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3
HOW I BECAME KING BY EATING MONSTERS

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How I Became King by Eating Monsters Volume 3

Daken

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How I Became King by Eating Monsters Volume 3

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FRAU
MARS
CARMILLA
NICOL
LUIDA
GAMARATH
"I AM AWARE, MARS. PLEASE, THERE'S NO NEED TO TEST US SO STRENUOUSLY."
NICOL HAD AN AWKWARD SMILE ON HIS FACE. TEST? WHAT AM I TESTING?
"EATING MONSTER MEAT IS THE FOUNDATIONAL PILLAR OF FARUNE'S POWER. WE CAN'T GIVE IT UP NOW."
CARMILLA TWISTED THE CORNERS OF HER MOUTH INTO A GRIMACE.
I JUST WANT TO LIVE A LIFE WHERE I CAN EAT FOOD THAT ACTUALLY TASTES GOOD...


THAT'S THE MAD KING FOR YOU, EVEN HIS TASTE IN WOMEN IS DERANGED!
DID KING MARS GATHER THE WORLD'S FOUR MOST DANGEROUS WOMEN TO BE HIS CONSORTS ON PURPOSE?
Lightning Empress
Twin Blades
Sword-master
Frenzied Princess


HIS MAJESTY...LORD MARS SAID THIS: "MARIA IS A TRUE SAINT."
MARIA

Prologue

THE red-haired swordswoman before me shouldered her greatsword, ready to fight. She had a large, muscular build for a woman, and there was a statuesque beauty to the proportions of her body.

"Come at me," she said. "Give me everything you've got."

I gripped my sword, my hands clammy with sweat. She was a dangerous opponent, so I was equipped with my usual set of armor, but I simply couldn't bring myself to use my full strength against her.

"Wait!" I called out desperately to the woman. "Why now, Cassandra?! Rethink this!" I didn't want to fight. She had long been my teacher, and was now my wife—there was no way I could cross swords with her.

"You won't make the first move? Then I will." Cassandra slowly leaned forward, then immediately kicked off the ground and closed the distance between us in a single leap, bringing her greatsword down on me. This was a Swordmaster; she moved with the speed and violence of a fierce gale.

I blocked her attack with my sword and a loud, metallic clank rang out. Her slash would have been enough to break an ordinary sword, but the keen blade of my finely crafted black longsword had never once been chipped. In this case, too, I somehow managed to defend against her attack.

But why, Cassandra?! I thought. *Why are you…* "Dueling me when you're about to give birth?!" I shouted in disbelief.

Yes, Cassandra was in her final month of pregnancy. In fact, she could easily have gone into labor at any moment. Not only that, but before she had started trying to duel me, she had specifically said, "The baby's coming any time now."

Which was all well and good. But then for some inscrutable reason, the next words out of her mouth had been, "So, fight me."

I had no clue what the point of this was. Why should I have to cross swords with a woman who was pregnant with my own child? Naturally, I tried to stop her: "What if you have a miscarriage?"

"A miscarriage?" she scoffed. "As if. It *is* my child, you know."

It was oddly convincing. She was right—it seemed extremely unlikely anything would be able to harm her child.

Cassandra was a real piece of work. She wore a ring that inflicted its wearer with various curses, including poison, petrification, paralysis, and confusion, at all times, as well as an armlet that multiplied the effect of gravity on her body by ten. At least she'd taken *those* off during her pregnancy. But either way, her child would probably be healthy enough to survive anything, even the end of the world.

None of that meant I should fight her though. *It's just common sense.*

"Okay, but why do we have to fight?" I persisted. "What's wrong with just taking it easy until you have the baby?"

"What are you saying? There are things I can only teach the baby while it's still inside me. I must give it the direct experience of a first-class warrior's fighting technique while I still can," she explained. "And in the moments right before it's born, it's at least *somewhat* conscious."

What? Teach the baby? Is a baby really supposed to learn how to duel before it's even born?

I had heard of something like this, a trend among noblewomen in central Ares. However, I'd gotten the impression that the goal was to engage in refined pursuits while pregnant, like listening to music, reading books, and viewing paintings. It definitely wasn't about swinging swords and rushing headlong into battles.

"But if you move around too vigorously, couldn't it have a negative effect on the baby?"

"What are you saying? It's our child, remember? It'll be invincible," Cassandra said confidently. "What's the harm in a bit of

light exercise? If anything, it'll get some much-needed experience as a warrior before being born."

There's no way an unborn child will retain that kind of experience! Don't you have any maternal instinct at all?

Cassandra seemed to have a high opinion of me, but at the moment, it was completely backfiring. Was she trying to bring up our child as the next Demon King or something? I had no idea why an innocent unborn baby should have to undergo such harsh training.

So I'd frantically resisted Cassandra, doing anything and everything I could to stop her, but she hadn't listened to any of my protests. On the contrary, she had dragged me all the way to the castle training ground.

Which brought us to the present moment.

"Fight like your life depends on it!" Cassandra shouted. "It's your duty as a father to give our precious child a proper education!"

A proper education? I only wished Cassandra's parents had understood the meaning of those words. It felt like I was being lectured on the value of human life by a murderer.

Around ten years earlier, I had come to respect Cassandra as my teacher, but looking back on it, all I could remember was being forced to eat extremely poisonous monster meat and fight until I was about to drop dead. *Don't tell me that's her idea of a proper education…*

Cassandra kept swinging her greatsword, striking me with a flurry of chaotic attacks. This, without a doubt, wasn't education—it was just plain violence. It seemed like I'd die before I could fulfill my duties as a father. I wanted to know how her parents had raised her, then make them apologize for everything they'd done.

She kept up her fierce assault. Showers of sparks went flying whenever my longsword and her greatsword clashed. It might even have been a pretty sight to anyone watching.

Thinking about it, I had really grown quite a lot to be able to take Cassandra's full-force attacks. A decade earlier, she'd always easily beaten me to a pulp with her bare hands, and I'd often

wondered how much I'd have to improve my skills before she was forced to use her sword.



For a moment, I forgot about my soon-to-be-born child as I engaged in the swordfight with Cassandra while thinking back on my growth over the years.

She wasn't called the Red Demon Swordmaster for nothing. Every single blow was as fierce as the last. Each time I blocked one, the paving stones at my feet cracked; they were steadily being smashed to pieces. When I blocked a horizontal sweep, I was overwhelmed by the sensation that my body was about to be sent flying all the way to the wall of the training ground.

And she was leveling these attacks at me without pause, with lightning speed. If I let my guard falter for even a second, I knew I'd be punching my own one-way ticket to the afterlife. My hands were so full just defending myself that I was completely unable to shift to the attack—not that I would even have considered attacking her in her current state anyway.

Then, as I continued to desperately withstand her assault, Cassandra suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"It's coming," she said.

Excuse me?

"I'll be right back," she announced. "I need to go give birth." Then she casually walked away as if off to take a quick bath, still shouldering her greatsword.

I spent a moment silently staring after her, then slumped to the floor. "Am I saved?" I said to myself.

I stayed there on the floor for some time, idly gazing into the distance. It had been a while since my black suit of armor had felt like it weighed this much.



"SORRY about the wait," Cassandra said. She was back, not having spent all that much time away at all, and cradling a wrinkly newborn baby in her arms. Her stomach looked a bit smaller than it had before, but otherwise, she didn't look that different. Even Frau and Carmilla, strong as they were, had been pretty exhausted right after giving birth, but I couldn't detect a hint of weariness in Cassandra. If

anything, the ladies-in-waiting who came running after her were the ones who looked exhausted, both physically and emotionally.

"Please, Lady Cassandra! You shouldn't move around so quickly after giving birth!"

"You mustn't move the baby so soon! Please, let it get some rest!"

They were practically screaming, but Cassandra completely ignored them.

"Here, it's your child," Cassandra said to me. "Hold it." Then, terrifyingly enough, she tossed the baby right to me.

Flustered, I caught it as gently as I could. This child had been born to such a regrettable mother; I felt so sorry for it I was afraid I might cry. It was somewhat large for a newborn baby, and it had red hair, like its mother. Newborns are usually frail, but I could sense a mysterious vigor in this one. It wasn't crying at all, despite the rough treatment it had received, and when I brushed my finger against its small palm, it grabbed it with an unexpectedly strong grip.

I named her, my first daughter, Hilda.



Chapter.1

SHE IS A SAINT

I: A Trip to Vulcan

AFTER Hilda was born, Cassandra devoted herself to looking after her daughter, despite her initial rough treatment. *I guess even a woman as fierce as Cassandra can't help caring for her precious daughter.*

Or at least, that was what I thought.

The reality was that Cassandra was already hoping to begin training the newborn Hilda, and I had to frantically stop her before she could put her plans into action. *I just wish she wouldn't try to give a baby a dagger to play with.*

It was too dangerous to leave Hilda alone with Cassandra, so I decided to assign plenty of maids to look after her. But Cassandra was terrifying so soon after giving birth, like a mother bear in the wild, so none of the maids stayed in their positions for long. Cassandra had the unfortunate tendency of wanting to be surrounded only by the strongest people possible, and no one could live up to her standards for Hilda's personal maid. It was becoming a real source of stress for me.

Incidentally, since Cassandra had gotten pregnant with Hilda, I had been spending my nights in Sheila's bedroom. Sheila was a former S-rank adventurer and an eye-catching beauty, with noble features and lush silver hair that she wore in a blunt bob. And out of all my princess consorts, she was the most sensible.

I wished I could go spend time with the others too, once in a while, but they all spurned my visits. It was like now that they'd had children, they had fulfilled their duty. Somehow, it felt a bit like they hated me. It was lonely.

When I grumbled about it to Sheila, though, she put on a serious expression. "I don't think they hate you," she said. "We all love you dearly, Your Majesty. But becoming a Farunian princess consort is difficult, in numerous ways. We need to be strong in both mind and body. Actually, it's made me realize I need to train more," she added thoughtfully. "But putting that aside, don't you think you ought to take more wives, Your Majesty?"

Honestly, I didn't need that many wives, and while I didn't get what was so difficult about being a princess consort, I hesitated to probe any further. If my relationship with Sheila turned contentious, I wouldn't have anywhere left to go. Afraid of dampening the mood any further, I decided to change the subject.

"Come to think of it, you're from Vulcan," I said casually. "Are there any good meat dishes there?"

I still hadn't given up on my dream of getting my hands on some good meat. I didn't want to live the rest of my days eating nothing but vile monster meat. By then, it had become impossible for me to find regular meat to eat in both Farune and Dorssen, but that just meant I'd have to go to another country to get some.

"Meat dishes? Vulcan prizes valor, so it doesn't really have any particularly refined cuisine," Sheila mused. "It's a culture that prefers simple things. But, while it isn't quite a full dish, maybe yakiniku is pretty well known."

"Yakiniku? What's that?"

"It's thinly sliced pieces of meat, grilled on a metal plate. It may not sound like much, but it's delicious when topped with a salty-sweet sauce."

"Huh, that sounds pretty good," I said. Slicing meat thinly meant it would burn quickly, so meat was typically prepared and eaten in thick slices. But the way Sheila described yakiniku, my mouth was watering already.

"But, ever since coming to Farune, I haven't had a single proper meal," Sheila complained, her expression turning gloomy. "Let alone yakiniku. It's all nothing but monster meat here…"

On second thought, maybe it had been the wrong choice to bring up food. Now the mood really was spoiled. But Cassandra was the one who had started eating monsters in the first place, and Ogma was the one who had spread the practice around. None of it was my fault.

Either way, I was glad to learn of the Vulcanian dish called yakiniku. My next goal in life was set: I would go to Vulcan and experience the dish.

In life, eating delicious food is non-negotiable. Man should not live by monster meat alone.



THOUGH I'd decided on my goal, there was still one small problem. To put it simply, Vulcan was far away.

If I (foolishly) decided to run all the way there, it would take quite a long time, even given how fast I could run. Luckily, I had a secret weapon—Wyverns. They were the next monsters due to be incorporated into the monster army, after Warwolves. Wyverns were dragons, but they were an inferior species of dragon, so they weren't all that powerful. If we were to deploy them in a real battle, they could definitely have been defeated. We didn't have as many of them as we had Warwolves, either, so it would have been a waste to use them to fight. After mulling it over, I had realized Wyverns would be great for tasks involving mobility, such as travel and transport.

Actually, Cassandra had originally come from the powerful Ronzan Empire to the north, which was famous for its Dragon Knights, so she was well-versed in training Wyverns—or rather, dragons. She had even given Keely a lecture on it. She had also taken the opportunity to show me the ropes, which meant I could now control Wyverns. In fact, because I had captured the Wyverns myself, it had been comparatively easy to make them listen to my commands.

I was also considering using the Wyverns as messengers, so I'd had a habitat built for them within the castle grounds that allowed us to take one out for a ride whenever we needed. The habitat was a structure assembled from piled-up stones, in imitation of the caves wyverns often used as nests.

I stepped inside the massive stone dwelling. The distinct smell of reptiles stung my nose, but I was used to the awful stench of raw monster meat, so it didn't bother me all that much. Wyverns didn't look like typical dragons—instead resembling big lizards with wings—so on close inspection, they weren't particularly awe-inspiring. Just a bit creepy, with scary faces. But as soon as they caught a glimpse of

me, they all simultaneously shrunk back in fear. *Do none of you have any pride as monsters?*

"Aer," I called, and a Wyvern on the larger side appeared from the back of the cave. Aer was the name I had given to the Wyvern I rode. It was the leader of the flock of Wyverns I'd captured, so it was more imposing than the others.

Today, Aer came out more quickly than usual. When it moved more reluctantly, I would hand feed it to build trust, but it looked like that wouldn't be necessary this time. As it happened, the feed I gave Aer was the same monster meat I always ate. According to Keely, eating the same thing would help strengthen our connection.

"Wyverns also eat monsters, so they'll get along with everyone in the Hundred right away," she had said. "I mean, normally, people don't ever eat monsters. They'd die. So in that sense, the Hundred are basically monsters themselves. Aha, haha, ha…huh? Your Majesty wishes to feed the Wyvern the same monster meat *you're* eating?" There had been a pause. "Um, well, even for Wyverns, that meat is…actually, never mind." By the end of our conversation, she had averted her black eyes away from me.

I had tried to follow Keely's advice and given Aer monster meat, but it had despised the meat I brought. I was a human, and I was eating it, so a Wyvern shouldn't have had any problems, but even so, Aer had tried to escape me by flying away. I'd had to leap up into the air, knock it out of the sky, and then force the meat into its mouth. After repeating the process several times, Aer eventually became completely obedient. Keely was right after all—eating the same meat helped us get along.

Aer lowered its head so it would be easier for me to climb onto its back. From what I'd heard, dragon species were proud, and it was rare for them to do something so servile.

"Poor thing," Keely had remarked upon seeing this, expressing pity for the Wyvern. I didn't see what was supposed to be so sad, though. After all, Aer and I were really in tune with each other.

"All right, Aer," I said, mounting the saddle on its back. "We'll be traveling a bit out of the way today!"

I pointed in the direction of Vulcan. Yakiniku was waiting for me!



I found Wyverns to be a more comfortable ride than horses. They didn't make contact with the ground, so there were no vibrations to transfer to my body. Plus, it was a nice feeling to fly through the sky. At first I'd thought, *It sure would be scary if I fell*, but then Cassandra had told me something:

"Your training isn't so slapdash that you'd die from a simple fall. If you could, I'd kill you first."

That had easily alleviated most of my fear of falling. Cassandra was far more terrifying.

So as long as you weren't afraid of them, Wyverns were very convenient to have around. You could get anywhere pretty much instantly. But while they may have been a lesser species, they were still dragons, so one downside was that they really stuck out. Vulcan was an enemy of Farune, so I couldn't very well go landing anywhere near a town. Instead, I decided to bring Aer down on a mountain near Thracia, the capital of Vulcan, and head to the city on foot from there.

One of Keely's spells had bonded me with Aer as its master, so it came to me right away if I called. There was no risk of it going off somewhere else—though whenever I called it, it always arrived with a sad look on its face. It must have gotten lonely all by itself.

After landing Aer, I descended from the mountain onto a large road, and from there I traveled by foot until I arrived in Thracia.

The city had to be around the same size as Berze, in Dorssen. Many of the buildings were simple and unadorned. I'd heard from Sheila that the people of Vulcan preferred straightforward grit and dependability, so these plain buildings were probably part of that local flavor. I passed by many people on the street dressed in clothes with modest designs compared to those in Dorssen. Few were wearing anything showy at all. It was something Vulcan shared in

common with Farune. *Well, for us, that's only because we're such a backwater.*

As I walked along a boulevard in the foreign city, I saw all sorts of shops selling rare and novel items. I was having fun just taking a stroll, but I still had one goal in mind: yakiniku. And seeing that I'd come all the way out there, I wanted to eat at the best place I could.

A restaurant, huh? I thought to myself. It would be my first time going to a restaurant in a proper city, and I started to feel a bit nervous. But all would be well, as long as I had money. After all, it made the world go round…

Wait.

I had forgotten to bring money.

Normally, I never carried money with me. After all, no one ever let me eat anything besides monster meat, no matter where I went around my territory, so I never had any opportunities to spend it. In other words, this wasn't my fault. It was the fault of the people of Farune, all of whom refused to sell me food.

It *was* a problem though. It would have been a huge drag to go all the way back to Farune just to grab some money. Yet I was also reluctant to borrow any from someone. Or rather, I'd never heard of a king who borrows money from ordinary citizens in a foreign country.

Imagine if I'd said, "You over there. I'm a king, and I've come from Farune, so can you spot me some cash? I'll give it back to you later." Who in their right mind would have believed something like that? Even swindlers would have come up with a better story. Not that I wouldn't pay back my debt or anything, of course.

And even if someone *did* believe me, Farune and Vulcan were enemies. If I introduced myself like that, I'd have been surrounded by soldiers before the words were halfway out of my mouth.

Realizing I was in a hopeless situation for any number of reasons, I continued my walk down the street with my shoulders slumped, the scent of what I guessed to be yakiniku wafting through the air around me, courtesy of all those restaurants. The savory

aroma of grilled meat and the distinctive smell of the sauce made me even hungrier than I'd been before.

For a split second, a thought crossed my mind: *What if I eat as much as my stomach can hold, then hit the road without paying the bill?* Vulcan was an enemy country, after all, so it would have been perfectly expected for me to misbehave a bit. If anything, it would cause a tiny amount of economic harm to Vulcan, and I'd get some yakiniku in the bargain, so there was nothing but upside. I was confident that I could outrun anyone. I tried running a simulation of it in my head.

As a rule, though, I always imagined the worst possible scenario.

In this case, I'd be eating yakiniku, then I'd make my daring escape. A crowd of Vulcanians would surround me, but I'd heroically blast them away, clearing a path through. Overawed by my might, none of them would dare lay a hand on me. But then, someone would notice something: "Wait a minute, isn't that King Mars, from Farune?" After all, anyone who'd gone to Farune's arena would very well have been able to recognize my face.

Then, one of the employees would shout, "Thief! That's King Mars of Farune! He's royalty, but he's still trying to dine and dash!"

Damn, no good. Dining and dashing is wrong. Plus, what if it gave an enemy I could end up fighting in the near future a weakness to exploit? There was no way I could withstand battlefield taunts of something like, "Mars the Cheat." The morale of my allies would sink like a stone.

I guess I have no choice but to raise funds somehow.

The first thing I thought of was trying to sell my ring of poison and my gravity armlet, but who would be willing to take cursed items like those off my hands? There may have been a demand for them as assassination tools, but as you can imagine, I didn't want anyone using my accessories to commit murder. And besides, if I did sell them and Frau or Cassandra found out, *they* would kill *me*.

Why am I a king anyway if I don't even have any respectable jewelry on me? Any ordinary citizen probably has way more

valuables than I do. You know, what's the point of being a king in the first place?

I plodded down the street, contemplating the meaning of royalty, when I suddenly felt a set of eyes on me. No, multiple sets of eyes. I didn't quite sense any hostility from them, but they were still strong gazes. Had the Vulcanians discovered my true identity? I had come wearing my simplest possible outfit, and the only accessories I was wearing were the usual cursed ones. I had my sword, of course, but it was debatable whether I was even identifiable as a noble, let alone a king. How had they realized it? Maybe I'd shown too much of my face in the arena after all.

I didn't want to get into an altercation in a crowded place, so I turned down a side street, continuing ahead at a quick pace until I reached an area that was somewhat open. *Everywhere has its share of deserted spots.* Eventually, I stopped seeing any passersby around.

"Here, maybe?" I said to myself, then I turned around. Behind me were the figures of seven young men, probably around twenty years old, all wearing swords.

"Am I correct in supposing that you are His Majesty King Mars of Farune?" one of them asked in a tense voice. Like Sheila, he carried two swords on his back. He also had her silver hair, so he might actually have been a relative.

But judging by the situation, it was more natural to assume that he and the others were Vulcanian knights, there to capture me.

"Are you sure you don't have the wrong guy?" I replied. There was no one alive who would be so foolish as to have answered, *"Yes, that's me."*

"Then, does that mean you're here as Zero?"

I paused. "What makes you think that?"

"We've seen you in Farune's arena. You were fighting as Zero, with the ranked members of the Hundred."

So they had seen my face in the arena after all. Had it been a mistake to take off my helmet and expose my face to the spectators? But when I hadn't done that, people had thought that Mars and Zero were two different people. That had only made things

confusing, so I'd tried to consolidate both personas under the name Mars, but somehow, the general populace had gotten the idea that my public-facing identity was Mars, the king of Farune, and my secret identity was Zero, the leader of the Hundred.

In terms of appearance, I was Mars when my face was exposed, and I was Zero when I was wearing my black armor. It was true that I'd distinguished the two before ascending to the throne, but now, everyone knew both of my identities anyway, public and private, so I didn't see much of a point to keeping them separate.

What good is a secret identity if you expose it to the public?

But still, what do I do? I wondered. The seven young men who had followed me were clearly skilled. They hadn't adopted fighting stances yet, but they didn't have any openings, even in their natural postures. They were solidly built, and I could tell they were well-trained. Outside of the Hundred, it was rare to see anyone this strong.

Whatever else happened, I didn't want to get hurt, so I sent mana into the magic inscription that had been engraved on my body —the one that had the convenient ability of instantly transferring my armor to me and equipping it. Of course, it also had the dubious distinction of having been cancelled for adoption by humans because when it had been tested on me, it had been discovered that the engraving process was extraordinarily painful. I really wished my subjects wouldn't do those sorts of experiments on their king.

The inscription activated and a white light engulfed my body. In an instant, I was clad in my black armor. Now, I didn't have to worry about getting injured, and once I unsheathed my black longsword, I'd be ready to fight.

"Aha, so you *have* come as Zero!"

I had no clue why, but for some reason they were all excited to see me in my armor. *What's happening right now?*

"Zero! We have been waiting a long time for your arrival!" the silver-haired young man said, trembling with joy.

"Who are you guys?" I asked. They gave me the creeps. I had been all fired up to fight, but my motivation had evaporated.

"Sir! We are members of the Hundred, Vulcan branch!"

…Vulcan branch?

"What the heck is that?" I asked.

"I am aware that the Hundred's rules are absolute," one of the men began. "The headquarters in Farune had no choice but to reveal its existence to the world when it overthrew the country, but we have always abided by the organization's rules to the letter. As such, even headquarters hasn't been notified of our branch's existence. I imagine the same is true for the rest of the Hundred's branches, scattered across various regions. The rules are that unbreakable."

Then, the young men all began to speak in unison:

"The first rule of the Hundred is: you do not talk about the Hundred.

"The second rule of the Hundred is: you *do not* talk about the Hundred.

"The third rule is: you don't eat anything except raw monster meat.

"The fourth rule is: strength is everything.

"The fifth rule is: if you're part of the Hundred, you have to fight.

"The sixth rule is: all fights are one-on-one.

"The seventh rule is: rule six doesn't apply to Great Leader Zero."

With their eyes glazed over like they were in a trance, they recited a list of rules I felt like I'd heard versions of somewhere before—almost like they were chanting from sacred scripture. It was too bad about the contents of what they were saying, though. And incidentally, the fact that I was the only one excluded from rule six was just cruel.

It reminded me that a short while after I had begun participating in the Hundred, Ogma and the others had made up some rules like those. Though rules one and two had become mere formalities over time. Anyway, several of the early members of the Hundred had suddenly started going on about things like, "We're going on a pilgrimage to propagate these glorious teachings!" and

had disappeared somewhere. I'd completely forgotten all about them.

So those idiots actually managed to spread the Hundred to other countries? Why did they have to replicate such a stupid organization all the way out here? I couldn't believe it. I wished they would consider the effects their actions might have on others for once.

I had all sorts of things I wanted to say, but the seven men were looking at me with sparkling eyes. Evidently, they thought of me as someone great, so with as much dignity as I could muster, I asked, "So, what is it you want from me?"

"Sir! We are trembling with delight that the day has finally come for the Great Leader Zero to guide Vulcan as well!"

Guide Vulcan? How, specifically? Vulcan is enemy territory, you know. Feel free to tremble in my presence, or whatever, but don't drag me into whatever that's about.

I didn't want to get myself into anything complicated or difficult at the moment, so I was going to have to disappoint them. "Farune is far from Vulcan," I said. "The time is not yet ripe."

That sounded plausible.

"We understand, it isn't time yet. But did you not come to Vulcan to prepare us for when it is?"

I'm just here to eat yakiniku!

"Aren't you guys from Vulcan?" I asked. "Why are you trying to side with Farune anyway? Do you mean to betray your country?"

I hoped they'd feel a bit guilty. The same thing had happened in Farune back when I'd become king. *Why does anyone and everyone betray their homelands at the drop of a hat? Work a bit harder for your country before you give up on it.* As a king myself, it made me feel sorry for the king of Vulcan.

"I see," one of the men said. "So you're here to test us, and find out whether we truly understand the ideals of the Hundred."

What ideals?

"Certainly, the public identity of Zero is King Mars of Farune," he continued. "However, that is merely a stepping stone."

Would you mind not turning my main line of work into something temporary?

"King Mars's true form is Zero!" proclaimed the young blond man standing next to the silver-haired one. "And we know the real purpose of the Hundred is nothing less than world domination!"

My head was spinning. Was I the leader of a villainous organization and I didn't even know it?

"You are truly awe-inspiring, Zero," the man continued. "You already consider rule by nations as a thing of the past, don't you? Few realize that Farune's invasions of foreign countries are but temporary, because their true aim is world conquest by the creed of the Hundred. Those with their minds still stuck in their old ways could never understand it."

Yeah, I don't understand it either. It sounds to me like the world is ending.

"At first, we, too, struggled over whether to choose Vulcan or Farune," said a young man with blue hair.

I think that's where you choose Vulcan. It's your home, isn't it?

"But that all turned out to be trivial," the blue-haired man continued. "After hearing that the Hundred's elites had crushed massive armies, one after the other, we were thrilled—surely this was the path we sought! Strength is everything! Nations are worthless! The Hundred is where we really belong!" He passionately clenched his fist.

"Nations are worthless"…? You're freaking me out. Are you guys terrorists or something?

But I did get the gist of what they were saying. They were probably the second or third sons of nobles, who didn't feel like they had anywhere they belonged. That was why they were dissatisfied with their government, and why their thoughts had taken a dangerous turn. Ogma had been like that at first too.

Now, what should I do? I wondered. *Honestly, this isn't* my *country, so I couldn't care less about people being disloyal.*

"Zero, we have a request for you!" the silver-haired man announced, and they all kneeled. "Please, grant us the honor of a

fight with you! Even just once, we want to experience your glorious power firsthand!"

If that'll satisfy you, then sure. I had forgotten to bring money with me anyway, so it wasn't like I had anything else to do.

"Very well. I'll fight you," I said. "Come at me." I unsheathed my black sword. I wanted to get this over with quickly.

"With all due respect, Zero, doing it here would draw too much attention. We'd rather take you to the place we usually use to train, so if you wouldn't mind coming along…"

These guys sure are sensible about random things.



THE seven Vulcanian men led me down an out-of-the-way road until we reached an imposing mansion on the outskirts of the city. The building had a dark exterior and a high wall that gave it a foreboding air.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"This is one of our bases," the silver-haired young man replied.

When we entered the grounds of the estate, the mansion's servants greeted my companions deferentially. When I looked closely at them, I could see that the servants appeared to be quite rugged, their faces and arms crisscrossed with visible scars. As soon as they spotted me, they began to tremble.

"That black armor!" one said with a gasp. "Could it be?! Zero?!"

Why do even the servants here know who I am?

"Please, do not be alarmed," the blue-haired man said to me, smiling. "Everyone in this estate is a member of the Hundred. You need not worry that they'll let slip any secrets."

So even the servants here are in the Hundred? What kind of hell have I walked into? Even Farune doesn't have anything like this.

"Vulcan prizes valor, so we have an affinity with the Hundred's teachings. Devotees of strength can be found anywhere, not just in Farune."

I don't think anyone will end up happy following teachings like these, though.

"So, where are we going?" I asked.

"There is a training hall underground, beneath the mansion, if you wouldn't mind following us there."

The servants slid part of one wall to the side, revealing a suspicious-looking stairwell.

"This way."

I did as I was told and went down the steps after my escorts. When I descended past a certain point, the walls around me transitioned to plain, unadorned stone. It seemed there was a large cave beneath the mansion, and it was being used as a training ground. I assumed it would be dark, but the large space was brightly illuminated by torchlight. The ceiling was quite high, and there was plenty of room. Swords, armor, and other pieces of equipment carelessly rested near the walls. As a whole, it closely resembled the ancient underground ruin the Hundred had first used as a base before moving to the arena.

If this was where we were going to fight, I had no complaints. There certainly wasn't any reason to worry that we'd be spotted.

"Please wait here while we prepare."

The young men chose from among the armor by the wall and began to equip it. Putting on armor was too difficult for amateurs to do easily, so these men were clearly used to the process. *They must have trained here often.*

They quickly readied their equipment until they all looked the part.

"Apologies for the wait," one of them finally said.

"So, are you all going to come at me at once?" I asked. I still wanted to get it over with quickly so I could head back home.

"No, if possible, we'd like to fight you one at a time," one man said. "I'm aware that we're lacking in strength, but we do have our pride."

"Okay. Then attack me one by one," I said, drawing my black longsword. "Show me your strength."

My first opponent was the silver-haired one. Apparently, he was ranked first in Vulcan's Hundred. He dual-wielded swords, and was certainly strong.

First of all, wielding swords in both hands was difficult no matter what. If you tried to attack with one then the other, it threw you off balance. The silver-haired man had conquered this weakness by maintaining a steady vertical axis through his body, and rotating around it to move. After attacking with the sword in his right hand, he would make a backhanded slash with his left sword, rather than a forehanded slash. Basically, he was chaining the momentum of his first attack into his next attack. It was quite technically difficult.

Come to think of it, I've never had a chance to properly fight Sheila, and she also dual-wields swords.

The man attacked repeatedly, adapting to the moment freely and swiftly. We clashed blades several times, which entertained me somewhat. He weaved in multiple sword techniques, so it almost felt like I was watching an acrobat at work.

But he was soft.

He feinted with the sword in his right hand, and I knocked it out of his grasp with a strong slash. His real attack was with his left sword, coming at me from a low angle, and I used my foot to pin it to the ground, then placed my blade right up against his neck.

"Whoa!"

A wave of excitement passed through the spectators, who included the other six men as well as a large crowd of servants.

"I have no complaints about your speed, but you're weak," I said to him. "And feints are pointless. They actually give your opponent a gap to exploit. Work harder on being able to chain together multiple full-power attacks." They held me in high regard, so I tried to say something that sounded kind of cool.

The defeated silver-haired young man looked pleased. "Thank you very much," he said.

My next opponent was a red-haired young man with a large build and a greatsword. He reminded me of Dante, who had been one of Dorssen's five Champions—but stronger.

The red-haired man's attacks were limited in number, but packed with power and mana. It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to call each one of them deadly in its own right. An ordinary warrior would probably have found it hard to take even the

very first one. But he still had a long way to go compared to the top-ranked members of the Hundred in Farune. I blocked one of his strikes straight on, then used my strength to force his sword back, lightly touching my black blade to his forehead.

"You're quite strong. Keep on training so you can build up that strength even more," I said, again giving some sensible-sounding advice.

"But, how am I supposed to do that?" he asked. "I'm training every day, but I'm still not improving like I want to…" He seemed worried about his sluggish growth.

"Wear a gravity armlet," I suggested, showing him the one I was wearing on my arm.

"You mean, the ones criminals wear?!" The red-haired man, as well as the rest of the spectators, were all surprised.

"That's right. I'm wearing one that multiplies the effect of gravity on me by five," I explained. "Of course, you haven't made it far enough to do that yet, but you should find and wear one that doubles your gravity."

"F-Five times! Y-You were just fighting while under the effects of gravity multiplied by five?"

That got a good reaction out of him. The members of the Hundred used to react like that too, a long time ago. Now, they just ask me when I'll be swapping to a ten-times-gravity armlet. It's not like I'm wearing it because I want to, okay?

Incidentally, Cassandra was the only one who had a ten-times-gravity armlet, and Frau was currently working on one for me. Which I wanted her to stop doing right away.

Eventually, I fought all seven of the men, and the fights all ended in the same fashion. Each man was adept in a unique skill, like channeling fire magic to create a flaming sword, or incorporating ice magic to create a frozen sword. Apparently, these were sword techniques that each of their families passed down through the generations, and they had inherited them. That meant they *were* actually all eldest sons, contrary to what I had thought earlier. Not that it really mattered to me.

Afterward, I fought the servants who looked the most like they wanted a match with me, all at the same time. They were pretty skilled, and even as I defeated them, they expressed how grateful they were to me, saying, "Thank you very much!" or "I really admire you!" or "I'm so lucky!" so I thought I must have done a good deed.

After all the matches were over, the silver-haired man spoke. "Zero, my deepest thanks for your guidance today," he said. "As a show of our gratitude, we've prepared some refreshments, so if you would be so kind as to join us for a meal…"

A meal? That means yakiniku, right?



"IF you would please do the honors, Zero!" one of the men announced. "I'm sure it can't compare to what you have in Farune, but we did everything we could to gather this meat for you!"

Yeah, I knew it. I did get my hopes up a bit…but only a bit!

Lined up on the table was the usual array of grotesque, purple, raw meat. And needless to say, it was monster meat.

Which reminded me. Earlier, they had said, "The third rule is you don't eat anything except raw monster meat." So did that mean there wasn't ever *any* food in this mansion besides monster meat?

Eat that stuff yourselves and leave me out of it! Don't you know it's customary to serve foreign guests popular local dishes? Do you have any common sense at all?

"I've heard there's a famous dish in Vulcan, called yakiniku," I said carefully. I didn't want to eat monster meat after coming all this way, so I tried gently hinting that they should bring out the yakiniku.

"Oh, how embarrassing," the silver-haired man said apologetically. "Vulcan is celebrated for prizing valor above all else, so it's truly regrettable that our most famous dish is something so pathetic. It's just meat that's been thinly sliced and grilled."

You know, I came here to eat that "pathetic" dish.

"You can say that again," the blond man said with emphasis. "If you're going to eat meat, monster meat is best. And it has to be raw! At first, there were some guys here in Vulcan's Hundred who

tried preparing and eating monster meat like yakiniku, but they clearly got stronger at a slower rate. It just goes to show that the rules of the Hundred need to be followed to the letter!"

"When the Hundred has made Vulcan ours, we'll put an end to yakiniku and all other foods like it. Every single citizen will eat nothing but monster meat!" the red-haired man said. Things were starting to sound dangerous.

Do they want to turn Vulcan into some sort of lawless hellscape? Can't we just eat things that taste good? As I listened, I got the feeling that these guys were even more extreme than the Hundred in Farune. I began to worry about Vulcan's future.

"By the way, how many members of the Hundred are there here?" I asked. "Are there many commoners in the Hundred, too?"

"Sir, the Hundred's ideology is spreading among all the young men of this country, mainly," the silver-haired man replied. "In that respect, there is no difference between nobles and commoners. After all, the teaching, 'strength is everything,' has no regard for status distinctions. We are nobility, but we believe in accepting anyone with strength. Though of course, we never fail to keep up our daily efforts to stay on top."

In other words, there were secret members of the Hundred all over the country, let alone the city. *I think it's time I got going*, I thought. With so many people around to monitor me, it didn't seem like I would have been able to eat yakiniku in Vulcan even if I hadn't forgotten my money. If anything, the Vulcanians were liable to treat me like a traitor if I *did* eat any.

"I understand now," I said. "I've learned everything I came here to find out. It's looking like I'll be able to go back to Farune without any worries. My consort, Sheila, might come back for a visit at some point in the future, so please treat her well when she does."

In a way, things were worse in Vulcan than they were in Farune. There was no saving them, so I decided to turn my hopes to some other country for a meal of non-monster meat. As it happened, though, Sheila had seemed down lately, so I had been thinking of suggesting she pay a visit home to Vulcan soon. It wasn't that far by Wyvern, and she would be safe as long as there were

enough members of the Hundred with her. I wanted to give her the opportunity to eat some yakiniku herself, at the very least, so she could get her spirits up.

"Are you already leaving?" My hosts looked reluctant to see me go.

"There's a lot I need to take care of," I replied. Mostly, I wanted to go search for meat in another country. "And a word of advice from me: make sure you keep the Hundred as secret as possible, and obey what your king commands of you."

With that, I said my goodbyes to the members of Vulcan's branch of the Hundred. With such a nasty organization taking root in this country, I felt really sorry for the king of Vulcan. I hoped they'd keep the Hundred a secret forever, obey the king, work hard, and live honestly.

After leaving Thracia, I found an inconspicuous spot nearby and called for Aer, then returned to Farune. It had been a complete waste of a day. I had absolutely nothing to show for it.

II: The Heir to the Twin Blades

I was born the eldest son of Garay of the Twin Blades. "The Twin Blades" is the epithet of one of Vulcan's vaunted Seven Celestial Swords, and a pillar of the country. As Garay's eldest son, I was destined to become that pillar in the future.

From a young age, it was both my dream and my duty to inherit the title of Twin Blades and become a Celestial Sword. I never once hesitated about it. If anything, I had pride in my future. I worked hard to gain the required skill with a sword, and I think I had a bit of a knack for it, too.

I was the eldest son in my family, but I did have an older sister. She was kind, pretty, and strong. I was proud of her, and we got along well. As a woman, she had no need to practice with a sword, but she began wielding one on her own initiative from an early age anyway. I liked to watch her as she swung it around. The arc her blade traced as it passed through the air was more beautiful even than our father's. As I grew older, I came to realize something: the

beauty of her blade's arc was due to her immense talent with a sword.

I began my training when I was very young. My father taught me the basics of dual-wielding swords, saying I needed to get used to it early. It's a very demanding skill. I still remember wielding two short wooden swords, trying to move the way I had been taught. It hardly ever went as I envisioned.

On the other hand, because my sister wasn't the heir, our father never taught her his dual-wielding technique directly. She only learned the basics from him, and even that had really just been for fun. But she was able to memorize the dual-wielding technique just from watching our father do it himself. Then she went even further and completely mastered it while observing me in my lessons with our father—even though I couldn't do it at all, despite being taught intentionally. My sister soon outgrew mere imitations of our father and went on to transform his teachings, elevating them into her own original technique.

In short, she was a prodigy who truly deserved the name of Twin Blades.

Our father lamented her skill. "If only you'd been a boy," he grumbled. And he kept trying to instruct me in the family technique with renewed enthusiasm.

I hated it. So what if my sister was a woman? Why couldn't she succeed him instead of me? Why should her gifts have to be squandered for such a ridiculous reason, all so a mediocrity like me could take over the family?

These thoughts tormented me, stirring up rebellious feelings that I couldn't help direct toward my father and my sister. It caused my sister great pain, until ultimately, she ran away from home. I regretted what I'd done, but more than that, I felt relieved: I finally didn't have to be compared to my sister anymore.

Well aware of how wretched I was, I devoted myself to training like never before, but all it did was make my limits even clearer. So, not wanting to acknowledge them, I made myself train even harder.

Eventually, I announced I was going on a quest, and I started battling monsters. The monsters were strong, and beyond my skill

level, but I was determined to defeat them. Thinking back on it now, I was probably behaving recklessly out of despair.

Very quickly, I hit a ceiling. I overestimated myself and challenged a powerful monster, a Great Basilisk. It defeated me, and I thought I would die. But I also thought that would be for the best. No one needed a weakling with the title of Twin Blades. It even occurred to me that, if I did die, my sister might have been able to succeed our father.

It was then that a lone traveler appeared. He was carrying a sword on his right shoulder and wearing a filthy outfit, like some kind of washed-up adventurer.

"Don't push yourself," he said simply, then he turned and boldly faced the Great Basilisk.

The man fought using all his might, and roughly, with flagrant disregard for sword forms. He was strong, resembling a wild beast with a sword much more than he did a human. He plunged his weapon into the throat of the massive lizard like it was the fang of a starving wolf, and dyed his body red with its blood. He didn't stop there, either; he finished by cutting the monster open down to its chest, then gouging out a chunk of meat and biting into it.

"Why the hell are you eating that?!" I shouted without thinking. Even children had enough common sense to know that monster meat was poisonous.

"Why? To get stronger, obviously," the man replied, his expression screwed up in disgust as he devoured the meat.

"Are you saying that eating monsters makes you stronger?"

"Yes. That's how we got stronger."

"We?" There was only one person there. Nobody but the man was anywhere around.

But instead of answering my question, the man asked me, "Do you want to get stronger too?"

"I do," I replied immediately. I really did. I wanted to gain confidence in myself, and become a man who wasn't ashamed to succeed his father.

"Are you willing to sacrifice everything for strength? Do you have what it takes?" The man stared at me intensely, like he was

assessing my resolve.

"If it makes me stronger, I don't need anything else! I'd give anything in exchange, even my life!" I didn't hesitate for a second. All I wanted was to be stronger.

"I see," said the man. "In that case, I'll give you the strength you seek. Starting today, you'll be a member of the Hundred, follow the teachings of our leader, Zero, and engrave these words on your heart: 'strength is everything.'"

It resonated deeply with me. *That's right, he's right. Strength* is *everything!* I thought. Becoming the Twin Blades or taking over from my father didn't matter. I just needed to get stronger.

From that day on, I studied all there was to know about the Hundred under the man who'd saved me from the Great Basilisk. He called himself Million. He drilled everything about his way of life into me, from how to fight monsters, to how to prepare and consume their meat. In the beginning, I had violent bouts of vomiting and diarrhea. But there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Slowly but surely, I overcame my limits.

Million never taught me anything technical, though we did constantly have practice bouts that were just like the real thing. We never held anything back—as if we were fighting to the death.

At first, I was afraid. But when I got over my initial fear, the ability to take pleasure in being alive was waiting for me on the other side. Strength was everything, and I didn't need anything else.

In the end, Million taught me his ways for probably around a year. When he was sure I was qualified to be a member of the Hundred myself, he left to continue on his journey.

"I live to spread the ideals of the Hundred around the world," he said. "Eventually, one hundred will become one million. That is our goal." Apparently, he wasn't the only one who was going by the name Million. Everyone who had left the place where the Hundred had originated—Farune—to evangelize about the organization called themselves Million.

"Now go forth, and spread the way of the Hundred across Vulcan," Million continued. "Carefully appraise and verify every single

person, and lay down firm roots. Eventually, our Great Leader Zero will visit this land. Until that time comes, build up your strength."

After Million left, I decided I would discreetly bring my closest circle over to the Hundred's cause. Vulcan prizes valor, so when I demonstrated my strength, there were many who readily showed interest. But that alone wasn't enough. I had to confirm that they truly hungered for strength, that they truly could sacrifice everything in exchange for it, and that they were truly willing to stake their lives on it.

Finally, I found six like-minded comrades. Like me, they were fated to succeed their fathers, and they felt doubts about this calling. Together, we are the seven who were intended to be entrusted with the future of this country.



"ZERO was incredible," said the silver-haired young man, Hart, his eyes wet with tears. He was both first in Vulcan's branch of the Hundred, and the heir to the Twin Blades, one of the Seven Celestial Swords.

"Yeah, he's reached the pinnacle of mental, physical, and technical ability," the blond young man, Igor, readily agreed. "To think that he'd so accurately pinpoint everything we're lacking. Even then, though, it was a shock to hear that he uses a prisoner's armlet to train. Use everything you can get your hands on, I guess. What a brilliant idea." Igor crossed his arms and seemed impressed. He was ranked second in the Hundred in Vulcan, and was heir to the title of Stalwart Blade.

"But Zero also said, 'I've learned everything I came here to find out.' What do you think that was supposed to mean?" the red-haired young man, Fabio, asked the other six. He was heir to the title of Blazing Blade.

"Isn't it obvious?" Hart replied. "He came to see how thoroughly the Hundred has spread around Vulcan. That has to be it, because no king would walk down a boulevard in the capital of an enemy country in broad daylight for no reason. And just as he

planned, he lured us out. He's a fearsome man who calculated absolutely everything before making his move." The others nodded in agreement.

"Do you mean to say that he came here to ascertain the strength of our Hundred?" Fabio asked.

"Yeah, and he hinted that my sister, his consort, will be returning to Vulcan someday soon," Hart continued—he was Sheila's younger brother. "Probably when the time is ripe. When that time comes, the Hundred will seize Vulcan for good. For now, we must continue to gather our strength in the shadows. That must be why Zero said to obey our king. We need to follow his instructions and act the part of faithful vassals. He also said to keep the Hundred as secret as possible, so we'll need to continue enforcing that as well."

The seven exchanged looks, then silently nodded their mutual understanding.

III: The Theocracy of Mauve

"YOUR Majesty, the Church of Mauve has issued a new doctrine," Gamarath reported. We were in the throne room, and he looked nervous.

In the past, Gamarath had looked like a stereotypical villain crushed by the weight of his crimes, but after I had pushed all the responsibilities of administering the country onto him, he had straightened up. His features had even changed to appear more intelligent and less devious. In truth, he was an excellent statesman. It wouldn't have been a stretch to say that Farune was still functioning, despite all the meatheads of the Hundred, thanks mainly to Gamarath's efforts.

I didn't really think it was necessary for us to talk about this in the throne room, but it felt like a kingly thing to do, so I tried to sit on the throne whenever I had time.

The Church of Mauve that Gamarath had just mentioned was the largest religion on the continent of Ares. Priests generally drew from Mauve's divine blessing as the source of their restoration magic's power, and nearly every country had made the church its

state religion. Officially, Farune was one of them, though I wasn't all that devout myself. Nothing in my life had ever given me much reason to find the existence of God believable. And things weren't that different now, either.

"The new doctrine contains three items: a prohibition against the consumption of monster meat, a prohibition against the large-scale use of monsters, and protection for the status of the nobility," Gamarath continued.

Hm, sounds sensible to me, I thought. None of the items on that list would have been an issue in nearly any country, but Farune didn't abide by any of them. Unfortunately, Farune lacked all common sense, and the doctrine seemed practically laser-targeted at us.

"Do they have some sort of grudge against us?" I asked. I wasn't all that interested in the religion, but I certainly had no memory of persecuting its adherents or anything.

"Your Majesty, are you aware of the church bishop's long absence?"

The bishop? Oh yeah, there used to be one of those. I remembered a plump old man who was always around at state ceremonies, pompously acting as if God spoke through him.

"You're right, I haven't heard anything about him in forever. What happened to the old bishop? I remember you got along pretty well with him." The last bishop had been close enough with Gamarath to have been part of his faction.

"Sir, he and I were indeed close," Gamarath said evasively. "However, that fact alone proves that he was engaged in fraud and corruption…"

Oh, I see what he means. Yeah, all the people who were buddy-buddy with Gamarath back then were crooks.

"When I usurped the throne, was he killed along with the rest of the nobility?" I asked. I had absolutely no memory of it, but I certainly wouldn't have put it past the Hundred. After all, they had indiscriminately slaughtered quite a large number of people, and an uncultured bunch like them would never have been able to distinguish between an ordinary nobleman and a bishop.

"Actually, the bishop wasn't in the castle at the time, so he was spared," Gamarath said. "However, he did amass a great deal of wealth through fraud, so following the coup, I confiscated his assets and banished him."

Well, that's not going to help Farune make a very good impression on the church, now is it?

"Do you think that's the reason for this doctrine?" I asked.

"No, I reported the bishop's fraud to the Theocracy of Mauve, and because we were not entirely at fault, it did not become an issue," Gamarath reassured me. "However, a successor has never been dispatched by the church."

Yeah, no matter how much the bishop may have been in the wrong, I don't think anyone would want to follow him to the sort of country that would treat him like that.

"Well, it's not like we need anything as formal as a bishop of the church." Ceremonies were a hassle, and the bishop's absence hadn't exactly caused any problems yet.

"I would expect nothing less from you, Your Majesty," Gamarath said, kneeling. "Your almost clinical desire to rid Farune of inefficiencies is what makes you a true king."

Hey, hold on, you're making me sound like some kind of cheapskate.

"So, how shall we respond to the Church of Mauve's new doctrine?" Gamarath asked.

It seems fine to me. Its contents are perfectly reasonable. After all, I'd never wanted to eat monster meat in the first place. As long as things stayed peaceful, the monster army was unnecessary too, and the only nobles left in Farune, Cadonia, and Dorssen were basically all relatives and friends. Was there really any issue?

But wait, I guess I still have to touch base with Nicol and Carmilla about it. I'd entrusted each of them with the rule of a country, so if I didn't explain things, it could lead to confusion. Religion was always a touchy subject, but as for the prohibition on monster meat, Nicol didn't eat monster meat himself, and Carmilla only ate it reluctantly, so they'd both probably be in favor of the prohibition.

I had to remember that if I was the only one who approved of the new doctrine, the Hundred would likely protest it, fiercely. In fact, I'd probably end up a victim of domestic violence, courtesy of Cassandra. On the other hand, if Nicol and Carmilla took my side, the blame would be dispersed. *Yeah, this plan doesn't sound half bad.*

"I'll decide my response after conferring with Nicol and Carmilla," I said.

"Yes, sir," Gamarath said. "I'll arrange everything right away." Having received instructions from me, he left immediately.



I couldn't leave Cadonia and Dorssen without their rulers, so the conference with Nicol and Carmilla was held via magic. We had a wizard project their images onto the wall of the conference room, and channel their voices so we could hear them from the same spot. *Magic sure is handy.*

Gamarath and Luida were also in attendance, Gamarath as chair of the meeting, and Luida to provide advice from a priestess's point of view. Incidentally, Frau was also there for some reason, sitting next to me. Well, she was the queen, so there was nothing wrong with her being there, but I had absolutely no memory of inviting her.

To begin the proceedings, Gamarath gave a brief explanation of the Church of Mauve's new doctrine. Everything he said was exactly as he'd told me earlier, and Nicol and Carmilla were probably already aware of the situation themselves.

When Nicol finished listening to Gamarath, he had a serious look on his face. "In other words," he said, "this means our next target is the Theocracy of Mauve."

What sort of twisted logic did you use to reach that conclusion?

"They have some nerve, trying to pick a fight with Farune," Carmilla said. "Those lowly servants of God have gotten quite full of themselves." She put her handheld fan to her mouth, only partially hiding a smug smile.

Huh? You too? But you hate eating monster meat! If you accept the doctrine, you won't have to anymore!

"Are you both opposed to the new doctrine?" I asked. "You're up against the largest religious organization in Ares, you know." I'd put Nicol and Carmilla in charge of entire countries, so I really wished they'd think things over a bit more soberly. In a certain sense, this could actually have been a good opportunity to turn Farune into a respectable country.

"I see, Mars," Nicol said consideringly. "So you wished to see whether we have the *fortitude* to make an enemy of the Theocracy." When he had first left for Cadonia, Nicol had still looked somewhat immature, but by now he had become significantly more dignified and kingly in appearance. As brothers, we had the same black hair and black eyes, so we looked alike, but he had given off more of a delicate impression when he was younger. Now, he even had his own children with Princess Rubis.

This newly distinguished version of Nicol was saying something I couldn't quite wrap my head around. *What do you mean, "the fortitude to make an enemy of them"? That wasn't what I had in mind at all.*

"Yes, the people may be disturbed by the news," Carmilla said. "But do we really seem weak enough for that to bother us?" With her violet hair hanging over her ample chest, Carmilla looked enchanting. Her beauty had increased all the more after having had a child.

Wait, you may be pretty, but are you really saying you want to fight against the church?

"Hold on. A monarch's primary duties are establishing peace for their country and stability for their subjects. You mustn't take that lightly," I said, chastising both rulers with as much dignity as I could muster. I had more experience as a king than either of them. If I didn't take charge, there was no telling what might happen.

"I am aware, Mars," Nicol said, an awkward smile on his face. "Please, there's no need to test us so strenuously."

Test? What am I testing?

"Eating monster meat is the foundational pillar of Farune's power," Carmilla said, the corners of her mouth twisting into a grimace. She seemed to have accepted the practice, albeit reluctantly. "Neither Cadonia nor Dorssen could survive without it. No matter how disgusting and how poisonous monster meat is, we can't stop eating it now."

It's the foundational pillar of Farune's power? How tragic is that? I just want to live a life where I can eat food that actually tastes good.

"Lady Carmilla is right," Nicol said. "The Hundred only exists because of eating monster meat. And Farune only exists as it is because of the Hundred. The Hundred you lead, Mars, is the bedrock on which Farune now stands. Farune has only been able to expand into the center of the continent with so few soldiers because of it. The Theocracy of Mauve doesn't like that, which must be why they're trying to incapacitate Farune's military by abolishing the practice of eating monster meat. The monster army must be awfully terrifying to them as well." Nicol paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. "Eyland and Vulcan have to be behind this," he ventured. "Those two countries sure went to a great deal of effort to weaken us."

Nicol saw monster meat as far more important than I had imagined he would. True, the country's current military force did rely in large part on the Hundred. Thanks to them, we were getting by with very few soldiers. Plus, the Hundred loved to fight, so I could send them into battle without having to worry. If the consumption of monsters was banned, how would they react?

They'll definitely go on some sort of rampage, I thought. *They might even go totally off the rails and revolt.* I also got the feeling that Ogma and Cassandra, and others like them, were likely to side with such a revolt, if push came to shove. When I thought about it that way, it started to sound like abiding by the doctrine was actually a pretty bad idea.

"And there is another issue," Nicol continued.

That's not all?

"The protection for the status of the nobility," he said. Gamarath happily nodded as his grandson spoke. Nicol was my half-brother, and his mother—my stepmother—was Gamarath's daughter.

But aren't pretty much all the nobles gone at this point? Mostly because you guys stamped them out of existence. So what's the problem?

"Currently, most of the nobility have been banished, but if we were to accept the new doctrine, they would most likely demand a restoration of their status," Nicol said. "Even if the original owner of some property has passed, for example, their relatives may request the return of their land and other property in their stead. The church is sure to back these claims, and Eyland and Vulcan will surely also support the former nobles. If that happens, there will be no avoiding internal disorder."

And that wasn't all.

"The vague wording of the doctrine alone also raises some thorny legal issues," he continued. "What exactly is 'protection for the status of the nobility'? To what point in time are their claims of status supposed to be restored? Should we base all of this on domestic law and precedent, or obey directives from the church? Trying to comply would be quite a headache. No, we simply cannot accept the doctrine. If we assent to anything, it should be at most the item about the large-scale use of monsters."

I hadn't considered any of that.

Right. The nobles' fortunes. We've probably used them all up by now. And we do have the revenue from the arena at this point, but I don't want to give that to them. This might turn into an annoying issue after all.

"In any case, I'm sure you were aware of all that already, Mars," Nicol added. "I didn't think an explanation would be necessary, but I took the liberty of giving one anyway, just to make sure that everyone was on the same page."

Oh Nicol. I had absolutely no clue about any of that.

"As to your last point, Lord Nicol, the prohibition on the large-scale use of monsters also presents issues," Carmilla chimed in, gently brushing aside the locks of her hair that hung over her chest.

It was an alluring habit of hers that actually made me regret somewhat sending her to Dorssen. "One reason Farune enjoys the support of the common people is our lack of mandatory military conscription. This is possible because we have a separate organization, the Hundred, but if a large war breaks out, they won't be enough, no matter how strong they are. Having said that, untrained soldiers will only be a burden on Farune, though it may be different for other countries. Military use of monsters will make up for this lack of strength in the future." She paused, then added, "Besides, other countries would love to make use of monsters, if only they could, but they can't, which is why they're jealous and trying to ban it. How silly. If anything, the protection for the status of the nobility is the most trivial matter on the list. We can easily dispense with it by simply exterminating every last one of them." She looked at Nicol, her gaze daring him to disagree.

Despite once having been known as the Frenzied Princess, Carmilla's thought process was surprisingly reasonable. For the most part. Her idea about exterminating the remaining banished nobles was just her usual bloodthirsty self shining through.

Either way, she was correct that Farune was in an ideal situation at the moment. Only the battle-hungry meatheads who wanted to fight did, while ordinary, upstanding commoners who didn't want to fight were free to devote themselves to their jobs and regular lives. Maybe the monster army *would* help maintain those favorable circumstances. More than anything else, there really were practical benefits to making use of the numerous hostile monsters that populated the Forest of Beasts.

"What you've just said troubles me deeply, Lady Carmilla," Nicol said, looking uneasy. "Surely you must be aware that not all problems can be resolved with force alone. The people will not so readily accept the existence of a monster army. With the fates of our countries resting on our shoulders, we must search for a milder solution."

"Both of you, please," Gamarath said, trying to mediate the burgeoning confrontation. "However we go about addressing it, are

we not all in agreement that we cannot afford to accept the Church of Mauve's new doctrine?"

"Indeed we are, Grandfather," Nicol said. "None in my country would even think to acknowledge it."

"Even a five-year-old child can see that," Carmilla said.

What does that make me?

"The main issue is how we ought to respond," Nicol said. "That's why, when we began, I wondered whether the Theocracy of Mauve would be our next target. A normal country would never even consider standing up to them, but I know you, Mars, and you don't have that kind of sense. However, and I say this with full awareness of your nature, please, at the very least, refrain from massacring all of them," he urged. "As you might expect, it would disturb the citizens."

Massacre all of them? Who do you think I am? I'm a common-sense pacifist, you know. I've never even considered making a move against the Theocracy.

"Oh my, there you go again with your squeamishness, Lord Nicol," Carmilla said. "My husband's ironfisted rule is already steeped in blood, so what are you so afraid of? The religion will only be a thorn in our side in the future. Don't you think it would be best to pummel them thoroughly now?"

Hey now, I won't have you soaking me with blood.

And another thing! Are you serious? You're really about to pick a fight with God? But just as I was about to stop them, Frau, who had been sitting by my side as quietly as a porcelain doll, tugged on my sleeve.

"Shall I crush the church?" she whispered.

I was just wondering why she was being so quiet, and those are the first words out of her mouth?! Is that *why she came to this meeting?*

Actually, yeah, that makes sense. She doesn't strike me as the type to believe in God at all. If anything, she probably thinks God is some sort of demonic creature.



"So you agree, Elder Sister," Carmilla said, clearly delighted.

This was bad. At this rate, I was going to go down in history as the villainous king who destroyed the Church of Mauve. I didn't want that to happen.

Besides Nicol, is there anyone else who can stop them?

Looking around the room, I finally caught sight of Luida. She was sitting at the end of the table and seemed unsure if it was appropriate for her to interrupt a conversation between such important people. Her face was so pale that she looked about ready to faint.

I can see why. Whatever other factors may be at play, they're still talking about destroying the church she belongs to.

"Luida, what do you think of the new doctrine?" I asked, bringing her into the conversation. "What do you suppose will happen if we violate it?" The futures of both Farune and the Church of Mauve hinged on this moment.

Luida was quiet at first, then replied, "The new doctrine was clearly created with Farune in mind, so I think the church will enact a suitable penalty. Most likely, they will excommunicate Your Majesty."

Her prediction was pessimistic, and even though she was being honest, I was sure her motives also included wanting to help out the church some way or another.

Excommunication? Well, it's not like it'll really have much of an effect on me.

"Will there be any issues if that happens?" I asked.

"Church ceremonies will no longer be held in Farune," Luida explained. "It will probably become impossible to obtain the assistance of a priest for services such as marriages and funerals. That may be no inconvenience for Your Majesty, but your subjects will suffer. Also, I think they will likely be disturbed if their king is excommunicated."

"So there isn't any other option except to crush the church, then," Carmilla said. The look on her face reminded me of a bird of prey.

"Please wait, Lady Carmilla," Nicol said. "If you destroy the church, there will inevitably be even more unrest among the citizens than in the event of an excommunication. You'll earn the enmity of every follower of Mauve around the world. Our countries will become more difficult to govern as well! Not just Farune!"

I was glad someone around here had some sense. Nicol was like our country's conscience, and as his older brother, I for one felt reassured.

"Well then, Lord Nicol, what would you propose?" Carmilla asked.

All right, Nicol, tell 'em. A peaceful solution, please.

"The current pope of the Church of Mauve is a moderate. As such, we can make him change his mind by exploiting his weaknesses," Nicol began. "I imagine the best initial move will be to bribe his close associates and bishops to support us. Threats will also be an effective tool, if they won't accept money. If we thoroughly investigate them, then advise them that we have knowledge of their family members and their locations, they'll be more amenable to listening to our 'requests.'"

Huh? What in the world is he going on about? I wondered. I looked around at the others, but nearly all of them were nodding along emphatically.

"For example, we could send birthday presents to their children or grandchildren," he continued, "which would imply that we know all about their families, including their addresses and other detailed information. On the surface, this method would seem like no more than a celebration, which would make it impossible for them to protest, thus significantly containing our risk. And if they still don't listen to our 'requests,' then we'll just make an example out of them. One of their relatives might just happen to get into an unfortunate accident, for example."

"I see. It seems like you could use this approach against vassals as well," Carmilla said. Unusually for her, she was even taking notes.

I wish she'd write down something less unsavory. Like a recipe for a meat dish she could treat me to. Monster meat not included.

"Another option would be to completely destroy a region under the jurisdiction of an influential bishop in the pro-doctrine faction as a warning," Nicol went on. "Of course, if we do, we'll have to destroy all evidence. That means we mustn't leave any survivors and we'll need to burn every last building to the ground. The more respectable a bishop we choose, the more effective this tactic will be, because the church's own devout followers will be losing their lives. This will undoubtedly increase the number of bishops on our side. So you see why there's no need in the slightest to massacre everyone. We ought to keep the number of victims to a minimum."

You know, this feels a lot like I'm listening to a superintelligent criminal plan out his schemes.

Nicol's face had not so much as twitched. He was actually serious. His plan was as unpleasant as it was realistic. Come to think of it, he *was* the grandson of the corrupt Prime Minister Gamarath. Of course his ideas were going to tend in that direction. I was starting to get really worried about how he was governing Cadonia.

Gamarath, on the other hand, seemed to be in favor of Nicol's plan, and he was nodding eagerly. *Yeah, well you've always been like that.*

Carmilla's expression had warped. She was probably put off by how unscrupulous Nicol's methods were. I sympathized with her so much it was painful.

"Not bad," she said, "but don't you think that's a touch lenient? If we fight them head-on and crush them totally instead, won't that teach them to know their place?"

Never mind, I take it back. She just wants to use a more direct method. This is really bad. Nothing good will come of me leaving this up to them.

Nicol and Carmilla were crazy; their only ideas for taking on an entire religion were either shameless crime or all-out war. I had no choice but to act. Talking things out was best, in order to reach a peaceful resolution. And according to Nicol, the pope was a moderate, which meant he would probably be willing to listen to us.

"Any direct interference will be unnecessary," I said. "Too much can go wrong if it's discovered, and it'll cause unnecessary panic

among our subjects. I'll go talk to him myself."

"To whom?" Gamarath asked, sounding genuinely curious.

He probably hadn't been expecting me to say that, which was disappointing. After all, I was a pacifist—so I believed war was the worst possible course of action… *Though I guess at this point, I've ended up solving all our problems with violence anyway.*

"Isn't it obvious? The pope of the Church of Mauve."

"You, in person, with the pope?" Nicol asked. He was surprised as well. "What will you talk about, Mars?"

"This whole thing is the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding between my country and the Theocracy," I explained. "I'll have a new bishop dispatched here, which will deepen our understanding of each other."

"A new bishop, after all this time?" Carmilla, too, had a puzzled look on her face.

"Invite a bishop to Farune?" Nicol thought it over for a bit, then understanding dawned. "Aha, of course. Like Lady Carmilla?"

Like her? What's that supposed to mean?

Actually, she *had* come to Farune as an enemy at first, but after that, she'd become part of our country's government. In a certain sense, she could have been seen as a symbol of reconciliation between two warring powers.

"Like me?" Carmilla asked, then understanding seemed to reach her as well. "I see, so that's what you mean."

Good, I'm glad we're finally understanding each other.

"A new bishop?" Luida asked. She should have been the most pleased out of everyone, but she still looked uneasy.

"That's right," I said. "I'll show that bishop what it's really like in Farune, and then they can issue their judgment."

"But, Your Majesty," Luida ventured, "this may sound strange coming from me, but the church higher-ups are all of noble birth. They're really awful. I don't think they'll have anything good to say about Farune."

She was part of the clergy herself, so her negative view of the church's leaders probably meant she'd had some bad firsthand

experiences. Maybe the leadership of every large organization was morally bankrupt.

"I'll pick them myself, so that won't be an issue," I said, trying to assuage her concerns. "They'll be the bishop of Farune, after all, so I'll need to find someone promising."

"Do you really think it'll work?" Luida asked, voice still full of doubt.

Oh come on, it's better than going to war or turning to lives of crime, right?

"Also, how will you get there, Your Majesty? It's impossible to reach the Theocracy of Mauve without passing through Eyland first." Gamarath, always the professional, was of course worried about the finer details. The Theocracy was quite a distance away from Farune. To reach it, you had to go through Dorssen, then cross Eyland.

"I'll take a Wyvern. Passing through Eyland won't be a problem if I'm flying."

"I see," Gamarath said, sounding satisfied. "That would solve the issue."

"Indeed, if you go in person, it will certainly resolve things. That's my brother for you!" Nicol declared, free with his compliments.

That's right, I knew it. Peaceful solutions are best.

"I knew you'd come up with something, my dear," Carmilla said, also sounding pleased. "I'm surprised this is the option you're choosing. I'm also impressed." She had undoubtedly fallen in love with me all over again.

"I'll go too." Last of all, Frau announced that she'd accompany me.

Well, all right. Going together as king and queen would be a show of good faith. When she wasn't speaking, Frau really did give the impression of a precious doll. Our son, Arthur, had also grown up enough that there wouldn't be any particular issue entrusting him to Cassandra or Sheila while we were away.

Good, I'm glad everyone agreed to talk things out. Peace really is the best way forward.



AFTER the conference with Mars was over, Nicol ordered a wizard subordinate of his to connect him directly with Carmilla in Dorssen.

"Lady Carmilla, were you able to grasp my brother's true intentions?" he asked her. He wanted to make sure there were no discrepancies in each of their understandings. Neither of them had wanted to embarrass themselves during the conference by speaking up and saying they didn't see what Mars actually meant.

"Of course I was, Lord Nicol. I'm his consort, aren't I? I instantly figured everything out." Carmilla, a lovely smile on her face, lightly fanned herself with her handheld fan. "The plan is to win over the bishop that the church dispatches, then support them in becoming the new pope, right? Like what was done with me."

Mars had made Carmilla, his former foe, into one of his princess consorts, then installed her as the de facto leader of Dorssen, formerly an enemy country. Both she and Nicol understood that he was trying to do the same thing again, this time with the largest religion in Ares. The plan could only be described as audacious, and naturally, Mars had absolutely no intention of doing anything less.

"Indeed. Looking back, my brother hasn't conquered other countries using just force. He usurped Cadonia by having me marry a Cadonian princess, Rubis, and he made your son, Leon, the king of Dorssen," Nicol listed off. "He abides by proper lineage. In the Theocracy of Mauve, lineage is irrelevant, but he must be planning to win over someone suitable. After that, he'll usurp the church as a whole. What a perfectly fearsome idea. I'd never have been able to think of it."

"Truly. He must be planning to rule over Ares religiously as well as politically," Carmilla agreed. "By the way, did you know? I've heard there's a woman in the Theocracy of Mauve right now who's a promising candidate for sainthood." Carmilla's smile widened.

"A saint! I see, well she would certainly be the ideal choice."

"My husband takes everything into account," Carmilla said proudly. "He must have held today's meeting to warn us not to act against the doctrine ourselves without his permission. What an intimidating man he is."

"Undoubtedly. I was worried about the new doctrine, and was about to take some minor action myself, but now the issue is settled without me having to do anything rash or unnecessary." In his desire to support Mars, Nicol had been about to make some "requests" of the Theocracy's leaders to bring them over to Farune's side.

"Yes, and I was in the process of selecting a force to conquer the Theocracy. He had to have seen through even that." Carmilla didn't like the new church doctrine either, and she had created a unit centered around her subordinate Shirley, a former assassin. Together, they had been about to take extreme measures against the church.

"My brother isn't forming a friendship, nor is he conquering them with force of arms," Nicol said, awe in his voice. "Instead, he's trying to swallow up the religion itself. The breadth of his plans is beyond any of us."

Nicol and Carmilla exchanged looks, then laughed. These weren't joyful laughs, though; rather, they could do nothing *but* laugh—they had no idea how far into the future their lord could see.

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THE day after the conference, I rode the Wyvern, Aer, to the Theocracy of Mauve. Frau was seated behind me, her arms wrapped around my waist.

The people who were mainly responsible for handling the Wyverns—and therefore the people accompanying us—composed a newly formed unit in the army called the Dragoons. Becoming a Dragoon required a certain level of aptitude, and Keely had selected the recruits herself from among the potential candidates. Those who were chosen fed the Wyverns by hand and performed other everyday tasks to build the trust necessary for the Wyverns to accept them.

The Dragoons and I traveled while standing out as little as we could, avoiding routes over major urban areas. It would have looked ridiculous if we'd been noticed and caused a stir before even reaching our destination.

Even after taking several rests during the journey, we still arrived in the Theocracy of Mauve after only half a day. It probably would have taken at least five days by land, so we had saved a great deal of time. *This Wyvern unit will definitely be useful in the future.*

The Theocracy of Mauve was a historic city fanning out in a beautiful sprawl of white buildings from a central temple. We landed our Wyverns in a square right in the middle of it all. Why? Because we wanted to offer a change in perspective.

The Church of Mauve had little appreciation for monsters. They held all sorts of deeply entrenched preconceived notions, like that monsters were scary, evil, and the natural enemies of humans. Now, these ideas *were* largely correct, but we wanted to prove that monsters could also be useful, provided they were properly trained. Hopefully, this would encourage the leaders of the Theocracy to be a bit more understanding about the large-scale use of monsters.

Also, as a weaker species of dragon, Wyverns looked cool from far away but weren't that threatening compared to other monsters. That would definitely make it easier for the townspeople to accept them. Yes, I had put my fair share of thought into all this. It would be a sort of demonstration, before my talk with the pope. Well-trained Wyverns weren't about to go off and start attacking people after all. However…

"Dragons! What are they doing here?!"

"Monsters, invading Lord Mauve's hallowed ground?!"

"Run! Call the Holy Knights!"

Upon seeing the Wyverns suddenly glide in for a landing, the city's residents screamed and ran away.

Oh well. No matter the field, I guess early pioneers are never appreciated at first.

"Your Majesty, what shall we do?" Captain Gyunei of the Dragoons asked me.

"I don't want the Wyverns to get attacked," I replied. "Leave the city for a while and await further instructions."

"Yes, sir. When you would like to leave, please call us, Your Majesty." Gyunei bowed, then led the other Dragoons in taking to the sky. Aer, whom Frau and I had ridden, followed after them. I'd given Gyunei a magic bell to take with him; when I rang the other bell in the pair, he would instantly hear it and know to come pick us up.

"Now, let's go," I said to Ogma, Aaron, Barry, Bill, and Bruno, whom I'd had the Dragoons ferry along with me. They'd be acting as my bodyguards for this mission.

I stood next to Frau. Her face was as expressionless as always, but she had turned her gaze to the town, perhaps out of curiosity. We began moving toward the temple right away, and in no time at all we were surrounded by what looked to be several Holy Knights. They were clad in exquisitely designed suits of silver armor.

"Who are you?!" the man who appeared to be their captain demanded, a harsh look on his face.

"I'm Mars, the king of Farune. I'd like to see the pope."

"The king of Farune?! The one the rumors say is the Demon King…?" The knights drew their swords, getting ready for a fight.

Hey, don't call me the Demon King to my face. Where are your manners?

"That's some insolence, calling His Majesty the Demon King to his face!" Ogma shouted. "My king is nothing like that weakling!" He and the others stepped forward menacingly.

Uh, I don't think that's the part you're supposed to object to.

"Arrest them!" the captain said, and the knights attacked us all at once, not seeming intimidated at all.

"Don't kill them, got it?" I said to my guards, just in case. I was planning to have a diplomatic conversation shortly, after all, and it wouldn't be wise to create any bad blood before that.

"I know, I know!" Ogma replied happily, probably thinking that my order was the perfect handicap.



"TAKE that! You call yourselves the glorious Holy Knights, servants of God? He's watching from up there! So maybe try harder!"

"What happened to those restoration spells you're so proud of? Heal yourself, get back up, and come at me already! Not that it'll keep me from hitting you even harder next time!"

"Is this all God's blessings can do? This Mauve guy is a piece of cake!"

In the blink of an eye, and using only their bare hands, my guards knocked out the ten knights that had initiated the battle. Then, still without drawing their swords, they started beating up the thirty additional knights that had come as reinforcements.

Aside from Bruno, who was comparatively well-behaved, the other four were pretty rough-mannered. This was especially true of Aaron, who had an inferiority complex when it came to these types of elite soldiers, so he tormented them relentlessly. He was really nasty, stomping on the sides of collapsed knights and breaking their ribs, or waiting for them to heal before he punched them again and knocked them out. Some of the knights were so frustrated they were actually shedding tears, but Aaron's response was to mercilessly kick them in the face.

Did I bring the wrong people with me? I get the feeling we're creating more grudges than if we'd just killed these guys.

I was greatly troubled by the behavior of my guards, but Frau looked like she was enjoying herself.

When every last Holy Knight was prostrate on the ground, with none of them moving a muscle, several clergymen in very ostentatious outfits came rushing over. They grimaced at the terrible condition of the Holy Knights, then one said, "The king of Farune, I presume? His Holiness will see you now. Please, come this way."

IV: The Pope

THE pope of the Church of Mauve was at a loss. He was in his sixties, though his white hair and long white facial hair made him look even older.

I never expected the king of Farune would come in person, he thought.

He hadn't yet had any issues with issuing the new doctrine, and this latest development was unforeseen. Or rather, who could have predicted that someone would do anything as outrageous as flying right into the heart of the city on a fleet of dragons? It was clearly a show of force. The king of Farune was demonstrating that he could easily have destroyed the Theocracy of Mauve whenever he wished. He feared nothing, not even God.

The pope had just received a report that his dependable Holy Knights had all been handily dispatched by the king of Farune's subordinates.

I've heard that Farune's knights are strong, but I never thought they'd be that *strong. Perhaps there's some truth to the rumors that the king of Farune's strength is matched only by that of the Demon King.*

It would have been unrealistic for the pope to request aid from Eyland, Vulcan, or Kiel at the moment. And yet, if he didn't do something soon, the dignity of the Church of Mauve would be tarnished.

There's no way around it. Should I accept his request for a meeting?

The pope called for a member of his entourage, then informed them that he would be meeting with the king of Farune. However, he made sure to order them to bring the unexpected visitor to him as slowly as possible. The pope knew what the king was there to demand: he wanted the new doctrine revoked. But the pope couldn't afford to comply. It would have been absolutely unacceptable to take back what he had already decided. The Church of Mauve had to remain infallible.

"Muster every one of the Holy Knights," the pope ordered another subordinate. "And gather as many as you can who are able to cast spells, then prepare for when the time comes they might need to do so."

He would make sure his forces got organized while he met with the king, and work out some way to take him down. No matter how

strong the king of Farune may have been, he only had a few people accompanying him. Divine miracles had enormous power when performed together by a group, which should have given the pope a good chance of success.

When the pope heard a commotion outside, he knew the king of Farune had arrived.

The door opened, and an ordinary young nobleman without any particularly distinguishing traits entered the room. Behind him followed an unrefined blond knight who appeared to be his bodyguard.

"It is an honor to meet you, Your Holiness," the young man said. "My name is Mars, and I am the king of Farune." The king smiled as he spoke. He had a gentle, kindhearted demeanor. The pope certainly couldn't sense any of the brutality or wickedness of a Demon King or even a Mad King.

Is this really the king of Farune? the pope wondered. It felt anticlimactic. On the other hand, the knight standing behind Mars was glaring suspiciously and being terribly insolent. He seemed awfully boorish, so the pope didn't want to provoke him.

"Surely this meeting is the providence of Lord Mauve. May God bless you," the pope said. Then, after this perfunctory greeting, he cut to the chase. "Now, what has brought you here today, Lord Mars?"

"I'm here because I would like to speak to Your Holiness about the new doctrine," Mars replied with a smile.

So it is that after all.

"Its contents are exactly as written," the pope said. "What is there to speak about?"

"Quite a lot, in fact," Mars replied. "This doctrine, which hasn't been recorded in church scripture before now, was newly added by Your Holiness. This is surely a historic moment for the faith, is it not? Or, I wonder, did Your Holiness receive a revelation from Mauve?"

The pope clammed up, unsure what to say. It was true that the new doctrine didn't originate in scripture, and he couldn't lie and say that he had received a divine revelation. *The king of Farune is unexpectedly eloquent with his threats.*

"I simply incorporated what is known to be right and natural for human beings into dogma," the pope said. "They are exceedingly obvious rules, but it appears that in recent years, some among us have been unable to abide by them. I simply made it clear that—"

Thud. The head of a bronze statue of the first pope went flying off. The knight Mars had brought with him appeared to have given it a good punch.

"Sorry," he said, sounding insincere. "I didn't like the look on that statue's face, and before I knew it…" With a flippant smile, the knight picked the statue's head up off the floor. He had to have been insanely strong to break a bronze statue with his bare hands. The members of the pope's entourage in the room all went pale.

"Hey, Ogma. Show some respect!" Mars scolded the knight. Apparently, the insolent knight's name was Ogma. "My apologies, Your Holiness. Many of my country's people are so unruly that I can't quite get them to listen to me."

"I-Is that so…?" the pope asked. *What a shameless lie,* he thought to himself. *I know he did that on your orders. You think I'll believe you, even after that obvious threat earlier? Wait, that reminds me, he was supposed to have five subordinates with him. What happened to the other four? And where's that infamous wife of his, the Lightning Empress?* "I heard you brought your queen consort and five others with you, Lord Mars, but where have they gone? Are they waiting outside this room?"

"Yes, I ordered them to stay outside, and on their best behavior," Mars replied.

But that very moment, the pope heard a sudden, deafening noise coming from just outside the room. There were battle cries, screams, and the sounds of things breaking. To put it simply, a brawl seemed to have begun. The pope had a terrible sinking feeling, but Mars continued to speak as if he couldn't hear the noise at all.

"So, Your Holiness, you said your decree is only right and natural for us as human beings, but there is absolutely nothing about eating monster meat, controlling monsters, or abolishing the nobility that goes against humanity," Mars said. "In fact, when I was unable to eat ordinary food because of constant attempts to poison

me, I was able to avoid starvation by eating monsters. The flesh of those monsters gave me strength, and that enabled me to become king. In other words, without monster meat, I would have died, and the citizens of Farune would have only continued to suffer under the tyranny of the nobles. From that perspective, eating monster meat is by no means evil. As such, if you could just limit it to one meal a day, or some other quantitative restriction, then—"

Mars's voice suddenly stopped working before he could finish what he was saying. He had been plotting to use this as an opportunity to avoid eating monster meat for every meal, but Frau had sensed his plans and remotely blocked his voice.

The pope had a suspicious expression on his face at the sudden silence. After a moment, Mars confirmed that he could speak again. Giving up on his hopes of having his monster meat intake at all limited, he moved to the next topic.

"And what's wrong with controlling monsters, as long as it helps people out?" he said. "If I'm not mistaken, there are accounts in scripture of Mauve controlling monsters. In fact, I used Wyverns to come here today, and the trip only took half a day, when it normally would have taken five. This is nothing short of a massive step forward for humanity. It is vital not to marginalize monsters as evil creatures, but to make use of their abilities to our advantage.

"As for the nobility," he continued, "doesn't the Church of Mauve preach that there are no status distinctions between people? That principle is the main reason commoners are more devout believers than the nobility. This new doctrine, which appears to give the nobility special privileges, is a departure from this principle. I have governed for the sake of the happiness of the vast majority of commoners, rather than for a small handful of nobles." Here, he paused somewhat dramatically. "That is why," he said when he spoke again, "to make my regime flourish even further, I would like to spread the teachings of the Church of Mauve to Farune!"

He had prepared this plan, to simultaneously argue against the new doctrine and announce his enthusiasm for adopting church teachings in Farune, with Gamarath beforehand. Its logic was flawless, and it should have been an easy resolution for the church

to accept. However, the pope was no longer in any condition to listen to what Mars had to say. The din outside the room was showing no signs of abating. If anything, it was getting louder. The pope could clearly make out screams and shouts of violence.

"Lord God, save me!"

"God's busy, he's out visiting his mistress!"

"Do you know where you are right now?"

"This is the place closest to heaven, right? Then I'll send you there right now!"

"You'll all be damned to hell!"

"We're already there! Farune is hell on earth!"

And so on. He couldn't bear to listen to it. He was also starting to hear what sounded like explosions, which he guessed were coming from Lightning Empress Frau's magic. The fact that she wasn't in the room meant that the notoriously powerful mage, once celebrated as a child prodigy, had probably been brought specifically to counter the priests' divine miracles.

The sounds of destruction continued without pause. Everything in the church, down to each individual chair, had immense cultural value. The pope felt a chill run down his spine just imagining what was being destroyed. He simply didn't want to believe this was really happening on the Church of Mauve's holy ground.

"Lord Mars, I can see what you wish to say," he started, "but, well…it's so noisy outside that I can't wrap my head around it all…"

"It is?" Mars had a blank look on his face, like he was feigning ignorance of the deafening tumult. "Hey, Ogma, is it really that loud?"

"Who knows? It always sounds like this in Farune, so it doesn't sound too loud to my ears."

"Well, there you have it, Your Holiness," Mars said with a bright smile. "Please, don't mind the noise, and let us proceed."

But just then, there was a knock on the door, and a pale-faced man of the church entered the room. He whispered something to someone from the pope's entourage, and upon hearing what the visitor had to say, the man's face turned as white as his. He approached the pope and spoke softly in his ear.

"Your Holiness, the Holy Knights and priests gathered in the cathedral have been defeated by the Lightning Empress and Farune's knights."

The pope was silent for a moment, then spoke. "Understood," he said. "You may take your leave."

This was the worst possible outcome. Mars had predicted the pope's next move and preempted it by having his consort and subordinates strike first. Essentially, the pope and his staff were now completely at the mercy of the Farunians. *Damn, he may look gentle, but he's got all his bases covered… Perhaps there's something to the name Mad King after all.*

"Lord Mars, I think I know what you want to say," the pope said, speaking much less politely than he had been previously. "So I'll keep things simple: what do you want?" All he could do was try to resolve this situation without further incident somehow. If he provoked Farune, the next head pitifully parting from its shoulders could very well be his own.

"Our wish is for it to be officially decreed that there will be no penalties for violating the new doctrine, and for a new bishop to be dispatched to our country," Mars said.

Refraining from setting penalties, rather than repealing the doctrine altogether, was just barely within the realm of what the pope could concede. The king of Farune had, in fact, made a realistic proposal.

"I agree, with respect to the penalties," the pope consented. "But what's this about a new bishop?"

"I believe this whole situation is due to a lack of mutual understanding," Mars explained. "I'd like a bishop to be stationed in Farune, and for us to maintain close communication so that we might deepen our understanding of one another."

"I see." It was true that the absence of a palace bishop in Farune made it difficult for the church to obtain any information about the country. As a result, the pope had established the new doctrine with Eylish, Vulcanian, and Kielian support, but that had only brought about the quandary in which he now found himself. If

he had only known a bit more about Farune, it was very possible that all of this could have been avoided.

On top of that, it was now abundantly clear that calling the man before him the Demon King was a total overreaction. If Mars really had been the Demon King, he would already have killed everyone in the church, let alone the room. He obviously wouldn't have troubled himself with a conversation like this. Even Farune's knights didn't appear to have actually killed anyone, despite their violent behavior.

"Very well," the pope said. "I will select a bishop for Farune." He intended to send someone he knew he could trust.

"Actually, Your Holiness, if possible, I would like the honor of selecting a bishop myself."

"What?"

"In Farune, there's a cultural tendency to devalue those lacking physical or magical strength. No matter how virtuous a bishop may be, if they aren't strong—say, if they aren't very good at restoration magic—they may be made to feel ashamed. Things might not go well for them when they otherwise would. As such, I'd like to evaluate how strong any prospective bishop is myself."

"Ahh, but…" The pope fell silent. Everyone he'd had in mind were skilled negotiators, but sure enough, they weren't particularly good at restoration magic. After all, mana power levels weren't an issue for high-ranking bishops as long as they could perform the proper ceremonies. "Lord Mars," the pope finally said. "Bishops don't need strong restoration magic. It's doubtful whether the kind of person you're hoping for even exists."

"I'd like to judge that for myself, if you don't mind. All the powerful mages in this country have been gathered in the cathedral, right?"

He saw that far ahead? The pope sighed deeply, then stood up. "All right," he said. "Follow me."

V: A Saint

SOMEHOW, the negotiations had actually gone well. I was really relieved. I'd been worried when the people I'd made wait outside had started getting violent. Frankly, I'd had the sneaking suspicion things were about to go wrong ever since Frau had mentioned she'd be waiting outside too.

"Stay on your best behavior, got it?" I'd told them all before the meeting, adding as much emphasis as I could. "I mean it, don't do anything stupid. All right?" I'd sensed something in the direction of the cathedral that felt like a gathering of powerful people. Maybe they were planning to try and do something about us.

But I was there to have a peaceful conversation. I didn't want to stumble into any fights.

"I understand, Your Majesty," replied Aaron, smiling. "Really, I do. C'mon, haven't we known each other for a while now?"

It has been a while, but so what? We've never managed to properly communicate with each other before, not even once.

"Yes, sir, we fully understand what Your Majesty is saying," Bruno added, putting a hand to his chest and bowing his head.

I didn't say anything all that deep, so why are they acting like I did?

"Your Majesty, this way, please," said the clergyman, opening the door to the room where the pope awaited me.

So, with a twinge of uneasiness, I had headed to my audience with the pope. And it wasn't easy. Ogma made threats like a cheap gangster, and even destroyed a bronze statue at one point. A fight audibly started just outside, which made me break out in a cold sweat. That familiar sound of loud, rumbling explosions was probably Frau's lightning. *Does she have a grudge against the church, or something?* I wondered.

But fortunately, about halfway through our conversation, the pope suddenly got a lot more receptive to what I had to say—probably because my best efforts at diplomacy had gotten through to him. And not because he thought my companions were out of control, and he wanted us to leave as soon as possible. No, definitely nothing like that.

In my advance preparations with Frau and Gamarath back in Farune, we'd reached the conclusion that the pope would be unlikely to accept a repeal of the new doctrine. So, we'd decided to try defanging the doctrine by removing its penalties, turning its mandates into nothing more than symbolic goals. Maybe the pope was relieved that I hadn't demanded he repeal the doctrine outright. Either way, he readily accepted the proposal.



AND so, we reached the cathedral where I'd be selecting a bishop for Farune. A giant stone statue of Mauve was nestled amid the structure's intricately designed ornamentation, which included paintings that recreated scenes from scripture and magnificent windows of stained glass set into the ceiling. The space was large enough to accommodate several thousand believers in its rows of antique pews. This was the holiest place in all of Ares.

Right now, however, there were also several hundred Holy Knights sprawled all over the floor. Quite a large portion of the furnishings, all which seemed to have storied pasts, had also been destroyed, and there were spots here and there that looked to be scorch marks—probably Frau's handiwork.

Speaking of Frau, she was perched on the shoulder of the stone statue of Mauve. It had to be the first time in history anyone had ever sat there. It was downright blasphemous. No matter how anyone looked at it, she was definitely a morally depraved she-devil. The thought that she was my wife made my head start to throb.

Finally, the trembling members of the clergy were huddled together in a corner of the cathedral, surrounded by my guards.

The pope and his entourage stood there speechless as they took in the scene. But one young woman of the clergy was still resolutely standing up to Aaron.

"Just like you ordered, Your Majesty, we were on our best behavior," Aaron said with a grin as soon as he saw us enter.

Do you even know what that means?

“Who is that young lady?” I asked after a pause. She had to have had considerable backbone to challenge a violent guy like Aaron.

“Oh, she just keeps nagging us, saying things like, ‘Please refrain from committing any further violence!’ and ‘Please, allow me to heal the injured Holy Knights!’” he replied. “She isn’t resisting otherwise though, so I haven’t laid a hand on her.”

The young woman was elegant and beautiful with pretty, flowing blonde hair and blue eyes that obscured a strong will. She exuded a captivating aura of divinity, and a charm that none of Farune’s fiendish, inhuman women could have hoped to possess.

“Sir, are you the king of Farune?” she asked me. “Please, allow me to heal the Holy Knights. They aren’t dead, but many of them have sustained grievous wounds.”



"What's your name?"

"Maria."

"Well, Lady Maria, these knights were probably gathered here to do us harm, so if I let you heal them, won't that be putting us in danger?" I asked. *Not that knights at this level will be much trouble.*

"I won't allow them to harm you," she said seriously. "I swear it, upon the holy name of God."

How can you be so certain? Sure you're cute, but do you really have that kind of influence? Even as I thought that, though, I felt exceptionally strong mana coming from the girl, more than I felt from anyone else around.

"Okay, very well," I said. "I'll allow it." For the time being, I decided to let her show me what she could do.

"I am truly grateful for Your Majesty's compassion. Well then…" And with that, Maria began a magic incantation on the spot. There were many injured people in the cathedral, but none who were right in front of her. The five from the Hundred turned their swords toward her, suspicious, but I held them back. I didn't feel any hostility in her spell.

After a long incantation, Maria finished by shouting, "Healing Field!"

The spell spread throughout the entire cathedral, and its effect activated. The knights who had been lying on the ground moments before began to get up, one after another, their wounds completely healed. Then they each began singing Maria's praises:

"Yep, that's our saint for you!"

"Incredible, to be able to heal us all at once…"

"This is truly a divine miracle…"

Saint? What are they talking about?

VI: Purchasing a Saint

AFTER healing all the Holy Knights in the cathedral, Maria spoke in a clear voice. "All Holy Knights, please leave the cathedral for now," she said. "I made a promise to the king of Farune in the name of God."

"But, Lady Maria…" one knight protested, looking at her with concern.

"There is nothing to be afraid of. Please." Maria's calm expression radiated devotion. Seeing this, the Holy Knights reluctantly left the cathedral, turning their heads several times along the way to look back at her.

Maria turned to me. "Your Majesty, is this satisfactory?" she asked, seemingly to indicate that she had fulfilled her side of our bargain.

"Yeah, it is," I replied.

"Now, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

With that, I remembered what I was there for. *That's right, I was looking for a bishop I could bring back to Farune. But what should I do?* None of the clergy who had been trembling under the glares of the Hundred seemed like a good fit for Farune's bishop.

"I want her," Frau said, pointing at Maria. She was still sitting on the statue's shoulder.

…First of all, can you get down from there? Everyone's staring at you like you're the devil incarnate.

But putting that aside, Frau's suggestion wasn't half bad. Maria's healing power was certainly a sight to behold. And she had successfully stood up to Aaron's threats, so she clearly had nerves of steel. I turned around to look at the pope.

"Your Holiness, I'd like to select Lady Maria as Farune's bishop."

"Wha—" All the color vanished from the pope's face, and Maria looked just as surprised. "I can't do that," the pope said. "Maria isn't in a position to be able to serve as a bishop."

"She isn't?" I asked. "Then, what is her position?"

"Maria is among the women who are candidates for sainthood. She is of commoner origin, but she has strong healing powers. That power must be put to use in the service of the faith."

"Even though she's a candidate for sainthood, she can't become a bishop?"

"Well…bishops need various other qualities," the pope said, a strained look on his face.

"You mean status and money, right?"

"That isn't all. Besides healing abilities, there are all sorts of other contributions a bishop needs to make to the church. It is not so simple to attain the title."

"His Holiness is correct. I'm not qualified to be a bishop," Maria said, smiling wistfully. "Just being a candidate for sainthood is enough for me."

This was ridiculous. The mana of all the other clergy standing around was clearly, and dramatically, inferior to hers. Plus, they were still trembling with fear, which meant they didn't have the advantage in terms of temperament either.

"Is that so?" I said. "Then, I'll ask everyone else. Is there anyone here who would do me the honor of coming to Farune to be our bishop?" I turned to the other clergy. "As you can see, Farunians are pretty rowdy, so I want someone capable, who can use the teachings of the church to guide them onto the right path." I wasn't lying. If any of them could do it, I would have loved to see them try. I wanted my subordinates to be closer to normal, not a bunch of violent musclemen who started fights whenever the opportunity arose.

And speaking of, Aaron glared at the clergymen. "Hey, is there anyone here upstanding enough to straighten up our act?" he drawled. "Hurry up and show yourself. Ahh, y'know, I'd really love to listen to a sermon right about now!" He played the part of a small-time gangster perfectly…or maybe that was just his natural personality.

Then, to make matters worse, Frau began discharging threatening little crackles of electricity from her fingers. The situation could hardly have been more intimidating.

The clergy shook their heads in unison. Not that I was expecting anything different. No matter what anyone said to Frau and the others, they weren't going to change. It would have been a better use of time to start counseling them now on how to be better people in their *next* lives.

"Well, now we have an issue," I said. "It doesn't seem like there's anyone *qualified* who wants to be our bishop." I turned to

Maria. "What do you think, Lady Maria? Are you interested? Or do you also want to stay away from a barbaric country like Farune?"

"I will go anywhere, if it's for the sake of propagating the wisdom of the faith," she said. "But as I said previously, I'm not qualified to be a bishop…" At least she didn't seem all that averse to coming to Farune, so that was a start.

"Your Holiness," I said. "Is there anything that can be done about her qualifications? We need someone who can preach the teachings of the church to Farunians."

"But, Maria is a candidate for sainthood," the pope repeated. "The church sees her as an important—"

"Y'know, I don't think I like the look on this statue's face either," Ogma said after the pope's unfavorable reply, banging a fist against one of the stone statues lined up around the cathedral.

"Wait! That's a statue of Saint Quantum! You can't destroy it!" the pope shouted, his face draining of what little color still remained.

The statue was apparently pretty important. But it did sound like he needed a bit more convincing.

"If you dispatch Lady Maria to Farune as bishop," I said, "I will donate three thousand gold coins to the church."

"Three thousand?!" The pope and his entourage were all totally shocked.

I guess from the perspective of a small territory like the Theocracy of Mauve, it's a considerable sum.

As it happened, I had already brought the coins with us on the Wyverns, so I could hand them over to the pope right away, if he agreed. Gamarath had advised me that in the end, compromises could sometimes be reached with a little financial assistance, so I'd made sure to bring a sizable amount with me. Though I hadn't expected I'd end up using it for what was turning out to be pretty close to human trafficking.

"I-I suppose I must accept your terms, if you so insist," the pope said. "For the sake of friendly relations between Farune and the Theocracy of Mauve, I shall make an exception and recognize Maria as being qualified for the position of acting bishop."

Acting bishop? I guess making her a full bishop was too much of an ask.

"Is that all right with you, Lady Maria?" I asked her.

"Y-Yes, it is. I look forward to working with you!" she replied, seemingly reflexively. She probably didn't fully understand the situation.

And so, it was arranged that we would bring Maria back to Farune with us right away. The original plan had been for the bishop to be dispatched from the Theocracy of Mauve in the days following negotiations, but Maria was in a unique position, and it would have presented a problem if the pope and the others had suddenly changed their minds, so I decided to bring her with us on the return trip instead.

I quickly donated the three thousand gold coins to the Theocracy, then exchanged all the relevant official documents. I'd discussed the necessary paperwork with Gamarath beforehand, so it went smoothly. However, when it was actually time to return to Farune, an unexpected issue arose: how exactly were we going to take Maria back with us?

I'd only brought just enough Wyverns for our party of Farunians, so I considered asking one of the Hundred, maybe Ogma, to run home on foot. But then Frau said, "I'll return on my own," and activated a teleportation spell to go back to Farune.

Despite how it might sound, teleportation magic couldn't actually be used to move around anywhere freely. Even Frau could probably only use it to return to Farune. So, why had she even come with us? Had she just wanted to wreak havoc after laying low for so long? Regardless, her departure did open up a seat, so I had Maria ride on my Wyvern with me.

"Are we going to Farune right now? On this dragon?" Maria asked, surprised. But it would have been too much of an issue if the church changed its mind. I didn't want to have to fly back and forth to the Theocracy of Mauve multiple times, partly because it would have been so awkward.

"Eeek!"

Maria wasn't accustomed to Wyverns, so as soon as we took off, she started screaming and clinging to my back. But either way, we had accomplished our mission, so we returned to Farune.



"YOUR Holiness! Why did you sacrifice Lady Maria to Farune?!"

After Maria was whisked away to Farune, an internal dispute erupted in the Theocracy of Mauve. The Holy Knights had surrounded the cathedral and were hounding the pope for an explanation.

"I didn't sacrifice her," the pope replied, making no effort to conceal his displeasure. "I dispatched her to Farune as acting bishop."

"Acting bishop? Lady Maria is a leading candidate for sainthood, not someone you should put in such a lowly position!" objected the captain of the Holy Knights. Maria was one of several women who were candidates for sainthood, but the captain was convinced she was the real deal. In fact, this was the consensus among the Holy Knights.

Despite their prestigious-sounding label, the healing powers of nearly every candidate for sainthood were pretty unimpressive. Candidates were generally of noble origin and, by now, the title was nothing more than a formality, having lost all actual substance.

On the other hand, while Maria was a commoner, her powers were the genuine article. She volunteered to accompany the Holy Knights on their missions, which were often dangerous, and exhibited her healing powers to their fullest extent as needed. She also worked in the service of the faith to proactively use her abilities to heal others regardless of their status, which had gained her support from the common people.

"Elevating Maria, a commoner, to acting bishop was an excellent decision by His Holiness," a member of the pope's entourage retorted. "The Holy Knights have no right to criticize it!" The Holy Knights weren't actually ranked very highly in the church, so it was unacceptable for them to object to the pope's wishes.

“Excellent?!” the captain objected. “Lady Maria sacrificed herself to Farune to save us! Also, didn’t His Holiness accept gold in exchange for her?! Where’s the excellence in selling a saint to another country?! She was screaming and crying when they took her away!”

Maria had only been screaming because she had been flying on a Wyvern, but to an outside observer, it *had* looked like she’d been resisting being taken to Farune.

“Hold your tongue, Captain!” the pope said, finally raising his voice. “Maria herself offered to go to Farune to fill the position left open by its absent bishop. She did it all of her own volition. And there are other candidates for sainthood besides her anyway. Do you still intend to favor only one of the candidates despite all that?”

The pope had been the one to make Maria a candidate for sainthood, because of her exceptional healing powers, but in reality, the logic of internal church factions determined canonization, and it was unlikely that Maria would be sainted without any backers. If anything, the pope had been having trouble dealing with Maria, with her many faithful supporters among the Holy Knights and the commoners. In many respects, this resolution was convenient for both the pope and the other leaders of the church.

“Lady Maria isn’t just another candidate. She is a true saint! All the other candidates have is their status! They’re nothing but fakes! Maria is exceptional, a once-in-a-century talent! Knowing that, how could you send her away to a godless country like Farune?”

The Holy Knights had a high opinion of Maria, and their impression of Farune was as bad as it could get. After all, they had been relentlessly crushed by the Lightning Empress and a handful of Farune’s knights. Their pride was deeply wounded.

“If she really is a true saint, then why didn’t you protect her with your lives?” said one of the pope’s subordinates. “After all, if you’d been able to put up a proper fight against Farune’s knights, none of this would have happened. But you’re shifting all the responsibility onto His Holiness. And you call yourselves Holy Knights?”

"But…" The captain was nearly speechless when his ineptitude was pointed out. He was well aware that he and his comrades had behaved shamefully. But then he found his voice: "Very well. In that case, I shall go to Farune myself and rescue Maria!"

"What are you saying? Her relocation to Farune has already been decided. If you really are a Holy Knight, then abide by the church's dictate!" the pope said with an irritated glare at the captain.

"If that's how it is, then I simply must resign from the Order," the captain replied. "I will devote my life to the saint!" He stared back at the pope, his eyes filled with determination.

"I'm also quitting!"

"Me too!"

"So am I!"

The trend immediately caught fire among the rest of the Holy Knights.

"What buffoonery! This impudence will not—"

The captain turned around, ignoring the pope's reprimands. Then the other Holy Knights followed suit, and they all walked away together.

In the following days, the Holy Knights departed the Theocracy of Mauve, seen off by those members of the populace who supported their actions. Eyland, Vulcan, and other allied countries were also sympathetic to their cause. Before long, they were banding together to organize a punitive expedition against Farune. Their common cause: to rescue the saint.

VII: Inside the Mind of a Saint

I am Maria, the candidate for sainthood who will one day become both the first commoner pope, and the first female pope.

There was a church next to my family home growing up. When I was very young, I began to imitate the way the priest there healed people. Around that time, a friend and I were once playing pretend knights with some swords that had been lying around my house, and I accidentally injured them quite seriously, lopping off one of their arms.

“D-Don’t worry, you’ll be all right! I can heal like the priest does!” I said, spouting nonsense as blood spurted everywhere. But when I earnestly offered up a prayer to God, I actually managed to heal my friend.

After that, everyone began showering me with praise, saying that I was surely the reincarnation of a saint. I was convinced too: me hurting my friend, then healing their injury, had to have been a test from God. There was no way the accident had been my fault. It was the will of God, and I was one of a chosen few.

Since then, I had conducted myself like a saint, using my healing powers whenever I had the opportunity. Everyone complimented me for it, which was a wonderful feeling.

However, when I was around twelve years old, my healing powers stopped improving. At first, I had thought I would keep getting stronger as I got older, but it got to the point where my powers were hardly growing at all.

Needless to say, I offered up prayers to God, along with various other efforts, like training my body and studying magic, but my healing abilities still refused to develop as I wanted them to. I was worried. If my slump continued, what would happen to the praise I so loved to receive? I intended to grow up and make my way in the world as a spectacularly famous saint. If my power plateaued permanently, it would ruin all my plans.

That was when a certain rumor happened to catch my ear: not only was it possible to grow stronger by eating the meat of monsters, according to the rumor, but it would also increase a person’s mana. The country called Farune, where the rumor had originated, had crazy strong knights and a powerful Mages’ Guild; it was suspected that this was because they were eating monsters.

However, everyone knew monster meat was poisonous. Even the most eccentric iconoclasts would never have considered attempting to eat it.

At least, none among the rabble.

As a saint chosen by God, on the other hand, it was a revelation. I immediately decided to start eating monster meat. The problem was finding some, but luckily, my parents were both

adventurers. They made their living killing monsters, so I was easily able to obtain some meat. Monsters yielded wide varieties of valuable materials; their meat alone was useless, and was usually disposed of. However, when they learned what I was trying to do, my parents stopped me.

"Cut it out, that's just poison."

"Listen to your father. Do you really want to be a saint that badly?"

Of course I did! I would become a saint and rise through the ranks to the papacy, where wealth, status, and fame would all be mine.

"If you won't give me any of your meat, I'll just go hunt some myself!" I declared, grabbing a sword. I was about to follow through, too, but my parents relented. They promised me they would bring monster meat back with them from their next adventure.

A few days later, they gave me the meat from a small monster, one they had painstakingly chosen after making sure that it wouldn't be poisonous enough to kill me.

I'll never forget the taste of my first monster. Pins and needles shot through my body, my consciousness faded away, and I nearly ended up experiencing the existence of God firsthand.

In short, I almost died.

Thanks to my mother, who used potions on me, and my father, who slapped me across the face as hard as he could, I was just barely able to regain consciousness. I cast an antidote spell and a stamina restoration spell on myself, and somehow managed to cling to life.

My mother wept. "Please, stop this already," she begged.

But this was a test from God. If I stopped now, my near-death experience would have been meaningless.

After recovering my strength, I learned a spell to increase my poison resistance, and then I tried to eat monster meat again, but a bit less this time. My second attempt went much better, and I only ended up with some stomach pain that resulted in vomiting and diarrhea. I got better at using restoration spells to cure these

symptoms, so in the end, it was a great success. Even though my parents were put off by it.

As for what was really important—my healing powers—I got results after living off monster meat for a month. I was now able to completely heal injuries that I couldn't have healed before. Pleased, I gradually increased the amount of meat I ate each meal, which steadily improved my healing powers.

Then, to develop my fame, I devoted myself to healing others. When they realized they could get healed for free, people came from all around. Occasionally, some even said, "It isn't much, but please, take this," and tried to give me money. It really *wasn't* all that much, either… Plus, when I replied, "It's all right, please use that money to recuperate," they always swiftly snatched their offerings back, saying, "What kindness, you're a true saint!"

How wretched and sinful! I had to become pope to guide these unwashed masses.

Offering healing for free also allowed me to use people freely as subjects on whom to test spells I was learning. In that sense, I was getting good experience.

After living like that for two years, I was finally recognized as an official candidate for sainthood. It was only natural. There couldn't have been anyone who was more loving or a more powerful healer than I was.

Incidentally, some nearby churches had nearly gone bankrupt right around the same time. Whenever churches performed a healing, they'd collect money in the form of a donation, whereas I healed everyone for free, which had led to a drastic decrease in church income. After receiving complaints from these churches, the Church of Mauve was finally unable to ignore my existence. That was when they formally welcomed me into the Theocracy as a candidate for sainthood. I was sixteen at the time.

Everyone who made up the church's leadership, beginning with the pope, came from noble stock. This meant that the hierarchy comprised people whose most impressive feature was their arrogance. None of the other candidates for sainthood—all of them daughters of nobles—had any notable healing powers, and they

were good-for-nothing slackers besides. But that was exactly what made me shine. By working diligently as a candidate and proactively assisting the Holy Knights on their quests, my popularity skyrocketed. The other candidates acted as my perfect foils.

By the way, I only helped out the Holy Knights to obtain monster meat. Leaving my parents' home made it harder to come by, but I secured a steady supply by accompanying the Holy Knights on their monster subjugation expeditions. I would stand before the carcasses of defeated monsters and say something like, "Even monsters deserve God's mercy." Then I would secretly stash away some of their meat while pretending to pray. The knights were touched, and always remarked about how compassionate I was. They were so simple.

Despite these steady, proactive efforts, however, my status hardly rose at all. I had gained the support of the knights and the people, but church leadership didn't look upon me very favorably. In their opinion, I was just an impudent commoner.

Even worse, the church proclaimed a new doctrine. It was clearly intended as a check against Farune's considerable expansion, but included a prohibition against the consumption of monster meat. I had kept my own diet a secret to keep up appearances. Now, if it got out, it would be a fatal blow to my position as a candidate for sainthood. I was also concerned about the matter of protection for the status of the nobility. The noble class was nothing but an obstacle on my way to the top, so protecting their positions was out of the question.

Just when I was starting to think, *I have to do something!* the king of Farune, Lord Mars, came storming into the Theocracy of Mauve on a fleet of dragons.

The man who had started the practice of eating monsters was, as one might expect, unlike anyone I'd ever seen before. He seemed to fear nothing, not even God. Otherwise, how could he have dared to land a dragon on divine soil? The church gathered powerful members of the clergy—including me—in the cathedral to resist him. They probably intended to direct us to perform a divine miracle as a group. But I had no inclination whatsoever to pray for their sake.

However, the wise Lord Mars seemed to see through every trick the church tried to pull. Lady Frau—the Lightning Empress—and the knights Lord Mars had brought from Farune came to the cathedral, beat up the Holy Knights who stood guard, and gained control of the building before the priests could activate their divine miracle. There were only five knights, but they utterly crushed the several hundred Holy Knights who were there.

Lady Frau's magic was particularly terrifying. When she arrived, she let loose a bolt of lightning in place of a normal greeting, paralyzing me and everyone else in the cathedral, and effectively halving our strength. She continued to fire off spells without any hesitation while the Farunian knights wreaked havoc to their hearts' content, despite being inside a cathedral filled with precious cultural and historical artifacts. All the gathered priests shook with fear.

But, what incredible strength! Truly this was the power of monster meat!

There was no way I could say that openly, of course. I had to keep conducting myself as a model candidate for sainthood.

"Please, stop!" I said. "This is a holy place for revering Lord Mauve. I beg of you, please refrain from committing any further violence!"

Of course, I only did this because I had judged that it wouldn't present an issue for me. The Farunian knights didn't seem like they had any interest in harming the clergy.

"I don't give a damn about this *holy* business, but if he's such a powerful god, then why doesn't he save you?" the Farunian knight with the smallest build said menacingly.

His reasoning was completely sound. And in all likelihood, God wasn't giving us His aid because, besides me, none of the members of the clergy were all that honest or pure. Though again, I couldn't say that out loud.

"God does not extend His helping hand for such trivial matters," I proclaimed instead. "However, that hardly gives you license to behave so violently right before His eyes. Please, allow me to heal the injured Holy Knights, I beg of you!"

The Holy Knights were my base of support, so it would have been a real problem if I allowed them to get *too* injured.

That led to my confrontation with the short Farunian knight, just before Lord Mars followed the pope and his entourage into the cathedral. As for Lord Mars himself, although he was the feared Mad King, he was also known for his meritocratic ideals. I decided that the best way to get closer to him would be to really knock his socks off.

So, I gave a demonstration of the highest-level healing spell I could cast, Healing Field. It went off without a hitch, and I was able to heal every last one of the Holy Knights that had been lying on the floor of the cathedral. All according to plan.

Actually, Lady Frau was the one who pointed to me and said, "I want her," but regardless, Lord Mars seemed to take a liking to me as well.

He said to the pope, "Your Holiness, I'd like to select Lady Maria as Farune's bishop."

Bishop… I thought. That position would be my first step on the path to becoming pope.

However, the pope showed reluctance. I decided to agree with him, outwardly. "His Holiness is correct," I said in my saintliest manner. "I'm not qualified to be a bishop. Just being a candidate for sainthood is enough for me." If anything, the position of bishop was nowhere near high enough. But I didn't say that out loud.

After that, Lord Mars made full use of money and violence to get his way, and it was decided that I would be made an acting bishop so I could assume the position of bishop of Farune. All according to plan. In Farune, I would be able to eat the meat of even stronger monsters, gain even more power, get the country's backing, and establish a firm position in the church for myself!

Wait, what?! I'm going to Farune right away? On that dragon? Actually, hang on, I'm not very good with heights, and—

"Eeek!"

VIII: Farune's Saint

WHEN I came to, I was in Farune. The dragons, or more precisely, the Wyverns, seemed able to bring a rider to their destination instantaneously. I definitely hadn't lost consciousness or anything, which might have made it *feel* like we'd arrived in an instant. Nothing like that. As a saint, it would have been impossible. There was no way the legend of Saint Maria, as recorded for generations to come, would report that I'd fainted when riding a Wyvern.

Farune's capital city was a bustling place. The huge arena and massive tents for monster exhibits were surrounded by rows of various shops, restaurants, and other businesses. It looked genuinely fun, quite a contrast from the dull…I mean, the *modest and reserved* Theocracy of Mauve. The castle itself was solid, though, and of simple construction. Apparently, as Lord Mars put it, "It's going to get destroyed anyway, so there's no point building anything fancy."

That was where the apartment I'd be living in would be: inside the castle. The previous bishop had used it as his quarters, and it had a surprisingly luxurious interior—a marked improvement over the place I'd had back in the Theocracy. I also got an attendant, Annie. She was a woman around my age and a devout believer in Mauve.

Attendant…what a pleasant-sounding word. I'd had many adoring followers up until that point, but I hadn't been able to treat any of them like attendants. Finally, I had a servant to whom I could do anything I wanted. Well, as a saint, I couldn't very well treat her with disrespect, but I mean, just having someone like that beneath me gave me a thrill. Right away, she started helping me in and out of my clothes, bringing me food, and doing all sorts of other everyday things.

"Actually, I can change my clothes myself, and I can get my own meals." I did, at least, say that to her. But she only turned down my offer with a smile.

"This is just part of my job," she said.

Yes, that's it, that's exactly it! This is the type of reception I've been waiting for! With that, I was officially among the ranks of the

nobility, and even royalty. It was a visible sign of how far I had come.

However, a certain something was missing from the meals Annie brought me.

"Annie, um…there doesn't seem to be any meat in here?" I said.

"Oh? If it's meat you desire, that's a new Farunian specialty right there," she said with some confusion, pointing to an appetizing dish of what looked to be some kind of grilled meat.

"No, that's not what I mean," I said. "Farune's real specialty is monster meat, isn't it?" Monster meat never looked that good. It should have been obviously repulsive, with a distinctive stench that made one feel as if their life was in danger.

"Um, Lady Maria, monster meat is not a Farunian specialty at all. Only a small group of slightly insan—" Annie stopped herself. "I mean, only people who would do anything to become stronger, like the Hundred, eat monsters."

"Oh? Is that so?" I pressed. "But I seem to recall hearing that in Farune, every citizen is forced to eat monster meat." That was what I had believed, anyway. After all, monster meat was so wonderful that, if anything, everyone *should* eat it.

"Lady Maria…that's just a stereotype," Annie said, sounding slightly nervous. "His Majesty is not the kind of person to do something like that. He's incredibly kind to his subjects. In addition to lowering taxes, he also abolished mandatory conscription. And with the further development of the Forest of Beasts, His Majesty has made Farune into a wealthy country and a wonderful place to live."

Huh, the citizens have a surprisingly high opinion of their king, I thought. "I see now," I said. "I'm sorry, I was being ignorant."

"No, not at all! There's nothing to apologize for!" Annie repeatedly bowed her head, as if to apologize herself for being impolite.

Now that feels good. Being in a master-servant relationship, holding someone's life and death in my hands, was just irresistible.

Be that as it may, though, I'd come to Farune specifically to acquire a stable source of high-quality monster meat to consume, so it would be an issue if I couldn't eat any.

"But Annie, one of my goals in coming to Farune is to determine the advantages and disadvantages of eating monsters," I tried. "I can't do that without eating them myself. So, if possible, would you mind making monster meat available for me to eat during my meals?"

"O-Oh, really? But monster meat is poisonous, so I think it would be best if you didn't eat it, Lady Maria, and…" She trailed off. "In any case, it's not a decision I can make myself, so please allow me to consult with my superiors." Annie looked somewhat disconcerted.

"All right," I assented. "I think I'll try asking His Majesty myself as well." It seemed things would move along more quickly if I spoke to him directly.



I had an audience with King Mars the very next day, and I immediately used the opportunity to raise the topic of monster meat.

"I'd like to try eating monster meat myself, but would it be all right with Your Majesty?" I asked.

King Mars gave me a baffled look. "Why? You know it's poisonous, right?"

I never thought I'd hear those words coming from someone who *ate* the poisonous stuff.

"It was decided that the new doctrine would have no penalties attached," I began, "but it is a fact that the consumption of monster meat has become a point of contention in the faith. I believe that, to ascertain whether it really is acceptable or not, I must eat monster meat myself."

"No, that's not happening," he replied instantly. "It's pure poison, and no respectable person should be eating it. Unless you're willing to put your life on the line to attain strength, it's worthless. If you want to live a decent life, don't mess with that stuff. You're a

candidate for sainthood. There's no need for you to tarnish your record by eating monster meat."

In contrast with the rumors about him, Farune's king was saying some exceedingly sensible things. And not only that, his message resonated with me. As someone secretly aiming to become the first female pope, I absolutely wasn't interested in living a decent life. He was right about that.

"I don't care about my record," I declared. "What matters is that, as an acting bishop of the church, I discover the truth. That's all. So please, grant me permission to eat monster meat."

As for my record, I'd been secretly eating monster meat for a while already, so it was already too late to do anything about that. In fact, one reason I wanted to eat monster meat under the pretense of investigating Farune was so I could eat it openly in the future.

"Are you serious?" King Mars protested. "You don't need to investigate anything. There's nothing good about monster meat. Instead of eating that awful stuff, just live your life eating normal food. On that point, I actually agree with the new church doctrine."

Why is King Mars recognizing the church's side of the argument? That doctrine was unambiguously targeted at the Farunian way of life.

"You know, there are people in this world who'd love to eat normal food, but can't. Listen to me, Maria, don't you realize how lucky you are?" King Mars said, becoming more impassioned by the second.

Why is he, the one who started eating monsters in the first place, so opposed to monster meat consumption?

"My king."

Just then, one of the princess consorts sitting next to His Majesty spoke up. She had fiery red hair, and for some reason, she was wearing a white mask. From what I could recall, she was his third consort, and her name was Cassandra.

"Are you dissatisfied with your diet of monster meat?" she continued.

Whoa, she's scary! She radiated a horribly intimidating aura. I shuddered, even though it wasn't directed at me.

"No, not really." King Mars said after a moment, folding as easy as anything.

Wait, is Cassandra actually the highest-ranking person in Farune?

"Fine," King Mars finally relented. "Maria, I'll tell them to serve you monster meat in your meals. But make sure you don't overdo it, all right?"

"I am grateful for your consideration, Your Majesty," I replied. In any case, it looked like I'd be able to eat monster meat going forward. With that, I'd accomplished one of my goals.

"Actually, I have something I'd like to ask of you as well," King Mars said.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"I want to make use of your healing powers."

That's right, that's what I thought. I, a saint who would one day be renowned the world over, had come to Farune, so it was only natural that the king would want my help. *Let me guess. He wants me to go around to the city's churches, healing commoners and racking up points for him as king. It'll only improve my reputation though, not his.*

"I would gladly be of service," I replied with my saintliest smile.



THE next thing I knew, I had been taken to the arena.

"Hey, thanks a bunch for coming," a woman greeted me. "I never thought I'd see a candidate for sainthood in a place like this. Anyway, more and more people just keep getting hurt, and lately it's been hard to handle the workload. I can easily mend most wounds, but the more serious ones are awfully tricky."

The woman introduced herself as Luida. Apparently, she worked as the Hundred's exclusive priestess.

As we spoke, an intense fight unfolded in the arena before us. Even the spectators were getting heated.

What? Am I really expected to use my healing powers here? Um, I get the feeling this place is a bit unsavory, for a saint. And are people gambling, too?

As I was thinking, one of the matches ended, and both the winner and the loser came over to where we were. The pair of them were horribly injured. The loser in particular had a huge open slash wound starting from his shoulder. *Shouldn't that be fatal?*

"All right, can you try healing the guy who lost?"

Huh?! What are you saying, Luida? The man's injury wouldn't be easy to heal. It was so bad that, if he'd been brought to a church, they would have recommended he get his affairs in order.

Hang on, I know exactly what's going on here, I thought. Luida probably just envied my position. She was only demanding I do the impossible because she was afraid I'd take over the job she'd been doing until then. I'd often experienced the same sort of harassment back in the Theocracy of Mauve. Every time I did, though, I overcame it and beefed up my reputation further.

I guess I'll have to knock her socks off.

"Very well. I'll do it," I said. I psyched myself up, then made a prayer to God. This was a high-level healing spell. The injured man was shrouded in light, and his wound closed up before my eyes. In just a few seconds, his scar disappeared, leaving his skin as good as new.

How do you like them apples? I'm incredible, am I not? You may now repent and sing my praises.

"Whoa, that's a candidate for sainthood all right," Luida said. "You're pretty good."

Huh? She doesn't sound very surprised. Is she pretending not to be impressed?

"Thanks, young lady," said the man I'd healed, not sounding especially shocked either. "Take this."

He handed me a single small gold coin. It felt like he was just casually buying a pint of beer or something. I didn't sense any gratitude from him, far from the reaction I'd been imagining. And when I looked around, I noticed that Luida had already healed the

winner herself. He'd also been horribly injured, though not quite fatally.

Why can she cast restoration spells while having a conversation with me at the same time? Maybe, and this is just a guess, but is she at quite a high level compared to the priests in the Theocracy?

As I stood there dumbfounded, a loud cheer went up in the stands. Yet another match had ended. This time, an actual corpse was brought over.

IX: A Saint's Ambition

IN front of me was a man without even the hint of a pulse, whose face was as white as a sheet and whose body was completely covered in blood. To put it simply, he was dead.

Um, what do you want me to do with this thing? He was already dead, so healing him would be impossible. *No, you can't be expecting me to cast a resurrection spell on him, can you? I know I'm powerful, but even* I've *never used resurrection magic.*

Everyone who worked in restoration was given a basic education in resurrection magic, but it required a great deal of experience and high-level healing abilities, so very few could actually use it in practice. Besides, the Church of Mauve taught that death was natural, which meant that outside of exceptional circumstances, resurrection magic was off limits. If, say, someone died in an arena match in front of hordes of spectators who were betting on the results, they were generally left to rot. And good riddance.

Now, what should I do here? Oh, I know, should I purify his corpse with Holy Flames? That must be it. Got it.

I began praying to God right away: "O God, may Your inexhaustible flames cleanse this—"

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Luida's face reddened with anger, and she stopped me from reciting my spell.

"What else? I was just going to purify this corpse with flames," I said, taken aback.

"Corpse?" Luida paused. "Well, I guess it does look like one, but in the Hundred this is classified as an injury!"

"What? His heart has stopped, you know." If someone could be injured with a stopped heart, then how was one supposed to decide who was dead?

"W-Well, yes," Luida said, "but resurrection magic works if they've only *just* died, as long as they haven't been decapitated. Like I said, this is an injury! I know it sounds strange, and that's coming from me. But fine, I'll do it myself." Then she began chanting a resurrection spell.

Resurrection spells themselves were a truly miraculous form of magic that very few people could use, but Luida cast hers in a utilitarian, matter-of-fact way. She didn't even seem particularly nervous. I doubted whether the corpse would really be revived, but then, as Luida continued her prayer, the dead man's face regained its color, and his body was suffused with life.

Huh? Luida is incredible! I think she's even better at healing than I am… Shouldn't she be a saint instead of someone like me? It was the first time in my life I'd ever almost lost confidence in my ability to be a saint. Almost.

Right after she completed her spell, Luida shouted, "Hey, how long are you gonna keep lying around, making me wait?! Get up off your ass and pay up!" Then she gave the previously dead man a swift kick in the head.

The man woke up, smiled awkwardly, and got up off the ground. "My bad, Miss," he said, then took a gold coin from his breast pocket and handed it to Luida.

On second thought, she doesn't seem suited to being a saint. I knew it, a saint has to have the right mindset, the right skills, and the right body—and there's no one who fits the bill better than me! Yes, looks were just as important as other factors when it came to sainthood. Luida was decent enough on that front, but her mindset was just awful. I instantly regained my lost confidence.

After that, I spent the rest of the day helping out with Luida's healing load in the arena. At first, a lot of what went on was pretty confusing, but midway through my feelings went numb, and I reached the point where I could recite healing spells with ease.

I had all sorts of questions, but this drudgery…I mean, this *healing* had one big upside: money. I earned more than ten small gold coins for the day, which was more than a commoner could have made working for an entire month. I'd made a killing, and Luida had made more than twice what I had, including that gold coin from earlier. She had to have been loaded. Looking at her more closely, I noticed that the equipment and jewelry she wore were quite nice. That made sense; it was obviously better to work for fair compensation than it was to heal the cuts and bruises of peasants…I mean, of those *unfortunate souls* suffering under the yoke of poverty.

King Mars himself participated in the arena's final match of the day, and when I saw him in action, I couldn't believe my eyes. I could finally see why he was rumored to be the Demon King himself. The members of the Hundred were all monsters, but King Mars easily swept the floor with them. There was no way anyone could have fought him properly. My final task was to use Healing Field to mend the wounds of everyone he'd crushed, all at the same time.

When I'd finished my hectic day and returned to the castle, Annie brought me my dinner. This time, she'd had monster meat prepared for me, but the meat was Killer Rabbit, which was for beginners, and it was only a small piece. As Annie eyed me worriedly, I ate the portion in a single bite.

I knew it, this is hardly poisonous at all, I thought.

"Annie, I'd like something a bit stronger tomorrow."

"What?" Annie exclaimed, surprised.

Maybe I was behaving in a way uncharacteristic of an amateur. But I had come to Farune to get stronger, so there would be no point continuing to eat low-grade meat.

"Lady Maria, um, are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, I am," I confirmed. "This much isn't a problem for me. Next time, I'd like a larger serving of meat from a monster that's a bit stronger, okay?"

"Ugh," Annie sighed. She seemed unsettled. "Saints must have a resistance to monster meat."

Of course not. Poison is poison, whoever you are. It had taken me ages to get used to this. But then again, if there was a story saying I was unaffected by the poison in monster meat, that could be one of my miracles, so I decided to play along.



"SHE ate the meat without batting an eye?" I asked, skeptical. Gamarath had just told me of a report from the maid he'd assigned to Maria.

"Yes, sir," Gamarath replied. "I suppose I should have expected nothing less from a candidate for sainthood. Though of course, your keen insight in detecting her talent is also deserving of mention."

He didn't seem to doubt the report. Gamarath was one of the few people around me who didn't eat monster meat, so he had no clue how potent its poison was, at least not firsthand. Something as flimsy as a god's blessing shouldn't have stood any chance against it. That being said, Killer Rabbit meat wasn't all that poisonous, comparatively.

"You said Maria requested meat from a stronger monster, right? Give her Bloodbear meat."

Bloodbears were mid-level monsters. Their meat was quite poisonous, and any normal person would have dropped dead as soon as they ate it. Even among the Hundred, it was said to take a year before you could handle eating Bloodbear meat.

"Understood." Gamarath unquestioningly obeyed my order.

Then, the next day—

"You're telling me she ate Bloodbear meat too?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. She said it was perfect."

As expected, Gamarath didn't question it, but to me, this was suspicious. Maria may have been a candidate for sainthood, but her poison resistance was way too high to be normal. In Farune, there were several thousand people who ate monster meat, but not one of them had ever displayed a high poison resistance when they'd first started. Or rather, each one, without exception, had begun by acclimating themselves to Killer Rabbit meat first. I had been the

same myself, and so had Frau, Ogma, and other powerful people. Even my master, Cassandra, had apparently started by adapting her body to the meat of weak monsters, though it hadn't been Killer Rabbit meat specifically.

Maria was the only one who was able to eat Bloodbear meat right from the start. It was impossible. If that was the kind of blessing God gave out, then He was displaying some pretty extreme favoritism. The development also cast her powers as a saint in a dubious light.

What if, instead of being able to eat monster meat because she was a candidate for sainthood, she had become a candidate for sainthood because she had been eating monster meat?

And so, I summoned Maria to my chambers.

"Maria, you've been eating monster meat since before you came to Farune, haven't you?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, I have been," she readily confessed, an innocent look in her eyes. "I came to Farune to eat the meat of stronger monsters, improve my healing powers, and ensure that I become a saint. I'm also here to get the backing of Your Majesty so I can use political authority, physical force, and financial means to secure the papacy."

This girl's saying some pretty crazy stuff all of a sudden, I thought. Despite her sweet, chaste appearance, inside she was more power-hungry than Carmilla, apparently.

"I-I see," I said. "But, what's in it for Farune if you become a saint, or the pope?"

"If that happens, the Church of Mauve will give Farune its complete support."

Support…hm. Honestly, there aren't really any problems at the moment. I'm satisfied with the way things are right now, with no penalties for disobeying the new doctrine, so I don't really need your support. As I silently mulled things over, Maria continued, somewhat impatiently.

"Just as I thought, Your Majesty," she said. "You're thinking that the mere support of the church is worthless, and that you can unify Ares with military force alone, right?"

What? No, I'm not thinking that, actually. First of all, I don't feel like unifying anything.

"However, Your Majesty, true unification can only be accomplished once you control Ares religiously, as well as militarily and economically," she continued. "If you want to seize the hearts of the unwashed masses, you have to approach them through religion!"

Unwashed masses? Did she just call commoners unwashed masses?

"That isn't all," she went on. "If you so graciously choose to help me become pope, I will swear fealty to Farune after absorbing the Kingdom of Eyland into the Theocracy of Mauve. As I believe you are already aware, Eyland was once part of the same country as the Theocracy, but they separated to detach the religion from the state. I am from Eyland, and I have many sympathizers there. If I become pope, reunifying the two territories will be simple. Once that happens, I'll enter under Farune's umbrella, and I'll be able to contribute to Your Majesty's unification of the continent."

I feel like I just got a glimpse of a nightmarish future. She says she has sympathizers in Eyland, but they sound like a bunch of terrorists to me. She's already a candidate for sainthood, and now she's not only aiming for the position of pope, but Eyland's throne too? Is there any limit to how power-hungry this woman is?

"But why go after the throne of Eyland?" I asked.

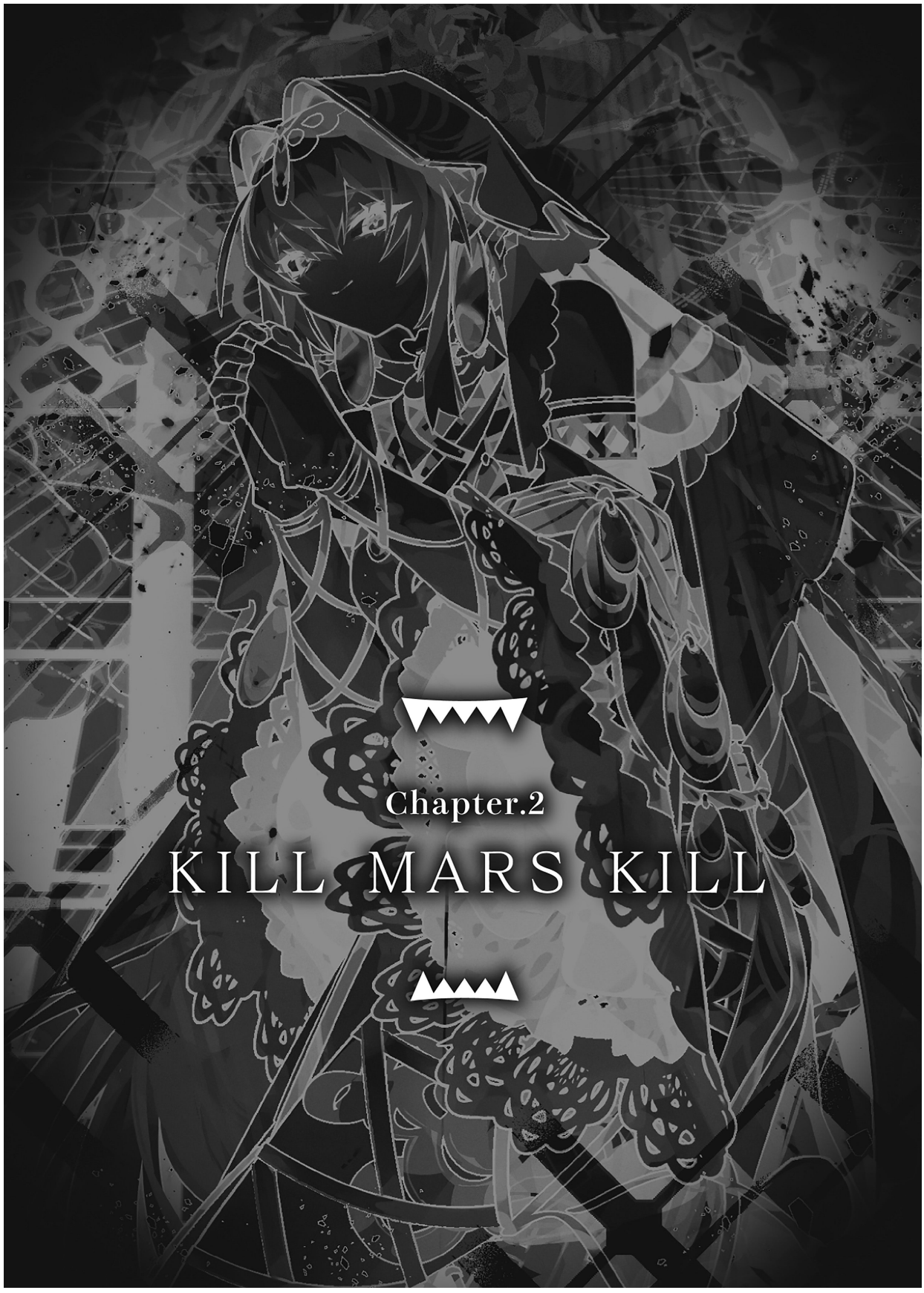
"As humans, isn't it only natural for us to set our sights high? Surely Your Majesty must understand. You hold the as-yet-unrealized ambition of unifying all of Ares," she stated like it was perfectly obvious. "With all due respect, Your Majesty and I are one and the same—we're each chasing impossible dreams. So, would you like to chase our dreams together?"

I had been wondering why she was being so strangely open about her evil ambitions. So, she thought we were similar? But she had such high aspirations that I was starting to feel dizzy. I certainly wasn't after the unification of Ares, or anything of the sort. I'd never had an impossible dream, unless you count fantasizing about living freely as a mercenary.

"Got it, I'll give it some thought," I said. I'd had enough at that point. I just wanted her to leave the room.

"Do you still not trust me?" Maybe Maria suspected there was something negative behind my response, because she kept pressing me. "If you're so inclined, I wouldn't mind it if you treated me as your unofficial princess consort! Then, our child could be the future ruler of Eyland. Oh, but please officially declare it a virgin birth. I do have my reputation as a saint to worry about, after all."

Please, I'm begging you, just get out already!



Chapter.2

KILL MARS KILL

X: The Plan to Assassinate Mars, Part 1

THE announcements came down that not only would the Church of Mauve's new doctrine have no penalties attached—which made it ineffective in practice—but Maria, the famous candidate for sainthood, had taken up the post of acting bishop in Farune.

The kingdoms of Eyland and Vulcan both lodged vehement objections to these developments with the Theocracy of Mauve, but the Theocracy forcefully responded that they never wanted to have anything to do with Farune again. Because the Theocracy was more powerful than either country, neither of them could protest any further.

But they couldn't afford to stand idly by, either. Farune's momentum showed no signs of slowing. Eyland and Vulcan feared that if they did nothing, they would leave themselves open to a Farunian invasion. And so, the two countries decided to confer with Master Matou of the Magedom of Kiel, and they set up a venue where they could have a discussion via magic transmission.

"I underestimated Farune," said the king of Eyland, his brow deeply furrowed. "I never would have expected them to resort to something as outrageous as raiding the Theocracy of Mauve, threatening the pope, and kidnapping a saint to install her as their bishop." The king—who enjoyed the enthusiastic support of his subjects—had blond hair and blue eyes, and his noble features were clouded with regret over having been outwitted by Farune.

"And they attacked the Theocracy directly, passing over Vulcan and Eyland," the king of Vulcan spat. "Not only that, but don't the reports say they rode in on a fleet of Wyverns, too? If they've been controlling such powerful monsters, that's exactly why we can't afford to ignore them!" The king of Vulcan had a solid, imposing build and a stern, kingly face. When a man like him burned with wrath, the intensity of his accompanying aura made him seem all the more daunting.

"So, what will you two do about it? Surely you haven't convened this meeting just to whine."

The originator of this scathing comment was Master Matou of the Magedom of Kiel. The projected image of him showed a man completely hidden beneath a robe, so it was impossible to discern his appearance. Master Matou had been active in his position of Great Mage for nearly a hundred years, and was therefore known as a man of many mysteries.

"Certainly not, Master Matou," the king of Eyland said, gazing steadfastly at the mage's image. "We can no longer rely on the Theocracy of Mauve. The bulk of the Holy Knights left the country in the aftermath of the saint's kidnapping, too, so they won't be useful in terms of their military, either. Incidentally, my country is actually sheltering the Holy Knights, so we've still got them on our side, but we haven't yet organized our forces, so we can't confront Farune directly. On the other hand, we can't afford to do nothing."

"Indeed," the king of Vulcan agreed, his expression twisting to show his displeasure. "We in Vulcan, as well as those in Eyland, lost much to the recent disaster in Dorssen. It will take time for us to recover. And if possible, I don't want to fight Farune head-on. That Hundred of theirs is a collection of warriors more powerful than we can imagine. I won't say that all our forces combined wouldn't be enough to beat them, but the casualties would be enormous."

"Can we get to the point?" Master Matou said. In contrast to the kings, he adopted an air of cool detachment, as if specifically to cast aspersions on their idle chatter.

"Very well. Then let me say this." The king of Eyland breathed a single sigh. He always enjoyed behaving melodramatically, and was disappointed by Master Matou's straightforward approach. "I'm considering using Shades to kidnap or assassinate King Mars or his relatives."

Shades were specialists in espionage and assassination, and members of secret organizations that existed in nearly all countries. Without such organizations, countries risked lagging behind in intelligence warfare and allowing important figures to be easily assassinated.

"Oho." Matou finally sounded interested. "Kill the man notorious for being the world's strongest warrior? And how will you do that?"

His words carried a hint of a provocation.

"We've already sent Shades into Farune—both Eyland and Vulcan. And there's something we discovered: there are no Shades in Farune or Cadonia. Both countries were always practically vassals of Dorssen. As a result, they never got dragged into the central continent's power struggles and never needed to train Shades," the king of Eyland explained before pausing briefly. "Though I certainly would have expected them to have trained some by now, after Farune's expansion."

"The king of Farune has no need for such underhanded tactics," Matou said. "He may intend to unify Ares by force alone."

"That gives us an opening." The king of Eyland spread his arms exaggeratedly wide, one of his deeply ingrained theatrical mannerisms. It made the king of Vulcan suspicious. Their countries had been enemies until recently, after all, and they were by no means on good terms. "Farune has no defenses against Shades," the king of Eyland continued. "As a matter of fact, our intelligence operations there are proceeding apace. We've assembled plenty of information, and it indicates that as long as we don't make any incursions into the castle, even assassination is not out of the question—if we, Vulcan, and Kiel join forces, that is."

"No incursions into the castle? What do you mean by that?" Matou asked.

"Farune's castle is a sinister place," the king of Eyland said ominously. "If you stick your nose in, you'll only get hurt. But, there's no danger outside the castle. That's where we'll strike."

"Hmph." Matou knew very well what the king of Eyland was talking about. There was a barrier spell around Farune's castle that was as good as impregnable to magic. Even Kiel was unable to get inside its walls. "But we don't have Shades," he added. "We don't need them."

The Magedom of Kiel was home to wizards from all over. The country itself was highly secretive. Ordinary people couldn't even get in, and if they did somehow manage it, they would be quickly exposed as frauds unless they were extremely skilled in magic. As

such, neither Eyland's Shades nor Vulcan's Shades had ever been able to do anything in Kiel.

"I know that," the king of Eyland said. "However, we'll need the aid of a wizard. If we combine our forces, we could potentially achieve victory over Farune without fighting a single battle or making any unnecessary sacrifices."

It wasn't a bad proposal from Matou's perspective. In an all-out war, the Magedom of Kiel would have to face Frau's Mages' Guild, as well as the monster army led by her subordinate, Keely. Matou was confident he could win in a battle of magic, but he wasn't so sure about the monster army.

The king of Eyland had identified where Farune's intelligence was weak, but the country was quite a formidable opponent in the realm of magic. Not one of the mages Matou had dispatched to the country to gather information had returned, probably having been disposed of by Frau herself. It was a surprise to him that as long as they didn't use magic, intelligence operations outside the castle could go well. He presumed an inconsistency like that was a unique peculiarity resulting from Farune's rapid development.

"What do you want my mages to do?" Matou asked.

"Teleportation magic. Whether we're talking kidnapping or assassination, Shades won't be able to do it alone. Farune may not have any of their own Shades, but they have enough expert fighters to make it difficult to physically execute the plan in the country itself. I want to teleport the target somewhere else using magic. On the other end of the teleport, it'll work out, one way or another."

"I see," Matou said. It certainly sounded quite viable. He turned to the king of Vulcan, who had been leaving the talking to the eloquent king of Eyland. "And are you on board with this?"

"Of course I am," the king of Vulcan replied. "War is about more than just fighting the enemy head-on. If there are measures that can be taken behind the scenes, then that's the best option." The king of Vulcan was known as a valiant general, and despite what he said, he looked somewhat dissatisfied with this solution. However, as a king, he wanted to avoid the folly of an all-out war with Farune.

"Very well," Matou said. "I'll arrange for two mages who can cast teleportation magic, one at the origin and one at the destination. But they can't work as Shades, so don't expect too much of them, all right? We're wizards, not bandits."

Teleportation magic wasn't so convenient that it could be used to go anywhere at will. At the very least, there had to be a magic circle at the destination to receive the target, as well as a caster to use the spell on the target, of course.

"With your help, Master Matou, our chances of success will be quite high," said the king of Eyland, his expression brightening for the first time since the meeting had started. "Now, all that's left is for the Shades to rendezvous in Farune."

"By the way, whom do you plan to target? King Mars, his princess consorts, or his children?" Matou asked. *King Mars himself won't be easy*, he thought.

"That will be up to the Shades themselves," the king of Eyland responded. "Those types of decisions are best entrusted to the people on the ground. I may not seem like it sometimes, but I'm a pretty down-to-earth king." He seemed to enjoy singing his own praises.

Well, I wonder, Matou thought as a twinge of uneasiness sparked within him. Certainly, the king of Eyland was not wrong. It was a mistake for those who didn't know the situation on the ground to make orders that might be unreasonable to execute in reality. But Matou also got the feeling that leaving the choice of target up to those on-site was too much of an abdication of responsibility.

And as a matter of fact, Matou's fears would soon materialize.



AT first glance, the woman looked like any ordinary traveler. She had well-proportioned facial features, but she wasn't so striking that she stood out. As for her age, she was probably somewhere in her late teens. Her simple clothing had seen better days, and her well-worn boots brought to mind long journeys. She was likely a foreigner who

had come to Farune to see the arena—or at least, people were bound to think that.

The woman blended perfectly in with the city scenery, looking just like one of the many tourists visiting Farune to gamble or sightsee. However, on closer inspection, she had an oddly dexterous gait, and—perhaps out of habit—automatically walked in a way that made no noise. Her gaze, too, was not an absent-minded one; she maintained a wide field of vision with clear, conscious intent.

Before long, the woman entered an inn. It was a building with a shabby exterior, which meant it drew in few customers, but inside, it was surprisingly well put together.

"No vacancies." The proprietor of the inn, the hair on his head looking sparse, spoke bluntly. He didn't even glance at the woman, giving off not a whiff of entrepreneurial spirit.

"Oh?" the woman replied, not seeming to mind. "In any case, were you born in Farune?"

The proprietor looked at the woman for the first time. "No," he replied. "I was born in Cadonia."

"What a coincidence," the woman said. "I'm here visiting from Cadonia. Naturally, I was also born there. So, as a fellow Cadonian, can't you find me a room somehow?"

"Where in Cadonia were you born?"

"The village of Nalmy."

"Your name?"

"Violetta."

"Nalmy's right next to the village where I was born," the proprietor said. "All right, Violetta. Use the room in the back on the second floor. You'll be sharing it, but it's big, so that shouldn't be an issue. There are already some guests there."

"There are? Then I'll have to mind my manners," Violetta remarked lightly. Then she went up to the second floor as she'd been instructed, where she tapped on the door of the room in the back.

"Who is it?" A brief, stiff inquiry came from inside.

"The owner downstairs told me to come here. We'll be sharing a room, so be nice."

The door opened slowly, revealing a man inside the room. He had an oval face with no particularly distinguishing features except the shifty look in his eyes characteristic of those in his line of work.

"Get in," he said. "You're the last one."

"So no one flaked on us," Violetta remarked. She slipped into the room, and the door instantly shut behind her.

The room was spacious, but the windows were closed, so even though it was midday, it was gloomy inside. Despite the poor lighting, though, Violetta instantly saw that there were five men there. They had adopted various postures, with one lying on a bed and another having sat himself down on the floor, but they all gave off the same air of nervous tension.

"This is everyone, right?" Violetta asked.

"Yeah," replied the man who had let her into the room.

"Should I introduce myself?" she asked him.

"I don't see why not. Farune's pretty relaxed in that sense. There's practically no worry that someone is listening in."

"That's good. My name is Violetta—this time, that is. And unlike all of you, I was hired to keep an eye on this job, so I'll be making sure you're putting in the effort."

Apparently, her name was for this mission only.

"What did they say when they hired you?" asked the man sitting on the floor. He was chubby, and he seemed relatively harmless.

"I know it's a kidnapping," Violetta replied. "And that depending on the target, it may change to an assassination."

"And the target?"

"I was only told they're Farunian royalty."

"Damn, and you took the job with nothing but that?" remarked a man who had been sitting on a bed. He got up, his distinctive, narrow eyes glinting in the low light.

"The pay was good," Violetta said. "Your masters are amazing at exactly one thing, and that's paying well. But remember, I'm only here as a helper. Hopefully this won't get messy."

"Is this job ever not messy?" the oval-faced man said with a self-deprecating smile.

"Fair enough," Violetta said with a shrug. With that gesture, the tension in the room lessened slightly. "For now, would my team members mind introducing themselves? Though we'll only be working together for a short time."

"I'm Al," said the oval-faced man. "I'm from Eyland."

"I'm Begie," said the chubby man sitting on the floor. "I'm also from Eyland."

"Garma. I'm Vulcanian," said the man with narrow eyes.

"Denze," a man with a large build said. He was also sitting on a bed. "I came here with Garma."

"Zeta," said the final man after a lingering pause. "I'm not used to this kind of thing. I'll be taking it easy until it's time for my part." Zeta stood in one corner of the room, dressed in a hooded robe. It wasn't that robes were all that uncommon, but wearing one still made it easy to pick him out as a mage.

Violetta narrowed her eyes. *Couldn't he have worn something just a bit less obvious?* she thought. In all likelihood, Zeta had been dispatched by the Magedom of Kiel. That meant that Al and Begie were Eyland's Shades, while Garma and Denze were Vulcan's.

"So, which of Farune's royals are we going after?" Violetta asked. "A princess? A child? King Mars has a few young kids. They're the perfect kidnapping targets." She guessed they would be abducting one of the children, obviously the safest option.

"Actually," Al began hesitantly, "the target is King Mars himself." There was a dark shadow over Al's unremarkable features. He clearly wasn't looking forward to this.

"Are you crazy?!" Violetta exclaimed. "You know that's the Mad King of Farune, right? He's an invincible monster against all those powerful warriors in the arena. They say he's more terrifying than a demon! Are those really your instructions from back home?"

Since taking on this job, Violetta had gathered some information of her own. The world was not a kind enough place that she felt comfortable accepting information at face value. In the end, she'd learned that the rumors were mostly bunk, but she didn't for a second doubt the strength possessed by the King of Farune, who went by the names of both Mars and Zero. He had probably spilled

more blood and built a taller mountain of corpses than anyone in over a hundred years.

Try to kidnap him? That hardly seemed like a sane decision.

"Violetta, I know exactly what you're saying," Al began. "But this actually isn't an order from back home. They told us the target is up to us. Basically, they gave us complete control over the mission. If they'd chosen a specific target, we would have been able to judge whether kidnapping or killing them was possible, and report back. But with instructions like this, that don't specify if we're targeting King Mars himself, his consorts, or any of their children, we can't very well reply that none of them are possible. That would be as good as saying we're a bunch of worthless incompetents." Al's expression twisted. "What a nasty way to give orders. Though I bet they *think* they're being thoughtful."

If even the momentous decisions were being foisted upon them, the ones on the ground, then what was the point of the higher-ups in the first place?

"So, the five of us discussed who to target," Begie said, picking up where Al had left off. "We had time to kill while you were on your way here. And, we came to the conclusion that the best target is King Mars." With his friendly, round face, Begie looked more fit to be a merchant than a Shade.

"That's what I need you to explain," Violetta said with a sharp look. "Why?"

"Well, what's your opinion? Who do you think we should target, Violetta?"

"Prince Arthur first. He'll probably be the successor to the throne of Farune. If we kidnap him, don't you think King Mars and the Lightning Empress, Farune's two greatest military assets, will be a bit better behaved?"

"Yeah. You're exactly right," Begie said, smirking. "That's what everyone thought."

"Who's 'everyone'?"

"Our bosses, the previous guys, and so on. Everyone thought Arthur would be the best target to make Farune yield."

"Eyland already executed that plan?"

"You could say that."

"So, what happened?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"The day after they put the plan in motion, every one of Eyland's Shades stationed in Farune went missing. Not only that, but all our collaborators in Farune also disappeared without a trace. That's why what actually happened and exactly *how* the plan failed is a complete mystery. We ended up having to rebuild the organization of Shades in Farune from scratch because of it. As a result, we're lacking in personnel—especially women. Which is why you were hired, Violetta."

Violetta was a freelance thief who performed a variety of shady jobs. She was known as someone who could keep a secret and who would take on anything, as long as it paid well.

"So, the ones who went missing still haven't been found?" Violetta asked, unconsciously lowering her voice.

"Oh no, they've been found," Al replied. "They turned up in Eyland's royal palace. Apparently, all of them had been turned undead. They appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the night and indiscriminately attacked everyone there. The incident was hushed up, so it hasn't been leaked to the outside, but they say it was a screeching, bloody, hellish mess." He shuddered. "Just imagining it makes my hair stand on end. And nobody in Farune knows about it either. I tried digging around, but even high-ranking figures have no idea. Which means that the one who did it all…"

"Was Lightning Empress Frau," Violetta said. Frau was Mars's queen consort, and an insane mage with numerous tales of cruelty to her name. It was rumored that she didn't balk at anything that could further her magic, not even human experimentation.

"That's right. That crazy witch did it all by herself. Which is why her and her son Arthur are a no-go. We want to choose how we die, at the very least. Plus, the two of them never leave the castle anyway, so there's no way to get close to them. We were told to do this job outside the castle, after all. Not that we could do it inside the castle even if we wanted to."

It was a terrifying story. They may have been enemies, but it was downright inhuman to turn someone undead and make them attack their former countrymen. It was enough to make even underworld operatives, no strangers to death themselves, shudder.

"Well, what about Second Princess Carmilla's son, Leon?" Violetta proposed, looking around at her team. "He's the king of Dorssen, even if it is in name only. If we abduct him, that'll shake Dorssen's legitimacy. We won't be doing it in Farune, but that shouldn't be a problem, should it? As long as we stay out of Farune's castle, it'll be fine."

"That's no good either," Garma said, squinting his narrow eyes even further. His slender body and awkward posture made him seem like he had somewhat of an anxious temperament. He looked like he could pass well as a scholar or a researcher. "We already tried that."

"You mean, Vulcan did?"

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Garma explained. "Just abduct and brainwash a single kid, and we could usurp Dorssen. At least, that was what our bosses thought."

"It didn't work out?"

"Well, it turned out better than the plan with Arthur."

"Meaning?"

"Everyone was captured, tortured, and executed. But that's a lot better than being turned undead, right? Apparently, Carmilla tormented everyone involved personally before killing them herself."

"The Frenzied Princess…" Violetta mumbled Carmilla's nickname. She had been infamous even before marrying into the Farunian royal family.

"Hey, Her Highness was kinder than the Lightning Empress. But her subordinates are tricky. Former thieves, former assassins, former mercenaries, former adventurers, you name it, they all have a good nose for the criminal underworld. And, while Dorssen was in a state of disorder after the recent power struggle, it's not like they don't have any Shades themselves. In a certain sense, it's actually harder to operate in Dorssen than in Farune. We could plan a kidnapping or an assassination there, but fat chance of it actually succeeding."

"All right, I get it, Leon's off the table too," Violetta said, raising both hands in surrender. "Then what about the third princess's daughter? I heard she was born just recently."

The five men exchanged looks.

"How much do you know about the third princess?" Denze asked, his tone delicate. With his broad frame and rugged face, he looked like a stereotypical urban laborer.

"I hear she's outrageously strong, and that she won that ridiculous Consort Selection Tournament using nothing but her bare hands. They say she crushed a spell in her palm. But she has to be better than taking on the Lightning Empress or the Frenzied Princess, right?"

Hearing that, Denze let out a deep sigh. "To tell you the truth, we can't identify the third princess or her daughter directly."

"You can't identify them? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Not one Shade has laid eyes on them. Cassandra is terrifyingly perceptive, and no matter how much distance you put between yourself and her, as soon as you look at her, she notices you. And, no one she's noticed has ever come back alive. A partner and I once went together to try and sneak a glimpse of her from outside the castle. We busted our asses doing it, but the second my partner somehow managed to catch sight of her, even though it was from far away, his head went soaring. I was so scared that my knees turned to jelly. I ran away as fast as my legs could carry me. She's no joke."

"What?! Is she even human? Are we sure she isn't some legendary monster that turns people to stone with her gaze, or something?"

"Who knows? But she has the same name as that Swordmaster who's been missing for more than a decade, so there are some who suspect they're the same person. Even so, we just don't have enough information—she's an unknown quantity."

"*That* Swordmaster? You mean the Red Demon Cassandra?!"

The woman was an absolute battle maniac, and was rumored to have destroyed an entire country by herself. Until the rise of

Farune, she had, without a doubt, been considered the greatest threat in Ares.

"She might even be worse than the Lightning Empress and the Frenzied Princess," Denze said, shaking his head. "Depending on the situation, it's possible she's even stronger than King Mars. There's no way we should be messing with her."

"If the third princess is a no, then that leaves Fourth Princess Sheila," Violetta said, still refusing to back down. "She doesn't have any children, but she's better than the Lightning Empress, the Frenzied Princess, and the Swordmaster, right? How about her?" No matter what, Violetta didn't want to make King Mars their target. She had seen him in the arena. He was inhumanly strong. They stood no chance against him.

"You at least know who Sheila is, right?" Al said, exasperated. "The former S-rank adventurer, Sheila of the Twin Blades? She was said to be the strongest adventurer there was after Sigmund the Dragonslayer retired. She might not be a savage fiend like the other consorts, but her strength is serious business. And on top of that, she hardly ever leaves the castle. She'll be a difficult target."

"Lightning Empress, Frenzied Princess, Swordmaster, and now Twin Blades!" Violetta looked up at the ceiling, exasperated. She may have already known it, but saying their titles out loud drove home how hopeless their situation was. Sure, the pay was good, but she was starting to wonder whether she should turn down the job at this late stage. "Did King Mars gather the world's four most dangerous women to be his consorts on purpose? That's the Mad King for you, even his taste in women is deranged! Can't he at least go out with someone decent?!" She flopped violently onto one of the room's beds.

As a matter of fact, Mars's taste in women was fairly standard. It was just that the people around him had decided on his wives without taking his wishes into account. But of course, there was no way for anyone to know that.

"Fine, okay! We can't go after the princesses!" Violetta relented. "But why should that mean King Mars is our target? He's the worst one by far, among men at least."

"It's because he leaves the castle," Zeta, the mage, said in a resigned voice. "For the most part, Farune is basically defenseless, so you Shades can operate with impunity. But that's only outside the castle. Inside, there's a powerful magic barrier set up by Frau and her subordinate mages. Even my master, Matou, would find it hard to breach. After all, it's more difficult to break a barrier than it is to put one up." Zeta paused before continuing.

"In other words," he said after a moment, "it's impossible to find out what's going on inside the castle. If anyone did find a way to break in, they'd probably be detected in an instant. If you got in through legitimate means—say by becoming a servant—it wouldn't be too hard to gather information, but if you did anything even slightly suspicious, you'd be found out. Either way, operating inside the castle is difficult. However, King Mars often leaves the castle alone, and he doesn't seem to notice it when he's being observed. Maybe it's his confidence in his own prowess, but it makes him the most vulnerable among our potential targets. That's why we decided to choose him."

Violetta took a moment to digest this information. "So he's the most vulnerable precisely because he's the strongest," she said. The strongest warrior, losing their life due to their own hubris and carelessness—it was a common tale, both in legend and recorded history. It wasn't out of the question.

"That's not all," Zeta added. "It seems like as long as we don't intend on hurting him, he's slow to respond to us. He's killed everyone who's ever attempted to assassinate him, on the spot, but he won't make a move against us so long as we're only observing him around the city. Apparently, he's been constantly targeted by assassins from a young age, so he's abnormally sensitive to people trying to kill him. But if we don't have that intent, getting close to him is easy. In fact, he casually interacts with ordinary citizens pretty often."

"I see," Violetta said. "Then, what do we intend to do with him? Take him captive? Or kill him?"

"Both," answered Al. In all likelihood, this inconspicuous-looking man was acting as the group's leader. "We'll trap King Mars when

he's left the castle. Then, before he can escape, Zeta will cast a teleportation spell on him."

"A teleportation spell? Where are you going to send him?

"Into an ancient ruin. It was recently discovered, and we haven't been told exactly where it is. The plan is for another team like us, with members from Eyland, Vulcan, and Kiel, to go in there, lay out a magic circle in the deepest part of the ruin, and bring King Mars in there."

"I don't know what kind of ruin we're talking about, but if anyone can make it out of one, it's that monster. Don't you think he'll be able to escape?"

"The team is destroying the entrance and several passages along the way there, to make it so *no one* will ever be able to get out."

"Wait a minute! But what about the team that's going inside? They won't be able to get out either!"

"They knew what they were getting into when they signed up for this, Violetta," Begie said, smiling kindly. "And it isn't just them. We'll be risking our lives too. But that's how important this job is."

"If we don't do anything, our countries aren't the only ones that Farune will conquer. That evil empire will conquer *every country in Ares*," Garma said. "That's the one thing we have to avoid. This isn't just for Vulcan or Eyland, it's for the fate of the world." Somehow, he actually seemed cheerful about it.

"We used to be enemies," Denze said. "Normally we did all sorts of crap jobs that could never be made public, even if it was for the sake of our countries. But this time is different. We'll be the ones who defeated the Demon King. Heroes. Of course, we aren't badass protagonist-types like in the fairy tales, but still, we can risk our lives knowing we're doing what's right. That's enough for us." He softly placed a hand on Violetta's shoulder. The weight of his hand communicated to her the accumulated anguish of working as a Shade, as well as the hope he placed in this mission.

Violetta could understand those feelings. People in their covert line of work only ever saw the rotten underbellies of countries and their citizens. Something as pure as righteousness just didn't exist

for them, but they still had to work for the benefit of their country, even if what they experienced wasn't just. It wore away at a person's body and mind, and there were many Shades who slowly destroyed themselves.

But this time, their foe was the evil king of Farune, who was plotting world domination. Just recently, he'd raided the Theocracy of Mauve and kidnapped the leading candidate for sainthood, Maria. It was said she was currently being forced to work as a healer in Farune's arena, and even that she was being made to subsist on a diet of monster meat. It was absolutely outrageous, the work of a man who didn't even fear God—a true Demon King.

"Okay. I get it—I get that you're all a bunch of reckless idiots," Violetta said, laughing despite herself. "But you know, I kinda like those kinds of idiots."

And so, on that day, the hearts of six people who served different countries were united as one.

XI: The Plan to Assassinate Mars, Part 2

LATELY, going on walks outside the castle had become part of my routine. After all, as long as I stayed inside I had to deal with Cassandra's poor temper, Frau trying to turn me into one of her magic test subjects, and Maria making me listen to those headache-inducing delusions of hers.

Cassandra was especially on edge because she was having a hard time keeping the maids assigned to Hilda. Technically, all the maids had to do was take care of our daughter, but Cassandra demanded a certain degree of strength from them anyway. There was basically no way any of them would qualify to stick around, and Cassandra took out her frustration with the situation on me. It was really becoming a problem.

And when it came to Frau, her magic experiments were seriously the worst. Up until recently, she'd been making me help her with a certain spell and I'd been having a truly awful time with it.

What do any of them think a king is, exactly? Even carthorses are treated with more care than this, I thought. That was why I didn't want to stay in the castle any more than absolutely necessary.

Among my consorts, Sheila was relatively sensible, but lately she'd been undergoing hellish training as a sort of apprentice to Cassandra. She was distraught. "If things go on like this, my body's going to give out," she kept saying.

And if I ever happened to speak to her during the day, I was likely to be dragged into one of her "special trainings" too, so I could usually only see her at night.

But even so, what was "my body's going to give out" supposed to mean? Was she not taking well to monster meat? *Sounds rough.*

Anyway, thanks to my walks around the city, it seemed I was finally recognizable without my armor. Commoners sometimes greeted me when I was out and about—though they still refused to let me eat any regular meat dishes. Some people spoke to me a little suspiciously, but I didn't sense any hostility from them, so I generally left them alone. Because I had been targeted since childhood, I could at least tell whether or not someone wanted me dead. Apparently, whenever Cassandra felt a suspicious gaze, she instantly attacked. But I wanted to live a bit more charitably.

When I walked through the city, there were shouts of "King Mars!" as my subjects waved at me. I waved back, thinking that I never would've been able to imagine a sight like this before meeting Cassandra.

Actually, my life has been way harder since meeting her.

Regardless, in the years since I had become king, Farune had been growing steadily. I was proud of it—the peace I'd worked for was finally coming to fruition.

It would have been even better if I didn't have an arena match next on my schedule.

I was walking my usual route, those thoughts drifting through my mind, when someone suddenly came bolting out of an alleyway.

"Help me, please!" she shouted. It was a young woman. She was pretty cute, though not so beautiful that she stood out.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Some men just broke into my house and started robbing me!"

Now that was an awfully audacious burglary. The neighborhood we were in had been a slum in the past, and crime was still an issue even though it was being redeveloped, but it was also broad daylight.

"Show me there. I'll take care of it."

"Over here!" she said, taking my hand.

How many years has it been since a normal woman held my hand?

Has one ever, actually?

This is nice, somehow.



THE girl led me to a large house made of gray stone. It certainly looked like someone wealthy lived there. I hurried after her to stop the burglars, and when I went inside, I saw there was nothing but one large room. It was dim and haphazardly cluttered with furniture, with wide, evenly spaced pillars that made it hard to tell if anyone was there.

"What is this?" I said.

On closer scrutiny, I saw what looked like a large magic circle drawn on the floor. A magic circle that began to glow. I could hear a spell being uttered from within the shadow of one of the pillars.

Is there a wizard hiding somewhere in here? I wondered. I was confident I could withstand most magic attacks, but something felt off. When things get confusing, get slicing—that was one of Cassandra's teachings. I tried to place my hand on the sword at my waist, but at that moment, the girl who'd brought me there clung to me from behind.

"I'm scared!" she said, wrapping her slender arms around my body, and preventing me from drawing my sword.

Crap, she's cute. None of my unnecessarily strong consorts had this sort of delicate, girlish demeanor. I wanted to shrug the girl off, but I didn't want to be inconsiderate, so I lifted her up onto my back, then forced my way over to where I could see the wizard was.

"Huh?" the girl exclaimed, surprised.

Just bear with me. If she had been some grubby guy, I would already have flung her away without a moment's hesitation. *If this is all, I can easily take down a wizard or two.*

But just as I was thinking that, four men leaped at me all at once.

Had they been hiding behind the furniture and the pillars? I hadn't sensed any hostility.

Each man clung to one of my limbs, and with the girl holding tightly onto my back at the same time, it was hard to move at all.

Hm? Am I actually in trouble here? If I didn't hurry, the wizard would have time to complete whatever the spell was. Going off what I could hear being chanted, it wasn't an attack spell, either. That meant there was no way for me to tell what kind of effect it was about to have.

I lifted up the men clinging to my arms, and with all my strength, bashed them together in front of me. I felt a dull, unpleasant sensation travel up my arms—their bones breaking. They might even have died. But they still didn't release their grips. They were disturbingly tenacious. With no other option, I forced my legs to move too, smashing the narrow-eyed man clinging to my right leg into a pillar.

"Guh!" he grunted. He was spitting up blood, but he still wouldn't let go.

Clicking my tongue, I lifted my left leg up high, then slammed the chubby man clinging to it against the floor.

"Mgh?!" His voice was pained, and I felt the strength ebb from his body, but even then, the hands clutching my leg held tight.

This is bad. At this rate, the spell is going to finish.

I contorted my body so I could remove my gravity armlet, and I felt lighter immediately. With the five people still holding onto me, I ran over to the wizard in the shadow of the pillar. I felt a surge of mana. The spell was just about to activate.

I slammed the body of the man still clinging to my right arm into the wizard's head as hard as I could. His gloomy face suddenly

jerked to the side, his neck twisting in the wrong direction. And at the exact same time, the world warped and turned insubstantial.



"AL, Begie, Garma, Denze, Zeta…" Violetta murmured faintly.

She was standing alone, petrified, in the room where King Mars had just disappeared from. None of the four men who had held onto their target until their very last breaths got up from the floor. Despite his neck having been snapped, though, Zeta had recited his spell all the way to the end.

It had certainly been a reckless strategy to try luring King Mars in and subduing him with nothing but their bare hands. But if he had seen even a single weapon, he would definitely have retaliated with all his power. The men had guessed he wouldn't be as violent when attacking unarmed enemies—and they'd been right. There had barely been any resistance from him. But even then, the strongest man in Ares had taken down all five of them with his bare hands.

Violetta had been trained as a thief, so she had a command of martial arts. She understood that King Mars had to have been remarkably strong to move around as much as he did, even while she adroitly clung to him to try and slow him down. His power at that very last moment had been particularly abnormal. The name of Demon King really did suit him.

"But everyone's smiling," she said into the silence.

The men who had lived their lives in the dark underbelly of society all had contented looks on their faces, like they had accomplished something important. They had perished from King Mars's blows, but even then, they hadn't let go. They had displayed incredible resolve.

"Will I be able to die like this too?" Violetta mumbled wistfully. Until then, she had carried out tasks with a cool indifference, but the men's last moments made her feel conflicted. For someone like her, who lived in the criminal underworld, there was no chance she'd die quietly or peacefully. But at the very least, she hoped when she did go, it would be for something that was worth it.

She headed to the door. The remaining Eylish and Vulcanian Shades would deal with the men's bodies. It was how every Shade's life ended, after all. She opened the door only as much as absolutely necessary, to keep the inside of the house from being seen, then slipped outside.

Where she was about to see something unbelievable.



JUST moments earlier, I had been inside a dim, cluttered house. Now, for some reason, I was in the middle of a large chamber with patterns drawn on the stone walls.

It seemed that the magic the wizard had been chanting had been a teleportation spell. I'd seen Frau cast one many times. It wasn't all that hard for casters to teleport themselves, but I knew it was extremely difficult to cast the spell on another person. That had probably been why they'd taken the time to lay down a magic circle.

I recognized the distinctive stone walls around me. The patterns were commonly used in ancient ruins. *I must be in a ruin somewhere.*

Inside the chamber with me were six people lying on the floor, their bodies covered in injuries. They were well equipped, decked out in armor and carrying swords. There was even a wizard and a priest among them, so they were probably some variety of adventuring party. But every one of them was at death's door. *What in the world happened here?*

"Ugh…" groaned one armor-clad man, who looked to be a warrior. He still had some life in him.

"What's wrong?" I asked him. "Get it together, all right? What is this place?" For the moment, I just wanted to know where we were. Hopefully the man's death could wait until after he filled me in.

The corners of the man's mouth turned upward. "This is an ancient underground ruin," he rasped. "Only a select few know about it. We made it all the way to its deepest level, but the monsters that nested here and the Golems that protect the ruin were…tough. And, well, you can see how that ended for us."

Golems were formidable monsters made of stone and often stationed to guard ancient ruins. *I see, so they must be adventurers who took on a request that was too much for them.*

"I'll let you in on a little something," he continued. "The cave mouth that was the only entrance to this place has already been destroyed. And we thoroughly sealed the passages on the way here too…*ngh*…" The man's face twisted with pain.

They destroyed the ways in and out? Why would they do that?

"No one's getting out of here now. Of course, it took us everything we had just to get here, so either way, we weren't ever making it back home…" The man smiled cynically.

Ummm, does that mean these people came all the way to the deepest level of an ancient ruin and set up a teleportation magic circle just to send me here?

I knew it, those guys hiding in the house were after me.

But what about the girl who brought me there with them? She couldn't have been involved; she was too cute. There was no way she was helping them. She'd probably just been dragged into their scheme coincidentally.

But more importantly, this ancient ruin. They destroyed the cave at the entrance, so it'll take a while for me to escape on my own. But if I just sit tight, then before long…

Even as the thought entered my mind, a white light shone before my eyes. This time, it was a light I was very familiar with.



THE man knew he was going to die. Nevertheless, he was content. He had lived his whole life for Eyland and he was satisfied in the knowledge that he was going to be able to die for it, too.

The people who had raided the ruin with him hadn't only been from Eyland. Vulcanian swordsmen, a wizard from Kiel, and a priest from the Theocracy of Mauve had been there too. The party had had more than ten members in total, all working toward the goal of trapping the evil king of Farune, King Mars, in the ruin.

The journey had been harsher than expected. Eylish warriors alone would not have been enough to defeat the seemingly endless monsters nesting on the way down. The Vulcanian swordsmen had slaughtered them one after another with their magnificent sword techniques, and then the wizard from Kiel had defeated the Golems, which were immune to swords. Finally, a dragon had lain in wait for them at the very end of the path. It had pushed the party to the brink of annihilation repeatedly, but the Theocracy's priest had used blessings and prayers of divine healing to get them back on their feet each time. The priest had been furious with Farune for taking away the Theocracy's saint, so he had defied his country's wishes to accompany the rest of the group on their mission.

Though the adventurers had been born in different countries, their souls were no less than woven together by the bond they shared as travelers down the same one-way path. By the time they finally reached the chamber at the deepest part of the ruin, their number had been reduced by half, to only five. Not only that, but the wizard, right after expending his last drops of mana to throw a barrier up around them, had breathed his last. He was the younger brother of the wizard who had taken on the duty of casting the teleportation spell in Farune.

"I know my brother's giving it his all," he had said, looking deeply serious. "I need to live up to his example."

The remaining man spoke up, hope faint in his voice. "Is there anyone else left who hasn't had the decency to die yet?" But his words echoed fruitlessly off the stone walls. There was no reply. "I guess they're all gone."

They had only known each other for a short time, but they had been true comrades. If possible, the man had wanted to return to the surface, and maybe have some drinks with them. His vision blurred in spite of himself. But he couldn't die yet. He still had one last duty: to tell that bastard Demon King to his face that these were his just desserts.

They had been right on schedule. Now, everything was riding on how well the Shades in Farune could do. Normally, Shades performed questionable jobs, like investigating the backgrounds of

both their enemies and their allies. The man had always considered them a slippery bunch, but he was sure they had no less desire to work for their country than he and his companions did for theirs.

Their opponent was Mad King Mars. It would be practically impossible to cast a teleportation spell on someone like him, and they had no choice but to stake everything on it.

It shouldn't have been all that long, but it seemed like an eternity to the man at death's door before the magic circle written on the floor began to glow. From the looks of it, things had gone well on the other side too. Eventually, the magic circle gave off a white light that was practically blinding, and a man appeared in its center.

Damn, he's just an ordinary young noble. This is the Mad King of Farune? the man thought, feeling let down. He pulled himself back together and tried to speak, but all that came out was a groan. "Ugh…"

Hearing his voice, the king of Farune approached. "What's wrong? Get it together, all right? What is this place?" he said.

Hmph, you're awfully calm. Now, why don't I do something about that and give you a taste of despair? Using all the energy he could muster, the man explained the situation in which Mars now found himself. But Mars didn't respond the way the man had expected. For a moment, his posture made it seem like he was deep in thought, then he just stood still in the center of the chamber.

What? Have you given up? Or are you just trying to put on a brave face? The man made a last-ditch effort to stitch together the strands of his fraying consciousness. At the very least, he wanted to watch Mars as he succumbed to misery. But after only a short time, something else, shining with a different white light, appeared in the center of the chamber.

What the…? No one told me about this part of the plan!

A pale woman who looked like a porcelain doll materialized from within the white light.

Who is she?

"That was fast," Mars said to the woman.

"I was watching," she replied in a monotone voice.

"Oh, you were?" An awkward expression appeared on Mars's face.

"Shall we go home?" the woman asked matter-of-factly.

Huh?

"Yeah, let's." Mars took the pale woman's small hand in his.

What does he mean, "go home"?! Who the hell is that woman? How'd she figure out he was here?

The man didn't know it, but Farune had a secret. Or rather, it had something that was only known to an extremely small group of people. The pale woman—Frau—was connected to Mars via a Contract Seal. The spell allowed Frau to see whatever Mars saw, and teleport directly to him whenever she wanted. Mars had covered up the situation out of embarrassment, and it hadn't leaked to any foreign countries.

Mars and Frau were once again shrouded in a white light.

Are you kidding me?! There's no way I can let this nonsense ruin everything!

The man wrung out the last of his strength and stretched his hand out to the light. Mars and Frau were facing in the opposite direction, so they wouldn't notice him—or at least, they shouldn't have.



But Frau abruptly looked back at the man.

Her face was lifeless, just like a doll's. Then ever so slightly, *ever* so slightly, it twitched.

To the man, it looked like she was smirking at him. And that was his final memory.



"HEY, are you all right?"

What Violetta saw when she exited the gray stone house was King Mars, to whose back she had been clinging only moments earlier. Next to him was a small, pale, pretty woman. She looked like an exquisitely crafted doll—this was Lightning Empress Frau.

"Huh?" Violetta exclaimed. A shudder swept through her body. "How did you find a way back?!" The faces of her dead friends passed before her mind's eye, and she unconsciously let out a scream.

XII: The Plan to Assassinate Mars, Part 3

WE returned from the ancient ruin to a spot right in front of the gray house.

Frau had been perfecting her magic day by day. Until recently, she had only been able to cast teleportation spells on herself, but she had now learned to teleport together with someone else. Naturally, I had been the guinea pig for her experiments. Which had been miserable. There had been quite a few times when I had been teleported somewhere completely different from my intended destination. I had thought I was going to die the time she sent me all the way into the depths of the Forest of Beasts.

Still, I couldn't very well let her do her inhumane experiments on someone else, so I always stuck with her through all the failures until she succeeded.

As soon as we got back, the door to the house in front of us opened noiselessly, and the girl from earlier slipped outside.

"Hey, are you all right?" I asked her. I spoke gently; after all, those men had probably only been using her to get at me.

"Huh?" she exclaimed, clearly taken aback. "How did you find a way back?!" She screamed once, her face pale. *She must have been worried about me.*

"It was really nothing," I said. I couldn't bring myself to admit that Frau had helped me out. *It's only natural for men to want to show off a bit.*

"No way…" The woman clasped her hands together as if in prayer, then sunk to the ground, undoubtedly thanking God that I was unharmed.

"What's your name?" I asked. At this, the girl shuddered as if shot through with an electric current.

"V-Violetta!" she said.

"Violetta… I like that name," I said. "Can I call you Vi?"

"Huh? Uh, sure."

"All right, Vi. How much did you know about what just happened?"

"How much did I…? I didn't know anything, nothing at all! They threatened me! So, um, I had no clue about anything!"

It was exactly as I thought. Vi had just been dragged into the situation.

"I see," I said. "That must have been awful for you. Do you have a home you can go back to?" Because she had been used by those men, it occurred to me that she might not have anywhere to stay.

"A…home?"

"If you don't have anywhere to go, you can come to the castle. I'll hire you."

Vi stared into my eyes. Her expression looked warm.

"Okay! Please do!" she replied vigorously. "I'd love to work for you!"

She must have been living a no-good, down-and-out life. I'll bet she's always wanted to get an honest job.

And with that, even someone like me had been able to save someone's life. It felt great. After all, a bunch of people had died

right in front of me earlier, so it was a real blessing to be able to end the day with a good deed.

And so, Vi ended up working in Farune's castle.



"IF you don't have anywhere to go, you can come to the castle. I'll hire you."

As soon as King Mars said that, memories of my companions flashed through my mind. It had only been a short time, but all five of them had been my true comrades. If I let this opportunity slip away after they'd given their lives for our mission, they'd never know peace.

"Okay! Please do!" I said on impulse. "I'd love to work for you!" Normally, I would have been making my escape by then, but I was a member of the team, just like my late companions. I couldn't just run away with my tail between my legs. Maybe I couldn't kill King Mars himself, but if I could make it into the castle and get closer to his consorts or one of the princes, maybe there would be an opportunity for me to kidnap someone.

At the very least, I wouldn't be satisfied until I could at least throw Farune for a loop somehow. I felt uneasy under Frau's silent gaze, but I decided to follow them into the castle.

"We've been needing some female workers," Mars said. "Especially now that we've got Maria here, the candidate for sainthood. I'd like to have you help out with my consorts and children."

"Th-Thank you very much!" I replied. Being a caretaker for them was exactly what I'd been hoping for. He had to have no sense of caution whatsoever to be comfortable entrusting the care of his family to a woman he'd only just met. The Mad King of Farune was, unexpectedly, a pushover.

I did as I was directed and made my way to the head maid, who managed all the maids in the castle—which, incidentally, wasn't particularly large. The room I was told to find wasn't that far away,

but as I turned down the last corridor on the way there, a man stood blocking my path.

"You're…" I said. He had short blond hair, and his face was covered in scars. It was Ogma, the man ranked first in the Hundred.

"Hey," he said, "are you the new girl working in the castle on His Majesty's recommendation?"

I paused, then said, "Yes." What did Ogma want with me? He shouldn't have known who I was.

"His Majesty has taken a liking to you, so does that mean what I think it does?"

What does he think it means? I wondered. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what—"

The moment I tried to answer him, Ogma threw a punch at me. I reflexively crouched, dodging his fist, then leaped backward to put some space between us.

"What was that all of a sudden?!" I shouted.

"Look at that, so you can fight." Ogma was smiling happily.

Damn! So that punch was to gauge my strength! An ordinary maid could never have moved like I just had. He had been testing me. "Um, actually, I was just…"

I knew it was impossible for me to run away from the strongest man in the Hundred. I had to come up with some way to explain myself.

"I know what you're really here for," Ogma said, his mouth twisting into a churlish smile. "It's not hard to tell." His expression was pretty macho, but surprisingly charming.

"What?" I exclaimed. *No way, did he find out my secret somehow?*

"You're here to join the Hundred, aren't you?"

"Excuse me?" *What the heck is this yellow-haired, scar-faced buffoon saying?*

"You're confident in your skills, so you didn't want to start off in one of the lower branches, and that's why you spoke to His Majesty directly, isn't that right?"

"No, that isn't really—"

"Don't try to hide it," Ogma interrupted. "How else would you explain the way you moved just now? You're not about to insist you're just some normal maid, are you? My skull's not thick enough for you to pull that much of a fast one on me, got it?" Then Ogma placed his hands on the wall behind me, blocking my escape. There was no way I could even try to run away in that position.

Ogma's skull was, in fact, even thicker than he suggested, but I couldn't think of any other excuse besides the one he had offered me. I had no choice but to go along with it.

"Fine, it's true," I said like I was confessing a real secret. "I got closer to His Majesty because I thought he could recruit me into the Hundred directly, but I was granted a maid position instead. I'm sure His Majesty thought that the responsibility of the Hundred would be too much for me. So, this will have to do…"

"Don't give me that!" Ogma shouted. "Gender, age, whatever—none of that matters! The will to be strong is all that's needed to be in the Hundred! And I'm impressed by the way you move. You're still young, and you have promise."

"R-Right…" He had such a menacing look on his face that I was afraid I'd be killed if I contradicted him. Actually, to be precise, being first in the Hundred meant that Ogma was insanely terrifying. I felt like I could have been crushed by the aggressive aura emanating from his body alone.

"You can count on me," he said. "Mark my words, I'll toughen you up."

After saying that, Ogma grabbed me firmly by the arm. It felt like I was being clamped in an iron vise. There was no way I could have hoped to brush him off.

"Um, His Majesty ordered me to be a maid…"

"I know. Lady Frau told me."

She did? Why?

"You'll be assigned to Lady Cassandra as her personal attendant. None of her maids stay on long. But, I'm sure you'll be a good fit. You've got this!"

Cassandra…the Red Demon Swordmaster?! Why do I have to be such a dangerous person's attendant?

Ogma forcefully took me along, practically dragging me behind him by the arm.



"SO, you're my new maid?" the woman said.

Clearly, she was not human. She was something else wearing human skin.

I was in the private quarters of Third Princess Cassandra. But for all her high rank, the room was nearly barren, with very few furnishings. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a winged white lizard gliding about the room.

What the hell is that? I wondered. But now was not the time to be thinking about lizards. I was in the presence of the woman with the title given to the strongest among humans—Swordmaster. It was a title that felt lackluster as I stood before this red-headed demon. I had thought I'd faced numerous terrors in my life, but I was wrong. True terror was right here.

She was holding a newborn child in her arms, but I still couldn't even consider making a move against her. My life was sure to be over the second the thought of harming her crossed my mind. My intuition as a woman of the criminal underworld told me two things: "You better run" and "You're about to die."

"Y-Yes, ma'am," I said, somehow managing to force out a reply. I was sure I'd be killed if I accidentally said even half a word out of turn.

"I heard about you from Ogma," she said. "You're resolved to start eating monster meat, right?"

I didn't remember saying that or resolving to do anything of the sort.

"Yes, I am!" I replied, straightening my back. There was no way I could say no to this woman. I'd be throwing my life away.

"Oho," Cassandra said with a smile.

The sight of someone smiling is supposed to make a person feel relaxed, but Cassandra's smile was different. I felt more like I

was looking at a dragon baring its teeth, and it solidified my impression of her as something inhuman and enigmatic.



"All right, then why don't you have some now?" Cassandra continued.

And with that, a small plate was placed on the table in front of me, presented by a silver-haired woman wearing two swords on her back—the former S-rank adventurer, Sheila of the Twin Blades.

Why is someone like her working as a waitress? I wondered. I could tell from every one of her movements that she possessed a great deal of strength, but even she had nothing on Cassandra.

On the plate, as if it were only natural, sat a sinister-looking piece of purple raw meat.

"Eat it, and show me the extent of your resolve," Cassandra ordered.

I stole a glance at her. Her blue eyes were staring right at me. I knew that if I showed any hesitation, my life would be forfeit. I politely picked up the plate, buying a few scant moments so I could steel myself for what was coming, and popped the meat into my mouth.

Ugh, it's awful!

The horrible stench forced its way through my nose. Its corrosive poison coated my tongue. Stomach acid welled up in my throat, demanding that I spit out the vile invader. This was no question of taste; I simply should not have put that thing in my mouth.

However, I had spent a great deal of time in the criminal underworld, so I had a certain degree of poison resistance. I somehow forced down the bile threatening to turn into vomit, and I made myself swallow. Tears streamed from my eyes, but I couldn't do anything about that. And, while I did manage to keep the meat down, I was overcome by the illusion that it had a mind of its own where it was lodged in my stomach, and was somehow consciously revolting against my body.

"Oho. Impressive, for your first time," Cassandra said, satisfied with what she had just seen. "All right. I'll make you my maid."

Huh? That was an audition to be your maid…?

"From the state of your body, it's clear that you're decently strong, but it's still too early for me to train you myself. Devote

yourself to toughening up with the Hundred. I'll instruct you after that, when you're ready."

Where did all this come from?! No, I can't bear to face such a cruel future! That was what I thought, but the words that came out of my mouth were entirely different: "Thank you very much! I'll give it my best shot!"

And that was how it was decided that I would become both Cassandra's personal attendant and a member of the Hundred.

I'm pretty sure I'm the unluckiest person in the world right now.



"BY the way, where's Vi?" I wondered aloud. I was in Frau's quarters with Arthur when I suddenly remembered that girl I'd hired. I knew she'd come to the castle pretty recently, but I hadn't seen her around at all.

"With Cassandra," Frau replied casually.

"Oh really, she is? She must really be exerting herself."

Since having Hilda, Cassandra had been as menacing as a mother bear after giving birth. If I was being honest, I didn't want to get near her. She'd had a hard time finding maids to help out, so Sheila had been filling in temporarily. *So Vi's working for her now, huh?*

I didn't know Frau had been mentally keeping track of Vi. Maybe she was actually an unexpectedly caring person.

Vi seemed like someone who'd had a rough upbringing, so I hope things work out for her here.



"THE assassination attempt was a failure."

The three leaders of Eyland, Vulcan, and Kiel were once again holding a conference, and the king of Eyland's frustration was evident. And a touch melodramatic.

"I heard," said the king of Vulcan. "Apparently the plan *did* succeed, but the king of Farune easily found his way out. He should have been trapped in that ancient ruin. What is the meaning of this?" The displeased king of Vulcan turned to Matou for an explanation, hoping the man who was called the Great Sage might know something.

"I witnessed everything up until right after the success of the teleportation spell," Matou said. "But that's all. Both my apprentice who cast the spell and my apprentice who drew the magic circle in the deepest part of the ruin died. Even with my sight, I can't penetrate all the way into those depths. However, I can guess what happened."

"And?" The king of Eyland looked dubious.

"I imagine this was the work of Frau," Matou explained. "I knew she could cast teleportation spells, but she must have learned how to cast them on other people, and not just herself. The question is how she discovered the king of Farune's location. I think it's safe to assume those two have some sort of magical connection between them."

"A magical connection?" This time, the king of Vulcan furrowed his brow.

"For example, there's a spell called a Contract Seal. It lets the caster synchronize their senses with the subject of the spell, and teleport close to them at any time. To put it simply, it basically turns a human into a familiar."

"Synchronize their senses?" the king of Eyland replied, baffled. "But wouldn't that mean that the Lightning Empress knows all of the king of Farune's secrets? A normal person could never endure having everything they did become known to someone else. If my queen consort saw me sleeping with my other consorts, I'd go mad. Is something like that really a possibility?" Reflecting on his usual conduct, he shuddered, imagining what it would be like if his queen consort knew about it all.

"Contract Seals are used to monitor those the caster has forced into submission. It's a type of magic that deserves to be, as it is, taboo. Whatever else Frau may be guilty of, I can't imagine her

using a spell like that on her own husband," Matou mused. "But she may be employing something similar."

"That's what I thought," the king of Eyland said with a faint smile. "I'd seriously lose it if my queen consort had eyes on me all the time. There's no way Frau is using that Contract Seal, or whatever it is, on a king."

"You can say that again. She'd never turn her own husband, who also happens to be the *king*, into a glorified familiar." The king of Vulcan shook his head.

As a matter of fact, Frau was using the exact Contract Seal under discussion on Mars, but even Matou couldn't guess that the king of Farune's circumstances were that dire.

"Regardless, this means that kidnapping the king of Farune will be more difficult than we expected," the king of Vulcan concluded. The specifics weren't important for their purposes.

"I dare say. And on top of that, I lost two of my best pupils," Matou said in an uncharacteristically gloomy voice. "A harsh blow." He felt some regret that he hadn't gone himself, but he'd been worried about it turning into a major international incident if Farune had learned of his involvement.

"The same is true for us," said the king of Eyland, troubled. "We can't get in touch with any of our Shades in Farune, and my palace is in a constant state of tension, afraid the Lightning Empress might retaliate. I can't stand it."

"We've all suffered. Vulcan lost outstanding swordsmen and Shades. But, grieving for them won't bring them back. What matters is what we do next!" Known for his militarism, the king of Vulcan pressed the other two to make a concrete plan.

"You're awfully eager, aren't you?" replied the king of Eyland. "Farune is as strong as you said. So do you really have any chance of victory?" It was a way of subtly ridiculing the king of Vulcan, who hadn't yet participated in any of the fighting himself.

"Hmph, we're preparing our forces," the king of Vulcan said. "The heirs to the Seven Celestial Sword families, the future leaders of the next generation, have sworn their absolute loyalty to me.

Each one of them is as powerful as the next. They'll be enough to take on the Hundred."

Until only recently, Vulcan's Celestial Swords had been split into competing pro-and anti-king factions, but since their children had sworn allegiance to the king, the country was finally unifying. The king of Vulcan could turn his focus and his strength to the matter of Farune.

"You're awfully confident," said the king of Eyland. "You shouldn't underestimate the Hundred…" Having lost one of his Three Counts already, Eyland's king had a more cautious attitude.

"Then what's to be done? Do you intend simply to let Farune do as they please?"

"There's no other choice but to fight them," the king of Eyland said after a moment, determined despite the tired look on his face. "And it will be our tribute to those who have already passed. However, before we do, we must ensure our preparations are flawless."

"Indeed, we have no other option," Matou echoed. "This time only, I shall arrange to join the fight myself. Farune is extremely dangerous. We cannot afford to ignore them."

"Very well. Then it's war! How much time will Eyland and Kiel need to prepare?" The king of Vulcan's cheeks flushed with excitement at the word "war." He always did prefer simple solutions.

"One year. We can't take any longer than that," said the king of Eyland, growing weary of the king of Vulcan's bellicosity.

"We'll get everything ready in a year as well," Matou agreed. "Farune is gaining momentum by the day."

"Then, one year from now, our three countries will come together to defeat Farune!" the king of Vulcan conclusively declared.

He had no idea that he had just sealed his own fate.

XIII: A Saint's Everyday Life

"UM, Lady Maria, do you really feel all right after today's meat?" Annie asked me hesitantly.

Earlier, I'd eaten the meat of a somewhat high-ranking monster, so she was probably worried about my health—and sure enough, my physical condition had deteriorated remarkably. I'd been continually casting restoration spells on myself for some time, but the dizziness, stomach pains, and vomiting wouldn't stop. My face was probably somewhere between distressingly pale and ghostly white. The meat had been really harsh.

Still, while Annie's worry was natural, what I was experiencing was by no means a bad thing. If no injured people were around, it was inherently difficult to train in restoration magic. Unlike swordsmanship or attack magic, it wasn't possible to practice it for its own sake. Eating monsters and harming my own health didn't hurt anyone else, and I was free to practice my restoration magic as much as I wished. Plus, unlike the inconsequential lives of strangers, this was my own life on the line, so I automatically took it more seriously.

I had increased my mana with monster meat and refined my skill with restoration magic by curing the poison that coursed through my system whenever I consumed it. I felt keenly that I was racing along the path to becoming a saint, and I felt a new lust for life. This was a good thing.

In any case, after spending an hour praying to God for a miracle, my body finally recovered.

"Sorry for worrying you, Annie," I said. "But this much is nothing. And it's necessary in order to understand Farune." Annie had remained by my side fussing over me the whole time, so I took the time to reassure her. Honestly, she was a nuisance, but showing kindness to graceless individuals like her made my status rise, so I graciously decided to forgive her.

"But, Lady Maria, do you really need to *keep* eating monster meat? I think you've already had more than enough."

Ugh, she just doesn't get it, does she?

Monster meat was wonderful. Fools may not have even attempted to realize its true potential, but anyone could grow stronger by eating it. Though yes, it could be *slightly* fatal.

On the other hand, anyone who learned what monster meat was capable of could become stronger. So there was never an excuse to stop eating monster meat no matter how much strength you acquired; if you did, there was always the danger that someone who hadn't even started eating it until after you could easily overtake you. As a saint, there was no way I could let that happen. I had to be a supreme being, always.

As such, continuing to eat monster meat was my duty as a saint, and eating the highest-ranking meat possible was required of those such as myself who had been chosen by God.

As a matter of fact, Luida had begun eating monsters before I had, and she was quite powerful. Her skillful restoration magic, honed on the arena's battlefield, might have been the greatest in the world. She was better than me. But Luida wasn't all that proactive about eating monster meat, and she always seemed to choose the least poisonous meat possible.

How ignorant. She was letting her guard down, just because she had a few restoration skills. She was getting cocky, just because she had a slightly pretty face and was popular in the arena. But that was fine. The more she neglected her magic, the easier it would be for me to leave her in my dust.

And so, my current goal was to supplant Luida and become the number one priestess both in name and in reality.

I won't spare any effort to get there.



I stood in the center of the arena like always. As part of my duties as king, I had just decisively beaten the day's challengers to a pulp. The arena was charged with excitement. But the spectators were no longer reacting to my victory; Maria's entrance was responsible for their current surge of energy.

Ever since Maria had become the arena's second healer, she had been proactively using her restoration magic at every opportunity. In the past, the injured had always dragged themselves to the medical facility where Luida waited, but the trend had recently

changed. As soon as a match ended, Maria, dressed in flashy white holy vestments, made her majestic entrance. Then, she performed a mesmerizing dance while casting her restoration magic.

"Hey, is restoration magic more effective if you cast it while dancing?" I asked Luida, who was perfunctorily healing one of the other injured.



"No, I've never heard of anything like that," Luida said with an awkward smile.

"Then, why's she dancing?"

"I think she just enjoys doing it."

As Luida and I chatted, Maria danced, incanting a restoration spell in a clear, beautiful voice:

"Great Mauve, please turn thy benevolent gaze toward us, and shine light onto these souls shrouded in darkness. May prayers in the ancient tongue turn to fluttering petals and sing the melody of the divine. Become stardust, the magic of a glittering heart. The order of the cosmos, guided by ancient precepts, miracles filled with love. I pray, deeper than the void and brighter than starlight, a heavenly verse carrying on into the hereafter…"

Is she reciting a poem or something?

"Luida, remind me, is that what restoration spells are supposed to sound like?" I asked. "I feel like they're usually shorter, and simpler."

"Restoration magic isn't magic, strictly speaking," Luida explained. "It's a prayer offered up to God, so to a certain extent, differing interpretations *are* possible. But this is definitely the first time I've heard such a long, embarrassing prayer." Even as she spoke, Luida was casting short and sweet restoration spells, healing one injured person after another. She was efficient, a skilled craftswoman.

Meanwhile, Maria was trying to heal Juza, who had sustained the worst injuries of the day and was no longer conscious. He was near death, so I could understand why Maria was taking her time, but why in the world did she have to spin around him while singing her spell like a song? I'd never heard such a rhythmic, expressive spell. Her dance gradually grew more dynamic as her spell-like song reached its peak and the spectators actually started singing along with her.

Is this even restoration magic anymore?

Maria wore rings, earrings, and other accessories dotted with magic stones on various parts of her body, and the stones responded to her mana and sparkled with a white light.

Is she trying to start a one-woman festival?

"Does the light from those magic stones enhance her restoration magic or something?" I asked Luida again.

"No, she's just wasting mana," Luida replied. The jewelry *she* wore had normal gemstones, and didn't shine with magic.

"You don't want to use magic stones in your jewelry?" I asked.

"Wouldn't it get annoying if they constantly sparkled in response to mana?"

Yeah, you're right. That much light is just disruptive.

In my opinion, Maria was laying it on too thick, but the spectators went wild, shouting over-the-top praise like:

"Lady Maria, you're amazing!"

"My soul is being healed!"

"I'm dying, so bring me back!"

Her popularity had a certain level of intensity to it. The spectators were so naive—none of them knew what she was really like. It was no wonder she had a bunch of dangerous terrorists as devotees. She was preternaturally charismatic.

Maria's singing, dancing, and sparkling spell finally reached its climax. As he lay on the ground at death's door, Juza was suddenly shrouded in a white light.

"Are you sure he isn't being purified?" I asked. The ranked members of the Hundred were not virtuous people in any sense of the word. *Is he gonna be able to survive inside that immaculate light?*

"Don't worry," Luida reassured me. "That light isn't necessary either. It has no effect on the restoration, so it's harmless."

In other words, it's useless. What a wasteful spell.

Juza regained consciousness in the midst of the light and got up. It was only to be expected—he'd just been the subject of a restoration spell, after all. But the flashy performance almost made it seem like an unbelievable miracle had just occurred. Thinking about it logically, healing the injured person quickly and cutting out all the dancing would have been better for the injured themselves, but regardless, Maria was a skilled performer. I could see now why the

pope hadn't wanted to recognize someone like her as a saint. She had so much ambition that it was oozing out of her magic.

She isn't planning to take over Farune, is she?

Maria tenderly extended a hand to Juza. She had a pure, kind smile on her face. Juza abashedly took her hand, then slowly stood up. His innocent expression was like that of a newborn baby seeing its mother for the first time.

Is he all right? He hasn't been brainwashed?

"Hey, Luida, what do you think of Maria?" I asked.

"I've never seen anyone more motivated," Luida said. "She's the way she is now after trying her hardest to stand out more than me in the arena, but it still somehow feels refreshing when she pushes it that far." She seemed to have a decent opinion of Maria.

Hmm, when she puts it that way, she might be right. But still, it's surprising how much Maria tries to stand out. Normally, you'd be cringing way too hard for that kind of performance to be possible.

Incidentally, the Hundred's opinion of Maria wasn't half-bad either.

According to Ogma, "There are a bunch of guys who'd rather die than have to be the subject of that flashy magic. First, they've lost, and now they're waking up engulfed in light, the center of attention of the entire arena? It's like a public humiliation. Because of that, everyone's started fighting even harder than before. And it's all thanks to Maria. As always, Your Majesty made a wonderful hire."

Yeah, her magic really is embarrassing, isn't it?

"If I ever get hurt, I want you to heal me," I said to Luida.

But she replied, "There's no way. That girl always gets the best for herself. On the off chance that something did happen and Your Majesty got injured, I bet she'd do anything to be by your side."

That's not good. I'll have to make sure I don't get hurt.

Perhaps this was another one of the saint's blessings.



"HOW was it? Did I shine today?" I asked Annie as soon as I got back to the castle. I'd had her watch my performance…I mean, my

restoration magic from the stands in the arena. I needed someone impartial to judge me so I could learn how to make my craft…I mean, *my prayers to God* more polished.

"You were incredible today as well!" Annie replied, clasping her hands together as she began to recount how wonderful I had been. "Your dancing was so beautiful. I've never seen anyone better at restoration magic than you, Lady Maria!"

It always felt good to hear praise. However, Annie was somewhat mistaken—my dancing had nothing to do with restoration magic. Normally, it was more subdued, and honestly, dull. But simply reciting spells wouldn't be as impactful, and there were so many people watching that it would have been a waste not to stand out.

Because it would have been nothing short of a loss to the whole world for me to remain unknown.

That was why, when I first started healing in the arena, I began incanting restoration spells as if I were singing. It was very popular, which was only natural. I was a saint, after all, chosen by God, so of course I had a beautiful voice. As I was singing…I mean, *incanting*, even I couldn't help thinking: *My voice is like music from heaven.*

I steadily reworked and improved my spells, my prayers to God, to make them easier to sing and more enticing to the arena audience. To be honest, I ended up ignoring their healing effects. After all, as long as the injuries got healed in the end, anything was fine. And even if the target of my spell died, I was confident that I could have gotten out of it as long as I shed a few tears.

As a result of my grueling efforts, my fame steadily grew, but it still wasn't enough. This was the arena, so singing alone couldn't possibly invigorate the crowd as much as the main event, the Hundred's matches. This was an unavoidable problem. After all, the spectators were nothing but human trash, there to gamble on the outcomes of fights to the death. There was no way they would appreciate the value of my songs—dare I say it, my art. It would have been easy for me to give up on those unrepentant philistines, but I was the future pope of the Church of Mauve. I was a supreme being, one who could make the impossible possible. I had to show everyone—even those unfortunate, grimy lambs—the path to God.

That was when I decided to incorporate dancing into my restoration magic, so even an idiot could understand God's blessings. Luckily, Annie was from a frontier tribe that danced during festivals, so I was able to learn techniques from her. There was no doubt about it: this servant existed for the purpose of teaching me how to dance.

"Why are you trying to learn how to dance, Lady Maria?" Annie had asked me.

I simply replied, "So I can make my restoration magic more effective," and she dutifully believed me.

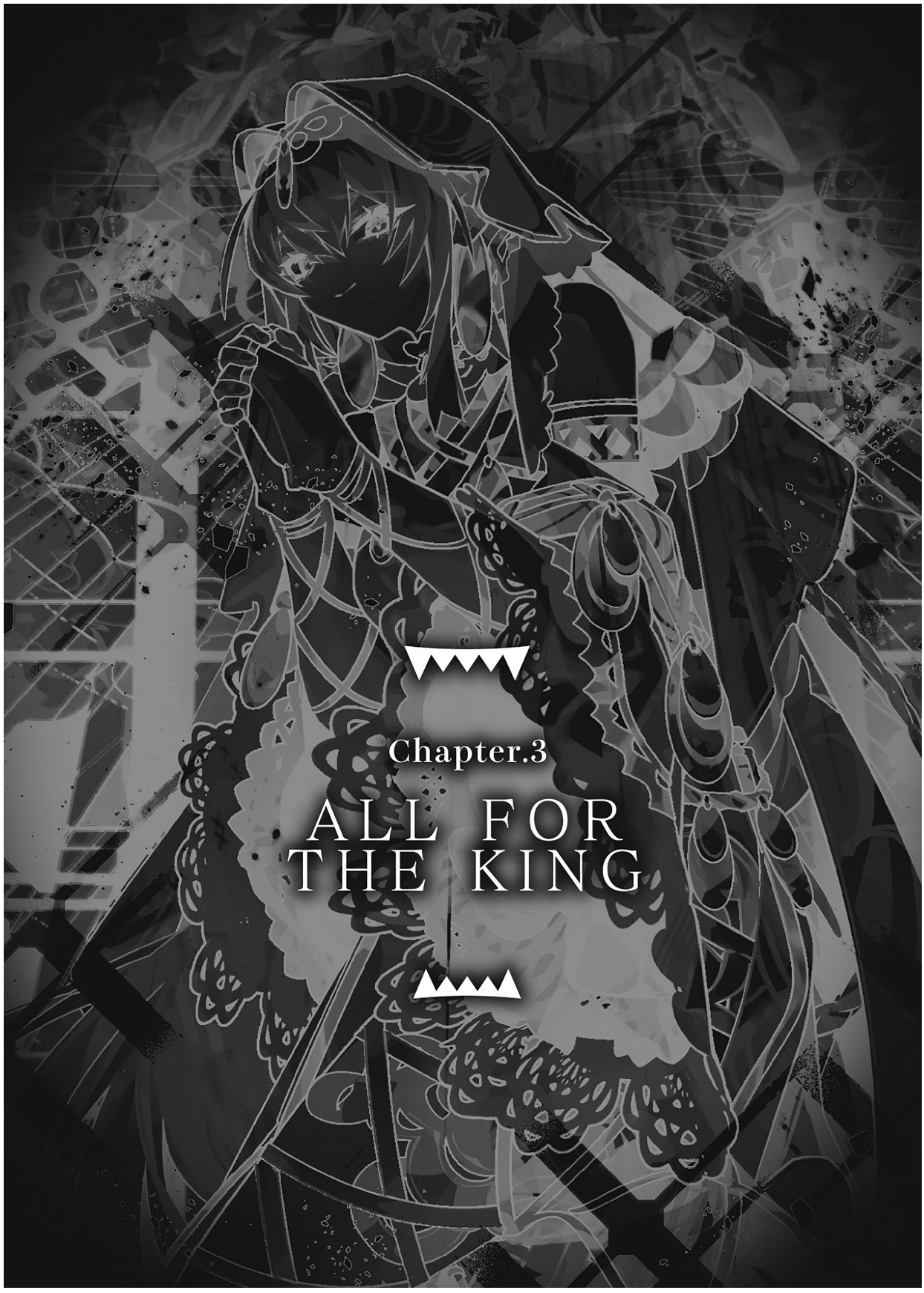
It was definitely not true. Obviously, devoting the time I used on dancing to prayer would have been more effective. However, what I wanted to get out of restoration magic wasn't restoration—it was renown. That was the only reason I needed to dance.

So I got Annie to teach me the basics, then I developed my dancing into something more elegant, and I was able to successfully incorporate it into my magic. I made it visually simpler, too. That way, even those with no more intelligence than an ape could understand how wonderful I was.

But even that wasn't enough. After all, there were some in this world who were below even the level of apes, who were only as intelligent as insects, and cared about nothing besides betting on matches. They were pests, not humans. My only option left was to shine in a way that took absolutely no brain power to absorb. I decided to use the money I'd made in the arena to purchase magic stones, which I wore in jewelry all over my body while healing in the arena. Charging magic stones with mana made them emit a beautiful light, and I combined this with my singing and dancing to produce a truly fantastical performance.

Finally, I was a massive hit. The shining lights had everyone's eyes glued to me, even those who hadn't shown any interest in my singing or my dancing. I'd won over the entire arena. It had taken some time and money, but thanks to that, my position within Farune was secure. If I could just obtain physical and political power by making King Mars mine, then it would all be perfect. The day was close at hand when the whole world would be under my spell.

As I listened to Annie's effusive praise, I thought about that wonderful future.



Chapter.3

ALL FOR THE KING

XIV: The Coalition Army

A year had passed since Maria's arrival in Farune. In contrast with her pure and chaste exterior, the candidate for sainthood was actually delusionally power-hungry, but she was still working hard in her role as acting bishop. She also did well in her duties as the arena's healer, a job I'd given to her, and she volunteered as priestess for expeditions into the Forest of Beasts, so she had a good reputation among my subordinates.

Apparently, more than anything else, the fact that she proactively ate monster meat gave them a favorable impression of her…and I had my issues with that part. She stood out in the arena in totally pointless ways, too, so she was popular among my subjects, who were thankful I had brought back "such a wonderful acting bishop."

Personally, I was wondering whether I could swap her out for a bishop who was a bit more normal. Her insatiable ambition gave me the creeps.

Around that time, a problem arose concerning her—though it wasn't about Maria herself, but rather an issue of foreign relations. The Holy Knights, who had left the Theocracy of Mauve and were sheltering in Eyland, had proclaimed a holy war to rescue Maria. Eyland had then jumped on the bandwagon and requested the support of other countries for their cause. Vulcan and Kiel had answered their call.

The Theocracy itself, which Maria served, was opposed to this move by the Holy Knights, and had declared that they were not involved in the affair. *They must have learned their lesson after their thrashing at the hands of Frau and the Hundred. Sometimes, the Hundred's depravity has its perks.*

The Holy Knights were currently stationed with Eyland's army at a fort near the latter's border with Dorssen, waiting for the other countries' armies to unite with them.

"She isn't even a saint in the first place…" I muttered. I was at a meeting with all my important vassals.

"Actually, Your Majesty chose her, so she must be a saint," Chrom, the captain of the Black Knights, said as a way of praising me. "Your judgment is never wrong!"

That's not the issue here.

"Um…I haven't been officially recognized by the church. I'm not a saint at all, even though the Holy Knights call me one…" Maria said, puzzled—or at least, *acting* puzzled. I knew what she was really like. She was probably thinking something along the lines of, *As they should.*

"Setting aside whether she's a saint or not, Eyland has denounced Farune with the following statement: 'After committing numerous outrages against the Theocracy of Mauve, Farune bought the saint from the pope against her will, then dragged her away screaming and crying on the back of a dragon,'" Gamarath said matter-of-factly.

What am I, some kind of vicious kidnapper?

"I don't remember doing any of that…" I said.

"I wasn't screaming and crying…" Maria said at the same time.

Actually, now that I think about it, they might have a point. It was true that the five members of the Hundred I'd brought with me had committed various acts of violence, and I *had* paid the pope money. Also, I vaguely remembered that Maria had in fact been reluctant to ride the Wyvern, and that as soon as we'd lifted off, she had screamed until she passed out.

Maria was clearly about to deny crying even more vehemently, but then she seemed to remember and get embarrassed, because her face turned red.

Wait… From an objective standpoint, am I like, a really bad guy?

"Well, that's neither here nor there," I said. "Whether it's the truth or not, they won't listen to anything we have to say anyway." There was no changing the past. I wanted to focus on the future. "So it's the Holy Knights and Eyland against us, and now Vulcan and Kiel too? There'll be quite a few on the battlefield, won't there?"

"There are also volunteer forces, like adventurers, mercenaries, and militias," Gamarath said. "That will bring it to approximately fifty

thousand mobilized soldiers in all."

The room filled with murmurs at that number. No matter how strong the Hundred was, it still had its limits, and only a small number of them could fight at the level of someone like Ogma or Yamato.

"Fifty thousand, huh? That sure is a lot," I said. "What did Carmilla say?" I had entrusted Dorssen to her. I wondered how she was handling the situation.

"Sir, she has gathered troops on the border, and has requested reinforcements from us. As a precaution against the Magedom of Kiel's Mages' Guild, she has asked for Lady Frau's assistance."

"Kiel's Mages' Guild?" I thought for a moment. As you might expect from the country founded by the legendary wizard Matou, Kiel's magical might was formidable. I didn't think we'd lose if it came down to a battle of pure force, but I couldn't deny that we were at a disadvantage in a magical fight. "Frau, can you use your magic to fight and win against the Magedom of Kiel?"

I was asking Frau, who was sitting right next to me, just in case. But I knew our chances were slim. Farune may have had a modest collection of wizards with a few screws loose, but there weren't all that many of them. Needless to say, most wizards were decent, respectable people. Those whose humanity was in doubt like Frau and Keely were in the minority. *If all wizards were like them, it'd be the end of the world.*

Personally, I wanted more normal wizards in Farune, if possible.

In any case, it didn't seem likely that we would be able to win in a straightforward fight against the strongest wizards in Ares. And if that was the case, I got the feeling that it would be best just to hand this self-proclaimed saint right over and be done with the whole thing. We'd effectively nullified the new doctrine, so was there really any need for Maria to stick around in Farune? If anything, she was quite capable of turning into a dangerous thorn in our side. I wanted our opponents to take her off our hands quickly.

But despite all of that, Frau gave an unusually straightforward answer: "Leave it to me."

Huh? So there's a chance? Matou is the strongest wizard out there, so I don't think he'll be that easy to go up against, but okay.

"I'll bring Keely with me," Frau added.

I see, so she's going to use the monster army. The monster army had grown greatly in size, so it would be a valuable fighting force. I had been considering using it to fight against the army of fifty thousand, but if Frau could use it to check Kiel's army instead, I supposed that worked too.

"Very well," I said. "The monster army and the Mages' Guild will be fighting together. Frau, Keely, I'm leaving the Magedom of Kiel to you."

Frau gave a slight nod. Keely was also in attendance, along with the rest of my important vassals, and her eyes gleamed.

"Your Majesty's wish is my command!" Keely said. "I'll teach those fools who derided my research a lesson!"

Oh right, I forgot about your petty grudge against them.

Keely was originally from Kiel, and she held the dubious distinction of having been exiled from her home country for doing repeated experiments to try and control monsters using magic. After she failed in her efforts several times, her test subjects ran amok, dealing serious damage to the country, and that had been that.

Her research in Farune was all worthless. For example, she looked into ways to provide a consistent source of monster meat, display monsters as exhibits, and find military applications for monsters. If this had been an ordinary country, I wouldn't have let her continue her research either. For one thing, it was extremely dangerous.

"I'll prepare to attack right away!" Keely said, then she breezily exited the throne room. Before I knew it, I had lost sight of Frau, too.

What? The war hasn't even started yet, so aren't you being a little hasty? Well, whatever. There's nothing wrong with being prepared early.

"Now, as for Vulcan," I began, "Sheila, what's the situation?" Sheila, my fourth princess consort, was from Vulcan, and ever since we had gotten married, she had been proposing that Farune form a

friendship with her home country. She came from a family of influential nobles who had served as Celestial Swords for generations.

"Sir, among the seven Celestial Sword families, three are sympathetic to Farune, but the king and the remaining four families have taken a hostile stance, which led to their current deployment of troops," Sheila said, speaking formally and sounding apologetic. "The king and those four families form the bulk of Vulcan's army. I'm sorry that my efforts have not been enough."

"That's okay. Your family isn't participating, right?"

"No, sir, they aren't. They were deemed friendly to Farune, and left behind in the country with the other two friendly families."

"I'm leaving Vulcan to you," I said. "I'll assign a few of the Hundred to go with you. If you take Wyverns, you should be able to make it there without any issues. You know what the next steps will be, right?"

I decided to have Sheila talk things over with her family and negotiate a withdrawal of Vulcan's army. I had a Vulcanian consort, after all, so it made sense for her to aid in these sorts of diplomatic efforts. However, Vulcan was currently an enemy, so while she may have been from there, it would have been dangerous not to send her with some bodyguards. As the fourth princess, she ranked relatively low, but she was still my wife.

Sheila widened her eyes in surprise, then closed them tightly. After that moment of inner conflict, she opened her eyes again. "I do," she said decisively. "I swear upon my twin blades that I will successfully carry out my mission."

Good, I'm glad she's motivated. Though, it's not a huge deal. It would be nice if things went well, but I'm not too worried if they don't. There's no need for her to be this tense.

"From the Hundred," I began, "I'll select—"

"I shall go," said Yamato. "Lady Sheila's mission is of great importance. And I will choose the others who will accompany us."

Yamato didn't strike me as being all that useful in a diplomatic situation, but he was one of the more restrained members of the Hundred, which admittedly did make him fit for the role. I would

rather have had him on the front lines in the coming fight if possible, but I decided to allow him to do as he suggested.

It'll be lucky if this gets Vulcan to withdraw from the war, but I'm not that optimistic.

"As for the all-important Holy Knights and Eyland's army, you don't think there's any chance they'll withdraw if Maria explains things to them and clears up their misunderstandings, do you?" I asked.

"I reckon it would be difficult," Gamarath replied. "It would be unthinkable for them to end things without a fight after having mobilized so many soldiers. Even if Lady Maria did go to persuade them, she would likely be captured, which would just give more momentum to the enemy. Their original goal of rescuing the saint has become a mere pretext, and I don't think the coming fight can be avoided, not until they succeed at getting some sort of material gain from it." He paused for a moment. "I dare say that at the very least, Eyland and Vulcan intend to use this as an opportunity to divide up and annex Dorssen."

I wouldn't have cared at all if they captured Maria. If anything, I wanted to give her to them in a gift box tied with a bow. However, Dorssen was Leon's, and he had a legitimate right to his position. I couldn't just hand it over to someone else.

"Then it's war," I said.

My military leaders, like Ogma and Warren, smiled fiercely. They showed no signs of hesitation whatsoever, not even against an army fifty thousand strong.

"Your Majesty, please wait," Maria spoke up. "I have friends in the Holy Knights and Eyland. I'd like to make sure they avoid the fighting, at least…"

Ahh, I see. She hopes to tell her individual followers that she's okay so they can withdraw without getting hurt. She must want to keep them in reserve as her soldiers for when she takes over the Theocracy and Eyland in the future.

"Very well," I said. "Chrom, escort Maria so she can meet with them. And make sure you don't stand out."

"Yes, sir," Chrom replied with a bow. These kinds of secret missions were the Black Knights' specialty, so I was confident he would do well.

"Now, let's head to Dorssen," I said. "We'll leave the Blue Knights here on guard, and the rest of the army will move out."

Despite how I talked about our army, our total strength hadn't changed since the Battle of Brix. We only had around two thousand soldiers. The army of Dorssen, headed by Carmilla, had around ten thousand. Using simple arithmetic, if Dorssen's army could take on an enemy army of the same size, that would leave Farune facing forty thousand—a force twenty times as large, more or less. It wasn't going to be easy.

"Should I come with?" Cassandra whispered to me, quietly enough not to be heard by the others, probably as a way for me to save face.

"No, take care of the kids," I said. "There's no way we can bring them to a battlefield, and it would be catastrophic if they were targeted while we were gone." The Swordmaster could probably take on ten thousand people on her own, but Arthur and Hilda's safety was what mattered most. Frau and I were symbols of Farune, so neither of us could afford to stay home, which made Cassandra the best choice for babysitter.

"Huh, that's too bad," Cassandra said, sounding disappointed. "I wanted to test my sword against an army. It's been a while."

I decided to keep her and her immense battle prowess in reserve. Farune was in part kept together by my personal military strength, so there would be all sorts of issues if it became known that she was stronger than me. The Swordmaster was my final trump card.

"Um…" This time, it was Maria who was speaking to me quietly. "When I meet with my followers, would it be all right if I exaggerated my story slightly?

"Exaggerate your story? What do you mean?"

"Something like, 'His Majesty recognized me as a true saint, and became my devout supporter,' or, 'He repented of all his past

wrongdoings, and plans to depose the current pope and install me as the next one.'"

For a moment, I was speechless. *That's an exaggeration, all right. How brazen can she get?* Though for Maria's crazed, borderline-terrorist followers, it might actually have been received better if she put it that way.

"Do as you please," I said finally. "It's a small price to pay if it means reducing the strength of both the Holy Knights and Eyland."

"Thank you very much! If we win, let's go further and take down the Theocracy of Mauve and Eyland!"

Why in the world is everyone working so hard to rescue someone like her? I was starting to feel bad for the Holy Knights and Eyland.

XV: The Strongest Mage

MATOU of the Magedom of Kiel, at the head of a Mages' Guild five hundred strong, had joined the coalition to rescue the saint. At the moment, he was waiting for the rest of the coalition armies to join him, working hard to maintain a barrier he had cast over the entire coalition as a precaution against possible Farunian ambush.

As a matter of fact, Matou himself was stationed away from the army. He was of quite an advanced age, and not in a condition to leave his own quarters, let alone Kiel, so he was merely deploying an illusory image of himself in his stead. He was, however, able to cast magic through the image. This special technique alone was enough to mark him as a fearsome mage.

Is this really for the best? he wondered.

Matou had his doubts. Throughout his well over one hundred years of life, the Great Sage had never actively wielded his celebrated power. That was because he held the firm conviction that magic's purpose was to make people happy.

Of course, there had been times when throwing himself into a fight had been unavoidable, but these were rare exceptions. He had fought when he had judged that the future of humanity was on the line, such as the appearance of a calamity-class monster, or the

Ronzan Empire's Southern Campaign, where they had attempted to invade and unify Ares by force. But what about this time?

Farune has the potential to threaten humanity. There are clear signs. The core of that country is the Hundred, a group of those who seek only strength. They also have dangerous individuals like Frau and Carmilla as followers, and they've been annexing other countries. I suspect they're commanding monsters as well, which is just too risky. And yet…

The people of Farune were not suffering. That was what troubled Matou. Farune was a country that worshipped strength, but that didn't mean they were forcing that belief on their subjects. If anything, they were expelling the nobility, enacting new laws, lowering taxes, and trying to build a nation where everyone could live well and be equal. Was that really evil?

Matou still couldn't grasp the true character of Farune's king, the man named Mars. He had heard that he was an inhuman villain, but he hadn't confirmed it for himself. In fact, he had also heard conflicting rumors that Mars was just a regular young nobleman.

Perhaps he's someone who's willing to listen to reason, Matou sometimes thought.

If Mars was actually a decent person, then maybe Matou could hope for a peaceful resolution once the public's misunderstandings were corrected. However, there was a powerful magic barrier surrounding Farune, so Matou, who was unable to move on his own without magic, couldn't meet with Mars. This impediment was probably intentional on Queen Frau's part, and if that was the case, then she had to have some sort of malicious plan in mind, even if Mars had no ill will of his own.

In the end, Matou had no choice but to confront Farune.

And there was something else weighing on Matou's mind: Keely. The black-haired, black-eyed wizard was one of his descendants. Matou had lived for a very long time, so he had quite a few blood relatives who were wizards, but Keely stood out among them all. For some time, it had been assumed that she would take over the leadership of Kiel in the future.

However, there had been considerable issues with her character. She had no conscience, lacked the ability to feel guilt, and followed nothing but her own desires. And indeed, she had caused many problems, so Matou had banished her from Kiel. But ought he to have had her executed instead?

Maybe I went easy on her because she's family, Matou thought.

Doubts like this smoldered in the back of his mind. Keely's research into the large-scale use of monsters was dangerous, and was possibly providing a great deal of power to Farune. Guilt over that fact was what had finally driven Matou to fight Farune.

But many would lose their lives in the battle to come. Was there really any justice in all this?

Those were the thoughts that occupied the Great Sage, even from the middle of Eyland's camp. And then—

"Hm? A fluctuation in the barrier around the country?"

Matou sensed a change in the barrier, not in the one around the coalition army, but in the one around Kiel. It seemed that someone had fiddled with it. Was it a mage he had banished, spontaneously returning? Something like that had happened several times in the past, but the breach in the barrier this time was large. Matou would have to get someone to confirm it, but he had brought all the mages who specialized in combat on the expedition with him, leaving only those who were more research-oriented back home. For his part, even Matou could not ascertain the conditions around his own body, let alone his country, while he was manipulating an illusion from a distance.

"Degin, I'm returning my consciousness back home for a time. You're in charge in my absence," Matou said to one of his skilled apprentices, Degin, who sat in the same tent as his illusion.

"Did something happen back there?" Degin asked. He knew the Matou he spoke to was only an illusory image, and he was surprised. Kiel should have been safe, especially compared to the battlefield where they'd been waiting.

"I don't know," Matou said. "There was a fluctuation in the barrier. Those we left at home are unsuited to fighting, so I'm a bit uneasy."

"Understood. If anything happens, we can teleport back as well, so please call us if necessary."

There was a teleportation magic circle in the Kielian army's camp, and it was possible to return to Kiel through it at any time. Back in Kiel, there was a facility dedicated to teleportation magic called the Gate, with anchored magic circles for both incoming and outgoing traffic, and the system was set up so teleportation spells could be activated whenever they were needed. This was one of Kiel's great intellectual achievements. The wizards that were part of the Magedom generally used the Gate to travel into and out of the country.

"All right," Matou said with a nod. His illusory image stopped its movements, and his mind returned to Kiel.

The next moment, Matou regained consciousness in the center of the magic circle in his quarters, and he used mana to revitalize his shriveled-up body. He was well past the age at which a normal person reached the end of their lifespan, and he was making his body live on with his fluent command of numerous sorceries. However, his flesh had become useless long ago, and he was only forcibly moving himself using magic.

"Is anyone there?" Matou used telepathy to call out to his apprentices.

Kiel's stronghold was not a castle. Instead, it was the Mages' Tower, a giant structure that had undergone multiple additions to expand it.

Matou's apprentices should have been inside the building, but there was no response.

What's the meaning of this? It's unthinkable for the Mages' Tower to be empty, he thought. So he activated magic of farseeing, but its structure wouldn't coalesce. *No, Jamming?! Blast it! A blocker's been cast, covering only telepathy and farseeing!*

There was a type of magic barrier that prevented the casting of spells, called a Forbidder. They were often employed in the traps in ancient ruins, but they weren't easy to establish over large areas. However, if their effectiveness was restricted to only long-distance magics like telepathy and farseeing, it was possible to obstruct spells

over a wide range. This was known as Jamming, and it was often used on battlefields to interfere with enemy armies.

Did they activate a large-scale Jamming right when they breached the barrier? Matou wondered. He reactivated his illusory image, then called out to Degin nearby.

"Jamming's being used back home. I can't see what's going on within the territory."

"What?!" Degin exclaimed. He immediately tried to connect to Kiel using telepathy, but he didn't get a single response. "You're right! No one's answering me!"

"Leave behind the minimum number of people who can sustain the barrier here, and return to Kiel right away. I'll return my consciousness as well."

After giving Degin his orders, Matou cut off the illusion. Regaining consciousness in Kiel once again, he cast his eyes about his quarters. He was in a room without any windows or doors, containing a hoard of precious grimoires. It was a hidden chamber inside the Mages' Tower, which made it difficult to discover. But it also made it so Matou couldn't see what was happening outside.

He erased the illusion he had deployed to the coalition army and reconstituted it in his room. An elderly mage with a black hood worn low over his face appeared. This was Matou's illusory image. The image passed right through the wall of the room, exiting the Tower while floating in midair, and he could finally behold the state of his domain.

Monsters were running amok, and not just a few of them—there were hundreds, and of various species. The wizards were trying to put up resistance to them, but Matou had sent everyone skilled at attack magic with the coalition army, so they were at quite a disadvantage.

Is it Farune?! To think they'd attack here while our defenses were weakened! Matou had thought he was going on the offensive, only to be caught completely flat-footed. Enraged, he immediately began reciting an incantation. He targeted five monsters within his sight, then said, "Burst," in the ancient language, and his spell activated. The monsters exploded.

The wizards that witnessed the spell knew Matou had returned. "Master Matou!" they shouted. "Monsters appeared out of nowhere. What in the world is happening?"

"I don't know. For now, take refuge in the Mages' Tower. Those I deployed with the coalition will soon return," Matou called out to the wizards. Then, he threw himself into fighting the monsters.

First, he made five gemstones appear in the palm of his hand, transferring them from his quarters. Then, he scattered them on the ground and incanted a spell.

Giant figures made of clay emerged from the earth, with the gemstones as their cores. These were Golems. And they weren't of average size; each was as large as two ordinary houses stacked on top of each other.

The Golems spread out to protect the Mages' Tower, flattening the monsters that assaulted them. Their attacks were swift, unsuited to their massive bodies, and any time one of them landed a direct hit on a monster, it was crushed to a pulp, all traces of its original shape gone.

As the Golems bought time, Matou began to recite a new spell. "Abyssal gloom, answer my call. Spirits of darkness, draw my enemy down to the underworld…"

After a long incantation, a magic circle appeared directly under Matou as he floated in the air. The circle swelled in size until, in moments, it had covered the entire city.

"Transfix."

With Matou's final whisper, countless giant, black needles appeared within the magic circle, as if sprouting up from the ground. Every one of those needles skewered one of the monsters within the circle. Even the hardy monsters, like Earth Dragons, of which there were many, had their hearts pierced with pinpoint accuracy. All of them died.

"Hmph. Is it over?" Matou said. As he gazed down from the sky at the mass of monster carcasses beneath him, he wondered how he was going to dispose of them all. However…

Wait. There were too many monsters, even for Farune. And even supposing that they were controlling them, the monsters

looked as if they were only rampaging according to their instincts. Matou had assumed that these were Farune's monster army, but now, he felt that something was off.

The Magedom of Kiel was a wizard's paradise that Matou had spent his life building, and it was located in a remote wasteland that was inhospitable to both humans and monsters. It wasn't the type of place monsters could just invade from the surrounding area. And if that was the case, then these monsters were…

With an ominous sense of foreboding, Matou headed to the Gate, still keeping his body floating in midair. It was strange that Degin and the others still hadn't returned yet.

Hm?

As he neared the Gate, Matou felt a surge of mana. He reflexively strengthened the barrier protecting himself—and just then, magic collided right into it.

There were several resounding blasts, so this was a type of explosion magic. Matou was an illusory image, so even if he took a direct hit, his physical body wouldn't suffer any damage. However, producing illusory images that were at a high enough level to use magic wasn't as simple as just a snap of his fingers. Plus, he had just reconstituted his image upon his return from Eyland. In a situation like this, where every second mattered, he needed to protect it.

Are these the mages that cast the large-scale Jamming?!

There was no need for him to identify the enemies that had attacked him—he could easily guess who they were. This was Farune's Mages' Guild, led by Frau. The magic just now had been a synchronized volley of spells that would have been impossible to cast without a good deal of training.

The smoke thrown up by the spells dispersed. The Gate was visible just ahead, looking like a massive brick storehouse. On top of the Gate stood a pale woman who resembled nothing so much as an exquisitely crafted porcelain doll.

"So it's you, Frau!" Matou bellowed.

Unperturbed, Frau lit up the end of her staff with a blue light.

"And now Lightning?!" Matou quickly tried to redeploy his barrier in response to Frau's Lightning attack—the origin of her nickname, the Lightning Empress. However, he was too slow and was struck by yet another concentrated barrage of spells. Beneath his feet, he saw numerous magic lights dotting the cityscape.

Farune's mages are in the city?! He was about to fire off spells toward the buildings where he saw Farune's mages, but then he hesitated. *My apprentices may still be there.*

He had only been able to cast that dark magic earlier because he had restricted it to targeting only monsters. Spells that conveniently allowed him to target and defeat only hidden enemies simply didn't exist. Without exception, targeting spells needed some way to distinguish between potential targets. Both Matou's enemies and his allies were mages, so even he was hard-pressed to tell the difference at a distance.

As if to scoff at his hesitation, Frau's Lightning crashed right into Matou. His physical body didn't sustain any damage, but his illusory image was breaking up.

How vexing!

Matou again turned his attention to Frau, and was once more showered with attack spells coming from the city. This time, he had already finished putting up his barrier—and it was a barrier to reflect magic. The spells that made contact rebounded and destroyed numerous houses. Matou focused his sight on the mages who were fleeing the destruction; they had to be Farune's mages. However, he also spotted several familiar faces among them.

No, could some of my apprentices be traitors?!

As soon as Matou reached that conclusion, he realized Frau's true evil intent. It was likely that for the past year—or for even longer than that—mages obedient to her had been lurking in Kiel, masquerading as ordinary citizens. This meant it would be nearly impossible to distinguish friend from foe. Perhaps those loyal to Farune had already infiltrated the Mages' Tower.

So we weren't the only ones making preparations!

Finally, Matou accurately grasped the extent of Frau's meticulous plan. In fact, she had had designs on Kiel's mages for

several years, and had slowly been bringing them under her influence.

Even the wizard's paradise of Kiel could not claim to be a pure, flawless country, and some who lived there were guilty of questionable deeds. Keely and the other former Kielian mages in Farune had investigated those citizens, then used that information to blackmail them and bring them over to Farune's side. In the meantime, there were also mages loyal to Farune among the new arrivals from the past few years. There were even turncoats among the Magedom's expeditionary force stationed in Eyland.

This isn't just about defeating Farune anymore. If we don't solidify our position, the Magedom itself may collapse.

After another moment's thought, Matou came to a decision: *A total withdrawal from Eyland. The first priority is the return of Degin and the others. Ignore the mages in the city. Defeat Frau.*

Matou wasn't known as the strongest mage for nothing. By dividing up his cognition, he was able to use multiple spells simultaneously. So, while maintaining his barrier against the spells being fired at him from below, he targeted Frau as she stood above the gate.

"Night-begotten abyss, star-snuffing darkness, black flames of the underworld, may you return all things to nothingness…"

The dark spell Matou incanted swallowed up the approaching Lightning, then bore down on Frau as if devouring space itself.

Hm? But the moment before his spell made contact, Frau disappeared. *Teleportation? Was she planning to run away from the start?* He could have chased after her using traces of her mana, but he hurried to the Gate instead. The skirmish had clearly been intended to buy time.

The entrance to Kiel's vaunted teleportation system, the Gate, had been destroyed. It was now just a large, gaping hole, which had probably been created so the monsters could get through. Just as Matou had suspected, the monsters that had appeared in his territory had been sent there through the Gate. He entered the hole himself.

Inside, he saw monsters silently waiting around a massive magic circle, and inside the circle a horrifying number of dead bodies lay in heaps, covered in blood. These had once been the wizards with the coalition army. They had specialized in combat magic, and normally would never have lost to mid-level monsters like this. However, they had been targeted while vulnerable in their immediate post-teleportation state, and ruthlessly slaughtered.

Among the bodies, Matou saw Degin, to whom he had entrusted the army. Because the monsters in the Gate had been indoors, they hadn't been targeted by Matou's previous spell, and they had survived.

"You bastards!" Mad with rage, Matou cast a spell in a single instant to produce blades of wind, targeting the monsters surrounding the magic circle. Several were torn to pieces, but most of the monsters noticed the activation of the spell and instantly began to withdraw. They cleanly dispersed, so as not to be wiped out completely. This was a logical course of action for them, and characteristic of monsters that were being controlled.

So this was their true goal! In all likelihood, the ones who had breached the barrier and invaded had occupied the Gate with the help of the traitors, then used it to bring in large numbers of monsters. After that, they had lain in wait for the Mages' Guild that was expected to return. *What a fiendish trap!*

Matou was both the most powerful mage and the greatest sage in existence, but he was also the type to always keep to the straight and narrow. He wasn't a scheming politician or a crafty plotter. As such, he hadn't expected the Gate to be exploited in such an underhanded manner. Of course, he had installed a custodian to ensure proper management of the facility, but the only guards had been a few Dragonfang Soldiers and Golems. They had to have been absolutely powerless against such a malicious plan.

Matou took down the dispersed, fleeing monsters one by one. They had only done what they had been ordered to do, but he was unable to forgive them for contributing to such evil. They had ended up all over, so it took Matou some time, but he finally managed to defeat all of the monsters that had been in the Gate.

Next, he considered the woman he believed had been, along with Frau, the mastermind of this plan: Keely.

She was a mage with distinctively feverish black eyes, which gave off a hint of danger. She was smart, and blessed with talent in magic, but she had squandered it all to research monsters. She hadn't drawn an ethical line anywhere, not even at causing death, as long as it meant advancing her research. Clearly, there was something off about her temperament.

However, she was no fool. She had to have known that she couldn't beat Matou, so she was probably pulling the strings of this whole affair from a safe place, most likely Farune.

It was a mistake to stop at banishing her. I won't let her get away with it, not now that it's come to this. I must deal with her myself—

But the exact moment Matou swore in his heart to kill Keely, a telepathic message arrived in his mind: *"It's been a while, my master. Your magic is as ruthless as ever."*

The one speaking was Keely. The fact that she could communicate telepathically with him even though he hadn't given her a pass indicated that she was close by, that she had come to Kiel in person.

"You monster, so you've come to the Magedom!" Matou replied in kind.

"Indeed I have. His Majesty is counting on me to deal with Kiel. Commanding these precious monsters is my role, you know."

"Where are you?"

"Oh, I'm close by. Very close by."

Matou looked around him, magnifying his vision dramatically using mana, but he couldn't spot her anywhere. *"Why don't you stop cowering and show yourself? Face me, and fight!"*

"What are you saying? I'm right in front of you, Master…but I accept your challenge. I'll make the first move, all right?"

At that, Matou strengthened the barrier around himself. He had no idea what sort of tricks Keely might have been about to pull.

Then…

His consciousness ceased.



KEELY looked down on the weathered corpse of the wizened mage before her. In her hand, she gripped a dagger stained with blood.



"Good grief," Keely said to the body. "You sure gave me a heck of a time trying to find this place. I was so nervous. I had no idea when I might be discovered!"

While Frau and the others had been breaching the barrier to the Magedom and activating their Jamming, Keely had led a separate detachment and quickly occupied the Gate. She had connected the Gate to the Forest of Beasts so she could draw monsters from there into Kiel. Then, she had brought in the Warwolves and, with the help of Farune's collaborators, had invaded the Mages' Tower. As they had taken control of the interior, she had searched for Matou's secret chambers.

Although Keely had lost the monsters she had left behind at the gate, the time they had bought while escaping had allowed her to sniff out the hidden room. In order to pinpoint his location, she had used the traces of mana that issued from Matou's physical body to his illusory image every time he cast a spell.

"Now, why don't we use the Gate to get rid of the rest of the mages in Eyland? His Majesty's orders are absolute, after all. Ah, but I can't forget to present the grimoires here to Lady Frau! I'm sure she'll be pleased." Keely smiled happily, overjoyed at having been able to devotedly serve the royal couple.

Later, Eyland's knights, suspicious about having lost contact with Kiel's Mages' Guild, visited their camp. Not a single soul was there, and there were traces of blood in the area. In their report, the knights said they could tell only that something had befallen the Kielians, though they had no idea what it could have been.

XVI: In Vulcan

IT was the middle of the night when Garay, who had been sleeping in his domain's estate, suddenly woke up. He sensed the presence of intruders on the grounds.

Garay reached out to the two swords leaning against the side of his bed. He was known by the nickname Twin Blades for his expertise with these weapons, and it was a name that was famous throughout the countries surrounding Vulcan. However, in recent

years, his daughter Sheila had gained fame as a dual-wielding adventurer. She had become the fourth princess of Farune, so by now there were many who associated the name Twin Blades with her.

From Garay's perspective, he was happy that his beloved daughter had made a name for herself, while regretting that he had been unable to make her his heir.

He had an inkling about who might have been the intruders. In his role as one of the Seven Celestial Swords, the central pillars of Vulcan, he had urged friendship with Farune, but Vulcan's king hadn't given his advocacy a warm reception. On the contrary, the king had fallen in step behind Eyland and had undertaken a failed invasion of Dorssen, one of Farune's allies. Following that, he beat the drum for the rescue of that saint from the Theocracy, again joining a coalition that opposed Farune.

The mainstream political faction in Vulcan was anti-Farune, while Garay, who had family ties with Farune thanks to his daughter, was viewed as the leader of the dissident faction. The king had ostracized him for, among other things, seeming to support Farune.

That wasn't all, either. In recent years, the next generation of Celestial Swords, who were rapidly growing in strength, had sworn absolute loyalty to the king. They had even begun suppressing his opposition—and their leader was none other than Garay's son, Hart. Whenever Hart found anyone even slightly dissatisfied with the king, he punished them without mercy.

Incidentally, there was a small but extant group of people even within Vulcan who supported the Hundred's ideal of strength above all. Vulcan's culture held the art of war in great esteem, so there was already a preexisting inclination toward sympathy for the group, but Hart and the other heirs had wiped out these sympathizers without exception. As a result, the king had placed his absolute trust in them. During his absence, he had passed over Garay and the other actual Celestial Swords still in Vulcan, leaving the seven heirs to guard the capital instead.

Garay had spoken noticeably less with Hart of late, and felt a growing gulf between himself and his son.

These must be the king's assassins, Garay thought.

The king and the four mainstream Celestial Swords had already departed Vulcan to join the coalition army, and Garay had been ordered to confine himself to his house in the meantime. It was suspected that he might start a rebellion, so it wasn't all that far-fetched to think assassins might have been dispatched to kill him.

Garay himself hadn't actually had any desire to betray the king. But after traveling to Farune and seeing the country's power with his own eyes, he had realized how foolish it would have been to make an enemy of it. He had only suggested friendship with Farune to protect his country. Naturally, the fact that his daughter was married to the king of Farune had also played into his decision, but that by no means meant he had any inclination to make a judgment contrary to the interests of his country.

I can't afford to die right now.

He headed to the garden where he'd sensed the intruders. If possible, he wanted to keep this from turning into a serious incident. He certainly didn't want his quarrel with the king to become public. If the king were to execute him, now that he was a relative of the king of Farune, it could very well have justified a Farunian attack on Vulcan. So, for the sake of Vulcan as well as himself and his family, Garay couldn't allow himself to be killed.

He sensed fewer than ten intruders. Garay was confident in his ability to win against such a small number. However, in the worst-case scenario, the assassins could have been Hart and the other heirs. Garay didn't think his son could beat him yet, but the next generation of Celestial Swords *had* gotten oddly powerful lately. If it came to a fight, there was every possibility the outcome would surprise him.

Garay closed in on the intruders, making sure he wasn't noticed, holding both his swords in hand, already drawn.

But one of the intruders was standing defenseless in a secluded part of the garden. "Father," the person called out to him.

It wasn't Hart. It was Sheila.



“WHAT’S the meaning of this, Sheila?” Garay asked, sheathing his swords. “Why are you here?”

The multiple presences he had sensed were Sheila and her bodyguards, members of the Hundred. Among those who had accompanied her was Yamato, who was well known even outside of Farune. The bodyguards had moved some distance away, both out of vigilance toward their surroundings and consideration for Garay and Sheila, so there was no chance of their conversation being overheard.

Just like in her adventurer days, Sheila was clad in armor, and she wore two swords on her back.

“His Majesty entrusted Vulcan to me,” she said.

“Entrusted? What’s that supposed to mean?” Garay asked.

“To tell you the truth, I’m pregnant.”

Garay gasped. Under ordinary circumstances, his first grandchild would be a cause for celebration. But this was Sheila’s child, and would one day be a prince or princess of Farune.

“I’ve been keeping it quiet, but His Majesty must have realized,” Sheila continued. “And the fact that he’s entrusted Vulcan to me means…”

“He wants you to make that child the heir to Vulcan…?” Garay’s voice trailed off.

Leon, Second Princess Carmilla’s son, had become the king of Dorssen while still very young, and Dorssen was now effectively Farunian territory. Mars’s younger brother Nicol had married into the Cadonian royal family and become king of Cadonia. Everyone knew that King Mars was using blood relationships to take over other countries. Sheila knew this too, and her fear of being taken advantage of for those purposes was exactly why she had hidden her pregnancy.

It was only when Mars had told her, “I’m leaving Vulcan to you,” that she had thought he must have figured it out.

As it happened, Mars actually hadn’t had any plans whatsoever to use family ties to take over other countries; things had just turned out that way. And needless to say, he hadn’t realized Sheila was pregnant, either. He had only had the vague hope that by deploying

her to Vulcan, she might have been able to resolve things peacefully and diplomatically.

In Farune, Mars held absolute sway, and those around him often read too deeply into what he said. Naturally, Sheila had ended up adopting that way of thinking too. The other leaders of Farune had interpreted Mars's order to Sheila just as she had, and believed that he planned to conquer the country in some fashion—which was why Yamato had come along with Sheila in the first place.

"The king of Farune is awfully cold-blooded, to dispatch you here while you're pregnant," Garay said. He was worried for his daughter, and was beginning to grow angry at Mars. Angry and fearful at the same time. Sure, Mars was only acting to extend his rule, but it shocked Garay to see him use his own wife in such a manner.

"I wonder sometimes," Sheila said. "He's usually a kind, ordinary man. But he already deployed Lady Frau's Mages' Guild and an army of monsters to Kiel. Perhaps he's entrusting Vulcan to me as a way of showing his affection."

As a matter of fact, Mars had been planning to use the monster army against the Magedom of Kiel's *army* during the coming fight. But when making his order, he had accidentally said "Magedom of Kiel" instead, so Frau and Keely had attacked Kiel directly without waiting for the confrontation with the coalition. To be fair, this was less a mistake on his part than a result of the discrepancy in their respective understandings; Mars had never had any desire to conquer other countries, but everyone around him thought he was aiming to unify the continent.

Frau alone was aware of Mars's real intentions, and was acting as she did in spite of that.

"Hrm…" Garay fell into deep thought. It certainly seemed to him that the people of Vulcan would suffer less if Mars used Sheila to take over the country by surprise, rather than directly invading with the Hundred's brutes and an army of monsters. "So, what are you going to do?" he asked. "No matter how strong the Hundred may be, you won't be able to conquer Vulcan with so few of them."

A fair number of knights and soldiers still remained in the castle, and more importantly, Hart and the other heirs were there.

"What will *you* do, father?" Sheila asked, responding to his question with another question. "When the current king of Vulcan ascended to the throne, you didn't support him, the younger brother of the previous king. You supported the crown prince instead. Hasn't it occurred to you that the king has ostracized you and is rejecting friendship with Farune because of those old grudges?"

Garay was silent. She was correct. The three families that were currently part of the dissident faction had supported the crown prince at the time, the son of the former king. They had fought over the succession with the current king—the former king's younger brother—whom the other four families had supported.

Ultimately, the current king had won. Since then, Garay and his allies had been given the cold shoulder because they had lost the conflict. The former king had been the one to designate the crown prince as his successor, while the current king had rejected the decision due to the crown prince's young age. It would have been a lie to say there were no hard feelings between Garay and the current king, as well as between Garay and the four families that had supported the king in usurping the crown prince. Now, Garay's proposals when advising the king were hardly ever considered, and this included his proposal of friendship with Farune.

"With Vulcan's strongest knightly orders absent, we can take over the castle, even with such a small number of us," Sheila said. "And when that happens, the Vulcanian army with the coalition will turn back. In all likelihood, Kiel is already withdrawing in a panic because of the attack on their country, so they won't be of any help. Besides, the saint herself wishes to ally with Farune."

"What? Wasn't she kidnapped?" Garay asked, surprised. He had heard that the saint had been forcibly taken from the Theocracy of Mauve.

Incidentally, Maria was still only officially a candidate for sainthood, but she was already generally being treated as a saint.

"I heard there was some issue when bringing her along, but she herself is eager to help out Farune," Sheila said. "She also gets

along incredibly well with His Majesty. There have even been talks about Farune backing her campaign to become the next pope."

"What, really? Then what about the coalition's goal of rescuing her?"

"It's nothing but a pretext for destroying Farune. I don't think there's any avoiding war now, not even if the saint herself intervenes."

"The coalition armies have more than fifty thousand soldiers, you know," Garay said. "Can Farune beat that?"

"Yes," Sheila affirmed. She didn't appear to be merely posturing, either. "If the greatest threat to Farune—Kiel—withdraws from the coalition, Farune will have no problems winning, and the numbers won't make any difference. No matter how many mediocre warriors you throw at even a single dragon, they cannot hope to defeat it. This obeys the same principle. Farune possesses that much power. You saw Farune's warriors fighting in the arena, didn't you, Father? They've grown stronger since then. Even I've become more skilled than when I was an adventurer."

"Even you?" Garay was doubtful. Sheila had been an S-rank adventurer, and quite a powerful one at that. She shouldn't have had much more room to grow beyond that level. Plus, Sheila had lived in Farune's royal palace for some time now, which should have afforded her fewer opportunities to hone her skills with a blade.

"Is monster meat really that effective?" Garay asked right away. Surely, that was the only means of increasing her power.

"Monster meat does increase a person's upper limit, but ultimately, it's ineffective if you neglect your training." Sheila smiled sheepishly. "I was trained by the third princess."

"The third princess?" Garay echoed, shocked. "That monster in the white mask who defeated you with her bare hands at the Consort Selection Tournament? Just who is she?" Clearly, she had left a distinct impression in Garay's memory.

"She's Red Demon Cassandra. The Swordmaster."

"Red Demon Cassandra?! I haven't heard anything about her for more than a decade," Garay replied. "I was sure she died somewhere. I couldn't see her face because of the mask, but

shouldn't Swordmaster Cassandra be older? She seemed pretty young to me."

Cassandra had been frozen for ten years, so there was a significant gap between her looks and the age people knew her to be.

"I don't know much about what happened, but it definitely seems to be her," Sheila said. "Or rather, I refuse to believe there are multiple people as ridiculously strong as she is. She's the Swordmaster, no doubt about it."

"I never thought I'd see the day you'd be taught by a Swordmaster. I guess becoming a Farunian princess in search of strength was worth it, then?"

"Huh? Actually…um…yes, it was. Living in Farune is difficult if you're not strong. In various ways…"

Sheila had competed in Farune's Consort Selection Tournament because she hadn't wanted to get wrapped up in any international conflicts involving Vulcan, and her excuse to Garay back then had been that she was going to Farune on a quest for strength. She had almost forgotten about that.

Being Mars's consort had turned out to be surprisingly difficult in any case, so ultimately, she *had* ended up getting tougher, just as she had said.

"So that means," Garay began, "that along with the Hundred and a monster army, Farune also has a Swordmaster?"

Cassandra was rumored to have destroyed an entire country by herself. As part of Farune's military, she was a decisive threat.

"Yes. It would be ill-advised to fight Farune, with her on their side." Sheila gently caressed her stomach, which had yet to grow larger. Then she pressed her father to make a choice. "What will you do, Father? Will you obey the king who has sidelined you, or will you install your grandchild as the next ruler?"

After a brief silence, Garay breathed a sigh. "Don't tell me King Mars predicted this far ahead when he made you his consort…"

"I suspect he did," Sheila said thoughtfully. "That Consort Selection Tournament was ridiculous on its face, but in the end it was successful at making the Swordmaster the third princess. The

other contenders who were confident in their skills were all incorporated into Farune's military, and under Lady Carmilla accomplished the feat of conquering Dorssen. Everything His Majesty does has some purpose to it. It's only natural to think that he investigated me extensively before we married."

Garay shuddered at Mars's foresight. Was there anyone who could stand up to this king, who was not only a brilliant general but also boasted the ability to orchestrate such vast designs?

"Very well," Garay finally said. "I'll prepare myself for the worst. But Hart and the others hold power in Vulcan now. The heirs to the Seven Celestial Swords are in league with one another and have sworn absolute loyalty to the king."

"They have? I didn't think they were all that strong anyway, though…" Sheila was well acquainted with the next generation of Celestial Swords, but she hadn't recognized any of them as being particularly talented.

"I don't know," Garay said. "They suddenly banded together a few years ago. And there aren't any divisions among them like the current Celestial Swords, with the mainstream faction and the dissidents. They unanimously swore allegiance to His Majesty. He trusts them deeply, and left them on guard during his absence."

"They may have gotten somewhat stronger, but I still don't think they can hold their own against me or the members of the Hundred accompanying me." When Sheila had known them, the next generation of Celestial Swords had displayed a certain amount of aptitude, and she assumed they had accumulated training since then. But they still didn't possess the natural talent that she had.

"'Somewhat' is selling them short. They've gotten to be awfully strong. I've heard that they're working hard and competing against one another, honing each other's skills. They may be a match for me and the other Celestial Swords at this point."

"Is that really possible?" Sheila found it hard to swallow. At the end of the day, swordsmanship fundamentally relied on talent. It wasn't the kind of thing where one could suddenly get stronger. The singular exception to the rule was the consumption of monster meat,

but if Hart and the others had sworn loyalty to the king, then it was hard to imagine them doing something like that.

"It isn't just those seven, either," Garay said. "Talented, mostly young warriors have flocked beneath their banner. You can't afford to underestimate them."

Hearing that, Sheila felt slightly apprehensive. Everyone who had traveled to Vulcan from Farune was an elite warrior, including herself. They could easily have overcome considerable numbers in the blink of an eye, as long as they were up against common soldiers. It was a different story if their foes were stronger than expected. If Farune's warriors struggled for even a second and took too long to defeat their opponents, their numerical disadvantage could become a real problem.

"Then I'll need help from you, Father," Sheila declared. "We'll have to gather more soldiers ourselves."

"Understood. But I have to pass this on to the other two families. Is that all right?"

"Of course, Father."

And so, the Farunian party in Vulcan set up camp at Garay's mansion.



THE heads of the other two Celestial Sword families that remained in Vulcan received messages early the following day requesting their presence at Garay's estate.

At the moment, the three of them were sitting at a round table in a highly secret, windowless room with only a single door.

"Do you really mean to defy the king, Garay?" said Hermann, the Stalwart Blade, with a frown. Hermann had blond hair, blue eyes, and a bulky build. Widely regarded as being second to none when it came to wielding a greatsword, he was also an old friend of Garay's. They were close comrades who had always acted together.

"Only one country can win, either Vulcan or Farune," Garay said. "I think Farune will win. And I don't plan on sharing the king's

fate. That's all there is to it." He communicated his intentions clearly and concisely.

"But will Farune really win?" asked the third man, Willem, the Blazing Blade. "Eyland, Vulcan, and now Kiel have joined the fight. I've even heard that adventurers are joining the coalition army as volunteers. Farune may be strong, but don't even they have too much of a disadvantage?"

Willem was a stylish man with eye-catching red hair, and his trademark technique involved generating flames within his sword. Currently, he looked concerned.

"Apparently, a Farunian force has already gone to Kiel," Garay said. "Lightning Empress Frau's Mages' Guild and the monster army. I don't know whether they really intend to invade, or if it's only a feint, but Kiel's army will be forced to withdraw from the battlefield to defend their home. With the wizards gone, this is bound to become a battle of pure strength, and there's no denying Farune's advantage on that front."

"I see," Willem said with a nod. "If Farune can tear the unknown factor, Master Matou, away from the battlefield and turn this into a straightforward clash…" He paused, considering. "Farune is definitely stronger. And the king of Farune is quite the tactician, just as the rumors say."

On Garay's recommendation, both Willem and Hermann had gone to watch a few of the fights in Farune's arena, where they had witnessed the strength of Zero and the Hundred firsthand. The experience had been what led them to oppose the Vulcanian king's hostility toward Farune in the first place—which the king, in turn, had used as reason to ostracize them.

"And there's something else," Garay said, lowering his voice. "I think Farune will win this time, but I don't think their momentum will hold forever."

"What do you mean?" Hermann asked softly, following Garay's lead.

"Farune is trying to expand as much as it can during King Mars's lifetime, but countries that rely only on force don't last long," Garay explained. "Cracks will eventually begin to show somewhere.

If something happens to King Mars, for example, the country runs the risk of sudden collapse. The annexed countries don't have any powerful nobles left, to say nothing of Farune itself, so they'll probably fall into chaos too. As long as we support Sheila and her child, then when that time comes, Vulcan, at the very least, will be secure. It doesn't even have to be Sheila's child; we can just install a relative of the former king on the throne. Then Vulcan might be able to take advantage of the confusion to expand our influence."

"I see," Willem said, the corners of his mouth curving up in a slight smile. "So if we think far enough ahead, there's a good chance that even if we fall under Farune's dominion temporarily, we could later gain independence anyway. And it's not far-fetched to hope that we might even be able to grow our territory."

"That's exactly right," Garay said, his ambition evident on his face. "It's very likely we'll be entering an age of war. But we'll have our opportunity eventually—both *us* and Vulcan." He was giving a glimpse of his reaction to the hardship he'd gone through after the king had alienated him. "So, what will you two do? If you want to be destroyed along with Vulcan, then go right ahead and choose your country. But I'm going to leave behind a legacy for my family, and reach for what's waiting in the future."

"All right. I'm with you," Hermann said with a nod, his features stiff. He had been ready to share his destiny with Garay as soon as he'd decided to join him in his estate.

"I'm in too. His Majesty despises us anyway," Willem said self-deprecatingly. "Even if we do nothing, this isn't going to end well."

"But what about the heirs?" Hermann pressed. "Right now, they're completely on His Majesty's side. It'll be hard for us to leave behind a legacy if we make enemies of our own heirs." It was already worrying that their sons had cut ties with their families and were acting on their own.

"It all depends on how you think about it," Garay said. "If we fail, we can just entrust our lineages to our heirs. If we succeed, all we need to do is bring them to our side. The crucial point is that Farune exterminates every noble who doesn't ally with them. The same is true of those who remain neutral. They despise the nobility.

It happened in both Cadonia and Dorssen. The only exceptions were the nobles who remained steadfastly loyal to Farune, and to King Mars himself. If we don't make our position clear from the start, there's no way our family lines will be allowed to survive. They won't even make an exception for me, and my daughter is one of Farune's princess consorts."

Garay planned to take advantage of the fact that their sons had turned against them. Yes, he predicted a Farunian victory, but it wasn't guaranteed. If Vulcan managed to defeat Farune, it would be better for their sons to have remained allied with the king. This sort of tactic helped the nobility ensure their survival far into the future.

"I see," Willem said. "That's true. In that case, we have to share our plan with Farune, and make sure we don't kill any of our heirs when we occupy the castle. We'll have to be especially clear with the Hundred." He looked anxious, perhaps about his son.

"I'll have Sheila give them thorough instructions too. Don't worry," Garay said. For him as well, his son was his precious heir, even if they were currently on bad terms. He couldn't afford to lose him.

"That means we need to act right away," Hermann said. "After all, the heirs will be quick to learn that we're here at your estate right now. We have to get moving, before they strike against us." He stood up, then picked up his greatsword, which had been leaning against the wall.

"You're right. There's no need to gather too many troops. Swiftness will decide this battle." Willem stood up and headed to the door. They had to get going as quickly as possible.

And so, the three Celestial Swords—the Twin Blades, the Stalwart Blade, and the Blazing Blade—made their decision to rise in rebellion against the king.



"IT'S quiet," a man said.

The man stood beside the royal castle in Thracia, Vulcan's capital city. He had long, tied-back black hair and wore a curious

outfit, a simple robe fixed at his waist with a sash. In his left hand he gripped a longsword in its scabbard. His name was Yamato, and he ranked fourth in the Hundred. Next to him was an armor-clad Sheila, and behind them were other ranked members of the Hundred.

There was nothing particularly odd about the castle being quiet, but it was suffused with a strange, mysterious tranquility. The gates were open, but there were no guards in sight. It almost looked like it had been abandoned.

"Yes, it's too quiet. Father, what's going on?" Sheila asked warily. Her father, Garay, was leading a group of several dozen soldiers, while Hermann and Willem were each commanding about as many troops themselves. Combined with the members of the Hundred, there were around a hundred of them in total.

"I don't know," Garay said. "It isn't usually like this. Perhaps Hart and the others got wind of our arrival, and they're plotting something…"

But if that had been true, they would have closed the gates to prepare for a siege. There would have been no need for them to leave the gates open. Hermann and Willem were as confused as Garay.

"Well, all right," Yamato said, looking downright ecstatic. "If it's a trap, then we just have to break through it. Strength is everything, and strength is justice. Great Leader Zero would do the same in our shoes." The other ranked members grinned in agreement. They were just happy to have the chance to fight.

The Vulcanians felt a chill creep over them. They were all thinking, *Has Farune truly made their rapid advance with nothing but strength?* The Vulcanians were by no means cowards, but they just couldn't be as ferocious as the Farunians. If the members of the Hundred were going to rush in for them, though, they had no choice but to silently follow.

Sheila drew the two swords on her back, then stood in front of the open gate. It was both her duty as a princess and her source of pride as a former S-rank adventurer to lead from the head of the

group. The Vulcanians were surprised, but the Hundred followed after her like it was only natural.

"Let's go," Sheila said, purposefully relaxing her body. She knew from her adventuring experience that if she was too tense, even things that would have normally gone her way could go poorly.

She fixed her sight firmly ahead, then slowly entered through the open gate. Rushing in quickly would only make it more likely that she would fall into a trap, and as long as she kept her eyes facing forward, she could extend her field of vision as wide as it could go. She proceeded, consciously softening the heightening tension in her body, but contrary to expectations, no one attacked her. She couldn't even sense anyone there.

What's the meaning of this? she wondered. In the end, despite her suspicions, she finally stepped foot inside the castle.



"IT'S been a while, Sheila."

Waiting for Sheila inside the castle was her younger brother, Hart, whom she was seeing for the first time in several years. The last time had been back when their relationship had soured while Sheila was still living in Vulcan. Hart had had an inferiority complex about Sheila. Back then, he had been unable even to bring himself to smile around her, but now, he was grinning from ear to ear. His boyish innocence was gone, and he had grown into a fine young man.

And—he was gripping blood-spattered blades in both hands.

On either side of him stood people Sheila recognized—and like Hart, the other Celestial Sword heirs also held bloodied swords. Behind them was a group of young people, equipped with a variety of different weapons. The castle was strewn with the bloodied bodies of knights and soldiers, and there were signs of a fierce fight having occurred. By all appearances, the dead were none other than the castle's own guards and knights.

"Hart, why'd you do this?" Sheila pressed her brother, caught off guard by the unexpected turn of events.

"Why? To prepare for your arrival, Sheila," he replied like it should have been obvious. "Everything we did was on Great Leader Zero's orders. He predicted all of this a year ago, you know." Hart's eyes glinted, and he flashed another toothy smile. Sheila had often seen the same expression in Farune, on the faces of the Hundred when they were singing words of praise for Zero.

"Zero, His Majesty, predicted this?" Yamato asked, smiling like he had just found a fellow traveler. "What do you mean by that, Lord Hart?"

"Lord Yamato, it is an honor to meet you, the Hundred's number four," Hart said. He and the others with him all bowed politely, very much like members of the Hundred, who recognized those with strength as their superiors.

Garay and the other two Celestial Swords looked conflicted as they beheld this sight—by contrast, their heirs had lately begun treating them, their own fathers, with disrespect.

"Now, allow me to explain," Hart continued. "One year ago, Zero arrived in Vulcanian territory. He walked down the largest street in Thracia, right out in the open, and his mere presence was so overwhelming that we of the Vulcan branch of the Hundred quickly sensed it."

"The Vulcan branch of the Hundred? His Majesty was here a year ago? And he was alone?" Sheila asked. Before anything else, that was the most unbelievable part. It was insane for a king to travel to an enemy country by himself and go for a walk in the middle of a city. She was close with her husband, and he didn't seem at all like the type of man to do something so bold.

"Yes, he was," Hart confirmed. "We couldn't believe it at first either. As you might expect, he was wearing simple clothing, but he wasn't otherwise disguised at all. Even though his frequent fights in the arena mean he's probably the king with the most recognizable face in all of Ares."

"I can't believe it," Garay grumbled after a pause. "Can he really be that careless?"

"Oh, Father," Hart said, his voice full of pity. "You're all so old-fashioned. Zero is able to outsmart his foes precisely because no one

can predict what he's going to do. As a matter of fact, not a single person stopped him as he strode through the city. And he was there for a reason."

"A reason? For walking around with his face exposed?" Sheila furrowed her eyebrows. She couldn't see any reason for doing something so absurd.

"He revealed himself to draw out we Hundred of the Vulcan branch, Sheila," Hart said. "In accordance with our rules, we hid the fact that we were members, and didn't even communicate with the Farunian Hundred. That was why Zero had to show himself in broad daylight, to make contact with us. Just as he predicted, we approached him. In the end, we were simply dancing in the palm of his hand."

Hermann groaned. "So, when you were suppressing the anti-king faction—" he began.

"We were only cracking down on weaklings who were all talk, Father," replied Igor, Hermann's son and the heir to the Stalwart Blade. "This, too, was at Zero's behest. He said this: 'Obey what your king commands of you.' That meant to stay camouflaged until the time came. Everything happened as he said. We easily gained the king's trust, and thanks to that, occupying the castle was simple."

"But weren't you killing Hundred sympathizers?!" Willem accused, pointing his finger at the heirs.

"To the contrary, Father," replied Fabio, Willem's son and heir to the Blazing Blade. "We simply framed those who attempted to betray us as Hundred sympathizers before we killed them. In Vulcan, the Hundred operates under complete secrecy, and it's set up so those at the bottom don't know who's in charge. Thanks to that, the informers mistakenly thought that we *were* confronting the Hundred, and came to us to make their reports. We followed Zero's advice to keep the Hundred as secret as possible, and it once again bore fruit. He is truly a fearsome man. Just how far ahead can he see?"

"But, how? How did you know that we were going to rebel today?" Garay asked, mystified that the heirs had been able to move so quickly. "We planned this in secret, and carried everything out

with the utmost haste. There was no way you should have been able to act before we did."

"As a nation, Vulcan prizes valor. Those who sympathize with the Hundred's teaching—strength is everything—are all around us. They're everywhere, Father." Hart smiled faintly.

"No, does that mean there were traitors in my own household?!" Garay turned around and looked with suspicion at his troops.

"Please, don't look at your subordinates like that. Haven't you yourself betrayed His Majesty?"

"But…"

"It's all right, father. You learned of the Hundred's power, and you were afraid. Any man would feel the same. Strength is everything—that is the one fundamental principle. If His Majesty the king were stronger than Zero, you wouldn't have had to betray him. That's all there is to it."

"You're wrong! We didn't rise up in rebellion for such an absurd reason! We're different from you!"

"Betrayal has no such pure justifications. Although in our case, we embraced the Hundred from the start, and we never swore our loyalty to the king." Hart readied his two swords. "Not that any of that matters. Why don't you hand your title over to me now, Father? It's going to happen sooner or later. It's best that we make it clear who's stronger, right here, right now."

Following Hart's lead, Igor readied his greatsword and Fabio coated his sword in flames, then they each turned their weapons toward their fathers.

"Is this part of Zero's plan too, Sheila?! Does this mean he never trusted us from the start?!" Garay scowled at his daughter as he drew his swords.

"I never heard about any of this," Sheila said, shaking her head in a panic. The Hundred from Farune stood protectively behind her, watching events unfold with interest.

On that day in Vulcan, a rebel army occupied the royal castle, and at the same time, there was a generational changing of the guard.

XVII: The King of Vulcan

THE volunteer army to rescue the saint, effectively an anti-Farune coalition, had gathered soldiers from all over. In total, they made up a force more than fifty thousand strong—a number that was both massive in its own right and unprecedented in recent years.

The core of the coalition army comprised the Holy Knights—formerly of the Theocracy of Mauve—the army of Eyland, the army of Vulcan, and the Mages' Guild of Kiel. The Holy Knights and Mages' Guild were particularly famous, the former for their excellence in recovery magic and the latter for being a group of the strongest wizards in existence. The general opinion was that no matter how adept Farune's advances may have been, they would be hard-pressed to win in the coming fight.

As such, even mercenaries and adventurers were jumping on the bandwagon and joining up with the army. With the expansion of the Hundred throughout Farune and the countries under its influence, the organization's members had started taking on the duties that mercenaries and adventurers usually performed. As a result, they already didn't look upon the Hundred particularly kindly. They were worried that if Farune extended its influence any further than it already had, they would be in danger of being completely out of work.

It was then that a rumor began to circulate, saying that Kiel's Mages' Guild had suddenly vanished. The barrier Kiel had put up to shield the coalition army had disappeared, and though it was reconstituted in the following days, the Eylish army's Mages' Guild was responsible for its restoration. This sent a wave of uneasiness through the coalition army, but when Vulcan's army of twenty thousand—on par with Eyland's—finally joined the fray, the forces grew to more than fifty thousand total, and morale recovered.

Meanwhile, the Farunian army joined with the Dorssenian army, which Carmilla was leading in a face-off against the coalition army. This side, too, was preparing for a decisive showdown.



"HUH? What did you say?" I asked. I was leading the Farunian army and had just reached the border between Eyland and Dorssen when Frau suddenly appeared and told me something strange.

"I destroyed Kiel," she said, as nonchalant as ever.

"The encampment?" I pointed over at the coalition army, just visible in the distance.

She shook her head. "The country."

What? Why?

I'd told her to take on the Magedom's army within the coalition forces. I had no recollection of ever saying to go and destroy the *country*. True, the monster army had grown in size to the point where I'd been idly thinking it could have done with a bit of thinning out, but had it really become large enough to destroy a country?

That kind of power is no joke.

"So, what were the casualties?" I asked after I'd gathered my thoughts.

"Complete destruction of the monster army, excluding the Warwolf unit."

"Hmm, well, that's all right, isn't it?"

I was just glad there weren't any losses among the Mages' Guild. I had no problem with losing excess monsters. As long as we still had the unit of Warwolves, which were easy to handle, and the unit of Wyverns, which were extremely useful, that was all we needed. As it happened, the Wyvern unit was in Vulcan with Sheila and the others at the moment.

"What's Keely up to?" I asked. "Did she go back to Farune?"

"She's on standby in the Magedom. If we use their Gate, we can move the entire unit of Warwolves at once."

The Gate. That large teleportation magic circle, right? I've heard rumors about it. Sure seems handy.

"All right, tell her to come over here. The coalition forces are large, so I want to increase our usable strength while we still can."

"Okay."



"YOUR Majesty! I have a message!"

The man who rushed in to replace Frau in my tent was Captain Gyunei of the Dragoon unit. He should still have been in Vulcan.

Did they make progress in their negotiations with Vulcan already? I wondered.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Lady Sheila's uprising with the rebel army was a success," he announced. "They've seized Vulcan's capital, Thracia!"

After a long pause, I could only say, "Huh?"

How did that happen? I wanted a peaceful diplomatic effort! What do you mean, rebel army uprising?

"I flew here as fast as I could to inform Your Majesty of the plan's success, but communication seems already to have reached the Vulcanian army here as well," Gyunei continued. "I only confirmed this from the air, but they seem to be moving to withdraw. They're returning home, I expect. What shall we do? The rebel army led by Lady Sheila is three thousand strong, but I imagine they'll be hard-pressed to deal with an army of twenty thousand."

What shall you do? How about you tell me what you want me to do? Am I supposed to break through the enemy camp and chase the Vulcanian army? Where am I supposed to find the extra manpower to—

"Your Majesty! I've just returned!" said Keely, walking in and interrupting my train of thought. Frau was behind her, probably having brought her to the camp as soon as she could.

Teleportation magic circles sure are fast.

"As you ordered, we destroyed the Magedom of Kiel!"

Yeah, I never made an order like that.

"Master Matou was awfully strong, you know," she continued. "I sent in a whole bunch of monsters, and he beat them with a single

spell! But in the end, I took him out, easy-peasy!" Keely was in a better mood than usual after winning the battle.

I guess that's to be expected. I mean, she did defeat a legendary mage…but, easy-peasy? Really?

"Well done," I said. "The monster army you created is really powerful."

"Thank you very much! The casualties were great, but my doggies are okay, so please don't be concerned!"

"Uh-huh, so the Warwolf unit is still going strong," I repeated. "Then, I have something else I'd like you to do."

"Yes, sir! Anything!" Even though this would be her second fight in a row with no breaks, Keely didn't even hesitate.

"It seems Sheila has gained control of Vulcan's capital," I said. "If the Vulcanian army here returns home without any resistance, it'll be a problem. I want you to fight them and whittle them down, whether through nighttime raids or ambushes."

"I see! My doggies will be just the ticket! Leave it to us!"

"I'm counting on you. Can you go with her too, Frau? It'll be tricky for the Warwolves to wear out twenty thousand troops on their own. But with Kiel gone, we'll make do on this front."

"Okay," Frau said, accepting the mission with her usual blank expression.

"If you do well," I added, "I don't mind if you and your mages use the former site of Kiel for whatever you want."

"Huh? Does that mean Lady Frau is getting her own territory?" Keely asked.

Hm…I guess that's what I mean, yeah. The Magedom was right in the middle of an inhospitable wasteland, so it was inconvenient to get to. If I took it over, it would become an exclave. Managing it as part of Farune would be too much trouble to bother with.

"Well, it's always been a sort of sacred place for wizards. If you defeat Vulcan's army, I'll give it to her," I decided on the spur of the moment.

"Understood! I'll give it my all!" Keely said.

"As will I," Frau added.

With uncharacteristic motivation, Frau swiftly left the tent, Keely at her side, to go on their raid. The Magedom of Kiel must have had some particular value to mages.

"That's the situation, Gyunei," I said to the Dragoon unit captain, who had been quietly waiting off to the side since Keely had come in. "Report this to Sheila."

Gyunei kneeled. "Your wish is my command, Your Majesty. I shall return to Vulcan right away," he replied. Then, he left the tent.



THE king of Vulcan had lost his composure.

It wasn't that he hadn't expected a rebellion. He had, in fact, taken precautions in case the dissident faction suddenly erupted in revolt. However, that very same faction's sons had sworn absolute allegiance to him, even vowing to kill their fathers with their own hands, if it came to that. The king knew that they had always been at odds with one another, so he had believed them.

But when the time came and the king dispatched his troops, Sheila, Garay's daughter and the fourth princess of Farune, returned. Garay took advantage of the opportunity to raise troops of his own, and this resulted in the castle's occupation by the Celestial Sword heirs. It was safe to say that the king had been completely duped by Garay and his son.

Plus, the four Celestial Swords who made up the mainstream faction should have been the king's allies. What in the world were their sons doing? The king pressed these four fathers, who were also his trusted retainers, but all they said was that they knew nothing. It didn't seem to be a lie. It was clear from the flustered looks on their faces that they really had no idea what was going on.

There was no way they had accompanied the king on this campaign while harboring rebellious feelings. If they, too, had betrayed him, he would have been killed long ago.

Regardless, the king had to get back to Vulcan, and quickly. The soldiers and knights had families there. He couldn't join the coalition army without first ascertaining their safety.

As the king of Vulcan rapidly prepared to withdraw, he sent a messenger to the king of Eyland, telling him that, due to the rebellion, he would be returning to his country. He immediately received a reply insisting he stay put. When he ignored it, the king of Eyland himself arrived.

"Wait, this is a ruse to make your army withdraw! Besides, weren't you the one to suggest this war in the first place?!" the king of Eyland admonished him. But, the king of Vulcan knew all that.

Kiel's forces were also gone from the battlefield, in all likelihood due to a Farunian scheme. If the Vulcanian army withdrew too, the coalition was at risk of a total breakdown. But the king of Vulcan was returning anyway. He had no choice. No army in existence could fight a war with its own capital occupied.

The king of Farune was fearsome. He was strategically chipping away at his enemies' fighting power. It had been a mistake for them to assume he was all brute force and nothing else.

The army of Vulcan ignored all of Eyland's entreaties and hurriedly began to withdraw. The abandoned objects scattered about their camp told the whole story. Not only the king, but his retainers, the knights, and even the common soldiers were worried sick. After all, the Hundred had massacred the nobility in Farune, Cadonia, and Dorssen. The Vulcanian army had no idea what those madmen would do if left unopposed. Naturally, that only quickened the pace of their return.

It was reported that Thracia was being occupied by three thousand enemy soldiers. The Vulcanians had twenty thousand. Apparently, several of the Hundred's elites, led by Sheila, were also in Vulcan, but no matter how strong the Hundred were, the discrepancy in the sizes of their forces was too great. Once the Vulcanians turned back to fight Farune, there was no way they could lose.



THE army of Vulcan raced down a road that cut through a forest. They had already entered Vulcanian territory, and it wasn't much

farther to Thracia, a fact that automatically filled their legs with the strength to carry them forward. The road was narrow, having been built by clearing a path through the trees, so the army's formation naturally became longer and narrower.

Suddenly, there was a scream.

"Monsters!"

Even this forest had monsters living in it. However, they weren't foolish enough to attack an army. Just what was happening? Needless to say, other soldiers tried to rescue the unit that was under attack, but the narrow road made it so they couldn't move freely.

The king of Vulcan, leading from the head of the army, clicked his tongue in frustration as he made the order for a full stop. "Exterminate the monsters right away! Then I want a casualty report, and make it quick!"

If he abandoned his troops and hurried ahead, he wouldn't have just seen their morale deteriorate; he could have been inviting desertion. But for better or for worse, the monster raid was quickly sorted. Then, the messenger he'd sent to check the casualties returned.

"Sir, a report! It was the mage unit that was attacked, by wolflike monsters! In all likelihood, they were Warwolves! Their exact number is unknown, but there seem to be several hundred of them!"

"You're telling me the mages were attacked?" the king of Vulcan asked. "There aren't any Warwolves around here! How many did we lose?!" He valued martial strength, but naturally, he also had mages. They couldn't cast powerful attack spells, but they had a solid reputation for defense, like barrier spells. This allowed Vulcan's knights to wield their full strength without having to worry about enemy spells, so the mages were indispensable.

"Well…" The knight messenger momentarily seemed hesitant to speak, but then he readied himself and continued. "They were completely wiped out. Apparently, the monsters precisely targeted only the mages. Normally, they would have had knights guarding them, but the narrow path made it so the monsters could get

between them and both their front and rear guards, which kept reinforcements from reaching them in time…”

“Why didn’t you lead with that?!” the king of Vulcan shouted. He found it hard to swallow that wild monsters would target and attack only the mages of their own accord. Nor had he heard any reports of a large pack of Warwolves. In other words, it was highly likely that this was the rumored Farunian monster army. And with the mages taken out, that meant—

“The trees up ahead are burning!” someone reported, in a voice that was nearly a scream.

The king turned around to see that the trees on both sides of the road to Thracia had gone up in flames, and were now slowly toppling over and obstructing the path. It would have been impossible for live trees to suddenly catch fire and burn like that. Clearly, magic was responsible.

“Get back! Retreat! Hurry!” the king of Vulcan shouted, giving the orders himself. Without mages, his army had no way to defend against these flames. And while they could otherwise have searched for the enemy mages, it was impossible inside a forest. The situation was as bad as it could get.

Fire swept through all the roadside trees at once in a blaze so intense that it was almost beautiful.

He had completely fallen into his enemy’s trap, but as king, there was no way he could give up. He squeezed his horse between the lines of soldiers, trying to force a retreat, and as he did, he saw a pale woman floating high up in the sky.

“The Lightning Empress…” A groan escaped the Vulcanian king’s lips.

With a grimoire in one hand, Frau began a melodious incantation. “Abyssal gloom, answer my call. Spirits of darkness, draw my enemy down to the underworld…”

A black magic circle appeared at the king of Vulcan’s feet, and it multiplied in number, propagating out to his surroundings.

“What the hell is this?!” he shouted. He could have tried to run, but there was nowhere to go. The burning forest enveloped him on

both sides, and the entire surface of the road was permeated with black magic circles.

"Transfix." With that single word, Frau's spell was complete.

The last thing the king of Vulcan saw was something like a black thorn, coming up from the magic circle as it entered his chest. He fell from his horse, his heart pierced. But there was no one to raise their voice in alarm; those around him had died in the same manner, all having been impaled through the torso.

"I'm satisfied," Frau mumbled quietly. Her goal had been to try out the spell Matou had used in Kiel. However, her spell hadn't covered the whole Vulcanian army; only the unit around the king had been affected. It was difficult to make a spell encompass the scope of an entire city without mana on the level of Matou's, but it was still a fearsome magic coming from Frau. The only sounds left in the area within the spell's range were the now-riderless horses neighing in fear of the flames.

"Burn them," Frau said telepathically to her subordinates, Mika and Noa.

In an instant the flames besieging the Vulcanian army closed in on both sides. What remained of the twenty thousand Vulcanian soldiers were burned alive. Some boldly broke through the fire and managed to escape, but the only thing waiting for them on the other side were the jaws of the Warwolves.

XVIII: Before the Showdown

THE deputy captain of the Holy Knights, Caim, was elated. The forces in support of their cause had reached fifty thousand in number. The Holy Knights themselves were only five hundred strong, but with this many on their side, rescuing Lady Maria from Farune would be child's play. Then, even the pope would have no choice but to officially recognize her as a saint.

With a true saint, the Theocracy would undoubtedly receive greater blessings from Mauve than ever before. Lady Maria was an angel who had alighted upon this desolate earth. All humans besides her were akin to detritus. If anything, Lady Maria should have been

made pope. The people who occupied the upper echelons of the Theocracy of Mauve were only there because of their noble origins, and they had none of the favor of the divine—no right to rule.

These were the sorts of thoughts that were going through Caim's mind. And he wasn't the only one. Maria's fervent devotees among the Holy Knights despised their noble leaders, and they dreamed of a righteous Theocracy based in faith. According to their beliefs, Maria was the one worthy of leading such a nation.

On the day the Vulcanian army had arrived on the battlefield and set up camp, with the fight against Farune close at hand, Caim returned to his tent to find a letter. It contained instructions for him to come alone to the forest near his campsite, and it said that if he didn't obey, Maria's life would be forfeit. Enclosed in the letter was the necklace Maria always wore. Clearly, this was Farune's doing.

"You cowards!"

Caim gnashed his teeth. He had been afraid of this. If the saint was lost, the coalition would lose the reason for its existence. While the individual armies might have been attacking Farune for their own variously selfish reasons, the battle would certainly have become meaningless for him and the Holy Knights. He had no idea what sort of demands might be made of him, but his only choice was to obey.

Crumpling up the letter in his fist, Caim got his gear in order before exiting the tent. Knights often went into the forest to relieve themselves, so his actions didn't stand out all that much. However, he continued on, deeper and deeper into the woods. The spot designated in the letter was in the forest's innermost depths.

When he finally arrived at the spot, a single person stood there, wearing a white hood low over their eyes. They were of small stature, and looked to be a woman, or maybe a child. No one else was there.

"Identify yourself," Caim said, and the person removed their hood, exposing their long, flowing blonde hair so it shimmered in the light of the moon. The person beheld Caim with compassionate blue eyes.

"Lady Maria…" Caim said.

"It has been a while, Lord Caim."

Caim wondered if this wasn't just a dream. Maria had appeared to him while he slept ever since the day Farune had kidnapped her, but now she was right in front of him. He wept, becoming so overwhelmed with joy that his knees crumpled under him.

"…I'm happy, truly happy that you're safe!" Caim said, wiping away his tears. "But why the letter?"

"Apologies for making you come all this way, Lord Caim," Maria replied, a grave expression on her face. "However, I had to, otherwise my life would be in danger."

"What do you mean?"

"To tell you the truth…all of this has been a plot by the pope. He handed me over to Farune, then used that as a pretext to dispatch armies against it."

"What?! But Lady Maria, wasn't he opposed to the coalition?"

"That was merely for the sake of appearances, so as not to draw the ire of Farune himself. He made it seem as though the army to subjugate Farune formed organically, and that the Theocracy had nothing to do with it."

"But, why would he do such a thing…?"

"Both Farune and I are thorns in the side of the nobility," Maria explained. "I am a candidate for sainthood who is not of noble origin, and Farune is a country that has abolished the nobility, so we are unacceptable to them. This is what led the pope to come up with his plan. He purposefully sent me to Farune to serve as the bishop they demanded—and moreover, he did so in exchange for money."

"That can't be…I know what the pope is like, but I don't think he'd go that far!" Caim turned pale and shook his head.

"I understand why you might not be able to believe it. I didn't want to believe it myself. However, I am a symbol of the light that signifies love, courage, and faith in God, and the king of Farune is a symbol of the darkness of constant, godless brutality. He and I are like oil and water. Seemingly, it was inevitable that we would repel one another. I imagine the pope expected I would soon incur the king of Farune's wrath and be summarily executed. His plan was to use my murder as a pretext to gather volunteers and form an army, then destroy Farune, getting rid of two obstacles at once."

"When you put it that way, it certainly does seem likely!" Caim said, readily believing Maria's story. He had always been a fervent believer in the church and a devotee of Maria, and he was very suggestible. More than anything else, he wanted Maria to be right and the pope to be wrong.

"Thank you for believing in me, Lord Caim," Maria said, smiling kindly as tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. "I wanted you to trust me, even if no one else did."

"How could I not believe you?! You are a true saint, Lady Maria! Please, forgive me for my doubts!" Caim paused. "However, if that was the pope's plan, then how are you still alive?"

"I used various methods to preach the magnificence of God to the Farunians, who were of little faith. I contrived simple, effective prayers, and added different gestures as accompaniment. In the end, by showing them the light of faith, I was finally able to claim the hearts of the Farunian people!"

"Oh!" Caim was deeply moved. He interpreted Maria's reported success as having been the result of some sort of miracle. And Maria wasn't exactly lying, either. Though Caim never would have imagined that she had been unnecessarily singing, dancing, and making magic stones sparkle as she chanted recovery spells in the arena.

"Finally, my devoted behavior even touched the heart of that evil king of Farune!" she finished with a flourish. "His Majesty…Lord Mars said this: 'Maria is a true saint.'"

"Even the Demon King!"

"Yes, even the Demon King!"

"Lady Maria, you're incredible, you really are a true saint," Caim said, shedding more tears. "There is no one in this world like you." He was certain that Maria really was a supreme being, just as he'd long believed.

"Lord Caim, that isn't all. Lord Mars also said this: 'Lady Maria ought to be the Vicar of God.'"

"The Vicar of God? You mean…"

"Yes, I do. He resolved to install me in the papacy," Maria said, suddenly looking somewhat downcast. "Of course, I refused him. I believed that the pope was a wonderful man, deserving of respect,

and that a girl like me could never handle such a heavy responsibility. However, no matter how many times I turned him down, Lord Mars was determined, and he wouldn't give up. Then, in an unfortunate turn, this eventually reached the pope's ears. Some member of the Church of Mauve in Farune must have told him about it. I imagine they didn't take kindly to the fact that someone as young as me was chosen for the post of acting bishop."

"And they call themselves a servant of God? How unseemly! People just as corrupt as the church leadership are everywhere!" Caim exclaimed, outraged. However, this was a fabrication on Maria's part; naturally, no such person really existed.

"It seems that this angered the pope. Afterward, he spread false rumors that I had been forcibly kidnapped by Farune and that I was being treated horribly, then formed the army to subjugate Farune. Even though I never even wanted the papacy…" Maria hung her head and made a motion like she was wiping away tears—but it was only an act, and she wasn't actually crying. It was dark, and she was looking down on the kneeling Caim from above, sure that he wouldn't be able to tell.

"No way," he said in disbelief. "I don't even know why we raised an army anymore! I want to rescue you from Farune. I came all this way for that singular purpose!"

"I see," Maria replied sadly. "Well, I'm afraid that, even if the army achieves victory over Farune, I will probably be secretly disposed of anyway. And, it will be made to look like Lord Mars killed me."

"No! But, doesn't this mean that the true enemy who's targeting you is the pope?!" Caim shouted, unconsciously raising his voice—forgetting that this conversation had to be kept secret.

"Please, don't say that, Lord Caim. I don't care what happens to me. But I can't stand the thought that so many people will lose their lives for my sake. I would like your aid in bringing an end to this fight."

"My aid? This place is teeming with the designs of so many powerful nations. What can I do? Eyland, Kiel, and even Vulcan have arrived on the battlefield. It's only a matter of time until the fighting

begins…" Caim hung his head, keenly aware of how powerless he was.

"There is still something you can do." Maria approached Caim, then softly took his hand. She was fully aware of what sort of effect this action would have on him.

"L-Lady Maria?!" Caim's face flushed red and his body went stiff as a board, exactly as she had expected.

"Actually, Farune has already attacked and destroyed Kiel," Maria said.

"Kiel?! That's impossible!"

"It's the truth. It was destroyed by Lady Frau, the Lightning Empress," she continued. "And that isn't all. There's been a large-scale rebellion in the capital of Vulcan, Thracia. The Vulcanian army has already begun to withdraw. However, these facts are being concealed by Eyland. It is foolish not to reveal the truth. If you, Lord Caim, make this public, then the army's morale will be broken, and we may be able to avoid an outbreak of hostilities. We may be able to bring this to an end without pointless bloodshed."

"Then, Kiel's and Vulcan's camps are…"

"Already completely deserted."

Because they were mages, the Kielians had set up camp quite far from the front lines. The army of Eyland was facing off against Carmilla's army from Dorssen, while Vulcan's camp was opposite Farune's main force. As such, there had been no way for the Holy Knights to know the circumstances of either of their allies.

"Understood. Then, after this, I shall go confirm your reports myself! If it's true, I will let the volunteer army know. If Kiel and Vulcan are really gone, the volunteer army will lose its absolute advantage. When they learn of this, those who joined up may very well leave the front in droves."

"Thank you, Lord Caim. However, I have one more request." Maria tightened her grip on Caim's hand.

"Y-Yes, what is it?"

"If the fighting begins despite your efforts, I don't want any of *you* to get involved. You may think me a selfish woman, but I don't want the people I know to die. I want you to live, and for us to meet

again. So please," Maria begged. "If the battle starts, can you promise me that you'll flee? It's not only you, Lord Caim. I don't want to lose any of the Holy Knights that treated me so kindly in Mauve!" Maria wrapped both hands around Caim's. Then, she forced her eyes to be wet with tears, and stared right into Caim's eyes.

"B-But, we are Holy Knights! To flee in the face of the enemy, why…" Caim had been appointed to the position of deputy captain, and he did have his pride as a knight.

"Please, help me, Lord Caim," Maria entreated. "If I lose all of you, there will be no one left in the Theocracy of Mauve who believes in justice anymore. If that happens, the pope will be able to do whatever he pleases. Is that really all right?"

"But…" Caim was at a loss. True, there was already no justification for the upcoming battle. It didn't seem like it was a fight that was worth risking his life for, but…

"The fight for justice will begin after this! I'm begging you! Fight by my side!" Maria insisted. Her eyes contained not their usual evanescent kindness, but a clear, strong determination.

"Very well, Lady Maria!" Caim finally agreed. "I promise you that, even if it means disgracing ourselves, my comrades and I will survive!" He firmly grasped Maria's hands back.

Epilogue

MARIA watched Caim go to make sure he returned to his encampment. When he had gone, multiple figures emerged from the surrounding trees.

"Lady Maria," said Chrom, the captain of the Black Knights. "Don't you think you phrased that in a way that was a bit too favorable to yourself?" As he and his subordinates came out from among the trees, they looked uneasy. They had been ordered to escort Maria and had been lying concealed nearby in the unlikely event that they were needed.

"If this reduces the enemy's strength, then isn't it all for the best?" Maria retorted. "His Majesty is a generous man. He will forgive my silly remarks graciously and with a smile." In sharp contrast with Maria's earlier expression, she looked perfectly composed.

"Well, that's true…"

"More importantly, we must return to camp quickly. His Majesty is expecting the good news." Without waiting for Chrom to reply, Maria turned in the direction of Farune's camp and began walking.

For Maria, the current situation was an opportunity. Queen Frau was pursuing the Vulcanian army. Second Princess Carmilla was commanding the Dorssenian army. Third Princess Cassandra was on standby in Farune. And finally, Fourth Princess Sheila was occupying Thracia. In short, none of Mars's consorts were anywhere near him. Plus, Mars was surprisingly chaste, so he didn't even have any female servants.

There's no one to get in my way now. If I can establish a relationship between us while I have the chance, power will be mine for the taking. He gave Kiel to Lady Frau. Lady Carmilla has Dorssen.

I don't really know about Lady Cassandra, but he'll surely give Vulcan to Lady Sheila. Becoming one of Lord Mars's consorts always comes with a country! What divine providence! I'll have relations with Lord Mars, and then I'll graciously accept Eyland as mine!

As Maria thought these things, she chuckled to herself. She would never have a better opportunity than this. She would have been a fool to let it slip through her fingers.

"Wait for me, Lord Mars!" she said into the forest. "Your saint is coming to be with you!"

Meanwhile, Mars had shut himself up alone inside his tent. His life had been under constant threat ever since childhood, so he didn't like for there to be people nearby—excluding his consorts, around whom he could let down his guard.

Suddenly, Mars was overcome by an indescribable chill.

Hm? That's weird, I don't sense anyone nearby, he thought to himself. *Though I do get the feeling that something dangerous is coming. But the battle is coming up, so, maybe I'm just nervous?*

He decided to retire to bed early—oblivious to the truth behind his concerns.



FRAU attentively watched it all through her crystal ball. Everything was going according to plan.

As a dutiful mother and Mars's faithful wife, she had to make him the world's greatest king. She could always be of service to him with her magic, but he also needed people to support him in other areas. Maria was one of those people. In the future, she would be a great help in the religious dimension of his rule—though Frau never would have expected her to have such an entertaining personality on top of that.

Frau was aware that she wasn't normal. She didn't understand love. She liked Mars, but she didn't know whether she was giving him enough love. After all, love had no form; it wasn't something you could see.



That was why she had allowed Mars to marry his princess consorts. She'd thought it would be for the best if it meant that he had enough love.

And yet, Mars still turned her way. Because it would defeat the purpose of his other marriages for them to be too close, Frau treated him coldly. Dejected, he would go see his other consorts, but after a time he always came back to her. He would hesitantly take her hand in his own. She was the only one he ever tried to hold hands with. To Frau, this was something special. It was warm and comfortable.

Perhaps *this* was love. If it was, then that was enough for her.

However, she didn't know if Mars had *enough* love. That was why, at the very least, she wanted to give him the world. She didn't know whether he wished for that himself. In the end, maybe she was only doing it all because she wanted to. But she wanted to give something to the person she liked, so wasn't that enough of a reason?

Plus, it was fun for her to watch Mars look so troubled over his uncontrollably growing territory. And that, too, had to be love.

Afterword

I have some space for the afterword in this volume, so I'll use it to give a supplemental explanation of the main story.

Monster meat actually has multiple secondary effects. This was explained in "Keely's Discovery," a bonus episode in the ebook of *How I Became King by Eating Monsters Volume 2* published on BOOK☆WALKER in Japan (I apologize; I should have added this to the main story).

One aspect of monster meat is that merely eating it isn't enough to make one stronger. Its effects only manifest when one trains while eating it (this applies to mana as well). It's like how consuming protein supplements is meaningless without working out. Young Mars was eating monster meat and fighting monsters, so he got stronger.

Next, when a person eats monster meat, they also adopt a monster-like sensibility. Specifically, this world's monsters tend to obey individuals of the same species that are stronger than themselves. This behavior is passed on to humans who eat their meat. These humans perceive those who eat monster meat as members of the same species as them, and this makes it more likely for hierarchical relationships based on strength to form. This is one reason for the unusual worship of Mars by the members of the Hundred.

However, in Mars's case, even without the meat, they respect him as their leader, and they've formed relationships of trust over a long period of time. So, even if someone stronger than him were to appear, the Hundred's loyalty wouldn't be so easily shaken. This is why, even with Cassandra there, they don't revere her more than they do Mars. If anything, their reaction is something like, "Lord Mars sure is amazing, to be able to make such a strong woman his wife." Incidentally, "amazing" here is being used synonymously with "insanely reckless."

Additionally, in terms of geography, please think of the continent of Ares as a similar shape to North and South America

merged together. The country equivalent to Canada is the not-yet-introduced Ronzan Empire, and the parts corresponding to the United States and Mexico are what is referred to as "the center." The eastern center has the midsize nations like Dorssen, Vulcan, and Eyland, and the west is a disordered clutter of small countries. Finally, North and South America here aren't divided by ocean, but by a mountainous region. There are gaps in the mountains, and this is basically where Farune and Cadonia are. To the south is a massive jungle, called the Forest of Beasts. Essentially, this is South America. Please think of the geographic aspect as just an undefined impression. I haven't really established it in detail.

The people of Ares don't know the true scope of the Forest of Beasts. They only think of it as a huge, scary forest, and no one suspects that it takes up around the same area as every human nation combined. The continent of Ares has more monsters than humans.

As such, whenever a super powerful monster occasionally carelessly wanders its way north, it's labeled a "calamity-class" monster, and all humanity ends up coming together to oppose it. When this happens, Farune and Cadonia are the very first places to get hit, and it's been truly disastrous. The same is true of monster stampedes. However, these kinds of catastrophes occur in cycles measured in centuries, so humans generally manage to live in peace. The current story takes place in the middle of a period of peaceful complacency, where people are oblivious to potential threats.

The various countries of Ares have never been unified, and while the Ronzan Empire has tried in the past, it's generally considered an "Evil Empire," so everyone resisted them and foiled their plans.

Master Matou played a major role in defeating calamity-class monsters and repulsing the Ronzan Empire, and he had become a sort of deterrent. It just so happens that he wasn't the sort of person who should have been killed so carelessly.

People really are thoughtless, aren't they?


I NEVER EXPECTED TO BE ABLE TO READ VOLUME 3 SO QUICKLY. I KNEW IT, DAKEN AND SHIBA MUST BE EATING MONSTER MEAT TOO! WITH PLENTY OF COMEDY AND FANTASY ALIKE, THIS SERIES ALWAYS GIVES ME ENCOURAGEMENT! I'M GOING TO PUT ALL THE MORE EFFORT INTO THE MANGA ADAPTATION.
THANK YOU FOR READING!
KARIN SURURAGI
EATorDIE
モンスターの肉を食っていたら王位に就いた件



Welcome to Olivia's Magic Jewelers

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By Hanami Nishine Illust Rin Hagiwara

Nina gets hired by a cat to play the role of heroine with the sole purpose of helping the villainess relish her downfall! Nina must work hard to make sure the villainess gets a satisfying triumph or she won't get her payment, but can she pull it off?



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