrilled by her defeat of the giant Skeletal Dragon, chanted Carmilla's name. The king of Dorssen looked happy too. His face had broken into a wide grin.

"Hm? Where's Frau?" I said. Frau had been riding on the dragon's back, but had disappeared at some point.

“Hey! Look up there!” someone in the crowd yelled, pointing up high in the air. Frau was there, and she was deploying multiple shining magic circles in the empty space around her.

Is that…wait, is she about to fire off Thunder Judgment?

“We can’t have that,” I said out loud. “Tell the mages to strengthen the barrier.” The barrier had been placed to keep spectators safe from physical objects during my match, but I had asked the mages to deploy an anti-magic barrier for Frau and Carmilla’s match as well. At its current level, though, the barrier wouldn’t be able to block Thunder Judgment.

“You’re using an anti-army spell against a single person?! Have you lost your mind?!” Carmilla shouted, her face pale. She opened up her parasol and activated its formula, getting ready for Thunder Judgment.

“I’m looking forward to seeing whether you can deflect this,” Frau said.

Then, her expression as unchanging as ever, she activated her spell. The sound of thunder reverberated all around, and countless searing bolts of lightning rained down on Carmilla. Several of them crashed against the barrier here and there, and the arena was engulfed with booms and flashes. Screaming could be heard coming from the stands.



Well, at least it looks like the barrier will hold, I thought. *The mages have gotten more skilled too.*

Finally, after Frau's spell was over, Carmilla was left standing in the center of the arena holding what had once been her parasol. Unable to absorb the spell, its canopy was gone, and its handle snapped. Her black dress was also in tatters and burned in places. The Skeletal Dragon, which had been nearby, had been turned to charcoal, and was crumbling to bits.

Carmilla was silent for a few moments. Then she said, "I've just remembered. Come to think of it, I've always wanted an older sister. So I shall call you Elder Sister from now on, if you would be so obliging." Then she coughed up some black soot, and collapsed.

Even her lungs are damaged. She's quite something, to go that far without accepting defeat.

"The victory goes to Lady Frau!" the announcer declared, after seeing that Carmilla was no longer able to fight. But not a single person could be heard celebrating Frau's win. They were all awkwardly murmuring things like:

"Don't you think that was a bit too cruel?"

"First that bone monster, now this. She went too far."

"I don't think it's okay to do *anything* to win..."

"Lady Carmilla did her best."

Then, as if to speak for the rest of the crowd, the king of Dorssen lodged a complaint with me, saying, "King Mars! Don't you think that was going too far?"

"...Well, nobody died, so that's good," I replied, watching the healers, with Luida leading the charge, rush over to Carmilla's side. *Frau's never* not *gone too far.*



AFTER the fight in the arena was over, the king of Dorssen, who had watched over Carmilla as she recovered, was in a carriage heading to his accommodations.

"Sigmund, every last one of these Farunians is absolutely crazy!" he said. "Summoning that monster in a match, using a spell that could've blown away the entire arena—they aren't normal.

And did you see the citizens just watching with stupid smiles on their faces the whole time? What the hell is wrong with them?"

"It is exactly as you say, Your Majesty," Sigmund replied. "Farune's citizens are abnormal. They're all skilled warriors, and while I wouldn't lose against any one of them individually, they are numerous. Regrettably, they are beyond the capacity of Dorssen's knights."

"That's what I thought," the king of Dorssen said. He had given up, in various ways.

"Yes, sir," Sigmund replied. "In particular, I might only just barely be able to take on those knight captains and the others like them, like Warren, Chrom, or Ogma. The man who sat with us today, Yamato, was also of considerable strength. However, King Mars is more terrifying than any of them. Even I couldn't defeat him."

"Not even you? Not even Sigmund the Dragonslayer?" Until the previous day, the king of Dorssen hadn't had a doubt in his mind that Sigmund was the strongest person alive, but the faint embers of that hope had been dashed.

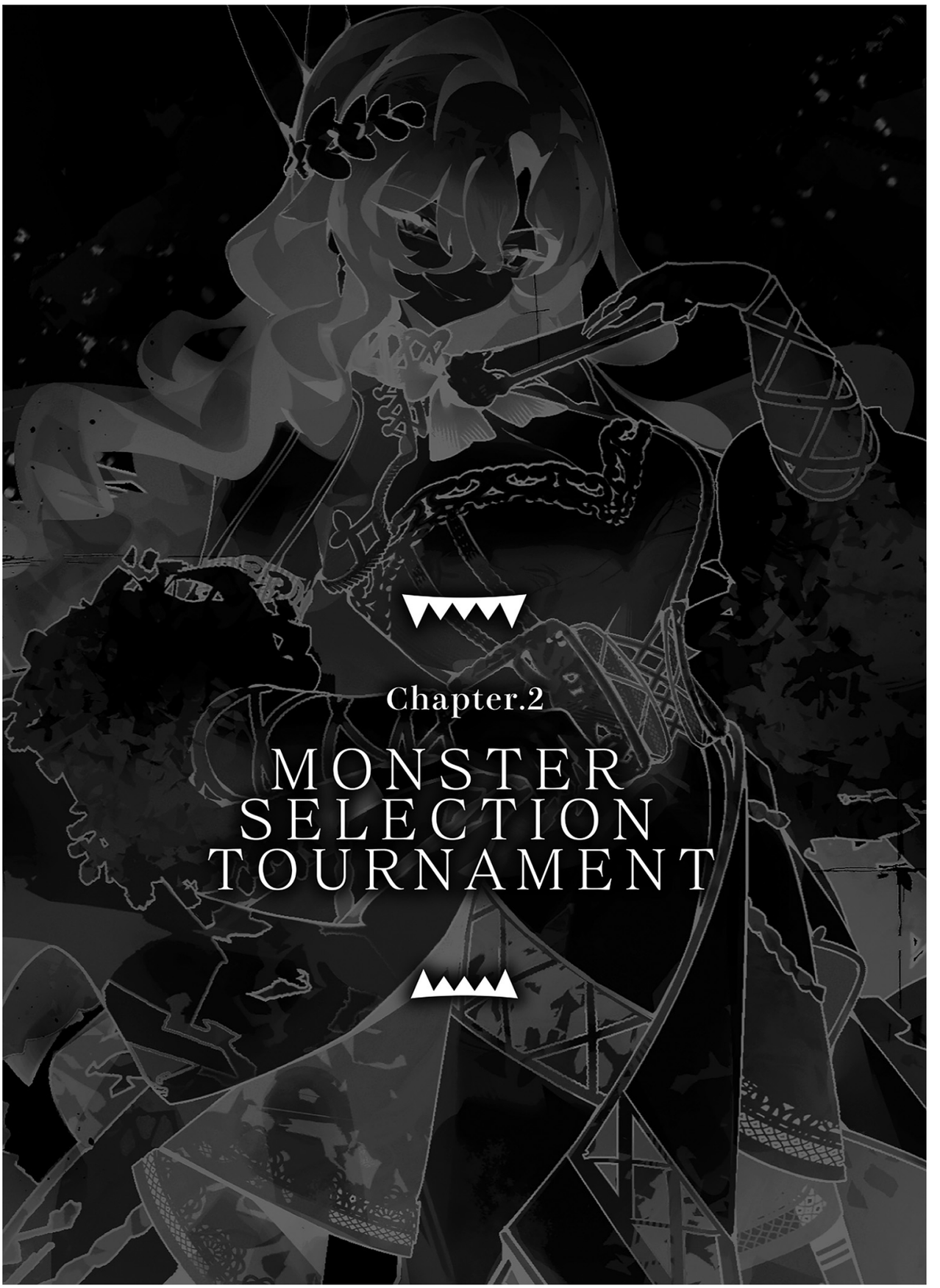
"No, I could not. And I believe he must also be unusually brave, seeing as he's taken the Lightning Empress as his wife."

"Yes, that's also true." The king recalled the day's matches. Personally, he could never marry a monstrous woman like her. "In any case, it seems best not to be on confrontational terms with Farune."

"I agree. The Hundred is a collection of warriors stronger than the rumors suggest. They may be on par with a knightly order from the center of the continent, or even more powerful than that. Additionally, their king and queen are at the level of heroes. They are not foes we can defeat."

"In that sense, this marriage was a success. If anything..." The king of Dorssen cast his gaze to the scenery outside the carriage window, considering. "A kingdom so chock-full of monsters might just be a better fit for Carmilla."

He trailed off, thinking about his sister, who for many long years had left him at his wits' end.



Chapter.2

MONSTER SELECTION TOURNAMENT

VII: Carmilla’s Dinner

AFTER being defeated in the match for the position of queen consort, I decided to influence the kingdom of Farune in a different domain. I had had enough for one lifetime of fighting with a woman who commanded Skeletal Dragons, and who fired off spells powerful enough to turn the entire arena to charcoal. It seemed that I was secretly called the “Frenzied Princess,” but I would have to yield the title of “frenzied” to that woman. And besides, now that we were both wives of the king, it was wrong for us to compete in the uncivilized realm of battle. I couldn’t have her thinking she was above me just because her magic was a bit strong. A person’s value did not lie in their ability with a sword, or in their mana. Trying to resolve everything with strength was for barbarians. I had to bring something else to this backward country—and that was culture.

There were few nobles in Farune, so the country’s culture was unbelievably crude. It was hard to bear for someone like me, raised in the resplendent culture of the central continent. Farune’s royal castle was a brutal structure utterly lacking in splendor, and it looked like it had been built with nothing but functionality in mind. When I thought about it, I remembered that when I’d fought with Yamato, some of the walls, ceilings, and pillars had been destroyed, and all their prime minister, Gamarath, had done was complain about repair costs. If I had known that was how things were, I would have been better off demolishing the entire castle and forcing them to rebuild it from the ground up. But that was in the past, so there was nothing to be done about it.

Regardless, as a refined noble, I was obligated to breathe new life into Farune’s culture. However, that population of barbarians wouldn’t be moved if I suddenly showed them a painting or a sculpture out of nowhere. After all, they were the type of people to wear prisoners’ armlets as accessories. It would be a tall order, to say the least, to teach them the first thing about good art. Making a monkey write a poem would probably have been easier.

No, the first step to teaching unpolished country folk about culture was through their diet. Surely if I served them a refined

Dorssenian meal, they would realize how backward their own culture was—and the first step was to disparage Farune's local cuisine. Even if it was of passable taste, I would need to search thoroughly for any flaw, summon the chef, shower them with abuse and corner them mentally, then oust them. Then, I would install the first-rate chef I'd brought from Dorssen as the replacement palace chef. It wouldn't be a violent abuse of my position, or anything of the sort; it was simply a necessary part of the process of developing Farune's culture.



SO, there I was, sitting down with King Mars for our first dinner together, just the two of us. I was awfully excited to see what sort of plain meal I would be served.

The servers brought the food in on silver trays.

Now, what sort of dish will it be? I wondered.

There was a single piece of raw meat on my plate.

What's the meaning of this? Is this harassment against a foreign princess? I looked to my new husband, King Mars, and saw that he was unhesitatingly eating an even more massive piece of raw meat than what was on my plate. *Are this country's eating habits stuck ten thousand years in the past?*

Well, fine. These were more dire circumstances than I had imagined, but that only meant my plan would be that much easier to put into action. I decided to call for the chef right away.

"Is this food some kind of a joke? Making me eat a raw piece of meat—are you mistaking me for an orc, or something? Call the chef, the chef, I tell you!"

"The chef? Umm, the chef didn't make this…"

As I expected, the servers were frightened. Starting on that day, I had to make it known who exactly was mistress of this castle.

"Then I don't care who, just bring me whoever was in charge of making this!"

The servers hurriedly exited the room.

Meanwhile, King Mars was silently eating his raw meat. He had to have had a strong will to be able to eat such a primitive meal without any complaints, but he also clearly had no backbone.

It occurred to me that it might be surprisingly easy for me to seize power in this kingdom.

As I secretly chuckled to myself, a man came into the room without announcing himself, but I recognized him as the first of the Hundred, Ogma. As if to symbolize all of Farune, both his body and his brains were made of nothing but pure muscle. In Dorssen, he was feared for having decapitated more than fifty knights in the Battle of Brix.

"Are you the one complaining about the monster meat we presented to you?" he asked.

Pardon me? Did you just say, 'monster meat?' This isn't beef, or venison?

"Th-this is monster meat?" I exclaimed. "And you're making the king and his consort eat it? Are there no bounds to your insolence?!"

"It isn't insolence. This type of meal is necessary for those of us in the Hundred to build a strong body and mind, and it was devised by the great King Zero himself. It *is* poisonous, but it'll improve your stamina and your mana. So shut up and eat."

"It's poisonous? And you're serving it with full knowledge of that fact? Just what are you—"

Ogma let out an irritated sigh. "I served you the monster that's the easiest to eat out of all of them: Killer Rabbit. Even sixteen-year-old boys who've only just joined the Hundred are eating it… Though admittedly, kids under sixteen, whose bodies haven't finished developing yet, would probably die if they had any."

"They what? You didn't just say they'd *die*, did you?"

"Give it a rest. You're over eighteen, aren't you? So you'll be fine. Just take a look at His Majesty. He's eating the meat of a monster all of us went to defeat together, a Behemoth. An ordinary full-grown adult would die the second their tongue touched that stuff. I have trouble eating it myself. The only person in the kingdom who can eat Behemoth meat without flinching is His Majesty. And you're whining about a piece of Killer Rabbit meat. If you're going to be his consort, why don't you show some nerve?"

A Behemoth? Those are massive, high-ranking monsters, on par with dragons. They're sometimes called 'walking cataclysms.' The king

of this country is eating that*?*

Looking at King Mars, he seemed like he couldn't hear our conversation at all as he silently and single-mindedly ate the meat.

"Behemoths are rare, but they're huge, so they have a lot of meat," Ogma continued. "But only King Zero can eat Behemoth meat, so we used magic to freeze it and preserve it. His Majesty has been eating it every meal since. Hear that? That Behemoth meat is testimony to the heights he's achieved. His Majesty exists always in a world far above our own." As Ogma gazed at King Mars, his eyes sparkled like those of a pure-hearted child.

This is completely beyond me. Is one's status in this kingdom decided by one's resistance to poison?

"This is preposterous. I came here from Dorssen. I have no need to abide by Farune's barbaric customs."

"I'm afraid that's not going to work. You're already a member of the Hundred. You're obligated to eat that meat. If you don't, I'll just have to shove it down your throat."

"I won't have you making me into one of your berserkers, if you don't mind!"

Ignoring my rebuke, Ogma took a step toward me. "Insolence!" he shouted.

Thanks to his provocation, I couldn't help but snap my fingers and fire off a Sonic Blade. Really, it was out of my control. It wasn't my fault at all.

"Whoa there," Ogma said casually, and simply caught the Sonic Blade with his palm. The shock of it made a loud explosion that echoed around the room, and even then, King Mars continued to eat in silence. "Hey, watch where you're pointing that thing. If it had been anyone else, you might've taken off a few fingers."

No, that should've been strong enough to take off your head, let alone your fingers. Why were you able to block it with your bare hand?

"You won't ever be a match for His Majesty with a Sonic Blade like that. You came here because you wanted to challenge him, right? Then that's all the more reason for you to eat monster meat. And if you don't have the guts, then I can always make you eat it. Would you prefer that?"

Ogma slowly approached me, which was terrifying. "All right! I'll eat it! Just don't come any closer!" I hastily turned to face the

piece of raw meat on my plate, used a knife to cut off a small piece, and put it in my mouth.

…I almost lost consciousness. This went way beyond disgusting. My body was rejecting it. It was clearly something that I absolutely should not have eaten. I suppressed the urge to vomit and somehow managed to chew and swallow it. Then, because of the sheer unpleasantness of the whole experience, I drank an entire cup of water in a single gulp. But even then, it felt like the meat was wriggling around in my stomach. I was overcome by the illusion that I had ingested some sort of giant parasite that was just *shaped* like meat.

“See, you can do it if you put your mind to it,” Ogma said, like he was praising a child performing poorly in school.

“Do you all really eat this stuff?” I asked after taking a moment to recover. I had only taken a single bite, and I already felt like this. I couldn’t believe they actually ate monster meat for every meal.

“Oh, we do. We started with the meat of weak monsters, and we’ve been gradually raising the levels over time.”

You’re raising the level of the poison? Does everyone in this kingdom have a death wish?

“I can’t do it!” I shouted. “This is impossible for me!” My only option now was to use tears to get my way. Ignoring Ogma, who had to have been some kind of cross between a demon and an ogre, I instead pleaded with King Mars, who had just finished eating his own meat. My eyes wet with feigned tears, I gazed at him and said, “Your Majesty. I cannot eat monster meat. Please, have it in your heart to take pity on me…”

The trick here was to let a single tear trickle down my cheek. I was the most beautiful woman in the world, so there could not have been a man alive able to say no, not when I begged him like this.

“Carmilla,” King Mars said with a cheerful smile.

All right! I did it!

“I’m expecting great things from you, so do your best,” he continued. Then, he hastily left the room.

Huh? Did he just abandon me?

As I sat there dumbfounded, Ogma placed a hand on my shoulder. “Looks like His Majesty has high hopes for you. There’s

no way you can't meet his expectations now. Well, if you don't meet them, the gods may forgive you," he added, "but I won't."

And so, Ogma monitored me until I ate the entire piece of meat. As I did, tears streamed down my face, and I occasionally paused to sob because of how awful it tasted and how despondent I was. It took me a full hour to eat it all.

Needless to say, I had a fierce bout of diarrhea that evening.



THE Behemoth meat was as disgusting as ever. If I didn't focus my mind and stimulate my body's poison resistance as high as it would go, I would be taken out by the poison in the middle of my meal.

It was the first time I had shared a meal together with Carmilla, but because of the Behemoth meat, I wasn't really able to talk much with her. Then, as soon as I was finally about to finish eating, she and Ogma started talking. Carmilla appealed to me, begging me not to make her eat monster meat.

Yep, I don't think we should be eating such vile meat either. It's obviously best to eat meals more fit for humans. Plus, it would be great if you could do something about Ogma, who brings me monster meat for every meal even though I've never asked him to.

That was why I told her, "I'm expecting great things from you, so do your best."

I was hoping that Carmilla, who had come from another country, would be the person to abolish the repulsive practice of eating monsters that was running rampant in Farune. But because I couldn't say it directly myself, I quickly exited the room as soon as I'd spoken.

You can do it, Carmilla!

VIII: Carmilla's Life

CARMILLA'S personal hell began the day she officially married into the Farunian royal family. First of all, she was fed nothing but monster meat, three meals a day. In the early days, she also managed to eat some dishes prepared by the chef she had brought with her from Dorssen, but it was just too miserable to stomach the monster meat if she wasn't absolutely starving. She

soon became trapped in a vicious cycle where she felt sick when she ate monster meat and was then left unable to tolerate any other food anyway, so she quickly stopped trying to eat anything else.

Every time she sat down for a meal, she regretted every decision that had brought her to that point. Back in Dorssen, Carmilla had issued constant complaints: “I’m not hungry right now,” or, “Do you really expect me to eat that?” or, “I don’t like any of those foods.” This had greatly inconvenienced her chefs and her attendants, and she had let many dishes go to waste.

I was so extravagantly indulgent, she thought. *If I had any of that food I wasted because of my pickiness in front of me right now, I would eat every last bite with a smile. I’ll never demand anything more from my food, not for the rest of my life, just so long as it isn’t monster meat.*

Carmilla repented, but the monster meat sitting before her didn’t go anywhere, and with Ogma’s glinting, watchful eyes staring right at her, she had no choice but to choke it down.



THEN there were the nights. Now that she was Mars’s wife, Carmilla was expected to be his partner in the privacy of his bedroom as well as in the public sphere. On top of that, right around the time of Carmilla’s marriage, Queen Frau had announced she was pregnant, which meant that Carmilla alone had to keep the king company after dark for the time being.

Back when Carmilla’s marriage to Mars had been decided, one of Frau’s attendants had asked her, “My queen, is it truly all right with you for His Majesty to take a new wife?”

The attendant knew that Mars and Frau were a loving couple, and was worried that Frau might be hurt by him marrying another woman.

“It’s fine. I’m going to be out of commission for a while,” Frau said. At the time, she was already anticipating her pregnancy. Then, she added, “And besides, it’s a difficult job for just one person.”

The attendant looked confused. She didn’t know what exactly Frau meant, but she thought that she was probably referring to

something about her duties as queen.

Now, for another anecdote.

There were many brothels in the royal capital, and with all the sightseers headed to the arena, business was booming. Naturally, some members of the Hundred also visited as customers on occasion—but they had an absolutely awful reputation. It wasn't because they shirked payments, or anything like that. If anything, they were better than most at paying up. This would normally have made them valued customers, but the women working in the brothels hated to keep the company of anyone in the Hundred, especially the higher-ranking members. After a single evening with any one of them, they were left utterly exhausted in both mind and body, so much so that it could take a few days before they could move again. That was bad for business, no matter how much they were paid. Still, that didn't mean they could just refuse members of the Hundred as customers, so the group remained hated by the brothels—not that they themselves paid it any mind.

Monster meat increased a person's stamina and mana, but its effects didn't stop there; it also had an enormous influence in a certain other area. Mars, who stood at the top of the Hundred, was no exception. In fact, he was affected the most of any of them. It was enough that even Frau, who consumed monster meat just like he did, and who barely ever showed even a flicker of emotion, had begun to feel somewhat sick of him. However, neither of them had ever been with anyone else, so they simply assumed their relationship was normal.

Carmilla, on the other hand, may not have had any experience herself, but she was aware of many past examples of princess consorts bending kings to their will through amorous congress, and she was fired up with ambition to do just that. It vexed her that Frau had gotten pregnant first, but from the perspective of lineage, she expected that her child would get priority anyway, as she was Dorssenian royalty, so she had positive feelings about spending nights together with her husband.

Then, on the very first night, she despaired. Completely exhausted and drained of all her willpower, she was astonished to see Mars getting out of bed still full of energy, as if she wasn't even there. This was no man—this was a monster.

If this goes on, eventually, I'll die! she thought, feeling that her life was genuinely in danger. But that gave her an idea: if she managed to end up in poor health, maybe she could return to Dorssen. Unfortunately, while her body was in bad shape at first, it quickly adapted, and she was nothing less than exceedingly healthy. Even trying to feign illness was pointless; when she did, Ogma just pushed her attendants to the side, dragged her out of bed, and forced her to eat her meals.



CARMILLA'S woes only continued. One day, after about a month had passed, she had just finished with the torture known as breakfast when Yamato appeared.

"Lady Carmilla," he began, "I've received news from Lord Ogma that your body has adapted to your new diet, so starting today, I would like to begin your training."

My body has adapted? Sure, I may not get an upset stomach anymore, but the taste is still horrendous. You call that adapting? And by the way, what do you mean, training? What need does the king's wife have for training?

Carmilla had already given up on various aspects of her new life, but she decided to try asking anyway, just in case: "Do I have the right to refuse that training?"

"What do you mean to say, Lady Carmilla? You possess extraordinary talent. Not developing it would be akin to blasphemy!"

Farune itself is akin to blasphemy. I hope the gods punish you soon…maybe sometime tomorrow.

Carmilla waited a moment before giving in and asking. "Then, what sort of training is it?"

"It's simple," Yamato said. "You only have to return from the Forest of Beasts alive."

Oh yeah, that's right. They mentioned something like that before, didn't they? Carmilla thought, remembering the conversation that had taken place while she was tied up. *So that was serious? You're really going to abandon me in the Forest of Beasts? That isn't training, it's human sacrifice!*

But just then, an idea crossed her mind. Did she really have to return from the forest? Couldn't she just use this chance to make her escape all the way back to Dorssen?

"Very well," she declared. "I shall undergo your so-called training."

With a single, faint hope in her heart, Carmilla headed toward the Forest of Beasts.



THERE'S *no way I'm going to survive this.*

Deep in the Forest of Beasts, Carmilla's life was in jeopardy. She had been told that the monsters wouldn't quite be enough to kill her, but now that she had actually arrived, she could see that the monsters in question were as powerful as they were huge.

There were snakes as thick as tree trunks, boars that looked more like hills, insects a hundred times larger than normal, plant-shaped creatures, spirits, ghosts, and so on; nearly everything Carmilla set her eyes on was a monster. She *could* defeat them if she tried, but when she did, more just kept showing up. All she could do was keep fighting while running away—heading back toward Farune's royal castle, which she could see even from the forest. It was her only option.

After exhausting every last bit of strength she could muster, fighting one monster after another, and struggling through an entire day and night, Carmilla at last reached the castle with her life intact. There, in front of the castle gate, she cried. The light of the city was so precious, and she was so happy to be able to see another human being again. More than anything else, she realized how wonderful it was to be alive. She had gained an understanding of the value of life and was feeling gratitude for all things when Yamato appeared before her. He was smiling.

"It seems that you can still keep going. Shall we go a bit deeper next time?"

"Are you totally heartless?!"

Carmilla lost it. She snapped her fingers several times in quick succession, attacking Yamato with blades of wind. They were more powerful than the last time she had fought him, and she had produced the blades more quickly as well.

Yamato instantly unsheathed his longsword and chopped down one blade of wind after another. But he didn't quite make it in time, and he had to twist his body to avoid the remaining blades. The last time, he had been able to deal with them with only his sword. Carmilla's skills had definitely improved.

"Wonderful! You've steadily leveled up since the last time we fought!"

And because Carmilla had never really put in any serious effort before, the speed of her growth was that much faster.

I can do it! she thought triumphantly. *I'll defeat this crusty stick-in-the-mud and go home to Dorssen!*

Carmilla's eyes turned crimson, her Magic Eyes activating, and Yamato's body suddenly weighed enough to keep him from standing upright.

"I see. The power of your Magic Eyes has increased by just as large a margin as your mana. Magic Eyes are really quite convenient," Yamato said, calmly analyzing the situation as if no more than a bystander. He quickly took off his gravity armlet, but this time, Carmilla's Magic Eyes were more powerful than the armlet's effect, so Yamato was still visibly less agile.

"Let's see how that pride of yours serves you in the afterlife!" Carmilla shouted. She took out her fan and waved it, producing a powerful shockwave. Needless to say, this was also stronger than it had been before, and it tore up the ground in its path as it neared Yamato.

Yamato jumped to dodge it, but was bombarded with blades of wind.

"You can't dodge that, can you?"

Assured of her enemy's demise, Carmilla smiled coldly, her eyes still a bright red. She was both beautiful and fiendish, her appearance reminiscent of an inhuman sorcerer.

"You still have a ways to go," Yamato said then, and all of a sudden, the number of swords he was holding increased. Actually, no, he was just moving his sword so quickly it left behind a visible afterimage. With that, he fended off every last blade of wind.

"That's Mirage Sword! What are you doing with Matheus's technique!?"

Carmilla was surprised to see the technique of her despised former comrade. She used to disparage it as a cheap trick, but in

Yamato's hands, the technique was more polished than the original. It looked like he had actually manifested a countless number of slashes in a single stroke. And that wasn't all: Yamato had used mana to create a foothold in midair, and he was coming at Carmilla with fierce momentum. He was maintaining the increased heart rate necessary to activate Mirage Sword and had applied it to his own movement speed.

"No way!" Carmilla panicked at Yamato's sudden boost in speed. She transformed her fan into a Magic Sword and tried to intercept him, but the moment before she did, Yamato vanished.

"Wha—?!"

This was the sword technique Yamato had displayed in his match with Ogma, when he had instantly taken the spot to his opponent's rear. By the time Carmilla noticed, it was too late. She took a powerful blow to the back of her neck, and her vision wavered—but even as her consciousness faded away, she could sense that her defense, too, had grown stronger.

IX: Good Eats

THINGS started to feel a bit livelier after Carmilla came to Farune. She was called the "Frenzied Princess," but she was also a member of the Dorssenian royal family, so she was surprisingly sensible.

Or maybe everyone here is just completely insane.

Regardless, she made various constructive proposals, which I was grateful for—starting with improving the meals we ate.

"Monster meat is too awful!" she insisted. "What are we, animals? We ought to eat meals that have been properly prepared! Eating raw meat without even cooking or seasoning it tramples on everything we humans have built with savage impunity!"

Of course, she was entirely correct. That meat was nothing but poison. Being forced to eat it for every meal was like losing out on half of what made life worth living. That is to say, I was losing half of my life's enjoyment, personally.

However, this perfectly reasonable proposal was met with some opposition. The first objector on the list was, of course, Ogma.

"Everyone knows eating monster meat raw is better," he said. "It makes you stronger! That is the sacred and inviolable law of the

Hundred!”

Sacred and inviolable? The Hundred has never been that serious. Who made up such an unnecessary rule? Show him to me!

Actually, I guess it was me. But it isn’t like that! I just didn’t want to be the only one eating that awful meat raw, so when Ogma and the others tried to cook it at first, I told them they had to eat it raw or they wouldn’t get stronger.

There was no doubt about it: cooking the meat and, say, sprinkling it with a bit of salt made it way easier to eat. I did that at first too. But it ended up becoming standard for me to eat it raw anyway, ever since my master forced me to. Either way, though, I didn’t really know whether eating monster meat raw actually made you stronger than eating it cooked. My master seemed like the type of person to think that the torture of eating something disgusting was another aspect of training. So, it had only been natural for me to try to increase my fellow victims…I mean comrades. I never imagined it would be turned into an ironclad law without my knowledge.

In any case, everyone in the Hundred was fiercely opposed to Carmilla’s proposal to improve the food.

What makes them reject the natural human desire to eat food that tastes good?

“As a human, Lady Carmilla’s opinion is only reasonable. I agree with her,” said the priestess, Luida. She was the only one who took Carmilla’s side. The Hundred feared her and depended on her, always addressing her as “Miss” (not “Madam,” as it turned out), so she was one of the few people in the kingdom who could stand up to them. “We aren’t animals, are we? Those meals are blasphemy against the god that created us. You all should eat some meals fit for humans for once.”

Seeing the leaders of the Hundred wavering, I decided to chime in.

“They say it’s important to try new things. If you just flatly reject the opinions of others without hearing them out, you’ll end up with old, outdated prejudices. After all, when you guys say it’s best to eat the meat raw, you’re just mindlessly repeating what I said. Try doubting my words for once. Believe what you’ve confirmed with your own eyes. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” They all kneeled at once. I was glad to see they understood.

“With that said, I approve of Carmilla’s venture,” I said. “Cook up a fine piece of monster meat.”

“Thank you very much,” Carmilla said with a refined bow. That aspect of her was actually pretty charming and princess-like.

Wait a minute. Don’t tell me Carmilla is the only proper princess left around here. A kingdom with no one more refined than the ‘Frenzied Princess’ is just not right.



SEVERAL months passed before I received a report from Carmilla that said she had perfected the monster meat dishes. According to her, the first-class chef she had brought from Dorssen had exerted a great deal of effort to make them.

I’m sorry for forcing you to cook with that poison, I thought.

All sorts of tasty-looking dishes that didn’t at all look like they were made with monster meat were brought in and lined up on the dining room table.

There was tender-looking steak, roasted to a perfect brown finish on the outside and with a scent that tickled my nose. The inside was a faint pink, and overflowing with juices. It was a mystery to me what the chef had done with that poisonous meat to turn it into this.

Next were charcoal-grilled ribs that gave off a smoky aroma. Grill marks were visible on their surface, and they were thickly coated with some kind of sauce that smelled absolutely out of this world.

Next to the meat was soup stewed with fragrant herbs and spices in a delicious-looking golden color. Apparently, by letting the meat simmer with vegetables for several hours, the flavor of the meat had dissolved into the soup. I, for one, was surprised that monster meat even *had* any flavor, besides poison.

There was also a strange dish that was made with savory-smelling grilled meat and fresh vegetables, rolled up in something that looked like lightly baked bread. This dish, topped with a sour sauce, was apparently a local Dorssenian specialty called driss. It looked like it would sell out immediately from one of our food

stalls over by the arena. It wasn't easy to find this much appealing food in Farune, monster meat or not. *We're basically a backwater, after all.*

"To prepare the monster meat, I marinated it in milk for several hours, which simultaneously removed the stench and softened it up," explained Zaburo, Carmilla's chef. He looked tense. He was a man past middle age, with facial hair and noticeable streaks of white in his hair—very much the image of a skilled chef.

So he used milk just to get rid of the smell? There sure are some extravagant dishes out there. No one would ever think of a cooking technique like that in Farune.

"However, well…I may have gotten rid of the stench, but I was unable to get rid of the poison, so I myself have not tasted it," Zaburo continued, sounding apologetic. "I requested that Lady Carmilla and Lady Luida ascertain the flavor."

Well, yeah. If you ate it, you'd die.

"I can vouch for the flavor," Carmilla said, placing a hand to her ample chest. "This *is* Dorssenian cuisine. Unfortunately, only meat dishes were allowed, so the spread is lacking in overall elegance, but there is no other chef who can prepare that demonic meat with this much flavor!"

Makes sense, definitely. I nodded along. *It looks delicious.*

"I helped in the preparation too. This is what we humans really *should* be eating," Luida added, backing up Carmilla. She seemed equally confident in the food.

"Now, if Your Majesty would do us the honor of taking the first bite," Carmilla said. She portioned out some of the food onto a plate for me.

It made me happy to see her conducting herself like my wife. *Don't mind if I do, thank you very much.*

"Wait." But just as Carmilla was about to bring me the plate, Ogma stepped into her path. "You can't let His Majesty eat that food."

Huh? Why not?

Carmilla gave Ogma a harsh glare. "What is the meaning of this? Are you perhaps suggesting that I am serving His Majesty poison?"

"Don't you dare mock His Majesty!" Ogma barked. "If a little thing like poison could harm a man of his stature, he'd have

passed away long ago from the poison in the monster meat he eats for every meal!”

What are you so pissed about? Instead, maybe you should question why your king is eating nothing but poison.

“Indeed, Lady Carmilla. If it were possible to kill His Majesty with poison, I would have killed him long ago.”

Gamarath?!

“…Then, what is the issue?” Carmilla asked. She was momentarily taken aback, but seemed to have regained her composure while Ogma and Gamarath spoke.

“King Zero is a being devoted to the pursuit of strength. I can’t let you feed him meat that’s less effective at strengthening him, even if only for a single meal. His Majesty must always be without flaw!”

Would you mind not defining my being for me? Personally, I’d very much like to eat the delicious-looking food that’s sitting right in front of me.

“Well, what do you want me to do then?” Carmilla said.

“We’ll taste the food. That way, only we’ll suffer,” Ogma replied. Then, he slowly took a bite of the steak. “Mhmm. That’s an elite Dorssenian chef for you.”

“It’s good,” said Frau. Before I knew it, she was nibbling on the driss like a squirrel.

“These ribs are also superb. And the sauce is simply wonderful,” said Yamato, his mouth stuffed full with ribs. He looked like he was really enjoying himself.

“This dish has quite a deep flavor too. The meat, vegetables, and spices form the perfect harmony,” said Chrom, extolling the soup’s virtues.

Even my vassals who couldn’t eat monster meat themselves, excluding Gamarath, were licking their lips.

Incidentally, Ogma was standing right in front of me, so I couldn’t reach out to grab anything for myself. *Is this intentional harassment?* I wondered. *Don’t even try to deny it, I know you’re doing this on purpose!*

“Ogma, do you remember what I said to you? I told you to confirm things with your own eyes,” I reminded Ogma, putting a kingly dignity into my words. “What makes you so sure this food isn’t as effective?”

Never mind that, just get out of the way. I want to eat some too.

“Sir! Certainly, we confirmed it, of course!” Ogma replied.

“Huh?”

“Come on in,” Ogma said to someone outside the door.

Two men entered the room. They were young, with traces of boyishness still evident in their faces. They were probably around sixteen, which meant they were just barely old enough to join the Hundred. Their faces were almost identical, but they were built completely differently. One was slender, though decently strong for his age. In comparison, the other’s body was solid and toned, and a good deal thicker. Even from the perspective of an adult, he was in excellent shape.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“They’re rookies in the Hundred. And,” Ogma said, pointing a finger at them, “they’re twins.”

They are? Sure, their faces look alike, but their bodies are totally different.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Carmilla asked, echoing my thoughts.

“Right, so for the last few months, I continually made one of them eat raw monster meat, and the other one I made eat cooked monster meat. Needless to say, they had exactly the same physique before eating monster meat at all. And now look at them.” Ogma sounded proud of himself.

Um, Ogma, you know they call that human experimentation, right?

“Hey, Abel. You ate the raw meat, what’d you think?” Ogma asked the more well-built twin.

“Sir! It was difficult at first, and there were times when I envied Cain the cooked meat he was eating,” Abel briskly replied, straightening his posture. “However, as the gap between our muscle mass grew, I also grew stronger in other ways, and as I did, my joy at being able to eat the raw meat became more intense than the pain! I’m going to eat nothing but raw monster meat for the rest of my life!”

“And Cain, what about you?”

“Sir! I found eating cooked meat to be easier at first, so I was glad I didn’t have to eat it raw. But then, Abel, who’d been raised in exactly the same way as me, started gaining more muscle and

beating me in strength, and now, I feel frustrated. I want to eat raw meat too, as soon as I can!" Cain looked impatient.

"With this, I've scientifically demonstrated what Your Majesty said! This food is definitely delicious! But, for the supreme ruler, King Zero, it's unnecessary!"

Um, I'm not a supreme ruler, and it isn't unnecessary.

"I see," Carmilla said dejectedly. "In other words, in Farune, where might makes right, raw monster meat is best?"

Hey! Why are you about to admit defeat?! I haven't even had any yet! I'm begging you, please, argue back!

"Certainly, it does seem that raw meat is more fit for His Majesty's consumption, and actually, for the Hundred too," Luida said, hanging her head in disappointment.

Hold on. Do you mean to tell me to eat nothing but raw monster meat for the rest of my life? I want to eat like a normal person, like anyone else!

I looked around for some help, and I saw that Zaburo, who had after all been brought all this way from Dorssen, was sadly mumbling to himself. "Then what was all my effort for...?"

That's it! I'll use him!

"Zaburo, you've done well," I said. "I won't allow your work to go to waste. Your dishes will be put to great use in Farune."

With the way things were going, I didn't think anyone would prevent me from eating the food now. This was for Farune, so it was meaningless if the king himself didn't try it. I did my best to act natural as I reached out to the plate in front of me, but then, Gamarath shouted.

"I see, I get it now, Your Majesty!"

What's there to get?

"What do you mean, Lord Gamarath?" Chrom asked him.

"His Majesty's intention in having Zaburo try to cook with monster meat was the establishment of new cooking techniques, and the creation of Farune's own unique cuisine!"

Um, what's going on?

"A new cuisine?" Chrom tilted his head, puzzled.

"As a frontier country, we've never had any dishes to contribute to our local charm. That's why foreign visitors coming to see the arena haven't really taken to their meals. It's been a constant worry. But no more! Any cooking techniques that can

make monster meat taste good should make regular meat taste even better. If we spread the word about these unique Farunian dishes, they will undoubtedly prove popular! His Majesty was aiming for that when he made Carmilla work on improving monster meat!"

Actually, I'm pretty sure I wasn't aiming for anything like that.

"I see, that's incredible, Your Majesty. Everything you do has a deeper purpose." Chrom was convinced. Ogma, Yamato, and even Carmilla were looking at me with expressions of admiration on their faces.

Um, no? Again, I wasn't trying to do that at all!

"Then, what does that mean for my cooking?" Zaburo asked, his face lighting up.

"I imagine it will circulate throughout all of Farune. And you, Lord Zaburo, will be spoken of for generations to come as the man who spread the good word of Farunian cuisine!" Gamarath said vigorously, grabbing Zaburo's hands.

"Why, I can't believe it! As a chef, this is truly my good fortune! Now that I have this chance, I think I'll devote the rest of my life to making use of my skills in Farune!" Zaburo gripped Gamarath's hands back.

Well, that's nice and all, but let me have some of that cooking too.

Ogma probably noticed the expression on my face, because he said to me, "Apologies for the wait, Your Majesty. We went ahead and ate, but you must be famished."

Oh, so are you finally going to let me eat?

"I prepared some fresh monster meat for you, so please, enjoy."

A chunk of poisonous-looking purple meat was thumped down on the table in front of me.

I took a moment to collect myself. *Incredible, there's a world of difference between this and the steak Zaburo prepared. It's hard to imagine that these are even made out of the same stuff.*

In the end, I ate the raw meat, my vision so blurred I couldn't even see it all that well. All I knew was that it was so disgusting I could have died.

After that, under Gamarath's initiative, Zaburo's cooking spread throughout Farune, and became famous as Farunian meat dishes.

By the way, I still haven’t had any.



A year had passed since Carmilla had become my second consort. With Ogma controlling the food she ate, Yamato training her, and Frau teaching her magic, she was rapidly growing stronger. At first, perhaps because she was homesick, she often cried, even at meals and in our bedroom, but by now, she had largely returned to her usual self. Though according to her attendants, she had actually become a kind and exemplary person. This change was probably thanks to Farune’s simple, rustic environment. Carmilla had also recently gotten pregnant. Frau had already given birth to a baby boy, so this would be my second child.

There were changes in the Hundred as well. In addition to the usual knights and warriors, even mages had started to join—and it was no longer just men, but women, too, who were joining. This seemed to be because of the arena match between Frau and Carmilla. After watching it, people saw that even mages could hold their own against knights, and they aspired to join the Hundred. In the same way, women who wanted to be strong like Frau and Carmilla started to join as well. The way Ogma put it, the Hundred demanded strength, so it didn’t matter whether you were a warrior or a wizard or a woman—everyone strong was welcomed.

Now, that was all well and good, but something troubling also occurred. Apparently, a rumor was circulating that any strong woman could challenge Frau for the position of queen, or to become my wife. This was another result of stories about Frau and Carmilla’s match spreading around, I didn’t even particularly prefer strong women or anything. Things had just ended up like this, with the Lightning Empress as queen consort, and the Frenzied Princess as second consort.

Now that I think about it, why do both of my wives have epithets?

Regardless, it would have been an issue if some ogre-like woman with hulking muscles had come forward to try to become my wife, so I instantly ordered that the rumor be quashed. However, there were objections from some unexpected people: Frau and Carmilla.

“You should have more wives,” Frau said. As she spoke, her face was as expressionless as always, so I couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“It is as my elder sister says: the king ought to have more wives,” Carmilla said, agreeing with Frau for some reason.

“But, I love you, Frau. And I love you too, Carmilla. I don’t have any intention of marrying again, okay? If there’s anything I’m doing wrong, please, let me know. I want to do whatever I can to treat both of you with love.”

“I don’t need any more love!” Carmilla shouted, coldly rejecting my sincere plea. *She’s too cruel.* “Rather than love, both my sister and I want you to marry more women. At least three more, if you could be so kind.”

“Why so many…?”

“I’m pregnant, and Frau is raising her son. We can’t be your companions right now, Your Majesty!” Carmilla insisted.

Having fewer princess consorts was obviously preferable. It cost less money, and would cause less conflict down the line. With that in mind, I tried consulting with some of my other advisors.

Gamarath had apparently heard all about it from Frau and Carmilla, and he said, “Indeed. They have quite a burden to bear, so it may be prudent to divide the responsibility…” Though he spoke evasively, he agreed with what Frau and Carmilla had to say.

Responsibility? Remind me, what were they doing again?

When I asked some members of the Hundred, they all told me, “I believe it is best for Your Majesty to have more wives.” Their reasoning was that it would lead to an improvement in the kingdom’s military strength.

So, with that, it was decided that a competition would be held in the arena to pick candidates to be my new consort.

X: A Princess’s Qualifications

***WANT** to Be Farune’s Newest Princess?*

All Comers Accepted, Regardless of Status, History, or Criminal Record!

No Need for Etiquette, Money Not Required!

All You Need Is Strength!

The King of Farune Is Waiting for Your Application!

That was what was on the flyers distributed both within and beyond Farune's borders advertising the competition to select the princess consort.

This just looks like a recruitment ad for a band of mercenaries. What are they planning to make me marry? She may not end up as the queen consort, but she'll still be a princess, so we should at least rule out anyone with a criminal record.

At the bare minimum, I wished they'd add restrictions based on age, or appearance. I was extremely anxious about the types of women that were going to show up. I wasn't enthusiastic about it in the first place, but if I *had* to get married, a sweet, normal girl would definitely have been my preference. What would happen to this country if I ended up with someone even more absurd than the Lighting Empress and the Frenzied Princess?

A few months passed after the applications opened, and one day, regardless of my worries, I got a report from Gamarath.

"Your Majesty, candidates for princess consort are steadily gathering, from both inside and outside the kingdom," he said. "As such, we will hold a ball by the title of 'Consort Selection Tournament,' if Your Majesty gives your approval."

"A *ball*?" I asked, unsure I'd heard him correctly.

"Yes, sir, a ball."

Well hey, a fancy ball is definitely a refined way to screen candidates. Gamarath probably felt a bit conflicted, and had come to the conclusion that a princess really did need to have some noble qualities after all.

"Of course, I don't have any objections," I said. "That seems like the perfect event for picking the next princess."

"Thank you very much. I plan to use the arena as the venue for the tournament."

The arena? Will that really be a good spot for dancing? Well, I guess the castle isn't all that big, so maybe the arena is the best place to display the new princess to the people.

"Very well," I said. "Then, let's hold the Tournament in the arena."

"Certainly, Your Majesty. I shall proceed with the preparations."

And so, Gamarath steadily went about arranging everything, and the day of the Consort Selection Tournament arrived. Frau, Carmilla, and I were to view everything from the nobility seating, and my other retainers, like Gamarath, Ogma, and Yamato, were there alongside us.

“I hope there are plenty of energetic candidates, Elder Sister,” Carmilla said cheerfully to Frau. Her midsection was growing larger, but she was wearing loose clothing, so it didn’t really stand out much.

“I agree,” replied Frau. She was rocking our son, Arthur, who was not yet a year old…in midair. As part of her rehabilitation after her pregnancy, she was casting floating magic on him. It made me anxious, somehow, and I wished she’d stop, but Arthur was cackling with delight, so, unable to do anything else, I overlooked it. Apparently, there were several magic barriers layered around him anyway, so he was pretty safe.

“Gamarath, where are the candidates?” I asked. I hadn’t been informed about them in any detail.

“Sir, handpicked candidates have gathered from all over the continent to be Your Majesty’s new consort.”

Handpicked… Does that mean, there is a chance, that they’re going to be women of peerless beauty? That advertisement had been something else, but he *was* choosing someone to be princess of an entire country, so maybe I had something to look forward to.

“They’ve just entered the arena. Please, look over there,” Gamarath said, pointing at an entrance from where several dozen women had just entered.

Nearly all of them were fully armed.

Why’d they bring weapons to a ball?

“The one in front is Minerva, leader of the Thieves of the Dawn, a thieves’ guild from the Casparne Mountains,” Gamarath explained. “She’s known by the name Scarface. She’s fought against punitive expeditions from various countries, among other accomplishments, so her skill is proven.”

The woman confidently walking at the head of the group had a large build and a sizable scar on her face. She had long, reddish hair and a fearless smile. She *was* good-looking, but she also had a fairly villainous look about her.

“A thieves’ guild?” I asked. “Is that really all right?”

“She has a bounty of one thousand gold coins on her head, so there’s no doubting her, in terms of strength. Apparently, she’s boasted that she’s ‘here to steal a country,’ so she clearly isn’t lacking in mental fortitude either. I think she will be fine.”

In what world is that fine? If I marry someone with a price on her head, won’t adventurers swarm the castle looking to claim it? And that part about stealing the country just makes her sound like a blatantly dangerous person.

“Next, the woman with two swords on her back is Sheila of the Twin Blades, an S-rank adventurer. She’s considered a favorite to win the tournament, and she’s the most popular of the candidates.”

There was a woman who fit that description behind Minerva. Generally, the rank of A was the highest an adventurer could obtain. An S ranking was exceptionally given to the very few top adventurers who surpassed that level.

Wait, is Sheila staring at Minerva? Are you sure she isn’t here as an adventurer going after that thousand-gold-coin bounty?

“Hang on, she’s the most popular? What does that mean?” I asked.

“Sir, that refers to the betting odds,” Gamarath explained. “The system this time is such that, in addition to betting on each match, it is possible to bet on who will be the champion of the entire tournament. Thanks to you, Your Majesty, the arena is completely packed, and quite a large sum of money has already been staked. This will once again fill up the coffers.” Gamarath smiled happily.

Match? Champion? Betting?

“This *is* a ball, right?”

“A *brawl*,” Gamarath said, sounding confused.

Huh? Did I really mishear him the first time? And just hold on, what kind of country decides who’s going to marry the king by making the candidates fight each other? What kind of barbarians are we? This is why the king of Dorssen said we lack common sense.

“Other famous contenders include Rhea, head of the Flaming Fox mercenary band, and Shirley, who’s known for being an expert assassin.”

A mercenary and an assassin? Yeah, that's the type I'd expect to show up after seeing that advertisement.

"Your Majesty," said Ogma. "For the tournament, I selected someone to send in to represent the Hundred. I believe you may know her; her name is Karen." He pointed at someone whose face was, in fact, familiar to me. Karen had joined the Hundred at sixteen, and had rapidly begun to distinguish herself lately. She had even become one of the Hundred's ranked members, though she was still toward the bottom.

Karen and I had actually known each other for a surprisingly long time. Once, when she was still a child, she had accidentally gotten lost in the Forest of Beasts, and I'd stepped in to protect her just as she was about to be attacked by a monster. Apparently, her family was poor, so she'd gone into the forest looking for food. It had sounded all too familiar to me, so I took pity on her, and gave her some nuts and berries. As it happened, I had been wondering whether the forest's berries were edible—the other members of the Hundred and I all had a resistance to poison, so we couldn't tell. But Karen ate them and was fine, which confirmed that they'd work as a food source. Thanks to her, that knowledge ended up being useful for the development of the forest.

Anyway, since then, Karen had been attached to me. It had actually been nice when she had treated me like a big brother for a while, but of course once I became king, she started calling me "Lord Mars." After that, for some reason, she had joined the Hundred, and now, there she was in the arena.

"She's been hoping to fight Your Majesty, and she didn't want to miss this opportunity, so she applied to participate," Ogma continued.

If she wants to fight me, then why'd she apply to marry me? Does she want to get into arguments over who should do the dishes or something?

As I recovered from my own mistaken assumptions, one of the other candidates caught my eye. She was a red-haired woman, wearing a white, featureless mask. On her shoulder, there was a small white animal that looked like a lizard. As soon as I saw her, a chill ran down my spine.

"Hey, who's the woman in the mask?" I asked Gamarath.

“Her? I only know that she gave her name as Cassandra, and that there isn’t any other noteworthy information about her…”

That’s my master! I haven’t heard anything, not even rumors about her for the past ten years. She’s been missing, so why’d she show up here? She’d been gone from the public eye for so long that even Gamarath seemed to have no clue that she was a swordmaster.

The masked woman noticed me, and casually raised her hand in greeting.

…Yeah, it’s definitely her. No doubt about it. Resigned, I raised my hand too.

“Are you acquainted with her, Your Majesty?” Gamarath looked at me, surprised.

“Gamarath, about that bet on who’s going to be the champion,” I said. “I’m putting everything I own on that masked woman.”



THE candidates for princess consort were gathered in the arena, and nearly all of them projected a menacing aura.

“The Consort Selection Tournament will begin shor—”

“Hold it.” Someone called for the opening announcement to stop. It was Minerva. “Enough about that. I’ll definitely become a princess consort, but what I want to know is, will I be able to challenge for the position of *queen* consort after? Like last year’s match with the Frenzied Princess. I don’t like having to bow and scrape at someone else’s feet. I want you to make that part clear.”

She was a thief, all right. I wouldn’t have expected anything less from her. Her no-nonsense remark put a damper on the arena’s atmosphere of excitement—but the other contenders must have been in agreement, because none of them did anything in particular to stop her. The only change was that the Hundred’s Karen looked a little flustered.

“It’s wonderful to see such enthusiasm, but you must learn there’s a time and place for everything,” Carmilla said, standing up from her seat. “If you’re going to be a princess consort, you must start by kneeling down to His Majesty.”

I've never seen you kneel down to anyone, I thought, but of course, my internal voice didn't reach her.

Carmilla switched her eyes from blue to crimson. The gravity from her Magic Eyes was nothing like what it had been a year earlier. Along with her improved mana and physical ability, Carmilla's Magic Eyes had also grown stronger.

The candidates caught in her gaze all bent the knee, one after the other. Minerva, Sheila, and the other favorites somehow managed to endure it, but they were visibly strained. As for my master, she only looked at Carmilla with bemusement. Naturally, she was completely unaffected.

"I applaud your efforts," Carmilla said after a moment. "Very well. Hold the matches among only those still standing. The rest have failed. If my power can make you yield, then you aren't fit to serve as His Majesty's partner. And if you wish to become queen consort, first win, then challenge me. None of you are anywhere close to being able to put up a fight against my elder sister."

Even Minerva didn't talk back to Carmilla. Having seen her Magic Eyes, she seemed to have realized the gap in their respective abilities.

There had been around thirty candidates, but only eight of them were still standing: Minerva, Sheila, Rhea, Shirley, Karen, and —of course—my master all remained.

Gamarath, meanwhile, called over the staff managing the tournament so they could revise the schedule, which had to be changed around pretty drastically, thanks to Carmilla. *He's quick to adapt*, I thought to myself.

Finally, another announcement was made.

"So, the remaining eight candidates will fight each other in a single-elimination tournament. The matchups will be decided with a lottery, then there will be a break, and the matches will begin in the afternoon."

The management probably had their work cut out for them, deciding new gambling odds and everything else. They took some time to do so, and then the tournament was set to begin.

The candidates drew lots to create the tournament bracket, but to be honest, I didn't care about the matchups. After all, it was obvious who was going to win. My master drew a lot—then, without checking the bracket, she left the venue.

“I’ll be gone for a bit,” I said, then I stood up from my seat.



“I knew you’d be here,” I said.

I found my master in the Forest of Beasts, behind the castle, at the usual spot where we had always met up. Actually, we were quite a distance away from the arena, but that wasn’t relevant to either of us.

“You’ve grown, Mars,” my master said, then she took off her mask. Her face didn’t look a day older than it had ten years earlier.

I know some people just look young, but this is pushing it, right?

“Master, um, you don’t look like you’ve aged at all.”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, that’s because I was frozen for about a decade,” she casually replied. “I shouldn’t have gone through any physical changes during that time.”

“You were frozen for ten years? How’d that happen?”

“After leaving this country, I went to an island in the far north, to defeat the White Dragon.”

The White Dragon of the North. The legends said it had lived since ancient times; it even appeared in fairy tales. It was treated practically the same as a god, and its breath could freeze everything in existence.

I sighed loudly. “So, you got frozen. Does that mean you lost?”

“Oh, no, I won. It took me three days and three nights. But the White Dragon fired off a powerful freezing curse just before I defeated it. That’s why I was frozen.”

If you were frozen for ten years as a result of the battle, then you really can’t say you won, can you? I thought, but I was afraid of offending her, so I didn’t say it.

“So, did the White Dragon of the North die?” I asked. The White Dragon wasn’t particularly evil; if anything, it was probably closer to good than bad. Was it really all right to kill something like that?

“No, it’s alive. It’s on my shoulder right now.”

The white lizard on my master’s shoulder gave a squeak.

I was silent for a moment. “*That’s* the White Dragon?”

“It is. It seems to have reincarnated while I was frozen. When I revived, it was just a baby, and it said it wanted to travel while it

was still small, and tagged along with me."

"When you revived? How'd you do that?" I asked. *I think any normal person would just die if they were trapped in ice.*

"Hm? Oh, I just focused my willpower for ten years, that's all."

She's probably the only person in the world who could pull off a stunt like that. Now apologize to everyone who's ever frozen to death!

"So, can you communicate with that lizard?" I asked.

"I can. We talk using telepathy."

I'm glad to be here, said a voice that sounded like it was speaking directly inside my head. Its speech was somewhat clumsy.

So this is the White Dragon's telepathy, huh? I thought.

"I see, all right. So, why did you come to Farune this time?" I asked.

"Hm," my master considered. "Well, it took ten years for that horrible ice to melt, so during that time I thought about all sorts of things. At first, I wondered what I'd try to defeat next. Should I go after a god, or the Demon King, things like that."

I think defeating either of those options would cause a nuisance on a global scale, so please stop thinking that way.

"But I was frozen for such a long time that I gradually started to think even further, beyond that. I won't be young forever, after all, and well, I won't always be able to constantly fight all the time."

Oh, so ten years was enough time to make this battle junkie regain her humanity, huh?

"So I thought, I'll have a child. I was born a woman, so why not take advantage of that and raise the strongest child possible?"

It was the absolute worst parenting plan I'd ever heard. Clearly, she'd never had any humanity to lose in the first place.

"...A child?" I asked. "What are you going to have one with? A dragon? A devil?" Those were probably the only creatures that could have a child who could keep up with that monster.

"Hey, what do you think I am? I might not look it now, but I was known as quite the beauty in my time."

True, there's nothing physical stopping me from considering her beautiful. I think the real serious issue is her personality.

"Wait, so does that mean you've been in relationships with men before?"

“I haven’t. I’ve never had any desire to get involved with a man weaker than I am.”

“If that’s your condition, Master, then don’t you think it’s impossible for you to be with a human at all?”

The title of swordmaster was only given to the strongest humans. There was no way anyone out there could defeat her.

“Well, I decided to compromise on that point. Then, I thought some more about who might be a good choice. And the image that popped into my mind was your face.”

“Me?!”

“That’s right. You were always talented. I thought that, after ten years, you’d probably gotten stronger. Also, you would be just the right age, too,” my master said. Then, she looked intently at my body. “It looks like you’ve been eating monster meat every day, just like I told you to. You’re also wearing your accessories properly, and I can see you haven’t missed any training. This will work.”

She seemed to have determined that I hadn’t been slacking. I was glad about that—it meant she wasn’t going to kill me. But why, oh why did I have to marry the woman who forced me to go through all that hellish training in the first place? I had a quick series of flashbacks to all the suffering I’d gone through. I was skeptical that I could ever bring myself to love her.

“Master, the world is a big place, so surely there’s someone else more fit for you out there, right?” I said, contradicting my earlier argument.

“What are you saying? You’re just right. And you’re looking for a new princess consort, aren’t you? The poster said, ‘All you need is strength,’ didn’t it? I’m perfect.”

Hahaha. Yeah. Perfect.



AFTER separating from my master, I returned to the arena. But I didn’t just go straight back to the nobility seating where my retainers were waiting. I’d left my seat for a perfectly inconspicuous and respectable reason, and now that I thought about it, this was the chance of a lifetime. After all, as long as I was sitting with my retainers and such, I’d never be able to eat

anything except monster meat. But the area surrounding the arena was packed with food stalls.

Naturally, Zaburo's meat dishes were on the menu. They were a sensation, and everyone spoke ecstatically of how they'd never before had such delicious food—even though I, the king, had yet to have a single bite. Today that was going to change. It was simple: I just had to buy whatever I wanted at one of the stalls, then eat it. Usually, I was surrounded by my retainers and couldn't do what I wanted, but now, I was free.

I ran to the stalls. I had plenty of money on hand. I had accounted for everything. As I grasped a gold coin, my mouth watered and I imagined the taste of the delicious meat I'd been seeing in my dreams. Stalls with curtains of various colors were lined up all around the arena, and the air was filled with the smell of savory meat and salty-sweet sauce. I didn't think anyone could resist this level of temptation, and it was before the afternoon matches, so business was booming.

However, as I got closer, there was a disturbance. A group of five or six people surrounded one female employee. The group clearly looked pretty rough, and they were wearing dirty clothes that made them look like a cross between mercenaries and bandits.

"Please pay for your food!" the woman said, quite courageously in my opinion.

"Don't try to pull one over on us, missy. We know that in Farune, as long as you're strong, anything goes. So what if we helped ourselves to a couple pieces of meat, all right?" taunted the man who looked like the leader of the group. "King Zero nicked the crown with his strength, didn't he? Compared to that, this is nothing!" The man was a bit thin, with crafty eyes and an appearance that somehow reminded me of a fox. He wore grimy armor, and a curved sword hung at his waist.

What horrible slander! Are you sure you aren't confusing Farune with the Land of Asura, from that story about the legendary martial artist? Last I checked, we're a proper constitutional monarchy here.

"His Majesty is recognized as king only because he's strong enough to steal a kingdom!" the employee retorted. "In Farune, it's not enough to have the strength to be a thief!"

That's not really true. I wish you'd reject the idea that the strong are allowed to do whatever they want. Being strong doesn't mean anything goes, okay?

"No problem. After all, our leader's going to be princess of Farune. Then, we'll be with King Zero. Got it?"

Oh, so they're Minerva's lackeys. The Thieves of the Dawn, or something, right? Now I can see why they're so crude—they're thieves. I'd rather not get involved so I can just eat in peace, but if someone who knows my face spots me, I bet they'll say something like, 'His Majesty is abandoning his subjects just to eat some meat!' And then Ogma and the others will find out about my little snack. I guess I have to help her.

I went up to the Thieves of the Dawn and amiably said to them, "You really should pay for your food, okay?"

It wasn't right to suddenly escalate to violence. Farune was a country with rules.

Incidentally, because I had prioritized ease of movement for the day, I wasn't wearing a particularly fancy outfit, but I was still dressed in nice clothes, all things considered. The thieves should have been able to tell from looking at me that I was of decently high status.

"The hell do *you* want?" the man who looked like a fox said, getting up in my face. He was an outsider, so as expected, he didn't know who I was by sight.

"I'm Zero, the one you were talking about," I said, promptly revealing my identity. *I've always wanted to do something like this, where I go, 'Actually…' and when everyone starts shaking with fear, I suddenly yell, 'Boo!' and make them all jump.*

"*You're* King Zero?" the foxlike man scoffed. "King Zero isn't some noble whelp like you. He eats the meat of monsters, and slurps up their blood. They say he's got the face of a demon and the body of an ogre, y'know? Next time you want to pretend to be him, take a look in the mirror first!"

The face of a demon and the body of an ogre? Is there anything human about him?

"He's right, mister," the woman said, a worried expression on her face. "King Zero wears cursed equipment, so he can't take off his black suit of armor, and he's always looking for new opponents so he can drink their blood. I'm thankful for the help, but if you

pretend to be King Zero, you should know that the Hundred will kill you."

It seemed that the general public didn't know my face either, and they seemed to equate my black suit of armor with their king. *Are they aware that I do have a body under that armor? Well, I guess I am always wearing it in the arena, and the helmet hides my face, so maybe that's unavoidable. Next time I have the chance, maybe I'll mint a gold coin with my face on it.*

"I'm telling the truth. Anyway, just pay up. Farune is a constitutional state, and everyone has to follow the law. You can't just settle everything with strength."

"Ha! I don't want to hear that coming from someone who's pretending to be Zero. If you really are him, then show us your power!"

The other thieves gave me vulgar smiles. "That's right!" they jeered. "Yeah!"

"See, this is what I'm saying. Violence isn't right. We're humans, so we can use our words. You're not a real fox just because you look like one."

"Huh? Didja just say *fox*?"

I had said the word in a perfectly friendly manner, but by all appearances, he wasn't too fond of it. A vein in his forehead bulged. The other bandits started murmuring.

"He just said 'fox' to the boss."

"That's the one word that's off limits."

"He looks that much like a fox and you can't even say it?" I said. "If anything, I thought I was going easy on him."

"That's it, you're dead, you bastard!" Fox drew his curved sword, a scimitar. That was the preferred weapon of thieves. While scimitars were unsuited to fighting armored opponents, they were apparently pretty easy to wield.

The stall employee shrieked, and before I knew it, the onlookers had started backing away from us.

There are this many people here, and not a single one knows what their king looks like? Something's seriously wrong with this country…

"Hold on, if we can just talk, we can figure things out. Put down your weapon, Fox. Violence is wrong," I said, frantically trying to persuade him. It would have been easy to use my power.

However, I was the king. I had to be a model citizen, so I wanted to stay cool and convince him using only words.

"Don't call me Fox!"

My attempt at persuasion was futile, and Fox slashed at me. His footwork was excellent, and he seemed like he had seen his fair share of fights.

I stopped his attack by pinching the blade of his sword between my right index finger and middle finger. Now that was cool.

"Wha—?!" Fox was astonished.

Still holding his sword, I channeled strength into my fingers. The blade of his scimitar gave a clean *crack*, then shattered, the pieces falling to the ground.

"What was that?! What the hell'd you just do?"

Huh? You don't have anything else to say after seeing that badass technique? Nobody can just pull something like that off unless they're way stronger than you, you know. How about you get down on your hands and knees and apologize?

"Hey, you guys, get him!" Fox shouted, and the other five Thieves of the Dawn attacked me, all carrying various weapons, from scimitars, to swords, to axes.

"Hold on, let's talk this out!" I said again.

The very first one to attack leaped at me wielding a scimitar, so I tried to stop him by lightly tapping my hand against his chest. He went soaring.

"Stop this violence!" I yelled.

The next man came at me with an axe, so I kicked it away. His arm bent into a weird shape and he started screaming and writhing in pain.

"Fighting doesn't solve anything!"

The third man slashed at me from behind with a sword, so I grabbed his arm to fling him away, and he left a dent in the ground. He was also spitting up a bit of blood, but should still have been alive.

"It's uncivilized to be so quick to resort to force."

The fourth man hesitated a bit, so I grabbed his shoulder to try and persuade him to stop, but I misjudged my strength and accidentally broke one of his bones. He made a big deal out of his pain, but I think he just lacked discipline.

“Listen to me!”

The fifth man turned his back to me, and I grabbed his helmet from behind, but the helmet broke and I ended up grabbing his head directly. I felt an unpleasant cracking sensation beneath my fingers, so I hurriedly released my grip, but he had already collapsed on the spot.

Hmm, I wanted to try solving this by talking things out, but it didn’t exactly work. With no other option, I decided to preach to Fox, who was sitting on the ground and shaking.

“C’mon,” I said. “I told you to stop the violence, didn’t I?”

“Yes, sir…” His voice sounded like that of a delicate young girl.

“Why do you have to resort to force so quickly? You know how to talk, don’t you? Violence doesn’t solve anything.”

Fox quickly nodded his head up and down. It looked like he finally understood what I was saying. Using words is important.

“So, do you feel like paying now?”

Fox nodded emphatically, tears streaming down his cheeks.

All right, now that’s over and done with.

“King Zero,” the stall employee said. Looking around, I noticed that everyone around was kneeling. “That merciless violence. You’re exactly like you are in the arena, Your Majesty. I understand now that you truly are King Zero.” She spoke reverently. Somehow, though, I wasn’t fully happy with how she had come to understand who I was.

“Oh, you don’t have to be so formal,” I said. I wasn’t there to show off that I was king. “I just got a bit hungry, and I wanted to get something to eat. I’ll pay for it, of course.”

That was a slick way to say it. Surely that gave a good impression of me, right?

On the contrary, everyone suddenly looked alarmed.

“Absolutely not, Your Majesty! There isn’t anything here fit to serve to you. My deepest apologies!” the employee said, pressing her forehead to the ground.

“Huh? Why not?”

“It’s common sense in Farune that King Zero lives by eating the meat of monsters and slurping up their blood. There’s only normal meat here, and I cannot by any means give it to you!”

What common sense are you talking about?! Who in their right mind would…ah, actually, that is *how I’ve been eating all this time.*

“And, if it becomes known that I’ve fed Your Majesty normal meat, the Hundred will be furious. They always boast, saying, ‘King Zero has only eaten monster meat for his entire life!’ If we feed you normal meat in spite of that, they’ll never stand for it.”

It hasn’t been for my entire life!

However, now that I thought about it, the members of the Hundred *did* seem like the type to vent their anger on store employees without batting an eye. They were basically common thugs. I couldn’t help but take pity on the woman working the stall.

“I see, all right. That was a big ask, sorry,” I said, then I promptly left the area. The gold coin felt like deadweight in my hand. *I really wanted to try those meat dishes*, I thought wistfully. *What should I do?*

It seemed that, as long as I stayed in Farune, I’d never be able to have an ordinary meal.

XI: The Consort Selection Tournament

THE tournament was going to start soon, so I returned to the nobility seating. The bracket for the tournament was already posted up everywhere. The names of my master and the head of the Thieves of the Dawn, Minerva—whose minions had caused that trouble earlier—were both on the list.

I really don’t want to marry my master, I thought. She had been my teacher, and, at least before spending a decade frozen in ice, ten years my senior. It was, well, awkward. But was there anyone talented enough among the other seven participants to beat her?

Actually, if anyone’s enough of a monster to defeat a swordmaster, that person becoming part of the Farunian royal family would be its own issue.

My one hope had to do with the white mask my master was wearing. As was always the case with her equipment, it was cursed, and apparently, as soon as you put it on, it completely cut off your vision. She had it equipped for training, and mentioned that she’d become able to sense her enemies using only instinct, or something, but I had no idea why she was forcing herself to go through something so torturous when she could have just used her eyes to see.

Apparently, she had chosen the white mask *because* it was cursed, and it wasn't easy to take off. *Does she think curses are some sort of added bonus?* I wondered. In the end, of course, she had developed a resistance to curses, so she was now able to remove it easily.

I also made sure to ask my master not to use weapons.

"If you use a sword, your opponent will die, so please fight using only your bare hands," I said.

"I see, all right," she casually agreed.

In all, she couldn't see, plus she was unarmed, which should have given her opponents a fighting chance. All I could do now was pray for the success of the other candidates.

When I returned to my seat, Gamarath asked me a question. "Your Majesty, will you also be participating in the betting this time?"

"I will. Like I said earlier, I'm staking everything I possibly can on Cassandra."

Prayer was one thing; reality was another.



FINALLY, the Consort Selection Tournament began. The matches would decide the next princess of Farune, so just like always, the stands were overflowing with spectators.

It's pretty weird that the citizens haven't even questioned that this is how their next princess consort is going to be chosen.

The first fight was Minerva versus Rhea. One was the boss of a group of thieves, and the other was the leader of a band of mercenaries, so they both came off as being pretty formidable. For Minerva's weapon, she used a battle-axe with a long handle, while Rhea had taken the more orthodox choice of a sword and shield. Personally, I hoped that Rhea, with her short, blonde hair and boyish-but-refined good looks defeated Minerva, who was really brawny and had a giant scar on her face. Of course, I didn't really know much about them beyond their appearance.

As the match progressed, Minerva flourished her battle-axe, taking advantage of its range, while Rhea defended and waited for an opening. They were both experienced fighters. And, being leaders of their respective groups, they were highly skilled—

probably strong enough to be ranked around fiftieth in the Hundred.

The fight seemed to be reaching a stalemate. Then, just when a tired-looking Minerva made a wide sweep with her battle-axe, Rhea immediately stepped in to attack. However, this was a feint from Minerva—she adroitly shifted her axe to her other hand, then successfully used its butt end to knock Rhea's sword from her hand. Without a moment's delay, she once again shifted to the attack position.

Cornered and weaponless, Rhea admitted defeat.

"She must have considerable technique and arm strength to be able to handle that long battle-axe with such ease," Yamato said, appraising Minerva. "Being able to use the butt of her weapon on the fly like that was very impressive."

Minerva had talked a big game, and her strength seemed to be the real deal. Unfortunately, I had no more interest in marrying her than I did in marrying my master.

No thanks.

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THE second match was my master versus Noa.

Noa was a mage, so she wore a robe and wielded a staff. Frau assessed her, saying, "Her mana is so-so." That meant she must have been quite powerful. She was also pretty, with long, flowing brown hair and a cute face. If I had to marry someone, I wanted it to be a woman like her. I desperately hoped she would win.

On the other hand, my master was unarmed, as promised.

"Cassandra, what happened to your weapon?" the announcer asked.

In response, my master bluntly replied, "I don't need one."

All right, she can win! You can do it, Noa! I thought enthusiastically.

Noa had been preparing a spell since before the match began, so at the very start, she shot off a fireball.

"That was fast," Frau said. Noa's incantation speed seemed to have lived up to Frau's exacting standards.

"That didn't appear to be incantationless, but if she can recite such a powerful spell that quickly, she isn't half bad," Carmilla said.

She didn't often praise others, but even she seemed to rate Noa highly.

"She's quite powerful," Frau muttered.

Does this mean I'm allowed to get my hopes up?

However, my master caught that "quite powerful" fireball with her bare hand.

"Huh?" Noa was at a loss for words.

Then, amazingly, using just her grip strength, my master crushed the fireball in her fist. Watching a massive fireball get physically destroyed was almost like magic. *But the fireball actually* is *magic…*

The spectators were also dumbfounded by what they had just witnessed.

"It looks like you're a wizard, so do you have any other spells?" my master asked. Apparently, she intended to take on whatever Noa had to throw at her.

Rising to Cassandra's challenge, Noa brought up her staff and began an incantation. "By the White Dragon's glacial breath, the spirit of the far north, and its frozen shackles, henceforth the eternal throne of frost shall…"

That must be a powerful ice spell. But you should know, that White Dragon you mentioned is sitting on my master's shoulder right now.

"Glacial Prison!"

The spell manifested a fog of white crystals, which wrapped around my master like a cocoon, freezing her entire body in an instant. When it was over, she looked like an ice statue.

Noa's cute face twisted into a grimace. "That might've been too far," she said, probably mistakenly assuming she had killed her opponent.

However, the next moment, there was a loud crack like a tree splitting apart. The ice sealing my master had fractured.

Yeah, I knew it. After all, she broke open the actual White Dragon's ice with sheer willpower.

The ice shattered, turning back into a white mist, and my master was visible again. She hadn't even moved a muscle from her original position.

"Anything else?" she asked. She was completely unhurt, and she still wanted Noa to fire off more spells.

Please, stop it already. Are you trying to break her heart too?

"I can't. I surrender," Noa said with tears in her eyes, looking like her heart had, in fact, been cleanly snapped in half. Her expression even then was cute, though, and I was disappointed that she had been knocked out of the tournament.

The venue was abuzz at the feat Cassandra had pulled off. Even Yamato was surprised.

"Who exactly *is* that Cassandra woman? Does she perhaps have some sort of special power over magic?"

Oh, no, that's no special power, it's willpower, that's all. The master I knew was just that kind of person.



THE third match was between Sheila and Shirley, the S-rank adventurer versus the expert assassin.

Remind me, what were these matches supposed to be about again? Deciding the world's strongest woman?

Sheila was straightforwardly beautiful, with eye-catching silver hair and noble features. Standing across from her, Shirley was wearing a veil that obscured her face, so I couldn't really see it, but I wanted to believe she was good-looking too. Whereas Sheila had on a silver suit of armor and wielded swords in both hands, Shirley had wrapped herself in what looked to be a large, flowing cloak, and held a dagger in each hand.

As soon as the match began, Shirley flung one of her daggers at Sheila, but the adventurer easily deflected it with her sword. Shirley then took out more daggers and threw them, and they were again neutralized. However, the daggers that Sheila had repelled floated up into the air, and once again flew toward her. There were four in all, and they moved like they had minds of their own. Then I looked back to Shirley and saw that there were close to ten more daggers levitating around her.

"That assassin's using a rare technique," Carmilla remarked.

You use some pretty rare techniques yourself. Like snapping your fingers to use Sonic Blade, or using your fan to create a shockwave.

Sheila was hard-pressed to deal with the more than ten daggers surrounding her, but as you'd expect from an S-rank adventurer, she was completely blocking them all. She even

skillfully dodged the daggers that came flying at her from behind, as if she had eyes in the back of her head, earning her cheers and applause from the audience. Then, in order to shift to the attack, she broke into a run in Shirley's direction. In response, Shirley took out another two daggers, one for each hand, and stood ready to intercept her. Each of the two fighters swung their dual blades faster than the speed of thought. They handled their weapons dexterously. Shirley didn't even seem to have time to manipulate her other daggers.

"Magnificent. Wielding two weapons at once is no easy task," Yamato said, impressed. "It's almost enough to make me want to beg them to teach me."

Dual wielding was definitely difficult. It opened up your body, and made it difficult to put force into your attacks. It probably wasn't quite as hard if you used daggers, like Shirley did, but Sheila's ability to use two regular swords like that was practically superhuman. She had to have had a really strong core.

Sheila gradually pressed Shirley, closing the distance between them. Then, Shirley's veil came off, revealing the brown skin of her face beneath.

That's a relief. She's decently pretty. Wait, did she just spit something out of her mouth?

Sheila nimbly dodged whatever it was and got ready to attack again. During that time, Shirley once again levitated her daggers and moved to counterattack.

"Mouth needles," Yamato muttered.

So that's what it was, huh?

"It looks like Shirley spat out needles she had been holding in her mouth. Sheila's response was quick," Yamato continued.

I don't think I'd like my wife to have that sort of special ability.

However, the needles seemed to have been Shirley's final, last-ditch effort, because while she did recover for a time, the difference in ability between her and Sheila was apparent. Sheila calmly dealt with Shirley's counterattack, and in the end, she placed the blade of her sword right against the back of Shirley's neck, deciding the match.



THE fourth match was Karen versus Sasha. From what I'd heard, Sasha was the daughter of a knightly family, and was currently working as an adventurer. Unlike the others in the tournament, she adopted a traditional, chivalric sword posture, and wielded a one-handed sword and a shield. Her appearance was somewhat refined as well; she was a young, beautiful girl with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Why'd she enter a tournament with all these monsters? Poor her. In terms of her family and etiquette, she's way more fit to be a princess consort than anyone here.

Karen, meanwhile, was a lively girl with brown eyes and short brown hair. She wore her trademark headband and wielded a two-handed longsword. Because she was in the Hundred, she was a familiar face in the arena, and I could hear lots of people cheering her on from the stands. She was also sweet and endearing, so I could see why they were rooting for her.

As soon as the match began, Karen charged. Her unrestrained fighting style was one of the reasons she was so popular, and her explosive power was surprisingly difficult to deal with.

Karen struck at Sasha, and Sasha defended with her shield, but before Sasha could counterattack, Karen swiftly circled around her and followed up with another attack. Karen's high agility somehow reminded me of a Killer Rabbit.

Karen was superior in terms of stamina and pure speed, but Sasha was well-trained. She was completely blocking all of Karen's attacks.

"That's some fine swordsmanship. I can sense how much Sasha has trained. She isn't leaving any openings or wasting any movements," Yamato commented. "She clearly understands how to fight against powerful foes."

He was right. Sasha was fighting well. She devoted herself to defense with the minimum amount of movement possible, to preserve her stamina, and waited for an opportunity to counterattack. Meanwhile, Karen was probably getting somewhat worn out; she was running out of breath.

Seeing this as her chance, Sasha shifted to counterattack. She moved steadily and carefully, like she was bringing down a monster. As she gradually pushed Karen back, some of the

spectators in the stands cheered Karen on. Perhaps spurred on by those cheers, Karen wound up, bringing her longsword to the side and getting ready to swing it.

She's full of openings, but...

Sasha instantly stepped in to attack. Unconcerned, Karen brought her sword around with all her might, like she was trying to slam it into Sasha. When Sasha calmly tried to parry it with her shield, she was rocked by an unstoppable force and her stance crumbled. Karen used that momentum to spin around like a whirlwind while she continued to attack. Sasha hurriedly tried to block with her sword, but Karen had so much energy that the weapon was sent flying out of Sasha's hands, and she lost her means of attack.

Finally, Sasha gracefully admitted defeat. With the match over, the two competitors shook hands and pledged a future rematch.

"That was rather forced," Yamato remarked. "It was a reckless attack that only a member of the Hundred could make. Perhaps she ought to follow Sasha's example and learn proper swordsmanship." He seemed to have mixed feelings about the outcome of the match.

Yamato loved swordsmanship, so he preferred Sasha's refined style of fighting. I preferred Sasha too—because of her looks, though.

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THE semifinals began, and the first match was between Minerva and my master.

"That was a curious technique, suppressing a spell with your hand, but can you handle my axe?" Minerva said, smiling boldly.

"Same thing," my master replied. "It makes no difference to me."

A bystander might have seen this as her answering a taunt with another taunt, but I knew she was simply stating the truth. She made no distinction between magical and physical attacks. Fundamentally, she believed that with her willpower, she'd manage.

God, please, lend Minerva your strength! I prayed.

When the match began, Minerva swiftly struck at my master with her battle-axe. But my master, who shouldn't even have been able to see, dodged it by a hair's breadth while simultaneously grabbing the handle with one hand. *Is that mask really blocking her sight? That's tough, even without a cursed mask on.*

"What?!" Minerva exclaimed. She tried to shake off my master's grip, but even though she put force into both of her arms, her battle-axe didn't move an inch. Then my master put force into *her* arm, lifting up the battle-axe and Minerva along with it. Her physical strength was practically comical. *Well, she's always been like that, ever since we first met.*

My master used all her strength to swing the battle-axe in her hand, sending Minerva soaring all the way to the wall of the arena, where she crashed at high speed, leaving a nasty crack.

I wish she'd go a bit easier on her. I feel bad for the wall.

With difficulty, Minerva managed to get back to her feet, but then, her battle-axe came flying at her, impaling itself in the wall right next to her face. My master had thrown it.

"Eek!" The usually strong-willed Minerva let out a pathetic squeak.

That was close. It's reckless to throw something without being able to see. She nearly took Minerva's face off!

"Pick up your weapon, and let's go again," my master said. She began to slowly walk in Minerva's direction.

Um, is it just my imagination, or is there an aura of hostility wrapped around her entire body?

In response, Minerva just looked blankly at the battle-axe stuck in the wall next to her, then returned her gaze to my master. She was trembling like a newborn fawn. "I'll do anything, so please, just don't kill me!" she begged. "Someone, help me!"

She probably instinctively felt that she was in danger, and because she had begun pleading for her life, she was considered unable to fight. My master was declared the victor. *Yeah, I wouldn't want to fight her either.*

The venue was once again abuzz upon seeing the overwhelming gap in their power.

"That Cassandra woman, she seems to be an acquaintance of yours, Your Majesty, but just who is she?" Gamarath asked me.

I paused. “She’s my teacher,” I confessed. “The swordmaster, Cassandra.” I hadn’t particularly meant to hide it, but somehow or another I had missed the chance to say it.

“What?! She’s the Red Demon Cassandra?! But there’s been no news of her for such a long time.”

“It’s because she was hibernating for about a decade, or so the story goes. If only she’d gone on to her eternal sleep,” I said. “But don’t make it public that she’s a swordmaster. It could cause trouble.”

I gazed at my master’s back as she exited the arena.



THE second match of the semifinals was Sheila versus Karen. Just like in her last match, Karen charged in energetically.

Hey, think of who you’re fighting, okay? You’ll die if you keep that up.

Sheila was a master at dual wielding, and she used one of her swords to parry Karen’s attacks while she counterattacked with the other. Karen hurriedly backed up. There was a distinct gap between their respective abilities.

Karen seemed to have learned something from the last match, because she shifted to hit-and-run tactics, making use of her vaunted agility, but Sheila gave her no openings to exploit, and Karen’s bold movements only drained her stamina even faster. Finally, she tried to break through by using the forceful spinning attack she had exhibited in her match against Sasha, but Sheila dodged it effortlessly.

Yeah, that attack is meaningless if it doesn’t hit.

After that, Karen was one-sidedly forced back by Sheila’s skilled use of her two swords, and the battle was decided before I knew it.

“She was simply outclassed,” Ogma assessed. “That Sheila’s quite the professional. She’d probably make it pretty high up in the Hundred. But Karen did well too. Just being able to hold her own against Sheila means she’s gotten better.”

After Karen lost, she started to cry, and the spectators gave her a warm round of applause.

I don’t think there’s any reason to be that *broken up about it. Did you really want to become a princess consort that badly? I hope this doesn’t sound like false modesty, but my other wives are monsters like Frau and Carmilla, so I think you’ll be happier if you just live your life normally.*



FINALLY, it was time for the championship match of the Consort Selection Tournament: my master versus Sheila. They had both exhibited overwhelming strength as they’d advanced in the tournament, but the betting odds favored my master. Naturally, I had bet on her too, but internally, I was rooting for Sheila. *I’m begging you, please defeat my master. If you do, I don’t care what happens to my bet*. Sheila was a cool, silver-haired beauty, after all.

Because of her mask, I couldn’t see the expression on my master’s face, but Sheila looked nervous.

As soon as the match began, Sheila’s swords began to shine brightly. One was enshrouded in a scarlet light, and the other in a blue light.

“Are those Magic Swords? No, have spells been directly applied to the swords themselves?” Yamato mumbled, greatly interested.

“Both,” Carmilla answered. “Without mana, those swords can’t manifest their true power.”

These two get along surprisingly well.



Sheila approached my master, readying her glowing swords, then began to swing them with blinding speed. Even my master probably realized she couldn't stop such powerful Magic Swords with her bare hands, because she repositioned her body to avoid them. The blades of Sheila's swords looked like countless beams of light, a truly fantastical sight.

"That's Mirage Sword," Yamato said. "Using it while dual-wielding Magic Swords is simply incredible."

As an S-rank adventurer, Sheila was a very skilled fighter. It was enough to make me wonder why she had decided to become a candidate for princess consort in the first place.

But even with all that, her swords didn't touch my master. Plus, there was a limit to how long she could keep Mirage Sword active. She must have been gradually feeling more and more tired, because her movements were getting slower.

That was when my master struck. She suddenly took a single step toward Sheila, then landed a powerful palm strike on her chin through her guard, sending her flying in a clean arc. Sheila hit the ground, bounced once, then collapsed, face down.

It looked like it really hurt. It wasn't easy for me to watch. I felt like I was going to start having flashbacks to my time training with my master.

After a moment, Sheila made a last-ditch effort to get back to her feet, using one of her swords to support herself. It was a touching sight that moved some of the spectators to start cheering for her.

How irresponsible. She'd be better off staying on the ground.

Ignoring the mood in the arena, my master slowly approached Sheila, then gave her a powerful kick to the stomach.

"Guh!" A voice—or rather, a sound—came from Sheila's mouth that made it seem like she might vomit out her internal organs, and she was sent flying into the air again. This time, when she hit the ground, she just lay there, not so much as twitching.

"Th-The victory goes to Cassandra!" the announcer stammered, naturally having determined that Sheila was no longer able to fight. However, the rest of the venue was deathly quiet. Everyone was probably put off by my master.

How can I put this? Her beatings make you feel like you're witnessing something nasty and brutal. It's painful just to watch it.

And I was often on the receiving end of that!

Thus, it was decided that my master, Cassandra, would be my third consort.

Any domestic quarrels between us would lead immediately to my death, so first of all, I swore in my heart to make sure I never disobeyed her.

XII: Cassandra

AFTER the Consort Selection Tournament, the members of the tournament committee—Frau, Carmilla, Gamarath, Ogma, and Yamato—got together for a discussion, and they decided that the runner-up, Sheila, would be made my fourth consort.

I'm the one actually getting married, so why didn't I get a say?

Also, Carmilla employed most of the rest of the thirty or so candidates as her retainers, excluding Karen, who was already a member of the Hundred. According to Carmilla, "My elder sister has the Mages' Guild under her direct command, so it's not fair that I don't have anyone under mine."

To be fair, the Mages' Guild is a full-fledged part of Farune's military. Frau just happens to have completely turned it into her own private army.

Surprisingly, no one spoke up in opposition to Carmilla's selfish proposal. It was judged that, with more princess consorts, it was best to have as many women as possible who could serve as both fighting power and as bodyguards. But was it really necessary for princesses with epithets like Lightning Empress, Frenzied Princess, Red Demon, and Twin Blades to have bodyguards?

At any rate, the unit under Carmilla's direct control was formed, and it was named the Palace Knights. Even though she was currently pregnant, she devoted herself completely to training them. By all accounts, she was making them undergo the same trials she had gone through when she had first come to Farune. With incredible vibrancy, devotion, and care, Carmilla took the time to go in person and make her new subordinates eat monster meat, guided them into the depths of the Forest of Beasts, and all the rest of it. I was surprised to see that she had such a tender side to her.

As for my master, she was having a great time in her position as a princess of Farune. For the first time in a while, she was back to training me, and after being invited by top-ranking members of the Hundred—like Ogma, Yamato, Chrom, and Warren—she was participating in practice matches, too. In reality, she was just one-sidedly beating everyone. Still, the Hundred enjoyed it. Maybe they all shared the same fetish or something.

Also, my master almost always spent nights with me in my bedroom. I felt apologetic toward Frau and Carmilla, but whenever I tried to address it with them, they replied coldly:

"Childcare is hard," said Frau.

"I'm pregnant, so I can't spend the night with you," said Carmilla.

Do they hate me? I wondered.



I was in my bedroom, and my master was lying in bed next to me.

"Your subordinates put up a good fight. I don't know if there are any other countries with this many strong people," she said. "I really never thought it would be possible to get so many people to eat monster meat. I always assumed only a few could handle it. But you distributed it to others who sought strength, and made it into a whole system. I never had that idea. Not only that, but you even turned them into training partners, and used them to grow your own skills."

Things had just turned out that way, and I hadn't meant to do any of what she was saying, but I decided to just accept the praise.

"By the way, why did you come to Farune ten years ago, Master?" I asked. Back then, I had been so preoccupied with enduring her abuse—done under the pretext of training—that I hadn't really had the chance to ask her anything about herself.

"Hm? Did I not mention it? I was here to explore the Forest of Beasts."

"Really?"

The Forest of Beasts was quite expansive. It covered pretty much the entire southern part of the continent of Ares. Ares was divided into north and south by two mountain ranges, and in the

gap between them, where north and south just barely touched, lay the countries of Farune and Cadonia.

“That’s right. There are hordes of powerful monsters in the forest, after all. I thought I’d conquer it all, taking as many years as I needed,” she explained. “But it was just too big, even for me. I tried to go as far in as I could, using Farune as my base, but that forest is unfathomable. I trained you every seven days because that was as long as I could stay there.”

So seven days was the limit, even for my master.

Currently, Farune was reclaiming and developing the Forest of Beasts, but compared to the overall scale of the forest, that was still only happening in a very small area. And the more the forest was developed, the more powerful monsters appeared, so the limit was probably approaching soon.

“I went pretty far into the forest too, but the monsters there get endlessly stronger,” I said. “The legends say that the Demon King himself is sealed away in the deepest part of the forest.” It was said that my ancestor, the hero, had been the one to trap the Demon King there.

“If the Demon King’s really there, I wish I could’ve fought him. But I never saw any demons, let alone a Demon King,” my master said. “The forest only has more, you know, primitive monsters. I haven’t seen any that resemble people, like demons. Of course, that means it’s perfect for getting monster meat.”

Demons were a race of monsters that resembled humans. But unlike humans, they lived long lives, had high mana, and possessed overwhelming physical strength. The one who stood at the very top of them all was the Demon King. I actually didn’t know if it was really accurate to categorize them as monsters themselves, but the stories said that demons lorded over most other monsters, anyway.

“Is it hard to get monster meat in the center of the continent?” I asked.

“Well, you don’t come by it every day. It isn’t like Farune, where you can get Killer Rabbit meat whenever you want.”

“Even in Farune, Killer Rabbits almost went extinct, you know. Though now, we’ve succeeded in domesticating them, and there’s a supply chain for providing monster meat without waste.”

They had been domesticated, but there actually wasn't all that much demand for large amounts of monster meat. It was hard to eat, after all. It used to be that the people who hunted the monsters would eat a bit of the meat themselves then discard the rest, but now, there was a system for dividing up a single monster's meat into appropriate portions and distributing it so the meat could get to everyone who wanted it.

"That's also something special about Farune. I imagine that other countries could never domesticate monsters. In the central continent, monsters are unambiguously seen as enemies of humankind. Farune's close to the Forest of Beasts, so the people have less of an aversion to monsters, which must be why they don't have any resistance to raising them. And in the central continent, eating monster meat is out of the question."

My master was being surprisingly rational. I'd only noticed it after we started sharing a bedroom, but she didn't only think about battling—she also had an unexpectedly levelheaded perspective on things.

"That's why using monster meat to improve the military is something that's only possible in the periphery, in Farune," she continued. "Other countries might look into it, but they couldn't imitate it."

"Not that I ever wanted to improve the military," I said. "The Hundred is just a collection of people with nothing but the desire to become stronger. Personally, I want peace."

"Then what about the monster corps? Is that not part of your military?" My master stared at me. There wasn't a harsh look in her eyes, or anything. She didn't seem confrontational at all.

"Well, that's…it's definitely a military asset, but I think that's all right, in its own way. I created it mostly on the spur of the moment, but it means there's less of a need to use the people as soldiers during war. If monsters can fight in their stead, I think that's a good thing."

It was common practice during times of war to conscript members of the general population into the army, but they had little will to fight, and they weren't very good soldiers either. Compared to them, monsters were strong and aggressive. If anything, monsters were actually the best tools for the job.

“Don’t you think using Wyverns in your army is kind of overkill?” my master teased, a mischievous expression on her face.

Wyverns were the second candidates I had set my sights on for the monster corps, after the Warwolves. The reason was simple: dragons are awesome. I hadn’t thought any deeper than that, but according to Keely, “Dragons are highly intelligent, which makes communicating with them easier, so it may be possible.” Among dragon species, those mid-level and above preferred to act alone, but the low-level Wyvern naturally formed flocks. That meant that if the leader of a flock could be captured, it might have been possible to control the rest, just like with the Warwolves. At the moment, there was a flock numbering around ten Wyverns undergoing training.

“Well, if you’re going to make a monster army, why *not* go with dragons? They’re pretty cool,” I said.

“You’re right. I do like dragons.” My master glanced at the young White Dragon, which was sleeping in a cloth-covered cage.

Oh right, that lizard’s a dragon too.

“What will you do with the White Dragon?” I asked.

“Hm. I’m thinking of taking it and going traveling on it when it gets big enough.”

A swordmaster riding the legendary White Dragon sounds terrifying. Won’t she cause widespread panic in the cities and countries she visits?

“How long does it take to grow up?” I asked.

“Who knows? It’s still only that big, even though I was frozen for ten years, so I think it’ll take quite a while before it’s big enough for me to ride. Not that I feel like going anywhere anyway until I’ve had kids, and they’ve grown up to a certain degree, so that works just fine for me.”

“Also, it doesn’t look like the central continent is the best place to go traveling right now anyway.”

According to the information I had gathered from the candidates for princess consort, the central continent was in a state of tension, with each country sparing no expense expanding their respective armies. Their recruitment of skilled warriors had gotten rather forceful, and there were several candidates who had come to Farune to avoid being recruited. Sheila, who had become my fourth consort, was a representative example from that group.

“Isn’t that your fault?” my master said, grinning.

The situation had shifted largely because the kingdom of Dorssen had grown weaker. They had lost not only ten thousand soldiers, but also three of their five Champions. Seeing an opportunity, the country’s neighbors were attempting to invade.

“I was the one who was attacked. It was self-defense.”

“If you hadn’t annexed Cadonia, Dorssen never would’ve made a move.”

“That’s just how things ended up happening. I didn’t want any territory or anything. I was happy just living peacefully in Farune.”

My master smiled. “So, usurping the throne and taking over Cadonia all just happened by chance? Doesn’t that make it sound like this is your *fate*?” she said meaningfully.

“Master, what’s that supposed to—”

Before I could finish speaking, my master softly pressed her finger to my lips.

“Stop with the ‘Master’ stuff. I’m your wife now, aren’t I? Call me Cassandra.”

“…Cassandra, what did you mean by that just now?” I asked. It was somehow incredibly embarrassing to call my master by her name.

“You’ll understand before long. At the very least, the people around you are probably already feeling it. That’s the type of man you are.”

My master, the Red Demon Cassandra, was blushing slightly.



NOW that she had somehow ended up a part of the Farunian royal family, Sheila was perplexed.

She had participated in the Consort Selection Tournament due to certain personal circumstances of hers, but in fact, she hadn’t actually been all that serious about it. She thought she’d just casually lose on purpose, but as a first-class warrior, her pride hadn’t allowed her to hold back, and she’d ended up making it all the way to the final round. However, her opponent was the woman in the white mask who’d won all her matches using nothing but her bare hands: Cassandra.

She’ll be a tricky foe to beat, Sheila thought before the match.

Sheila had made it through numerous fights to get to where she was, and that meant she could accurately read her opponents' strength. Cassandra was no normal foe. She had defeated her opponents unarmed, but she didn't look like she made her living as a martial artist specializing in hand-to-hand combat. In other words, she wasn't using her full power.

In the end, Sheila, too, was defeated without even being able to make Cassandra use a weapon. She had taken a palm strike to the jaw and a kick to the stomach. This was a shock to her, both physically and mentally, because it hadn't felt like she had been hit or kicked. It had felt more like she had been struck by the trunk of a hundred-year-old tree. If she was being honest, Sheila had been afraid that she'd accidentally become a princess consort, so it was a rude awakening to realize that had just been her pride speaking.

Yeah, I should've known that you have to be a monster to become a Farunian princess, she thought.

In fact, she hadn't wanted to be a princess from the start, so she was internally relieved, but for some reason, she was selected as the fourth consort anyway.

At some point, she'd made a miscalculation.

XIII: Sheila

I was born in a country called Vulcan. My father, Garay, was one of the Seven Celestial Swords, Vulcan's strongest warriors.

Well, they were called the strongest, but the position was hereditary, which meant that the title was inherited by the eldest son in each generation. Every one of the seven families had their sons follow a strict training regimen from a very young age to live up to the title. Because I was raised in one of those families, I gained an interest in swordsmanship early on, and my father taught me the basics. Our dual-wielding technique, along with the "Twin Blades" name, was passed down through our family, so through practice bouts with my father, I ended up picking up the fighting style. By the time I ended up in Farune, I was called Sheila of the Twin Blades, but the name Twin Blades used to mean my father, Garay.

"If only you'd been a boy," my father often complained.

Vulcan was a patriarchal society, and it was impossible for women to inherit noble titles. I had a younger brother, so he would be the one to inherit the estate, but he wasn't as good with a sword as I was. Of course, he made painstaking efforts to improve. After all, it would be unacceptable for someone weak to claim the title of Celestial Sword. They would bring disgrace to all of Vulcan. To avoid this scenario, there had even been times when one of the seven families had adopted an outstanding swordsman as son-in-law, after having him marry a daughter, to continue the family name. However, our family boasted that in every generation, the actual eldest son had inherited the title of Celestial Sword, so adopting someone from another family in my generation was unthinkable.

This meant there was a great deal of pressure on my brother. He had the potential to be a decently skilled knight, but I knew he'd never be as strong as I was. He had vaguely come to this realization as well, so our sibling relationship steadily grew more distant.

I hated being the one to create problems in my family, so when I was fourteen, I ran away from home. It was clear to me that if I stayed, I would just be forced to marry into one of the other six families, and I didn't want to marry a man weaker than I was.

After leaving, I turned to some connections to join an Adventurers' Guild in a town far from home, and there, I rapidly distinguished myself. I formed a party, defeated powerful monsters, and even explored dungeons and ancient ruins. My rank rose with ease. Life as an adventurer was by no means a walk in the park, but I enjoyed it nonetheless. I was free to do as I wished, and while I may have been a woman, I was strong enough to gain status and fame. I didn't want for money, either.



IT had probably been about half a year earlier that my fulfilling life had come to an abrupt turning point when the head of Dorssen's five Champions, Sigmund, paid me a visit. Sigmund had originally been an S-rank adventurer, and I owed a lot to him for his help

when I had first started out on my own. He was also one of the very few people I recognized as more powerful than myself.

"I want you to join the Champions," Sigmund said right away, skipping all the pleasantries. "Right now, Dorssen needs manpower, and the Champions have major vacancies. If this situation continues, other countries will see it as an invitation to invade. And if that happens, there'll be war. To prevent that, I need your strength."

I already knew what he was talking about. It was all anyone *could* talk about: after being defeated in their war against Farune, Dorssen had rapidly lost strength, and other countries were now aiming to take advantage of that weakness.

"I'll be made a Champion? You do know I'm a woman, right?" I said. The Frenzied Princess Carmilla had been royalty, so she had been an exception, but properly speaking, the Champions were like the Celestial Swords—only men could occupy the position.

"This isn't the time to be worrying about that. All we need is the necessary strength, and you have it. His Majesty has already given his approval."

I was attracted to the offer. No matter how famous I may have been as an adventurer, in the eyes of society, I was nothing more than a lawless wanderer. However, the Champions were the face of Dorssen, and as one of them, I could gain official acceptance—I, who hadn't been able to become one of the Celestial Swords. But I did have one substantial concern.

"Currently, Dorssen is enemies with Vulcan. That's my home country. Do you mean to tell me to fight against them?"

For many years, Dorssen and Vulcan had been in a dispute over rights to a mine near their shared border. If there was to be war, it was most likely to occur between those two countries.

"I'll take charge of that border. I want to put you in charge of a different area. Also, I promise that Dorssen won't invade Vulcan itself. I swear on my life."

Sigmund valued honor over everything else. If he swore it, he would never go back on it.

I paused. "I like my life as an adventurer," I said. "And, while my younger brother is expected to succeed my father, if I become one of the Champions, that could affect him in some way." Me becoming a Champion might be seen as a snub in Vulcan. I might

have partially cut ties with them, but they were still my family. I didn't want to do anything that might undermine them.

"I see. But please, don't make a decision just yet, and think about it carefully. Dorssen needs your strength. I also promise you'll be treated as a noble."

"A noble?"

That was a surprise. Class differences were not so easy to overcome. Whether you were born a commoner or a noble, you stayed that way until you died. There was an immutable barrier between the two. I may have once been a foreign noble, but now that I was an adventurer, it would normally have been impossible for me to become a noble anywhere else.

"That's right. Times are changing, and the day is fast approaching when merit, and not one's inherited position, will mean everything. We learned that painful lesson in our war with Farune. Over there, they use strength to decide everything, even the position of queen consort. I saw the match between the Lightning Empress Frau and Lady Carmilla, and it was quite striking. Women with strength aren't to be disdained. If anything, it's men who are useless if they *don't* have strength. So please. Won't you think about it?" Sigmund bowed his head.

"Can you please give me some time?" I asked, putting off my decision. Honestly, I was tempted by the prospect of becoming a Champion. I owed a lot to Sigmund, and I knew I could put my trust in him. But I had no complaints about my life as an adventurer, and I had to think about my family, too. I wanted to calm down a bit and give it some thought.



SOON after, I got a letter from back home. In short, it said: "I'll give the headship of the family to you if you come back to Vulcan."

"What's the meaning of this?!" I reflexively shouted upon reading the letter. My brother hadn't died, or gotten injured, or anything like that. I had apparently been made heir to my family's estate out of nowhere.

Just what was happening back there? I decided to try getting some advice from my fellow party members. My party was made

up entirely of Vulcanians, so I figured they might have known what the circumstances in Vulcan were.

I promptly gathered them all together in a room in the Adventurers' Guild.

"Why not?" they said. "Come back with us."

I didn't expect that reply. It turned out that they had also received letters from their families and friends in Vulcan, saying that they could be employed as retainers and would be given good positions.

We had formed a party as fellow Vulcanians because we'd all come from similar backgrounds, and we'd had a shared goal: we were skilled but unable to make a living in our home country, so one day, we'd show our families and the government how wrong they'd been to overlook us. Thinking about it that way, it wasn't a bad offer. We'd be able to get status in Vulcan, just like we wanted. But why this timing?

"Of course, you're coming back too, right, Sheila? Don't tell me you're thinking of going to Dorssen," one of my party members pressed me intently.

Ahh, I see how it is. From their behavior, I realized what was going on. They had probably told Vulcan I had been in contact with Sigmund. Based on the current state of affairs, it was easy to guess what he'd said to me. So, to keep me from going to Dorssen, the higher-ups in Vulcan had made me this offer.

But if I accepted, what would happen to my brother? He had spent his entire life working to succeed our father as a Celestial Sword, and now, through no fault of his own, he was being removed as the successor. Even though I hadn't seen him in years, I still cared for him.

"My younger brother will take over my family. I won't go back to Vulcan," I definitively declared.

"So you're going to betray Vulcan and go to Dorssen?!" my friends protested.

"Weren't you the ones who betrayed me first?" I countered.

A wave of tension swept through the room. If it came down to it, though, I was a knight who fought on the front line of the party, whereas their jobs—mage, priest, and thief—meant fighting in the rear. I didn't believe I'd lose, even if they wanted to fight me three against one.

“Didn’t you want to be a Celestial Sword?” one of my friends asked after a moment. Perhaps he had cooled his head a bit, because his tone had softened.

“That’s right, I did. At first, that was my pure, innocent aspiration. But things are different now. I don’t want it so much that I’m willing to take away my brother’s position,” I said. I looked at each of my friends’ faces, one by one. Their expressions were of incomprehension. They’d worked this hard and come this far because they wanted approval from their families, and approval from their home country. I could understand why they didn’t want to miss their chance, now that it had finally come.

“Let’s dissolve the party,” I said. “You guys can go back to Vulcan. I’ll continue as an adventurer.”

And so, I lost my friends.



AFTER dissolving my party, I was considering my future options when one day, I had another visitor.

It was my father.

I once again borrowed a room in the Guild, and my father and I sat down across from each other.

“You look well. I’ve heard about your exploits. I’m proud of you,” my father said, looking bashful. He also looked somewhat older than the last time I had seen him several years earlier.

“More than anything, I’m glad to see you’re in good health, father. I apologize for running away from home like that,” I said. I was a bit nervous. I knew that my father had probably come here to call me back to Vulcan. I had no idea what I could say to refuse him.

“I read your letter. You have no intention of coming back to Vulcan?”

In my reply to him, I had turned down the offer to take over the family.

“No, I don’t. I believe my brother ought to inherit the title.”

“Is that so? Then, all right,” my father conceded. “But I still want you back home. The situation in and around Vulcan is volatile right now. We want anyone capable we can get our hands on. The higher-ups have said that they’ll guarantee you a good position.”

Just like in the past, my father wasn't pushy at all, and he treated me with flexibility. But that just made it even harder to refuse him.

"No, I, well…"

"What's wrong? Do you have a man in your life?"

It was a strange question. Actually, it wasn't strange. As my father, maybe it was only natural for him to worry about me in that sense, considering my age.

Incidentally, I didn't have anyone like that. I had stuck to my policy of only going out with people stronger than I was, and as a result, after making it all the way to S-rank, there was no longer anyone around who fit my criteria.

Just then, a flyer on the room's bulletin board caught my eye. It said that Farune was taking candidates to be the new princess consort. Before I knew it, I blurted out something absolutely crazy:

"I want to become the king of Farune's consort."

"The king of Farune's consort?" my father repeated, visibly perplexed.

"Yes. There's going to be a competition for the position of new princess consort in the capital of Farune, and I've applied."

Naturally, I hadn't done anything of the sort. I had only learned about it just then.

"I've heard of it…but why the king of Farune?" So my father already knew about the Consort Selection Tournament. But he was frowning, forming a deep crease in his brow.

"He's stronger than I am. The king of Farune acceded to the throne on his own strength, suppressed a stampede, and even annexed Cadonia and achieved victory against Dorssen. He defeated two of Dorssen's Champions, so there's no doubting his ability. I've always wanted to marry a man who's stronger than I am, so the king of Farune is my ideal partner."

These were also lies. No matter how strong he may have been, I still didn't want to marry some weirdo known as the Mad King.

"You know he's the kind of man who eats monster meat, tortures his retainers by forcing them to fight each other in his arena, and even makes his consorts compete against each other for the position of queen, right?"

Hearing my father list it off, I could see that the king of Farune really was absolute trash. Forcing women to fight each other went way beyond a little eccentricity. But on the other hand, I didn't want to go back to Vulcan. I could clearly see that I'd be shipped off to war if I did. On the other hand, I'd be labeled a traitor if I went to Dorssen. As long as I continued as an adventurer, it seemed like it would be difficult to get out of this bind. So, somewhere like Farune seemed like a good compromise. Apparently, they even had a famous arena, so trying to make my living there as a fighter might not have been all that bad.

For the time being, I wanted to go to Farune and wait until things cooled down. I didn't care at all about being the king's princess consort.

"But still," I said. "I became an S-rank adventurer, and there weren't even any high-ranking male adventurers who could keep up with me. If things go on like this, I'll never get married. I think that the king of Farune and I might be compatible."

My father tilted his head to the side, puzzled. "Were you always like this?"

I'm not even like this now. I'd never think to marry someone just because they were strong.

"What are you saying, father? Haven't I always said ever since I was young that I wanted to marry a man who was stronger than I was?"

"Well, yeah, you did, but you never seemed like you'd be this careless about it."

That's my father for you. He truly understands me. But none of that matters right now. I just don't want to be caught up in all this troublesome stuff about Vulcan, and Dorssen, and all that. I was interested in the Champions at first, but I don't care about that anymore, either.

"Also…I'm proud to consider myself the strongest among all women. I want to try challenging Farune's princess consorts, the Lightning Empress and the Frenzied Princess."

At that point, I myself had absolutely no clue what I was going on about with this strongest woman business, but I just wanted to convince my father of my seriousness so he would go back home. I hoped he'd be satisfied with my nonsense story about how his daughter yearned for strength and went to Farune.

"...I see. All right," my father finally said, nodding solemnly.

Really? That convinced you? I could hardly believe it.

"Let's go to Farune together," he continued, much to my surprise. "I want to see your way of life with my own eyes. Actually, I've been interested in Farune myself for a while now."

Huh? Together? No, thank you! I mean, all that princess consort stuff was a lie!

But of course, there was no way I could say that, so my father and I left for Farune together.



OUR trip to Farune was actually the first time I'd ever traveled with my father, so it was rather pleasant.

After a few weeks of journeying, we arrived in Farune's lively capital city. Originally, it had been a small fortress city, enclosed by a wall, but now the city outskirts contained newly built arenas and large tents, which were themselves surrounded by rows of inns, restaurants, and shops. The whole place was bustling with activity.

There were two circular arenas: one large, and one small. The main stadium had sizable, tiered seating for spectators, and it was where the ranking matches for the top hundred members of the Hundred were held. The smaller arena had fewer seats, and it was where matches between those members outside the rankings—called the Rookie League—were held. It seemed that there was a system for those who won their matches in the smaller arena to challenge ranked members for their spots.

First, we went into the smaller arena, which had fewer people and was easier to get into. Every single person we saw fighting there possessed strength that made it hard to comprehend the fact that they were supposedly unranked.

"I certainly never expected Farune's warriors to be *this* strong..." my father said, nearly speechless after watching the matches.

They may have been unranked, but these people were all tough fighters with the potential to be ace knights in other countries. They were probably equivalent in strength to B-rank adventurers. Sure, their technique showed some inexperience, but they had abnormally high base levels of stamina. My father, whom

I suspected had come in part for reconnaissance, spectated with intense concentration.

After a while, we moved to the main stadium. The area was thronged with people looking to spectate and gamble, and it was much busier than anything I'd seen in any other country. It was difficult even to make it into the arena itself, but we somehow managed to push our way through the crowd and enter.

"What is this?!" my father shouted.

His reaction was only natural. As we watched, we saw numerous matches between skilled fighters, all of whom used high-level sword techniques or spells. Occasionally someone would take on a dragon one on one. Their strength was on an entirely different level from those in the Rookie League. If they'd been adventurers, they were guaranteed to have been above A-rank. I doubted whether even *I* could beat some of the higher-ranked warriors. This was especially true for the top ten, who were all actual monsters. There had to have been no end to the number of foes they could defeat.

Finally, Mars, the king of Farune, appeared in the arena. He was also known as Zero. Wearing a suit of black armor and holding a black-bladed longsword, he looked like the god of death. Zero fought against everyone who'd won in the arena that day—all of those powerful people at once—completely on his own. It was absurd. Zero's strength was simply in a different dimension from theirs. A single swing of his sword made me feel as if the atmosphere was being rent apart. A single step made the earth shake. He was no longer human. And the others were fighting this inhuman man. It would have been difficult even to make it out with your life if you weren't a high-ranked member of the Hundred. He was that outrageously powerful.

Who the heck is this man? Is he really a human like me, and not the Demon King or something?

"We mustn't ever fight against Farune. Absolutely not," my father muttered to himself.

Yeah, you can say that again, I thought. No matter how much of a numerical advantage there may have been, a single Farunian was just too powerful. It was certain that even someone with ten times the number of soldiers would easily lose. Zero was especially bad news. He was strong enough to take on an entire army by

himself. If winning a war meant killing the enemy's king, then Farune was effectively invincible. Like my father, I was also seriously shocked. I hadn't thought I was the strongest S-rank adventurer out there, but I had believed I was somewhere close to it. That confidence had just been completely pulverized.

"Dorssen was bound to lose to them," I remarked. I understood now why Sigmund had been so busy gathering military strength. The situation around Dorssen may have been tense, but even more than that, being neighbors with Farune must have been terrifying. I wouldn't have been able to sleep at night if I had to be close to a country with that much military might.

"And now Dorssen has offered up their imperial princess, and established friendly relations with Farune. If it comes to war with Dorssen, we may be making Farune our enemy," my father groaned, his mind on the precarity of Vulcan's current situation.

Dorssen marrying their princess off to the king of Farune had been ridiculed as cowardly foreign policy by those inside and outside the country, but now it looked as if Dorssen's decision had been the correct one. However, even Dorssen probably didn't want to be too hasty in asking Farune for reinforcements. That may well have been like inviting a dragon into one's home out of fear of a wolf. The Hundred were that great a threat.



THE next day, we went to the tents—though really, going off size alone, the facility was larger than a town. The entrance fee was fairly steep, but there were many customers, including some entire families, and the place looked to be doing good business just like everywhere else.

Inside, monsters were on exhibit. Some were in cages, while others had deep ditches separating them from the visitors; there were as many different methods for keeping them under control as there were varieties of monster. I was impressed by just how many they'd managed to gather: there were Killer Rabbits, of course, but also Great Basilisks, Redbones, Bloodbears, White Tigers, Warwolves, Earth Dragons, Wyverns, and the list went on. My father watched them with curiosity. He had experience

subjugating monsters, but not frequently, and from the looks of it, he wasn't familiar with many of the ones there.

Also, and I had no idea how they did it, but I couldn't feel any hostility coming from the monsters. There were some muscular guards on duty—probably members of the Hundred there in case of an emergency—but the monsters were more docile than I'd ever seen.

I unintentionally blurted out what I was thinking: "Why are they so well-behaved?"

"Well, you know, I make sure to feed them," someone replied to my mutterings.

She was a short, black-haired woman. At first glance, she looked almost like a young girl, but the unusual glint in her eyes said otherwise. Also, I hadn't sensed her presence at all until she had spoken.

Who is she? I wondered. Just as I was about to grasp for the handle of the sword on my back, my father responded to the woman.

"Just feeding them makes them obedient?" he asked, doubtful. He didn't seem to have noticed how unusual the woman was. He probably just thought he'd overlooked her because she was an ordinary girl.

"That's right. They can be placated by providing them with the proper food and environment. Then, they won't attack humans."

No, there's no way that's true. Monsters were nothing like animals. Just feeding them wouldn't be enough to domesticate them.

Still wary of the woman, I went ahead and grabbed the handle of my sword. But just then, I felt eyes on me. No, not just one gaze—there were too many to count. Looking around, I saw that all the monsters there had turned to look at me. They hadn't had a care in the world for humans just a moment before, but now they had all shifted their focus to me at the same time.

Are they trying to protect her? As a test, I slowly let go of my sword, and the monsters stopped looking at me, seemingly losing interest.

I felt a wave of cold sweat break out over my whole body. *Who is this woman?*

The black-haired woman was thoroughly explaining the facilities to my father. She didn't seem to have noticed my suspicion.

"Can I ask your name?" I asked the woman after she more or less finished speaking.

"My name is Keely. His Majesty has put me in charge of managing this facility," she said, smiling brightly. "You two are Lord Garay and Lady Sheila, am I correct?"

I paused. "Why do you know our names?"

"Both of you are carrying two swords. The first people who would come to anyone's mind when they think of dual-wielding swords are the two Twin Blades, Lord Garay, one of Vulcan's Seven Celestial Swords, and Lady Sheila, the S-rank adventurer. You're famous, after all."

"Oho, so you know my name too? Thought I'd practically given up the title of Twin Blades to my daughter these days." My father grinned broadly. He seemed to have taken a liking to Keely now that he knew she'd recognized us.

However, I was unable to lower my guard. I was certain that this Keely woman had approached us *because* she knew who we were.

"You're the talk of the town," Keely said. "They say the renowned Sheila of the Twin Blades is going to participate in the Consort Selection Tournament. You know, you're the number one favorite to win."

Oh, so I'm just in the news, that's all. As soon as I realized that, the tension left my body, and I suddenly felt tired. I hadn't really wanted anyone to make a big deal about my presence in Farune, but my father seemed happy to hear I was the favorite for the championship.

After we exchanged a few more words with Keely, she slowly walked away.

In the end, we spent half the day touring the facilities.

"Now that was worth coming to see," my father said, satisfied.

At first, I had thought it would be a good chance to observe monsters more closely, but midway through, I'd started feeling a creeping worry: *If they've been able to tame monsters this thoroughly, couldn't they also use monsters in battle?*

Farune was adjacent to the Forest of Beasts, where they could get as many monsters as they pleased. If a country like that could bend monsters to its will, it would be a massive military asset. And that would mean Farune would have two powerful armies: the Hundred, plus an army of monsters.

Keely also gave me a bad feeling. That mysterious woman was undoubtedly the person who was in command of the monsters.

Just what was Farune hoping to become in the future?

That was what concerned me.



THE day after that, the Consort Selection Tournament finally began. The main arena was the venue. With my father watching over me from the stands, and with nowhere left to run, I entered the arena together with the other candidates. The person walking in front of me was Scarface Minerva, who had a price on her head.

Why is a wanted person openly entering as a candidate for princess consort? I could get a thousand gold coins if I captured her right here, I thought, staring straight at her without meaning to. Then I remembered that the flyer had said anyone, no matter their personal or criminal history, was free to apply. *Meritocracy has gone too far.*

Looking around me, I saw that there were all sorts of famous, powerful people, like Rhea, the leader of the Flaming Foxes mercenary band, and Shirley the Dagger. According to the rumors, various countries were trying to recruit them, just like with me. They had probably also run away to Farune to escape, and if possible, become a princess. *What a shameless bunch… Though, I guess I shouldn't throw stones.*

As I had expected, the method for selecting the princess consort was a single-elimination tournament where the candidates would fight, and the winner of each match would advance to the next round. *This has to be the first time in history anyone's selected a consort this way,* I thought. In this kingdom, all people were evaluated on was their strength. That way of thinking was closer to an orc's than a human's.

Personally, I would rather have lost right away, but if that happened, I could see my father carting me off to Vulcan with him, and besides that I had my pride, so I gave it everything I had. I made it all the way to the championship round, then lost to a ridiculously strong woman wearing a white mask. That was the first time in my life I'd ever taken that much of a beating. I only learned this later, but apparently, she was a swordmaster, the Red Demon Cassandra—that legendary berserker. I never had a chance. However, I had finished second, and was recognized as having sufficient strength, so I ended up being chosen to be the fourth consort anyway. I had mixed feelings about it.

Surprisingly, my father was happy with the results. According to him, "If you marry King Mars, Vulcan might be able to form a friendship with Farune."

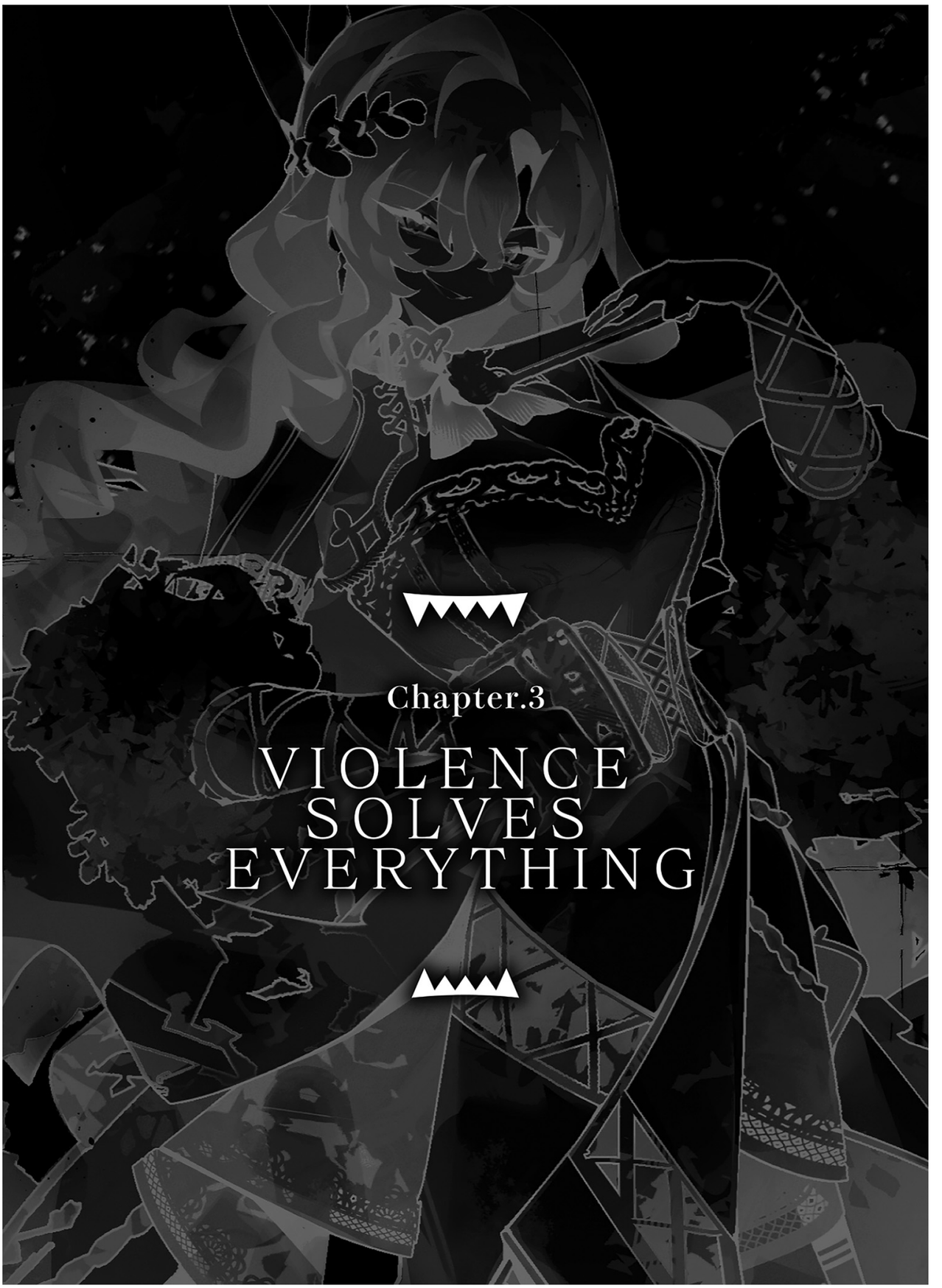
After learning what a threat Farune was, he seemed to have been thinking that he had to do something to establish good relations with the country.

Hey, don't put so much pressure on me. Though, I guess I'll make the best of it. Vulcan was my home, after all.

As for the man who was to become my husband, King Mars, I had learned how strong he was after seeing him in the arena, but he was also terrifying in his private life. I won't say how specifically. The new third consort, Cassandra, was accompanying him to bed for the time being, for which I was incredibly grateful.

Also, I was served nothing but monster meat at all three of my daily meals.

I never should have come to a place like this...



Chapter.3

VIOLENCE SOLVES EVERYTHING

XIV: The Coup in Dorssen

A year had passed since the Consort Selection Tournament. Soon after the tournament, Carmilla had given birth to a baby boy, and Cassandra had also become pregnant. I was now the father of two children, with a third on the way—and I was glad. I'd had a difficult childhood, so I was ready to raise my own children with love.

However. It was also an opportunity. An opportunity to finally eat some delicious meat that had *not* come from a monster. No matter where I went in Farune, I couldn't find a single person who would allow me to eat regular meat dishes. The citizens had all banded together in an effort to make me eat nothing but raw monster meat.

Who do they think I am? I'm their king!

But then it struck me that Zaburo, who had been the one to create the new dishes, was from Dorssen, which meant that so was his style of cooking. If I wanted to try similar dishes, all I had to do was go there. And because Dorssen was a foreign country, even if they found out I was the king of Farune, I figured they wouldn't dare do anything as outrageous as refusing to let me eat.

With the final month of her pregnancy on the horizon, Cassandra couldn't move around very well, so I didn't think she'd do anything like—for example—chase after me and drag me back. Frau, meanwhile, had been spending all her time since our son had been born caring for him. Apparently, young Arthur had an even greater aptitude for magic than she did. In other words, she had her hands full, and had no time to spare for me, so she probably wouldn't get in my way either. Finally, Carmilla was working hard to be even more passionate about her child than Frau was about hers—Carmilla adored Frau, but she also had a fierce competitive streak. She didn't care at all for me anymore. It felt a bit lonely.

All in all, it meant that even if I went to Dorssen, nobody was around to follow and detain me. And if anyone in the Hundred tried, all I had to do was give them a merciless beating and send them packing.

First, I left a note that said, "There's been a development in the central continent, so I'm going to observe the situation," and

then I set off for Dorssen. I had been vague about where I was going because if I wrote anything too specific, someone might have chased after me. In Farune, I spent most of my time being forced to fight in the arena while Gamarath took care of the government for me, so I knew there wouldn't be any real issues if I left.

Though considering that I'm the king, I do think that in itself is an issue…

Just as I had done when I was younger, I used the secret passageway in my quarters to escape into the Forest of Beasts in the dead of night—though unlike before, thanks to our ongoing reclamation of the forest near the castle, I could see the monster tents from the passageway's exit. *Things have really changed since then*, I thought, reminiscing as I ran.

After so many years of eating monster meat, I ran a good deal faster than a horse. It would have caused trouble for me to be seen leaving, so I wanted to cover as much ground as possible while it was still dark, but if I pushed myself, I figured I should make it to Dorssen by midday.



I had run at breakneck speed down the highway, which meant that I made it to the capital of Dorssen, Berze, around noon, just as planned. However, things seemed a bit strange. The gate was shut, so I couldn't enter the city. A significant number of people stood around by the gate, shut out of the city like I was. Among them was a man who looked like a merchant and sounded like a real know-it-all.

According to him, "There's been a disturbance in Berze, so it's impossible to enter the city."

A disturbance, huh? Well, whatever. I can easily jump over a wall this low.

Still, it was a crime to enter the city other than through the gate, so I had to look for an out-of-the-way spot where I'd be as inconspicuous as possible. Circling around the outside, I noticed a somewhat deserted spot near the west gate. There weren't any guards in sight, so I jumped over the city wall there and entered the city of Berze.

My anticipation grew. Soon, I would be eating delicious meat.

However, the city was quiet. The buildings lining the streets were more diverse and colorful than those in Farune, and they oozed with the refined culture of the central continent, but the streets were deserted. It was as if everyone there was holding their breath. This was a surprise—given the city's central location, I had expected the place to be busier. I had visited once before on a diplomatic mission when I'd been much younger, and I had the feeling the city had been a lot livelier back then. It was right at the peak of lunch hour, but none of the places that sold food were even open. There were signs hanging outside with drawings of meat on them, but the doors were all firmly shut.

What is this? Sort of sick joke at my expense? I've been running constantly since last night, and I haven't had anything to eat. I'm starving and I'm irritated.

If that was how things were going to be, though, then I had an idea of my own. I was not only acquaintances with the king of Dorssen; he was also my brother-in-law. When he learned that his precious younger brother was here to see him, surely he'd serve me *something* to eat. After the match over the position of queen consort a few years earlier, he had treated me so affably it was as if he'd become an entirely different person, so I had probably made a pretty good impression. Also, unlike the castle in Farune, which only served raw monster meat, Dorssen's castle certainly had actual delicious food on the menu. Plus, it would be free.

With that in mind, I looked to the castle. They seemed to have been cooking the meat for lunch, because several pillars of smoke were rising into the sky. My heart swelled with excitement, and I ran toward the castle.

When I got closer, I could see there was a big ruckus going on. The din of battle cries and the piercing, metallic sound of swords clashing filled the air, along with some magical explosions for good measure. To be specific, a large-scale fight was underway.

Huh? You've gotta be kidding me. I come all this way, and there's a war going on?

…What should I do? Maybe I'll act like I saw nothing and just go home.

By all appearances, the attackers had the advantage. It was clear that if things went on like this, the king would lose.

Well, he is *my brother-in-law. I get the feeling Carmilla will be angry at me if I abandon him. I guess I have to help.*

To avoid getting injured, I equipped my armor just in case. Not that I had brought my black armor with me, but by calling on a magical inscription that had been newly engraved on my body, I could transfer the suit of armor directly onto me, already equipped, whenever I wanted.

As usual, the person who had devised the inscription was one of the mages Frau had recruited. Usually, magical inscriptions were applied to items like swords and pieces of armor to improve their capabilities, but some lunatic out there had tried to make inscriptions work on human beings. When they tried engraving a small inscription on someone, the mage in question, who clearly had no regard whatsoever for humanity, had been swiftly exiled from their country. Then, they had found their way to Farune, and I had become their lab rat. The reason was simple: I was the toughest-looking person around.

What the heck do they think the point of a king is?

I thought of pushing it off onto Cassandra, who had a reputation for resilience, but she was so obnoxiously overpowered that she didn't even *wear* armor, so she flatly refused with an "I don't need that." So I wound up the guinea pig. That crazy mage excitedly engraved a pair of inscriptions, one on my body and one on my black suit of armor. It was incredibly painful, but ultimately, it *was* pretty useful. I could now equip and remove my armor whenever I wanted without having to carry it around with me.

So, I consciously let mana flow into my inscription. My body was enveloped in a white light, and the magic transport formula activated. When the light disappeared, my armor was equipped, positioned exactly as I'd had it last—another of the inscription's capabilities.

If I had to name one flaw, it was that using the magic inscription hurt so much it felt like I was dying. In fact, I was pretty sure a normal human being would have actually died from the pain.

Anyway, with my preparations complete, it was time for me to make my way to the castle. As soon as I approached the gate, I

was swarmed with soldiers. Luckily, the soldiers in the rebel army had graciously wrapped red strips of cloth around their arms, so it was easy to tell who was who.

I ignored the cries of, “Who are you?!” and proceeded ahead, using waves of energy to blast away every single one of the rebel soldiers. This sword technique—actually, it was closer to a regular old fighting technique—involved concentrating mana in my palm and turning it into a wave, so just pushing my palm against my foe was enough to be a powerful strike. It was the same feeling as Earth Break, only instead of using a sword, I was doing it with my bare hands.

Even so, the rebels were weak. The soldiers, and even the knights, were all at low skill and strength levels. There was a world of difference between them and the guys in the Hundred I constantly fought in the arena. In all, the rebel army was about as effective as a clump of weeds at blocking my path.

Now, according to convention, kings tended to be in throne rooms, and the rebel army seemed to have already made it that far into the castle—the luxurious doors at the entrance to the chamber showed signs of having been violently forced open.

I pushed my way into the throne room, placing my hands on each of the two knights blocking the entrance and sending them flying back into the room. There, I could see the king of Dorssen, fighting, sword in hand. He was clutching his side, and a considerable amount of his blood was spilling to the floor.

This is bad. It’s more serious than I thought.

“Who are you?!” one of the rebel knights in the throne room yelled, and then they all came at me at once.

They were somewhat skilled. Maybe around as troublesome as a copse of trees, this time.

I drew my sword and stepped forward, like I was performing a light dance step. It was enough. I leaped low to the group, obliterating the distance between me and the enemy knights in an instant, then raised my sword. One of them tried to parry me, but he was unable to take my attack and his sword was destroyed; he stood there in a daze as I slashed him from shoulder to waist. The next, a heavily armored knight, tried to block me with his shield, so I instantly circled around behind him and plunged my sword into his back. Another came at me holding his sword aloft to try to cut

me down, and I made a sweep, slicing his torso in half for his trouble. One tried to back away, so I approached him faster than he could escape and decapitated him, leaving an expression of despair frozen on his face. Finally, one had turned his back to me and was trying to run away. I stood in his way and, after glancing at his dumbfounded expression, I chopped off his head, too. I repeated this several times with the rest.

In all, it had taken ten of them to prevent me from advancing for around ten seconds. But because each of them had taken a second of my time to defeat, I considered them to be on the stronger side as far as enemy soldiers were concerned.

It was baffling, though, that they had even tried to take me on at their skill level. With how weak they were, they could have been having their fill of peace. Why weren't they happy with that? They had no clue just how good they had it.

I bet they can eat delicious food whenever they want. They could've lived happily together with their family and friends. Ahh, I wish I had a normal life. I couldn't understand anyone who threw that life away in favor of fighting, especially when they had no strength to speak of.

It was then that I noticed everyone in the room had their eyes on me. Both the king of Dorssen and the man he was facing had stopped fighting and were looking at me.

Hm, maybe I went a bit too far. I was still wearing my ring of poison and my gravity armlet, but there were probably fewer than half as many foes still standing as when I had entered. I had only come to help, but this was also my first real fight in a while, and I had gotten carried away.

"King Zero, have you come to save me?" the king of Dorssen groaned after the pregnant pause.

It definitely didn't feel like the right time to say I had actually come to sneak a delicious meat dish, so I just nodded.

"King Zero?!" shouted the knight who had been crossing swords with the king of Dorssen, shocked. "Why is the king of Farune here?!"

"I have no intention of telling you," I said, then I sighed. I'd somehow ended up having to do something I didn't want to do. "Unfortunately, my coming here is a secret."



AFTER defeating all the rebels in the throne room, I hoisted the king of Dorssen over my shoulder and escaped the castle.

As I passed through a forest, the king of Dorssen continued bleeding from his side, but I didn't think a wound like that would kill him…*at least, I hope not*. Anyone in the Hundred with an injury like that would heal on their own. But, not only could I not use restoration magic myself, but with the rebel army almost completely controlling the city, I didn't know anywhere I could go in Berze to have him healed. My only option was to return to Farune and have Luida heal him.

"…Stop already," the king of Dorssen said faintly.

I looked around to check and see if there were any enemies, then came to a stop and slowly laid the king on the ground.

"I'm done for," he said, his face pale. "At any rate, being saved by a foreign king means I've already lost any position of strength I might otherwise have had. And you, too, came to help me because your goal is the conquest of Dorssen, isn't that right?"

I just shook my head. I had only come to eat some non-monster meat, but the dire situation made it impossible for me to admit that.

"Hah, you still baffle me." The king of Dorssen weakly removed a ring with a large gemstone from his finger. "Take this. It's the symbol of the king of Dorssen."

The shining blue gemstone was tinged with mana. It looked like a magic stone, and between its size and its purity, it had to be quite valuable.

"It's a present for Carmilla's baby boy. Her son has the right to inherit Dorssen. I don't imagine that any of my children are still alive, and I won't hand it over to Alan."

Alan? If I remember correctly, Carmilla had a brother by that name.

"…Take care of Carmilla for me. I know what she's like, but there were also times when she was just my adorable little sister." Then the king of Dorssen's pupils dilated, and he stared blankly into space.

He was dead. Even Luida's healing wouldn't be enough to save him now. I couldn't put a name to what I was feeling. I hadn't

particularly liked or disliked him, but at the very least, this was the first time someone who wasn't my enemy had died right before my eyes.

I struck the ground with Earth Break to create a large depression, placed the king of Dorssen's body in it, and then buried him using the piled up dirt nearby.

I think this is enough. He probably would have wanted to rest beneath the earth of his own land, rather than be buried in Farune. Once someone was dead, there was nothing more you could do for them. This may have been a simple grave for a king, but there was nothing to be gained from an opulent burial. If I'd been assassinated when I was a prince, I imagined I would probably have gotten a decent grave, but it would have been meaningless.

I left the grave behind me and returned to Farune.



IT was late at night when I got back to the castle, but for some reason, everyone was awake and waiting for me.

"Your Majesty! Where in the world have you been at such a late hour?!" Gamarath said, running up to me looking shaken. "This is major! There's been a rebellion in Dorssen!"

I know. I just saw it in person earlier today.

"The king's younger brother, Lord Alan, won over the second of the Champions, Sir Randolph, and led a coup with his mother's country of origin, Eyland, backing him!"

I see, so Alan was the one who caused the rebellion. I wouldn't want to give him the symbol of the kingship either.

"And with the king's power waning after Dorssen's loss to Farune, many of the nobility deserted his side and allied with Lord Alan!"

Huh? Does that mean that the rebellion was somehow my fault? At that unpleasant thought, a trickle of sweat ran down my back.

"At the time, the head of the champions, Lord Sigmund, was fighting against advancing Vulcanian forces, so he was unable to reinforce the capital. I believe this means that Vulcan was also supporting the rebellion. The capital of Dorssen fell this afternoon, but the king's whereabouts are unknown."

There was no way I could say, “Actually, I just buried him,” no matter what, so I stayed quiet.

“We cannot overlook this,” declared Carmilla. She was there with my vassals, who were all gathered in the room. “I may have married into Farune, but I did once owe my loyalty to the king of Dorssen. No, I absolutely will not stand for this savagery.” Despite the content of what she was saying, she wasn’t visibly angry. In fact, she looked overjoyed. “I want to help my brother. The Palace Knights and I will head to Dorssen. Is that all right with you, Your Majesty?”

It isn’t all right. First of all, your brother is already dead. But I couldn’t treat her desire to help her brother with disdain. With no other choice, I decided to give her the ring the king had entrusted me with. I took it out of my breast pocket, then softly handed it to her.

“Your Majesty! This ring is the symbol of the kings of Dorssen! Where did you get it?!”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t make it in time.” I didn’t say anything else, certainly not the fact that I had actually only gone to Dorssen to get a decent meal. *The king’s death is confirmed, so for now, you should give up on going to Dorssen.*

“Don’t tell me! You were gone because you were in Dorssen?! So ‘There’s been a development in the central continent’ was referring to Dorssen?!” shouted Chrom, shocked. He was a bit off base, but I nodded anyway.

“No way…”

“That’s His Majesty for you.”

“Just how far does his foresight extend…?”

My vassals were getting noisy. Carmilla also looked at me with wide, surprised eyes. Everyone was making it all the more difficult to tell them the truth.

“Thank you, Your Majesty!” Carmilla said, the corners of her mouth twisting upward. Her smile reminded me of a carnivorous animal. “With this, it is now clear that justice is on our side. The fact that my brother gave His Majesty the ring can mean only one thing: Leon has been named the next king of Dorssen!”

Hm? Well, I guess he did say he has the right of inheritance, but…

“Dorssen belongs in His Majesty’s hands! This is a just war!” Carmilla looked around at everyone, then raised her right hand.

“Yeah!” The members of the Hundred bellowed in agreement.

Huh? There’s no need to go help the king anymore, so doesn’t that mean we don’t have to fight? Does this mean there’s still going to be war, but the pretext for it has changed? What do I need Dorssen for anyway?

The bloodthirsty ones like Ogma weren’t the only ones in favor, either. Even the moderates like Gamarath looked open to the idea. Basically, every one of my vassals was enthusiastic about going to war to claim Dorssen.

“Will you be all right with just the Palace Knights?” I asked Carmilla, referring to the knightly order built around the thirty women who had participated in the Consort Selection Tournament. The Palace Knights also included Minerva’s thieves, Rhea’s Flaming Foxes, and the assassins Shirley had brought along with her, and they numbered more than a hundred all together. However, there were *only* a hundred of them—not nearly enough to wage a war, no matter how weak their enemy might have been. *So, can you give it up already?*

“I am grateful for your concern, Your Majesty. That is why I’d like to borrow some of the Hundred as well.”

That isn’t what I meant!

“I’ll collect anyone who wishes to join,” Ogma responded instantly.

He’s probably raring to go himself, and if the Hundred are with them, then strength won’t be a problem. Is there no way to avoid this war?

“Your Majesty, supposing, just supposing,” Carmilla began, a cruel smile on her face, “that we defeat my brother Alan, I’d like to make our son, Leon, the next king of Dorssen, but what do you think?”

This caused a stir among my vassals—an affirmative one. I imagined they thought that, rather than me directly annexing the country and ruling it myself, governing would go more smoothly if they installed someone on the throne who had Dorssenian royal blood, like Leon. Everyone in the room seemed to be hoping for that as they looked at me with anticipation.

“Very well,” I said. When I was a child, no one had ever expected anything of me, so I found myself wanting more for my son.



“YOU still can’t find the former king?!”

The newly crowned king of Dorssen, Alan, was losing his patience.

His coup had been a success. Nearly all of the nobility had fallen in line behind him. Both Eyland and Vulcan were backing him. Everything seemed to be firmly in order, but the whereabouts of his older brother, the former king, were still unknown.

Apparently, he had been momentarily cornered where Alan currently was, in the throne room, but the squad of elite knights that Alan had sent in after him had been completely wiped out, and they had let him escape. Alan didn’t know how he had done it, but he suspected that the former king had secretly kept another powerful warrior up his sleeve, in addition to Sigmund. In fact, during the fighting in the castle, both sides had confirmed sightings of an unknown knight in black armor. Dorssen had been recruiting skilled adventurers in recent years, so the possibility that the former king had used one of them as his trump card couldn’t be ruled out.

At the same time, though, the former king’s disregard for proper lineage had been one of the causes of the discontent among many of the nobles. Dorssen was a kingdom steeped in tradition. It wasn’t acceptable simply to gather manpower without regard for the methods one employed.

In the end, Alan’s brother hadn’t been fit to rule. He, Alan, was the one who was really worthy of being king. The former king was no longer a threat, but Alan still had to do whatever was necessary to get his hands on the ring that was the symbol of the monarchy. After all, that was what tradition dictated.

Just then, Randolph entered the throne room. He was the second of the five Champions. As the second son of a ducal house, he was of reputable lineage, and was the most powerful of Dorssen’s knights, blessed as he was with superb physique and talent. Compared to him, Sigmund was nothing more than an outsider.

“Lord Alan, Farune has raised an army with Lady Carmilla as their leader. They are believed to be around two hundred strong,” Randolph reported with a sneer. Any way you looked at it, two

hundred was far too few. Of course he was sneering. Sure, there were small, elite squadrons out there, but this was something else.

"Hmph, so you've deceived the king of Farune, and now you've come to take Dorssen, have you, Carmilla?" Alan said to no one in particular. Sitting on the throne, he twirled a lock of his hair. It wasn't the distinctive violet of the Dorssenian royal family; it was the blond of the Eylish royal family. Alan believed that he had been unable to become king through ordinary means because of this coloring. Both his older brother and Carmilla, the one who was raising troops against him, had violet hair. "Is two thousand enough for you, Randolph?"

"Yes, sir, that will be sufficient."

It was ten times the number of soldiers as the enemy, and included the battalion that Randolph himself trained and commanded. They were quality soldiers—there was no way they could lose.

"Then go," Alan said. "I don't care if you kill Carmilla. She'll be a nuisance to capture alive."

Carmilla was a former Champion. Her strength could not be overlooked.

"Understood. I shall humbly execute my duty."



CARMILLA easily broke through the border on her way to the capital city of Dorssen. There had never been that many soldiers stationed there in the first place, and because their commander hadn't sided with Alan during the coup, he had chosen to allow Carmilla to pass when she'd announced she would defeat any traitors.

Well, it would have been faster just to force my way through, but my son is going to be king of Dorssen. It's best for him to maintain a good reputation, Carmilla thought. In her mind, her son was already set to become king. And she—no, Farune—was strong enough to make it happen. Her husband, Mars, was utterly unremarkable in his personal life, and she couldn't sense in him any of the ambition that the public whispered about, but on the other hand, he was steadily accumulating strength.

He has the Hundred, my elder sister's Mages' Guild, the monster corps, and now the swordmaster. With all that at his fingertips, as a king, sitting back and doing nothing simply isn't an option.

Carmilla didn't dislike Mars. If anything, she had come to think that perhaps, a man with a calm disposition like his suited her. However, he was abnormally strong, and he was assembling others who were strong around himself. They had all gathered to his side in the pursuit of power. From the beginning, there had only ever been one thing into which they were sure to channel that power.

You will conquer the world. That is your destiny. Carmilla spotted the enemy army deploying in the distance. *This fight is the first step toward that future.*

Carmilla was ecstatic. She had become stronger, much stronger than she had been before going to Farune. And now, the opportunity for her to wield that strength had arrived. There was no way she wouldn't feel elated.

In the end, strength seeks to prove itself, through conflict.



RANDOLPH stood before his two thousand soldiers and officers. He thought it essential that, as one of the Champions, he himself was at the vanguard of the army. Carmilla stepped forward from among the opposing Farunian troops.

"Has your betrayal made you the head of the Champions? Just like always, you're still just a weakling," she said. She was wearing her usual white dress. It looked out of place on a battlefield and, together with her beauty, made her stand out that much more. She unfolded her fan and used it to conceal her face. The fan's dark red color was reminiscent of the color of blood, and the pattern on it was modeled after the scales of a dragon. She had used a much more elegant and luxurious fan when she had still been in Dorssen.

Her tastes have certainly changed, Randolph thought. Though he felt somewhat disconcerted, he replied, "The Champions ought to be Dorssenian heroes. Lord Sigmund and the previous king had to have lost their minds to think someone from just any country could be one, so long as they filled the position."

Randolph's position in the Champions was as a representative of Dorssen's knights. He was proud of that fact, and looked on Sigmund, who had been an adventurer, and Carmilla, who had been a princess, with disdain.

"The *previous* king? Oh, does my elder brother believe he's become king already? Does he bear the ring of the royal family?" Carmilla flashed her trademark bewitching smile.

As a princess, her looks had been the only attractive thing about her, and as she had aged, she had grown even more gorgeous. Randolph had heard she'd even had a child, but her extraordinary beauty hadn't dulled one bit.

"If I were to state that he does, would you mind returning whence you came?" Randolph said. Alan did not in fact have the ring, but that was of little importance to Randolph.

"Don't lie to me." Carmilla's smile widened. "I have the ring right here," she said, holding up the ring, which she wore on the ring finger of her left hand. Its magic stone responded to her mana, emitting a brilliant blue glow. The ring had glowed on the fingers of generations of Dorssenian kings, but when Carmilla wore it, the stone gave off a particularly intense light.

"How did you get that?!" Randolph said, agitated. Unrest also spread throughout the knights and soldiers he had brought with him. Their claim to legitimacy had been shaken. Of course, they had sacrificed any potential legitimacy as soon as they had started the rebellion, which they had only done because the former king's light had grown dimmer. However, on Carmilla's hand, the magic stone's glow was so strikingly intense that it was enough for the rebels to recall the glory of the Dorssenian royal family.

"It's a fake!" Randolph shouted, trying to calm his subordinates. "There's no way she has the ring of the royal family!" The ring's authenticity was far less important to him than whether they won this fight.

"You can't even tell whether the royal family's ring is real or not? That's one of the reasons you were never chosen to lead the Champions, Randolph," Carmilla said, smiling slightly. She closed her fan, and mana gathered at its tip, shining brightly.

What's she planning on doing? Sonic Blade? But no, what's that mana for? Randolph thought.

Carmilla swept her fan horizontally. The trail it left behind in the air turned into a blade of light and hurtled toward Randolph.

What's that?! It's nothing like Sonic Blade!

Randolph instantly sensed the danger he was in and dodged the attack with a jump.

"You've gotten stronger, Lady Carmilla!" he said. "You must be training diligently, unlike when you were in Dorssen." He wasn't as confident as his words suggested. Not even two years had passed since Carmilla had gone to Farune. Not only that, but she should have spent nearly a year of that time being pregnant and then giving birth. The extent of her growth despite that was beyond what Randolph could have expected.

"Take a look behind you, Randolph."

Randolph turned around, and was shocked by the disastrous state of his army. Nearly all of the soldiers on the front line had been ruthlessly mowed down, their bodies torn to shreds by Carmilla's attack. The other soldiers were starting to panic at the sudden loss of their comrades.

"Impossible! There's no way an attack can pack that much power from such a distance!"

Whether a spell or a sword technique, the power of an attack dropped the farther away its target was. Randolph's army and Carmilla should have been plenty far enough apart from each other.

"You know, Randolph," Carmilla said with a scornful laugh, "Farune really is a hellish place."

This time, she opened her fan, then gave it a graceful wave.



The fan’s gentle breeze was wrapped in mana that transformed it into a shockwave, which crashed into the Dorssenian army.

Randolph doggedly withstood the blast, using his shield to defend against it, but the soldiers near him were pathetically blown away.

Spells with the same level of power as Carmilla’s shockwave were not uncommon. However, spells required incantations, and the more powerful a spell’s effect, the longer its incantation took to recite. Carmilla had stirred up her shockwave with nothing more than a single wave of her fan. Not only that, but the vicious blade that had cut up the soldiers a moment earlier had also boasted a terrible power—enough to make the Dorssenian soldiers think, *There’s no way we can beat that monster.* They had already fallen into despair.

Now that their foes were ready to cut and run, the Palace Knights mercilessly assaulted the Dorssenian army. At the head of the vanguard were the former thief, Minerva, the former mercenary, Rhea, and the former adventurer, Sasha. They all had the same savage expression on their faces, one that said they were thrilled to finally have a target they could wield their strength against. They had always had confidence in their skills, but in Farune, they had been so decisively beaten that it had blown their pride to smithereens. Then, from their new vantage point at rock bottom, they had been forced to eat appalling meals and engage in outrageous training, after which they had obtained new power. There was no way they *wouldn’t* have been excited now that they actually had somewhere to use that power. By now, they, too, were full-fledged members of the Hundred.

Meanwhile, Randolph, being the second of Dorssen’s Champions, made full use of his abilities. No matter how well-trained the Palace Knights may have been, their base strength was completely different, and they weren’t a match for him. However, even he was unable to kill them, and his frustration was building. Whenever he tried to land a finishing blow on one of them, a new foe came at him, so he could never get them to stay down for good. Not only that, but his own army was also shrinking before his eyes.

Things can't go on like this! Randolph thought, feeling a crisis coming on. At that moment, a lady in a white dress appeared before him. They were in the very center of the battlefield, but there was somehow an air of stillness around her. Needless to say, it was Carmilla.

"Well, why don't we finish this?" she said, smiling elegantly. "By the way, even if I beat you, I don't need the position of second in the Champions. I'm going to be the queen mother of Dorssen, after all."

"Enough prattling, you witch!" Randolph readied his sword and shield, then approached Carmilla.

He still had a chance of success. Just two years ago, he had been stronger than her. There hadn't been much of a difference in their skill level, but his mental fortitude had far surpassed the spoiled Carmilla's. People could not fundamentally change who they were so easily. No matter how much stronger she had gotten, he believed she must still have had her weaknesses.

Carmilla snapped her fingers, firing Sonic Blades at Randolph, but he skillfully parried them with his shield. She was incomparably stronger than she had been two years ago. If he didn't avoid her attacks, any blow could have been fatal. As he approached her, he felt cold sweat trickle down his back.

Just one step away, now only half a step... Carmilla used her glamor. Randolph had taken her illusions into account as he closed the gap between them, and he swung his sword in an attack that was certain to deal her a deadly blow.

Got her!

However, his blade passed through thin air.

That was an illusion too?!

Randolph darted his gaze all around, searching for any sign of Carmilla, when suddenly, right next to his ear, he heard the sound of his ruin:

Snap.



RANDOLPH had perished in battle.

The news stunned Alan. Randolph had been his one and only trump card. He still had plenty of soldiers left, but no heroes on

whom he could depend. He had gained Eyland and Vulcan as allies under the condition that he ceded territory to them, and Vulcan was currently keeping Sigmund occupied, so Alan would have to rely on Eyland's army.

In Eyland, there were three famous comital families renowned for their martial valor, known as the Three Counts. The head of one of the families, Count Godwin, had come to support Alan. Alan summoned him.

"Count Godwin, my apologies, but can you defeat the Farunian army?" Alan asked. He told him he wanted to entrust the task of dealing with Farune to the Eylish army.

"The Farunians?" Count Godwin's reply was unenthusiastic. He already knew that Randolph had died in battle, and Randolph had by no means been a weak man. Count Godwin had fought against him in several border skirmishes, so he was well aware of that fact. Randolph had been an unquestionably strong Champion who could hold his own against the Three Counts. Count Godwin wasn't so conceited as to think that, if he had been there in Randolph's place, he would have been able to win.

"The fact that Lord Randolph was defeated while leading a force ten times the size of his enemy's means they were quite a formidable foe," Godwin said. "I believe that perhaps, rather than counterattacking, we ought to confront them at the castl—"

"Ridiculous! You're that afraid of those provincial idiots? And you call yourself one of the Three Counts of Eyland!"

Alan looked down on Farune. That was why, when the previous king had lost to them and offered up his younger sister for marriage, Alan had harbored rebellious feelings and led a coup.

"But with the Battle of Brix, and now Lord Randolph's defeat, Dorssen has already lost twice to Farune. As long as you continue to make light of them, won't you only end up losing again?"

Internally, Godwin was fed up with Alan. The man was clearly a fool, and he lacked the temperament to be king. That was why he had been deceived by Eyland and Vulcan in the first place. But now, things had taken a turn for the worse. Vulcan had marked Farune as a country to watch out for. A Vulcanian, Sheila of the Twin Blades, had even married King Zero himself, which meant the country probably had a fair amount of information on Farune.

“That was a fluke! Twice!” Alan shouted. “How could it be anything else?”

What a hopeless idiot, Godwin thought to himself. However, with the loss of Randolph, Alan was the only one who could move Dorssen’s armies.

Then, just as Godwin was pondering what to do next, a Dorssenian soldier burst into the room. “There’s been an enemy attack! They’ve penetrated the walls! It’s believed to be the Farunian army!”

XV: The City of Berze

IN the capital city of Dorssen, Berze, the tension was palpable. With the civil war and the regicide of the previous king, the city was already in a state of confusion, and now, the Farunian army was approaching.

The soldiers stationed along Berze’s walls had mixed feelings about the situation. They hadn’t participated in the coup that had taken place within the walls, so they hadn’t sworn loyalty to the self-proclaimed new king, Alan. But neither had they felt duty-bound enough to the previous king to resist the coup, so with their livelihoods (and lives) at stake, they had continued serving at their posts. Carmilla was the one leading the Farunian army—she was a sibling of the former king, just like Alan, and she said she had raised her army in the former king’s name. If that was true, then wasn’t justice on her side?

As the soldiers puzzled nervously over the state of things, a group of horses appeared in the distance, already closing in on Berze. It was probably Farune’s army. The soldiers had already been informed of their numbers, but now that they could see them in person, it seemed they really weren’t very numerous.

Spotting the enemy army, the captain of the garrison shouted, “Ring the bells and notify the city of the approaching enemy! The others should get bows and—agh?”

Before he could finish speaking, the captain collapsed. His blood pooled on the stone ramparts. In his place stood a man none of them had seen before. He was dressed like a fashionable commoner, and in one hand he held a sword dripping with blood.

“I’m thirtieth in the Hundred, Juza.”

“Juza? Juza the Gale?!”

The soldiers all simultaneously raised their weapons.

In the two years since peace had been established between Dorssen and Farune, the amount of traffic between the two countries had increased. More Dorssenians went to see battles in the arena, and stories of the Hundred had begun to spread widely. One of the subjects of these rumors was Juza, known as “the Gale” for the way he moved like the wind.

It could be said that the general population had an accurate appraisal of the Hundred. In contrast to the noble and knightly classes, who disparaged the Hundred’s strength as exaggerated for the show of it, commoners had actually experienced the Hundred’s matches firsthand, or at least heard about them from those who had.

“How delightful. It’s an honor that my name is known all the way in Dorssen,” Juza said, grinning. “This is a message from Lady Carmilla: ‘Those who don’t resist will be spared.’ But she also said this: ‘Have no mercy on those who do resist.’ So, what will *you* do?”

“There’s only one of him! Get him!” shouted an older soldier. Several of the soldiers drew their bows, aiming at Juza.

Juza practically fell toward the soldiers as he broke into a run. His flexible movements gave the impression of a wild beast.

The soldiers fired off their arrows in a panic, but Juza approached with a posture so low to the ground as to be almost crawling on it, weaving his way through the arrows’ flightpaths. He easily cut down the soldiers with the bows, as well as the older soldier who had given them the order to fire. After defeating more than four people in an instant, Juza shook the blood off his sword, then asked again, “So, what will you do? Just so you know, you can’t beat me.”

At that, the soldiers discarded their weapons. Their lack of loyalty to Alan, along with the display of strength they had just witnessed, left no choice but to surrender.

Meanwhile, Juza wasn’t the only one who had scaled the city walls. Shirley and the assassins under her command, all members of the Palace Knights, had moved out ahead of the Farunian army to infiltrate the walls while the main force approached. They captured the watchtowers and rendered the garrison dysfunctional.

However, the city gate was still shut. There, a single Farunian rode ahead of his compatriots. The huge bald man, as wide as he was tall, rode a massive horse as thick as an ox. It was Wan Hu of the Hundred, and in his hand, he gripped the Bloody Rod. Coming up to the entrance to the city, he jumped down from his horse, then bashed his weapon against the gate. The sheer weight of his attack destroyed the bar holding the gate closed from behind, and with a creaking sound, the gate began to swing open. The soldiers inside the gates rushed over to see what was happening, but when they saw Wan Hu appear, they backed up again.

"Out of the way. I won't kill you if you behave," Wan Hu warned in a low, booming voice.

"It's Bloody Wan Hu!" shouted one of the soldiers protecting the gate. Wan Hu was another member of the Hundred they knew by name, and his nickname came from the bloody mist that was produced when he swung his weapon.

"You monster!" yelled one of the knights, slashing at Wan Hu.

Wan Hu swung his Bloody Rod like he was swatting away an insect, squashing the knight inside the armor he was wearing and turning him into an inert chunk of meat.

The soldiers grimaced—that was a perfect example of how they didn't want to meet their end—and while they were being intimidated by Wan Hu, the Farunian army raced past them into the city. At the head of the army was Carmilla in her white dress, sitting astride her horse's saddle. She wasn't gripping the reins, which made it unclear how she was controlling her horse, but despite that, it made a beeline for the castle. Her long, flowing violet hair and the folding fan she was using to conceal her mouth exuded an elegance that made it seem more like she was on vacation than on the warpath, but the others who followed behind her were all fully armed and armored. Giving a sidelong glance toward the carnage at the gate, she smirked. *Apparently, it's awfully easy to break through the gate of my home country,* she thought cynically.

After the Farunian army passed by, Juza jumped down from the city wall. "Hey old man, you coming with us?"

Wan Hu glared at Juza, then brusquely replied, "You lead the way. Isn't that why you came here first?"

“Yeah, yeah,” Juza said. “Well, I’ll be going, I guess.” But instead of heading straight for the castle, he began walking into the city.

“Hold it!” one of the Dorssenian soldiers cried out. “Where are you going?!” He was afraid that the Hundred were going to harm the townspeople.

“Don’t worry. We won’t lay a finger on any ordinary citizens,” Juza said, waving his hand.

“Then what are you going to—”

“Crush the Eylish army,” answered Wan Hu, without even looking at the soldier, and he, too, began to walk.

There were around five hundred Eylish soldiers stationed in the city of Berze, brought along by Count Godwin. That was the Hundred’s quarry.

Thank goodness… I didn’t have to fight them… As the soldier watched the Farunians go, he was sincerely grateful.



THE castle was in a state of panic. The Farunian army they had only just heard was approaching had already breached the gates and made it inside the castle walls. Godwin wordlessly left the throne room and tried to link up with the Eylish army he had stationed in the city.

“Hurry, while the Dorssenians are still buying time!” he said to his retinue. He was planning to escape the city via a location far from where the Farunians were entering it.

If I can group up with my other subordinates, we’ll leave by the rear gate and join with my reinforcements. When he’d heard news of the Farunian army’s invasion, he had instantly requested reinforcements from his home country, and those troops should have been close by now.

However, when he and his retinue left the castle and arrived where the army was supposed to be stationed, they were greeted by a hellish sight: piles of corpses were strewn everywhere.

“You were late,” said a man with long, tied-back black hair. He was an unremarkable-looking man, but the bloodstained sword in his hands indicated that he was one of the architects of the terrible scene around him. Behind the black-haired man, around

twenty warriors wielded a diverse array of weapons. Among them were those who had performed well in the fight at the gates, like Juza and Wan Hu.

"I suppose I am not mistaken in assuming that you are Count Godwin, one of Eyland's Three Counts?" the man said.

"What's it to you? Who are you?" Godwin replied. The five members of his retinue drew their swords.

"My name is Yamato, and I am ranked fourth in the Hundred," Yamato said nonchalantly. "Would you do me the pleasure of engaging in a duel with me? The soldiers you brought with you left me quite unsatisfied."

"Unsatisfied! After killing five hundred men?!" Enraged, Godwin drew the sword from his waist as well.

"Perhaps I should say, quality over quantity?" Yamato clarified. "When I heard they were the soldiers serving one of the famous Three Counts, I hoped for more, but they seem to have been rather lacking in skill. I won't allow my men to lay a hand on yours for the time being, so how about a round of one-on-one combat?"

It was clear to Godwin that this wasn't a request—there was no way for him to survive without fighting this suspicious black-haired man.

"Very well, I'll make you regret ever insulting the Three Counts!" Godwin said. No sooner had the words left his lips than his body was faintly enveloped in what looked to be a bluish-white flame. This was a physical strength-boosting skill that had been passed down through generations of the Godwin family. By sending mana into their body, the user of the technique received a brief but massive increase in strength. And in addition to the body, the skill's effect also extended to its user's sword.

"Amazing! That isn't a sword technique, but it's a wonderful skill!" Yamato said, looking elated.

"Die with your pride still intact!" Godwin cried. He rushed Yamato as fast as a speeding arrow, then swung his sword.

Yamato didn't block the attack with his own sword; instead, he lightly parried it.

"Oho! You've greatly increased not only your speed, but your power as well! I would expect nothing less from one of the Three Counts!" he said. While praising his opponent's skill, he crossed

swords with him several times. Godwin let out piercing yells as he wielded his blade, while Yamato continually dealt with his fierce attacks with the lithe elegance of a willow tree.

“You slippery bastard! Stand still!” Godwin shouted. He was growing impatient. His physical strength boost was not going to last much longer. He’d win if he could just land a single attack, but this man called Yamato was a skilled swordsman. He wasn’t just defending; after using his sword to parry Godwin’s attacks, he would sometimes instantly turn his sword to make attacks himself. Godwin couldn’t let his mind wander even for a split second.

Time continued to tick forward with neither side landing a decisive blow.

“You seem to be reaching your limit,” Yamato said. He even seemed to have a grasp on how long Godwin could use his strengthening technique. “However, that should be enough.”

Enough? Enough for what? Godwin didn’t understand what Yamato was saying. Fatigued, he momentarily put some distance between the two of them. He was nearing the limits of both his stamina and his mana, and he breathed heavily, his shoulders heaving.

With a sidelong glance at Godwin, Yamato leisurely got back into a fighting stance.

“This is it, isn’t it?” Yamato said. Then, his body was cloaked in a bluish-white light. It wasn’t as striking as Godwin’s, but there was no doubt that it was the same skill the count had just used.

“Impossible!” Godwin shouted. That skill was a closely guarded secret of the Godwin family. It wasn’t something that could be so easily acquired.

“I have to say, this skill is certainly difficult to use,” Yamato remarked. “It requires diffusing mana evenly over one’s flesh, which is quite physically demanding. This is as much as I can do through mere imitation.”

It had taken Godwin three years to master the physical strength-boosting skill. Knowledge of magic was necessary, to say nothing of training one’s body, so it required time, no matter what. It should have been impossible to learn in just a couple minutes.

“Just who are you?” Godwin demanded after regaining his composure. “With such talent, what are you doing in an insignificant country like Farune?”

“I used to run a humble sword school out in the country, but now, I occupy the post of official sword instructor.”

“An instructor? That’s all? Come to Eyland. I’ll give you money, status, whatever you desire. If you so wish, I’ll even give you a noble title.”

Godwin of the Three Counts had a certain degree of authority. If he negotiated with the king, it wouldn’t have been impossible for him to install Yamato in a position worthy of his talent.

“…A noble title? Hah,” scoffed Yamato. The other members of the Hundred standing behind him also laughed. “Alas, I have interest in neither money nor status.” Yamato adopted a low stance. He was building up power, aiming to finish the fight with his next attack. “Strength is everything. That is the one and only law of the Hundred. All else is worthless in the presence of strength. And, in exchange for our strength, we offer up everything to His Majesty.”

In response to Yamato’s words, the members of the Hundred shouted, “Our hundred lives are for His Majesty!”

Godwin and his retainers felt something uncanny in the perfectly synchronized voices of the otherwise ragtag bunch, with their mismatched weapons and clothing.

“You baffle me. We’re not animals. Strength can’t be all there is,” Godwin said. Wringing out the last of his energy, he strengthened his entire body’s mana one more time.

The gazes of the two men squaring off against each other met, and then, in the next moment, their bodies crossed. There was a beat before Godwin slowly collapsed, staining the ground red.

“We’re the same. For animals, humans, and monsters, strength is everything,” Yamato said, and as he did, he noticed a wound on his shoulder. “Oh? I suppose I should say: I would expect *nothing more* from one of the Three Counts.”

Although Godwin’s retinue tried to avenge the death of their lord, they were quickly slain by the surrounding members of the Hundred.

XVI: The Conquest of Dorssen

THE thousand Eylish knights Count Godwin had called in as reinforcements had made it to Berze's immediate vicinity. After sending ahead a detachment of scouts, the Eylish general in command learned that the Farunian army had already breached the city walls.

They made it in too quickly! What was the Dorssenian army doing? The general vehemently cursed the Dorssenians' incompetence.

Normally, the defenders had an overwhelming advantage in the case of a siege, and it should have been possible to hold a fortress city the size of Berze for several months. There was no conceivable reason the Farunians should have been instantly allowed in, other than negligence on the part of the Dorssenians.

"There's no way around it. We'll charge into Berze and group up with Count Godwin!" the general ordered his subordinates. The Farunian army's soldiers may have been powerful, but there were only around two hundred of them. If the Eylish knights could coordinate well with the troops inside the walls, they should be able to make full use of their numbers to execute a pincer attack.

The general's strategy was a reasonable one—if only there hadn't been anyone barring his way. But only a small distance from the city, five men stood blocking the highway.

What's with them? the general wondered. After a brief moment of hesitation, he made his decision.

"If they're allies, avoid them! If they're enemies, rout them! Keep pushing ahead!"

Count Godwin's welfare was the general's top priority. Time was of the essence, and he didn't have any to spare to concern himself with five people who could've been either friend or foe. They didn't even need to stop their horses—all they had to do was trample over or speed around the five men.

The thousand knights dashed onward, not slowing for a second. Then, just when they were about to collide with the five men, one of the men stepped forward and raised his sword. He twisted his body, building up power in his waist, and readied his weapon behind him.

Does he think infantry armed with a sword can do anything against knights on horseback?

Swords simply didn't have a particularly long reach, which put infantry at a devastating disadvantage to cavalry. The man was being extremely reckless.

But then, the man's sword became suffused with mana.

"Does he have a sword technique? Everyone, evade!"

The general gave the order at the exact same moment that the man swung his sword. The gale the sword unleashed buffeted the Eylish army. The knights that had been riding up front were blown away, together with their horses, and the horses in the rear spooked, throwing knights out of their saddles one after the other. The Eylish army, in a state of disarray, completely lost their momentum and came to a stop.

"This is a dead end," announced the man who had swung the sword. "If you insist on trying to get through, you'll have to fight us." The man had short, clipped blond hair and sharp, masculine features.

"You're part of the Hundred, aren't you? Tell me, what's your name?" the Eylish general asked. He was the first to get back to his feet, and he had judged that, given how ridiculously powerful that sword technique had been, its wielder was probably a high-ranking member of the Hundred.

"I'm the first in the Hundred, Ogma." Ogma pointed to the four men behind him. "These guys are also in the Hundred: Aaron, Barry, Bill, and Bruno."

"The First Five."

Expecting to face the Hundred, the Eylish general had thoroughly investigated the group beforehand. Among them, the very first members—Ogma, Aaron, Barry, Bill, and Bruno—were specified as the "First Five," the founders of the group. Ogma was exceptional among them, in that he was always ranked first, but the other four were also powerful, and constantly contended for the top ranks.

"Don't think of them as humans—they're monsters!" the general warned. "Use your numbers! Corner them by circling around and surrounding them!"

In accordance with their general's orders, the Eylish knights immediately formed an encirclement, using their experience as a monster subjugation unit to intuit what the general meant.

“Good plan. We don’t want this to be too boring, do we?” Ogma gave a toothy grin.

“Do you think you can take on a thousand soldiers just the five of you? I hear you defeated fifty Dorssenian knights alone in the last war, but you’ll have to defeat more than that if you want to win this time!” the general shouted, trying to intimidate his enemies.



“Remind me, how many years ago was that? We train by continually fighting to the very brink of death. I wish you wouldn’t confuse the me of today with the me of the past.” With his greatsword in one hand, Ogma pounded his chest, then calmly took a fighting stance. “Well, you’ll get it once we fight. Ready yourself!”

Ogma charged his greatsword with mana, then swung it. This wasn’t Sonic Blade, which created a blade of wind; this was Ogma’s original sword technique, called Storm Burst, and it disrupted the very atmosphere, producing a tempest that tore everything it touched to pieces. It was so powerful that its use in the arena was restricted.

Dozens of Eylish knights were sent flying in the face of the torrent of energy Storm Burst produced—and they wished that was all. The knights that took the technique head on were also torn limb from limb.

After losing dozens of his subordinates to a single attack, the Eylish general was trembling. *Why, it’s almost like we’re fighting a dragon!*

“Circle around behind them! Aim for their backs!” he quickly ordered, but the four warriors behind Ogma blocked the knights’ path forward, making it impossible for the Eylish to outflank them.

Ogma’s four companions weren’t as flashy as he was, but each of them still took on five opponents at once. Their speed was exceptional, their strength was outrageous, and they were exterminating the Eylish knights like insects. The general hadn’t brought common grunts with him, either. These were knights, elites who had undergone strict training.

Who are these people? Are they even human?! The Eylish general shuddered at seeing his army cut down in an instant.

“Magic Knights, to the front!” he shouted, calling for his ace in the hole, the hundred Magic Knights he kept in the rear.

The Magic Knights were a special force in Eyland’s army. It had been formed by training as knights those without *quite* the talent to be wizards, and by teaching magic to those who were lacking as knights but excelled in their studies. The king of Eyland, who hated wastefulness, had come up with the idea.

As one might have expected, the Magic Knights couldn’t use powerful spells, but they were adept at both close-quarters

swordsmanship and long-distance battles using magic. If they had one disadvantage, it was that not everyone had the talent to become a Magic Knight, so they didn't have much in the way of numbers, but even so, they were a unit that had become widely feared in other countries. The Eylish general had brought a hundred of them because, naturally, he had expected a fight with Farune.

"Circle them from afar and attack with spells! Everyone else, provide cover for the Magic Knights!"

From their horses and with their spells ready to go, the Magic Knights sent over a wild rain of fireballs, lightning bolts, and blades of wind. The individual spells weren't particularly powerful on their own, but coming from a hundred knights at once, they created a fierce bombardment. The knights rode in a large circle around their targets, firing off their attacks without pause. The five members of the Hundred defended using their arms to cover their faces, and they didn't move from where they stood.

"Magic Knights, keep firing for as long as possible! Other knights, prepare to attack! You'll charge in once their magic runs out!"

Having recovered from their momentary confusion, the Eylish knights readied their swords and spears, encircling the five Farunians from a distance again. There were no longer any traces of fear in their faces; they were ready to fight to the death if necessary to take advantage of the opportunity to bring down their foes.

They held their breaths and stood by. As the magical barrage gradually abated, the tension mounted like a string pulled to its breaking point. The knights gripped the handles of their weapons more tightly.

However, just when the Magic Knights were about to fire off their final volley, the five members of the Hundred broke into a dash all at once. The Magic Knights hadn't completely used up all their magic yet, but the five didn't care. And it wasn't like the knights' spells weren't hitting—the five sustained direct hits to their faces and bodies, but they charged forward anyway, only squinting somewhat, as if they were being showered by a light rain.

The Magic Knights hurriedly drew their swords, but their foes were on a completely different level from what they were accustomed to.

“I won’t let you get away,” said Aaron as he made a long, leaping slash. He was small in stature, but had a reputation for speed.

The Magic Knight he targeted screamed as he was cut down without any means to resist. Then, Aaron used the knight’s horse as a stepping stone to go after the next knight. Leaping from horse to horse, he felled knights one after another, like something monstrous out of a fairytale.

Bruno used his greatsword to cleave through the knights, together with their horses. He looked somewhat somber out of pity for the horses, but still displayed no hesitation as man and horse were indiscriminately split in half. Even ogres probably didn’t have that much brute strength.

Barry targeted the Magic Knights with Sonic Blade. Some tried to deploy magic barriers to defend against him, but they were still shredded, along with their barriers. Low-level barriers were about as effective against him as paper.

Bill simply walked up to his foes and slashed through them—or at least, it looked that way. He was so abnormally skilled that it was impossible to avoid or block his attacks. Any knight who tried raising their sword to counterattack was cut down before they could make a move, and if they readied their swords to block, Bill passed right by them anyway, slashing right through their bodies. He did this with nothing but his superhuman ability with a sword, but to the Magic Knights, who had never even been trained as full-fledged knights, it seemed like magic.

Finally, Ogma ignored the Magic Knights entirely, charging straight into the middle of the encircling cavalry getting ready to charge. With a ferocious look on his face, he defeated every knight he came across, greedily searching for ever stronger foes. It was as if he was trying to make them realize one thing: *this* was a berserker, the legendary warrior who sought endless combat.

The morale of the Eylish knights had been completely crushed. Their general considered directing the regular knights to relieve the Magic Knights, but Ogma was making that impossible.

“Surround and kill them!” the general ordered. This was an entirely reasonable order, but it came out lukewarm. The Eylish knights had lost whatever will to fight they had briefly regained, and their chances of winning had disappeared. Actually, they had never had a chance. The general would have done well to withdraw as soon as he lay eyes on the First Five. Half-baked soldiers like the Magic Knights could never have competed with them. And now, the magnitude of his mistake was becoming apparent.

Ogma appeared before the general. His eyes were lit with the joy of exerting his strength to its fullest.

He’s crazy. The general finally realized how inhuman the Hundred were. But he was too late.

Unaware that the foe he was about to defeat was the enemy leader, Ogma casually swung his greatsword.



ALAN had totally lost his composure. Just as he was getting exceptionally stressed over the news of the attacking Farunian army, Count Godwin had disappeared without him noticing.

Did he run away?! To abandon me?!

His guess was correct. Count Godwin had never been a subordinate of his, either, so even if Alan had tried to summon him back, he probably wouldn’t have responded.

And in any case, the Farunian army had made it into the castle.

Should I run too? No, should I meet them in battle, like the king I am?

After thinking it over, Alan had a group of knights and mages gather in the throne room. The nobles who had sided with him also took refuge there.

For now, I’ll confront the Farunians directly. If things get dangerous, I’ll just run away.

The throne room had an escape passageway in case of emergencies. If Alan’s subjects could buy him some time, it shouldn’t have been that difficult for him to escape.

“If those doors open, fire your spells,” Alan ordered, disregarding the possibility that some of his allies may still have

been hoping to take refuge in the throne room.

After a brief quiet, the doors—still visibly damaged from the coup—slowly began to open. The mages who had been preparing all fired off spells at the same time, and the doors flew off their hinges with a loud explosion.

“Using magic to open doors is the pinnacle of showmanship for this country.” Standing just beyond the now-open doorway was Carmilla, fan in hand. She had likely protected herself from the spells using just her fan, because she didn’t look at all hurt.

Carmilla briskly strolled into the throne room. Minerva, Rhea, and several other Palace Knights followed behind her.

“Hee hee, I’m surprised to see how many allies you have, brother. Look at all these nobles,” Carmilla said happily, the corners of her mouth curving upward. It was a terrifying expression that put the fear of death in the hearts of everyone in the room. “I imagine Gamarath will be quite pleased. He’s always wanting to reduce the number of nobles, that cheapskate.”

“The nobility are useless, after all,” said Minerva. She glanced at the nobles in the room, and a fierce smile appeared on her face.

“Have you come to usurp the throne, Carmilla?!” Alan demanded, still sitting on the throne in question. With how pompous he was making his voice, he sounded like he was putting everything he had into trying to seem dignified.

“Oh my, has my brother come down with amnesia?” Carmilla asked theatrically. “Were you not the one who usurped the throne?”

“No! That was by the common consensus of Dorssen! None will recognize as king a man who bowed down to Farune! This was a legitimate succession!”

“You’re so funny sometimes, brother, talking about things like ‘consensus,’” Carmilla said, seeming like she was deeply enjoying herself. “Consensus, temperament, justice—you don’t need any of those things, you know? If you want something, then use your strength and take it. Simple, right? The only reason you became king was because you had the power to bring down the last king. And the only reason I didn’t become queen was because I lacked power. But what about now? I’ve become stronger myself, you know.”

“You may kill me, but our brother is still alive. Even if you win, he’ll just return to the throne! Then won’t this all be meaningless?!” Alan shouted. He was revealing more than he had intended in an effort to reduce Carmilla’s will to fight.

“Oh? Were you unaware?” Carmilla responded. “Our brother… the former king has already passed—entrusting his affairs to my husband.” Carmilla showed off the ring on her left hand. The magic stone’s blue light illuminated the room.

“How’d you get that? And, your husband? The king of Farune? Our brother would never hand over the ring to a provincial Farunian! The king of Farune has to have been the one who killed the former king, and he obviously stole the ring!” Alan ranted, trying to pretend his own rebellion hadn’t happened, and to push all the blame onto Mars instead.

“Do you really think any of that matters?” Carmilla said, calmly closing her fan. “Whether the ring was freely given or stolen makes no difference. The outcome is the same. The winner must simply choose whatever is more advantageous for them.” Despite what she said, Carmilla didn’t think Mars had stolen the ring. She knew her husband wasn’t the kind of person to do that.

“That’s absurd! A country can’t survive without justice!”

“Justice? Unnecessary. The world is built on one fundamental principle: justice is on the side of the strong—and what a cruel principle that can be.” Carmilla’s smile twisted with irony, but Alan didn’t notice. “Now, are you prepared? Have you gotten your affairs in order? Are you finished with your last meal? Food is *especially* important. Every single day since marrying the king of Farune, I’ve keenly realized the importance of food. How wonderful it is to be able to eat a good meal! Thinking back on it now is enough to make me believe that perhaps, the most glorious time in my life was when I could eat whatever I wanted, as much as I wanted.”

Carmilla had begun talking about food out of nowhere, but for some reason the Palace Knights were vehemently nodding along in agreement.

“…What are you talking about?” Alan asked, momentarily distracted. “What in the world are they making you eat in Farune?”

“Just monster meat, of course. Nothing more or less than vile poison.”

“But you don’t really have to eat that, do—”

Carmilla laughed scornfully. “Hah! We have no choice in the matter. In Farune, it’s what we have to do. Weaklings who don’t eat monster meat remain weaklings forever. My pride can’t allow that. And these Palace Knights are the same. For those of us who seek power, Farune is both an ideal country, and a living hell.” The smile disappeared from her face. “Now, that’s enough chit-chat. May I begin? Since you seem like you’ll scamper out of here as soon as possible if I allow it, why don’t I kill you first? After all, I’m sure you were thinking of letting your subordinates fight, and escaping through the passageway as soon as things got dangerous, weren’t you? You’ve always been like that. You know, that’s why father always saw you as lacking the temperament to be king.”

“Wh-What are you saying? What the hell do you know about me?! You, who have always been so full of yourself, just because you were born with a bit of talent, what do you know about me?!”

“Nothing, really. And I don’t particularly wish to know, either.”

Carmilla focused mana into the end of her closed fan, then gave it a light wave. Although she was standing quite far away from the throne, the blade of wind that discharged from her fan passed between the knights guarding Alan and split both his body and the throne into two symmetrical vertical halves.

“Your Majesty!”

The Dorssenian nobles and knights screamed in despair. Then, when they saw that the man who had just moments before been their lord had been cleanly bisected, their faces turned pale as ghosts.

“Princess! I swear my undying loyalty! I offer up everything to you! Please, I beg of you, just spare my life!” one of the nobles said, stepping up to Carmilla before falling to his knees.

“Loyalty? Didn’t you say the exact same thing at the former king’s coronation? I heard you then. And yet you swore support for my brother’s rebellion with those same lips. Is there any value to that sort of loyalty?”

“Well, you see, we were told that it was for Dorssen—”

“I don’t need your loyalty.” Carmilla snapped her fingers, lopping off the noble’s head with a blade of wind. “Take care of the rest for me,” she said to her Palace Knights. Then, she exited the throne room.

All that remained to be heard in the moments that followed were the screams of the Dorssenian nobles.

XVII: A Meeting

NORTHEAST of Eyland lay the smallest country on the continent of Ares: the Theocracy of Mauve. It was the location of the head cathedral of the Church of Mauve, the largest religion on the continent, and it was considered a holy site. While the country was small, its god, Mauve, boasted the overwhelming majority of believers across the continent. Even the healing spells priests used had as the source of their power the divine blessing of Mauve.

Every church on the continent was under the Theocracy of Mauve's jurisdiction, and a constant stream of devout believers entered the country on pilgrimages. Plus, the country possessed an order of Holy Knights, made up of knights who could cast restoration spells, so it had a formidable military as well. With such a large influence, the country's ruler, the pope of the Church of Mauve, was rumored to have even more power than the kings of the various kingdoms. From a religious perspective, it wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say he had nearly the entire continent in his grasp.



TWO visitors arrived for an audience with the pope. They were the king of Eyland and the king of Vulcan.

"Your Holiness, this is a global crisis," said the king of Eyland. He had blond hair, imposing facial features, and a powerful look in his blue eyes. Eyland bordered the Theocracy, and they had traditionally had a close relationship. Many in Eyland, from the nobility down to the common people, were devout believers. Because of that, it was said that the wishes of the pope were strongly reflected in the Eylish royal succession. The king of Eyland was young, in his forties, and he was known to be an ambitious man. He intervened in foreign countries' affairs whenever given the opportunity, and he spared no effort in strengthening his own country's interests. His invasion of Dorssen had sprung from that ambition.

“A global crisis?” echoed the pope. In contrast with the king of Eyland, the pope was in his sixties, but his white hair and long white beard made him look even older than he really was. The pope often appeared before believers, which demanded both authority and a paternal demeanor—or at least the appearance thereof.

“I’ve heard the rumors about Farune,” the pope continued. “It’s a strange place, they say. They aren’t very devout believers in Mauve, either. That’s undesirable, from our perspective, but it hardly justifies seeing them as such a threat… Are you sure you aren’t just making excuses for your recent loss?” With his almost sleepy-looking eyes, the pope firmly locked his gaze on the king of Eyland.

“Certainly, we did lose,” the king replied. “One of our Three Counts was even defeated, and I would be lying if I said I didn’t hold a personal grudge against Farune. However, the power that country possesses is unnatural. In the end, Dorssen has come under Farune’s sphere of influence. Just a few years ago, Farune was nothing but a small frontier nation, but it has now annexed Cadonia and brought Dorssen, which was overwhelmingly more powerful than it, to heel. This is highly irregular!” The king of Eyland raised his fist insistently.

“Indeed, Your Holiness. That country is not normal,” said the king of Vulcan. “One of the citizens of my country has married the king of Farune, and she reports being forced to eat monster meat for every meal—monster meat, which can only be described as poison. This hints at the possibility of something untoward… perhaps some sort of fiendish cult influencing the country.”

The king of Vulcan was a man of around fifty with a solid physique. In his younger days, he had been known as a valiant general. Farune’s fourth consort, Sheila, was from Vulcan, and had written letters to her family to inform them of her circumstances. The king had received reports of the contents of those letters.

“Is it really true that they eat monster meat?” the pope asked. “You know that’s impossible. There have been some in the past who have needed the care of the church after trying monster meat out of curiosity, and lately, there’s been a string of people eating it after hearing the rumors about Farune. However, I’ve never heard of anyone *successfully* eating it. It’s pure poison. And I haven’t

received any reports from churches in Farune of people needing healing because of it, either."

The Church of Mauve had also been gathering information regarding monster meat, and had heard nothing of Farunians falling ill after consuming it.

"Besides, eating monster meat is not forbidden. The church doesn't intend to take action because of something like that," the pope added. He wasn't particularly interested in the idea of enacting some sort of sanction against Farune. The Theocracy was fundamentally neutral as a matter of state policy. It didn't want to take part in international disputes because any foolish overreach could threaten its own position. This policy had served the country well, and it was a tradition that went back many years.

"They aren't only eating monster meat," the king of Eyland said, lowering his voice somewhat melodramatically. "In Farune, they're allegedly controlling monsters, too. And quite a large number of them."

"That must be in their large-scale exhibits. I've received reports about those as well." The fact that Farune was putting on state-run monster exhibits was widely known, and had reached the pope's ears.

"I do not refer to the exhibits. They are organizing monsters and forming an army out of them."

"What? That's absurd, I've never heard of such a thing." The pope's expression hardened. As the leader of the Church of Mauve, he couldn't afford to let that stand, if it was true. "Have you in Eyland fought against that monster army?"

"No, we haven't. However, I do have reliable evidence."

"Really? What kind of evidence?"

"Please, take a look at this." The king of Eyland produced a scroll from his sleeve and unfurled it on the desk. There was a magic circle written on the scroll.

"What's this?" the pope asked.

"It's from Master Matou, of the Magedom of Kiel."

"Matou?" The pope sounded perplexed.

The magic circle on the scroll shone with light, and above it appeared a small, pale blue, transparent person. This was a magic transmission, the kind that made use of an illusory image.

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Holiness. I am Matou, of the Magedom of Kiel,” the image said. The man in the image who had introduced himself as Matou had a hood pulled over his head, and was using a cane to support his body.

“Can you hear our voices, Master Matou?” the pope asked the image.

“Of course. Excuse me for appearing in this manner. As you know, I don’t get out of the house much these days. Now, let’s begin right away. The fact that this scroll has been opened must mean that the king of Eyland has told you that Farune is controlling monsters. What he says is true.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Someone from my country who was researching monsters drifted into Farune. I didn’t know this until recently, but when news arrived of the large-scale monster exhibits, some of my state mages visited Farune for research. It was then that they confirmed it was the work of that person.”

“Hm? I know about the exhibits. I don’t think there’s any issue with them.”

“This person was not researching monsters to make exhibits. Their goal was to control monsters to use as weapons. They repeatedly engaged in dangerous research in my country, and caused considerable damage. As such, they were banished.”

The pope looked totally bewildered. “You didn’t dispose of such a dangerous person? Don’t you think that was a bit irresponsible of you?”

“The Magedom of Kiel is a country in some ways, but not in others. It is more simply a place that exists to provide an ideal environment for mages. However, we do make those who engage in research that could be harmful to society leave. That’s all there is to it. And you know, magic research is expensive. It depends on the contents of the research, but the research that person was working on required live monsters. Naturally, capturing monsters alive is difficult, and breeding them costs exorbitant amounts of money. It’s not something anyone could do on their own.”

The small illusory image made it hard to read Matou’s expression, but he seemed ashamed, somehow.

“But, you say that this person has received support from Farune?” the pope asked.

“…That’s right. To be more precise, they have gained the patronage of the queen consort of Farune, Frau. Frau has rolled out the welcome mat, not only to the one I speak of, but to many mages that have been banished from my country. Frau has a notable tendency to spare no regard for morals in her study of magic. She’s a dangerous mage.”

“The Lightning Empress Frau, was it? She was known as a prodigy when she was young.”

“She certainly was. But in my estimation, she was an entirely typical precocious mage, and her mana was due to plateau soon. Despite that, it’s possible that her mana is somehow still growing, even now. The magic barrier around Farune is quite powerful, and even I can’t break through it. As such, we have no clear grasp on the situation inside the country. However, according to reports of those who’ve witnessed the monster exhibits firsthand, the monsters are quite docile and obedient. These aren’t only low-level monsters, either. There are powerful monsters there as well, like Earth Dragons. With this in mind, it would be a mistake to assume that Farune has not already succeeded in creating a monster army.”

“Hmmm,” the pope hummed. He seemed to be at a loss as to what to do. There was no hard evidence, but what Master Matou said was probably the truth. That meant that Farune could become a threat to all mankind.

“Your Holiness, you seem to be uncertain, but let me say this: Farune is a danger in every sense of the word,” the king of Vulcan interrupted. “That country rejects the nobility. When King Zero took the throne in Farune, nearly all of its nobles were purged. In Cadonia, too, most nobles have been deposed, besides the ones connected to Queen Rubis. The same is true of Dorssen after becoming a vassal of Farune. Every noble who sided with King Alan was massacred, and the power of the nobility has been weakened in the extreme. And, for each noble gone, they’ve reduced taxes by that much, gaining the support of the common people. Now, there are even some commoners in *my* country who hope to one day be under Farunian rule. Damn them! At this rate, the order our fathers built will come crashing down around us. Won’t that be a problem for the Theocracy of Mauve as well?”

Officially, the Church of Mauve was a religion that did not discriminate based on status, but in practice, nearly all of the clergy were of noble birth. In fact, it was often the case that the higher someone's rank in the clerical hierarchy, the higher their social position had been before becoming a priest. The pope himself was related by blood to the Eylish royal family. The church administration was kept afloat largely by donations from royalty and the nobility; income from the common people was just a small drop in the bucket.

"...Certainly, the existence of the Kingdom of Farune isn't favorable to the Church of Mauve, as you tell it. But what of it? At the moment, the church can't afford to sanction the king of Farune."

"I have a suggestion," the king of Eyland said, a smile creeping onto his face. "I'd like for the Church of Mauve to announce three prohibitions. The first one will be on the consumption of monster meat. Only monsters eat other monsters, so to eat monster meat is inhuman. The second will be a ban on the large-scale use of monsters. This would protect tamers, who make use of monsters on a small scale, while forbidding the forming of armies made up of monsters. The third will be the preservation of the status of nobility. This would forbid the illegitimate abolition of the nobility, and demand order and stability. What do you think?"

"Hm, not bad." The pope stroked his beard. The proposition was easy to accept, from the church's perspective. "So, what will happen when those rules are broken?"

"I'd like the punishment to be excommunication. Naturally, anyone who's only broken a single one of the prohibitions might get off with a warning, but those who break all three should be excommunicated. After all, it's the same as degrading the authority of the church itself." The king of Eyland paused for dramatic effect. "Then, you'll announce that the king of Farune has fallen under suspicion of being the Demon King."

"The Demon King?! That's going too far, surely... The Farunian royal family is descended from the hero who *defeated* the Demon King."

"And that descendant has bared his fangs at the entire world! If we don't do something fast, we may be heading straight off a

cliff!”

“...What do you think?” the pope asked, looking at the king of Vulcan and the image of Matou.

“I agree with the king of Eyland,” the king of Vulcan replied right away.

“I’m in agreement as well,” Matou said. “Using monsters as weapons is too dangerous. They’re too powerful for humans to handle.”

“Very well. Then, what do you intend to do after casting doubt upon the king of Farune?”

“We ought to form an alliance between every other country, and raise a punitive expedition against him, of course,” the king of Eyland declared.

Epilogue

FINALLY, I was able to enter the city of Berze through the main gate. However, just like the day I had come to eat non-monster meat, the city was desolate. Carmilla and every one of her Palace Knights came out to greet me.

"Welcome to my country, Your Majesty," Carmilla said with a beaming smile. She was probably pretty happy now that she was effectively the ruler of Dorssen.

The armies of both Vulcan and Eyland were already beginning to withdraw from Dorssen. Sigmund, who had been valiantly fighting alone against the Vulcanian army, had sworn allegiance to Carmilla. Apparently, after Alan's rebellion, the late king of Dorssen had told Sigmund to obey Carmilla, just in case the worst occurred.

That king predicted all this as soon as the rebellion started? I had mixed feelings about it all, somehow.

Carmilla had welcomed Sigmund back, and it seemed like she was going to keep him on as head of the Champions. The remaining positions were going to be filled by four who had made it past the quarterfinals of the Consort Selection Tournament: Minerva, Shirley, Rhea, and Sasha. *Well, I think they're about as strong by now as the two Champions I defeated, so it works out, doesn't it?*

Maybe it was only natural, but the reception we received from the citizens was anything but warm. The doors to every building were shut tight. Although none of the city's residents had perished in the fighting, the Dorssenian nobility and knights who had participated in the rebellion had been eradicated, and I'd heard that the Eylish troops stationed in the city had all been wiped out. I imagined that the Dorssenians found it hard to welcome the wild, brutal bunch that had done all that. I also got the feeling that they'd overdone things by a smidge, but I'd done something similar in Farune myself, so I couldn't very well go around pointing fingers.

Though technically it hadn't been me who'd done it; it had been the Hundred.

Anyway, I expected that whether Dorssen would accept Farune's rule was going to come down to the work of Gamarath, who had accompanied me to the city, along with the bureaucrats he led. In the end, the people would form their judgments based on the way the country was governed. There would be no tyrannical rule by force.

Speaking of which, in Farune, because the intelligentsia—in other words, the nobility—had almost completely disappeared, I had been appointing anyone to positions in the government no matter their status, so long as they seemed capable. As a result, there were now many young, talented officials in Farune who were extremely motivated and incredibly enthusiastic. The same style of appointment without regard for status would probably be put into effect in Dorssen so the people of the country could work for the betterment of their home. That was what was really important. And naturally, branches of the Hundred would start popping up too…

Besides Gamarath, the Black Knights, led by Chrom, and the Red Knights, led by Warren, had also come with me to Dorssen. There had been some among the Hundred who had expressed a desire to enter the knightly orders, so the orders had grown larger than they had been in the past. Before, they'd each had five hundred members, and now their ranks had grown to a thousand each. Putting them together made a force two thousand strong. It was small, as far as national armies went, but I had no complaints as to its quality.

The civil war had greatly weakened the Dorssenian army, and the hundred or so members of Carmilla's Palace Knights weren't nearly enough to cover their former duties. Fortunately, the only country Farune and Cadonia had shared a border with was Dorssen, which meant there were no issues transferring a certain amount of manpower from one place to the other, which was why I had brought the Knights with me. I expected there to be internal revolts and skirmishes with foreign countries in Dorssen, too, so the knightly orders would probably have many opportunities to distinguish themselves… Or rather, they had already begun running riot without my permission anyway.

Chrom and Warren hadn’t been able to fight in the civil war in Dorssen, so they had been feeling pent up—and as soon as Warren had entered Dorssenian territory, he’d made an announcement.

“Your Majesty. I’ll continue to the border with Eyland, and drive out the enemy armies. If they aren’t at the border, I’ll cross the border and exterminate them where they stand.”

But if you cross the border to fight them, isn’t that just an invasion?

Warren’s features were brimming with hostility, and I was too scared to try and stop him, so he went on his way to Eyland with the Red Knights in tow.

When Chrom saw this, he said, “Your Majesty. I suppose I’ll go to the border with Vulcan, then. I’ll make those Vulcanians rue the day they ever messed with Farune. And if they aren’t there, then I shall cross the border and teach them their lesson that way.”

Oh, you ‘suppose,’ do you? Please, I’m begging you, don’t start a war in the heat of the moment!

But just as I’d been unable to stop Warren, I also couldn’t tell Chrom no, so he went off to the border with Vulcan and the Black Knights. Apparently, in the end, both the Eylish and Vulcanian armies had crossed the border into Dorssen anyway, and Warren and Chrom gave each army a severe beating for doing so. I breathed a sigh of relief, glad we hadn’t invaded. From the bottom of my heart, I was grateful to the Eylish and Vulcanian armies for straying over the border.

In any case, one of the reasons I came to Dorssen was as a display of my authority as king of Farune, but my main duty was to bring my son, Leon, with me. Carmilla may have lacked common sense in some ways, but even she wouldn’t bring her young son straight into a battlefield. Leon was going to be the next king of Dorssen, though, so he had to be brought to the country for his coronation. Basically, I was providing childcare, because Carmilla had ordered me to do so.

“Please, would you mind doing something around here for once and bring Leon to Dorssen, Your Majesty?” she had said harshly. “And make sure you don’t take your eyes off him, not even for a second.”

I didn’t dislike children. I’d had an unpleasant childhood, and I didn’t want to make my own children go through the same things I had, so I took care to look after them. However, my eldest son, Arthur, constantly clung to his mother, Frau. She also doted on him. “He’s precious,” she’d say to me, “and he looks just like you.”

It certainly didn’t feel bad to hear that, but it also felt like my son had stolen Frau away from me.

Frau always used magic to humor Arthur by making him float gently in the air. I could only carry him in my arms, which was apparently not entertaining enough for him, so he would always rather have been with Frau. That made me feel a bit sad, too. Wizards really have unfair advantages.



As for Leon, he was quite attached to me. During the trip to Dorssen, he constantly clung to me, never letting go for a second, and we slept and ate all our meals together. I carried him in one arm even as I walked toward the castle to hand him over to his mother. He was adorable. But, he would be spending his time in Dorssen going forward. He was going to be king, so there wasn't any other option, but it still made me feel lonely. I had to go back to Farune myself, after all.

Back in Farune, I had three princess consorts: Frau, Cassandra, and Sheila. Putting Frau and Sheila aside, I was worried that if I left Cassandra alone for too long, she'd destroy the kingdom. That was because before I'd left, she had made sure to say to me, "When I deliver this baby, stay by my side. No matter how powerful I am, I don't know what'll happen if I'm attacked at that moment. You have to protect me."

After that warning, I wasn't sure what she'd do to me if I wasn't there for her. Personally, I thought that attacking a dragon would have been a better choice than attacking her, but even the swordmaster had her worries about giving birth, apparently.

Carmilla took Leon from my arms. It was the first time in a while he'd seen his mother, and perhaps he didn't recognize her, because he turned to me, scrunched up his face, and burst into tears. Carmilla took no offense, simply smiling softly and rocking the child in her arms. I had been worried about how she'd act toward her son, given that she'd been raised in a royal family, but she was taking surprisingly good care of him. Of course, if she hadn't, I never would have been able to leave Leon in Dorssen with her.

She took the ring of Dorssen off her finger and handed it to Leon. The ring's magic stone flickered with light. Leon cackled, delighted at the sight.

Did it respond to his mana, even though he's still only a baby? I wondered. The retainers I'd brought with me and the Palace Knights both seemed surprised as well.

Carmilla looked satisfied as she watched Leon play with the shining ring. The light coming from the stone was soft and gentle. That had to mean he would be a good king.

I'll protect this country so that can happen, I swore to myself. *No matter who I have to fight.*

But now, I guess there's no chance I'll ever be able to eat a decent meal in Dorssen, either.

Afterword

THANKS to everyone's support, the first volume sold well, and it looks like I'll be able to put out a third volume. Perhaps Volume 4 might be in the cards as well. However, starting with Volume 3, there's nearly no material left to adapt from the web novel, so I'll be entering uncharted territory as an author.

This was quite challenging, and to tell you the truth, I find it more difficult to come up with comedic stories than serious ones. The novel I released with Sneaker Bunko, *Who Killed the Hero?*, sold quite well, but I put more effort into *How I Became King by Eating Monsters*. Spending more time by no means guarantees a better end result, but I've been incredibly happy to hear reactions like, "*How I Became King by Eating Monsters* was entertaining," and it makes me want it to sell even more.

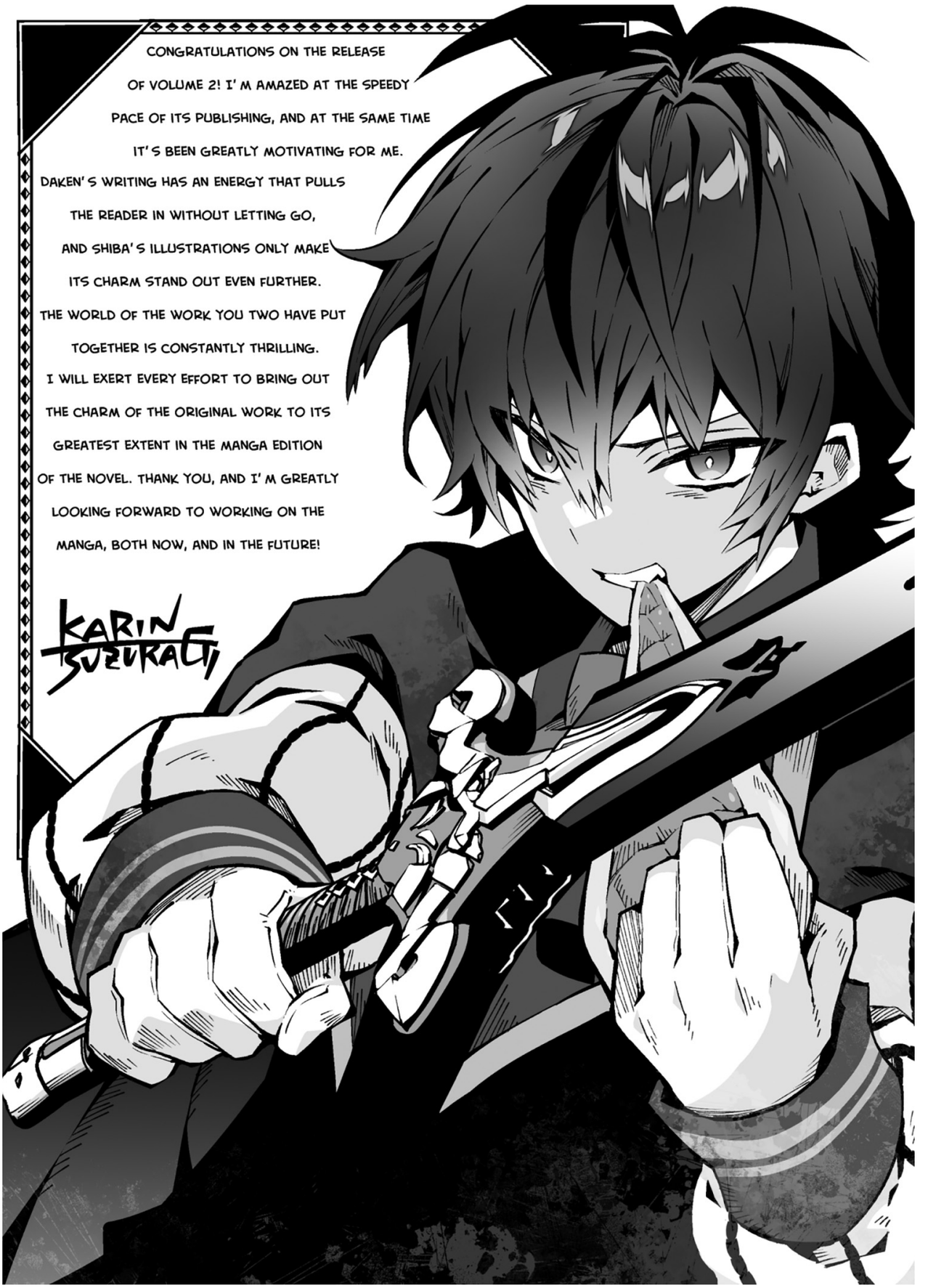
Now, Shiba graciously drew the fantastic illustrations for this volume as well, and the character design illustrations that didn't make it into the book also came out beautifully. In this volume, I'm especially partial to the illustrations of Carmilla, Yamato, and Sheila. The character designs can be accessed at the exclusive Japanese site for the book, so if you check there, it may increase your enjoyment of the book even more. If you're so inclined, please give them a look.

Now, starting January 9, 2024, the manga adaptation of *How I Became King by Eating Monsters*, by Karin Suzuragi, began serialization in the magazine *Young Animal Zero*. I've had the opportunity to meet with Suzuragi in person, and though she is an accomplished manga author, she's also an incredibly wonderful and humble person. I'm overjoyed that she took an interest in this work and decided to draw it, and I'm glad we met.

As a matter of fact, when the light novel adaptation of *How I Became King by Eating Monsters* was first decided upon, I thought: If this gets canceled midway through, it'll be because I just wasn't skilled enough, and well, that's life. However, the more I worked with Shiba, Suzuragi, the editors for the manga and the novel, and

many others, and—more than anything—after seeing readers' impressions, I began to think, I have to work even harder.

After all, when you don't bring a story to completion, all sorts of things lose their destinations. I would be overjoyed to receive the support of all my readers, all the way until the very end.


CONGRATULATIONS ON THE RELEASE
OF VOLUME 2! I'M AMAZED AT THE SPEEDY
PACE OF ITS PUBLISHING, AND AT THE SAME TIME
IT'S BEEN GREATLY MOTIVATING FOR ME.
DAKEN'S WRITING HAS AN ENERGY THAT PULLS
THE READER IN WITHOUT LETTING GO,
AND SHIBA'S ILLUSTRATIONS ONLY MAKE
ITS CHARM STAND OUT EVEN FURTHER.
THE WORLD OF THE WORK YOU TWO HAVE PUT
TOGETHER IS CONSTANTLY THRILLING.
I WILL EXERT EVERY EFFORT TO BRING OUT
THE CHARM OF THE ORIGINAL WORK TO ITS
GREATEST EXTENT IN THE MANGA EDITION
OF THE NOVEL. THANK YOU, AND I'M GREATLY
LOOKING FORWARD TO WORKING ON THE
MANGA, BOTH NOW, AND IN THE FUTURE!
KARIN SUZUKAGI



Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!

By Makino Maebaru Illust Yoko Matsurika

When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now

By Suzume Kirisaki Illust Cosmic

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World

By Kosuzu Kobato Illust Yuichi Murakami

What Awaits Her In Another World Is Delicious Food And A Relaxing Life Surrounded By Spirits!

Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



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