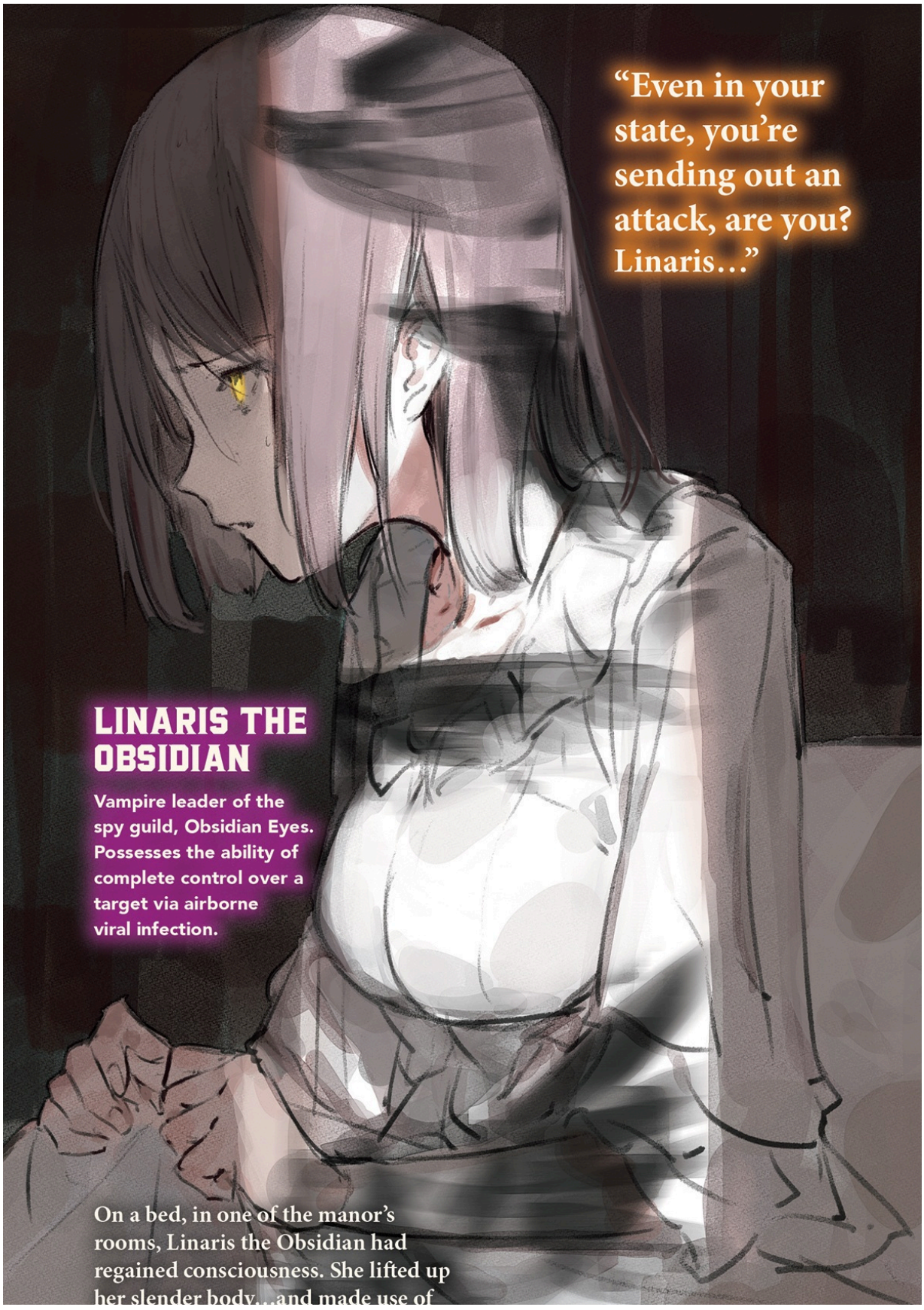
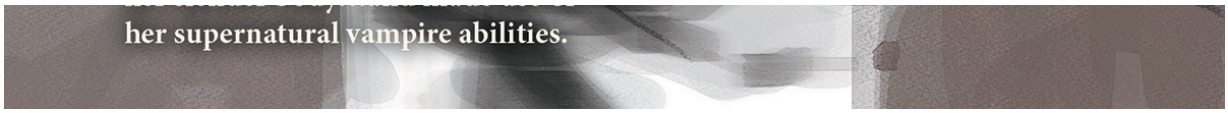
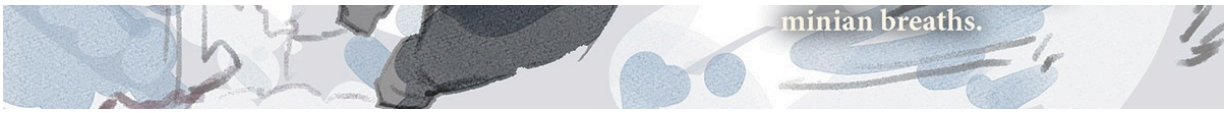

OSHURA
IX
Keiso
ILLUSTRATION BY
Kureta
Den of Divine Tragedies


“Even in your state, you’re sending out an attack, are you? Linaris…”
LINARIS THE OBSIDIAN
Vampire leader of the spy guild, Obsidian Eyes. Possesses the ability of complete control over a target via airborne viral infection.
On a bed, in one of the manor’s rooms, Linaris the Obsidian had regained consciousness. She lifted up her slender body…and made use of


her supernatural vampire abilities.


SHALK THE SOUND SLICER
A skeleton with no memories of his life before he died. His godlike speed outstrips sound itself, and he is able to transform his bones to render any distance from his foe meaningless.
"I got you."
"Tu the Magic… Guess you can put up a fight after all!"
TU THE MAGIC
A mimic created by the self-proclaimed demon king Izick the Chromatic. Fights with a physical body of perfection, possessing both indestructible tenacity and inexhaustible stamina.


UHAK THE SILENT
An ogre and the only creature in the world unable to understand Word Arts. In his vicinity, all supernatural abilities, Word Arts first and foremost, are completely nullified.
A large shadow was cast over him.
The sprint from the base of the slope, two hundred meters in the distance, the acceleration, the jump, and finally arriving on top of the second story rooftop, happened all within the span of two


minian breaths.

ISHURA

IX

Den of Divine Tragedies

Keiso

ILLUSTRATION BY

Kureta

YEN ON

New York

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ISHURA IX
Keiso ILLUSTRATION BY Kureta Translation by David Musto

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CONTENTS

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Story So Far

Glossary

Aureatia Twenty-Nine Officials

***TWELFTH VERSE:* WORLD SUBJUGATION I**

Chapter 1 Dissection

Chapter 2 Fallen Wings

Chapter 3 Climax

Chapter 4 Inebriated

Chapter 5 The Ruins of the Azwa Great Belfry

Chapter 6 Aureatia Internal Affairs Ministry Eastern Office

Chapter 7 Kadan Third District

Chapter 8 Sixth Borough of Aureatia's Northern Outer Ward

Chapter 9 Aureatia Northern Outer Ward's Fifteenth City Guard Post

Chapter 10 The Twelfth Match

Chapter 11 Death, Poetry, and Cogwheels

Chapter 12 Demon King's Rebirth

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

STORY SO FAR

The identity of the one who defeated the True Demon King—the ultimate threat who gripped the world in terror—is shrouded in mystery.
Little is known about this hero.
The terror of the True Demon King abruptly came to an end.

Nevertheless, the champions born from the era of the Demon King still remain in this world.

Now, with the enemy of all life brought low, these champions, wielding enough power to transform the world, have begun to do as they please, their untamed wills threatening a new era of war and strife.

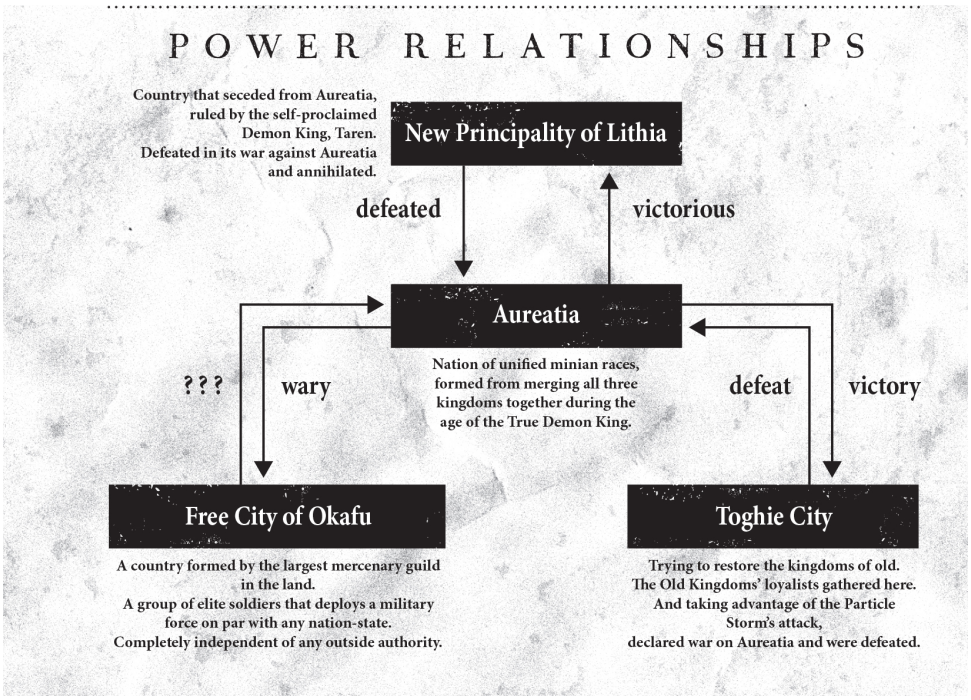
To Aureatia, now the sole kingdom unifying the minian races, the existence of these champions has become a threat.

No longer champions, they are now demons bringing ruin to all—the shura.

To ensure peace in the new era, it is necessary to eliminate any threat to the world's future, and designate the True Hero to guide and protect the hopes of the people.

Thus, the Twenty-Nine Officials, the governing administrators of Aureatia, have gathered these shura and their miraculous abilities from across the land, regardless of race, and organized an imperial competition to crown the True Hero once and for all.

POWER RELATIONSHIPS




ROSCLAY THE ABSOLUTE
Knight Minia
Sponsor
ELEA THE RED TAG
KIA THE WORLD WORD
Elven Word Arts Master
Sponsor
HAADE THE FLASHPOINT
SOUJIROU THE WILLOW-SWORD
Blade Minia
Sponsor
YUCA THE HALATION GAOL
OZONEZMA THE CAPRICIOUS
Medic Chimera
UHAK THE SILENT
Oracle Ogre
Sponsor
NOFELT THE SOMBER
ZIGITA ZOGI THE THOUSANDTH
Tactician Goblin
Sponsor
DANT THE HEATH
SHALK THE SOUND SLICER
Spearhead Skeleton
Sponsor
HYAKKA THE HEAT
MELE THE HORIZON'S ROAR
Archer Gigant
Sponsor
CAYON THE

SIXWAYS EXHIBITION

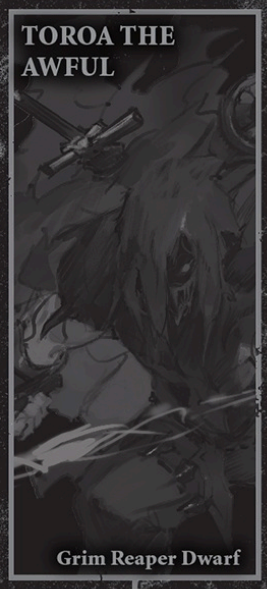
Sponsor
HARGHENT THE STILL



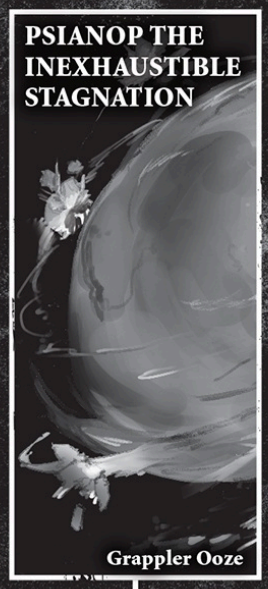
Sponsor
HIDOW THE CLAMP



Sponsor
MIZIAL THE IRON-PIERCING PLUMESHADE



Sponsor
QWELL THE WAX FLOWER



Sponsor
ENU THE DISTANT



Sponsor
KAETE THE ROUND



Sponsor
FLINSUDA THE



Sponsor
NOPHTOK THE



GLOSSARY

Word Arts

① Laws of the world that permit and establish phenomena and living creatures that physically shouldn't be able to exist, such as the construction of a gigant's body.
② Phenomenon that conveys the intentions of a speaker's words to the listener, regardless of the speaker's race or language.
③ Or the generic term for arts that utilize this phenomenon to distort natural phenomena via "requests" to a certain target.

Something much like what would be called magic. Force, Thermal, Craft, and Life Arts compose the four core groups, but there are some who can use arts outside of these four groups. While necessary to be familiarized with the target in order to utilize these arts, powerful Word Arts users are able to offset this requirement.

Force Arts

Arts that inflict directed power and speed, what is known as momentum, on a target.

Craft Arts

Arts that change a target's shape.

Thermal Arts

Arts that inflict undirected energy, such as heat, electrical current, and light, on a target.

Life Arts

Arts that change a target's nature.

Visitors

Those who possess abilities that deviate greatly from all common knowledge, and thus were transported to this world from another one known as the Beyond. Visitors are unable to use Word Arts.

Enchanted Sword • Magic Items

Swords and tools that possess potent abilities. Similar to visitors, due to their mighty power, there are some objects that were transported here from another world.

Aureatia Twenty-Nine Officials

The highest functionaries who govern Aureatia. Ministers are civil servants, while Generals are military officers.
There is no hierarchy-based seniority or rank among the Twenty-Nine Officials.

Self-Proclaimed Demon King

A generic term for "demonic monarch" not related to the One True King among the three kingdoms. There are some cases where even those who do not proclaim themselves as a monarch, but who wield great power to threaten Aureatia, are acknowledged as self-proclaimed demon kings by Aureatia and targeted for subjugation.

Sixways Exhibition

A tournament to determine the True Hero. The person who wins each one-on-one match and advances all the way through to the end will be named the True Hero.

Backing from a member of the Twenty-Nine Officials is required to enter the competition.

CONTENTS

TWELFTH VERSE: WORLD SUBJUGATION I

Chapter 1
Dissection

Chapter 2
Fallen Wings

Chapter 3
Climax

Chapter 4
Inebriated

Chapter 5
The Ruins of the Azwa
Great Belfry

Chapter 6
Aureatia Internal Affairs
Ministry Eastern Office

Chapter 7
Kadan Third District

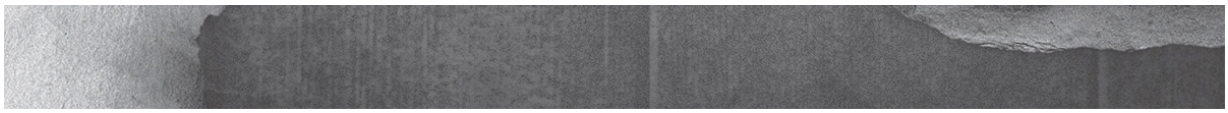
Chapter 8
Sixth Borough of Aureatia's
Northern Outer Ward

Chapter 9
Aureatia Northern Outer
Ward's Fifteenth City
Guard Post

Chapter 10
The Twelfth Match

Chapter 11
Death, Poetry, and
Cogwheels

Chapter 12
Demon King's Rebirth



AUREATIA
TWENTY-NINE OFFICIALS

First Minister
GRASSE THE FOUNDATION MAP
A man nearing old age.
Tasked with being the chairperson who presides over Twenty-Nine Officials' meetings.
Not belonging to any of the factions in the Sixways Exhibition and maintaining neutrality.

Second General
ROSCLAY THE ABSOLUTE
A man who garners absolute trust as a champion. Participates in the Sixways Exhibition, supporting himself. Despite guiding the Twenty-Nine Officials' majority faction to imminent victory, he was slain by Soujirou the Willow-Sword in the tenth match.

Third Minister
JELKY THE SWIFT INK
A bespectacled man with the air of a shrewd bureaucrat.
Planned the Sixways Exhibition.
Belongs to Rosclay's faction.

Fourth Minister
KAETE THE ROUND TABLE
Sponsoring Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge.
An insufferably caustic man.
Kiyazuna the Axle's former pupil.
On the lam from Aureatia, he now

Fifth Official
IRIOLDE THE ATYPICAL TOME
Old man, resembling a withered tree. Mastermind who controls Haade's military faction and a secret organization, the National Defense Research Institute, from the shadows. Attempted a coup d'état against Aureatia but was killed by Haade.

Sixth General
HARGHENT THE STILL
A man who yearns for authority despite being ridiculed for being incompetent. Not part of any faction. Killed his old friend-turned-self-proclaimed demon king, Alus. Former sponsor of Lucnoca the Winter.

Seventh Minister
FLINSUDA THE PORTENT
Corpulent woman adorned in gold and silver accessories.
Leads the medical division.
A pragmatist who only believes in the power of money.
Sponsoring Tu the Magic.

Eighth Minister
SHEANEK THE WORD INTERMEDIARY
A man who can decipher and give accounts in a variety of different scripts.
Acts in practice as First Minister Grasse the Foundation Map's Secretary.
Maintains neutrality just like Grasse.

Ninth General
YANIEGIZ THE CHISEL
A sinewy man with a snaggletooth.
Belongs to Rosclay's Faction.

Tenth General
QWELL THE WAX FLOWER
A woman with long bangs that hide her eyes. Sponsor for Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation. A dhampir who possessed powerful physical abilities, but was killed by Romzo the Star Map.

Eleventh Minister
NOPHTOK THE CREPUSCULE BELL
An elderly man with a gentle demeanor. Sponsor for Kuze the Passing Disaster. Head of the Order Division. Currently wanted by the Free City of Okafu.

Twelfth General
SABFOM THE WHITE WEAVE
A man who covers his face with an iron mask.
Previously crossed swords with self-proclaimed demon king Morio and is currently recuperating.

Thirteenth Minister
ENU THE DISTANT MIRROR
Expressionless man in a bowler hat. Betrays several camps—Aureatia, National Defense Research Institute, and Obsidian Eyes—to achieve his goal.
Currently working with Kuuro the Cautious to apprehend Linaris.

Fourteenth General
YUCA THE HALATION GAOL
A simple and honest man, round and plump. Doesn't have a shred of ambition. Head of Aureatia's Public Safety branch.
Sponsoring Ozonezma the

conspires with the Old Kingdoms Loyalists to recapture Mestelexil.

Capricious.

Fifteenth General
HAIZESTA THE GATHERING SPOT
A man in the prime of his life with a cynical smile. Possessed monstrous muscular strength. Secretly part of Kaete's faction, but was manipulated by Obsidian Eyes and killed.

Twentieth Minister
HIDOW THE CLAMP
A haughty son of a noble family and at the same time a popular, quick-witted man.
Sponsor for Alus the Star Runner.
Sponsoring Alus to ensure he doesn't win.

Twenty-Fifth General
CAYON THE THUNDERING
A one-armed man with a feminine speaking manner.
Sponsor for Mele the Horizon's Roar.

Sixteenth General
NOFELT THE SOMBER WIND
An abnormally tall man.
Sponsor for Uhak the Silent.
Originated from the same Order almshouse as Kuze. Killed by Kuze and Nastique.

Twenty-First General
TUTURI THE BLUE VIOLET FOAM
A woman with grizzled hair tied behind her head. Collaborator with Iriolde's coup d'état, and headed the operation to slay Lucnoca the Winter.

Twenty-Sixth Minister
MEEKA THE WHISPERED
A stern woman who gives a rigid and rectangular impression.
Acting as the adjudicator of the Sixways Exhibition.

Seventeenth Minister
ELEA THE RED TAG
A beautiful, young woman who walks a different path from her ancestral trade of sex work. Supervised Aureatia's intelligence apparatus.
Put to the sword for her acts of foul play during the Sixways Exhibition.

Twenty-Second General
MIZIAL THE IRON-PIERCING PLUMESHADE
A boy who became a member of the Twenty-Nine Officials at just sixteen years old. Sponsoring Toroa the Awful. Iriolde's camp imprisoned him, but Kuuro and Enu rescued him.

Twenty-Seventh General
HAADE THE FLASHPOINT
A man who sincerely loves war.
Sponsor for Soujirou the Willow-Sword. Secretly conspired with Rosclay to destroy Iriolde's faction from within.

Eighteenth Minister
QUEWAI THE MOON FRAGMENT
A young, gloomy man with outstanding computational abilities. Collaborator with Iriolde's coup d'état, but was killed by Haade.

Twenty-Third Official
VACANT SEAT
Previously the seat of Taren the Punished, a battle-hardened and fierce woman who led the New Principality of Lithia in seceding from Aureatia. However, it is currently empty following her secession and defection.

Twenty-Eighth Minister
ANTEL THE ALIGNMENT
A tan man wearing dark glasses. Belongs to Rosclay's faction.

Nineteenth Minister
HYAKKA THE HEAT HAZE
A small-statured man who supervises the agricultural division. Straining himself to become worthy of his position in the Twenty-Nine Officials.

Twenty-Fourth General
DANT THE HEATH FURROW
An exceedingly serious man.
Part of the Queen's faction—and harbors ill feelings toward Rosclay's faction.
Sponsoring Zigita Zogi the

Twenty-Ninth Official
VACANT SEAT

Sponsoring Snaik the Sound Slicer.

Thousandth.



ISHURA

Keiso

ILLUSTRATION BY Kureta

Twelfth Verse:

WORLD SUBJUGATION I



CHAPTER 1 Dissection

The false heroes must be eliminated.

Having returned from the New Continent and come to this loathsome land once more, Ozonezma the Capricious entered the Sixways Exhibition arena with this single-minded purpose.

He knew that the True Hero who defeated the Demon King did exist. As the only one who knew the truth, Ozonezma needed to bring ruin to all those claiming to be heroes, save for the True Hero himself.

It was only Cetera the External of the Final Party who deserved such honor and glory, and Ozonezma firmly believed that this lone fact would save Olukt the Drifting Compass Needle's soul.

Everything about this driving impulse was unhinged.

After suffering defeat in his deadly duel with Soujirou the Willow-Sword, Ozonezma finally realized that he had been lost to madness from the very beginning.

The Demon King's arm that dwelled within Ozonezma was nothing more than a severed limb, but its very existence had been more than enough to corrode his sanity.

Revealing the truth was the most terrifying act of all.

The True Demon King was a visitor, called to this world by the Wordmaker, while the True Hero was little more than a machine, possessing no valor or purpose of his own. That was the truth.

If this truth spread across the world, where the terror from the Demon King's age remained and the embers of war still smoldered, everything that Olukt risked his life to protect would go up in flames. What Olukt had wanted was not sobering truth, but peace that delivered all from fear.

Ozonezma had been plunging ahead to an end result completely opposite his own wishes.

Right now, there were most likely three others besides Ozonezma who knew, and could speak on, the truth of the True Demon King. Hiroto the Paradox. Yukiharu the Twilight Diver. Morio the Sentinel.

Each of them were visitors and part of the same camp Ozonezma had previously associated with.

Hiroto the Paradox and Morio the Sentinel, both leading their respective nations, may not have openly spread this truth themselves, as it would destroy both minian and goblin society.

But what about the journalist, Yukiharu the Twilight Diver?

Ozonezma determined he posed more than enough of a threat.

In fact, Yukiharu had made contact with many powerful people during the Sixways Exhibition and was selling them all vital secrets. There was a chance he had already spoken to someone about the existence of Cetera the External.

Whether it was the result of dealing in such information, or because he wanted to use it as a stepping stone to obtain new information, Yukiharu the Twilight Diver used the large-scale coup to sneak into the National Defense Research Institute.

Aureatia's commission to assassinate Yukiharu, having seen through his movements, was simply to erase from the playing field a journalist who knew too many inconvenient secrets and nothing more. This was most likely done at the behest of Rosclay the Absolute. They had aimed for the moment when defenseless Yukiharu could be caught without a shadow of a doubt. Even if Ozonezma hadn't accepted the mission, someone else would have come to kill Yukiharu.

Nevertheless, it fell to Ozonezma to kill him.

If he did, there would be no risk of the truth leaking any further. He could perform the deed with absolute certainty.

Though it was only for a brief period of time, the job had entailed killing a comrade who had belonged to the Gray-Haired Child's camp, just like Ozonezma.

Perhaps he was simply repeating what he had always done up until now.

Ozonezma the Capricious, just as his second name implied, repeatedly betrayed the side he was on and had wandered through

several camps by now. Perhaps, being a chimera, it was impossible for not only his physical body to maintain consistency, but his mind and heart, as well.

He needed to make amends for his own mistake—allowing his guilt for slaying countless champions at Izick the Chromatic's command to spur him to join the Final Party's journey, only to then betray them.

Meanwhile, in the present, he was in the Tim Great Canal harbor, confronting a bizarre and grotesque wurm.

YUKIHARU THE TWILIGHT DIVER HAS BEEN DEALT WITH. HIS WOODEN BOX CONTAINED NO LIVING ORGANISM, EITHER… IF THE CONTENTS HAD BEEN PAPER OR SOME TYPE OF MECHANICAL RECORDING DEVICE, THEY WOULD HAVE NEEDED TO BE DISPOSED OF AS WELL, BUT…

The sun loomed high overhead. A majority of the harbor facilities were destroyed, and water was streaming into the cracked pavement beneath his feet.

This was the result of the wurm's colossal body ravaging the land.

From over fifteen meters up in the air, a row of eyes keenly glimmered down on Ozonezma.

…THIS ENEMY WILL HAVE TO COME FIRST.

Ozonezma, with his eight-legged, wolflike form, possessed an irregularly large frame compared to a minia, but the building-like scale of wurms was beyond compare.

A fight with a wurm was itself almost equal to a disaster in scale. To ensure the Aureatian infiltration unit wasn't caught up in it, Ozonezma had needed to move the battlefield a considerable distance away from the research building.

"THIS IS NOT A HEARTLESS CONSTRUCT WEAPON."

He understood this much from fewer than three clashes back and forth.

Ozonezma put away the countless arms he'd deployed from his back. He had already clearly determined that against this wurm, his scalpel-throwing attacks wouldn't prove lethal. He couldn't afford to

turn back for the infiltration unit.

As the wurm raised its head, Ozonezma saw several penetration scars in the area around its vital organs, seven in total. Ozonezma's scalpel throwing, repeatedly improved and iterated on, boasted enough stopping power to easily penetrate the wurm's scales, its organic armor plating said to be second only to dragon scale.

"A PLANT PARASITE INFESTS ITS BODY. THE INTERNAL ORGANS THEMSELVES AREN'T FUNCTIONING AT ALL."

"You haven't even touched me…"

The wurm spoke for the first time.

At that same moment, the wurm's tail attack passed through with almost supersonic speeds, but Ozonezma evaded.

He landed perpendicularly onto a half-destroyed warehouse wall. The horribly wide-reaching tail swipe flattened the entire warehouse, but Ozonezma kicked off the wall and landed in a space the attack didn't reach.

This was not just a wurm, nor a revenant. It was some unknown being.

"And you still understand that much? Not only that, but those mere knife tosses of yours hit harder than a cannon."

The wurm wasn't attempting to make conversation. Like Ozonezma, it appeared to be verbalizing its foe's capabilities to analyze them.

IF THE PARASITIC PLANT IS THE ACTUAL BODY, THEN I NEED TO DESTROY ITS LOCOMOTIVE CENTER, NOT THE INTERNAL ORGANS.

Right in the middle of his series of dodges, Ozonezma took a new weapon in his hand. A piece of steel from a warehouse caught up in the destruction. Grabbing it with four of the arms stretching out from his back, he readied it like a massive blunt weapon.

"…!"

Appearing to pick on Ozonezma's intentions, the wurm moved its head in the opposite direction, away from its face-to-face position, to escape.

All too slow. With a single leap, Ozonezma got in range of the wurm's head, fifteen meters up in the air.

"*GRAHK*!"

A leap.

The wurm, stopping its evasion, opened its mouth wide.

It didn't actually intercept the attack. Perhaps its massive frame made it misjudge the distance.

Ozonezma's perfect chance. In midair, he then…failed to bring down the steel beam.

He had already stopped brandishing it. He shrunk his body into a ball. From there, he kicked the steel beam away from himself. Rotating from the recoil, he landed back down, even farther away from the wurm.

It had been only moments before he'd entered the effective range of the teeming branches stretching out from inside the wurm's maw.

"I KNEW IT."

The branches, as fast as spear thrusts, tried to catch Ozonezma.

Ozonezma murmured as he chopped them down with his scalpels.

"YOU PURPOSEFULLY LURED ME INTO JUMPING TOWARD YOUR HEAD. YOU WERE NOT AIMING TO DESTROY ME BUT FOCUSED SOLELY ON PENETRATING ME WITH YOUR BRANCHES."

It had been no coincidence that the wurm had stopped moving with its head reared. To make Ozonezma focus his sights on his motionless head, it had intentionally failed to counter with its fangs. Then, it hoped to pierce Ozonezma with the densest branch cluster it could muster from inside its wide-open mouth. This was the wurm's strategy.

Once he understood it, Ozonezma could deal with it. His jump from the very start had been a feint. The purpose of the steel beam from the beginning hadn't been as a weapon, but as necessary footing to make an abrupt trajectory shift in the air.

The wurm had come to a standstill.

"*Hraungh, ngh*."

"I PIERCED YOUR MOTOR NERVES."

Back on the ground, Ozonezma spoke as if heaving a sigh.

The colossal wurm could no longer maintain its posture and

began to slide down into the canal.

As long as Ozonezma understood the moment when the wurm's mouth would open, destroying its cranium wasn't even necessary.

The number of moves he had at his disposable was simply different. For Ozonezma, using one of his innumerable arms to precisely launch a scalpel while using four arms to ready the steel beam was a simple task.

"You didn't just run…but attacked…all in that single move…"

"IT WAS A SPLENDID EFFORT TO BUY TIME."

Ozonezma looked in the opposite direction of the wurm, to the research building.

The destroyed terrain and buildings carved up during the fight stretched out like a straight pathway in front of him, but from afar, its starting point—the camouflaged National Research Defense Institute facility—appeared to be a commonplace harborside warehouse.

This operation targeted two individuals for destruction: the visitor journalist Yukiharu the Twilight Driver and the former self-proclaimed demon king, Viga the Clamor. Ozonezma's mark, Yukiharu, had already been finished off by Aureatia's infiltration squad in the initial engagement. While he drew the wurm away, the squad should have raided the facility to take down Viga.

As long as there was the risk that Yukiharu had already made contact with Viga, they needed to take her down for good, too.

Right as he went to rush to the research building, he stopped.

"I SEE."

A harsh light illuminated Ozonezma, originating from the sea surface.

"I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THEY DID NOT INTEND TO GIVE ME ANY ROOM TO RETURN AND HELP."

A craft golem hovered over the water surface, loudly beating its wings in an intense rotation.

Fungi formed in a hideously colored sporocarp, bubbling up from the gaps in the debris.

A swarm of revenants, seemingly made with a mix of minian and wyvern body parts, rose up.

"…IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE TO ME, BUT…"

From Ozonezma's back sprouted a wriggling mass of pale, dead arms.

"…IS THIS EVERYONE, THEN?"

◆

While Ozonezma was engaging the wurm, Aureatia's unit breached the research building. The National Defense Research Institute was a den of self-proclaimed demon kings. They had anticipated that some number of bioorganic weapons would intercept them.

Furthermore, they were able to surmise, to some extent, the threat level of a construct from their outward appearance. The mightier the construct—most of the time—the more combat-oriented they looked.

However, this tendency didn't hold true for all examples. There were exceptions.

One such exception was the young girl the infiltration unit encountered upon breaking into Viga the Clamor's laboratory.

The girl atop the operating table was naked. She wasn't equipped with any armaments whatsoever, but…

"Group One, you're on Viga the Clamor! Group Two, handle this new threat!"

The soldiers immediately determined she was one of these exceptions.

Despite having the appearance of a young girl, and even if they couldn't intuit the threat she posed, this was what they were supposed to do.

Musket gunshots echoed in continuous succession. Then, ricochet sounds. Their line of fire at Viga the Clamor, standing beside the operating table, had been obstructed at some point by the very same table, now tipped on its side.

The girl who should have been standing on the table had disappeared from the soldiers' sights. She had leg strength that was able to send the steel operating table flying with a single kick.

"The enemy's above—"

The only soldier who kept a visual on the girl's abnormal mobility had his throat slit right as he informed his comrades. Fresh blood spurted out. The girl, dropping into the middle of their defensive formation from the ceiling, extended the nerve fibers coming out of her back in a radial pattern and stabbed all the men around her.

None present had been able to witness the motion.

"*Hee-hee*."

The girl giggled.

"*Grgle!*"

"*Eaaugh!*"

Controlled by the nerves linking them, the Group Two soldiers' arms all reacted as if they were creatures with minds of their own.

Their fingers pulled triggers, counter to their own will, and shot down their comrades.

"…Damn you!"

By the time one of the Group One soldiers realized the situation and drew his short sword, the girl's finger had pierced through his gut.

Slicing upward at an angle with her other hand, she cut out another soldier's eyeball, smoother than any sword could.

Soon after, the remaining soldiers were wiped out by their comrades, still propelled by the nerve fibers even in death…

"V-Vortical Stampede…!"

—The captain of Group Two groaned his last words on his knees, his innards spilling out from his gut.

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede.

It was the name of the wickedest living weapon of them all, who, in the age of the Demon King, invaded Aureatia alone and successfully wiped out an entire Aureatian field army.

Neither the fact she had secretly been apprehended by Aureatia and deployed in the Lithia War, nor the fact that Dakai the Magpie had killed her in secret, were known to any of the men present.

Now, she had come back to life.

◆

"*Hee-hee*. Hmm… I forgot quite a lot about how to move, since I was a head for so long."

She wiped the soldiers' blood splattered on her chest and stomach with her finger.

On her pale, soft skin remained a faint red line.

Nihilo's naked body looked like a single flower, blossoming from a ground paved in blood and viscera.

"Good thing I made it in time, wouldn't you say, *Mom*?"





Her address was dripping full of sarcasm, instead of deep affection.

While Nihilo didn't loathe Viga for creating her, she had no respect for her, either.

Viga the Clamor was far too removed from the minian races. Almost certainly even more so than Nihilo herself, naturally born to be a weapon.

"Yup. You were a huge help there!"

Viga said with a mellow smile, paying no mind to the appalling scene in front of her.

She was a tall woman with long greenish-gray hair.

"In the end, you really are my one true masterpiece, Nihilo."

"Your masterpiece, hmm?"

Nihilo touched the suture mark that extended in a line around her neck. Blood seeped slightly from the scar.

When she was just a head, she was burdened with constricting and contracting a frog's stomach with her nerve tendrils to talk, but being a revenant, there wasn't any need to rigorously connect the organic nerves and blood vessels together.

Nevertheless, it was makeshift stitchwork, with only a fifty-fifty chance of being able to hold out through an intense combat scenario.

Yukiharu had brought Nihilo's neck all the way to Viga's side. However, without the wurm's sudden interjection, Viga would have likely been disposed of by Ozonezma as well, without ever having the chance to revive Nihilo like this.

"How does your new body feel? I'd think that, functionally speaking, it'd be far superior to your previous body."

"Not quite a minia's body, is it? Sorta feels like a vampire."

While the body below her neck was somewhat different from what it had been previously, the spine and the nerve tendrils extending out from them appeared to have been transplanted from her previous body. Through Viga's personal stitching work, Nihilo had quickly regained her bodily functions.

Even Nihilo's own creator Viga wouldn't have been able to conveniently grab a body with such an easy adjustment period out

of thin air. The body, from the very beginning, had been prepared with the intention of sewing Nihilo's head to it.

"You knew I wasn't dead, huh?"

"Of course. Helneten's carcass was inspected by yours truly. But then, I seriously doubt any of Aureatia's Word Arts casters understood that the shared curse was still unbroken."

"…Did you know Yukiharu was coming, too?"

"…"

"All Yukiharu was thinking about was investigating the National Defense Research Institute when he forced his way in here. That's just how he was, really."

He wanted to find the truth of his "story" that could move the hearts of the people.

The words had been said from the heart, there was no doubt about it.

Despite that, he had brought Nihilo inside the institute with him, downright forcing her to come along on his dangerous story-gathering mission.

Maybe part of his purpose had been to return Nihilo's body back here.

"…Yukiharu."

Yukiharu remained collapsed on the floor, completely motionless.

He had been that way even after Viga finished treating Nihilo.

"Far too late for him."

Viga cordially declared.

She was almost maddeningly calm.

"There's no Life Arts caster out there who can bring the dead back to life."

"I know, I know… Still, he and I, we made a pretty good team…"

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede was a weapon, far removed from the regular minian races.

Even though she tried to conduct herself like a minian, she didn't feel any sadness when she witnessed a death right before her eyes. Nihilo's personality was little more than an incidental afterthought to her function as a weapon, and she was truly unable to imagine what those who weren't like her thought or how they lived their lives.

Yukiharu the Twilight Diver was the complete opposite of Nihilo, who had longed to conduct herself like a minian despite not being one herself. Yukiharu was a *monster* in minian skin—the person who had gone around with Nihilo the Vortical Stampede the longest while she was rendered unable to function as a murderous weapon.

"…It is what it is, though."

"You're right, I waited for him to deliver your head to me. I got the information from a collaborator of mine, Enu the Distant Mirror."

"Enu? The one on the Twenty-Nine Officials?"

He was Aureatia's Thirteenth Minister, secretly connected to the National Defense Research Institute.

In the midst of gathering material on the Institute, Yukiharu had made contact with Fifteenth General Haizesta just once and informed him about the suspicions surrounding Enu. After that, Haizesta had been erased while following Enu's trail.

Through Enu, Viga had learned of Yukiharu's visit—in which case…

Yukiharu made contact with Enu without me knowing. Enu then told Yukiharu about the National Defense Research Institute's location. If there had been someone to act as an intermediatory between the unrelated men, then…

"For now, let's escape from this siege, shall we?"

It appeared Viga had already finished preparing for their departure.

She let three frightening revenants, who appeared to be minia crossed with amphibians, out of their cages.

They were weapons meant to charge into the Aureatian forces and buy the two of them time to escape.

A single glance made it clear that no consideration had been given to their barest minimum level of life-support functionality.

"Did you revive me for that, too?"

"Yes."

Nihilo had nothing resembling love or affection for the woman she could call her parent.

Given that she was a revenant of Viga's creation, she couldn't disobey her. However…

"As a readily controllable weapon, Vikeon may have been a wonderful revenant, but… Still, he was nothing compared to my Nihilo and Helneten. Instead of creating a new revenant, it really is much better to repair the one that already achieved such a high level of perfection, don't you think?"

"…"

Nihilo was not a soulless construct merely forced to labor. She possessed a unique heart capable of understanding Word Arts.

If she had a minian body and was capable of the same line of thought as a minia, would it be possible for her to lead a minian existence, completely divorced from battle and combat?

Minian or weapon?

When she walked, the soles of her feet pulled up strings of blood and sinew from the Aureatian soldiers' corpses.

So long as Nihilo had freedom, she would kill like this without feeling any guilt for her actions.

Weapon or minian? No matter how much she struggled, it was perfectly clear where between the two Nihilo's true nature lied.

Thus, Nihilo believed the motive behind her fruitless endeavor stemmed from nothing more than her curiosity toward acting against her own nature—like a child trying to see how long they can go without breathing for fun.

"…Fine, then. I wouldn't mind protecting you for just a little bit longer, Mom."

Nihilo replied with a smile similar to her creators', the true intentions hidden behind it an enigma.

It wasn't that she had decided to battle as Viga's weapon.

She believed that she needed to fight against Aureatia.

For now, joining Mom's plan here is totally fine. I mean, Aureatia are the ones who killed Yukiharu. Besides…

She passed her pale, lithe arms through the laboratory's plain patient's gown.

A minian life. Enrollment in school.

…I need to make sure Hidow keeps his promise, too.

CHAPTER 2 Fallen Wings

While it was the brightest light of civilization and the most developed nation across the land, not all of Aureatia consisted of busy city streets.

Districts that had purposefully preserved nature and the scenery of the Central Kingdom were scattered about its borders. The forested district where, during the chaotic coup, the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists fanned out their forces, was one such example.

This forest, that the citizens of Aureatia didn't even pay a second thought to, was the basepoint for Obsidian Eyes.

It was a dark forest, like the depths of the ocean, the overgrown leaves in the canopy leaving no gaps for sunlight to filter through.

"Kiyazuna's golems will be in charge of combat and reconnaissance."

Caneeya the Fruit Trimming declared with a resounding voice.

The woman had a large physique, on par with a male dwarf. Her face seemed to always be filled with a profound smile.

"The enemy force is estimated to consist of a vampire parent unit and the corpses under their control, but…it's very likely that their route of infection is completely different from anything we currently know of. Thus, we will keep our distance as we continue to enclose the target and use bows, guns, and golem attacks to kill each corpse we lure out one by one."

In a position slightly removed from this group of Old Kingdoms' Loyalists, Kaete the Round Table has just finished his final adjustments on a golem. For this work, he was covered from head to toe in light gray protective gear.

Though his harsh temperament often made him come off as a military officer, as the former Fourth Minister in charge of the Industrial Ministry, Kaete was well-versed in Craft Arts and

mechanical engineering.

Utter fools.

That was all he thought of Caneeya and the rest of the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists.

More than half of the explanation about their operation went in one ear and out the other. There was no point in listening to it.

As if a rabble of pissants like yourselves can win with those hackneyed tactics.

If Obsidian Eyes only consisted of simple, well-trained soldiers, suppression by sheer force of numbers may have been possible. The golem troops that Kiyazuna shared with them had the capabilities for that.

However, when Kaete had previously crossed swords with Obsidian Eyes, he had witnessed the combat abilities of Yakrai the Tower for himself. He was a powerful fighter on the same level, or perhaps even stronger, than the military officers of the Twenty-Nine Officials. Did they have many others who possessed such skills, and what were their methods of attack? Obsidian Eyes' overall fighting strength was impossible to estimate.

—Above all else though, Obsidian Eyes currently had Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge with them.

The entire reason behind Kaete and Kiyazuna's deception—using false information to lead the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists into a clash against Obsidian Eyes—was to recapture Mestelexil.

No matter how many soldiers encircled their basepoint, if Mestelexil was mobilized, he alone would annihilate their entire force. Whether it was the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists or the Aureatian regular army with superior numbers and equipment, it wasn't any different to Mestelexil.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean the loyalists were entirely meaningless.

"We're gonna drive the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists forward and *lure Mestelexil out to the front lines*. Got it?"

The old woman beside him, Kiyazuna the Axle, murmured. She was monitoring the locator tracking Mestelexil's position, and just like Kaete, had her tiny frame covered in protective gear from head

to toe.

"If things go south, you better put your life on the line, too."

"I don't need you to tell me that! We need to separate Mestelexil from the parent vampire before we can get anywhere, whether we're trying to interfere with Mestelexil's takeover or make those Old Kingdoms' Loyalists dispose of the parent unit for us."

While they had greatly weakened as an organization, the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists were a rebel army who traced their lineage back to the Central Kingdom Imperial Army. One of their advantages was that they weren't a riotous mob but a regimented military force.

Even assuming the agents of Obsidian Eyes did possess extraordinary fighting strength, as long as they were taking on an armed military host, individual strength alone would not save them from any losses altogether. At some point, or potentially right from the get-go, Obsidian Eyes would need to bring Mestelexil to the front lines.

"Grams."

The forest was deathly still. Not the slightest buzzing insect or chirping bird could be heard, and though it was still daytime, the area was as dark as in the evening.

"You think the enemy is watching us?"

Kaete muffled his voice and asked.

At this point in the game, it wasn't about whether or not they were being watched.

Obsidian Eyes was a spy guild that had acted behind the scenes all through the warring upheaval of the True Demon King's age. If their true identity was a vampiric military force, then it was also possible for them to infiltrate every single major power with corpsified grunts. It was hard to think that the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists' assault strategy hadn't been leaked to their foe.

"No clue. Ain't change much either way, yeah?" Kiyazuna replied, showing very little interest in the topic.

"Both me and you kept our nerves on edge while we were prepping, right? They never barged in during all that, so either they were never looking, or they ran away. Only other possibility's they got a trap set up that'll be able to crush us good when we attack…

That's 'bout it."

"Obsidian Eyes has absolutely nothing to benefit from taking the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists head-on. Assuming their goal's to detect the attack beforehand and annihilate the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists before they make their move, then the trump card they left back at the manor's got to be Mestelexil…"

"'N that case, it was worth egging on those Old Kingdom idiots, right? What's important is that Mestelexil's here. If Obsidian Eyes turned tail a long time ago, we don't even need to do any separating, since Mestelexil will be there waiting for us."

It was the sort of odd situation where a trap was actually *more* convenient for them.

Unfortunately, even when assuming that all other sources of fighting strength they possessed had left the scene, Mestelexil still posed a threat powerful enough to outstrip the army of an entire nation.

"Any chance of a missile attack?"

"Nah. If Mestelexil was planning that, they never woulda been any radar blip in the first place. Best way to attack us with missiles woulda been to fire on us from outta our range."

"Obsidian Eyes must not want to get their basepoint involved in a struggle and cause any obvious damage, then… Hard to believe some vampire would have the strategic judgment to make that call, though."

The methods of intercepting them with Mestelexil while also being able to quietly annihilate the whole force were limited.

"That'd explain this protective gear, then. Their trick of choice has to be an immediately effective nerve gas."

Kiyazuna flashed a wicked smile underneath her resin covering.

"Sure is. Me, I'd go with a G-agent like sarin or soman. Got the power to clean up a whole slew of bastards at once, and in a natural environment like this, it'll only take about two odd days to break down. Kill the enemy dead, and keep the basepoint safe… In these types of situations, chemical weapons are Mestelexil's most efficient means of attack."

"Hmph. So long and short of it is, these Old Kingdoms louts are

our canaries in the coal mine."

The protective gear they were draped in had been specially made with Kiyazuna's Craft Arts. The Old Kingdoms' Loyalists hadn't gotten any explanation whatsoever. For Kaete and Kiyazuna, the attack on the manor being called off with the threat of chemical weapons would have been the most inconvenient development of all.

Should nerve gas get used, their deaths would serve as a forewarning.

Go ahead and launch your ignorant little attack, you cannon fodder.

Kiyazuna's golems advanced through the forest without making a sound.

With a bottom half like an insect, their multiple legs gave them greater mobility and handling performance than even well-trained soldiers.

The four arms folded inside their upper bodies were fitted with a shield and a blade of rigid composite material.

Behind them, lining up with bows and guns, the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists' fighting force closed in the circle surrounding the target, too.

"Dammit, Mestelexil's stopped moving altogether."

The instrument in Kiyazuna's hand was a locator with a display, tracking Mestelexil's position. The lit-up dot wasn't moving.

"*Grahak!*"

It may have been a gut instinct cultivated from his combat experience that told Kaete this quiet exhale he heard was, in fact, a soldier's dying gasps. He immediately turned his guard in that direction.

The dense foliage obstructed his view, and he couldn't see from his position if anyone had collapsed.

There was no gunshot, or even an impact sound from the attack. Kaete figured that most of the soldiers hadn't even noticed that one of their own had just fallen to the ground.

"The enemy's—"

Another soldier, somewhere in the forest, died before he could finish his sentence.

Imbecile. At least shout out the enemy's method of attack before you kick the bucket!

They were under attack.

With frightening silence, it had already begun.

"Get back, Grams."

"Don't you tell me what to do."

It wasn't Mestelexil. This was clearly Obsidian Eyes' handiwork.

In which case, there must have been agents lying in ambush in this forest, just like Mestelexil. This implied that despite possessing an ultimate weapon in Mestelexil, there was something that necessitated defending the manor without relying on chemical weapons…

Kaete caught a silver flash of light through the air somewhere.

It swiftly traced an arc through the sky.

"……!"

He immediately pulled his head back and flew into the shade of the trees. He was too late.

The flying blade grazed the top of his shoulder as it flew by.

"Shit, my protective gear's been cut into!"

"Don't get yer panties in a bunch, Kaete, it's pathetic! A chakram… It's the same marksman that tried to off us before!"

Kaete and Kiyazuna may not had known his name, but they had fought against this chakram-wielding marksman—Wieze the Variation—once before, after losing the sixth match. At the time, they'd beat back Yakrai the Tower, acting as the vanguard, and narrowly managed to escape, but…

"Bastard doesn't know when to quit!"

The chakram flittered, leaving nothing behind but the sound of leaf, branch, and flesh being sliced in its wake.

This marksman snuck into the gaps and blind spots in their formation and threw his chakrams.

Though it seemed almost presumptuous to call this a sniper attack, with the tactics running counter to the advances of the era, the chakrams and their curved trajectory would travel around any obstacles to reach their target. That made it extremely difficult to pin down the sniper's position from their flight path.

"*Urnk!*"

Not another one!

The third dying gasp most likely hadn't come from the third victim. There had to be even more casualties who died instantly without letting out a cry or dying groan.

Long-range attacks with a chakram, of course, didn't produce any gunshots, either.

While he had identified the enemy's method of attack, Kaete didn't bother conveying it to the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist troops. The enemy was plainly prioritizing anyone who said a word.

Moreover, if Kaete did shout now, it would likely only have the opposite effect.

"Sniper! We're under attack!"

"Two've been killed! Their throats and heads are cut open!"

Delayed cries rang out throughout the forest.

It was clear the regulated paces from before were in chaos, and voices crying out in confusion, anger, and fear at the already numerous casualties continued to spread.

This chakram marksman can pull something like this *off? He couldn't have created this situation without the skills to kill several far-away targets almost simultaneously while ensuring their foe never caught on*.

After discovering victims cut down by multiple simultaneous attacks in several places, no single person was able to determine which reports were correct, or which were the most recent. The soldiers who shouted about the crisis moments ago were being slain, one after another.

There began to be soldiers who decided that, faced with this unknown attack, the best course of action was to hide.

Confronted with the fear of this silent sniper attack, the regulated troops fell into disarray.

"…The enemy's moving through the treetops."

Kaete lowered his voice, passing the information to Kiyazuna alone.

"It's the only position that would allow them to get multiple targets in range across such a complex terrain. You have a way to

shoot them down, right?"

"Obviously ain't happening if we can't even see the bastard. 'Sides, if we're in a spot to fire at 'em from our position, that'll mean we're in their line of fire. You sayin' yer confident enough to try to pick off a marksman that skilled without getting cut down first, eh?!"

"Dammit! Even still…"

Kaete had a terrible premonition. Peering through his monocular sight, he looked at the situation around the black manor far in the distance.

Though the ranged unit taking up the rear had fallen into disarray, the golem force charging forward on the front lines should have already broken into the manor itself by now. If the enemy only came at them with this sniper attack, it shouldn't have affected the golem's advance whatsoever—the golems wouldn't be fearful of such an attack, and their armor wouldn't easily been harmed by the chakram projectiles.

However, Kaete couldn't see any signs that the manor was currently under attack.

The golems were being kept in check by some other unknown means.

"We're in trouble."

The words weren't regarding the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist army's continued destruction.

Their main target, Mestelexil, had yet to appear.

◆

As the panic spread, the commander of the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists, Caneeya the Fruit Trimming, issued the most levelheaded decision.

She turned not toward the forest, with its more abundant cover, but to the small hilltop that gave the best sightlines of the manor and the surrounding trees.

"Shield troops, circle up!"

Nine shield troops, along with the golems accompanying them, encircled the area and created a safe zone.

The composite plated shields created from Kiyazuna's Craft Arts were equipped with rigid defenses against head-on attacks, while also being light enough to be handled with ease.

"All troops, halt the advance and reorganize into formation! The marksman is moving through the treetops! Do your utmost to shield your head from above and keep a sharp eye on the surroundings!"

The voice from Caneeya's massive body reverberated well through the dense forest.

The very act of exposing herself as the commanding officer on open terrain was bait to focus the marksman's attention on herself. Still keeping a part of her mind cool and levelheaded, she prepared for the assault.

…Figured our foe wasn't naïve enough to get lured out by this. Would've been perfect if they panicked and tried to snipe at us before we could solidify our defenses.

She had purposefully created an opening in the shield-troop formation.

To entice the marksman, given their confidence in their long-ranged skills, using that gap to target the commanding officer. If she could just pinpoint their location, then Caneeya could use her herculean strength to swing her thick hatchet and knock the projectiles out of the air.

After the defensive formation was complete and free of any openings, Caneeya twirled her axe and put it away on her hip.

Taking out the radzio she carried with her, she called out.

"Kiyazuna the Axle. I ask you to call the golems on the front lines back to support the rear guards."

<Bah! What's backin' off the offensive gonna do for us? One or two of ya get shot down and now you're pissing in yer pants, huh?>

"That's not it. You must not be able to see it from your position. Charging heedlessly forward will—"

A shrill explosion rocked the forest trees.

Caneeya could tell it was the result of one soldier charging forward in a panic.

"—end with massive losses. There are threads stretched out in a web between the trees. We've sighted several pieces of water-

resistant fabric that are likely wrapped around explosives. Use the golems to dispose of them."

<Hmph, must be those "booby traps" they talk about in the Beyond. Sure are a band of has-been vermin, but guess it's still the *Obsidian Eyes' basepoint. 'Course the bastards would pull something like that.>*

"There is one other factor I would like to verify by mobilizing the golems. The golems in the vanguard may have stopped moving entirely. While it may not be an explosion, it could be something to tangle up their limbs and—"

Something soft gently caressed Caneeya's shoulder.

A terrifying chill shot through her nerves. Ducking her head was almost entirely a reflexive reaction from her spine.

There was a loud *crack* that resounded directly above her head.

Caneeya's right ear, and everything above the neck of the soldier standing on guard in front of her, was cut off.

From where?

The question came to her first, along with a sense of danger.

They were standing on high ground, with every direction defended by shields. No matter what type of high-angle firing might've been used, they were being attacked in a space that was impossible to reach via thrown projectile.

Faster than the decapitated soldier could collapse to the earth, she felt another thing touch the top of her head. A light, invisible… thread.

"……!"

Caneeya pulled in the soldier's corpse in front of her and protected herself by crawling beneath him.

Another violent slicing attack ripped through the air and a stalwart soldier's body was ripped into six pieces like they were just a sack of blood and guts.

Together with some number of the other soldiers still able to move, Caneeya went prone on the ground, sliding down the hill to escape. Grass and bits of earth slipped into her mouth. She didn't think it was unsightly at all.

"Now, now, now, Caneeya the Fruit Trimming, that will simply not

do!”

The voice sounded pleased and terribly out of place on the gruesome battlefield.

The woman laughed with cheer.

“*Ahyah-hyah-hyah-hyah!* If you are so eager to invade with your soldiers from the Old Kingdom, you’ll find the royal palace is that way. Getting yourself lost will ruin this whole little excursion of yours!”

“Zeljirga the Abyss Web…!”

It was a zmeu in a vibrant orange harlequin outfit, with a thin body like that of a gecko.

Any and all news or information on her had ceased altogether ever since she claimed victory over Mestelexil in the sixth match. Zeljirga the Abyss Web, despite still being counted among the hero candidates, hadn’t shown herself anywhere and didn’t make any moves at all. She no longer performed her craft in front of the citizenry, and even the raid by Alus the Star Runner came and went without her acting at all.

Her sponsor, Enu the Distant Mirror, had gone missing as well. In which case, was there actually anyone on the Twenty-Nine Officials who was capable of keeping precise track of Zeljirga’s recent activity?

So she never broke away from Obsidian Eyes, after all.

The thread sensation Caneeya felt had come from the tarantula cutting threads that Zeljirga manipulated.

The warp threads of tarantula nests boasted a tenacity that no ogre nor any degree of herculean strength could cut, and their weft threads had a keen profile capable of slicing through wyverns, bones and all.

No matter how strong their target’s defenses, she could cast them from above…or weave them through any gaps, instantly pulling them tight to cleave through her opponent. She utilized such a unique form of attack, all while never giving her presence away to her foe until this very moment, despite her blindly conspicuous clown getup.

“…You damn monster.”

They weren't only losing soldiers, but their golem numbers as well. It was impossible to return to the top of the hill to confirm the situation, but the slicing attack right now must have either dissected them entirely or restrained them. It was clear that Zeljirga's threads were the entire reason why the golems had stopped their advance forward, too.

Caneeya immediately made her decision in order to clear an escape route for them all.

She sent one of the multilegged golems accompanying her flying straight ahead into the forest.

It got entwined in the threads laid out between the trees, tumbled, and activated the bomb trap.

"Onward!"

Giving a brief command to the soldiers, she ran, dashing through the blast wave.

Through the cloud of dust and smoke blocking her line of sight, something passed right next to Caneeya. A chakram.

"*Augh!*"

A soldier's arm had been sliced off.

The shield—

In a moment's judgment, she grabbed the shield out of midair, the soldier's severed arm still gripping it tightly.

Right as she readied it, she felt an impact through the cloud of dust. A second thrown chakram dug halfway into the composite-plated shield.

The golem that remained behind her was moving to intercept Zeljirga. Cutting threads flew past each other. A supersonic explosive cracked in the air, and a sturdy golem limb was sent flying.

One of the threads touched Caneeya's flank and cut right through her armor, rending skin and fat.

Drawing on all her physical fitness, she jumped between a gap in the complicated rock crag. Curling herself up, she readied her shield.

Everything had happened in the span of an instant following their encounter, but it was clear that several miracles had occurred through it all.

It was a hellish clash.

"Obsidian Eyes… A mere two of them can wield this much fighting power?!"

The shield soldiers accompanying her had dwindled down to just three.

Caneeya had no grasp of who had died or at what point. If she spared a single second to ponder such things, Caneeya herself would've died with them.

"Commander Caneeya, what do we do?!"

One of the shield soldiers hiding in the same rock shadow asked, holding back his scream.

"We hold out."

Even now, Caneeya the Fruit Trimming's expression was unchanged. She always had a big smile stretched across her face.

No matter how inwardly perturbed she may have been, this natural face of hers never changed.

While the truth behind it was torment, given she was the commander of her troops, it was better this way.

"Our enemy's numbers are few. That's why they're attacking us with just two people. Not only that, but their offensive is meant to terrify us, targeting myself as the commanding officer and trying to instill chaos… However, I can say the current situation is leaning in our favor. We've managed to draw out two of our enemy's elite fighters all on our own."

Stalling measures that utilized traps and fear, for a military force like this, were little more than a temporary stopgap.

It had to be physically impossible for them to hold back the entire unit slowly circling in on the manor from all directions. Furthermore, the Old Kingdoms' forces included golems created by Kiyazuna the Axle.

Their current predicament may have been extremely dangerous, but it was also a perfect opportunity for the troops on the opposite side of the encirclement to raid the manor.

We won't retreat.

Of course, that was never an option to begin with.

At present, with Aureatia gaining complete control after the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists' repeated defeats, Caneeya had reached the

point where rebuilding her group's morale would be impossible. The return of the Central Kingdom would also never be fulfilled.

Obsidian Eyes was a fearsome fighting force, but compared to Aureatia's regular forces—decked out in the best equipment with overwhelmingly superior numbers and regulation—Caneeya's forces *still* had a chance of beating them.

Obsidian Eyes were nothing but covert agents. They weren't monstrosities that would crush them head-on, but instead excelled the most at pretending to be a greater threat than they really were through their supernatural skills and dirty tricks.

More than anything is the fact that Obsidian Eyes is defending this base of theirs. If they knew about our assault and prepared so heavily for it, it then means there is something worth defending in that manor. While I doubt that everything Kaete the Round Table said was the truth…

According to him, Aureatia was performing an experiment with a vampire, intending to use the vampire infection to dispose of hero candidates. Even if this chain of events was just something Kaete thought up on the spot, now that they *had been informed* of the large-scale coup via the Gray-Haired Child and their final opportunity for them to act, Caneeya had no way to stop a group like hers that longed to take action.

While she had prepared for their moves to end with a fruitless struggle, if there was still any chance for results, then there was value in fighting.

"Kiyazuna the Axle."

Caneeya called through the radzio.

"Right now, we're luring two of the enemy's fighting force, Zeljirga and the chakram marksman, to the southeast. I'd like you to confirm the density of immobilized golems and find which direction has a hole to slip through."

<Sure… Southeast? So you're to the southeast and not to the west, yeah?>

"The west…?"

A shield solder who tried to peek out from the rock shadow to gauge the situation let out a shriek. A chakram on a roundabout

path cut deep into his wrist. The marksman was still closely observing their position.

"Is there some problem there—"

A roar split through the air and cut off Caneeya.

A torrent of fire, as bright as lightning, rained down west of the manor.

<Ain't nothing to worry about. Guess it's yer lucky day, Caneeya the Fruit Trimming.>

◆

A light came swooping in from the manor like a falling star.

The light braked in midair, then causally swept the ground below in a hail of Gatling gun–fire.

A direct hit from the 12.7×99mm bullets packed enough power to blast a passenger car from the Beyond to bits. The kinetic energy of a grazing blow was still enough to make a person's body burst.

These bullets poured down uninterrupted, firing in fast enough succession to trace rays of light through the sky.

The soldiers in the west didn't even have time to scream before their very flesh and blood disappeared amid the giant cloud of kicked-up dust and smoke.

Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge landed together with a flareback and trampled over the remains, a mixture of flesh, vegetation, and dirt.

"*Ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha!*"

An ominous single red eye flashed from within the smoke cloaking the dense woodland.

"*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*"

Kuuro the Cautious perceived the scene in its entirety.

Despite being in the complete opposite direction and on the other side of the manor, he sensed it all, down to a single burning leaf or the single nail of a blown apart Old Kingdoms' soldier, more accurately than a machine. This was Kuuro's supernatural gift,

Clairvoyance.

Kuuro the Cautious was acting under a different objective, and with a different force, from the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists and Kiyazuna the Axle.

His goal was to retaliate against Obsidian Eyes for incinerating Kuuro and the entire clinic with him, and for forcing Mizial and Cuneigh into their dire predicament.

The undeserved assault had stripped Kuuro of the chance to stop his friend, Toroa the Awful.

He needed to give them their just retribution.

With the burns on his face haphazardly concealed under bandages, the leprechaun's appearance would have stood out against the forest backdrop, but Kuuro the Cautious had utilized his omnipotent Clairvoyance to became Obsidian Eyes' strongest assassin. Continuing toward his target while weaving through blind spots and dead angles was all too easy.

"…Be careful. The enemy's sent out Mestelexil," he whispered, connecting to the radzio in his hand for only a single second.

The radzio linked back to Enu the Distant Mirror, who was waiting standby beyond the battlefield.

Enu was formerly Aureatia's Thirteenth Minister. Using the large-scale coup, he simultaneously broke away from Obsidian Eyes and the National Defense Research Institute and possessed an inscrutable—even with Kuuro's Clairvoyance—purpose of his own.

Kuuro and Enu were temporarily cooperating with each other for this assault, at the very least.

Enu's goal was to kidnap the mutated vampire strain, Linaris the Obsidian. Their interests coincided.

"Hmm. I'll be extra sure not to approach closer, then. Does it seem like you'll be able to grab Linaris?"

I wonder.

Kuuro wasn't listening to Enu's response via his radzio.

His extraordinary hearing was able to process any and all noise and sound accurately and at once. Even as the soldiers' shrieks and bellows resounded around him, through the explosive Gatling gun noise, he could pick out *a mere voice* being spoken two kilometers

away.

Kuuro connected the radzio again.

"Maybe if it was just me, but…"

His connecting and severing of the radzio call over and over was to counterattack any wiretapping. Kuuro's understanding was that radzios, indiscriminately spilling out information in the form of electric waves, were a tool that necessitated extra care in their usage from the start.

"It'll be impossible to drag Linaris through all the blind spots while Mestelexil is running rampant. Even if it were, Linaris's body wouldn't be able to handle it."

Moving while always slipping through the blind spots of everyone on the battlefield was a feat only capable thanks to Kuuro's precise movements, reflex speed, and a leprechaun's characteristically diminutive stature.

While it was a different story for a homunculus like Cuneigh the Wanderer—just big enough to fit inside his breast pocket—it would require a considerable amount of luck to lead a human, and a hostage at that, through the surrounding forces closing in. Given Linaris's critical condition and already weak constitution, the burden from the artillery aftershocks and evasive action brought with them enough danger.

Obsidian Eyes is desperate enough to mobilize Mestelexil to defend this place because Linaris can't easily be moved elsewhere right now… My prediction was spot on, then. On top of that, these Old Kingdoms' Loyalists seemed to time their interference here with the chaos of the coup.

"Kuuro. If Mestelexil's presence will be a problem for the transport, I'll prepare some methods on my end. I just ask you to take care of any others who get in the way and bring her back to me."

Some methods, huh…

Intermittent gunfire echoed from the west. Mestelexil was disposing of what little survivors remained one by one. Kuuro couldn't move carelessly.

He reopened the radzio line.

"Kiyazuna the Axle is acting together with the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists. You knew that from the beginning, eh, Enu?"

<That's right. If there was anyone who was capable of disposing of Mestelexil, it'd have to be his creator, Kiyazuna the Axle.>

Kuuro sensed Enu's reaction with his Clairvoyance. Heartbeats, breathing, mannerisms. During any negotiations with Kuuro, Enu the Distant Mirror always replied honestly—since the man understood that no lie would work on Kuuro.

"That was the plan you worked out to get through Mestelexil. In which case…"

Given that Kuuro could determine the veracity of something regardless of the answers he got, the act of asking questions itself also served as a way to obtain further information. This behavior of Kuuro the Cautious was in some ways similar to a bat, grasping the layout of a terrain from the reverberations of his own cries.

"You fully knew not only that the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists would attack Obsidian Eyes today, but that Kiyazuna the Axle would be acting with them. Which would mean that there was someone who would indirectly contact people like you…and like Kaete the Round Table, the ones who've broken away from the Twenty-Nine Officials, and passed you the same information. Wouldn't it be Aureatia, or Iriolde…the Gray-Haired Child, then?"

<……>

Enu understood the lack of any immediate reply in and of itself signaled agreement. Even assuming the contact had been indirect, someone with Enu's level of analytical skills must have already arrived at the truth at the core.

Enu the Distant Mirror had a secret objective that opposed Aureatia. In order to achieve this personal goal, he had directly made contact first with Obsidian Eyes, and then the National Defense Research Institute, crossing between camps.

While Kuuro wasn't fully acquainted with the Gray-Haired Child, the hearsay he had heard was enough for him to make a few estimations regarding how the man operated—he made use of other people with a strong desire of their own and maneuvered the playing field in order to realize all of those desires.

Zigita Zogi the Thousandth. Ozonezma the Capricious. Dant the Heath Furrow. Yukiharu the Twilight Diver. Kuze the Passing Disaster. Morio the Sentinel. Most of the people who belonged to the man's camp, including the names totally unknown to Kuuro, gathered in order to achieve their own aspirations.

However, what about the Gray-Haired Child himself? Hard to say this is a very logical maxim to act under.

This was different from the time when Zigita Zogi and Linaris were secretly warring with each other. Currently, the brain of Obsidian Eyes was neutralized and impossible to serve as any threat to Hiroto's camp. Conversely, storming their base involved running into a tremendously powerful obstacle in Mestelexil.

Normally, consuming precious pawns like Enu and Kiyazuna to attack them would've been worth it.

The Gray-Haired Child is trying to get revenge.

Just like him, ripped away from Cuneigh and Mizial, and losing Toroa…the Gray-Hair Child had lost a great deal at the hands of Obsidian Eyes as well.

<Kuuro. Your speculation…is correct. To go one step further, with the help of a connection of mine, it might be possible…to prolong the life of Cuneigh the Wanderer.>

"Wha—?"

Kuuro wanted to ask more of him, but his intuition moved his finger and he cut the radzio line.

Getting down and clinging to the terrain, he covered his body in his dark brown coat.

He could recognize even through his coat that a light only visible to Kuuro's eyes was passing through the air.

Short wavelength electrical wave.

The intuition of his Clairvoyance, on par with actual future sight, showed him the correct action to take.

While the knowledge was totally unknown to Kuuro, the electrical waves were in fact the microwave radar of the Beyond.

Mestelexil, with the extermination of the western front over, was performing a wide-range search for his foes.

<What happened?>

"Recon. Bad news. Can't reveal myself carelessly now…"

With bows or muskets, Kuuro was able to predict the attack movement and evade.

However, even when utilizing his Clairvoyance's powers of future sight, the collection of Beyond weaponry that Mestelexil battled with were wholly unlike the attacks that Kuuro was able to evade. Kuuro the Cautious's means of surmounting Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge was, from the very beginning, to simply maneuver around him without making his presence known.

"…?! What is she doing…?!"

In addition, there was an omen of an even more outrageous situation.

Kuuro's involuntary shout came not from any danger to himself of the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist, but instead out of shock to the danger his *enemy* was in.

The manor and its surroundings, serving as Obsidian Eyes' base of operations, was a quiet forest, dark even during the day.

A small shift had begun happening to the environment.

An uncanny stir, like the sound of a ripple and nothing like the remaining echoes of Mestelexil's Gatling gun, surrounded the forest, radiating out like a wave.

The thin sunbeams peeking through the trees clouded, and a darkness like true night itself began to poke through.

"Even in your state, you're sending out an attack, are you? Linaris…"

Kuuro's Clairvoyance perceived everything about the situation occurring around him.

On a bed, in one of the manor's rooms, Linaris the Obsidian had regained consciousness. She lifted up her slender body…and made use of her supernatural vampire abilities.

◆

The thin rays of light, fluttering in through the gaps in the curtains, traced an outline of the bed and wardrobe. Golden pupils, opened

ever so slightly, seemed to give off a light of their own amid the scant sunlight.

Atop the bed, Linaris had sat up. Her thin nightgown clung tightly to her body.

Her consciousness was hazy, as if on the edge between dream and reality. Only the sound of the clock hand ticking echoed in the quiet room.

She had awoken due to the sounds of Mestelexil's gunfire, shattering the still and reverberating into the manor itself. Considering Linaris's critical condition, it was a miracle it had woken her up at all.

Just now, what…?

She attempted to think through her fogged mind.

The days when she was ignorant of everything. The days she had been betrayed by someone. The day she let her father die.

They had all been terrible dreams, appearing to be an extension of her waking consciousness.

The one certain reality was the sound of Gatling guns. She could still feel the reverberations in her far-off bedchambers.

Something had happened to cause such a sound. It meant that right now, with Linaris unable to leave the manor, they were being pressed into mobilizing Mestelexil to mount a defense. Not an individual that could Obsidian Eyes could manage, but a group. Furthermore, a foe with a clear and defined intent to attack Obsidian Eyes.

"*Ahhh*…"

She let out a frail, dejected sigh.

Linaris didn't have the stamina to cry out in despair.

The force carrying out the attack on the manor had to either be mercenaries from the Free City of Okafu or the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists—whatever the case, she merely understood that her appeal to the Gray-Haired Child had been rejected.

"…We must not mobilize Master Mestelexil."

She murmured in the completely silent room, as if unoccupied.

The average person wouldn't have sensed any trace of her, however Linaris trusted that whenever she laid sick in bed, Frey the

Waking was always hovering at her side.

"My lady. Please, you must rest."

The old woman's voice replied just like always, from the darkness.

It was the only thing that brought Linaris any feeling of relief.

"The enemy are remnants of the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists. Entrusting Mestelexil to the task will keep both Wieze and Zeljirga safe from harm, and won't cause any trouble for you, my lady. Right now, Aureatia's eyes must be turned toward Iriolde's coup, and the cancellation of the tenth match. Everything shall be handled quickly and in perfect secrecy."

"No…"

This was a foe that, were Linaris in perfect form, never would have been allowed to carry out such an attack.

However, while their parent unit Linaris laid unconscious, the method Obsidian Eyes excelled at the most—using the corpses infiltrating each major power for information manipulation—was unable to be used. They had been left with no choice but to drastically cull the corpses themselves to sidestep Aureatia's thorough infection tracking and prevention measures.

The next best plan was to annihilate all the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists who had reached their main stronghold. Among the cards Obsidian Eyes could currently play, deploying Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge was the only one capable of doing so.

"I'm sure…that their goal…was to lure out Master Mestelexil."

Pausing to take long breaths in between, her frail voice squeezed the words out.

It was as if time had flown right by while she laid collapsed in bed. The eighth match had ended, and the circumstances dramatically begun to shift. She had entrusted their direction from here to Yuno and Lendelt, and after that… she wondered what exactly was happening in Aureatia at that moment.

All she could do was piece together the fragments, missing several pieces of information, through conjecture.

"*Koff*…The fact Master Mestelexil used his weapons here in and of itself…means that even if this assault is a failure, our enemy can then have Aureatia attack us next."

Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge was one of the hero candidates Aureatia had let slip away, as well as the one they prioritized disposing of the most.

If the plot in Rosclay's camp that Linaris and Yuno had exposed were to come to fruition on the day of the tenth match, then afterward, a fully prepared Aureatia army would march to storm the manor.

While Mestelexil may have been a different story, she didn't think that herself, nor the others in Obsidian Eyes, would be able to hold out against them.

"My Lady."

Frey's voice was ever gentle and always tried to calm Linaris down.

"Is the Gray-Haired Child the one pulling the strings here?"

When Linaris thought about how she was unable to do anything in return for Frey's devotion, her tears threatened to pour forth.

"*No, he's not*."

In exchange for Linaris's life, the Gray-Haired Child would promise to bring Obsidian Eyes under his umbrella.

She hadn't told any of the other members about her secret bargain with the Gray-Haired Child that Lendelt the Immaculate had been entrusted with on her behalf.

Should the negotiations break down and the Gray-Haired Child turn completely hostile to them, Linaris didn't wish for Obsidian Eyes to pursue any sacrificial revenge.

In fact, if Linaris had correctly discerned the Gray-Haired Child's temperament, there was even the chance that *the negotiations had gone well*. If Obsidian Eyes were to pull the trigger on an all-out annihilation at this stage, that could easily become a reason for withdrawing a previously agreed-upon deal.

Linaris would always understand where all their choices would lead them in the future. Most of the paths available to Obsidian Eyes sent them to their destruction, and in order to pick the few paths of survival available, Linaris wasn't always able to choose the victory immediately presenting itself.

"It will be okay… Even without mobilizing Master Mestelexil…we

can…render them helpless…”

There was one more thing she could do, now that she was awake.

Something the spontaneous mutated strain of vampire Linaris could do simply by manipulating her will, even as she lacked the strength to lift her body out of bed.

Outside the dark window letting in thin rays of a light, there was a stirring noise different from the sound of the swaying trees.

◆

Yuno felt like she had been walking for a whole day since separating from Hiroto.

Even after entering the dense forest, it wasn’t a straightforward road to the manor. Just how long had she been walking?

The feeling in her legs seemed to have progressed past pain a long time ago.

The Gray-Haired Child was going to kill Linaris. Yuno the Distant Talon was returning to the manor to inform Linaris of the Gray-Haired Child’s plans.

Even if Linaris was nothing more than an evil force that the minian races were meant to kill, Yuno needed to head to her rescue to save her own heart.

Practically ascending farther up the treetops as she moved, Yuno’s feet stopped with a feeling of tension.

There are even string traps here, too?!

In between the branches, thin threads sparkled, reflecting the light.

The discovery came right after she had avoided a stretch of the path she’d sensed was dangerous.

If I came back without knowing about these, I might’ve died. These traps are set up to anticipate the thinking of anyone trying to outfox them.

She was able to surmise what sort of trap setup had caused the explosion she’d heard far off in the distance, since Yuno had

temporarily acted in consort with Obsidian Eyes.

"I have to get closer. What should I do…?"

In some senses, it may have been good fortune that the attack by the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists was already underway. If Yuno had arrived first, she might not have been able to sense the traps at all. Or, if she had been attacked together with a military force that arrived after her, she would've died a meaningless death.

The truth was she had needed some chance of success ahead of time to ensure that didn't happen. Even if a young girl like Yuno ran headlong into the situation, she didn't have any power to change what was happening.

Nevertheless, there was one thing she knew.

Most likely, Yuno hadn't actually arrived too late.

I saw several soldiers with the Central Kingdom's crest on them… The Old Kingdoms' Loyalists have to be the ones attacking the manor. Except, that's not their true goal. If a minian military squad was enough to take on Obsidian Eyes, then Hiroto would've sent in a mercenary force from the Free City of Okafu from the start. So… there has to be something. The real threat, using this force as a smoke screen.

Right in the midst of the Aureatia army and Iriolde's army openly battling in the city streets, the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists, a force hiding on the outskirts, was wielded at Hiroto's beck and call to attack the target he was aiming for on the exact date he wanted. Yuno couldn't even imagine how one had to maneuver to make such a feat possible. Hiroto the Paradox's network of acquaintances was a monstrous, nigh inevitable, strength of its own.

What Yuno understood was simply that the Gray-Haired Child was serious about his plans.

…Calm yourself, Yuno. The first thing I need to get across to Linaris isn't his plot to attack her. Linaris and Obsidian Eyes are more than capable of figuring that out without a nobody like me telling them. Where in this whole assault of the manor are Hiroto's true hostile intents hiding—I need to see through that to be any help.

The Old Kingdoms' Loyalists' advance had stopped, disturbed by marksman attacks and traps.

Yuno had one advantage over them in that she was all by herself. With the need to move as a grouped unit, their route of infiltration would be naturally restricted, but for Yuno, all by herself and capable of casting a fair amount of Power Arts, she possessed a wider range of choices.

"Uno io shyipi." (From Yuno to Fipiq arrowhead.)

Yuno murmured in the treetops, looking down on the battlefield and sitting on a thick branch.

"Un2 lino. Corro enuha, 8dihine, viradna!" (Axel is second finger. Lattice star, bursting spark, rotate.)

Sharp arrowheads flew out from inside her sleeves. They stuck into the trunk of the thick tree growing above the slope.

The only combat-capable Word Arts Yuno used were Power Arts that fired these arrowheads. She was uneasy about how many she had left, too.

Still, she attached a simple rope ladder to them and sent them flying.

"Great. That should be stable…"

Yuno pulled on the rope to check.

She also twisted the arrowheads when they hit the trunk. She had modified several of her sharpened arrowheads to have barbs, ensuring they weren't easily pulled out of the trunk.

The attached rope ladder provided a footing for her with its uniformly spaced knots. She had procured it in the Aureatian streets as she rushed here.

She had never thought she would make use of Force Arts like this back when she lived in Nagan Labyrinth City. Still, it might have been purely because this forest was densely covered in trees that she was able to move three-dimensionally, avoiding any traps or brushes with Old Kingdoms' Loyalists.

Gripping the rope tightly, she placed her feet on the knots.

Yuno's sights began to sway back and forth, sitting about three stories in the air.

There aren't any soldiers left keeping close watch on this area… But, the senses of an ordinary person like me can't guarantee anything. There's even a chance someone'd pick me off from the

ground if they spotted me.

She relied on her grip strength instead of her legs, too numbed from all the walking. In the middle of a battlefield, she continued across the swaying rope ladder, her stuck arrowheads the only point of support. The work required far more courage than it did stamina.

Her exhaustion grew along with her altitude each time she crossed from one tree to another.

She still couldn't let herself get close to the manor she was heading toward.

"…"

Her goal was to have a bird's-eye view of the battlefield.

There was an explosion from the other side of the manor. It meant that the thread traps were still functioning.

It did assist her in estimating just how close the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists front lines had encroached. Considering how far she still was from the manor, she didn't appear to have much time to spare.

There were very few units moving across open terrain. They must have been on guard against any marksman fire.

Among them all, there was a unit of troops fighting out in the open on a small hill.

From how far away and high up Yuno was, the ghastly battlefield resembled a toy shop display.

There was a large woman who appeared to be the commander and Old Kingdoms' Loyalist soldiers with their shields raised. Along with—

"…! Golems…!"

Yuno fought back the reflexive bile rising in her throat.

Yuno was on top of a fifteen-meter-tall tree. She needed to maintain a cool head. Letting her thoughts be painted over in red would be fatal.

Nevertheless, in what was an acquired instinctual response, hatred and fear bubbled up inside her.

The Old Kingdoms' Loyalists are using golems…! The chance of victory Hiroto gave them…was to provide them with golem soldiers?! He could've easily traded in precision parts as a secret agenda to his business dealings… He was manufacturing golems and hiding them

from Aureatia?! No…

Biting down hard on her thumb, she attempted to cool her feverish thoughts.

"Calm down, just stay calm…!"

Hiroto the Paradox was definitely a terrifying monster, and golems were Yuno's hated foe.

However, Yuno needed to distinguish these two facts from each other as she thought.

Hiroto… He was under strict surveillance by Aureatia. Mass producing golems under those circumstances would've been impossible. It's more logical to believe that those golems weren't provided to them by Hiroto. Which means that there was someone among the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists who created them… A self-proclaimed demon king capable of creating golems, and with a reason to join an anti-Aureatia force—

At that moment, an eardrum-splitting noise severed Yuno's line of thinking.

Wholly unnatural, the gunfire sounded like metal being scraped and torn apart.

"*Eek!*"

The shriek had come from the physical reflex produced by her lungs. It took another beat for her to become cognizant of the roar echoing through the air.

She looked west of the manor.

What she could only describe as rays of fire rained down from the sky.

A one-eyed golem was mowing down the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists.

"…!"

It was not terror at the sound of carnage reverberating around her that made her breath catch in her throat.

It was because she knew the identity of this one-eyed golem.

"M-M…Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge!"

She thought back over what Hiroto the Paradox had told her.

—There was a chance that Obsidian Eyes took control of Mestelexil during the sixth match.

A flood of questions flashed in the back of Yuno's head.

What was Kiyazuna the Axle's goal? How much of the current state of affairs was Linaris aware of?

Above all, if Kiyazuna and Mestelexil were both here in the same place, that meant…

Finally…! Finally, I can…

Yuno's homeland, Nagan Labyrinth City, was in ruins.

The city itself had actually been a colossal golem created by self-proclaimed demon king Kiyazuna.

"Calm down, stay calm!"

She bit down not on her thumb, but her wrist.

The people living in Nagan had perished without the slightest explanation, trampled underfoot by a tremendous power. Lucelles, the friend she cherished more than any other, had died as well, her entire body torn apart.

Finally, I have it… This is my chance to get my revenge, isn't it?!

Kiyazuna the Axle had to be somewhere on the same battlefield as Yuno at that moment.

She was supposed to return to help Linaris, having suppressed her passions that seemed to reduce everything to ash, and yet, time and time again, the flames of that day tried to control Yuno.

She needed to win out against her heart. She needed to control herself.

A faint taste of blood welled inside her mouth as she bit her wrist.

I want to redeem my regrets. I need to save Linaris. For that, I need to investigate the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists. Assuming their trump card is Kiyazuna the Axle, and Hiroto knew everything from the start… Mestelexil is allied with Obsidian Eyes. Linaris could've joined forces with Kiyazuna the Axle. I was being deceived by someone. Kiyazuna wasn't my only enemy from the start. It was my fault Lucelles died. This will be my only chance to kill Kiyazuna. I want to redeem my regrets. I need to save Linaris.

Her confusion and doubts halted her train of thought.

As such, when she came back to her senses, *it* had already happened.

"Huh…?"

The pain felt like the flesh in her side had been gouged out.

It hadn't been a sniper attack. When had there been any sort of attack that could reach her up here in the treetops?

Her body staggered and lurched. Even though it was her own body, it almost didn't feel real.

As she was pulled down by gravity and began to fall, she could see something.

Commotion and darkness.

Her flesh hadn't been gouged out but pecked at by something hard. Beaks and feathers.

Yuno saw the true form of the darkness spreading over the battlefield.

"Birds…"

The forest where the Obsidian Eyes manor sat had been a quiet one, with no sounds of any birds or insects.

As if a curtain of even stiller silence was being draped over the forest—a flock of black birds had begun to blanket the sky.

◆

It was as dark as if night had fallen upon them.

And just like the night, there was nowhere to run.

The din from wings beating the air.

The sound of several thousand wings echoing throughout the dark forest were in perfect, uncanny sync.

The enormous, harshly cold sound diluted the noise of blood and screams that erupted amid the darkness.

"*Auuuuuuuugh!*"

"Stop it! Let go, you damn bird…! What the hell's with these things?!"

"Birds! The birds! H-hel—"

The black flock, thick as a locust swarm, swooped down on the soldiers nonstop.

It was impossible to run from them or break free from their grip. Counterattacks with guns and swords were similarly meaningless.

Their tiny bodies easily wove past any defenses and slipped into any place of shelter. Their beaks and talons tore at the flesh of the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists.

Each injury itself likely wouldn't prove fatal. However, the nightmarish flock of birds was enough to plunge the soldiers into a panicked fear. No matter how excellent a warrior any of them may have been, no one could maintain their will to fight while being pecked incessantly by an innumerable host of birds.

An impossibly unnatural phenomenon was unfolding.

"Over her, Grams! There's a shallow cave in this stretch of rock!"

Kiyazuna and Kaete were also coping with the sudden chaos raining down on them.

As he ran, he stepped on black feathers, shed in enough numbers to cover the whole earth. Similarly, Kaete's cry itself was almost completely drowned out by the sounds of wings, shaking the very air itself.

"Best to limit the number of directions we need to defend and hold out!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know! Gotta roast these bastards first!"

Bright flames shot out like liquid from the pipe Kiyazuna held in her hands.

The pipe was connected to a golem, or more precisely, the storage canister that was installed inside the golem's body.

The flamethrower from the Beyond was one of the few weapons they were able to recover from Mestelexil's bequest. To prevent the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists from mishandling the equipment from the Beyond, it had been disassembled and built into several of the golems assigned to guard Kiyazuna.

"There we go, drove those buggers off! Outta the way, Kaete! I'm hiding in there!"

"Stop it, Grams! Squish yourself in!"

Once Kiyazuna entered the narrow cave, they ended up with both of their bodies scrunched up together.

The golems they had taken with them were deployed to protect

the cave and steeled for the following waves of attack.

The flamethrower's fuel was limited. Their protective gear was only useful to combat poison, and conversely, there was a high risk of setting themselves on fire. Even fully aware of how risky it may have been, it was essentially their only means of repelling the swarm of small birds.

"Dammit! Didn't waste any time showing their trump card…! The hell's with these jackdaw bastards, anyway?!"

"Ain't revenants, by the looks of 'em," Kiyazuna murmured as she pulled the breechblock of a small handgun. "They seem to be attacking under some sorta commanding will, but they still got an instinctual fear of fire in 'em—these birds are flesh and blood."

"…Impossible."

Kaete shook his head. He immediately picked up on what that fact suggested.

The ability to make another obey a singular directive without robbing them of their thoughts and instincts as a living animal—there was one race present on this battlefield who could satisfy those requirements.

However, it was an existence that should not be.

"This vampire pathogen…*is able to infect birds*?! Infecting a homunculus like Mestelexil was abnormal enough, and now it's not just minians but beasts, too?!"

Linaris the Obsidian was capable of annihilating the minian world.

Among those beings who had reached the realm of the shura, many possessed hidden aces up their sleeves that defied all imagination.

Much more, the figure who—more than any other—wielded information and secrecy as her weapon was always going to be prepared for a direct attack against her. The virus Linaris produced hadn't proliferated entirely because she consciously limited its range of infection. Originally, however, this virus was a calamity that spread its infection limitlessly, using not only minian races but small animals as well, as carriers.

From the very beginning, for Linaris, eliminating her foes without paying any heed to concealing information or the sustentation of her

control—even when accounting for some number of individuals possessing immunity via antiserum—had never posed a problem.

"Shit, some Old Kingdom idiots are making their way back!" Kiyazuna mumbled bitterly.

Beyond their golem protectors in front of them, and deeper within the swarm of birds that almost completely blanketed their vision past the cave, they could see the figures of soldiers tottering like they were on their last legs.

Using the flamethrower to drive off the birds had turned them into a suitable landmark.

"If they're still all in one piece even after getting attacked by the swarm, that's gotta mean…"

"Don't tell me they've all be corpsified."

Their plan to use the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists offensive for their own attack had completely backfired on them.

The swarming crows hadn't been sent out to peck the enemy to death at all.

The goal had been to cause an explosive outbreak, using the grazing wounds to turn the armed force into corpses.

A proper vampire could never manage this… No… I should've already known that from the moment it stole Mestelexil's control from us in the sixth match! Our enemy's infection abilities defy all common knowledge of vampires! They never needed a long period of contact at all! They're able to corpsify anyone from just the slightest cut!

How were they going to handle this? Kaete's thoughts spun in his head.

The golems defending the cave would have been fitted with guns from the Beyond. If the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist soldiers were going to attack them, they could mow them down all at once.

While they may have temporarily shared a cause, neither Kaete nor Kiyazuna had the slightest qualms about intercepting them now that they posed a threat.

However, at that moment, the true problem laid elsewhere—

"Grams! The birds're getting in!"

"Kiyazna io Woletzhigen. Sai delsa xa. Nolain ielin shaldekain!

Tarfsips!" (Kiyazuna to Wolehshigen cloth. Condensation melody. Glimmer surface crystal. Permeating color of unsightly chromium! Entangle!)

Kaete could tell that he had been stabbed several times by the birds' beaks, but there were no signs that the protective gear had been penetrated at all.

Kiyazuna the Axle's Craft Arts denatured the material of the protective gear covering them both. Her decision-making, having passed through numerous bloodbaths as a self-proclaimed demon king, was faster than seemed possible for someone so old.

"Quit yer blubbering, Kaete! You've had the damn antiserum anyway, ain't ya?!"

"I was worrying about *you,* Grams so—*argh*, those Old Kingdom idiots are here!"

The golem soldiers under Kiyazuna's command opened up their collapsible arms for just a second.

The precision fire from the guns installed in them shot through the knees of an approaching soldier. The soldier screamed.

They could still hold out for a little longer. As long as it was that and nothing more.

"How stab-resistant is this protective gear?!"

"It ain't no armor! Get hit enough in the same place and it'll tear open!"

"What about the flamethrower fuel?!"

"That just used up half of it!"

Just holding out was possible. They couldn't manage a single thing beyond that.

"We're on the backfoot! Completely and utterly on the backfoot!"

Kaete and Kiyazuna's fight was what amounted to hopeless trench warfare.

Not only that, their enemies weren't even minian but instead an inexhaustible swarm of birds.

Kaete devoted himself to supporting Kiyazuna. If her protective gear was damaged, he needed to restore it with Craft Arts

immediately. They needed to face the situation under the assumption that if a bird slipped in through a gap in her gear, and she suffered any scratch, she would immediately be infected and turned into a corpse.

"*Baaah!* Why the hell's this vampire hiding out here on the city outskirts if the smallest damn prick's enough to infect someone, huh?! If they got serious about attacking Aureatia, they'd be able to take it down 'fore sunset!" Kiyazuna shouted as she swept her flamethrower across the coursing swarm.

She's absolutely right. If this foe felt like it, they could easily become the ruler of all minian civilization.

Kaete wasn't firmly convinced a vampire like this existed, even after seeing an actual example when Mestelexil was taken over, because common sense dictated that this foe's actions were extremely illogical.

If Kaete's camp had this power at their disposal, they would've claimed victory on the spot. Mestelexil may have been capable of bringing ruin to all of Aureatia, but the parent unit of Obsidian Eyes was even more terrifying for accomplishing the same feat without any of the destruction. They could simply spread the infection systematically through the nation's leading figures, faster than anyone could catch on, and gain control of the political core. They could easily crush any resistant forces that slipped through the first stages head-on, as well.

"I finally get it… This enemy is unrivaled, but cowardly. They don't want complete control, but to keep hiding. They're fighting like a coward who doesn't believe they can perform the monstrous feats they're capable of."

"*Hah*! Look at ya, talkin' like you figured the whole damn scheme out! 'Cept, I agree with ya there! They're keeping an ultimate weapon like Mestelexil in this dreary forest like he's some kinda knickknack—that gives some idea about how serious they are, all right."

Someone trying to hide and control the situation from the shadows won't be able to endure blunt hostility straight on. All they can think is that if they fight, they'll eventually lose and might die

along with it…

For Kaete the Round Table, this was the loathsome thinking pattern of the uninformed masses.

Normally, this enemy would've had the intelligence to easily outwit Kaete's camp and drive them into this corner.

Kaete couldn't understand it whatsoever. Was there really someone out there who was born with the gifts, both a supernatural ability and the skill for subterfuge, meant to control everything, yet *still didn't desire control themselves*?

"Grams! How the fuel?!"

Kiyazuna's flamethrower spit fire and scattered yet another wave of crows.

"It's 'bout to run out! I'm making all the surviving golems gather up over here!"

Kiyazuna tossed aside a small, radzio-like handheld device.

It resembled a tiny, warped metal box, but Kaete could see that it was equipment for sending out some sort of signal.

"A gather-up order. You stuck that function in those things?! Golems you just made with whatever was on hand?!"

"Soul or not, they're still my babies! Like I'm letting the Old Kingdom dumbasses use them however they like!"

It signaled that Kiyazuna, from the very start, intended on using the golems she provided to support the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists for herself. Kiyazuna the Axle was a brutal villain who wasn't going to be used by anybody.

"'Cept these golem soldiers aren't gonna have a chance against a swarm like this! We need poison or fire!"

"Better than nothing!"

In truth, the golems defending the cave opening were intercepting the swooping birds as well, but they weren't at all up for the job.

The golem soldiers' general methods of attack were punches and slashes. The firearms from the Beyond they secretly had installed unbeknownst to the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists had a limited number of bullets as well. While it probably wasn't impossible for Kiyazuna to create rifle bullets on the battlefield, she didn't have the spare

energy to utilize complex Craft Arts while undergoing an incessant enemy attack.

"Ceite io kaster. Mi mea deo. Nax treeyu. Sahares—Zii!" (From Kaete to Kaster ivy. Fluttering star, puppet, iron dregs—Bind!)

The iron wire stretched across the cave mouth was restored and knitted into a barbed shape.

While Kaete, a former pupil of Kiyazuna, took pride in his ability to use Craft Arts at a higher level than the average person, the only things he could successfully use them for on unfamiliar soil were shape changes to mend the barbed wire he brought with him and their protective gear.

The end result was a brief peace of mind. Just like with the protective gear, he was simply repairing the wiring whenever it was broken. Once Kiyazuna was out of fuel for her flamethrower, their fate would be sealed.

Their foe wasn't even sending the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists under their control at them anymore.

The initial approach of the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists had purely been to see what exactly their methods of attack were. This enemy had decided that they wouldn't send any more Obsidian Eyes agents at them either, and instead would painstakingly dispose of them all with the flock of birds Kaete and Kiyazuna had no means of counteracting.

"We ain't gonna survive, Kaeteeee!"

"Get back, Grams! We'll keep holding on until the golem troops are all gone!"

"…?! Something ain't right, the number of golems I gathered together—"

Right as Kaete went to pull out his sword and move forward, the scene in front of his eyes was blown away.

It was like an iron meteor strike.

The golems on guard were squashed by the speed and mass and scattered in smithereens.

The only thing that stopped Kaete from instant death was that a different golem soldier was hit by the scattered fragments in his stead.

An indigo silhouette lifted its body up from among the thick dust and fire.

It was then that Kaete thought, *We had no chance of victory here.*

Both Kaete and Kiyazuna were no different from the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists. Those who had suffered such a wide-scaled defeat never even had the option to choose how to fight.

Any chance of victory was a luxury. Whether they liked it or not, betting everything on this operation had been their only option.

Luring out Mestelexil by using the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists as bait —it was safe to say that just now, they had achieved their goal. The rest of the plan afterward had been, as far as Kaete's mind could imagine, impossible from the beginning.

Even if they had been able to take advantage of the chaos caused by the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists attack…

"*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*"

They couldn't have beaten Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge with proper methods.

Kaete had stopped hearing the sounds of Mestelexil's gunfire ever since the bird assault began, and they hadn't any time to spend on searching out where he was. Mestelexil had most likely disposed of any enemies that couldn't be handled by the bird attacks—in other words, the golem soldiers.

Even still…

The Old Kingdoms' Loyalists had been annihilated and couldn't distract him.

The golem soldiers' numbers had already been drastically reduced.

On top of it all, the bird force still swooped down upon them incessantly, and in this situation, they were now confronting Mestelexil head-on.

"I-I will defeat you… for the n-nice lady! Destroy the weapons!"

Even still, we just have to get it down.

◆

When she opened up her eyes, she saw sunlight filtering through the trees directly in front of her.

More than her body, forcefully struck from the fall, there was a stabbing pain in her left shoulder.

It was possible that it might've been dislocated.

Just how stupid can I get…?

Yuno regained consciousness and felt frustrated.

She figured that the only reason she had survived the fall from the fifteen-meter-high tree was because the highly dense branches lessened her momentum mid-fall, and that the ground where she landed was soft.

The instant she felt herself falling, Yuno shot an arrowhead into the trunk to slow her fall—it was attached to her left arm with a string, readied in case she missed her footing on the rope ladder or any other emergency. However, as a result, her left shoulder had momentarily borne her full body weight and suffered a lot of damage. She certainly couldn't claim her quick thinking had let her survive.

If Yuno hadn't gotten so worked up in the first place, she never would've lost her balance just from being pecked by a bird.

Birds taking off en masse isn't even some unexpected phenomenon… Just forget it. Instead of my own problems…I need to see Linaris. I have to tell her danger is on the way, and ask about Mestelexil…

The normal stillness had returned to the forest.

Had that massive flock of birds already made its way through the forest? Even then, she found it eerie that she could no longer hear the sounds of battle, or even the voices of the soldiers.

Was Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge still lurking somewhere in this forest?

Never mind… Trying to keep up my guard in case Mestelexil shows up is meaningless anyway.

Whether she found herself face-to-face with Mestelexil, or one of the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist soldiers, Yuno was as good as dead either way. With her sense of balance still haywire, she rose to her feet with a struggle.

She had several faint scratches, but her feet looked unharmed.

"Oh, and what's this?! We have quite the unexpected guest!"

A high-pitched voice came from deeper in the forest.

When Yuno reflexively looked in that direction, all that greeted her was the impenetrable arboreal darkness.

The owner of the voice appeared to have a clear sight of her, though, approaching as they continued to talk.

"Yuno the Distant Talon! What brings you back this way? Though perhaps…if you stay here too long, even an obscure and remote forest like this may start to feel like home! *Ahyah-hyah-hyah-hyah!*"

"Aren't you…?"

There was snap of a string, and a slender body came twirling out of the darkness.

It was a zmeu harlequin dressed in a vibrant orange costume. Yuno found it strange that her outfit stood out so garishly amid the dark forest, yet she hadn't been able to see it at all until that moment.

The zmeu lined up her feet, stood in front of Yuno, and waved her right arm out in front of her to give an overexaggerated bow.

"I do believe we have yet to properly meet, Miss Yuno the Distant Talon. I am Zeljirga the Abyss Web. I am Lady Linaris's ever loyal clown. I do wish I had the chance to perform some of my tricks for you while you were still at the manor! *Ahyah-hyah-hyah-hyah-hyah!*"

"Zeljirga the hero candidate…! Wait, so that story about separating from Obsidian Eyes…"

"Uh-oh! Please, if you would kindly spare me from any further inquiry. After all, how am I supposed to keep up my buffoonery in business if the audience knows all my secrets? *Ahyah-hyah-hyah!* Though, being as intelligent as you are, Yuno, allow me to tell you one more thing! I know your name and that you previously left the manor once only to return."

Zeljirga made a show of bringing her pointer finger up to her lips.

"Perhaps, if I may be so bold, it would be best to respond with care. Lady Linaris gave you permission to leave in order to summon help for her… So why then have you returned? I assure you, if you returned with a skilled physician in tow, I always have a gust of

confetti revelry saved for just an occasion!”

She’s…

Yuno felt as if all the extraneous thoughts that, up until that moment, threatened to tear her brain apart, were all scraped away.

Similarly to Yuno, Zeljirga was an ally of Linaris’s. From the very beginning, she had never defected from Obsidian Eyes and had snuck herself into the Sixways Exhibition as a hero candidate for Obsidian Eyes.

Nevertheless, this did not mean that she was Yuno’s ally.

*…*Interrogating *me. This latest assault…and why their hideout’s location had been pinned down. Zeljirga believes that it was all because I leaked information to an outside party. Lendelt accompanied me in order to keep me quiet, too, and he isn’t with me, so I’m even more suspicious… She’s planning on disposing of me, depending on how I answer.*

“*Ahyah-hyah-hyah!* What’s the matter? Oh, mayhaps you don’t wish to reveal your secrets, either? How about if I share one of my own in exchange? Given this our first chance to chat with one another, I do hope to make it an enjoyable one!”

“I-I’ve come…to warn her about danger! The negotiations with the Gray-Haired Child were successful, and I managed to get his promise that he will have a doctor see Linaris! Still, there is someone after Linaris…”

“*Ah-ha!* You wouldn’t be referring to that little group just now, would you…? If so then, who do you think…was the one to invite them here?”

Zeljirga’s eyes narrowed.

Think. You have to think.

If this woman was powerful enough to be a hero candidate, then she could likely vivisect Yuno into pieces before she could finish exhaling. Conversely, Yuno couldn’t hope to escape even a single Old Kingdoms’ Loyalist soldier in her current state.

“I-I don’t know.”

“Nor do I, I’m afraid. Shall we back up a bit, then? What would be this danger that you are in such a rush to tell Lady Linaris about? More specifically?”

*That's right…*Who *brought the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists here? The soldiers reached the manor before I did. I wasn't being tailed by them, and neither I nor Lendelt gave Hiroto any information on its location. Even if the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists are connected to Hiroto, the location of the manor undoubtedly came from a different information source entirely. The means to locate this hideout… The true method of killing Linaris that Hiroto mixed into the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist assault has to be somewhere in how the manor was located.*

Yuno the Distant Talon was not powerful. She was just a young girl. It seemed essentially impossible for her to hypothesize what sort of information sources the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists had at their disposal when she had never interacted with them before.

"That would be…"

While the period of silence had been very short, it felt like an absurdly long stretch of time.

In the moment, a second from death, fragments of her life unrelated to the present situation passed through her mind.

The day Nagan was destroyed. Her travels with Soujirou. What Haade had told her. The things she had talked about with Hiroto—

"…Kiyazuna the Axle."

It was her most intense memory.

Floating into the back of her mind, she thought that itself was her answer.

"Hm?"

"Kiyazuna the Axle is joined up with the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists. Isn't that right? I saw golems fighting together with the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists from above the treetops! Right now, the only Craft Arts caster in Aureatia who is capable of mass-producing a fresh golem force is Kiyazuna the Axle!"

"I see, I see…"

Zeljirga put her hand to her chin, pretending to be pondering Yuno's answer.

She had assuredly judged for herself if Yuno was pointing her finger at the right person.

"Kiyazuna, joined up with the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists, and came

to steal Mestelexil back…! The Gray-Haired Child has a connection with the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists and already had information on the attack ahead of time. He told me all of this, and that's why I came back first!"

She wove lies into the explanation, since the one driving this assault was none other than the Gray-Haired Child himself.

At the same time, everything she said was truth. Regardless of who was behind everything, the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists and the Gray-Haired Child were indeed connected to one another. Furthermore, it was in fact Hiroto the Paradox himself who told Yuno that there was going to be an attack.

Zeljirga was with Obsidian Eyes from the start and fought against Mestelexil… So Mestelexil really did get stolen by Obsidian Eyes, then. In which case, regaining control of Mestelexil would have to be the only possible motive for Kiyazuna to attack them like this.

"If that is the case, it is quite strange for the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist fellows to know about the location of our manor here, yes? I certainly doubt that they happened to stumble upon it while out for a leisurely stroll, however—"

"This is just a theory, but…" She took a deep breath after interrupting Zeljirga. However, the unrelated fragments of her life pieced together into one, and from it she gained a certain degree of conviction.

"I might know how. I traveled together with Soujirou the Willow-Sword and talked with him a great deal. About the languages they use in the Beyond, as well as all the weapons Soujirou defeated there, too. In the Beyond, their military forces and weaponry are set up to share information with each other on their location at all times, in order to allow them to adapt their tactics on the fly. Though, Soujirou was terrible at explaining it all to me…"

"Hmm, well, isn't that interesting? So, as an example, like that bird flock just now?"

"On a theoretical level, it is possible to transmit location information using these invisible waves, like how radzio calls work. Mestelexil is fitted with technology from the Beyond, right? Since Kiyazuna the Axle made him…it wouldn't be strange for her to be

capable of tracking him down, right?"

"*Ahyah-hyah-hyah-hyah!* I see, I see, what an intriguing explanation! But, of course, a Nagan scholar like yourself would be far more educated than I could ever hope to be! My lady absolutely loves hearing about such things, too!"

"I know. I've talked a lot with Linaris."

"Oh, silly me, I clearly must work on my manners! Here I am peppering my lady's dearest friend with all manner of rude questions. I imagine you will likely be saying all of this in front of her yourself no less. Now I've gone and stolen that delight from her ahead of time!"

Yuno had already been infected and turned into a corpse.

She would only be able to answer any questions from Linaris with the absolute unvarnished truth.

Right. I'm just buying time here. Obsidian Eyes possessed the most surefire method right from the start.

At the very least, she had managed to avoid being disposed of here.

She couldn't rest. She needed to head to Linaris's side.

"Zeljirga. Please tell Linaris what I've told you. I'll be…"

"Heading to the manor, yes?"

"That's right."

Yuno had just fulfilled her mission of informing Linaris about the danger, but even then she still felt the urge to go back.

She didn't want to relive the regret and despair of abandoning a friend.

"As you see, we have packed seats for today's performance. It seems that I will need to meet with another guest in a little while. You should follow this game trail here to the manor. It will be a bit of a roundabout path, but…I have gone ahead and cleared away some of my tricks for you."

"You did all of that before you even came over to me?"

"*Ahyah-hyah-hyah!* I may have forgotten to clear away some of them, or I may be accidently sending you down the wrong path entirely! Can you trust me?"

"I trust you. There's nothing untrue about my desire to help

Linaris." Yuno smiled slightly. "You certainly would have already seen through that, Zeljirga. Am I wrong?"

◆

On top of the bed, Linaris exhaled painfully.

She put a hand on her chest, over her thin white nightgown. Was this cold sensation because her body temperature had indeed cooled?

At the very least, she knew her coughing and difficulty breathing were from a pulmonary edema inducing heart failure.

She wouldn't be able to maintain consciousness for long.

The Old Kingdoms' Loyalists…should be mostly neutralized by now…

Even then, this was enough time for Linaris to suppress the armed force.

It was far easier to erase any trace of the bird flock that moved and hide themselves on their own, than it was for Mestelexil's bullets and cartridges, clearly a product of technology from the Beyond.

That's why I had Mestelexil clean up and dismantle the golems without letting him get in any fights with his firearms… The golem soldiers' remains could just as easily be a pretext for the Aureatia army to make their way here.

For this assault, neither victory nor retreat were the best courses of action.

A victory meant the scars of the battle would bring Aureatia to their heels, and fleeing meant their enemy would just come at them again.

Since the Gray-Haired Child sent the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists out to attack, despite having the mercenaries of the Free City of Okafu at his disposal, he still had the leeway to deny his direct involvement.

The rest of Obsidian Eyes, save for Linaris, needed to unknowingly form cooperative relationships with the Gray-Haired Child.

So the best plan is to pretend that it never happened at all*. We never crossed swords with the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists.*

The Gray-Haired Child was, without any doubt, an unfathomable monster, but he was a politician.

If they created an even more favorable situation for themselves, then there still remained a chance for harmony. It didn't appear that Yuno and Lendelt failed, or that negotiations had broken down, either.

In exchange for what little remaining life Linaris had, they wouldn't fight. If they did end up doing so, Obsidian Eyes would be seen as a threat and be eliminated as an enemy of all, just like the True Demon King.

After Linaris died, no one in Obsidian Eyes would survive. Her submission to the Gray-Haired Child had been the one choice that still preserved the smallest chance of Obsidian Eyes' survival.

"My lady."

There was a knocking sound from the hall.

"It's Wieze the Variation. I have captured the enemy's ringleader."

Linaris tried to answer herself, but her suffocated breathing left her unable.

Glancing over at Frey by her bedside, she told her to let him in.

"Wieze. Our lady is telling you to come in."

Frey replied in Linaris's stead.

Wieze was accompanied by a woman with a massive physique, larger than the average dwarf's. She had her eyes blindfolded, and her hands were bound behind her back.

Linaris already knew a few things about Caneeya the Fruit Trimming.

"Good day, Miss Caneeya the Fruit Trimming. My name is…Linaris. Please…forgive our harsh treatment."

She apologized in a voice so feeble, it may not have even reached Caneeya standing in front of her.

"What a lovely voice you have. I would have never guessed such a person to be the Obsidian."

"…No."

While she tried to remember not to let her reaction to such

comments show on her face, she figured she once again had a troubled look.

"I am not Obsidian."

The name was only appropriate for her father.

Until Linaris fulfilled her father's earnest wish, she couldn't even serve as his substitute.

"I see. A meaningless comment on my part. I understand what is going to happen here."

"…Miss Caneeya, there are some questions I wish to ask you."

Those defeated by a vampire would have all their information extracted out of them.

Corpses could not rise against a vampire's nervous system manipulation. Especially when facing the technique of the Obsidian, which unraveled nerve safeguards like solving a woodcraft puzzle to interfere with even deeper portions of the consciousness.

"Why did you attack this manor?"

She gave her question as though she was permeating Caneeya's brain with pure water.

Caneeya couldn't put up any resistance to the penetration.

"There were suspicions…that Aureatia was using a vampire as a weapon to destroy the hero candidates. We assaulted the manor in order to verify this and to use the evidence to strike against Aureatia…"

"…"

A groundless assumption.

During the True Demon King's era and among the peoples' conflicts, Obsidian Eyes had stained their hands with many dirty deeds.

Shouldering the destructive infamy and intrigue was also included in their work. Nevertheless, she could only view this excuse as little more than a pretext to entice the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists into attacking Obsidian Eyes.

If Linaris had awoken sooner and gotten information from her corpses inside the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist ranks, she may have been able to change where their blades were guided. While Linaris, the parent unit, was unconscious, the corpses only managed to continue

leaking information according to the commands previously instilled in them.

"How did you find this place? Who…told you all of this?"

She deliberately began to ask this question.

At the same time, Linaris manipulated Caneeya's psyche. This fact was imperceptible to both Frey and Wieze looking on at her side. Only the bare minimum manipulation needed—even if it was the Gray-Haired Child who actually incited the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists to make their move, she wasn't *going to let her say so*.

"Kaete the Round Table. Aureatia's former Fourth Minister… He said that he had arrived at this conspiracy to turn the hero candidates into corpses and the position of this hideout, from surveys done during his time in the Industrial Ministry… The fact that Obsidian Eyes was, in fact, based here corroborated his explanation."

"That is…*koff, koff*."

Coughing, she took time to steady her breathing.

…Terrifying. Even with how confident I am, I could easily slip into believing that the Gray-Haired Child was completely uninvolved. Although he incited an attack like this, Master Hiroto made it happen without interjecting almost any of his own demands, and as if the perpetrators wished to do it themselves*… Master Zigita Zogi had, from the very beginning, arranged the playing field to ensure Master Hiroto could accomplish such a feat.*

The reason Linaris was so firmly convinced that this was an attack from the Gray-Haired Child was because she knew that her envoy, Yuno the Distant Talon, had passed on the information regarding Rosclay and Haade's connection to the Gray-Haired Child.

Linaris trusted Yuno to use this fact as a bargaining chip in their negotiations, and in her secret orders to Lendelt, she had also instructed him to not silence Yuno for making said information known.

Even if use my vampire power to make her identify the "who" and the "how," I won't arrive at the answer. The real problem with this attack…is the "when." Why today, when the grand coup was guaranteed to happen…? Did he know he would be able to deceive Aureatia, even if he mobilized all these troops at once?

Zigita Zogi, having traced a course to inevitable victory with minute planning and daring action, had been the strongest strategist of all, as far as Linaris knew. If he had remained on the playfield, the Gray-Haired Child's victory would have been assured.

However, even after losing this strategist, Hiroto the Paradox was a terrifying foe. While he had not drawn the path for himself, he was connected to an unfathomable network of acquaintances. The supernatural power to make people's individual wills lock together like gears and mold them into a singular colossal monster.

"…Thank you kindly, Miss Caneeya the Fruit Trimming… I will have you…forget everything that happened in this room, but…I promise that both you, and your followers…*koff*…are not harmed any further."

Linaris felt mortified that these intermitted and disconnected words were all she could respond with.

Caneeya remained silent as Wieze led her out of the room.

"My lady, you must be exhausted."

"Thank you…for your concern…Miss Frey…"

When she laid her body back down, it only made her breathing even harder. Frey folded up blankets and stacked them between Linaris and the bed for her to lean against. This elderly house maiden was always the one looking after Linaris and cared for her like a mother.

Just how much could Linaris accomplish right now, while she was awake, for Obsidian Eyes until she was gone? If she went back to sleep now, there was a chance she would never awaken again.

Ever since her father had died, she hadn't managed to carry out even half of the mission she needed to finish.

While she thought Frey was certainly someone she could entrust it all to, she felt guilty to do so.

Before she closed her eyes, she gazed vacantly out at the room.

Her consciousness was hazy. She needed to finish everything while she could still wield distinct control.

She sent out her commands all at once to the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists, excluding Obsidian Eyes—from the targets they needed to attack, excluding golems and corpses, to the memory erasure

following the attack and shift to go on standby.

Kiyazuna and Kaete would be dealt with before long.

The evidence of any battle, including bodies and traces of gunfire, would be thoroughly destroyed by Mestelexil. When considering the worst-case scenario, was she then supposed to make him avoid any encounter with Kiyazuna?

After that, she hoped that Yuno would at least be alive and okay…

"I'm not sure how many years it's been since I left, but…"

The voice made Linaris's breath catch in her throat.

It was this voice that first informed the only two who were supposed to be in the room that there was another man inside. Not only that, but he had been lurking inside since before Wieze the Variation brought Caneeya inside.

Neither Frey the Waking, a battle-hardened veteran agent, nor Linaris herself, with her tight security net of numerous bird eyes watching the area, had sensed his approach at all.

"You've changed, my lady."

The voice's owner was leaning motionless up against the windowsill.

Once she noticed, it was plainly evident he was standing there, and yet no one had picked up on him at all.

There was only one person capable of slipping unseen through the security network of the greatest spy guild of all and reaching Linaris's private bedchambers.

"Master…Kuuro."

"Call anyone else here, and I'll kill you. Included whoever shows up."

It was a leprechaun wrapped in a brown coat. While he was even shorter in stature than a small young girl like Linaris, he was truly the most fearsome assassin in the entire land.

Kuuro's face was covered in harrowing burn scars. His bandages were wrapped haphazardly around his face less to heal them and simply to keep them hidden instead.

"You've come after all, Kuuro the Cautious…"

Frey the Waking had accepted his arrival.

It was in complete contrast to Linaris, who was fearful, her mind

racing.

"Yeah. You know already, right? With my Clairvoyance, it's not hard to evade radar or an avian surveillance network. I can see my lady's…the vampire's pheromones, too. Try to give a new order, and I'll kill you instantly."

"Mistress Frey."

"Please, my Lady, you do not need to worry."

Now that he had gotten this close to them, there wasn't the slightest hope of victory.

Linaris's control via airborne infection wouldn't have any effect, either. Kuuro had worked during the Particle Storm battle as a spotter for Aureatia and had been inoculated with the antiserum at the time. The only means they had to escape Obsidian Eyes' natural enemy was to maneuver in a way that avoided crossing paths with him.

The way to counteract Clairvoyance was to launch a wide-area saturation attack at a speed that vastly outpaced Kuuro the Cautious's reaction speed. The only one capable of that kind of attack anywhere nearby had to be Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge.

As long as Linaris was lying sick in bed, Obsidian Eyes was unable to move their base of operations.

Furthermore, if Mestelexil performed such a large-scale attack, they would be unable to keep their hideout's location concealed from Aureatia. Spraying a chemical weapon would leave no traces behind; nevertheless neither Linaris herself nor the Obsidian Eyes agents protecting her would get through it unharmed. Linaris also needed to avoid Mestelexil coming into direct contact with his creator, Kiyazuna the Axle—the option of letting Mestelexil fight at full strength posed too great of a risk to the future lying ahead.

Linaris's objective wasn't to wipe out her enemies or take over a nation. It was just to prolong Obsidian Eyes' life.

From the very beginning the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists were here to restrict our options around mobilizing Mestelexil… I'm sure that even if we had noticed Master Kuuro's approach, my heart couldn't have made that decision.

That wasn't all of it. There was one other reason why she wasn't able to predict Kuuro's appearance.

Why had he come here?

"Why…?"

"It's because you stopped Mestelexil's attack. From the very beginning, the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists were here to make you hesitate about attacking with Mestelexil. I'd guess the one who set up this whole situation never expected you'd be able to so easily suppress the situation yourself, my lady, but—"

"That's not what I mean! I don't mean why me, but…why do you have those scars, Master Kuuro…?!"

Her bewilderment and shock were greater than any fear for her life. Kuuro shouldn't have been involved in the Sixways Exhibition or a concern of Obsidian Eyes' operations at all.

Mobilizing Mestelexil to dispose of Kuuro the Cautious was a decision she never would have made. For starters, the idea of Kuuro attacking Obsidian Eyes itself was wholly unexpected to Linaris. She had ordered that he was the one person they needed to avoid fighting with, given his potential to become Obsidian Eyes' greatest enemy.

Why had he been reduced to such a wretched state? What exactly happened while she had been straddling the line between life and death, from the eighth match up until now?

"…Ah, these burns? Didn't think I'd be getting any sympathy there."

Kuuro's smile looked almost nihilistic.

"I was hit with a bombing attack from Mestelexil. Within Obsidian Eyes…is a traitor who acted on their own to try eliminating me. Frey the Waking… It's you."

"Mistress Frey…"

"Yes, yes."

Frey's voice was just as gentle and mild as ever.

"You're absolutely right."

Linaris coughed. She was pained, and frightened.

She couldn't comprehend why Frey had done it. She had thought Frey the Waking was the most loyal operative of all, serving Obsidian

Eyes since before Linaris was even born. To Linaris, she was like a mother figure.

Did she really not understand Frey the whole time? Had Frey never really trusted her? It was a terrifying, bone-chilling idea.

"You must have revealed yourself to ask me that, yes? You're correct. Completely independent of my lady…or anyone else, I ordered Mestelexil to attack you."

"Figured. You're not lying," the bearer of Clairvoyance declared.

Her body and mind were wasting away to nothing, and yet Linaris's brain alone tried to meaninglessly search for an answer. Nevertheless, if she was going to think, it needed to come before this situation worsened.

She never imagined that Frey would betray her. Did this mean that she was supposed to have used the techniques of Obsidian Eyes on Frey, like she did with all the corpse agents outside the organization, and dismantle her psyche until she was fully subordinate? Turn the woman who showed Linaris more parental care and affection than anyone else into a puppet lacking free will?

"We're in front of the Mistress. Give us the reason… I'll give you just enough time to spit it out."

"*Heeh-heeh-heeh*, oh, how very kind of you."

Frey's cane-staff technique was fast enough to cleave a body, armor and all, in two, but this too was meaningless.

Opposite Frey, her staff in hand, Kuuro didn't even have a weapon at the ready, but Frey must have known that at this distance, there was none who could overtake him.

"Though, perhaps…you're being quite merciless instead."

Frey put down her cane and walked closer to the bedside.

Though Linaris didn't have the stamina to raise herself up from the bed, she felt so terribly saddened that she quivered in fear at Frey's approach and drew her body back.

A wrinkle-laden hand gently patted Linaris's head.

"Nothing would make us safer than having you dead. In our battle against Zigita Zogi…in the worst-case scenario, were Zigita Zogi or Aureatia to employ you again, my lady's fate would be sealed. No matter how unlikely that case may be, it was something I

couldn’t overlook. Since, for my lady, even if she had been aware of this possibility…killing Kuuro the Cautious would surely be impossible.”

“I had no intention on joining up with Aureatia, the Gray-Haired Child, or Obsidian Eyes. You sent Lena the Obscured my way to check for yourselves. Assuming you rendered me unable to fight during your operation in the eighth match, did you think you could kill me for good? Frey… You know what I was in the old days. Why didn’t you realize that your own actions put your lady’s life in the most danger of all?”

“…*Heeh-heeh-heeh*. I see your omnipotent Clairvoyance isn’t able to see through everything after all, then. When you survived and resolved to get vengeance on Obsidian Eyes, your Clairvoyance *understood perfectly* what had happened no matter what, yes? You see, since the one who ordered Mestelexil…the one you’re meant to kill isn’t our lady, but myself instead.”

“…”

Linaris listened to the conversation, feeling as if she was suffocating.

The cold terror beating in her heart wasn’t because she couldn’t understand Frey, but because she was beginning to comprehend what Frey had been thinking, and why she betrayed her.

“*Nhg…Nhah*!…*Hn, koff, koff.*”

“It’s okay, my lady… Yes, there is no need to fear. None at all…”

Frey was thinking of Linaris.

However, this was the one thing Linaris didn’t want taken from her. She didn’t desire anything else.

“Kuuro. Even these old eyes of mine would never misjudge a former compatriot. I know your style very well. *My death alone* will serve as retribution for the attack. As long as we claimed victory in our battle with Zigita Zogi, losing an old bag of bones like me wasn’t going to change the outcome of the greater picture.”

“…Even if you lost like you have now.”

Kuuro murmured. His tone was horribly bitter and loathsome.

“No, even if you did win…you’d be able to give the Mistress freedom, no longer tied down by Obsidian Eyes. That was your

thinking, then… What a selfish idea. Do you have any idea how much the Mistress cared about you…?”

Frey simply smiled and shook her head.

Miss Frey.

Linaris’s golden eyes still remained open, yet the unconsciously pooled tears began to stream down her cheeks. It was exactly as Kuuro said, a very selfish and cruel thing.

Did she really think that my suffering was all for the sake of Obsidian Eyes? Is there really any other happiness out there for me beyond the family I’ve shared joy and hardship with my whole life? Up until now, I’ve never stopped trying to ensure I wouldn’t lose anyone else…

Her thoughts bubbled up one after another, but she hadn’t the courage to put them into words.

She was supposed to save Frey, yet if Frey herself didn’t wish for happiness, then what exactly had Linaris been trying to accomplish, and what was the meaning of all the sacrifices that had been made along the way?

“My lady… My lady Linaris. These are to be my last words. I ask that you listen well.”

Frey rubbed Linaris’s back like a parent soothing a child.

A warm hand. The same voice Frey always had.

“We of Obsidian Eyes…are so very fortune to be able to cherish and show consideration to one another. It is a blessing we could have never even hoped for during your father Rehart’s time. However…that happiness can only be maintained by devouring the happiness of others and continuously sucking on their blood.”

“No… That’s not true, that’s not true…!”

“You are intelligent and beautiful. You could have had true happiness. Instead of traveling along with those who should have died together with the end of war, you could’ve made friends like Miss Yuno, used your talents properly…and chosen a path free of sin, interacting with a variety of people. Even knowing all of this…your humble servant Frey possessed neither the courage to choose death for myself, nor to leave your side.”

“It’s far too late to make yourself sound so high-minded. If you

truly wished in your heart for the Mistress to be free from everything, you should've done all of this before she stained her hands… You're too late."

"*Heh-heh-heh*. Yes. Of course. That is quite right. However…even your omnipotent Clairvoyance is unable to comprehend what I hold in my heart, it seems."

Frey the Waking smiled.

"Neither the happiness I felt, unable to have a family of mine…to love and be loved like a parent and child—"

However, she didn't show this final smile to Linaris.

A black, wicked smile.

Kuuro was the only one looking at Frey's true face.

"Nor the wicked urge…to hoard that happiness for myself for all eternity."

"…You admit it in front of the Mistress, then."

"*Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh*."

"I'm following the way Obsidian Eyes does it. I decided that before I killed you, I wanted you to taste the greatest amount of agony I could."

Frey left Linaris's side on her own.

Kuuro pointed a submachine gun at Frey.

With her sickly body, Linaris couldn't even reach out her hands to pull Frey back.

"—and now, I've done just that."

His Clairvoyance eye, glimmering blue, looked as merciless as the eyes of a hawk.

"M-Master Kuuro… Please, forgive her. I, I will atone for what happened however you wish. So, please, I-I beg you… Please forgive Miss Frey…"

"Bringing appropriate reprisal to the appropriate person—that's the Obsidian Eyes way. The one responsible for leading an organization needs to be given a suitable punishment for their organization's actions. I showed myself here and revealed the whole story to you *to deliver exactly that*."

"No!"

Linaris let out a shriek like the dying gasps of a rent throat.

The windows all broke apart, and black birds surged into the room.

Mestelexil's long-range gunshot rushed through walls and terrain at the leprechaun.

Kuuro merely moved two steps to the side.

None of them hit Kuuro the Cautious, as if the outcome had been settled from the beginning.

"Watch and suffer."

Then, he pulled the submachine gun trigger.

Together with the sound of bursting gunpowder, Frey's small body danced helter-skelter.

Her arm and her legs wriggled violently, and what were once fingertips, eyeballs, were reduced to simple flesh before scattering. She grew distorted. Torn apart. Everything was shaved away, rendered into something that could never be once more.

The same person who had been lovingly hugging Linaris moments prior was gone.

Lost in her despair, Linaris didn't remember what sort of scream she let out.

Everything around her descended into darkness and began to disappear.

◆

Battles against Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge were not always without survivors.

During the sixth match of the Sixways Exhibition, Zeljirga the Abyss Web, matched against Mestelexil, used her superb dexterity and several breaches of the rules to buy herself time and pierced through a gap in the invincible machinery.





Toroa the Awful, clashing with Mestelexil during the Particle Storm's invasion, battled on his own and fought for even longer than Zeljirga. Beyond that, he had managed to kill Mestelexil and his raw overwhelming power, several times.

Normally, such a thing could never happen. The ones capable of *fighting him at all* were those powerful enough to outstrip all knowledge.

A battle between a shura and the non-shura was settled the moment it began.

If there was the slightest possible chance of that not happening, though…

"Exil io shaltes." (From Exil to Shaltes chicken.) It was nothing more than a problem of priorities.

"Hasyites opcrait zit desnacter jal del hal tatzilidor. Datara." (Where drought and typhoon content swing and detach death's edge shadow of the glen where muddy yellow beasts come. Terminate.) Word Arts were the construction and communication of a will. A technique cast by understanding a target and weaving words. As such, the time needed to make use of them was not always guaranteed to be in proportion to the length and complexity of the incantation.

With that in mind, Mestelexil's incantations were far too instantaneous.

The carcasses that Mestelexil had crushed to death as he landed, and two golem soldiers in addition to those, *vanished*.

The composition of body and life was directly broken down and rendered into dust indistinguishable from the forest soil.

Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge was in and of himself an unparalleled construct weapon, but at the same time, he was also —theoretically—the ultimate Craft and Life Arts caster, surpassing even Kiyazuna the Axle.

When dealing with soulless constructs, her skills were practically the stuff of fairy tales, casting Word Arts capable of dissecting her targets alive. Even without using these advanced Word Arts at her disposal, there were several more efficient methods of destroying Mestelexil.

While Linaris the Obsidian lacked the knowledge regarding weapons of the Beyond, she had come up with a completely different way to utilize Mestelexil compared to Kaete's camp—using his immense Word Art abilities not for creation but for erasure.

They're destroying the evidence. Thoroughly destroying it at that.

With Mestelexil putting a priority on dismantling the golems with his dreadful craft, it created time for Kaete and Kiyazuna to think and make their next move. Kiyazuna manipulated something in her hands.

Almost at the exact second the information from his optical nerves produced an image in his brain, Kaete's body went into action.

He kicked off the ground. He rushed toward Mestelexil, through the thick of the avian throng.

"Kiyazna io—" (From Kiyazuna—)

"Ceite io woletzhigen!" (From Kaete to Wolehshigen cloth!) Together with Mestelexil from moments prior, all three had begun to incant Word Arts the exact instant they encountered each other.

The gap in Word Arts speed indicated the disparity in the ability to weave one's will as a Word Arts caster.

Kaete's initial move lagged the most behind. Even Kiyazuna the Axle, a monstrous self-proclaimed demon king who had single-handedly held sway over the world, was far slower than Mestelexil.

"Orunastea jiodestas varthalter gest nemlords djai gaddazia boqarsones—" (Like a luminescent axle, form geometry of interstellar waves of sand reach the edge of the azure stone and amethyst prism—) *"Higarp…"* (Shellfish ranging.)

Kiyazuna's Word Arts were bizarre, complex, wholly abnormal.

What?

This was fundamentally different from Mestelexil, who was capable of immediately generating incantations with his advance computational abilities. Kaete wasn't sure if even *the* Kiyazuna the Axle could properly use Word Arts this complex.

"Nyaie ozard. Licraxia!" (Clock, vivid wings!)

Even as he ran, his Word Arts continued. While shouting the two-word clauses, he moved forward through the fray.

Five mechanical silhouettes attacked Mestelexil from up in the air.

The golem soldiers Kiyazuna had ordered to assemble made it in time, by a stroke of good luck.

With two punches, Mestelexil blew apart two of the remaining golems guarding the cave and prioritized taking care of the reinforcements. From both arms, he created whips of steel wire that glowed red hot.

The wires, laced with heat, tore apart the five golems' plating without any resistance and dismantled them beyond all recognition.

Within the scene of black-bird feathers dancing wildly around, metallic fragments scattered and glittered in the sunlight peeking through the trees.

Mestelexil's singular red eye trailed after him as he turned toward Kaete.

"Art syalda art kotord quast qiden worednas bigger nayao ae olkisma—" (Inherit in perpetuity the brilliant stone pillar's, arriving with glitter, last cornerstone's progenitor specialization and apprehension, consecrate, to extreme—) *"Sito!"* (Weave!)

Everything had happened in the single moment it took Kaete the Round Table to finish his Word Arts, while Kiyazuna the Axle still continued her incantation.

The Word Arts Kaete invoked were very simple: protective gear repairs.

Recognizing their encounter, the first choice he made was to take over the problem that *proceeded* handling Mestelexil. In the middle of the black birds' unending assault, he bought as much time as possible for them to move without letting Kiyazuna get infected.

While the protective gear he repaired might have immediately gotten pecked and destroyed, it was faster to end this situation altogether than handle that, whether it meant their death or not.

"Th-there is one, still alive! Who could it be?!"

Covered from head to toe in protective gear, Mestelexil pondered their true identities.

This, too, may have given them an ever so tiny bit of time.

During that brief moment, Mestelexil—

"Ha-ha!"

—decided without any hesitation to kill them.

The supersonic shock wave rushed past Kaete as he charged.

A damp smack echoed behind him.

Then, there was gunfire. He didn't have any moment to spare a look backward, yet there was only one person behind Kaete who could've made that noise from inside the rock-enclosed hole.

Grams—

He felt anger. Anger at his whole soul for reacting with bewilderment and anguish amid such an urgent situation.

Hadn't he studied under Kiyazuna the Axle because he couldn't accept such weakness?

"Mestelexil!"

"Ah!"

Jumping forward with a single sword, Kaete surely came off as a fool seeking his own death.

Despite immediately running forward as soon as they encountered each other, there were still three paces of space between them.

After several coincidences, and Kiyazuna's sacrifice, still three more paces.

"Ah—!"

In a moment that allowed him to shrink the gap by a step and a half, Mestelexil malfunctioned.

Just like the flamethrower that had driven off the bird swarm, Kiyazuna installed weapons of the Beyond, left behind by Mestelexil, in the golems accompanying her. The instant Kiyazuna was cognizant of their encounter with Mestelexil, she had remotely operated some of them.

The weapon that had caused the malfunction in Mestelexil had fortunately escaped the dissembling Word Arts Mestelexil brought with his arrival and had been loaded into one of the golems that was destroyed by the follow-up punch. The weapon was known as a HPEM generator.

Generating a very short-range EMP, it caused electric circuits to malfunction.

"Kastam…roll…moresdes…jakza! Nabead…! Dedcal!" (Twisted…

hexagonal crystal's…great rainbowed…dove's blood! Wisteria flower…! Rodgersia Bronze-leaf!) Thin, rasping Word Arts continued on behind Kaete.

Grams… She's still alive…!

The momentary malfunction threw off the aim of Mestelexil's shot. She had avoided instant death.

Right. Now he understood.

He couldn't give up. He couldn't yield.

Kiyazuna the Axle wouldn't do it, no matter how hopeless the situation may have been.

"Exil io mestel. Nio biq basteroid. Sakragetten. Kibvartia Tafait." (From Exil to Mestel. Thulite is ruddily sweet. The extremes of weaponry. Earth-quaking antenna. Hide.) Exil's Craft Arts instantly restored electric circuit functionality. It was too fast.

Now he understood.

The time amounted to less than a single second, but Kaete got it.

Kiyazuna used an EMP to force Exil into *resetting* Mestel's state. Even if Mestel's construction might have changed while in Obsidian Eyes' hands, for this single moment of recovery, his internal construction would return to how it had been. In other words, to the construction of Mestelexil that Kiyazuna was familiar with.

Word Arts, meanwhile, had a more powerful effect the deeper one understood their target and wove words to reach their soul.

In which case, for the one who loved and understood Mestelexil better than any other living being in the land…

"Kyastal!" (Open!)

The grandest Word Arts Kiyazuna the Axle had incanted bore fruit.

Mestelexil's main body, down to the interior, shattered like crystal beads. The preservative amniotic fluid gushed out like blood, and the fetus-like homunculus was exposed.

Word Arts capable of dissecting a target alive were the type of skills only spoken of in fantasy.

I made the right decision.

Why did Kaete not hesitate to rush straight at Mestelexil?

Why had he only prioritized defending against the bird attacks?

Thinking about it now, there hadn't been any logical reason at all. He understood what he needed to do faster than any spoken arrangement with his master would've conveyed to him.

Kaete was a civilian official, but his talent and skills with a sword were on par with any military officer.

It should have been easy to run the fragile homunculus through.

I was right, and even then—

One single step. After just one more step.

He hadn't hesitated a moment to rush out, yet he was still one pace too far from piercing Mestelexil's core.

Mestelexil moved first. If he repaired his armor plating, Kaete lost any chance at victory, and if he was then hit by Mestelexil's punch, his body would burst apart. Either one would have finished before he could take the final step.

"—"

However, at that moment—

Mestelexil acted abnormally.

He transformed the back of his fuselage without repairing his chest area.

The Gatling gun barrel, sprouting out crookedly, turned toward the mansion and fired randomly in that direction. Kaete felt the only possible explanation was the vampire parent unit had given him an extremely flurried command.

Before he considered everything about the phenomenon happening in front of him…

"I…"

Kaete the Round Table took his final step forward.

His whole body had been pecked by birds. The protective gear had been torn open, and half his head was exposed.

He didn't stop for an instant.

"…win! Victory's mine, Mestelexil!"

Kaete stabbed his longsword at a precise angle, and in the motion to return his sword, pulled out the homunculus core.

Smacking it down to his feet, he crushed with the soles of his shoes.

The pale, immature flesh splattered and melted like bubbles

between the dead leaves.

All the heartbeats in that condensed moment came to him at once, and the hot blood flow seemed to burn his brain.

The black birds that had blanketed the forest all lifted up into the sky at once.

"Ngh, urngh, hnnnnnngh."

Mestel let out a groan that resembled white noise and began to restore his core Exil.

"Haah, haah, haaah…"

After the blood flow, next Kaete's sweat and breathing assailed him all at once.

The flight of death had barely lasted ten paces.

It was a miracle. It was the only way he could describe it.

In this single moment, so many layers of coincidences, strategy, and sacrifice had— "…Grams!"

Kaete turned around.

Blood was thickly splattered over the cave's rock walls.

Slumped there was Kiyazuna the Axle.

She had no right arm. It was blown clean off by Mestelexil's gunfire.

"*Hah,* here I thought…you'd be an immature snot-nosed punk forever, but…"

Kiyazuna opened up the head section of her protective gear and struggled to breathe.

Kaete could tell that in her current state, she wouldn't have been able to get enough oxygen otherwise.

"Ya really did it, Kaete…"

"Idiot! Forget about me! You're taking Mestelexil back, aren't you?! You can still do it, Grams!"

"*Hah*, that ain't it, though… I wasn't looking to take him back, see…"

Kiyazuna gazed at Mestelexil, looking fully content.

She looked at her very own child, who had finally escaped from being under anyone else's control.

"M-Ma…ma…"

Mestelexil murmured with a shaky voice.

He had long finished restoring himself, yet, he could only vacantly look at the scene before him, unable to move.

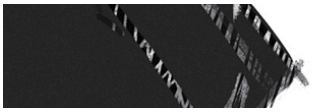
"Yer free."

Even as she suffered fatal wounds, the force behind Kiyazuna's wounds was unchanged.

"Free to do anything. The pretty, the ugly…all of it is…yers now. Anyone crosses you, go ahead and pummel 'em dead, and anything you want…you take for yerself."

"M-Mama! I'm sorry! Mama!"







"It's fine."

Kaete watched as the most brutal and savage self-proclaimed demon king in the whole land, Kiyazuna the Axle, smiled from the heart.

"I'm satisfied, 'slong as yer laughing…Mestelexil…"

◆

Kuuro the Cautious's Clairvoyance perceived everything about the battle occurring in the forest.

For now, at least, Mestelexil's been neutralized.

When he exited into the hallway from the blood-soaked bedchamber, Kuuro sensed the conclusion of the battle.

On his back, he carried the now unconscious Linaris the Obsidian.

Carrying a person like this was familiar work to Kuuro, yet even when discounting that fact, he thought her body was very light and delicate.

While a few events were outside my speculations, everything happened as I had foreseen. *So long as there was a trigger for some randomness… Kiyazuna the Axle and Kaete the Round Table had made all the preparations to upset an absolute victory.*

A miraculous victory that involved several compounding layers of normally inconceivable luck to come together.

It was a fact that left no room for dispute. Even if they replayed the same events under the same circumstances thousands upon thousands of times, there was no other possibility for the two of them to win over Mestelexil.

Still, was it all truly luck?

At the very least, he had manipulated the instant that Linaris had impulsively controlled Mestelexil. Kuuro the Cautious understood beforehand at which point him taking action would lead to the best result.

Kuuro's Clairvoyance was capable of pulling together information that even he was unconscious of and occasionally predicting the future.

They were very thin prospects, the kind I was only barely able to forecast from observing the situation. I, Enu…and the contriver of this whole situation, the Gray-Haired Child, were saved by the strength of those two.

Given he was leading Linaris away from here, any sort of cover movements, like during his initial infiltration, were all but impossible.

If Mestelexil was still guarding the area, he never would have been able get out of the forest.

Now that that possibility had been fully eliminated, Kuuro would need to accept he was going to have a certain number of clashes and encounters from here.

"Put down our Mistress."

The voice had come practically from the floor.

There was someone lying in wait with silent footsteps behind Kuuro as he exited into the hall.

Linaris's scream was surely heard throughout the entire manor.

"Fair enough. With the Mistress on my back, both my hands are busy."

He replied without turning around.

Kuuro didn't make any movement to initiate an attack.

"Probably hard for me to move very quickly, too. Even then, do you really think you can beat me…Wieze?"

"Get your hands off her."

"Looks like words aren't enough to get through to you."

Kuuro murmured and kicked his heel up behind him.

The chakram aimed at his gut slanted off course and dug halfway into the wall.

Without turning his sights backward, Kuuro could see that Wieze already had numerous others ready to throw. A marksman like Wieze didn't pay any consideration to his own defense. He was trying to cut Kuuro to pieces with a series of point-blank throws, regardless of whether it would lead to both their deaths. Wieze also had the skills to ensure none of his throws hit Linaris while saddled on Kuuro's back.

However, Kuuro could see through *this level of attack*.

"I didn't plan on killing anyone else besides Frey, but…"

A tiny metallic clanging sound echoed through the corridor.

What appeared to be a thin metal can slowly rolled out from the open bedchamber door.

"!"

There was a flash of light. For Wieze, the impact felt as if he had been directly punched in the brain.

By the time the explosive blast split his ears, he had lost his sense of direction.

An M84 stun grenade.

"Gaaugh…!"

"Beyond weaponry's really well made. Normal weapons would've made it a lot harder to get by you without bloodshed."

Kuuro calmly murmured as he was showered in the same blast and blinding light.

A stun-grenade attack happened by giving a stimulation that far exceeded what a normal person could handle, and thus against someone wielding Clairvoyance, processing a tremendous degree of sensory information at all times, it had no effect whatsoever.

Now, the corpsified Caneeya the Trimming is the only one left here in the manor. She won't make a move. Zeljirga is searching for any troops laying in ambush around the forest, but…given her route, she'll turn her attention to losing control over Mestelexil before she discovers Enu. The last person…won't pose a problem necessarily, but…

Disordered footsteps turned the corner into the hall and rushed toward him.

The running wasn't prompted by the previous explosion but had been aimed straight at the bedchamber from the start.

"Linaris…! Linaris!"

"You're Yuno the Distant Talon, then."

It was a young girl with her brown hair in a braid. He had already heard her name before.

The conversation she and Zeljirga shared had all been within the perceptible range of his Clairvoyance.

Yuno was frightened, gulping back the saliva in her mouth.

"Wh-what're you doing?!"

"I don't intent to kill you or Linaris. Saving Linaris is what you want, isn't it?"

"…"

Yuno stayed silent for a long pause. She was desperately thinking through something.

"…Th-then…that means you must be…the one that the Gray-Haired Child arranged to take Linaris to a doctor…right?"

She's quick to catch on.

Kuuro was impressed that the most insignificant girl in this current situation immediately arrived at the truth of the matter. Even after hearing the Gray-Haired Child's evasive and roundabout answer, she wouldn't be able to arrive at such a fact without the ability to think through everything from her enemy's perspective.

"Look at the situation. Linaris will die unless a doctor sees her immediately. The only way you have to accomplish your goal is to do nothing at all."

"In which case, I'm going with you! Let me come along…!"

"Give it up."

"Do you have any idea what's going to be done to Linaris where you're taking her?! The Gray-Haired Child is trying to get revenge on Linaris! I'm sure—"

"Doesn't concern me."

Kuuro started walking.

While it would've been better to convince her to back down, his only choice might have been to knock her unconscious first.

In any case, he couldn't join back up with Enu while a person like Yuno was in tow.

"*That time* is now… I have to protect her…!'

"Don't do it."

Yuno touched the arrowhead inside her sleeve. Kuuro could see it.

While he could have stopped her from making the move at any point, he hadn't.

Since it was nothing but literal, self-destructing behavior.

"Hrnk…!"

Yuno the Distant Talon simply collapsed where she stood.

With her own arrowhead, she cut deeply into the artery on her wrist and was losing blood.

"What're you trying to do here? What will killing yourself in front of me accomplish?"

"I-I'm not…killing myself… You're taking Linaris to see a doctor, right…?"

"…"

The blood was gushing out, creating a line through the dark hallway.

"Even if you stop the bleeding…if I'm not brought to a doctor soon, I-I'll die… *Heh-heh*… No one's ever going to come through a forest like this, after all…"

It was bizarre. She didn't even possess Clairvoyance to show her with certainty how things would play out, so how could she do such a thing?

"Now I really don't get what you're talking about… What reason do I have to save you from offing yourself? Whether you live or die has no bearing on my job here whatsoever."

"…You're really fine with this?"

Yuno weakly smiled while lying face down on the ground.

"…One of Linaris's friends is going to die, you know…"

"—"

Even Clairvoyance, capable of predicting behavior, any and all physical phenomena, was unable to penetrate a person's mind.

Just as Kuuro had been unable to see into the darkness within Frey's heart.

This girl's…

From the moment she had encountered Kuuro, she *had picked up on* his relationship with Obsidian Eyes.

She had thought up this fatal gambit to make use of that relationship in an instant— —that Kuuro the Cautious was bound to help out and save Linaris's friend.

"Linaris was always…telling me about you…"

…No joke.

He felt Linaris's weak body heat on his back.

The clinic had burned to the ground. Toroa the Awful died, and

Kuuro now suffered as he did.

Kuuro's own softness and naïveté had invited all of it. He had decided that he wouldn't hesitate to stain his hands with whatever killing was necessary.

If he was going to make Linaris feel the same pain he had felt by losing a friend, this would've been a suitable punishment, wouldn't it?

"…Your name is Kuuro the Cautious. No, the Clairvoyance…"

He had a memory of talking to her about the outside world that she couldn't see from the window of her bedchambers.

Linaris's very young, beautiful smile.

The young girl had adored him, the assassin who had dirtied his hands more than any other, like a hero.

What the hell does she take me for?

CHAPTER 3 Climax

Along a canal in the second borough of Aureatia's Outer Western Ward, there walked a woman with grizzled hair.

Flames rose up from the city on the other side of the river. A new battle was beginning. There were screams and gunshots.

The young soldiers of Iriolde's army, burning with ideals and ambitions, must have been boldly squaring off with the Aureatia army. They believed that, surely, they would claim victory and be able to overthrow Aureatia.

—The massive coup was over.

While for many involved, it may have only just started, for Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam, it was all long since finished.

"What a terrible mess."

She nihilistically murmured as she watched the black smoke from the far shore, blowing upward like a monster's breath.

Tuturi was a deserter. Leaving the countless soldiers under her command behind, she had fled.

Her dry coughing never stopped. In the ninth match she had led her troops to their death, risked her life, ultimately entrusted the task to Psianop, and miraculously managed to slay Lucnoca, and this was the end result.

"*Koff*, *koff*… This really how it all ends…? *Hah, ha-ha*."

Haade the Flashpoint, who Tuturi served under, had been communicating with Rosclay's camp from the very beginning. In order to dispose of insurrectionists like her all at once, he had sent them out to meet an absolute slaughter.

Every part of their operation had been leaked to Aureatia, and there was no chance of any reinforcements.

Everything was over. Was Tuturi just going to die like this?

She couldn't envision any other future for herself, but it still didn't

seem real to her yet.

Right now, she lived. She breathed, her heart pounded, and thoughts were in her head.

Despite all of that, was she really, truly, going to be the one to die by herself?

"H-hell, it would've been better…to just get killed by Lucnoca, without knowing a thing…"

She wondered why she ended up choosing all of this.

She didn't have any fervent beliefs or relatively personal history as a reason.

She played make-believe war games, moving wooden pawns by herself. She never had any friends who shared her interests, so Tuturi was always on the side of the Kingdom's Army, the righteous force taking down foreign invaders.

After learning that the kingdom she had admired in her childhood as stronger and more righteous than any other had never fought with just and honest strength to begin with…she simply entertained the whim that maybe *she could do that*, too.

"Tuturi, you have nowhere to go, yes? You might be better off resting for a bit."

A lanky, tall old man walked behind Tuturi.

He was Romzo the Star Map. The failure from the First Party, who had always betrayed everything and everyone, didn't despair at the fact that this large-scale coup had been an Aureatian setup from the start, nor that the two of them had been abandoned.

"Can you just forget about me…and piss off somewhere? Having you looking at my back, I mean, not sure anyone'd feel safe doing that… You know how everyone sees you?"

"Hmm. Can't say I really do. Wouldn't that go for everyone?"

This man was unable to distinguish hostility or betrayal from anything else.

After fighting the True Demon King, *this* was how he had ended up. Without ever gaining trust from Rosclay, Haade, or Tuturi, he simply continued to survive, strong and alone.

From the very start, Tuturi's reason for having Romzo accompany her had been to dispose of him for good during the operation. At

this point, now that everything was truly finished, that too had lost all meaning.

"…You're real pathetic."

The smell of the river carried on the blustering wind.

Was that really true? Tuturi was probably a lot more wretched than Romzo.

She had merely wanted to show pity on him to comfort her for her own sorry state.

"Tuturi."

"…?"

The footsteps following behind her had stopped before he spoke.

There weren't signs of anybody on the paved embankment road. It was early morning.

However, in her sights up ahead, she could see what appeared to be a round black garden stone.

The amount of light simply made the scenery look black, but in reality, it was a transparent ooze.

There was only one person that Romzo would purposefully stop for.

"Psianop…"

Tuturi's gut told her this wasn't a coincidence.

Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was able to precisely estimate and trace his enemy's tracks and thought patterns.

If Psianop had intentionally located them like this…

"Sorry, but…I don't have time to sit 'round chatting. *Koff*, the Aureatia army might come to bump us off at any moment…"

"Did you kill Qwell the Wax Flower?" Psianop curtly asked.

Tuturi felt cold. An icy sweat traced her brow.

In the ninth match, Tuturi had used Psianop in her operation to slay Lucnoca.

In the process, she had ordered Romzo to brutally murder his sponsor, Qwell the Wax Flower.

She didn't know how exactly Psianop had arrived at the truth. Whatever the case, she should have already steeled herself for the inevitability.

I need to think or I'm dead. What should I say here to survive?

Tuturi needed to think of an answer worth an entire lifetime, in the time it took for one of her beads of sweat to finally fall.

She needed to end the battle, all alone, in her mind.

Pin the blame on Romzo? Offer to sponsor him in Qwell's stead? Blurt out everything about Aureatia's scheming? I made the right call… If I hadn't killed Qwell, then Psianop would've been in danger himself. Am I supposed to come clean and push back at him? Or would Psianop…be satisfied with a heartfelt apology? Would you people *feel satisfied to make the weak grovel on the ground?*

At the end of her extreme line of thought, the words came spilling from her mouth.

"Okay, Psianop, now just listen… See, I—"

In the middle of her sentence, her intestines twisted.

The flesh and bones inside her torso were folding together from the inside.

A thumb was pointed up against her back.

"Rom…zo…"

Tuturi groaned with the last breath left in her lungs.

Romzo looked down at Tuturi, now with no hint of her minian shape remaining.

When the fatal pressure point—knotting flesh and bone together—was pressed with superhuman strength, this was how the body ended up.

Romzo the Star Map, for no reason whatsoever, betrayed Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam.

"Ah, sorry." Romzo the Star Map flashed a wide, pleased smile. "You were getting in the way of our chat."

◆

The First Party didn't always travel with all eight members together at once.

It was the generic monicker of three groups of powerful figures who were occasionally cooperative, occasionally antagonistic, and occasionally moved between each other's groups. The only time they

would actually pool their strength together was when they gathered for the last time, to defeat the True Demon King.

For example, Fralik the Heaven and Yugo the Moving Decapitation Blade, both wandering champions from before the age of the Demon King, were well known as the first group of the First Party.

Izick the Chromatic and Neft the Nirvana, powerful figures on the outside of minian society, formed a collaborative relationship under their shared goal in eradicating the True Demon King, while secretly intending to never let down their guard around each other.

Conversely, the group of the strongest gathered from within minian society consisted of Romzo the Star Map, Lumelly the Poisoned Ground, and Alena the Benighted White Wind. Psianop, without a second name of his own, was with them.

Psianop, having traveled a long time, didn't necessarily stay with that group, either. He remembered accompanying Fralik and watching Yugo fight, and when Neft had protected him from Izick's threats to "modify" him—the memories were still fresh in his mind, even now.

Nevertheless, he had the most memories of his travels with Romzo's group.

The meal provided to them that day at their lodgings was first-class, a rare treat for the past several days.

The chicken, lathered and grilled in a fruit sauce, was juicy, with fragrant charred marks on its surface.

Psianop himself didn't fancy such meals, but it had to be a feast to the minians.

"Oh, wait."

A mere second before Alena could take one of the carved-up pieces of meat, Romzo snatched away the scrap with his fork.

Their forks never touched one another. It appeared as if Alena's movements had been perfectly predicted.

"Hmm. It's still a bit difficult for you, Alena, it seems."

Romzo quietly partook in his newly secured meal, while opposite him, Alena slumped his shoulders in disappointment.

The faint-hearted Alena was a young man possessing prodigious and unparalleled talents with a spear, but on this day, Romzo had seen through him in the same way enough times to lose three pieces of meat.

"Why, though? You're not even moving that fast…"

"Picking up on that is a good start. If you didn't have any understanding at all, you'd mistakenly believe I had moved faster than you. I'm going to end up repeating myself here, but…watch your opponent, not the meat. Read their emotional forewarning."

"But, that's not like their breathing or pulse, right? You *always* have the same look on, Master Romzo! 'Emotional forewarning'…? Like hell I'd be able to pick on that!"

Alena held his head in his hands.

The events of the meal weren't mere entertainment, but a part of their training regimen.

Romzo was a master of his craft and in the prime of his life; however, he indicated that if he had the young prodigy Alena the Benighted White Wind inherit these techniques, now honed by his seasoned years, perhaps one day Alena would succeed in defeating the True Demon King.

"You've been able to conceal and read emotional forewarnings for a long time yourself, Alena, lad. It was all just done unconsciously. You only display it when fighting. Once you can consciously control it…"

"Ah!"

Romzo had grabbed Alena's wrist as the young man unconsciously thrust out his fork.

"You thought I moved just now, hmm? You can purposefully show forewarnings to your enemy like this. The ability to utilize it at will, instead of masking your mind haphazardly, is the first completed form to aim for."

"Can I actually *eat* something here?"

Alena's voice sounded on the verge of tears.

"That's amazing." On the other hand, watching this back-and-forth, Psianop simply sat in admiration.

He spoke to the black-haired girl next to him, spinning a feather

top in boredom.

"C'mon, Lumelly. We should do that, too."

Lumelly had untied her usual double ponytail. Unlike Alena and Romzo, she generally only ate vegetables and fruit.

"Like I'd fight over that slushy slop of leftovers you love so much. Trying to kill me with food poisoning?"

"Fine, fine, we can go with slushy fruit instead!"

"So *rotten* fruit then, right?"

Lumelly the Poisoned Ground was a powerful fighter who utilized the fantastical and aberrant Word Arts she was innately gifted with. Her black, gnawing Heat Arts would overwrite even a dragon's breath attack. In all of history, there wasn't anyone else who had been able to wield these techniques.

Psianop would never been able to fight like Lumelly, but maybe, just maybe, he could get closer to how Romzo and Alena fought. In order to continue traveling with them, and provide whatever little fighting power he could, Psianop watched and learned from them in his own way.

"Now that I think about it, Master Romzo, Psianop doesn't even have a face, right? Can you read his emotions, too?"

"Of course I can. He's probably the easiest to read."

"What?! Okay then, go ahead and try!"

Psianop crawled along the floor and asserted himself at Romzo's feet— "I'm going to take some meat, too."

"You don't even eat meat."

Lumelly jeered from the corner of the room.

Right now, he thought. Surely, Romzo wouldn't expect Psianop to act so quickly— "Ah!"

"See? I knew instantly."

His piece of meat got stolen after all.

Romzo exhibited the same composure as always, but there was a slightly teasing glint in his smile.

Perhaps the whole reason Romzo had suggested this type of training was simply because he wanted more meat for himself.

"You're still an immature kid, Psianop."

"Hmmm, what are these emotional forewarnings, anyway…? How

long do you think I'll need to practice?"

Romzo smiled.

"Ten years, I'd say."

◆

Twenty-one years had gone by.

"I'm asking a question. Answer me. You killed Qwell the Wax Flower, didn't you?"

Psianop once again asked Romzo the Star Map.

Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam, having walked together with Romzo just moments prior, was dead. Folded up in a ball by the contracting of her own muscular strength, she was now casually collapsed on the ground.

Romzo's techniques, stabbing the pressure points on the body, were capable of destroying nerve and muscle at a single point of contact, causing death with ease.

However, the Romzo he had journeyed with before never once used such tragic and horrible methods.

"Hm? I suppose I did kill her, didn't I? She was a Nobit of a letdown as a practice dummy. For how rare dhampir she was—"

Psianop jumped and sent a punch at Romzo.

He did it all before he was even conscious of his own movements.

"…All I asked was if you had killed her or not."

"*Heheh*. Interesting."

While he answered, Romzo had already shifted his center of gravity behind himself. His palm, blocking the punch aimed at his face, had a layer of skin chafed off and was bleeding.

It wasn't a telling blow. Romzo sat outside of Psianop's effective range.

"That punch wasn't just the opening volley leading up to the big finish, was it? This blow has more than enough power behind it to make any body it hits burst."

The act of taking a blow from Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was fatal in and of itself.

In the first match, Toroa the Awful had stopped several of Psianop's blows, but that was because he used his superior advantage as a swordsman to its fullest benefit to maintain space between them, and maneuvered in a way to ensure Psianop couldn't send out his strongest punch. Not a feat any normal person could replicate. Psianop's fists didn't just outstrip all weapons and enchanted swords, but unleashed techniques that had narrowly reached the ultimate heights of *the* Lucnoca the Winter as well.

However, Romzo was an accomplished master of the First Party, who had full knowledge about all the body's meridians. For Romzo the Star Map, one of Psianop's very own mentors and masters…

"You didn't put everything behind that punch, did you?"

"If you don't have anything more to tell me, the next one will."

From the beginning, Psianop never intended to entertain Romzo's pleas for his life.

Psianop was instead the one who felt it necessary for one last chance to talk, out of sentimentality.

Though aged now, nothing about Romzo the Star Map's voice or appearance had changed since that day long ago.

Romzo titled his head far to the side. The movement was artificial and inhuman.

"Hrm. Is that how you killed Neft the Nirvana, too, then?"

"That's right."

"Too bad. If I had known he could still come back…he would've made a wonderful, hard-to-kill practice dummy, I'm sure. Looks like you beat me to the punch."

"I fought with Neft because he was fulfilling a promise. You don't get that? You were his comrade in arms, weren't you?!"

"Comrade?"

Romzo gently spoke with both arms behind his back.

"They don't exist at all. Comrades, enemies, good, bad—none of that exists. All people simply distinguish value based on their own personal views. All there is in this world is action, and their results."

Romzo's face, bearing more wrinkles than the days of their adventure, wore the same large grin as always. However, deeper behind his eyes, there was nothing beyond the fathomless, pitch

blackness.

Romzo interlocked his fingers together.

"Let me teach you, just like the old days. Everything is easy. The things that you and I thought were impossible…are easily realized once you simply decide to do them. You can actually use every last one of the techniques you once thought taboo on others. I *was able to kill* Lumelly with these hands. You're *just as able* to kill yourself. Why not prove it to me?"

"You're lying."

Romzo the Star Map had done something that surely betrayed everything about his own self.

He suffered continuously, trying to align his character, fundamentally unable to endure his own actions, with what he was now doing. With it, he had broken.

"The Romzo I knew would never abandon the responsibility of his own actions. Wouldn't abandon the understanding of what he had done. If you're saying that, ultimately, you've been reduced to a wretch who killed Qwell and repeatedly betrays others, then…"

Several memories flashed through Psianop's mind like starlight.

The days with Alena and Lumelly around the fire. He remembered each and every conversation.

They had saved him from life-threatening danger many times, and occasionally, barely a handful of times, he had saved them, too.

The First Party had always been a point of pride in Psianop's heart.

It hadn't been due to the nobility in their cause, the defeat of the True Demon King.

It came from how much he cared for the people he had journeyed with.

Are you really not going to come back, Romzo?

Unlike oozes, minia shed tears.

When the sadness or regret exceeded what they could bear, they were able to shed tears.

He had watched and learned from them because, as they continued their travels together, he had wanted to provide any small amount of fighting power he could.

Psianop had been able to read the script in the Sand Labyrinth and learn minian techniques, because Romzo taught him during their journey. There was no one else out there who would teach these things to a lowly ooze like him.

If, at that moment, he was able to return back to that time, would Romzo have taught him how to shed tears, too?

At this point, while Romzo the Star Map was still a minia, he no longer had the ability to shed tears anymore.

"…Out of dignity, I will kill you."

"Killing an enemy with ambush trickery is a fool's errand. The fastest weapon of all lies in open dialogue. I believe that was something I taught you at some point. The thing is, Psianop…"

Romzo opened up his big, pitch-black mouth. He resembled some sort of bizarre monster.

"…that was a lie. Killing an ooze instantly is such an easy feat. Just by drilling into a single point of your nucleus…and those fists of yours are unable to conceal your emotional forewarning. Your attempt at meaningless conversation gave me the time I needed to release four types of pressure points."

Titling his head. Putting his arms around his back. Interlocking his fingers.

All of these casual acts combined together to strengthen him as much as possible.

The pressure-point techniques that could strengthen himself and others to their physiological limits or deliver fatal blows. For a true master like Romzo the Star Map, he didn't even need to poke pressure points to do so, instead simply controlling the flesh and bone inside his body.

"Zephyr Collum Lymph. Dwelling Might. Jabbing Step. Release Vitality."

Romzo kicked off from the ground with inhuman speed, with a thrusting attack using two fingers.

He pierced through.

"Truly ea—"

There was a smacking sound, like a water bag being punched.

Psianop had already finished his dash and stood behind Romzo.

"Fore fist."

"……"

The right half of Romzo's skull was shattered.

Bursting open bright red, it collapsed.

His frontal lobe trickled down.

Psianop knew all about Romzo's pressure-point movements, interspersed with lies and truths.

When he fought Neft the Nirvana, Psianop had defeated the lycan after making him reclaim the same amount of strength Neft had in his golden age.

What he had always wanted was the proof that he was equal with their former selves.

"With all your emotions dead and gone, you were never going to be able to read me… You've waned, Romzo the Star Map. This was one estimation I wanted to be wrong about."

"Psi…an…"

"At the very least, I'll give you a living creature's death."

"…"

Romzo tried to moan out words before perishing without them ever reaching his voice.

The final moments of a champion meant to save the world.

Perhaps the figure of his former mentor fallen into depravity was the same ending that Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation would meet.

He was not so far removed from the sight before him.

With everything lost, Psianop was now staining himself with the blood of shura.

His disciple was killed, and he killed his own master.

All of the worthy opponents in his matches, whom he had found an understanding with, were dead.

At this point, Psianop was the only one of the First Party who remained in the world.

"Sleep now."

Putting the pool of blood behind him, Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation departed.

Now, there was no one who understood him.

Romzo didn’t get to savor the loneliness of being the last.

CHAPTER 4 Inebriated

The large-scale coup d'état that Iriolde the Atypical Tome had spent many, many years enacting had been largely suppressed—despite displaying enough military power to take over all of Aureatia—in an unnaturally short amount of time.

Rising in revolt all across Aureatia at once, Iriolde's army succeeded in capturing several of the important people in Aureatia, chiefly starting with the aristocracy. And yet, several times just as many of the Iriolde army's most important leaders were captured from strategic failures, and it was now impossible for them to draw out favorable hostage exchange conditions.

It was clear that the intelligence network Iriolde had built off his connections during his days as Fifth Minister, with roots spread deep in Aureatia, as well as the supply lines cleverly linking together anti-Aureatia cities, had been identified very early on. This also greatly surpassed the Iriolde army's expectations. Everyone believed that with its bureau chief, Elea the Red Tag dead, Aureatia's Information Bureau wouldn't be functioning properly.

While there was no doubt whatsoever that a high-level commanding officer on the inside, one with full understanding of the entire organization, had been continuously leaking information, now that they were on the verge of annihilation, they had no means to identify the culprit.

Using the cancellation of the tenth match to conquer the city had been their big gambit in order to guide public opinion; however, this too took less than half a day to subdue. Putting aside the self-proclaimed demon king Yukis's slaughter of the Kadan Third District, the casualties among the citizens were insignificant, and not enough to exhaust Aureatia's organization energy.

It was as if it had all been manipulated at a devil's fingertips to

proceed in the absolute worst way possible.

On the other hand, something had happened that even this devil man wouldn't have ever predicted.

It was the day of the tenth match.

"…Rosclay…"

Haade the Flashpoint received the report in the Fifth Stronghold, transformed to serve as the Iriolde army command center.

The dried blood splattered all over the floor and walls belonged to Iriolde the Atypical Tome and his collaborators.

"He really kicked the bucket."

Haade's cigar slipped down from his dried lips.

He had disposed of all those who wouldn't be needed in the world hereafter, without Iriolde ever suspecting his betrayal until the moment of his death, and sent those who would been necessary back to Aureatia with Hidow the Clamp.

Now convinced that the entire operation had been successful, and they were the victor in the coup—though technically a loss from Haade's position—this notice was the very next information reported to him.

"Hah, ha-ha."

Thrusting both his hands onto the table, he supported his body as it threatened to tip over.

He simply laughed. It was unbelievable.

Haade's plan, Jelky's plan, and everything else along with them had ended in success, yet despite it all, with Rosclay—the crux of everything—now dead, it all proved totally meaningless.

Not only that, but he had also died in the worst situation imaginable.

One of his hands covered his face, his nails almost drawing blood from his grip.

"Soujirou… Soujirou! That damn fool… *Hrnk, hwah, hah-hah-hah-hah*… Yup…you're a real funny guy, all right. Sure, I'm not against that or anything but… *You seriously went and did it now!* Th-that bastard… You left me up shit creek now…!"

—Nothing conveniently goes your way on the battlefield.

This sentiment was a constant expression of his.

Haade had been prepared for his espionage to be discovered and to end up dead. If his strength on the battlefield proved lacking, he could have even accepted it as a sign of his aging decline.

If Rosclay or Jelky made a massive blunder and got themselves defeated anyway, he would've been fine to actually command Iriolde's army to take over Aureatia himself.

To have *Rosclay die* while everyone was able to secure *the best possible victory* for themselves was the worst outcome of all.

"*Bw-bwah-hah-hah-hah*… What'll happen to me…? I'm the archvillain who slaughtered the beloved Rosclay the Absolute, huh? If I had just pulled out as his sponsor, then all there'd be left would be a feel-good execution! Except Soujirou went…went and won the damn match!"

Until Soujirou lost in the Sixways Exhibition, his only choice was now to play the villain to all the citizenry of Aureatia. The greatest villain of all, who took complete control over the military, waved a flag of rebellion against Aureatia, and used that chaos to have Soujirou the Willow-Sword kill Rosclay the Absolute.

Neither Rosclay, Jelky, nor himself could even think about publicly revealing the truth behind the grand plan they put everything on the line to carry out.

There were even fewer ways to go back to how things were than there had been in the beginning. The fact that his only choice was to continue forward was terrifying.

Rosclay, controlling the playfield with his absolute schemes and strategy, was dead. It was impossible to predict the future now.

The battle that was supposed to bring order had birthed an uncontrollable chaos.

"A-all…all right, then. I'll go along with this… If this is how it's gonna be, then I guess I'll have to see it through to the end!"

His heart pounded like a fire bell, and his face was drenched with thick sweat.

The youthful vigor that welled up in him, even in his sixties, vanished, and his head ached horribly with fear and shock.

However, it wasn't a lie.

This feeling had been something he had forgotten for a long time,

since his days killing as a frontline soldier.

Any *encouraging and rousing* war was a lie.

The fear and despair, enough to paint over the exultation of combat, was the real deal.

He spoke as he tore at his face.

"This is a real war now…and I sure do love war, after all!"

◆

The Aureatia Central Assembly Hall was like a big flowing river of people.

The number of personnel coming and going through the hallways had to be three times more than usual.

It was a complex series of events that had brought Hidow the Clamp to be standing among the crowd.

After he was replaced on the Twenty-Nine Officials, he had infiltrated Iriolde's camp to probe further and lure away talent back to Aureatia's side—or at least, that was the role Haade had pushed on to him; however, all the bureaucrats didn't even have the time to praise or criticize Hidow or to even look at him.

"Minister Jelky collapsed."

Meeka the Whispered said succinctly without turning back to look at Hidow.

She had a massive physique—a woman built like an iron statue. While she had been tasked with adjudicating the matches as a member of the Twenty-Nine Officials, she hadn't witnessed the ninth match, held away from the public's eyes, nor the tenth match, forced to start by the citizens' crazed enthusiasm.

"Minister Jelky is currently administering orders from his sick bed, but even still—when considering the roles that Minister Jelky and General Rosclay filled—the hole left behind here must be a large one."

"Probably." Hidow spat out his reply.

He was fully aware he looked like death warmed over right now.

What were they supposed to do? he wondered.

Given that Jelky had given his life to public service, he was bound to return to action, but did he really think they'd be able to keep Aureatia together right now with Rosclay's death and Haade's defection?

For Hidow, he did have to admit this was better than getting executed for being a traitor aligned with Iriolde. He also needed to do something about the talent Haade had forced into his care. He had only one choice.

Even still, he truly and deeply loathed going back to the Twenty-Nine Officials.

"So, what am I supposed to get started on first? Just to be clear here, I don't know anything about what happened while I was gone. Even with the War Damage Reconstruction Agency, I only got wrapped up in it 'cause it all got foisted on me."

"I'm well aware. There's no need to have you return to the War Damage Reconstruction Agency."

"That just makes me feel even worse."

"When the royal palace grounds were attacked, you commanded a unit to rush to aid its defenses. In which case, I figured it was logical to leave you in charge of handling the rest of that matter. I'll have you take charge of investigating the crime scene."

"…Oh, so that's it."

When it came to the assault on the palace during the coup—in addition to several inscrutable firsthand accounts—Jelky had purposefully concealed much of the information, so Hidow still didn't know the particulars.

However, Hidow had indirectly heard the name of the other individual who stormed the palace grounds with Kyaliga the Music Reed.

"Kia the World Word, right?"

"Yes."

Walking ahead of him, Meeka stiffly nodded without turning around.

That was the hero candidate that Elea the Red Tag had stand in as Jivlart the Ash Border's substitute in the fourth match.

A young elf girl with no relevant or remarkable background.

"General Yaniegiz's testimony would point to that, so long as he wasn't delirious at the time."

"I wonder. That Yaniegiz has always been 'bout thirty percent delirious to begin with. 'Sides, if it really is true that Kia annihilated a whole guard squad…there's no way that she could've set up the same tricks she used during the fourth match on the royal palace grounds."

"And what if there were no tricks at all? That would be the most logically consistent explanation."

"…No way."

Elves were a long-lived race that possessed a youthful appearance throughout a majority of their lives. What if, then, he assumed that Kia the World Word was a terrifyingly old elf, and had honed her Word Arts to a degree that far surpassed that of a self-proclaimed demon king?

There were certainly past examples of individuals who had possessed monstrous Word Arts skills on the battlefield.

The First Party member, Lumelly the Poisoned Ground, for example, or the notorious Eswilda the Boundary of Tragic Dreams. Or even among the minia, there were records of those like Izick the Chromatic enacting Word Arts with a scale and output on par with a dragon's breath.

However, even among anomalous individuals such as these, the remarkable act of utilizing clearly different systems of Word Arts simultaneously had never been seen before.

There were other reasons to deny the possibility.

During the fourth match, it was highly likely that Life Arts had been used directly on Rosclay's physical body.

Enacting Life Arts in such a manner was totally impossible, unless one was their personal physician or Life Arts healer with a deep understanding of the individual, down to their flesh, bones, and internal organs.

During his match with Soujirou the Willow-Sword, Rosclay apparently didn't have Ekirehjy the Blood Fountain providing Word Arts support. Sending Ekirehjy to analyze Nectegio's toxins couldn't have been the only reason why. Rosclay would have worried about

the absolute worst-case scenario. That was how Hidow saw it.

If Kia the World Word…really did use Word Arts directly on Rosclay without any sort of cheap tricks…then that'd mean nothing makes any damn sense.

The reason those who made use of constructs utilized machines and corpses for their materials was that they were all fairly simple objects compared to a living body. It was believed that no matter how tremendously powerful a Word Arts user was, it was impossible to directly enact Word Arts on an opponent the caster had just met. It was just natural logic.

Were such a feat possible, it would be the same as having complete control over the life and death of every soul in the world.

"You seriously think Kia the World Word's some omnipotent monstrosity?"

"I do."

Meeka asserted. She was a levelheaded adjudicator, and far more rational than any other member of the Twenty-Nine Officials.

"I saw the fourth match between Rosclay and Kia with my own eyes. She caused all those phenomena with just a single word and didn't use any foul play to do it. If you want to say she pulled off trickery skilled enough to fool these eyes of mine, then she surely could've done the same in the royal palace grounds, too."

"*Tch*, how'm I supposed to argue when you put it like that, sheesh… You want me to capture an all-powerful Word Arts caster?"

The perfect raw deal for the guy who came crawling back. Either that, or they didn't expect any results from him in the first place.

In any case, the only option was to gather up information the honest way.

"Miss Meeka! So this is where you were! We've had a new person surrender to us just now…"

A single official came running over from the crowded flow of people passing through the hallway.

"And they're someone I should deal with directly?"

Meeka the Whispered, in control of the Justice Ministry and left to clean up the aftermath of the large-scale coup, was tasked with the peripheral clerical work around the handling of important captives.

The decision not to drop the indictment against Hidow and reinstate him in the Twenty-Nine Officials happened through a clemency bargain with her.

"…It's Kaete the Round Table. He is demanding his reinstatement as Fourth Minister!"

"I have no reason to accept his demands. I don't need to confirm that for myself, do I?"

"Would've loved if you had rejected my own reinstatement like that…"

That said, Hidow would've made the same judgment call if he were in her position.

The circumstances between Hidow and Kaete were different. Kaete had conspired with the self-proclaimed demon king Kiyazuna, preparing a massive quantity of Beyond weaponry with the intent to overthrow Aureatia. Several pieces of evidence had turned up and there was no room for any excuses.

"Um, I'd like you to hear this from him directly, Miss Meeka, but… he has presented something in exchange. Should he be reinstated… he will provide Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge to Aureatia to use in battle!"

"He'll *what*?!"

"Come again?"

◆

They were going to storm the royal palace. He had to protect it. Yet, his feet couldn't feel the ground at all.

There was a panic, as if trying to crawl up from the bottom of a bog. He slipped down and fell back to where he began several times, but never slid down for good. It was a fruitless feeling.

…Then, Dant the Heath Furrow awoke, seeing a pale light-brown floor and ceiling.

Wh-where is Queen Sephite…?

Still gripped by his dream panic, he looked for the Queen.

Practically jumping to his feet, he looked around him, only to

finally comprehend that he was in a hospital room.

His shoulders slumped low, and he ground his teeth.

"A horrible, utter disgrace…!"

He quickly realized that he was completely unharmed, with no scars left behind on his body.

Dant remembered it clearly, too. Twenty-Fourth General Dant, Ninth General Yaniegiz, and Fourteenth General Yuca had encountered a young elf girl immediately after suppressing Kyaliga the Music Reed's attack force at the royal palace grounds.

That girl, Kia the World Word—by some unknown means—had neutralized all the forces she encountered on her way to the royal palace. First, she defeated Yuca, and although Yaniegiz and Dant coordinated to capture Kia together and utilized magic items to do so, they were completely outmatched.

Then, Kyaliga blew himself up while they were all right next to him…

"…?"

Dant looked down at his hand.

Why am I alive?

He checked his body multiple times, but he didn't see any scars from Life Arts treatment. Not even the slightest burn mark was left behind.

A miraculous stroke of fortune couldn't even explain how he had been hit with such a large blast at close range and escaped without any physical or internal injuries whatsoever. Although Dant lost consciousness from the strong shock wave, he distinctly remembered part of his body being torn off in the moment of the explosion.

"It really is quite strange, isn't it, Lord Dant?"

The wiry man with a snaggletooth staggered into the hospital room.

Dant's senses reflexively signaled their disgust.

The man had been caught up in the same explosion as Dant—Yaniegiz the Chisel.

"…You look unharmed, then."

"That's right. My body's in perfect shape. I'm getting discharged

in the afternoon, actually."

Yaniegiz casually waved his thin hand.

Just like Dant, he too seemed to be perfectly unharmed.

"The Queen!"

"She's just fine. Really, what a relief. If anything were to befall Her Majesty, our heads would've been destined for the chopping block, I'm sure."

"…What do you think happened, Yaniegiz?"

"Who knows? The effects of the blast were miraculously blown off course, or perhaps Kia the World Word, well…"

"…"

Dant understood why Yaniegiz fell silent.

Their dying bodies had been healed by Kia the World Word directly utilizing Life Arts on them, all without living a single scar behind.

After witnessing Kia's tremendous power firsthand, it was the most intuitive answer to them both.

"In any event… Given she threatened the royal palace, Kia the World Word cannot be ignored. This case is bound to full under the Palace Guard Bureau's jurisdiction. We need to share this information with Rosclay posthaste to—"

"He's dead."

Yaniegiz interrupted, the words coming out like a sigh.

"Rosclay is dead. While quelling the uprising in the city, he was attacked by Soujirou the Willow-Sword… Though, of course you wouldn't be aware of that after just waking up."

"Huh? Dead…?"

At first, Dant thought it was one of Yaniegiz's sick jokes.

He even felt anger well up, convinced he was the same scurrilous, despicable man as always.

Rosclay the Absolute couldn't have died at a time like this.

He looked at Yaniegiz's face.

Though it seemed just the same as always, he wasn't smiling.

"…I don't believe it."

Rosclay's camp should have been moments away from claiming victory on this massive, complex playing field.

And in the very last moments, unbeknownst to both Dant or Yaniegiz, Rosclay had died?

"Yaniegiz, how can you stay so composed…?"

"Composed?" Yaniegiz crooked his snaggletooth and smiled. "Do I look *composed* to you?"

The once-poor Yaniegiz had been saved by Rosclay and climbed up to the Twenty-Nine Officials through diligent hard work. Gaining Rosclay's trust as his greatest adjutant, he had always worked to live up to said trust.

"Rosclay was risking his life to fight, and I failed to give him any support."

While Yaniegiz and Dant were polar-opposite generals in every way possible, the feelings of adoration Yaniegiz felt toward Rosclay might have been the closest sentiment to the devotion Dant had to the Queen.

"Yaniegiz…"

"I'll never let it go. Soujirou the Willow-Sword, Kia the World Word, the Gray-Haired Child… Factions don't matter anymore… I'm going to make sure…they're erased from this world for good."

Faced with this boiling hot animosity, Dant was unable to say anything to the man.

As long as he was aligned with the Gray-Haired Child's camp as part of the Queen's faction, Dant too would eventually have to face off against Yaniegiz once again. Even then, Dant couldn't do anything to stop him.

If he ever lost the Queen, he probably would have ended up the same way.

◆

During the grand coup, Dant and Yaniegiz weren't the only members of the Twenty-Nine Officials who ended up involuntarily hospitalized.

Almost exactly as the tenth match reached its conclusion, Jelky the Swift Ink collapsed from fatigue and was transported to the

hospital.

Of course, Jelky spent far less time unconscious than Dant or Yaniegiz. Awaking after what constituted a normal night's sleep, he immediately plunged into continuing his work.

The first thing he attempted was contacting the Gray-Haired Child.

While the physician stopped him, he used his authority as a Twenty-Nine Official to bring a radzio inside his hospital room, gathered together the people he needed, and contacted him in an official capacity.

<I appreciate hearing from you, Third Minister Jelky. Are you recovering well?>

"I don't need your hollow concern. Nor any pointless preamble, either. I want to continue our negotiations…from this morning."

<Thank you very much. I, too, would like to arrange an agreement that will lessen some of the burden on yourself.>

"You had two major demands: revising the slave law and financing postwar restoration, correct? In four days…make it three days, I'll set up a meeting for you to present and negotiate the details for both. You can send an envoy if you want. Whether we'll accept your demands is up in the air till then."

Permeate the Aureatian social structure with goblins as slaves, openly grow their numbers, and when they became impossible to dispose of, they'd take over the whole kingdom's structure. Hiroto's demands were the first step.

The Gray-Haired Child, with that single first step, would establish a firm foothold in Aureatia's structure.

Could a society transformed under a visitor's values truly be called a proper and just kingdom at all?

In the end, we don't really have any right to say anything, either.

<Master Jelky…do you intend on continuing with the tournament?>

"Don't be ridiculous. You think a mere defeat will get me to stop it? This fight is no longer an issue of whether we win or lose. All of it comes down to an earnest wish to dispel fear, and the hope Rosclay entrusted to me."

<Personally, I feel Master Rosclay's demise was quite a shame. Being an unofficial match as it was, it never should have resulted in death…or perhaps it could have been settled with a surrender. While the result may have abided by the accords of the Sixways Exhibition and its true duels, I can't believe Soujirou the Willow-Sword was forced to fatally wound him.>

Jelky ground his teeth and endured the regret surging up inside.

While normally he was able to control his emotions like a cold, heartless machine, he had forced himself to avoid thinking about Rosclay's death ever since he had regained consciousness.

It was foolish escapism, as though he were turning his eyes away from the death of a close family member in the hopes that when he looked again, it would all be a lie.

"I'm…relieved. You act composed and unperturbed, but you don't possess some deviant ability to make everything turn out in your favor, either. If the flow of that very match had tilted ever so slightly in our favor, Rosclay would have won. Both Ozonezma and Zigita Zogi lost… Gray-Haired Child, you excel at creating situations themselves, but in the end, it's all as reckless as stepping out over a sheet of thin ice."

<…You're right. My forte is simply to present a composed front as if everything had been *in the palm of my hand all along. The battles where a small discrepancy costs me everything vastly outnumber the ones I have won. That may indeed be true for the Sixways Exhibition as well. I have lost a great deal.>*

Of course. If Hiroto the Paradox had been destined from birth to always win and expand ever further, this fight never would have turned out this way to begin with. Even after establishing the goblin nation on the new continent, he must have lost many compatriots along the way to where he was now.

Which was precisely why he was a threat.

During his many years, just how many stretches of thin ice had this visitor stepped on and broken? On top of that, how was he able to experience such tremendous loss and still risk his life on a new flow of ice?

"…Gray-Haired Child, there is something I can provide you in

addition to a negotiation opportunity."

<Allow me to ask what that would be.>

"Hiroto the Paradox, I will recommend for you to join Aureatia's Twenty-Nine Officials. If you seek reform, then fight from the position best suited to do so. From the very beginning, that was your goal in coming to Aureatia, wasn't it?"

<That is quite magnanimous of you, Master Jelky. Such an honor to give the man who drove your close ally to his death…>

"Is that how it looks? I'm saying I'll *kill you through political strife*. We in the Twenty-Nine Officials are constantly fighting against far more colossal threats than this mastermind charade of yours. I want you to answer me right here if you have the courage to expose yourself to these dangers."

<……>

Just counting from the start of the Sixways Exhibition, six of the Twenty-Nine had died already.

This wasn't simply the result of political strife. From the age of the True Demon King, Aureatia's Twenty-Nine Officials had been on the front lines to stop any threats, fighting for this country while fully resolved to perish in the process.

At the very least, Rosclay the Absolute had been that way, right up to his very last moments.

Jelky had his own duty to do everything in his power to stamp out all the threats in the land.

The way to deal with a threat that devoured all those who weren't his ally, was to ally with him.

Kill him, as an ally.

<…I'll gladly accept your offer. Please, I ask for your recommendation. If I am admitted in your ranks, I assume that managing the Sixways Exhibition will become one of my jobs, won't it? In which case, as a show of thanks, though that may not be quite the right word for it, allow me to share with you some beneficial information for continuing the Sixways Exhibition.>

"Go ahead, then. While we've disposed of all the hostile camps, now that we've lost Rosclay, it's now impossible to bring all of their remnants into the fold. The one who turned the Kadan Third District

into a labyrinth. Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge whose whereabouts are still unknown. Finally, Kia the World Word, who attacked the royal palace. We cannot dedicate all of Aureatia's combined forces to subjugating these threats. We need a method to immediately dispose of these risk factors on the fringes."

<Well then, one among those names, Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge is bound to become a powerful piece at your disposal, I'm sure. This, too, was another big gamble, but I received word that Kaete the Round Table has successfully retrieved him. I imagine Kaete himself will come looking to bargain with Aureatia before long.>

Jelky's brow furrowed at the Gray-Haired Child's calm tone.

So these were the ones sheltering Kaete, were they? The possible suspects were already limited just by the fact Kiyazuna the Axle hadn't been brought into Iriolde's camp…

<Now then, this would be what's truly been on my mind. Currently, Uhak the Silent is in Aureatia's custody, yes?>

"…That's not even worth concealing. Immediately after the eighth match, we secured him while he wandered the city streets. He's obediently obeying our orders, but…given that his sponsor Nofelt is dead, there's no guarantees he is under anyone's control. We need to keep eyes on him."

<Fair enough. Also, without a sponsor of his own, he has utility as a participant you can force to drop out of the Sixways Exhibition at will… I assume that is your thinking?>

"I don't think he's that convenient. While he may be exceptionally strong, he is still an ogre that can't use Word Arts. Shalk the Sound Slicer's his next opponent, and after he beat Mele, clearly we can't aim to win out with a small bit of sabotage."

<Not at all. Uhak will win that fight.>

"……?"

<Uhak the Silent might be the one and only answer to bring this chaos under control. Allow me to tell you the truth behind his abilities, that you haven't been able to observe for yourselves…>

Even if he had to swallow his hatred and agony, he would battle, piling up corpses to build a world of peace.

Jelky the Swift Ink could not drop out of the contest.

He turned to Hiroto the Paradox in order to win after losing his just and proper trump card.

Jelky would need to extend a hand to Uhak the Silent, a wild card concealing a powerful curse.

CHAPTER 5 The Ruins of the Azwa Great Belfry

The Iriolde army's bases of operation, hidden away in unseen corners of Aureatia's vast borders, had mostly been uncovered by the Aureatia army. The National Defense Research Institute, the greatest weapon research facility, was no exception.

In Aureatia, at least, it had become impossible for Iriolde's army to hide away.

However, there always existed exceptions. Who had originally shared these unseen corners of the city, not recorded in any maps or other official documentation, with Iriolde's army in the first place…

In an abandoned district of the city, practically nothing but desert at this point, was an entrance to one of these unseen locations.

A tall woman with gray hair and a young girl in a patient's gown, her bangs covering one eye, descended into the stonework room.

Viga the Clamor and Nihilo the Vortical Stampede.

"Never knew Aureatia had these types of places."

"A really surprise, isn't it? Judging by the style, the tower must be from around one hundred and fifty years ago. It looks like the foundation was liquified, and the whole building itself sunk into the ground."

"We just entered the top of the tower, right? How'd you even find a place like this?"

"*Hee-hee*, that's a secret."

The one who provided the base for the National Defense Research Institute was Enu the Distant Mirror, while he had still been on the Twenty-Nine Officials. Using his position as head of the city development department, he used unseen corners within central Aureatia as his bargaining chips.

On the other hand, Viga the Clamor was an undercover spy sent by Aureatia to look into the strict confidential secrets held within the

National Defense Research Institute.

She had leaked a great deal of information to Aureatia that Haade the Flashpoint alone wouldn't have been able to catch, but the location of this home base that served as *her personal trump card* was the one thing she had kept secret.

Enu and Viga had joined forces to achieve their shared goal even before the Sixways Exhibition got underway, each moving as spies between two organizations at once, while belonging to no specific camp of their own.

The creation of a new construct—the method to unify the people's will without being under anyone's control—the krsnik.

This base was prepared previously by the two of them as a research facility for the creation of the krsnik.

"The plan was to meet up with Enu here. Hopefully he's arrived already."

Descending three sets of stairs, they entered a floor of the tower that was clearly different from the rest, with brand-new construction work.

Craft Arts must have been used for a large-scale remodeling of the area to serve its goal as a research facility.

The nerve fibers extending from Nihilo's back were the first to sense the presence of another.

"Looks like he's already here."

Opening up the door, in the tiled room sat Enu the Distant Mirror and Kuuro the Cautious.

"Well, hello there, Enu. You just waltzed right in?"

"There were unavoidable circumstances, Viga… You're Nihilo the Vortical Stampede."

"*Hee-hee-hee*. I sure am. Good on you for recognizing me."

"Sorry for being late. This wouldn't have happened if everything went as planned, but…I juuuust barely made it out, okay? I was just supposed to take Nihilo's head back and leave the National Defense Research Institute, but for some reason, I nearly got killed in the process."

"…The institute was attacked? Right in the middle of a coup?"

"Yuuuup. I was a bit suspicious of you for a moment, Enu. I

wondered if maybe you simply didn't care about the krsnik research anymore."

"Then, my being here should be enough proof to dispel those suspicious."

Following Enu, Nihilo added her own speculation.

"The main target of their attack in the first place…was the one I was with, Yukiharu. For Aureatia, it was probably just all a bonus if Mom got wrapped up in it, too."

"*Hee-hee*. Heck, maybe that's why I survived at all. Once I've lost my research facilities, I'm just a little ole Word Arts caster that knows a teensy bit about Aureatia's internal affairs."

"Hm. In any case, you have the equipment here, and we've captured Linaris the Obsidian. You can continue your research without issue."

"Let's see…that would be Linaris, then?"

Without having any contact with Obsidian Eyes herself, Viga didn't know what Linaris looked like in person.

Nevertheless, she was immediately able to distinguish which of the girls laid out on the two beds was Linaris. She had an alluring silhouette that would charm anyone, regardless of gender. Her face, with its pale complexion, was a beautifully sculpted masterpiece, even when accounting for the vampire's inherent good looks.

"The other girl?"

"Yuno the Distant Talon."

The leprechaun sullenly replied, sitting in the corner of the room with bandages wrapped around his face.

Viga was already acquainted with Kuuro the Cautious as well.

"She needs an emergency blood transfusion and using the facilities here was the only option. Sorry for bringing her unannounced."

"I'm glad you successfully brought Linaris this far, but this girl was there in the carriage with you. Was she…?"

Enu shrugged, his owly, emotionless look unchanged.

"Carrying her was the only choice. The town's a battlefield. We couldn't make a stop at a hospital on the way here, and tossing her out in the road would just invite more suspicion."

Yuno's bedsheets were stained red with blood.

"I mean…I don't reaaaally care either way. If you wanted me to treat her, I just wished you would've kept her in her clothes and not brought her in here. Now she's brought in unwanted bacteria."

Viga pouted as she disinfected her hands with chemicals, changed her clothes, and began getting ready to treat her.

The interior of the room bore a striking resemblance to the biological experiments building at the National Defense Research Institute.

In other words, it was both an operating room and a laboratory, furnished with all the necessary facilities for both.

"Using pressure to stop the bleeding was the right call. Though, you can see all her blood vessels anyway, Kuuro, so that must've been pretty easy, right? Using the stockpile here for a big blood transfusion wasn't a mistake, either. But, with the wound left open, she would've been in quite a pickle had I gotten here just a biiiit later."

She began to suture together the artery with needle and thread, all without ever breaking her smile.

Technical medicine, treating patients via physical surgery, had been seen as fishy and dubious within the Kingdom.

However, on the other hand, to self-proclaimed demon kings dealing in Life Arts, it was a technique they had continued to individually pioneer and develop. Even among them, due to her unique origins, Viga was extremely well-versed in technical medicine.

"It's definitely deep, but it's still just a simple cut. As long as it's not infected, she should recovery completely. There is one big problem though, isn't there? We can't really discharge her now, can we?"

"No problem. That girl knew full well what would happen to her. If necessary, I'll keep watch on her."

"I think it'd be just easier to kill her, personally," Viga replied, wiping her blood-soaked hands on a throwaway piece of cloth.

"After I watch her for a bit longer…I'll decide if that's necessary or not."

"There's one other person here, right?" Nihilo suddenly spoke up.

She must have determined Kuuro was the most threatening and warranted the most caution—as soon as she entered the room, she had kept close watch of the leprechaun.

"Inside your coat…you're hiding another person. Who?"

"Right. Would've rather asked for this without already owing you for Yuno's treatment, but…"

Kuuro languidly stood up.

"As requested, I have brought Linaris the Obsidian back here alive. For my reward, there's a patient I'd like you treat."

"…? A patient?"

Viga the Clamor. Nihilo the Vortical Stampede. Enu the Distant Mirror. Kuuro the Cautious. Linaris the Obsidian. Yuno the Distant Talon—these six were not the only ones in the room.

The seventh individual was far too small, her heartbeats far too faint, to be noticed until now.

"Viga the Clamor. You told me before you wouldn't mind making me *a second one*."

To carry out his revenge on Obsidian Eyes, Kuuro the Cautious required Enu's assistance. If slipping within Mestelexil's defense net was all he needed, Kuuro might not have needed to share information with Enu at all.

However, there was something he needed to accomplish immediately after he carried out his revenge.

"*This one* is the only one for me. You made her, so I want you to heal her."

Kuuro gently laid out the horribly enervated homunculus on the bed.

Cuneigh the Wanderer didn't say a word, her eyes painfully closed shut.

◆

In the middle of her sleep of despair, she was tormented by an even more horribly grievous memory.

It was from when Obsidian Eyes had retreated from Kuta Silver

Town to Mikweh Quartz Town.

In the middle of the night, gazing out at the cityscape, silent with all the lights gone out, Linaris lingered in place.

She was hoping he would look for her. She was already fourteen, yet her chest pounded like a young child impatiently waiting.

"Linaris."

Finally, she heard the voice she'd waited for.

Rehart the Obsidian's low, dulcet voice.

"You can't be walking around outside right now. Even if you bring Zeljirga or Frey along to guard you."

"…Father."

"Your appearance immediately draws people's eyes. Your pale skin stands out even more in the middle of the night like this. I can't have you be seen and leave an impression behind. You need to keep this in mind."

"I'm sorry, Father, for making you worry."

She politely bowed her head.

Linaris did feel guilty for being so giddy, despite knowing full well that her selfish behavior would lead to this scolding.

"Today…I have something I absolutely wanted to show you no matter what."

"Out here?"

Rehart sighed.

He looked to be alone, but surely that wasn't the case.

Even when in front of his own daughter, he probably had an assassin nearby like he did when meeting Obsidian Eyes' clients.

When she imagined her father's solitude, the sadness ever so slightly dampened her excited heartbeats.

However, she had wanted to tell him that he no longer had any reason to fear.

"Fine, then. Know that I won't ever entertain this kind of selfishness again."

"Thank you very much… Father, here."

A light went on in the one of the residences behind her.

This wasn't Kuta Silver Town or Aureatia. Normally, none of the people living here would be awake this late at night.

Another light was lit. This one in the home right next to the other. Again, to their next neighbor, as if a flood of light was spreading around. The houses of the town, continuing along the slop, all turned on their lights at Linaris's will.

"Look for yourself. No longer will we have to lay low and stay hidden."

"Linaris."

Rehart's eyes widened as he looked at the flood of light.

Every single mind across the town was controlled and now awoken.

"What is this?"

"The ability to control others! Father…I have the very same vampire power that you have yourself! Father… Finally, I'm no longer…your powerless, useless daughter!"

"…"

The vampire's supernatural powers of control did not manifest from birth. Given that mechanism behind their orders to their corpses was done via pheromone, they were endowed with the power alongside their secondary sexual characteristics.

Not only that, but Linaris had been helpless, born without the superlative physical abilities characteristic of vampires.

While she desperately learned the tricks of mental control passed down in Obsidian Eyes, she completely lacked any of a vampire's natural gifts—nothing more than a well-bred young daughter to be protected, lacking any of the power suitable for a successor.

"…Father?"

"What *is* this?"

Rehart repeated the same words over again, befuddled.

Linaris found it strange.

Her venerable father at all times was dignified, sharply intelligent, and had never appeared agitated in front of her before.

Not only that, but here she was, showing this power meant to help her father…

"…Um, this is…my, um…"

"H-how did you get…a whole town under your control…? Is a vampire truly…capable of manipulating all of them at once…?"

The vampire threat terrorizing the land told of a time long past.

By the age of the True Demon King, Rehart had been the last vampire descendant.

Had their repeatedly inherited bloodline birthed a parent unit that didn't even require violent bloodshed, as if the virus had spontaneously mutated, facing the threat of total extinction?

"This should not be. What am I supposed to do? Linaris…y-you're really capable of…even more than I…"

"…F-Father…!"

Linaris moved forward out of concern. Rehart recoiled from her.

She was scared. What had she done wrong?

The daughter who always needed protection thought she had finally paid him back. If her beloved father saw even this long-awaited awakened power of hers as unnecessary, it meant that there was no value in Linaris's life anymore.

"Please, please let me be useful! I'll give everything, my body and my soul, to you, Father! I'll do anything you ask me to! So please…I beg you…don't be disappointed!"

Much like Rehart had feared Linaris, Linaris too felt terrified and clung tight to her father.

"…I…I just want you to be happy, Father."

She offered up a blinding flood of nighttime light, like she had once seen in Kuta Silver Town.

She thought she could bear the beacon of hope, even amid the uncertain blackness of the dying vampires.

"I…am going back to my room, to rest some… I need to…think on the organization's future…from here… Linaris…"

"Father…wait… L-look…"

The desire had always been on her mind. She wanted the power to be a suitable successor.

Being born without any power at all, hadn't she been the cause behind the decline of Obsidian Eyes, the organization her big, kind, and strong father had built?

"Please, look at me."

Obsidian Eyes' decline didn't stop.

Linaris's power, in fact, was the first omen of its inevitable

destruction.

Rehart the Obsidian died a year later.

◆

"Eeeyaaaaugh! Auuuuugh!"

The shrill, piercing cry echoed through the underground operating room.

Linaris writhed, arching her porcelain—almost translucent—back like a bow.

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede held her down with one hand, but the strength of her resistance was little stronger than a mouse, and honestly, it didn't seem like Nihilo needed to pin her down at all.

"Ah…aaah…haah…"

"You awake now?" Nihilo asked with a grin as she pulled her nerve fibers out from Linaris's back.

Linaris the Obsidian was such a valuable specimen *because* she was still alive. Viga's exhaustive medical procedures had kept her alive, but for the past days, even while Linaris was awake, more often than not, her consciousness was muddled and indistinct.

"Anh, augh…"

"*Hee-hee,* sorry about that. Guess they hurt when I take them out, too."

The nerve fibers that extended from Nihilo's spine acted like a control stick, operating a machinelike part of her own body, but at the same time, they were capable of forcibly sending signals to a living organism's nerves, throwing muscle movements out of whack and causing intense pain.

Nihilo didn't necessarily understand what sort of meaning there was in such a torturous experiment, but when it came to Viga the Clamor, Nihilo could imagine her causing unnecessary pain to test subjects.

"…P-please… I beg you… I, I will endure this… *Ngh, augh*… So please, leave Obsidian Eyes alone…"

Linaris pleaded as tears dropped from her large eyes.

Even with a woeful look on her face, her profile was as beautiful as freshly fallen snow.

"Sorry. I don't think me or Mom have anything to do with this Obsidian Eyes of yours. We're not trying to get any information out of you or looking to get you to do something for us, either—apparently, all that's important is *that you feel horrible pain*. *Hee-hee-hee*…what a funny experiment, right?"

"…"

"So, Obsidian Eyes is really important to you, huh?"

Nihilo didn't hate this work—tormenting Linaris and watching her reaction. It was far better than dealing with some mysterious beastfolk or revenant.

She herself was rather indifferent to people's appearances, but even Nihilo could tell that Linaris was beautiful.

She had silky smooth skin, even paler and more translucent than Nihilo's own dead skin. In stark contrast was her thick, glossy black hair. Her lips were pale enough to think no blood passed through them at all, yet the blood flowing through the pipes connected to her body was colored deep red, like a precious jewel.

"Now, now, Nihilo, dear. You're doing your job properly over there, I hope?"

The door to the room next door opened and Viga appeared, wearing a surgical gown.

Both her hands were stained with blood. Both Yuno the Distant Talon and Cuneigh the Wanderer's procedures should have long been finished by now, but maybe she had been wrapped up in some other work separate from their treatment. In the next room over, there were several other test subjects besides Linaris.

"While it's all well and good that you're enjoying yourself, you still need to give her as much pain as possible, okay? For a vampire like Linaris…we won't be able to draw out her emergency signal unless she feels her life's in danger."

"*Angh*…*agh*…lease… Please, spare Obsidian Eyes…"

"Now, now, it'll be all right. Don't worry, the pain won't last *too* long. Bear with it a liiiittle longer and it'll be over soon."

Viga spoke to Linaris with a smile.

She looked like a nurse gently reassuring her patient.

Nihilo had seen her gently soothe a test subject like this as they died writhing in agony many times before.

Linaris the Obsidian was a terrifying and horrible organism. However, in this situation, she was nothing but a powerless, infirmed young girl, even weaker than a noncombatant like Viga.

The corpses that kept her protected couldn't reach their base here, and there were almost no effect targets for her vampiric control. Enu and Kuuro, of course, had been inoculated with the antiserum beforehand, and Viga too, having personally dissected Qwell the Wax Flower's corpse and having a hand in the new antiserum production process, had been inoculated, too.

Finally, for those already dead like Nihilo, a vampire's infection and control had no effect at all. Constructs, including revenants, didn't have normal blood circulating through them, and for a vampire, who used a blood-borne infection to control a target, they might have been their greatest natural enemy of all.

"Oh, right, Mom."

"Eeyaaaauuugh!"

Linaris's elegant body leaped when Nihilo inserted her nerve fibers.

Though part of her wanted to enjoy Linaris's reactions more closely, she could handle the torture while she talked.

"What is a vampire's emergency signal, anyway? Is it related somehow to taking blood from her like this?"

"I might not have ever gone into detail about vampire biology with you, now that I think about it. Vampires' behavior is similar to honeybees', in a way. In both cases, they create this system where a parental unit, like a queen bee, manipulates the colony below them with pheromones. In fact, vampires also release a special alarm pheromone in response to threats or pain. They really are similar, aren't they?"

"I see, so like an emergency order to protect the parent unit…"

"That's right. While there's possible biomaterial alternatives, their normal pheromones…the alarm pheromones possess a far more

powerful effect on inducing behavior. Not only that…it will seep into their blood just by causing pain like this, without need to *ask*, so it really is quite brilliant. This material was the one sample that was impossible to get from a dead specimen."

Even while Viga happily explained everything to Nihilo, Linaris screamed, hugged her shoulders, arched her slender back, sometimes hugging her knees to endure the pain.

"Hnaugh…ngh…nrggghh…"

"*Hee-hee-hee*… Isn't that cute. So do you like it more when we do these awful things to you, hm?"

"Don't worry now, Linaris. I promised Enu and Kuuro that I wouldn't do you any bodily harm. Do your best for me now, okay?"

"No, noooo… I don't want to hurt anymore…!"

From anyone else's perspective, the sight probably looked like the pits of hell itself.

However, to Viga and Nihilo, this very sight had been part of their everyday life during the age of the Demon King.

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The shrieks of agony reverberated into the adjoining sickroom.

Though, naturally, the facility wasn't built under the assumption it would house the sick. It was furnished with a bed; however, the room was originally expected to serve less as a sickroom and more as a morgue.

"…I'll kill you…! I'll kill you!"

"Don't move."

Kuuro curtly advised her, sitting in front of the door.

Yuno the Distant Talon was struggling so hard to free herself from the bed restraints, it really did seem like she would cut open her arm again. She looked almost like a rabid beast, a complete reversal from the resolve she had shown him when they'd met in the manor.

"Hraaaah!"

"You want to get hit with more anesthesia? You know full well that it's pointless to struggle."

"But, Linaris… Linaris, is in so much pain! If it means letting Linaris…letting my friend die, I don't care what happens to me!"

"…The goal isn't to kill her. As part of the experiment, they just need to cause her a certain amount of pain, and they promised me they wouldn't take her life, crush her eyes or nails, anything like that… I'll stop them if they try."

"Kuuro…h-how can you stay so calm?! You treated Linaris like a little sister, didn't you?! Even Linaris, she, she always looked so happy when she talked about you…she adored you, so why…?! How can you take part in something like this?!"

"It's *because* I think of her like a little sister, I'd say. Do you know how many people have died because of her? If her only crime was being born a vampire, I could sympathize. But the crime of using and killing innocent people needs to be punished accordingly."

"Th-that…doesn't have anything to do with the actual victims at all, does it?! You're…not publicly passing judgment on her, either… Instead, you're just torturing her in some experiment that no one else can see…! This isn't what Linaris should actually do to atone at all…you're just doing this to satisfy yourself!"

That's right. All of this is just self-righteousness and for my own satisfaction.

Kuuro was already not a part of Obsidian Eyes.

However, he decided to pass judgment on Frey and Linaris in the style used by his former spy guild.

Those who drove their comrades to death would *always face retaliation*. They responded with a befitting amount of fear and suffering. That had been the Obsidian Eyes way when Kuuro was in their ranks.

No matter how despicable and worthless the dead may have been, as long as they were with Obsidian Eyes, there would be reprisal. Conversely, even if someone was a previous friend, with whom they had shared past joys and sorrows, if they were no long in Obsidian Eyes, they would be used and killed. An easy to understand, and thorough, custom.

For Kuuro, at least, this wasn't for the sake of justice or logic. It was to deter enemies with fear and show dignity to the lonesome

nonconformists, nothing more than an agreed upon code of conduct as a means of protecting themselves.

Thus, Yuno's assertion was probably correct. In fact, in Kuuro's own case, even if he wished for a fitting retribution for all the lives he had stolen, he didn't expect it would ever come.

"…That's fair. If there's something I'm hoping for, it's that with the weight of Linaris's punishment, she'll forever disengage from the guilt and responsibility for Obsidian Eyes. There was one among them who wished for something similar themselves. Though, I ended up killing them, too."

Ultimately, he was doing exactly what Frey wished for.

Kuuro broke into a wry smile.

"Yuno, what are you after, then? Do you believe that Linaris shouldn't face any punishment at all?"

"I-I don't…i-it's not about, Linaris's crimes…"

Yuno moaned, struggling to squeeze her voice out. She was in tears.

"Wh-why am I…so powerless? I was prepared… I-I thought if it meant saving Linaris…if it meant redeeming myself for past regrets, my life was cheap, expendable… Yet, Linaris is suffering like this… and even all those crimes she's committed, if it was already way too late to do anything about them by the time we first met, what was I ever supposed to do to save her?!"

"…"

Kuuro listened to Yuno's breathing as he remained seated in front of the door.

Anxiety, fear, and self-reproach.

If even after learning everything about Linaris, Yuno still treasured her this much, then Kuuro figured he had made the right decision not to kill Yuno on the spot after all.

"Know your place. You're a normal minia who won't even live for very long. You should just be glad someone without a single ace up her sleeve like you is here in the first place."

"Hic, mrrnggh…hic…"

Kuuro thought back to Linaris when she was young, her eyes sparkling with curiosity as she listened to him tell her about himself.

Those moments were the best, when he was tasked with looking after the young lady, and he didn't have to talk about killing. He talked about the trees and creatures he could see with his Clairvoyance, and about the people living beyond the manor's walls. Within bloodstained and dirtied Obsidian Eyes, Linaris alone was innocent and pure, which was why everyone cared about her so dearly.

"Talk to her. You're going to be her spiritual and mental sanctuary. For the Mistress, that's the only meaning you have in being here."

He said something similar to what Toroa the Awful had said to him once before.

It was more than likely that Kuuro would never been able to do the same again.

Everything had completely changed, and it could never be restored to how it was again.

Both for Linaris, and himself.

◆

"Miss Yuno."

From the bed next to hers, Yuno heard a very weak voice.

In the underground sickroom, she couldn't distinguish day from night, but at night, the lights were all extinguished, save for one.

"Are you awake…?"

"Linaris."

Yuno tried to jump up before remembering her ankles were bound to the bed.

Raising just her upper body, she strained her eyes to get a better look.

Linaris might have been laid down in the bed, but it also looked like just a pile of sheets, too.

To her eyes, it seemed very hard to believe there might be a person under them.

"I'm awake… I'm awake! Go ahead, talk all you want! If there's anything you want to say, I'm here!"

"…Oh no… I'm just glad, you're there…"

The pile of sheets didn't budge. Was Linaris's body really all in one piece?

Kuuro's mentioning the promise to not harm her body only served to make Yuno feel even more uneasy.

"Miss Yuno… Allow me to apologize… You surely must have endured quite a lot…"

"Not at all! I mean…we're friends, aren't we?! You've been in agony this whole time, this is nothing compared to that!"

"…"

"L-Linaris… Th-the negotiations with the Gray-Haired Child, they were a success! Lendelt and I, we got him to promise that Obsidian Eyes would be protected…! So, please, don't worry!"

"Thank you…"

Her voice seemed to fade as she mumbled.

"…Thank you…for believing, in me…"

"…"

Yuno considered Linaris a friend. However, when Hiroto the Paradox told her the truth, if Yuno hadn't stood by Linaris in that moment, would she have killed Yuno?

Kuuro claimed that he had captured Linaris to get revenge. Yuno had come to Aureatia herself after swearing to get revenge on the ones who destroyed Nagan.

Even if it had all been for the sake of Obsidian Eyes, each family member of the victims Linaris sent to their deaths surely had the exact same right to revenge as Yuno.

"…Linaris, have you…killed people?"

"…"

"I never imagined that you could do something like that. Since to me, you just seemed like a quiet, gently bred…and kind young girl… But I heard from Kuuro… Obsidian Eyes killed a lot of people and wants a great big war…and that they have killed even more people to see that happen… Is that all true?"

"…"

"I've killed someone before, too."

Yuno didn't have any experience directly taking another's life.

However, she had killed before. In Lithia, she had indeed wished for Soujirou's blade to cut down Dakai the Magpie. She didn't necessarily regret the rage she felt back then.

Still…

"Even though it was something I thought was right…afterward, I felt afraid. When I thought about how…the person I killed had a heart and soul, just like me…and had thought all sorts of things throughout their life, I realized just what a major thing I had done… It made me want to forget, to ignore it."

"…Yuno. I'm sure…you'll be disappointed…"

Linaris's voice quivered, but Yuno couldn't tell if the quivering was out of fear, or because she was exhausting her stamina.

"I was scared the whole time, and yet…I was never able to feel the type of fear you speak of, Yuno… Even if I felt sad…even if I was able to imagine and empathize with the person…like some, heartless…different creature…"

"Linaris…"

Linaris was a vampire. Though she may look like a minia, she was a fundamentally different creature, and she could never expose herself to miniankind as they were, to Linaris, her natural enemy.

Perhaps those people who lived in the world outside of Obsidian Eyes, in Linaris's eyes, were nothing more than beasts bereft of Word Arts. Or perhaps Linaris was trying to say that was what she had been like herself.

"…I'm sorry."

Hearing her apology, mixed with tears, the thought came to Yuno.

If Yuno had betrayed her, Linaris *would have surely killed her*.

Linaris had lived her whole life with the resolve to do such a thing.

"Yuno… I'm sure, there must have been others like you among them, Yuno. I'm sorry… I'm sorry… I'm sorry…"

Yuno wanted to extend her hand to Linaris, but with her legs bound, it was impossible.

The feeble, weak apology didn't extend outside the sickroom, sunken under earth and stone.

The experiments of shrieking torment still continued from there, unending.

◆

When Viga the Clamor was dissecting a person alive, she didn't put any malice in the act.

This was both a result of her innate temperament and of her education.

The village Viga had been born into didn't have a name.

The settlement, hidden away from the Kingdom's eyes, had been inhabited by a single-family line since long ago, who passed down their unique techniques and successful accomplishments through generations.

To someone with the average person's sense of values, it must have seemed a far cry from what could be called technical medicine, and more like a cacophony of devilish skills. The techniques to take apart the secrets of the minian form and reconstruct it into a completely different life-form altogether.

Their origins weren't exactly recorded in the Kingdom's annals, either. They were a clan dedicated to honing Life Arts, birthed in secret by a demon king expelled from the Kingdom in an ancient age long past.

Across many years, they pruned and selectively bred their own bloodline over and over. With each passing generation, they'd birth children able to more deeply observe a person's body and who possessed even more precise techniques, and these children were educated, inheriting the bloodline's accumulated techniques and knowledge.

The goal of the education was to scrape away any feelings of sympathy and step into the realm of the unethical.

The patients having their bodies mangled and cut up might scream out in pain or pitifully beg for mercy.

However, for a physician, none of it had any bearing on their work. People would let out screams when dealt pain, but so did

heartless beasts. They were taught that this was simply a natural reaction.

They were told that more than the piled-up corpses of the innocent, more than any revenge against the Kingdom that drove them from society at large, the most important thing of all was to simply pursue their clan's research, their deepest desire.

To create a perfect life-form that would never be visited by sickness, age, or death—to complete the miracle that the Wordmaker entrusted to the hands of mortals and create a fantastic world teeming over with life.

This was Viga the Clamor's sole objective, both then, and now.

When Viga exited the lab room, Enu was gazing over a city map of Aureatia, looking bored.

Even as Linaris's shrieks continued unabated, Enu—just like Viga—didn't flinch at all.

"I'm assuming you've finished gathering today's samples, Viga?"

"Yup. Right now, I'm having Nihilo wash up. Since we were able to get Linaris in perfect shape, we were able to skip over a few processes we expected to deal with."

"It'll finally be finished soon, then… It's been a long time."

Viga sat down in the chair right next to him and tried to peer over at the map.

In a rare twist, Enu reacted with displeasure and twisted himself to move away from Viga.

"Ah."

"Just as long as things are going smoothly. I was thinking it was about time to give Kuuro a detailed explanation on the krsnik. He's a very important collaborator of ours, after all."

"Fiiiiine with me."

"Well, I figured it was best not to ask about anything I didn't need to know."

That was the first time Kuuro had spoken up. He had always had a weak presence, and would breathe and walk in total silence, so unless he purposefully asserted himself like this, he would often go

unnoticed.

"Either way, I can't leave this place until both Linaris's and Cuneigh's procedures are finished. Since I would learn all about it at some point, I'm guessing we'd all be more comfortable if you were the ones to tell me."

"I suppose you're right. I mean, with that eye of yours, Kuuro, you're going to see what we're making here anyway. Want me to answer some questions?"

"My problem is less with the krsnik and more with you individually. Are you creating the krsnik to destroy Aureatia?"

"Oh no, not at allllll! The vampire powers are meant to be used for something much more peaceful."

"…I'm surprised. You're not lying. You yourself used Nihilo the Vortical Stampede to assault Aureatia, didn't you?"

"*Hee-hee-hee-hee*. Well, I was still pretty young back then."

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede's invasion during the Age of the Demon King might have been the closest precedent they had for the Particle Storm's advance, which Kuuro the Cautious had witnessed for himself. Several layers of defense were broken through, and after *that thing* passed by, only corpses were left behind, soldier and civilian alike.

At first, Aureatia searched with all their might to find out who had employed the construct, and for what purpose, but it was meaningless. Nihilo the Vortical Stampede was a revenant with a soul of her own, who could make decisions and act of her own accord, and, just based on the fact she continued her destruction and slaughter without depending on commands from a self-proclaimed demon king, was invincible.

Ultimately, it was said the conclusive piece of evidence was gained by tracing the route of how the vast quantity of deep celestial charsteel used to make the armoring had been obtained. In a destroyed village, they discovered the corpse of the self-proclaimed demon king who had created Nihilo and, based on the weak point they analyzed at the research base there, dealt with Nihilo the Vortical Stampede for good—this was what the public believed to the true.

It had always been a fishy story. For starters, did Nihilo the Vortical Stampede even have a weak point at all*? If she was a revenant with a heart, able to act freely and judge for herself, then the way of suppressing her must have used that heart, too… Maybe they did it by using a self-proclaimed demon king captured on Aureatia's side as a hostage to bargain with?*

Whatever the truth, Aureatia never publicly announced the self-proclaimed demon king's name and closed the case by saying they were dead.

Then, Viga the Clamor infiltrated the National Defense Research Institute as a double agent, and Nihilo the Vortical Stampede was reused as a siege engine in preparation for war, though Kuuro had no idea of the course of events that led them there.

"The village where they discovered the self-proclaimed demon king… I heard that a majority of the people living there had been dissected alive. Guess that was your handiwork."

"Indeed."

Viga's expression shifted ever so slightly, but there weren't any further signs of mental turmoil.

While she looked like a person, she was far closer to a construct herself.

"The krsnik project…was something I proposed, knowing Viga's history. At the time, the True Demon King's terror had already spread on an irrevocable scale. If one singular fear is uniting the people's minds and driving them mad, then what would you think the antidote would be?"

"All the honest methods that could be thought up have already been tried. What did you come up with?"

"*Overwriting* that control. Of course, putting that load on just a single vampire meant that the parent unit's actions would potentially wipe up all their corpses, too. We needed a method that would unite everyone's wills, but without having any control over them. What would then make that possible is the krsnik, an artificial vampire mutation."

"…Vampire mutation?"

"Think about it. You must have some idea what I'm referring to."

In this world, there were a great many organisms, such as the dragons and gigant, who could not be explained solely through the laws of physics. Even among these organisms, the vampires had an especially unusual nature.

Essentially just a disease, vampires were born by remaking the children of the infected at the developmental stage. Superb looks and exceptional physical abilities compared to those of the same race—in and of itself, a spontaneous mutation within the range of what was theoretically possible. The point that definitively separated vampires from other individuals was that their bone marrow created the virus at the same time it created blood, and they possessed an acinus that produced pheromones to control corpse behavior. Looking at them from a biological standpoint, this lone discrepancy would be the only difference between vampires and non-vampire races.

"Vampires excel more than any other at recreating the chains that serve as the blueprints for life, but it is extremely delicate work that can be affected by both individual differences and external factors. As a point of fact, there have been more than a few confirmed cases of unintended vampire mutations already."

"Dhampirs, I'm guessing. Individuals born with vampire characteristics, but innately lacking the ability to spread the infection. Their bone marrow doesn't contain the pathogen, but the ability to create an antiserum instead."

"Linaris is clearly another example of a mutation. She is extremely weak physically, but on the other hand, she managed to acquire a route of an infection that doesn't rely on said abilities—airborne infection."

"…"

Kuuro knew the fact that she hadn't been born as a normal vampire had torn Linaris up inside. No one, including herself, ever imagined she would awake to the colossal powers of control she had now, and it was believed she'd never be unable to act as Rehart the Obsidian's successor.

"I let myself get caught up in a pompous lecture when I am no expert in this subject, but the truth is, I just hypothesized the

possibility from the facts of the past and the opinions of researchers. It was only thanks to Viga's cooperation that we learned an artificially manipulated spontaneous vampire mutation was feasible."

"I can see the general logic. What mutation are you going to cause in the krsnik, then?"

"We're planning to cause a mutation not in its infection ability or physical abilities, but in his behavioral commands," Viga answered. "The krsnik will be able to spread the infection and increase their number of corpses, but they will be a vampire that cannot freely give orders as a parent unit. Theoretically speaking, it's not *too* far of a stretch to imagine that kind of mutation now, is it?"

"As far as you're making it sound, sure…"

"If we're able to imbue the pathogen itself with a powerful action-inducing pheromone—in particular, the warning pheromone we're gathering from Linaris now—then the krsnik corpses will obey that command forever. *Hee-hee*, isn't if funny? I mean, the parent unit *won't be able to override the command at all*…"

Linaris the Obsidian could freely manipulate the corpses she generated, but that was in large part due to the excellent nerve manipulation techniques passed down through Obsidian Eyes, and her own outstanding capacity for thought. The average vampire could only control their corpses by swapping out the single command they had been given for a new one.

"And this, this will happen even in the next generation. That's because, when there is an abnormality in the vampire pathogen, the corpse's child then isn't born as a normal vampire, either. The infection passes from mother to child, and they're corpses from birth, so even if, say, the parent unit dies, they'll continue obeying the command worked into the pathogen itself."

"…"

At first glance, this was just an inefficient bioweapon.

Whether the idea was to make the infected commit suicide with a command that couldn't be overruled, or make them kill someone else, there were other viral pathogens that similarly killed the ones they infected.

However, just as Enu had mentioned from the start, the purpose

of this weapon wasn't slaughter.

"A singular, unified command… I see, so then what're you trying to do…"

"Is use an explosively transmissive virus to forcibly *forbid infected from killing each other.* For the citizens spurred on by the True Demon King's terror…and the monsters powerful enough to destroy our world as we know it, the most direct method of reigning them in is to obstruct them from doing anything that would cause destruction, regardless of whether they have any intention to or not."

Kuuro shook his head.

"A ridiculous fantasy."

"*Hah-hah-hah-hah*. I mean, we thought the same thing at first. But, think about it, isn't this the method that our world needs right now? Of course, the Sixways Exhibition needs no mention, but… there's the Lithia Incident that Talen caused, and this latest coup attempt by Iriolde, too. Among all the schemes to unite the post–Demon King world that have happened up until now, and are likely to keep happening from here on out, this one will cost the least number of lives. Even once everyone becomes a krsnik corpse, biologically they won't be any different from any other minian."

Aureatia's Thirteenth Minister, Enu the Distant Mirror, when did he start putting this plan of his together?

As head of the Construction Ministry, he knew the geographical blind spots that could serve as bases of operations. From his position on the Twenty-Nine Officials, he was able to make contact with the self-proclaimed demon king Viga, who was kept in secret. As the one put in charge of vampire subjugation campaigns, he continuously searched for living vampires to serve as specimens. By providing a basepoint to the National Defense Research Institute, and sending Viga to join them, it allowed the research to happen. With his life in Obsidian Eyes' grasp, he used the Sixways Exhibition situation to keep himself alive longer. Then, by connecting with the Gray-Haired Child, he was able to finally escape from the yoke of everyone, both Aureatia and Obsidian Eyes.

He had kept acting entirely on his own, without ever revealing his

true purpose to anyone.

"To carry out the plan, we thought to use the network of water channels to cause a pandemic, but…with the discovery of a vampire with airborne transmission, this became unnecessary. My chance encounter with Linaris was personally my greatest moment of crisis, but at the same time, an incredible stroke of good luck."

"You really believed…that the self-proclaimed demon king Viga would cooperate with a plan like that? She's betrayed both the National Defense Research Institute and Aureatia to be here, just like you have. Not only that, but she's the only one between you who's fully versed in the life sciences. I bet she could make a small adjustment to the krsnik and create a weapon that'd destroy all of Aureatia."

"*Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee*. Oh, but I wouldn't do something like that. Peace maintained through innate instincts—I feel like that's a way more fundamental and surefire idea than hoping people will obey unclear rules and laws."

Kuuro furrowed his brow. Viga's words were genuine.

Even when he used Clairvoyance to gaze at them, these two truly and honestly believed in their plan.

"If you want peace, why did you create something like Nihilo the Vortical Stampede?"

"Oh, well, I mean…"

Viga cocked her head and awkwardly smiled.

"If all these people driven crazy with fear and killing each other kept living…then there's the chance their children *would inherit those characteristics*, too, right? Back then, all of my clan, and all the people on the Kingdom side of things had ended up that way so…I figured before there were any more of them, it'd be better to clean them all up first."

…What a monster.

She genuinely didn't think of minian life as any different from that of a squirrel or a bug.

Her belief was that by getting rid of the unwanted individuals in a population and making the desirable ones breed, it would lead to even more desirable results. To Viga the Clamor, this krsnik plan was

also simply an experiment to introduce a more desirable group of individuals into the larger herd.

"…What do you think, Kuuro? Your Clairvoyance sees everything. You must despise the nature of this world, of killing and mistrust. Now this cooperative relationship is entirely in exchange for Cuneigh's treatment, but…I revealed all this information to you now. I believe you definitely won't interfere."

"…"

Enu might be right.

It was a terrifying project, but even a man like Enu felt a strong-arm measure like this was necessary.

There was no doubt that the situation their world was in was dire enough to warrant it.

"I just need Cuneigh healed up. I decided I wasn't going to get caught up in any more trouble."

"In that case, all you need to do is protect this place until that's done—once the krsnik's complete, it will be invincible."

Since the infected would be unable to harm one another, and this command could never be updated, it meant there wouldn't be anyone capable of harming the source of the virus's outbreak, the krsnik itself. On top of that, the infection would spread through the air. Whether the small number of individuals inoculated with the antiserum, or constructs without any blood to infect, were capable of resisting the immense number of infected or not…that was the type of experiment they were now looking to conduct.

Even with his Clairvoyance's foresight, Kuuro couldn't imagine how society would transform after all the people were robbed of the will to harm and kill one another. It was probably going to cause a seismic amount of turmoil and chaos.

Kuuro the Cautious might have been the only one in a position to stop it at that moment.

"What does your Clairvoyance see. Success? Failure?"

"…Can't say. But maybe it wouldn't be so bad if something like that did happen."

Kuuro pulled his flat cap down past his eyes to hide them.

"Anything's a hell of a lot better than more people dying."

One thing was certain, both in the past, and now.
Kuuro was sick of watching people die.

CHAPTER 6 Aureatia Internal Affairs Ministry Eastern Office

"Sheesh, how long am I supposed to wait here…?"

A fair bit of time had gone by since Kuze the Passing Disaster had sat down in the waiting room chair.

The office staff moving to and fro looked busier than Kuze had ever seen, and no one even said a word to him, let alone had shown any sign of taking him to a reception room.

"…I haven't been forgotten about in here, have I? Is this really how a hero candidate gets treated…?"

He could understand that with the military's rebellion and the death of Second General Rosclay coming one after another, it wasn't strange to see this place in so much chaos. Even still, Kuze felt he was visiting about a pretty important matter of his own.

He felt awkward about stopping these staffers who looked far busier than him, so he simply sighed.

"Guess I'll head out…"

"Oh, Mr. Kuze the Passing Disaster, I assume."

A young office lady jogged over to him.

She must have been in the middle of carrying something somewhere, holding a small parcel at her side.

"Please head to the reception room. Do you know where it is?"

"What? Don't you usually show someone to the room in this situation?"

"My apologies, but I have a more urgent matter I must attend to."

"I mean, that's fine, I guess… Let's see… Up the stairs and to the left? The third room down?"

Watching the staff member depart with the same jogging steps, Kuze stood up, feeling wearied and fed up. He was dressed in the same long black vestments as usual, but given that he clearly

couldn’t bring the massive greatshield he usually carried into a place like this, there was a chance that no one had even realized he was a hero candidate.

Ah, whatever…that’s more convenient for me, anyway.

At the very least, when he had provided support for Rosclay during the tenth match, the impression he gave as an ambitionless man who was doomed for mediocrity had served him well. Kuze had only revealed himself in front of the citizenry for a brief moment during the fifth match before it immediately ended in a win by default, so there were probably a lot of them who didn’t remember him.

Though, at this rate, there were equally inconvenient aspects as well.

When he opened the door into the old, austere reception room, a man nearing his twilight years was sitting on the sofa, waiting for him.

While his face was a bit crooked asymmetrically, his demeanor gave an impression of health and confidence.

“Sorry for the awful reception, Kuze the Passing Disaster.”

“Oh yeah… I’m sorry, but have we ever met before?”

“Right, right, guess introductions come first. Grasse the Foundation Map. Aureatia’s First Minister.”

“*A-ah-haaah*… The First Minister himself…”

A pained fake smile came over Kuze’s face as he gripped Grasse’s outstretched hand.

Kuze hadn’t imagined one of the Twenty-Nine Officials, especially the First Minister of all people, would meet with him directly. He had come here with the expectation some random mid-level management type would hear him out and pass on his suggestion.

“For now, why don’t you sit down. That’s some perfect posture you got there, Kuze! I get the same impression looking at some of my subordinates, but a lot of you Order folks were really brought up well, huh?”

“Oh, no…I wouldn’t say that. Thank you, though.”

“Well then. You said you have something to say regarding your match?”

"Yes, and I realize this might be a bit impertinent of me, but…"

Kuze couldn't let himself get caught in Grasse's rhythm.

Sitting down on the opposite sofa, he brought up his main point.

"Would it be possible to save the eleventh match for later?"

"Hmmm." Grasse leaned forward, looking intrigued. "Kuze, in the fifth match, you won by default, right? If you're not withdrawing, I'm assuming that means you're still willing to fight, but…are you not feeling well? Injured?"

"That's not it. The opposite actually, not having *my opponent* in tip-top shape isn't ideal either, given the purpose of the Sixways Exhibition, wouldn't you say?"

Although the circumstances behind it were unjust and bizarre, the tenth match still went on as scheduled, and Soujirou the Willow-Sword had won. Though it may not have been an officially recognized match, given how many people had witnessed the events, Aureatia was likely forced to treat it as such.

If the Sixways Exhibition continued on as scheduled, the next match would be the eleventh, and Kuze the Passing Disaster was scheduled to fight in it. His opponent was the winner of the sixth match, Zeljirga the Abyss Web.

"Everyone's saying that no one knows the whereabouts of Zeljirga or her sponsor, right? Having a guy like me win by default twice, it's not a great look, is it…? These days, the Order's treated pretty harshly as it is, and it'll be the match right after Rosclay's desperate battle to the death, right?"

"I see. That ain't a great sequence of events for the one doing the fighting now, is it?"

"If Zeljirga has already requested to forfeit her match, then it is what it is, but…if not, then I'd at least like you to search for her and get her confirmation first. Would it be too difficult to hold the twelfth match first, and use that time to search for Zeljirga?"

"I get where you're coming from. Thing is, I mean, these matches are true duels and all. Win or lose, it's a massive amount of pressure. It's real easy to believe she just ran away without notice."

Naturally, Kuze's request wasn't out of consideration of his broader societal reputation.

Among the hero candidates, Kuze was the only one who would be greatly inconvenienced if *his second-round match didn't actually happen*.

Starting from the second round, it was decided that Queen Sephite would spectate the matches. Kuze needed the Queen in the arena, where he would be able to get her in his sights and kill her.

It was all to wipe away the Order's sins. During the age of the True Demon King, all of the unjust crimes that the Order took the blame for would be shouldered by the Order's leadership, starting with Kuze. Together with the proof that the heads of the Order had forged in secret, the Queen's assassination would become the definitive event to demonstrate their evil deeds.

It was highly likely that by the third round, it would already be too late. Should Shalk the Sound Slicer advance, Nastique's automatic counterattack would settle the match faster than Kuze could think, and he wouldn't be given the momentary reprieve he needed to get the Queen in his sights. If Uhak the Silent advanced, Nastique wouldn't even function at all, making not only the Queen's assassination impossible, but also any hope of advancing to the finals.

Kuze had planned on the match schedule being adjusted by Rosclay after they secretly joined forces, but he had perished in the tenth match, and no one else knew the truth about their collaboration.

Rosclay kept our promise… No one's gonna imagine for a second that the Queen'll be assassinated.

"For starters, though, the agreement we all had was that we wouldn't listen to any requests from the hero candidates themselves, see… *I need to hear about this through your sponsor*. You understand that's how this works, right?"

While he made a show of scratching his head, Grasse's eyes examined Kuze closely.

This aging man was ever vigilant, showing clearly why he had survived through the political strife in Aureatia.

"*Bweh-heh-heh*… Of course I do. And I assume you understand the situation yourself, too."

Kuze's sponsor, Nophtok the Crepuscule Bell, had suffered a mental breakdown with no hopes of recovery.

He was being confided in the Free City of Okafu, basically as a hostage with his life in limbo. It was impossible for Aureatia's side to use the rules around lacking a sponsor to make Kuze withdraw from the tournament.

On top of that, Aureatia's side had their own circumstances behind why they were unable to take Nophtok back by force—the man was also the mastermind who'd ordered the attack on the Order orphanage.

Politically, Kuze was close to the weakest position of all, but he currently had a blade proving their foul play pointed straight at Aureatia's throat.

"…All that said, though, we'd be just as put out if the match falls through. Between spectators being barred from the ninth match and the wild, ad hoc tenth match…if the eleventh match then *also* fell through, even the audience is bound to think something's fishy. I'm guessing the others have already started making their own moves, too."

"Would you be able to put in a word for me, then, Minister?"

"So long as the winds're blowing in a good direction. Then, I'll at least go along for the ride."

Grasse's smile was an asymmetrical one, twisting up one side of his mouth.

"Maybe by some stroke of luck, they'll find you a good opponent to go up against."

◆

The wanted criminal Kaete the Round Table had returned.

Not only returned, but had come to Jelky the Swift Ink's sickroom to apologize himself.

Down on all fours on the floor, his head seemed to droop as he bowed it.

"A-as you can see…I am very, very sorry for what I did!"

"…"

Jelky's cold gaze looked down on Kaete like he was some rare, peculiar creature.

Seeing the same Kaete known to be a wicked tyrant apologizing in a nominally commendable manner extended past comedy and almost seemed like some sick nightmare.

"I-It is true… I gathered weapons…and planned to rebel against the Aureatia Assembly…! But th-that was all out of loyalty to Her Majesty and also to protect Aureatia! From the hero candidates threatening it! I-I'll admit that…I didn't have the courage to turn myself in, until now…b-but, *hnggh*!"

"If you're forcing yourself to talk here, I don't mind if you stop."

"…N-no please, let me say this…! When I learned the rebels' havoc even involved an attack on the palace… That's when I truly realized! Th-that we should go beyond factions and principles, and p-p-p-pool our strength together…!"

"That so?"

Jelky continued his aristocrat-script translation on the table next to his bed.

While nothing Kaete claimed was worth a single iota of his full attention, the fact that the man known to be one of the proudest among the Twenty-Nine Officials was acting like he didn't care about appearances at all was an unexpected development for Jelky.

What reason could be pushing him to do this to secure his return? Not only bowing his head to me, but to hand over a trump card like Mestelexil, too…

Despite how unsightly Kaete looked, Jelky knew very well he was not someone to be underestimated.

While in the Aureatia Assembly, Kaete had managed to prepare a tremendous fighting force all on his own. The outflow of golems and weaponry from the Beyond following Kaete's downfall was having an unfathomable effect, both big and small, on the war situation.

"In any case, given what you're claiming here, I know it will be useless to probe your motives any further. Normally, apprehending you as a criminal would be the suitable response, much less reinstated, but given that you have reclaimed control over Mestelexil

and gained information on the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists and Obsidian Eyes, I can allow some room for consideration."

"…That's right. That lot…they're a threat to all of Aureatia. I've directly witnessed the faces and abilities of the Old Kingdoms' Loyalist leadership, and Obsidian Eyes' agents alike. We should be able to come up with effective countermea—"

"If you're speaking of threats to Aureatia…"

Jelky cut Kaete off from continuing further.

"What of Kiyazuna the Axle? If you and Mestelexil are together, why isn't she with you?"

"Gra—Kiyazuna…"

Kaete's words caught in his throat, with his demeanor different from how it had been up until now.

Silence.

"…She's dead. During the fight to get Mestelexil back, she was fatally wounded and couldn't be saved. I no longer have any comrades who share my ambition."

"…"

"The truth is…I don't even care about getting my seat back. I just really wanted to realize Grams's ambitions for her… Mestelexil is all-powerful. I want to see that with my own eyes! If I'm pardoned, then Mestelexil might just be able to make a return as a hero candidate, too!"

It was an unrealistic and all-too-convenient desire.

Normally, Jelky never would have entertained this sort of whining.

The end result is, everything went as the Gray-Haired Child said. In order to fight this situation, with threats still clamoring around us, we will definitely need hero candidates that're under our control. More than anything else…we can't let Mestelexil and his inexhaustible production of Beyond weaponry pass into the hands of another power from here on out.

Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge also had all the grounds for returning to the Sixways Exhibition playing field lined up.

If Kaete was returned to his Fourth Minister seat, Aureatia's side would work to clear him of one of his crimes at least—the charge of foul play during the sixth match.

The charges of foul play would instead be levied on the currently missing Zeljirga. During the sixth match, Obsidian Eyes had committed plenty acts of dishonesty themselves. The suspicions of Mestelexil's corpsification and the interference from the outsider parent unit making Zeljirga's opponent drop out would wipe away her victory, and they *would make it so* Mestelexil was the one who advanced from the sixth match.

When it came to the most serious crime of treason, given the current situation, with Aureatia preparing to accept Iriolde's camp's own capitulation, it wouldn't be out of the question to mix his treason as one part among the greater whole and gradually let it fade away.

Right now, we can shape how things play out from here… Kaete must know that, too. He's brutal, but still a very capable man.

He turned himself in because he pinpointed that this situation was his perfect, and only, chance.

Together with Hidow the Clamp, he might have been a necessary talent to have on the now Rosclay-less Aureatia Assembly.

"I understand your case. I'll take a vote from the Twenty-Nine Officials currently available and decide on how to deal with you. Until then, wait in jail."

"In jail?! Me?! Ridiculous!"

"Of course, in jail. You're still a criminal."

◆

It was a spacious, semicircular underground passage.

There were no lights, only the ruins of an underground channel, abandoned long ago.

In one single area of the tuff-covered wall surface, there was a gap that was impossible to distinguish without straining the eyes.

This hidden room, created by cutting out the wall, wasn't even known to the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists who originally used these canal ruins as their base of operations. It was created afterward, processed with advanced Craft Arts that defied imagination.

Inside, it was furnished with a bed that was at total odds with the underground canal surroundings.

Both water and gas pipes were pulled into the room from somewhere, perhaps elongated and twisted from the critical infrastructure already present in the walls, and the interior of the room, away from the eyes of any others, was set up to fully support daily life.

A camouflaged door in the wall opened, and something rolled inside.

A miniature golem, with three thin limbs sprouting from its round body like an insect.

"M-M-Mama!"

The indigo golem shouted, flicking its single eye.

"You're all right?! Were you lonely at all?! Kaete, did a great, job!"

Strictly speaking, this was not Mestelexil's actual body. It was a remote-controlled drone unit.

Although his actual body was under Aureatia's strict management and control, for Mestelexil, who had always possessed two lives at once, which body was his actual body had never been an especially big problem.

"*Hah*… That you, Mestelexil?"

An old woman was lying down on the bed.

"Mama! Mama!"

Mestelexil's mini-unit raced around in circles on the floor like an overly excited puppy.

Kaete continued into the room after Mestelexil.

"…You there, too, Kaete?"

"I am. Everything went swimmingly. My release is still conditional, but I'll be let go eventually. Not only that, right now, Aureatia's side of things believe that you're dead, Grams."

Kiyazuna the Axle had suffered a fatal wound while trying to regain her control over Mestelexil. That itself wasn't a lie. If she had been abandoned, her serious wounds would've killed her in short order.

However, Mestelexil's excellent Craft Arts weren't his only forte. Just as Kiyazuna was able to enact Word Arts on Mestelexil's

structural construction, Mestelexil was able to give Kiyazuna Life Art treatments, being more closely familiar with Kiyazuna than anyone else.

Of course, Mestelexil was in a horribly confused fluster immediately after regaining his sense, and if Kaete hadn't scolded him harshly and ordered him around, even the emergency triage may have been too late.

Kiyazuna the Axle's right arm was still lost.

While Mestelexil's Life Arts may have been able to regenerate her arm, too, there was no question that restoring a lost limb to Kiyazuna's already aged body would dramatically shorten her remaining lifespan. The only ones who could handle such Life Arts treatments in old age were extreme exceptions, like Neft the Nirvana.

Grams… From here on until she's dead, she'll only have one arm.

The old woman who had been overflowing with the spark and savagery of a teenager, just by having one of her arms torn off, was left so thoroughly exhausted that she couldn't even lift herself up from bed.

She was just a minia, too. The natural laws of age caused even the unbending axle to bend.

"I-it is, okay!" The small orb jumped. "I, I won't let, you die, Mama!"

Mestelexil was desperately trying to help save Kiyazuna.

It also seemed like this atrocious weapon of destruction, in this sole regard, was acting out of regret and guilt.

When Mestelexil created this treatment room, Kaete had actually needed to curb Mestelexil's chaotic conduct in treating her.

Mestelexil attempted to use various doses of medicine, or mechanical joints, but many among them would have clearly killed someone in the process. Mestelexil knew countless methods of taking life but knew almost none of the means to save one.

Once I can get back my real power in Aureatia, I can easily draw in a doctor or two who can keep strict secrecy… You just have to hold out till then, Grams.

He couldn't let Aureatia try to finish off Kiyazuna in her weakened

state. If they could endure just a bit longer, victory was theirs. They had even managed to take back Mestelexil themselves.

"I had Mestelexil investigate, and the feeling I got was that I'm highly likely to be reinstated. I'll prop Mestelexil up as a hero candidate once more, win out in the end, and grab all the power and authority now that Rosclay's gone…! *Hmph*… Those Aureatian imbeciles believe I've tossed aside my ambitions and don't doubt me at all."

"They're definitely gonna see through that…"

Kaete himself was confident in his brilliant acting performance, but even assuming that he wasn't able to appeal to their emotions, the factors for them to be accepted once more were already set up on Aureatia's side of things.

Since the Beyond weaponry seized from Kaete's camp had been widely used in the grand coup, Aureatia now needed to put together their strategy and tactics from here on out under the assumption such weapons would be used against them. To Aureatia, with Rosclay defeated and lacking management ability, the highly capable Kaete and his knowledge of Beyond weaponry was bound to be a talent they were itching to get their hands on.

Mestelexil was as a piece of antihero candidate fighting power. The request to be reinstated with Hidow the Clamp already served as precedent. He had turned himself in precisely because the situation left him with many excuses that were beneficial to the other party.

"What a disappointment. I didn't even need to use *this,* either."

Kaete took out three thin vials from inside his coat.

A drug that was worth its weight in gold—especially in Aureatia's current state of affairs.

"Huh?! B-but it was, so hard to, make!"

"It won't go to waste. When this antiserum becomes vital to them all, we'll be able to browbeat them into paying a high price for it."

It was the sole means to protect against a vampire's viral pathogen, that could only be produced from the bone marrow of a dhampir. Mestelexil's Life Arts, capable of creating life itself, were capable of analyzing the extremely rare medicine and mass-

producing it.

Even after surrendering to Aureatia, and forcing himself to plead with power, Kaete's group still had the advantage.

This present was only possible because he hadn't given up, even after all the conclusions had been made.

"As if I'd throw away my ambitions. Me? Kaete the Round Table…? Like hell I'm giving up!"

The bedridden Kiyazuna answered Kaete's declaration with a wicked smile of her own.

CHAPTER 7 Kadan Third District

As sentient creatures capable of understanding Word Arts, the monstrous races were recognized to have a certain number of rights—this "certain number," in effect, meant not equal rights as the minian races.

The Monstrous Races Protective Camp was, despite the "protective" descriptor, largely constructed the same as a jail.

The thick metal door to prevent escapes had only a small slit in it for passing through meals, and it was impossible for Kuze to figure out from the outside if behind it was an ogre, a lycan, or some other creature.

At the very least, there weren't vampires behind the doors—since they were immediately disposed of when found.

This is a real depressing facility.

To successfully postpone the eleventh match, he needed to convince Uhak the Silent, who was to fight in the twelfth match.

He figured someone else was more suited for the role, but the explanation he got was that, currently, he was the only other person living in Aureatia who had any connection with Cunodey the Ring Seat.

There was some possibility that this was an expedient on Aureatia's part.

Kuze didn't want to suspect there was a hidden meaning to everything, but perhaps Aureatia's people had, through some means, learned about Uhak's power of Word Arts negation and planned to use him at the right moment to snuff Kuze out.

There were plenty of reasons for him to be treated like this. With Rosclay—the only one who knew his secret plan—dead, there was in effect no power capable of restricting Kuze's movements. It would be better for Aureatia if he were to simply die, in an accident if

possible, while they were still able to dispose of him.

"He is in this containment room."

"Thank you for showing me here. Is Uhak behaving himself?"

"Yes. In fact, I've never seen an ogre as calm as him."

After the soldier showed him to the door, Kuze took a step inside Uhak's cell.

It was a clean room. His garments were folded along the wall, and the small dishes from his finished meal were neatly lined up together, with Uhak himself sitting unmoving and staring out the window. His living arrangements looked like those of an Order priest who had given up all worldly desires.

"Heya there, Uhak. Been a little while."

When Kuze greeted him, Uhak reacted by turning his white eyes in his direction.

He was a gray and large ogre.

Nastique meanwhile…

He strained his eyes at the empty air, but the usual figure of the angel was nowhere to be found.

Nastique really didn't show herself around Uhak, after all.

Death was only ever about Kuze when he stood at Uhak's side.

He thought that perhaps having Uhak kill him here, exactly according to Aureatia's plans, might have brought him much greater salvation.

"Haven't seen each other since the almshouse attack, am I right? *Bweh-heh-heh*… You really saved my butt there."

He didn't know how it may have looked objectively speaking, but at least to Kuze, he had been saved.

After the fifth match, when Nophtok the Crepuscule Bell spurred the Sun's Conifer to attack the almshouse, Kuze had gotten through it without killing anyone. Uhak had fortunately stopped Nastique from slaughtering them all.

"I just thought I never really thanked you for that… So thanks."

Uhak nodded, like a great tree tilting forward.

Though they were both students of Cunodey's, Uhak remained composed, completely opposite of Kuze.

"I'll get straight to the point. Something's come up that you need

to help out with, as a hero candidate. Kadan Third District's been swallowed up by a swarm of constructs, and it's put Aureatia in danger. I want you to come with me to put them down. Right now, if possible."

He was told that not a single vestige of the city remained in Kadan Third District.

Mushrooms taller than buildings forested the area, blocking out sunlight and contaminating the air with thick spores, with unknown fungal life-forms that walked and crawled around flourishing as well. The phenomenon had been caused by a fungus by the name of Nectegio the Ravenous Rot.

"Look, I get you may not have any reason to hear me out, but… even then…we're still hero candidates. Can you help me save everybody?"

Uhak, held captive by Aureatia, was to be deployed to Kadan Third District and destroy Nectegio. In light of this judgment, Kuze felt it even more likely that Aureatia had grown wise to Uhak's powers.

If the enemy basepoint was both clearly visible and stationary, then wouldn't it by far easier for Aureatia to clean up the situation by using Mele the Horizon's Roar's precision, long-range bow fire to blow away the entire district itself?

Sending a regular ogre into that nightmare would be condemning them to a meaningless death. Are they trying to confirm for themselves if he really does have the power to negate Word Arts or not…? And if he truly has the will to battle as a hero candidate?

Uhak didn't possess the power of Word Arts. Ultimately, he didn't give any response to Kuze's request, as expected.

He simply stood up quietly, as if he had decided what needed to be done.

◆

Kadan Third District was covered in a thickly layered fog that gave off a metallic glow.

It was impossible to grasp the situation in the district from the outside. The only certainty was at nightfall, the eerie bioluminescence would pulsate through the fog.

The metallic fog that sealed away the Third District didn't originate from Nectegio the Ravenous Rot's spores—it came from one of Aureatia's magic tools, Liquified Rampart.

It was an oil-like magic tool that possessed an unnatural rainbow luster. Possessing a mass density far greater than what one would expect from a liquid, and an effect that dissolved living bodies like acid, it was a formless defensive wall the shape of which could be freely transformed at the user's will.

Aureatia used water and sewer infrastructure to make Liquid Rampart flow into Kadan Third District and permeate the soil, which served to just barely prevent the spread of the contamination. The fog was the Liquid Rampart in a vaporized state.

Although at present, Liquid Rampart was breaking down the spores and preventing any further spread, it didn't prevent the district's complete annihilation. The speed of the spores' production and adaptation far outpaced the speed of the disintegration.

The labyrinth's growth was under careful observation and all citizens were strictly prohibited from going to and from the area.

Arriving at the temporary checkpoint set up on the road was a minia in black robes, and an ogre dressed in white.

The greatshield-bearing man with a vaguely ill-omened aura about him was Kuze the Passing Disaster.

The club-wielding ogre, placid in contrast to his massive body, was Uhak the Silent.

"*Bweh-heh-heh*… Heya there, looks like you've got your work cut out for you. Kuze the Passing Disaster, and that's Uhak the Silent. Now *this* sure is something, huh?"

Kuze languidly raised up his hand and greeted the checkpoint soldiers.

"I should be saying that to you, Master Kuze. Thank you for your cooperation. Truth is, the situation here is terrifying…" the soldier said, turning back to look at the soaring layer of fog behind him.

From afar, the area reflected light like a mirror, so Kuze had no

way to know, but after getting this close, he understood.

On the other side of the fog was the outline of a dense, grotesque forest.

Stalks well over ten meters tall rose upward in a serpentine, and countless mushroom caps stretched out as if putting a lid over the sky.

The outlines of the buildings that originally made up the cityscape were either rotting or crumbling away, while others still were unnaturally growing outward, and it was clear to see that absolutely everything had been covered in some enigmatic fungi.

"I get it… Yeah, no wonder Mele can't use his arrows in a situation like this."

Kuze's idea that mobilizing Mele the Horizon's Roar could clean this up had been naïve.

If Mele's arrows destroyed this hyphal labyrinth now, there was no telling just how far these unknown fungal spores would fly beyond the district's borders.

"Incineration, disintegration, whatever it is, the only way to handle an ecosystem like this is to destroy it down to the root… Oh yeah, this is asking the impossible, all right."

"Liquid Rampart is only keeping it back because this enemy doesn't intend on trying to attack aggressively. Just two days ago, a fungi variant we believe was cultivated within the labyrinth attacked the ninth checkpoint. Five were killed taking on the lone creature, and two among the survivors died from some unknown plague later that day."

"So it's staying quiet to prioritize producing more of those *things*, then… You guys have done a great job. Bet it was terrifying being here."

"I would be honored to be able to give my life for the Kingdom."

The soldiers maintaining the blockade must have been constantly exposed to dangers far greater than the hero candidates faced in their matches. The danger didn't only come from direct threats like a fungi assault, either. They were left in constant fear that they'd be affected by the spores that got through Liquid Rampart, and even the fog from Liquid Rampart was dangerous in and of itself,

disintegrating all living cells in its wake.

Guess this means that Aureatia was in such chaos and so pressed for help, they had no choice but to leave a labyrinth this dangerous to be dealt with later…

"We've prepared protective gear developed by the Equipment Agency. The ogre-sized gear was specially made to order, so you should first go to the cantonment and… Is something the matter?"

"Er, well…"

Kuze looked at Uhak, lingering in silence.

It was evident that the ecological monster that constructed this hyphal labyrinth—Nectegio the Ravenous Rot—was a construct.

Yet, Uhak the Silent hadn't erased this abnormality.

If Uhak felt like it, he should have been able to completely kill off Nectegio, growing lush across their entire line of sight, even as Kuze stood there chatting with the soldier.

Is there some reason why he shouldn't kill Nectegio…? Wait, if I were Uhak… Maybe he senses that Nectegio's too big in scale, and he'd be forced to get the people inside mixed up in it all, *too? It's definitely not just because he doesn't feel like it, right?*

"Sure is inconvenient that I can't just ask you at times like this, you know?"

Kuze scratched his head.

Just because Uhak wasn't making a move didn't mean it was okay for Kuze to do nothing.

"Bah… Sure, sure. So, protective gear? How long's that gonna last inside there?"

"As long as it doesn't suffer any impacts, we've confirmed it can at least handle searches twenty meters past the barrier. Any farther and there are fungi wandering about, so…"

"*Bweh-heh-heh*… The mushrooms are just too strong, huh? Got it."

Borrowing the protective gear that engulfed his entire body like an animal costume, Kuze took his step into the Third District.

He knew full well he risked death. While the attacks from fungi didn't pose him any threat, the toxins—without any life of their own—were the most dangerous of all. Depending on the density and

properties of the spores, it was highly likely the protective gear would completely dissolve away.

Even still, if there was something inside that made Uhak hesitate to enter, Kuze, being harder to kill than anyone else, needed to be the one to go in and check.

The Aureatian soldiers, with death coming to them far easier than anyone else, had summoned up all their courage to maintain this current situation.

If he wasn't able to fight now, then he didn't understand why the angel of death was haunting him at all.

…A guy like me, not putting his life on the line? No way can that happen.

◆

An Aureatia army garrison lay near the southern part of Kadan Third District.

There was no trace of its regular appearance left. The military base had collapsed from the weight of the fungal sporocarps and their abnormal growth, and everything—not just organic but metallic objects as well—was being devoured by an unknown mold. With the density of spores, the air was now tinged with viscosity, turning into dirt-brown smoke and covering the area.

In the middle of the smoke, amid the gregarious sporocarps, there occasionally flashed a baleful bioluminescence in pink, light blue, and red.

The irregular luminescence almost appeared to be the atypically massive organism's neural transmission.

"*Aha! Aha! Aha!* Now isn't this interesting!"

A man stood atop a building that was beginning to collapse.

He wore a white lab coat with spotty moth-holes and had hair discolored by chemicals. Inside this space where any and all non-fungi ecological systems had been eradicated, he was the lone minia. The self-proclaimed demon king, Yukis the Ground Colony.

Yukis was able to survive in this atmosphere, filled with lethal

spores, in part because Nectegio continued to adjust the environment surrounding him, but also because—after using himself as his lab rat for so long—he had acquired a resistance to several types of toxins and fungi.

"Oh, yes, yes, how! Wooooonderful! Oh no, but it cannot be, can it?! There really is a creature capable of undergoing Nectegio's absolutely sublime response to eradicate any foreign bodies, and yet still not be incorporated into the ecosystem!"

On the drilling grounds directly below the building where Yukis stood was a white writhing mass, like a cocoon, covered in several layers. With it came the sound of hyphae, as tough as steel, being snapped apart.

"Then, oh goodness, does this mean there is another besides me who can share in Nectegio's wonderfulness?! How about it?! Will you be my friend?!"

"Ngh… Hraaugh!"

The girl's shout echoed, and the white mass burst from within.

Long legs kicked the ground and fled from the sea of hyphae.

Her green eyes left an afterimage in her wake. She was faster than a musket shot and more powerful than a tank. The momentum of the girl's escape was enough to send her through the collapsing defense barrier, and she dug into the ground with her bare feet to stop.

Her long chestnut-colored braid trailed behind her.

"I didn't…hear anything you said! Friends, uh…what was all that?!"

Tu the Magic.

She was a former hero candidate, separated from Flinsuda the Portent's control, and released into Aureatia.

"I'm Tu the Magic."

"Magic?! An amusing name indeed! The supreme being you are currently bearing witness to would be none other than Nectegio the Ravenous Rot! The species restraining you just now was the sixth-generation variant of the spinning species, Nelmerorie Lyadatiesna! Incidentally, I am Yukis the Ground Colony!"

"I came here to stop this thing! Can't it be stopped somehow?"

Though her position had changed, Tu's actions remained the same.

In the massive coup, she had used brute force to mediate fights and made every effort to rescue any citizens caught up in the strife.

As many times as she intervened, she wasn't able to save all victims of the coup, either. The rumors about Kadan Third District's eradication took a big month's time after the tenth match to reach her ears.

There was guaranteed to be casualties she couldn't save and atrocities she'd be too late to reach.

Nevertheless, she wasn't wrong for continuing to help what was right in front of her.

By accepting Flinsuda's words, Tu felt that she had gained a spirit core to her actions.

"How am I supposed to deal with this mushroom thing?!"

"'Deal with it,' I have no…huh?! You don't think it's amazing? Wouldn't it be grand to gaze at Nectegio with me and bask in the beauty and mystery of biology, enjoying unlimited pleasure? Why, you are especially grand yourself, Tu! Your keen ability to appreciate Nectegio… How I wish you would share it with all miniankind!"

"If you know about this…uh, Nectegio thing? Then help me! There'll be even more casualties if it keeps up like this! I have to find its main body somewhere…"

"*Brzzzzz.* Analyzing the tar, get. *Brzzzzz.* Tu the Magic. Nectegio will, use target's, self, certification as identifier."

The noise, like the air being caressed, reverberated from somewhere unknown.

Several of the mushroom lamellae vibrated.

The noise may have been coming from all the air surrounding Tu.

"Strengthening, restrain fibers. Producing, *brzzzz*, corro, sive poison instead of, neuro, toxin."

"Aheeeeeh!"

Yukis suddenly screamed and collapsed on the spot.

Tu was left bewildered.

"What happened?!"

"…*Awah?!* Forgive me! Nectegio's voice was simply so divine, I

believe it caused a tachycardia-induced cardiac syncope! Yes, yes, but! This is proof that my body is able to perceive Nectegio's brilliance like normal…!"

"I have no idea what're you talking about… Am I just too dumb to understand…?!"

Egg-shaped sporocarps were now growing in an encircling formation around Tu.

Immediately reading the situation, she ran through them all. Her goal was the supersized sporocarp stretching close to twenty meters in the air.

Behind her, the egg sporocarps burst, and a restraining fluid shaped into strands scattered everywhere. It wasn't able to catch her.

At the same time, as if predicting Tu's trajectory, small mushrooms that gave off a violet glow flowered en masse.

"Corrosive Species, Colkatisano."

What would be an instantaneously lethal chemical substance to a normal life-form had scored a direct hit on Tu, but her speed never slackened whatsoever.

"Hyaaah!"

Tu sent a kick into the towering mushroom edifice. She cleaved through more than half its diameter and kept going.

Next, swiping it with her fingers, borne like claws, she fully severed it at the base.

With this, the colossal sporocarp collapsed, previously looming as the largest in the whole area.

Tu's mind was unable to determine which part of the rampantly proliferating Nectegio she needed to destroy to get this situation under control. From first arriving in the district, until she made it to where she was now, she had deforested all the colossal sporocarps she laid eyes on.

"…!"

New giant sporocarps began rising up like trees, buildings and earth splintering apart as they grew.

Simply, punches or destruction didn't prove at all effective against this enemy.

"Er, Tu…? I think you mentioned that you need to find the 'main body,' yes? 'I cannot say that will be a constructive endeavor, no siree! We multicellular organisms may all be a single colony, universally composed of microorganisms known as cells, but…would you yourself be able to verify—*hee-hee-hee*—verify *which one* of the cells composing you is the main body?!"

Before she even reacted to Yukis's voice, Tu jumped down from the remains of the pillar with a spin.

Immediately afterward, thick sticky arms smashed the area where she had just stood.

There was now a seven-armed monster, composed from a mesh entanglement of hyphae— There hadn't been any signs it was approaching. It had likely been cultivated underground and *germinated* at that exact location.

The arm that swung down at her then burst, apprehending Tu with its tenacious fungal tissue.

"Cleanup Species, Neltoral Tetsnyates! *Hee-hee*! A rare one indeed, this one!"

"Get the heck…away from me!"

Tu immediately tore off several threads of the restraints. She could tell that they had become far stronger than they were before.

Tu the Magic didn't die. While Nectegio would endlessly grow and adapt to its enemy, it couldn't compose a fiber that was able to completely stop Tu in her tracks.

In the same vein, however, Nectegio was boundless. The landscape, as far as the eye could see, was all Nectegio the Ravenous Rot. Unless it was all eradicated simultaneously, this enemy would not fall, and by breeding new species, it could immediately supplement any functionality it lost.

But…if this foe's a construct user, like Krafnir…

As she continued this morass of a battle, Tu's attention turned to Yukis, standing atop the garrison.

It was entirely unthinkable, given the situation they were in, but Yukis was totally unprotected. For construct users like Izick and Krafnir, it was normal to have the constructs they created themselves stay at their side like guards, but Yukis didn't even have

Nectegio properly protecting him.

Amid her close-ranged exchange of blows, her leg was caught by hyphae.

The leg was swung about by the colossal fungi, and she was slammed into the avenue.

The buildings, eroded by the hyphae, weakly crumbled away like a baked confection.

The sticky liquid packed inside it flowed out. Accumulated inside were dissolved minian skulls.

"Urk…ngh…!"

Even as she tried to talk with the man rationally, Tu understood.

Yukis was a self-proclaimed demon king, able to kill this many minia without any guilt at all. No matter how much love he may have showed his creation, this fact didn't change.

Spinning her body around like a top, she twisted apart the restraints.

Intersecting the colossal fungi's follow-up attack, Tu used her claw-like hands to sever its leg. She raced past it.

Behind her, the massive fungi began to fall, having lost its balance.

Exiting into the roadway, Tu's sights once again focused on Yukis the Ground Colony.

If there's too many constructs to handle, maybe if I defeat their creator…

"Whoa, whoa… What're you doing here all by yourself?"

The voice that interrupted Tu's thoughts sounded genuinely surprised.

It came from the opposite side of the street. She had heard that voice before.

A low voice that sounded run-down and worn out.

"Huh…?"

Kuze the Passing Disaster wasn't wearing his usual black vestments and was fully wrapped up in gray, ungainly protective gear.

Kuze beckoned her over to him.

"Come on, Tu the Magic. Fighting here isn't going to get us

anywhere.”

“Wait, but, Kuze…?! What’re you doing here?!”

Kuze didn’t answer, pulling Tu’s hand back toward the city.

As she ran, pulled along by Kuze’s hand, she noticed a bizarre change.

The path Kuze had passed through, and only this path, was clear of the spore smog, as if the sun had shone down on the area. The slime mold and lichen that once submerged the street like floodwaters had dwindled enough for the ground surface to become visible again.

“Tu?! Where are you going?! I must insist we admire dear Nectegio together! I absolutely must have you experience this scientific religious experience!”

While Yukis’s screaming at her back faded in the distance, she felt the firmness of Kuze’s fingers at the same time.

They were gnarled and far weaker than Tu’s, and yet despite that, so very strong.

…Kuze.

Their encounter had been so sudden, Tu wasn’t sure she knew what she was supposed to say.

“Thank you,” maybe? “Good to see you again”?

Or perhaps, hearing “How could you do that to Rique?” would have eased Kuze’s heart the most.

“Look. You see those mushrooms growing up like towers? Like that one you just brought down…”

Kuze was the first one to speak up, glancing out at the scene of the writhing city.

“That’s probably like an artillery battery for firing spores way out into the distance. It’s fermenting all sorts of things inside… It planned to build up pressure and expand its domain out all at once. At least, that’s what the Aureatian scholars hypothesized, anyway.”

“…Hey, Kuze. Just now, I—”

“It’s fine.”

Right. It felt like Kuze had saved Tu just now.

Even if her life hadn’t been in danger, she might have taken a single step toward a critical moment in her life.

If Kuze hadn't pulled her hand at the moment, she might have considered killing Yukis.

"You're a real kind girl, Tu, see… Am I wrong? So, well, *bweh-heh-heh*… What this old man's trying to say is, I'm sure your rampaging around has saved a bunch of people…"

"Yeah… Thanks."

"*Bweh-heh-heh*… Not sure I deserve any gratitude, if I'm honest."

Kuze's smile looked weak and exhausted.

Though Tu didn't actually know the expression he had underneath the thick protective bodysuit.

As Kuze continued forward, the thickly growing creatures all seemed to disappear somewhere, as if avoiding Kuze entirely.

The tide of death filling the town pulled away. Anything that tried to kill Kuze would perish itself.

The countless microscopic fungi around them were no exception.

"Tu. Can you see the outside of my clothes right now? If any part of it snapped or has one of the layers lifted up, can you let me know? The visibility's so bad here, I can't check for myself."

"Sure… Ummm, while on the move? I have to look while we're running?"

"Please!"

Designed to be equipped with the greatest physical abilities possible, Tu the Magic had always possessed excellent dynamic visual equity.

In the span of five paces, she would jump while rotating around, bending her body like a spring to bounce to another angle.

Tu jumped around Kuze's vicinity like an acrobat and looked at the state of his body from several angles.

"Oh! The fabric on your back might be a bit rougher than the other spots…! Is that okay?"

"Sure isn't! I can manage the bacteria, but lifeless toxins are tough… Especially since I plunged in here on my own. I planned on going back really fast, but…I spotted you and definitely wandered way too far inside. If it's already getting rough, then I might be cutting it a little close."

"Huh…?"

"Honestly, how do always get stuck doing this unproductive stuff? I mean, none of this matters at all, does it? For your mission to meet with Queen Sephite one more time…or my own goal either, *bweh-heh-heh*… Still, we always see this bad news through, don't we…"

"I think…"

Kuze probably was just complaining to himself, but Tu felt like she needed to answer him.

"It's better this way. This is fine. This feeling, like that I want to help the people I see in front of me, I think it just kicks me into action no matter what…even if I got other stuff to do, or I know it'll just be a waste of time. But I'm really happy! You felt the same way too, huh, Kuze! Aureatia may be after me and all, but… I'm not all alone, after all."

In spite of what she said, she couldn't help feeling happy and smiling.

Though, she understood that it wasn't the time for it at all.

"……"

"Oh, and…ah, that's right! I even made a new friend! It's this girl named Kia the World Word…so you don't gotta worry about me at all! I even came up with a way to help out…! So, listen! You can't let yourself die here!'

"I mean, you can't fix failing protective gear with just willpower…"

"Which way?!"

Tu advanced forward a bit before turning back toward Kuze.

"Which direction do you want to escape, just *point me straight there*!"

"*Bweh-heh-heh*, I see… You always think up the wildest ideas, don't you…!"

A radiant smile came to Kuze's face, like the sun was shining down upon him.

◆

A sound like a destructive landslide echoed all the way to the military base roof where Yukis stood.

"Huh?!"

Yukis ended up jumping from his prostrated admiration of the earth where Nectegio was rooted. From his face-down position, he was literally flown into the air.

"No, no, nooooo! Nectegio's beautiful ecosystem! It's being destroyed!"

From the rooftop, a story above every other building, he could clearly see the unfolding destruction as every part of the flourishing organic colony got mowed down, the buildings broken through. The smoke was creating a path.

It was Tu the Magic. With her unnatural durability and physical abilities, the girl thrust ahead, destroying all the obstacles in a straight line as she went.

"Tu! For your own sake, you mustn't do such a thing! The time has finally come for you to be eliminated by the perfected organism Nectegio's perfect defensive functions! Look, right as I say it, eight Cleanup Species, Neltoral Tetsnyates, are being formed at once…! The ninth generation… At this point, the generations have iterated so much, it could very well be something completely different biologically! Parasite Species, Kuyatie Photos, too?! *Gaaaah*, dying from that species is so very, very, *very* painful!

"*Brrzzzzzz*. Analy, sis, impossible."

"*Ahh*, so sonorous!! Wait, what?!"

Right after Yukis squatted down, clutching his heart, he abruptly returned to his senses.

Analysis impossible?

"You can't analyze her, Nectegio?! In other words, you mean to say it's impossible to produce a species that can deal with her…?! I'm so shaken that I can't help but blabber on about facts that don't need to be reconfirmed at all!"

"Tu the, Magic is being, dealt with. Dissolution. Blight. Quiescence. The life, spans of, species tasked with, disposing of her are, *brzzzzz*, are growing very short. No consistent, cause means Nectegio, cannot analyze."

"Whaaaat?!"

Reacting with almost overexaggerated surprise, Yukis looked at

the conditions on the ground.

Up until moments ago, there should have been eight colossal fungi heading to intercept the path of destruction.

Right now, they were all defeated. Two, scattered in all directions as if torn apart, had fallen victim to Tu's direct attack. The other six, however, simply collapsed on the spot, without any evidence of combat movement, and dissolved away.

The destruction, thrusting in a straight line back toward the city, hadn't stopped.

"Instant death…by a theoretically unclear cause! I do get the feeling… Miss Tuturi mentioned someone capable of doing this… *Gaaah*, I can't remember! Since I had no intention on sparing any memory space on things beyond Nectegio and my fungi!"

"*Brzzzzzz*. Tu the Magic, has es, caped the Third District. Impossible to, pursue."

"*Phew*… Thank goodness."

What Tu had aimed to do was break out of the Third District using the most direct route possible. Physical obstacles were handled by her sturdy physical capabilities, and the organic obstacles form Nectegio's defensive functions were penetrated with the ability of fundamentally enigmatic instant death.

Tu the Magic, an organism that even Nectegio the Ravenous Rot's full capabilities were unable to kill, may have been the one exception that shook the fungi's perfection.

Even this Tu had been too moved by her admiration to choose to hurt Nectegio itself. Truly a triumph of life and beauty.

"Nectegio! Nectegio! Neeeeectegio! From here on out, all living organisms will come to love Nectegio! *Hee-hee-hee-hee!* Just as much as myself! So, to you, Nectegio, I sa—"

The raving words spilling out of his mouth abrupt vanished.

"…Nectegio?"

Yukis the Ground Colony was standing on the military base rooftop. He looked down over Kadan Third District.

Ruins spread out before him. Cracked streets. Brittle, crumbling buildings. Bent lampposts.

Yukis learned, for the first time, that there had been a long

downhill slope past the edge of his vision up until now.

A landscape of quiet death, withered and dissolved hyphae covered in gray dust.

Nectegio the Ravenous Rot had disappeared.

"Hwah?"

It was said that when a normal person encountered an ogre, generally speaking, if the ogre got within thirty meters of said person, all hope was lost.

Yukis's vision had clearly caught that at the end of the long downward slope, about two hundred meters away, there had been a gray-colored ogre. However, even if the ogre had been in his line of sight, Yukis hadn't actually been cognizant of his presence.

At that moment, Yukis exhausted all of his superb intellect on denying Nectegio's demise and coming up with a rationalization on why it would appear that way.

"Nectegio… This can't be, can it?"

A large shadow was cast over him.

The sprint from the base of the slope, two hundred meters in the distance, the acceleration, the jump, and finally arriving on top of the second-story rooftop, happened all within the span of two minian breaths.

Uhak the Silent swung down his club without a single grunt.

Yukis the Ground Colony splattered everywhere, transforming into vivid colors among the gray.

◆

"Are you okay, Lord Kuze?!"

"*Koff*, *koff*… Oh, don't worry about this. The sudden rush of fresh air just made me choke a little."

Once back at the checkpoint, Kuze was doused in a large amount of water and chemicals, and forced to get washed down while still in his protective suit. He had also needed to ask Uhak to erase any Word Arts organisms. Among the fungi that Nectegio created, there were likely to be many strains that weren't affected by simple

washes and disinfectants.

"A really long time passed since you went inside there, so we were all very worried…"

The words came not from the man's duty as a soldier, but because he truly felt that way. He was a good-natured soldier.

"Sorry! I sort of pushed myself a bit too far…*bweh-heh-heh*…"

"That said…"

The kindhearted soldier glanced over at Tu standing on the other side of the street.

Tu looked restless, fidgeting with concern over Kuze.

Her clothes had almost completely dissolved away, so she was wearing a military coat one of the soldiers had given her.

"Tu the Magic has left the control of her sponsor and we've been ordered to arrest her. There wasn't any need to go to such great lengths to save her, was there?"

"Ah well, I suppose…"

He sat down on the side of the road. Right now, all he could do was answer vaguely and keep silent.

So not designated a self-proclaimed demon king like Alus, nor a wanted criminal like Kia…just an order to arrest*, huh? Krafnir the Hatch of Truth was there at the tenth match, too… Guess he must have secretly negotiated with Rosclay, then.*

However, as long as Tu's goal was to meet with the Queen, the situation surrounding her wasn't going to improve from here. Eventually, Aureatia would discuss subjugating her, and in the end, one of the hero candidates—perhaps Kuze the Passing Disaster himself—would end up putting down Tu the Magic.

That's one thing I can't let happen.

He began to think if there was anything he could for her.

The future Tu the Magic was heading toward had absolutely nothing to do with the goal Kuze was risking his life to achieve.

However, when he'd accidently killed Rique the Misfortune, Tu the Magic had chosen not to kill Kuze in return. Kuze couldn't help but think if there wasn't some method to protect the light that was seared into his eyes that day.

Nastique. Is there any way I can save Tu? No matter how far I

go, is watching people die all I'm good for?

Right now, with Uhak heading into the deepest section of the hyphal labyrinth, Nastique was at Kuze's side.

During the hunt for Nectegio, Nastique had spread her bizarre, wing-like appendages and killed a nightmarishly great number of organisms, but just as the natural law of death itself never waned, Nastique's hazy white form hadn't changed whatsoever.

"Hey, Kuze! This coat has pockets on the inside, too!"

Tu's cheery voice reached him, interrupting his thoughts.

She happily flapped her coat open and shut.

"See, look, you can put stuff in here, too!"

"Whoa, whoa, come on now… Don't open up the front when you're dressed like that."

The Aureatian soldier coat was merely draped over Tu to replace the clothes she'd been originally wearing.

"Oh, whoopsie, *ha-ha-ha*… But it's just sorta funny to actually wear the clothes all the soldiers are wearing…"

"Can't take my eyes off you for a moment, can I…"

Kuze thought it was pathetic.

He was certain that Tu brought up this silly, useless topic of conversation because of how solemn and melancholic the look on Kuze's face had been. Tu may have had a childlike ignorance of the world, but just like a child, she closely observed what was going on around her far more than Kuze expected.

"Mr. Soldier. About dealing with Tu, see—"

"…! Lord Kuze, look!"

When Kuze followed the soldier's sights, Uhak the Silent was returning from the rotten city district.

Kuze felt Nastique disappear. Right now, even the soldier beside Kuze could kill him.

In the arm that wasn't carrying his club, Uhak was dragging what appeared to be a tattered red leather belt. Hair burst out from the warped flesh, and it was coiled around scraps of a white lab coat.

Kuze could tell it was Yukis the Ground Colony.

"Uhak…"

Uhak let go of the corpse he dragged behind him. How much

brute force did one have to hit with in order to reduce a minian body to *this*?

Another soldier at the checkpoint in full protective gear came running over and began to identify the corpse.

"I-I don't believe it… Not only did he erase Liquid Rampart along with Nectegio, but this sheer fighting power… Lord Kuze, did you know? That Uhak would be able to defeat Nectegio?"

"…Oh no, of course not. Me, I was just doing what Aureatia told me to."

This good-natured soldier didn't understand the true meaning to Uhak the Silent's terror.

The fact that Nectegio was erased was so horrifying, it couldn't even be measured through the dimensions of fighting strength.

The construct that proliferated to an inextricable scale, itself turning into a labyrinth all on its own, Nectegio the Ravenous Rot—even though the fungi was able to repropagate itself if even the smallest bit of it was left over—Uhak had killed its entire body all at once.

Nastique can kill anything and everything that I can lay my eyes on. Uhak though… He entirely killed any colony of countless organisms that stretched far beyond his range of vision, all at once. Is there a chance that this guy doesn't have any range restrictions at all*? Assuming that, he must've held his ground because he could erase absolutely all of it and felt the possibility there was still a construct left alive in the third district…*

Uhak possessed no means to explain himself, nor did he try to communicate with written words.

His real motives could only be interpreted by observing him from an outside perspective.

With this matter, Aureatia will be firmly convinced of the value in utilizing Uhak. A weapon to make the Sixways Exhibition go exactly as they want it to…acting as the "True Hero," who doesn't say anything inconvenient.

Even this good-natured soldier didn't refer to the hero candidate as *Lord* Uhak.

Ogres were in a subordinate position to the minian races no

matter where they went, only sought for their brute force while subjected to deep-rooted prejudice.

—Was there anything Kuze could do?

Not only for Tu the Magic. For Uhak the Silent, too.

It felt like a terrible act of bad faith to himself and to the Wordmaker to simply resign himself to following the great flow around him, even when he knew the end that awaited the pair.

Though he may have already guaranteed himself a place in hell, was there at least some good deed Kuze could do beforehand?

"…I think it'd be better not to arrest her yet. Tu the Magic has utility."

He mumbled, lowering his voice.

Just loud enough for the kindhearted soldier next to him to hear.

"What do you mean…?"

"I only just heard about this from her, but Tu's connected to Kia the World Word. I don't know what's going on with that girl, but… seeing as the search for her has intensified lately, she must've done something during the coup, right? I'm guessing she'll be labeled a self-proclaimed demon king sooner rather than later."

"As an Aureatian soldier, I do not wish to act on mere speculation. However, the search for her has been slow going, and it's been incomprehensibly difficult to pin down her location."

"…If we tail Tu the Magic, you'll be able to capture Kia."

"Lord Kuze. This is not widely known among the citizenry yet, but we have been notified that Kia possesses some sort of means, either with a magic tool or something else, that uses extremely advanced and multitudinous Word Arts. This is my own personal opinion, but Kia must be utilizing some sort of specialized Word Arts to conceal herself, to prevent anyone from finding her location simply by tracking her."

"All the more reason, really. I know what happened during the fourth match just as much as anyone else. Uhak the Silent is the only one who can *break through* Kia the World Word's Word Arts. Given that we know we can use Uhak, now… While we still have Tu's location locked down, it might be possible to round them up all at once. *Bweh-heh-heh*. Just something this old man thought up,

though."

"……!"

This soldier was good-natured and honest.

If Kuze proposed an effective strategy to maintain peace in Aureatia, he was guaranteed to approach his superiors with it.

After that, it was all for the upper brass to decide.

"I would like to discuss how Uhak and Tu are treated on our end as well. Therefore, Lord Kuze, if you could continue to keep control of Uhak…"

"*Bweh-heh-heh*… Sorry, but I feel like I actually did swallow one of the spores back there. I've had this nonstop chill going for a little while now… Honestly, I'm too exhausted to get up. If you wouldn't mind, while you're taking care of all that other stuff, could you get me a trip to the hospital, too?"

"Wh-what…?! That's serious! Why didn't you mention anything sooner?! Wait just a moment, I'll head to the command post, posthaste!"

"Sorry 'bout this."

Watching the soldier dash off, Kuze did truly feel apologetic.

…I really am sorry about this. For using your good nature for my own self-interests.

The poor health Kuze reported was a completely fabricated illness.

It was all to ensure he didn't give Aureatia's side the pretense that he had failed to keep Uhak under control. It was also to buy time until the eleventh match, following the twelfth, *which was likely going to end without actually being held*.

"Uhak."

With the closest surveilling eyes send away, Kuze walked up to Uhak and muffled his voice.

"Aureatia is trying to use you to kill anyone that'd be inconvenient to keep around. If you get ordered to trail Tu, you should pretend to go after her, and flee Aureatia. If possible…and if your own conscience would allow it, I'd like you to save Kia and Tu, as well."

Uhak's opaque eyes simply stared back at Kuze.

Kuze believed that behind them was a conscience and a

benevolent heart.

"*Bweh-heh-heh*… Sure, I'm the elder disciple here, but maybe I'm being too selfish. Even then, Uhak, I get the feeling I sorta know what you want to do… You want to do good, don't you?"

Just like Tu the Magic, and the people living out their everyday lives, naturally wished to do.

It might have been Kuze the Passing Disaster's own wish, too.

Around Uhak's Word Arts negating power was the only time he was unable to see Nastique. He almost found himself comical that it was only when he was somewhere beyond the white angel's eyes that he could openly speak of this wish of his.

With a sigh, this time he turned to Tu.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Tu. You need to stop hanging around and escape, too. Maybe you've forgotten, but you're a wanted woman, y'know."

"*Eh-heh-heh*, I mean, sure, but I was worried about your condition, Kuze… Everyone's real nice, so I just sorta stayed around. They have to be pretty nice if they'd give a construct like me clothes."

"Yeah. But it's a lot more painful to make enemies out of the friendly ones than the scary guys. They're going to follow after you, but…I've talked it over with Uhak already. Can you protect Uhak for me, along with Kia the World Word?"

"Why're you so worried about Uhak?"

"Well, we shared the same teacher, see. He did the memorial service for her… He's a real stand-up guy, not like me."

Tu the Magic coincidentally getting caught up in the hyphal labyrinth was likely an unexpected development for Aureatia, too. Kuze couldn't give them time to get into the perfect position to hunt her down.

Thus, if Tu was able to immediately make her escape, it would be impossible for the capable players like the Twenty-Nine Officials and their ilk to respond appropriately to this situation. It was highly likely that they would utilize their own pawn here right now, Uhak the Silent, and as many other personnel they could mobilize to search for Tu and Kia's base of operations.

"…Okay. I'll protect Uhak, then."

"*Bweh-heh-heh*, thanks. I really…only ever manage to cause you trouble, huh…"

"Hey, Kuze?"

Tu's round green eyes stared straight at him.

"Will we be able to meet up again?"

"Oh yeah, sure we will. So long as the Wordmaker's words guide us."

She was a dazzling young girl.

Kuze wanted to talk to her about a lot of other things the next time they met.

About angels. About Rique the Misfortune. About the children of the Order.

So…don't go dying on me, Tu the Magic.

Even knowing she was invulnerable, he still worried.

CHAPTER 8 Sixth Borough of Aureatia's Northern Outer Ward

An Outer Ward, situated in the Aureatian borderland, was lined with shops and inns.

The townscape seemed to melt between the thickly forested mountain and canal. While in the era of the Central Kingdom the district had gathered many tourists visiting its plentiful hot springs, it had lost its former prosperity, and more than a few inns were now nothing but empty buildings.

At the foot of the mountain, there were a few inns that had fallen to ruin that even the residents of the region weren't fully aware of.

It was in one example of these ruins…

"So, basically… Ta-daaaah! This is Uhak the Silent!"

"Wh-whaaat…?"

Kia the World Word was at a loss for words. Tu the Magic, having run off claiming she was going to rescue the people caught up in the Kadan Third District labyrinth, had returned with a massive, mysterious ogre in tow.

"Are you crazy…? Why'd you bring someone like him back…? Tu, you might not know otherwise, but he's totally just an ogre."

"Well, yeah, sure, Uhak's an ogre! But he made a promise with me and protected me! Also, Ku—er…um…an older guy I know? He said he was harmless, so it's okay!"

"That's basically a total stranger!"

For the past two big months, Kia the World Word and Tu the Magic had been traveling together due to their shared circumstances.

Their encounter had only happened by chance, but they were both being hounded by Aureatia. They were both former hero candidates, and they both wanted to meet with Queen Sephite. Tu was moved by the coincidence and immediately grew attached to

Kia, and while Kia had been annoyed by it all, she just couldn't bring herself to be mean to Tu.

When Kia learned Tu had gone off alone to the hyphal labyrinth, she had been very anxious, but apparently the Aureatia army was so intent on capturing Tu they didn't even attempt to fight her at all.

Although Tu's explanation had been basically pointless, from what Kia struggled to interpret from it all, it sounded like Uhak was meant to be used as the Aureatia army's trump card, but actually cooperated with Tu, and as a result, they successfully arrived at the Northern Outer Ward without worrying about anyone tailing them.

Is Aureatia just stupid…? What did they even expect to accomplish with some ogre who's just got size and nothing else…?

It didn't seem like a strike from the ogre would even leave a scratch on Tu.

Kia came to understand it immediately after they began to travel together, but Tu the Magic's physical abilities and tenacity were abnormal.

It had been Tu herself who first told Kia she was a hero candidate like Kia.

Under the pretext of preserving the fairness of the royal games, the pictures or likenesses of the hero candidates weren't officially circulated by the Aureatian government, with the only ones on the market being unauthorized versions from the merchant guilds. As such, when excluding the most famous participants like Rosclay, Mele, and Lucnoca, very often children like Kia or citizens without a vested interested in all the candidates did not to have an accurate grasp of all the names and faces of the candidates.

"And those clothes you're in! Did you strip down again?! You look like an Aureatian soldier in that getup, honestly…"

"I-I couldn't help it! Just being inside that labyrinth made them all tattered and stuff… I didn't get them caught somewhere and tear them off like I always do…"

"'Like I always do'? See, you admit it!"

Kia resignedly decided to make a change of clothes for Tu.

That said, all it involved was saying a single word in the air.

"Weave."

From nothing, fibers were sewn together, and a set of clothes in Tu's exact size was created on the spot.

"Thanks, Kia!"

"Listen, using my Word Arts for this sort of nonsense is not… Hey, Uhak! Look the other way! Do you really need me to tell you that?!"

"*Ah-hah-hah*, it's fine, Kia, he's an ogre…"

"Don't toss your old clothes on the floor! How many times do I have tell you?!"

Kia was mostly a child herself, but Tu the Magic was even more of a childish handful.

When she had been living by herself, Kia had solved everything with her Word Arts and hadn't dealt with any hardships whatsoever. However, since she started living with Tu, she now had to look out for not just her own well-being but Tu's as well. Tu was like a big and tall younger sister.

Would they really be able to get through to Sephite like this?

"Hey, Kia! I was thinking that Iznock Royal High School's really gotta be the best way to meet with Sephite…"

"Well, I already tried that myself and know it's not going to work. Sephite is talking time off from school until the Sixways Exhibition's over and might not ever go back, honestly. Once they decide a Hero, she's gonna get busy with her Queen job and not have time to play with friends, right? Not like I know or anything. She's got plenty of personal tutors at the palace, so she can study there just fine…"

"Oh wow, you already tried that? How'd you get in?"

"I mean, I just made myself invisible."

Masking her figure and sounds to flee the wanted search for her, Kia had used the same method to infiltrate Iznock Royal High School. She wasn't guaranteed to conveniently be in a spot where someone was openly discussing the Queen, so it had been a very inefficient investigation and had taken her quite a long time.

She slept and lived at the school for about a full small month.

"That's amazing… You can do that sorta stuff, too? Then, why don't use that to get into the royal palace, too?"

"*Mhm*… I mean, I'm thinking about it…"

Kia nodded ambiguously.

Directly marching into the royal palace—she had resolved to do that exact thing many times but could never go through it.

Kia was a wanted criminal to Aureatia. If she was going to talk with Sephite, there was a chance Sephite might not hear her out if she didn't go through proper procedure to meet with her.

However, now she had a different fear.

It's probably too late to start worrying about this stuff.

The flames of Alus's attack hadn't been the end of it. Ultimately, war had broken out in the Aureatian streets.

At the time, Kia acted without giving a second thought to what would happen after. Witnessing so much death and fear in front of her, she felt that she had to get Queen Sephite to stop the fighting immediately. She wanted to make her promise they'd stop not just the ongoing war, but any battles down the line from happening, too.

Kia the World Word may have already been seen as an enemy of Aureatia for raiding the royal palace grounds. In which case, wouldn't it all end up the same even if she suddenly appeared in front of Queen Sephite and made her hear Kia out? Since, ultimately, that had been what she was trying to do when she headed to the royal palace.

"Kia? If you don't wanna, you don't have to force yourself."

"I never said I *didn't*, okay…"

"We'll figure out the best way to go about it, no need to hurry. We could even wait until the whole Sixways Exhibition is over."

"…Yeah."

"Sorry for saying a bunch of dumb stuff about meeting Sephite. *Eh-heh-heh*, I'm just not too smart and let some weird stuff slip out… Don't let it bug you."

"…Of course not, like I'd ever let something you said bug me anyway. How about you go take a bath?"

While she didn't want to admit it, traveling and chatting with Tu like this served as some measure of comfort for Kia. When she was all on her own living in hiding, she felt like she would eventually go crazy without having anyone to talk to.

I need to meet with Sephite.

There were other reasons why she was being spurred on by her

impatience.

While the Sixways Exhibition was ongoing, Aureatia wasn't likely to invade Eta Sylvan Province. Still, Elea the Red Tag was surely suffering while Kia hesitated.

I need to set Elea free. I can't let her feel the same stuff I've been through.

Elea was likely being held captive somewhere in Aureatia. That was what Kia believed.

She still remained totally separated from Elea after the fourth match.

Back then, Elea hadn't run away, but actually let Kia escape. Kia was immature and confused and hadn't been able to fully realize Elea's act of self-sacrifice.

This time, I *need to be the one to save Elea.*

Elea was different from Kia. Kia would someday be able to return to her homeland in Eta. However, for Elea, Aureatia itself was her home. Simply releasing her through force would mean that her one and only home, and the position she had desperately fought so hard to build for herself, would get stolen from her. She would be hounded as a criminal, and Elea would have solitude forced on her.

Kia needed to find a way to exonerate Elea.

The best method to do so was convincing Sephite, the highest authority in Aureatia, but in order to make sure Sephite understood the truth to Kia's claims, she had to use improper means to actually meet with Sephite, and…

My head's going in circles…and I can't figure out what I'm supposed to do at all…! If only I was clever like Elea, I wouldn't be so stuck like this. I wouldn't need to have these scary thoughts…and work so hard to stop myself from doing anything!

Never finding the answer wasn't what terrified Kia.

She was terrified that she eventually might solve a problem she could've found the answer to, *forcefully*,

If she truly wished for it, she could do it.

She simply had to systematically subordinate all the important people in charge of Aureatia, reconstruct their way of thinking, and make them listen to any demand Kia made of them. Simply make

them forget all about Eta, erase the wrongs levied against Elea and Kia, and then return everything back to how it was, as if nothing ever happened.

Kia found it terrifying. As of this moment, she was still able to think of it that way, too.

If she was still all alone, would this fear have grown unbearable as well?

"Whoa, Uhak, you can cook?! Wooow, I wanna see!"

Tu's voice echoed from farther down the wooden corridor.

Kia finally stood herself up and noticed that the coat Tu left lying on the ground had been neatly folded up.

Had Uhak seriously done something like that for her while Kia and Tu were talking?

What a weird ogre…

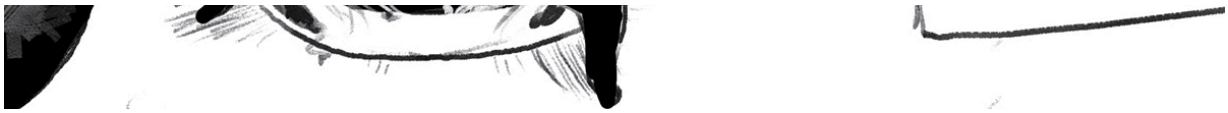
Puzzling as she left the room, Kia headed toward the kitchen.

As she advanced down the hallway, the smell of simmered potatoes and butter grew stronger.

At some point or another, Uhak had put a pot on the stove.

The firewood-lit fire showed signs of having been started by hand. Kia was surprised he'd waste time on something so onerous.





“Oh, Kia’s here, too! Come, look! Uhak can cook! Don’t you think bringing him back here was the right call?!”

“I don’t get that worked up over basic cooking, okay? Also, he’s just helping himself to our food supplies, isn’t he?”

“But you said before that you could gather however much you wanted, right?”

“That’s just because you always pass on eating anything…”

Tu was apparently a construct of some kind and hadn’t eaten a meal since they started traveling together. To Kia, it seemed like Tu had some unknown inferiority complex and actively strived not to eat.

While they would both clean and take baths together, meals were the only time that Kia would create whatever she wanted with Word Arts and eat by herself.

Whether it was the stir-fried wild vegetables Elea would make, or her mom’s signature potato pie, Kia could make anything she wanted with her Word Arts, even down to the tastiest baked goods she had bought from Aureatia’s street stalls.

Thus, she didn’t think anything about someone being able to do a bit of cooking.

“He’s making soup with mashed potatoes and butter. Wow, Uhak, you’re so handy.”

“That’s no better than the basic stuff we learned in cooking class at school, you know.”

Of course, in said classes, Kia’s cooking produced wretched results.

Compared to that, Uhak’s cooking was much better—not just better, the smooth and soft soup was finished with care.

“Looks like it’s done. Let’s eat together.”

“…Tu, too?”

“I’m all set, I think.”

“ Then I’m not having any, either.”

“…Let’s all have some. Uhak, too.”

“Well, in that case, sure, fine.”

They carried over the plates and soup. The dining tables sitting side by side in the dining hall were clean, as if they were brand-new.

The furniture they were using in their base were all left-behind pieces covered in mold, but Kia had used Life Arts and Craft Arts on the necessary items to restore them and allow them to live comfortably.

Kia took a bite of some bread, drank a spoonful of soup, and soaked the torn pieces of bread in the soup.

The mild sweetness of milk and salt spread through her mouth.

"…This is good."

"It is, huh?"

"You can taste it, Tu?"

"Yeah… I was made like that. But it's apparently just a function to help me pretend to be a minia, so it's totally meaningless. It's just a waste on me…"

"…It's not meaningless at all."

"You think so?

"It's always better to eat meals together. You think so, too, don't you?"

"…Yeah."

With the three of them sitting down at the table for the first time, it was unexpectedly relaxed and quiet, creating a tranquil atmosphere.

Uhak didn't say a single word and remained completely still like some kind of plant.

What a weird ogre.

"Hey, so. Would it be all right? For Uhak to stay with us, too?"

Kia didn't really understand in the first place why Tu was so stubborn about getting Kia's permission, but when she thought about it for a moment, since Kia was overseeing their living arrangements and food stores, Kia may have indeed become the master of this ruined home.

She thought of the days she spent living with Elea.

If she could come to enjoy these tranquil days without being impatient with fear, perhaps then she would be happy. She had been when living with Elea.

"…Sure, I guess."

"All right! Isn't that great, Uhak?!"

Looking at Tu wrapping her arms around Uhak, Kia couldn't help but smile.

This ogre looked so dangerous and scary, and here he was with a smiling girl wrapped around him.

"Okay, Uhak. So, you'll have to listen to what we say, got it? We're all in it together now."

If Kia was going to search for the correct answer, the more the companions she had, the better.

◆

Hidow the Clamp listened to the report inside the radzio operator room that had been specifically allotted to him.

"The wait was killing me here. You get results?"

<The targets are in the sixth borough of the Northern Outer Ward.>

The voice on the other side of the radzio answered.

<At the foot of the mountain along the harbor, there's an inn… The ruins of Dayflower of Clouds, I think? Sorry for the vague answer but seems like even the residents don't remember the ruins' old name. That's where they're hiding out.>

"That's good enough. You're positive all three of them are together? Kia the World Word, Tu the Magic, and Uhak the Silent."

<Not unless I've got holes for eyes. Thing is, I'd rather not get stuck with any more of these errands. I'll begin to forget why I even showed up in Aureatia.>

"Sorry about that. Though, if you're wondering what you came to Aureatia for, then…those errands must feel worthwhile too, eh, Shalk the Sound Slicer?"

<I wonder about that.>

The matter of Tu the Magic's coincidental discovery in the hyphal labyrinth was, strictly speaking, not under Hidow's jurisdiction. The reason the report reached Hidow's ears was because Tu herself testified that she was working together with Kia the World Word.

Kia the World Word was charged with attacking the royal palace.

As one of the people handling the matter, this now necessitated Hidow's attention.

However, by the time Hidow heard the full series of reports, Tu had already escaped from the scene. It had been decided on-site to send Uhak the Silent, just tasked with wiping out Nectegio, to trail her.

For Hidow, not being on the scene himself, the situation was all news to him, and he had a horrible time trying to sort out the necessary information.

Entrusting Uhak, with his Word-Arts negation powerful enough to eradicate Nectegio, to pursue the two targets that his Word-Arts negation would prove most effective against, Tu the Magic and Kia the World Word—Hidow's gut reaction coming from his own heuristics intuitively told him that while this appeared to be a rational strategy at first glance, it was in fact a bad move.

Uhak the Silent couldn't be reliably controlled, even when using Kuze the Passing Disaster as an intermediary. If he was tasked to independently dispose of Tu and Kia, then there wouldn't be anyone who could tackle him going out of control, or if there was a harmful interplay with Kia's omnipotence, in an emergency.

Lacking leeway both in time and manpower while facing a situation that required them to immediately take any action they could, Hidow the Clamp succeeded in selecting the best person for the job and dispatching them to take care of it. The request to Shalk to pursue them had been done under Hidow's sole discretion.

Tu had neutralized and shaken off all the Aureatian soldiers tasked with apprehending her, but Shalk the Sound Slicer was able to use his unparalleled mobile speed to arrive on the scene, observe Uhak stealthily outside of Tu's detection range, trail them both, and pin down their hideout.

Shalk the Sound Slicer would be the one to do it. *I had the right idea.*

When Hidow heard during the seventh match that Shalk the Sound Slicer had personally suggested fighting at the Mali Wastes, the only impression he had was that Shalk was a skeleton with a completely inscrutable way of thinking.

He had known how Shalk fought during the assault by Alus the Star Runner, too. He arrived at the battlefield before anyone else, to immediately serve as a frontline decoy in the most dangerous position of all.

Behind the seemingly insane judgments Shalk made was this vivid desire that seemed to overwhelm all others. Was it perhaps that Shalk the Sound Slicer wouldn't ever allow himself to *flee* from a battle?

A man like Hidow needed to analyze and utilize this madness while remaining sane and level.

The possibility that Uhak would run away from the twelfth match was more than enough of a reason to deploy Shalk.

<All my effort was a waste of time, huh? While I was observing them just like you asked, Tu and Uhak met up with Kia the World Word. If I was going to end up standing guard like this, I should've stopped them before they gathered together, right? After this, it doesn't appear there's anything they can do but give up or die.>

"That's fine. If we didn't let them run free for a bit, then we wouldn't have known where Kia was hidden, too. As long as we know where they are, we have plenty of ways to take care of it."

<What'll happen with the match? Wasn't this whole thing to secure Uhak and make him appear in the twelfth match?>

"Now that he's intentionally joined with Tu and fled to their hideout, doesn't it mean that Uhak's ended like this because he's gone out of control, right? From our position, it's clear that he's chosen to run away. Uhak doesn't have any will to keep fighting in the Sixways Exhibition."

<…I see. Still, I want to bring him back, no matter what. If he really plans on running away from his match, it'll leave me a match's worth of extra work.>

"I'm surprised. I didn't take you for a mercenary that worked for free."

<I don't want to let this guy run away for personal reasons, that's all. I just think getting to live carefree without caring about heroes or demon kings…is way too selfish.>

"Don't worry, then. We'll collect Uhak the Silent. That's a done

deal. You're going to help us do it, too."

<Sure hope so.>

Even after hanging up the radzio, Hidow's headache didn't get any better.

Uhak the Silent had already been in Aureatia's custody to begin with. All they had needed to do, after testing out his abilities to defeat Nectegio, was intern him like before and use him when the situation called for it.

However, they needed to destroy Kia and Tu without Uhak. Hidow was cleaning up the mess caused by the rushed decision-making on the ground. Identifying Kia's location was the sole return from it all, but the card they had given up in exchange was far too great.

Everything's a jumbled mess. Now with Rosclay gone and Jelky not at his best either, the control in Aureatia's the frailest it's ever been…

"Hidow."

A dry voice came from behind him.

"I have an idea how to pull Kia the World Word out of hiding."

"…Yaniegiz."

"Let's share the responsibility for this operation. Your main goal here is arranging to get Uhak back, right? For Kia…can you leave her to me?"

"I mean, I'd definitely appreciate it if I can leave that up to you, but…"

Hidow wasn't the only one in charge of dealing with the attack on the royal palace.

That was the Ninth General, Yaniegiz the Chisel.

Considering the operational scale needed to match their foe's might, Hidow would need this man to take charge of half the operation. In terms of authority, Yaniegiz was in a higher position than Hidow, since Hidow had only recently returned to his position.

However, was it really okay to do so? He felt like his heuristic-given intuition, and the madness that Haade instilled within him, had morphed into his present headache and continued to ring alarm bells inside his head.

"…Can you actually get her?"

“Huh? Get her?”

Yaniegiz flashed a small glimpse of his sharklike snaggletooth.

This man was filled with hatred. More than anyone else, he hated the girl who, on two occasions, in the fourth match and during the assault on the royal palace, had worked to send Rosclay to his death —Kia the World Word.

“I’ll kill her dead.”

Kia the World Word. Tu the Magic. Uhak the Silent.

The union of the three dropouts, who had now turned into the greatest threat to Aureatia and minian peace, were given an unofficial nickname—neither hero candidate nor self-proclaimed demon king.

A new demonic force threatening the monarchy—the New Demon King Army.

CHAPTER 9 Aureatia Northern Outer Ward's Fifteenth City Guard Post

Kia wasn't staying completely idle while living in hiding.

After arriving in this new city ward, she went in and out of the guard spot overseeing the area, and learned as much of the information circling around Aureatia as she could, just like she had done while infiltrating Iznock Royal High School.

While they were Aureatian soldiers, the city guards tasked with preserving the public peace were under the jurisdiction of the Police Agency. The investigation briefs surrounding wanted criminals, including Kia the World Word herself, were almost always shared between guard posts.

Kia had been able to escape the long arms of Aureatia because of her tremendous Word Arts power, but there had been several instances where she had escaped danger by getting a handle on such information ahead of time.

This is a pretty lousy guard post…

In this regard, the guard spot overseeing the sixth borough of the Northern Outer Ward did not have a very well-suited structure for gathering information.

Whether because of the city's dwindled population or because maintaining the peace wasn't often necessary, a city guard stationed here would generally be either an old soldier bent over with age or one who was slightly younger, yet still overweight and in his twilight years, and there was almost never more than one on duty at a time.

It posed a big problem.

If they don't talk about who's wanted…what the heck am I going to learn here?!

Aureatia's wanted criminal system was steadily becoming more and more documentation-oriented. Suspect descriptions utilized photograph technology, combinations of symbols to indicate the

crime, and maps showing where they were thought to be hiding.

For a metropolis the size of Aureatia, in order for their wanted criminal system to function, they couldn't stop at mere word-of-mouth alerts and needed to widely disperse these types of wanted posters.

Likely due to the propagation of this system, in recent years, investigation briefs written down in simple Order script had started to be left in city guard spot as well, but…

Do I really have to read this? Me?

Kia wasn't great at reading written script. A large majority of the minian races in this world likely shared her woes.

If anything, Kia was one of the more well-educated people when it came to reading and understanding writing. Her home-tutor Elea had taught her how to read and interpret written passages, and at Iznock High School there were more advanced classes that went over learning how to read the Order script and certain aristocratic scripts as well.

However, Kia didn't engage seriously with such subjects. While she had some interest in history and the natural sciences, the passages written in Order script, in exchange for how easy the characters themselves were to learn, could produce a completely different interpretation of their meaning even when the notation was the same. In any case, it had all been ambiguous, open-ended, and a huge pain for her.

As a result, throughout the city up until now, Kia had mainly gathered information through conversation.

She didn't even know where these investigation documents were stored in the first place.

"*Bleeh*… Patrol time, I guess. I'm beat already…" The elderly guard looked at the time and mumbled drowsily.

Laboriously lifting the sword off the wall, he staggered out to go on his rounds.

"Does he even want to do this anymore?" Kia couldn't help but murmur as she watched the soldier descend the easy slope.

Sitting down in the same guard post chair, there was, of course, no one to challenge her actions.

Kia had reflected somewhat on herself after Acromdo successfully picked her out and was now concealing herself with Word Arts that prevented anyone from perceiving her smell and sound, in addition to her form.

"For now, I should pick out all the documents that might… Oh—*keep guard*."

At first blush, it appeared the Word Arts had no effect at all. She wasn't manipulating bugs or small animals. She was tasking the air, the light—the world itself, so to speak—to keep watch for anyone approaching.

Nevertheless, it didn't take her any time at all to find where all the documents and the like were stored.

They were sloppily stacked up on the edge of a desk.

"There they are. Is this…it?"

The documents listing a personal description meant that this must be the investigation briefs used to make the wanted notices.

It wasn't only young girls like Kia who felt deciphering Order script was annoying and complicated. Even the soldiers in the field, who were drilled in reading comprehension, found dealing with official written records troublesome and complicated, and there were many cases where they were left lying in full view with no precautions against information leaks, particularly out here on the outskirts.

For the older generation in particular, like the guard who just left, many had lived their whole lives without ever coming into contact with the concept of written script.

I can't read the script, but it should have the picture if it's the real deal…

Hastily flipping through the stack of papers, she found the face she was looking for. Kia the World Word's face.

If Kia's face was recorded in these documents, then she could be positively certain they were investigatory briefs from the Police Agency.

"Perfect… *Copy*."

A mirror image of the bundle of papers in Kia's hand was compiled out of thin air and appeared before her.

Each piece of paper and the information recorded on them was an exact copy.

Looking at it from another perspective, not relying on conversations for information meant that she could read all the information recorded in these reproductions from the safety of her hideout. As she departed the guard post, she casually flipped through the bundle in her arms.

Then, when she saw the portrait on one of the pages, her fingers stopped.

"…Elea?"

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Returning to the ruins at the foot of the mountain, she first decided to disclose all the information to Uhak and Tu.

"Elea the Red Tag? This is her? She's real pretty, huh!"

Tu the Magic had both hands on the floor and was gazing at the collection of official documents spread about.

Though, in her case, it seemed more like she was less interested in the actual content of the documents and more just the suspects' portraits themselves.

"She's my teacher. In the fourth match, she tried to let me escape…and I thought she got captured by Aureatia at that point. But if her info's bound up with all this stuff…"

"There's a chance she might still be on the run."

"…Right. None of the wanted posters circulating around town ever showed Elea on them, of course. But Elea's really important—she works as one of Aureatia's…something-or-other, so I'm wondering if maybe Aureatia doesn't want everyone to know about what she did, either."

"But you don't know if these documents are about her being a wanted criminal or not, right?"

"Right. So, I'd like some help deciphering these if possible…"

Kia looked up to gauge Tu's reaction. Tu was flipping the pages over and then back again.

Though Kia was the one asking for help, she hadn't done so with much hope in mind.

Tu the Magic was who she was, and even if Uhak the Silent could decipher it for her, there was no way to convey the information to her.

"*Eh-heh-heh*, sorry. Maybe if I was a bit smarter… I only really picked up a bit of the Order's script while playing with the kids, and I haven't done any sorta studying before. The stuff Izick taught me was all too complicated, so I forgot. If I knew it'd come in handy, maybe I should've taken Flinsuda up on her offer to give me an in-home tutor."

"I mean, I can't read this writing either, okay? We can't go ask someone else for help, either…"

"Hey, Kia! Do you know what sort of wanted poster's out there for you?"

"Hm? I mean, I saw that in the last town I was in, so… I think it accused me of attacking the royal palace and foul play in the fourth match, and anyone who gave Aureatia my location would earn a bounty. Oh, but it said that the citizens weren't supposed to attack me or capture me. No idea what that's about, though…"

"So, in that case, that same sorta stuff has to be written here, right? If you know enough of the Order's script, you can probably find it!"

"I mean, sure, maybe, but my whole wanted poster is totally… Oh, I get it."

What Tu meant was to pick out the shape of the passage.

In one of the classes she hadn't really paid attention to, she remembered being taught something similar.

Passages scribed by the same writer would often get recycled. Just by changing a single character of Kia's crime of "Attacking the Royal Palace," it could be changed to say "Attacking Merchant Shops." The Order's script was difficult because the same single character could have multiple meanings, but Kia understood enough to pick out the difference between "Royal Palace" and "Merchant Shops."

In which case, they could identify the context's point to "royal

palace" and "merchants" in separate passages as well.

From there, one by one, they puzzled out the passage containing information on the search for Elea.

"How's it going? Seems like you can figure it out, right?"

Maybe Tu isn't actually that stupid at all.

Tu would often jokingly talk about her own stupidity, but she may have actually been a much faster thinker than Kia. At the very least, it would've taken Kia several days to arrive at this method of decoding the passages.

"Studying this stuff drives me crazy, but…I have to do this."

"I'll help out, too. This Elea woman's really important to you, right?"

"…Thanks."

When Kia imagined the life Elea must be enduring, she felt like she had to do something fast.

At that very moment, Elea might be exposed to danger, and Kia could already be too late. Even when she thought to defy everything and go to save her, she couldn't help remembering the events at the royal palace grounds and the terrible result she had brought about.

It seemed like taking action, and not taking action, would equally produce the absolute worst outcome possible. She needed to gain information to determine how she was going to act.

With countless passages in front of her, she continued to work by trial and error.

Naturally, these documents were written in a way to ensure that the city guards could understand them with the little education they received. It certainly wasn't an impossible endeavor, even with just Kia and Tu.

It was just past midday when Tu put forth a proposal.

"Hey, how about we call Uhak over here, too?"

"Uhak's an ogre, right? Can he even read…?"

"But doesn't he seem like he'd be smarter than me?"

"Hmmmm…"

Kia crossed her arms and pondered.

Uhak the Silent was far more cooperative than Kia had imagined when it came to daily life in their hideout, but that didn't mean she

had fully warmed up to him, either.

Still, Kia thought that she was being really friendly, comparatively speaking.

Normally, there would be far more pressing problems with an ogre living together with a child.

Kia just happened to have her invincible powers and no reason to fear an ogre's violence whatsoever, and thus could remain unafraid of him. If anything, Kia's frame of mind saw her as watching over him to ensure he didn't go into the town below and cause trouble.

According to what Tu had told her, Uhak was—in a turn that was far too much to be pure coincidence—another hero candidate like them, and somehow managed to completely erase the hyphal labyrinth that Tu had tried to conquer herself.

It was all far too suspicious. While he may have been able to wield some power just like Kia, Uhak couldn't use any Word Arts whatsoever, and despite how supposedly strong he was, he spent every day cleaning, tending to the garden, and doing other forms of menial labor.

"I mean, I guess it'd be fine to let him read a bit… He's pretty calm, so I doubt he'd rip the paper or anything."

"Woo-hoo! Okay, I'll got get him! Heeeey, Uhak!"

Tu vigorously tromped down the hallway.

"She's so loud…"

Kia smiled, exasperated.

When she thought about it, not only did she not know much about Uhak, but she also wasn't fully aware of Tu the Magic's personal history, either.

Tu herself claimed she was a mimic, but it was a race Kia had never heard of before.

Kia understood just from Tu's physical capabilities that she had to be a construct, but it was mysterious how her outlandish tenacity and her carefree attitude unbefitting a weapon were at odds with one another.

"I brought Uhak, Kia!"

"Don't run up the stairs."

The noisy footsteps returned. Tu had immediately pulled Uhak

over to them.

Tu the Magic may have been tall for a woman, but Uhak was a considerable giant among ogres as well.

He practically took up the entire hallway himself, and the old stairs would probably break just by him going up and down them. Kia had needed to preemptively reinforce those areas of the stairs herself.

Uhak looked down over the documents while standing.

The ogre was as still and silent as a statue.

Tu appeared to really value Uhak's good nature and earnestness, but the impression Kia got was that he was a bit absentminded and spaced-out.

"Hey, so Uhak? We're trying to read the writing on these papers."

Tu explained everything rapid-fire, like a child talking to their parents.

"And so, we've managed to figure out this one means 'wait' and this character is 'special.' Do you know at all what's written here on Elea's documents?"

"…Well, Uhak?"

Uhak stared down at the scattered paper documents.

His irises were colored gray, bordering on white, and it wasn't clear if they were out of focus or not.

Finally, his thick finger pointed, in order, to several characters on the documents.

"Wait…"

"We've got a clue!"

Tu was overjoyed.

"You really do understand then, Uhak! Look! The characters being used here are different, but the pauses in the passage are practically the same…and we've got that rule you picked up on, that the symbols mean what sort of crime and punishment they get!"

"Hold on. Okay, so this character means 'locked up,' so…"

The work continued into the evening.

However, the clues Uhak pointed out to them dramatically sped up their decoding.

Neither Kia nor Tu felt like they had given Uhak enough of an

explanation, but it felt as if he had sympathized with Kia's emotional state and showed her the way forward.

"…I've got it."

At the end of their work, like untangling a mess of threads, finally, they successfully deciphered the information about Elea.

Kia had gotten wise to the fact in the middle of their decoding work already, but strictly speaking, this was neither an investigation brief nor a wanted notice. They were documents concerning a criminal's crime and their punishment.

"Elea…is said to have committed foul play and rebelled just like me, but has already been dealt with… But her punishment…"

If Elea had been captured, just what sort of suffering was she enduring?

This was what terrified Kia most of all.

"The punishment is…'special' and 'wait'…! There's no map, but on the southeast outskirts, there's a residence…or a facility, and for 'four small months'…'going outside' is 'forbidden,' so…of course, thank goodness…"

Kia's voice was hoarse.

There hadn't been any indication of tears up until that moment, yet her throat grew hot, and they burst forth all at once.

Elea the Red Tag was safe.

While her punishment definitely wasn't absolved, it was a far more promising result than the worst outcome Kia always imagined.

"Thank goodness… I'm so glad…"

"…Kia."

Tu hugged Kia as she sobbed, gently rubbing her back.

◆

The next morning came.

After crying herself into an exhausted sleep, Kia woke up very hungry and made enough breakfast for two people with her Word Arts before eating all of it.

"I decided to wait."

Kia resolutely declared after finishing her meal.

"Sure, it really rubs me the wrong way that Elea's being treated like she did something wrong, but…at least, if I wait just four small months, then she'll be able to be freed the proper way."

"You sure? Don't you want to meet with Sephite and get all your crimes wiped clean, too?"

"Me? I'm totally fine. Being chased down by Aureatia doesn't scare me at all! I wanted to meet with Sephite and find out if Aureatia was trying to invade Eta, but… I figured that's not something I need to do right this minute, either."

Kia smiled nonchalantly.

She might have been right, and the Aureatia army might not have posed any threat to her at all.

For a while after they had met, Tu was amazed and astonished by everything Kia did and had peppered her with questions nonstop. She previously believed that Izick the Chromatic had to be the greatest Word Arts user this world had seen, but even for someone who had been so ignorant of the world as Tu the Magic, seeing the very young Kia the World Word easily utilize Word Arts powerful enough to reshape reality itself was shocking enough to destroy her entire sense of values.

Kia's Word Arts really are amazing. If a little girl like this is totally beating him with her Word Arts, then Izick really doesn't have any good points left, does he…?

Nevertheless, the reality was that there was some part in Tu that had apprehensions about this tremendous, unproportionate might. While Tu herself had proposed infiltrating the royal palace, if Kia ever got a different idea, one accompanied by brute force and destruction, Tu felt she might ultimately have to put her life on the line to stop her.

"I think I'd be a bit relieved if you did plan on waiting. I mean, Kia, when you're by yourself sometimes…you've always had this really pained and worried look on your face."

"Me? No way! Obviously, you're mistaking it for something else."

"*Eh-heh-heh*, maybe you're right… Lots of people have told me I'm pretty quick to assume things."

However, in the first few days they had been together, Tu's impression was that Kia was just a young girl.

She'd get sour or put on a brave front, but her inner nature seemed to be that of an artlessly considerate and kind child.

Tu couldn't allow a child like her to use such an irreversibly serious power.

It almost feels like I'm her big sister, thinking stuff like this.

The thought was a bit delightful.

"What're you smiling about…?"

"I'm just glad, that's all."

"Hey, Tu…it doesn't bother you what I've done? I feel like I've talked a bunch…about the whole treason stuff, or about foul play and all…"

"Oh yeah, I guess you did, huh. What did you do?"

"I-I didn't…do *nothing* exactly, but…"

"You didn't act unfairly in the fourth match, right?"

"…No."

For simple-minded Tu, she didn't really understand what was considered foul or fair play in the Sixways Exhibition to begin with. Kia simply fought with her omnipotent Word Arts and was suspected of cheating somehow, while on the other hand, Kuze attacked Tu before their match and was able to move on in the tournament without being disqualified.

Were the people who set the rules arbitrarily deciding where the line lay, ensuring they could win? But Rosclay the Absolute should've been able to do just that, and he still lost the tenth match.

Winning and losing and stuff is all so complicated. Winning's not just with strength, but winning with one's head, or heart, or just through luck… The result's gotta be from the whole world doing all sorts of stuff.

"Going into the royal palace and putting everyone to sleep…that's true. But that was just to stop people from fighting and harming each other…! On the way to the palace, I healed all the injured people I saw, and I really just wanted to talk to Sephite, that's all!"

"But you know that sneaking into the palace was a bad thing. That's why you feel guilty, right?"

"…Yeah."

Kia nodded, crestfallen. Kia was a child, but she was probably far more sensible and prudent than Tu was.

She was a child who was able to self-reflect on the meaning and responsibility of her actions.

"Did Elea do that sorta stuff, too?"

"…Probably. Elea…was a really kind teacher. But she still killed Jivlart the hero candidate. Elea did a bunch of stuff that she kept secret from me, so I can't say with confidence that she didn't do anything wrong. She might've done bad stuff like what Aureatia said she did, or all their allegations could be false. But…even if she did do something bad, once she's atoned for what she's done, I want to live with her again."

"Elea really is important to you, huh?"

"…"

Kia was able to say she'd wait for Elea's release because, in truth, she didn't want to use any cheap or unjust methods. Tu figured that if Elea the Red Tag was the one who taught her to be this way, she really must have been a good teacher after all.

"Hey, Tu. Do you think we're actually bad people? You said you were glad and all, but…do you still think you'd help me if I was a bad person?"

"Yup. If someone's in front of me, in trouble, and we can get along, then…I just sorta end up wanting to help out. I never really worried if you were actually a bad person or not."

Tu thought back to the screams from the young men in the Sun's Conifer that she'd heard on the day Rique died. Whether wrong or right, there was nothing sadder than the idea of a world where there wasn't a single person who would empathize with someone else's pain.

There may have been a lot that Tu still didn't know about this world, but even still, she wanted to save people without distinguishing the right from the wrong. Tu the Magic, after all, was the "Demon King's Bastard," created by one of the worst scoundrels the world had ever seen.

While it may not have been a firm conviction she could put into

words, letting her heart lead her to judge others couldn't be a part of saving people as her heart desired.

"Is it all right to go out on watch? I want to see the city."

"Isn't it boring to do that every day? You just look out at the town from the roof…"

"I don't get bored," Tu replied with a smile. "That's how I was raised."

In this district, separated from central Aureatia, it was peaceful enough to think the turmoil of the Sixways Exhibition was all a dream.

Tu wished the world could keep on living in peace like this.

CHAPTER 10 The Twelfth Match

The unbelievably peaceful days continued.

No one chasing after Tu or Uhak popped up in the sixth borough of the Northern Outer Ward, and living in the inn at the foot of the mountains, overlooking the city, felt like being in a gap between nature and civilization. Though quiet, it was never lonesome.

Like Kia and Elea had done in Eta, they had decided on duties for everyone.

Uhak was assigned the cooking and cleaning, Kia the laundry, and keeping watch and inspecting the building was left up to Tu.

Of course, no matter how much laundry piled up, Kia could clean it all with a single word, and since she no longer needed to run around as much, it meant most of her time was spent thinking.

Usually, she would think about Elea.

Now, Kia wanted to let her know she was living in total peace and comfort. That she wasn't lonely or in pain.

The Sixways Exhibition will finish up, the hero'll be decided, and she'll be pardoned.

After thinking and talking it over with Tu, she had come to believe it was best for her to wait for this moment to come.

The concept of pardons was something that Kia had learned once in class and only vaguely remembered, so to learn about it, she had needed to sneak back into Iznock Royal High School again and listen in on a class for students two years ahead of Kia's previous grade.

A pardon is when the royal family specially exonerates someone from punishment for their crimes… Once they decide on a True Hero, they might even exonerate me for going onto the royal palace grounds. When that happens, Elea can get discharged, too, and we'll be able to live together again.

She was able to embrace this meager hope because the days

with her companions had been so comfortable. It was fun to simply talk with Tu and Uhak or take strolls through the mountain that reminded her of her homeland.

Tu was always up to something bizarre, while Uhak was almost laughably serious and earnest, and it felt like they were living in a completely different world from the roiling political landscape of Aureatia.

"Kia, look at this horned beetle! Got myself a brand-new one!"

"You brought one of those things in here again?! Our whole place is going to be filled with bugs at this rate! If you don't do something about them, bugs will just keep popping up nonstop, you know!"

"Sure, but still, look! On just this mountain alone there's four species of these horned guys, right? But the one I got today is the first female I've seen among all the ones with three horns, so—"

"Enough already! Send it back home this instant! You're not going to show it to anyone, anyway!"

"Hey, Uhak! You'll understand how cool this is, right?!"

Tu's eccentric-yet-innocent nature was similar to a girl Kia had treated like a young sister back in Eta, Yawika.

Tu gave energy to Kia's life here, discovering and teaching her all sorts of ways to enjoy themselves even as they lived in hiding and weren't able to go into town.

Uhak earnestly lived out his days in complete silence and would look after Tu and Kia whenever his hands were free. Though he looked completely different, and their personalities were nothing alike, Kia felt he was like a mother.

Once when Kia happened to wake up early in the morning, she saw Uhak kneeling in the spacious lobby and offering up some sort of prayer. It was the prayer style of the Order.

When she had attended school, there had been a very small number of children raised the same way, and Kia remembered thinking it was a really strange custom. While the actions were the same, Uhak's prayer, with his colossal frame, was so majestic, it came off as something totally different, and Kia unconsciously held her breath as she watched from the shadows.

"…Hey, Tu, tell me."

Once at night, when falling asleep, Kia called out to Tu in the bed next to her.

"Why…did you go to the hyphal labyrinth? It wasn't like anyone asked you to…and Aureatia was chasing you, too, so wasn't it risky?"

"*Eh-heh-heh*, my bad."

"You really had to go?"

"…Yup. The truth is, there's people suffering all over the place… and I think being able to think about someone who isn't right in front of you, however big or small the thinking may be, is what actually saving people is about. I really respect those people…who can think about the bigger stuff like that."

Constructs were said not to have any function for sleep.

Tu clearly answered Kia's drowsy questioning.

"But see…a person like that told me once, that even if I can only save the people in front of me, even that's a really great thing. While we may do things differently…I'm sure she would've approved of it."

"…"

"For the hyphal labyrinth, I just thought I needed to go. I thought the same when Alus the Star Runner attacked. Even I couldn't really answer why I felt like that, but…lately it feels like I've started to figure out the answer. I think this is part of a code and duty, as a champion."

"A duty and code."

"…Uh-huh. I was born really strong, so…I gotta do something if someone's suffering under some strong and unjust power. I might lose…and I might end up causing trouble for you, Kia."

"Well, um… There were people who were saved thanks to you, right?"

"There wasn't anyone. All the people in the hyphal labyrinth died."

"…"

Kia hadn't ever once asked Tu about how many people Tu had saved that day.

Had Tu spent her days with all this sadness in her heart?

Not just the sadness of the hyphal labyrinth, but something more varied and complex.

"But I don't regret going or anything. I did what I thought I had to do. Besides, it wasn't a total waste…"

"…That's really admirable, Tu."

"Huh?! Kia, do you have a fever or something?!"

"Shut up… I just said it was admirable. I'm going to sleep."

In truth, Tu thought about things much more seriously than Kia did.

Even though Kia had powers that were far greater than Tu's, she had never used them to save a life.

With both the Lithia fire, and the fire Alus caused, by the time Kia quenched the flames, most things had already been settled.

If Kia wished for it, she could've easily erased the whole hyphal labyrinth, but instead she feared drawing any attention to herself, and even viewed Tu's self-sacrificing act as nothing but risky and dangerous.

It wasn't at all, though. Not to Tu.

Kia had the power of a champion. Would she someday be able to have the heart of one, like Tu?

As the three of them lived together, Kia came to know all sorts of things.

Tu knew about all types of people from the United Western Kingdom of Old. Ever since then, she had always liked people and had always acted this way for a long time.

When Kia thought about Elea and cried, there were times when Uhak would silently come up and nestle close to her. It served to make her even sadder and her crying even uglier.

When she woke up in the morning, she wasn't alone. Energetic Tu and silent Uhak were there.

These peaceful days continued for a spell.

Then, without almost any forewarning, Kia the World Word disappeared without a trace.

◆

It was a night where the red large moon and pale small moon were clearly visible.

The sixth borough of Aureatia's Northern Outer Ward was a hot-springs town, but it was also a port town, with the springs bubbling up in the mountain range flowing into a large canal.

Atop a ship, rolling in the nighttime wharf, Shalk the Sound Slicer quietly trained himself.

It was extremely simple spear practice. He stabbed his spear toward the wall and stopped the instant it made contact with a point on the wall.

This one spot needed to be the farthest position his top-speed thrust would reach. From here, he would need the skills to gauge the feeling of distance with his spearhead while taking up position at the most optimal range from his foe.

He needed to be able to perform this attack whenever, wherever, without the need for any special tools.

A skeleton like Shalk didn't need to sleep and as such had continued this training every day without rest.

Uhak the Silent, the True Hero.

He didn't know how much the information Yukiharu the Twilight Diver told him was based in fact.

What were Yukiharu's intentions in passing only this information onto Shalk?

On top of the boat, he thought as he swung his spear like the wind.

How do my actions change knowing this information? As long as I don't accept Yukiharu's commission, it'll be impossible to figure out the truth or not. Still, it isn't the sort of information that could be waved off as lies seeking profit.

His spear prodded the ever so shallow point in the ship mast.

Shalk had already stabbed his spear several hundred times, with speed that beggared all learned knowledge, but there only ever remained a single shallow point where his spearhead connected.

Truth is…I only started to get so persistent about Uhak after that guy told me he was the True Hero. I can't let Uhak die before I know for sure. Though, it's not inconceivable he might've given me that

idea for this very reason.

Yukiharu the Twilight—and, by extension, the Gray-Haired Child who made use of him—didn't want to let Shalk kill Uhak, did they? Shalk's way of approaching his battles didn't involve disposing of his opponent in advance, but even if it did, just having this information would make him hesitate to try something on Uhak.

The reverse held true, too. Once Shalk learned the suspicions that Uhak the Silent was the True Hero, it led him to what he was doing now, trying to stop Uhak from stepping off the playing field before revealing anything.

Or perhaps, they don't want Uhak to kill me *and are trying to stop me from doing anything unnecessary. If so then, this latest fight—*

"…Shalk?"

A voice called his name from the wharf.

It was a tall, slender young girl, with her long chestnut hair in a braid.

She anxiously held a mud-like mass, and a green coat, to her chest.

"Shalk… Wh-what're you doing here?"

"Am I not allowed to be here? I can at least give you time to think about that."

"Hey, Shalk… Kia, she disappeared somewhere. I-I looked for her, but her coat was left in the path to the port and nothing else… So…"

"Yeah. Of course you did."

Shalk jumped down from the ship to the wharf with a light thump.

Tu showing up here was exactly as he expected. It was why Shalk had come.

Tu the Magic backed away.

"…Did they need to send a big, bombastic army to encircle you guys for you to figure out that you're surrounded? That coat's a fake that Aureatia threw together. So that when Kia disappeared…we could draw out someone thoughtlessly coming into town. Like you."

"Why…you, Shalk…?!"

"Because you're a self-proclaimed demon king. Hero candidates

have a duty to put down self-proclaimed demon kings—and both you and Kia the World Word were just designated as self-proclaimed demon kings a little while ago."

Tu the Magic was no longer to be arrested alive.

The enemy was the New Demon King Army. By acting together with Kia the World Word, the greatest threat of all and perpetrator of the attack on the royal palace, it was determined that Tu was an enemy of Aureatia.

"You should've learned more about the tricks Aureatia's got up its sleeves. I'm guess you never once thought that any of those geezers and grannies dressed up like shopkeepers or fishermen might've been a spy the whole time, huh?"

"This can't be right, Shalk! I mean, during the Alus attack, we both—"

Tu tumbled over mid-sentence.

Shalk the Sound Slicer was already at her back.

"What was that? You were talking so slow, I missed it. Talking about the time we fought Alus the Star Runner, was it?"

"I thought you were a friend! Someone who thought like me!"

Tu was thinking that amid this battle of shura, there were others besides her making a hobby out of acts of charity.

Her thinking was far too naïve.

"Sorry about that. I wasn't there outta the goodness of my heart, I just wanted to go toe to toe with Alus the Star Runner."

Shalk let out a derisive, bone-rattling laugh.

"And right now, I'm really in the mood to go toe to toe with you."

Twelfth Match. Shalk the Sound Slicer versus Tu the Magic.

◆

I have to run.

She felt the cold ground on her cheek. The first choice that came to Tu was to flee.

Tu didn't want to fight Shalk the Sound Slicer. She didn't want to

be defeated or defeat him.

She didn't know Shalk's real motives here, but whatever they were, she hated the idea of either of them getting meaninglessly hur — *No, no, no, I can't! If I run, then Uhak and Kia'll be in danger!*

Kia had been lured out somewhere, and there was no one left to protect Uhak.

Shalk had likely anticipated that Tu would use her durability to escape by force. If he managed to pull Tu far enough away from the sixth borough of the Northern Outer Ward, Uhak would be isolated. In fact, hadn't he just told her that there were several undercover Aureatian agents in this town already?

Aureatia was trying to capture Uhak. Kuze had misgivings about this exact situation and had entrusted Uhak to Tu.

If Tu left this area, Shalk would attack Uhak next.

"Shalk…!"

"Tell me if you're finally interested. I'm bored."

"If that's, what you, want!"

Tu lowered her center of gravity to charge forward. It was the same stance she used when she broke through Nectegio.

If Tu the Magic put everything she had behind the charge, she could blitz through all the residences in the ward.

"Then, let's g—wah?!"

Her explosive charge forward never came.

Just like when she went to move a moment ago, Tu suddenly collapsed on the ground.

Rotating from the momentum, she slammed headfirst into the wharf pavement, breaking it apart.

"Now that was a real interesting little move. You tried to catch your opponent off guard for once, eh? Make like you're gonna run me over, but actually you were headed back to your hideout…to protect Uhak."

"…! Why?! I didn't trip or anything?! How could I fall over?!"

Tu the Magic falling over, with her supreme motion nerves, was a completely inconceivable phenomenon.

Whether there was some sort of obstacle placed at her feet, or something caught on to them, Tu possessed the physical capabilities

to quite literally *trample underfoot* such obstacles and break through them.

Shalk's spear was still slung on his back. It appeared that he hadn't moved an inch from where he stood.

"You've got all the time in the world. Think about it. As you can see, I haven't attacked you once. See, I already know that'd be a waste of time…"

"Urngh!"

Tu tried to stand up once more, but the instant she took a step, she fell down.

Her movements left her looking like a clumsy, writhing mess.

"Stabbing your mouth or eyes, focusing all my attacks on one point, if that sorta stuff was enough to kill you…then you would've been long dead from Alus the Star Runner's attack. Ain't that right, Tu the Magic?"

Tu didn't think that any attempts on her part would succeed. Instead, she focused on Shalk's behavior.

Shalk wasn't moving—but that couldn't possibly be true. He was sending out his spear too fast for the average person's sight to capture and immediately returning outside Tu's range. The feat of agility was something that Tu's keen sight was just barely able to pick up on.

"I get it… You're not attacking me. You're shaving away at *where I'm standing* each time I go to take a step forward. So the force of my step…gets thrown off, and I can't go forward!"

Tu looked at her feet. The wharf pavement was faintly shaved off and scattered from the impact.

The instant she went to take a step, the footing where she meant to put her weight was carved out.

Like a carriage was unable to progress through a frictionless mire, once she lost the foothold generating the counteraction, no matter how much power she put into the motion, it would never result in actual movement.

Tu didn't fully comprehend how these dynamics worked, but there was one thing she knew for sure now.

There was a hopelessly large gap in speed between the two, to

the point he could watch and aim for the exact instant she moved.

My weakness is being unable to think during a fight. But if I don't think, this will keep up forever! I'm not doing this to win, I need to think to save Kia and Uhak!

"What's wrong? You figured it out, and you're still just flailing around?"

"…!"

"Give me all you got. It'll be way too dull if this is how it's going to end."

I might be able to do it. But I could fail, too…

There was one method she had to attack Shalk in this situation.

The orb of mud that Tu held in her hands—Rotting Soil Sun was her personal magic tool that she had obtained for herself on the day of Alus the Star Runner's attack, in order to keep it under control. It could fire off a large quantity of mud with the speed and power of a bullet.

Shalk's movements were faster than a bullet. Tu was fully aware of that. But still…

"Rotting…Soil Sun!"

Offense wasn't the goal. Her aim was to use the threatening wave of mud to block Shulk's line of sight.

And, take a step!

She kicked out with her whole body, and yet, all she hit was empty air.

"Too slow."

Even though Tu made the movement, the instant the thought popped into her head, to Shalk the Sound Slicer, there was still enough of a delay for him to calmly slip around Rotting Soil Sun and reach Tu.

She tumbled. Her body tilted and slammed to the ground.

Thrusting out her hand, she used it to push against the ground—but the instant before she could, countless strikes of cold steel blurred together. The base she went to push against was gouged away. Even using her hand for her *forward step* had been read perfectly.

Nevertheless, Tu didn't drop any speed whatsoever, and instead

of thrusting her body upward, she slammed it down, as if diving straight into the earth.

A violent explosion. A fissure.

"If I can't move on the surface, then…"

The sturdily compacted pavement was completely pulverized from Tu putting all her muscular strength into a body slam.

The canal waterway billowed in like storm waters, dragging Tu down with the debris.

"How about this?!"

"C'mon now. Even if you go down there, in the end, I'm still on—"

Shalk spat out his words with exasperation, but then he immediately noticed a strange shift.

As if pulled down by Tu's movements as she sunk, Shalk fell into the water as well.

The wharf collapsed.

◆

Shalk the Sound Slicer's thoughts were just as swift as his movements.

Any trick against him that his thoughts could work through, he could read completely in what was a single second to the average person.

What did she do to me?!

However, even with these powers of thought, this proved incomprehensible.

He hadn't lost his footing with the collapse of the wharf. With Shalk's speed, he was more than able to react to any unexpected destruction of the terrain around him and escape to safety.

He didn't even need to consider it, but since Tu had been so out of range, she hadn't grabbed on to his body and dragged him down with her, either.

However, as for this strange thing pulling against his bones…

"Aha, so that's what it was…!"

He hadn't been able to see it.

Shalk's body was entangled in what looked like a strand of thread.

Delicate and silky though it may be, a single strand was able to pull Shalk's whole body down without snapping.

Her hair! She wrapped it around my body!

This had been the goal behind the smoke screen of mud projectiles.

In order to interrupt Tu's kick and her attempt to land with her hand, he had needed to approach her twice and cut away her footing.

Anticipating they would get tangled up by the intense movement, Tu had loosened her braid slightly and let it sway in the air. By curious coincidence, the thread trap bore a striking similarity to the final move Mele the Horizon's Roar used in the seventh match to curb Shalk's godlike speed.

He sunk down into a darkness where he lost all sense of up from down.

Bubbles. Debris. Light.

In the evening depths, two green eyes glittered.

"I got you."

An explosive current of water flew past Shalk's sides.

Even though he dodged, an impact shock powerful enough to blow his right arm away ran through him.

"!"

From underwater, using just her leg power, Tu the Magic flew up to the water's surface.

Dragged by a single strand of hair, Shalk collided violently with the water surface from below. An impact. A hard blow. Up over the water.

The silhouette of Tu dancing in the moonlit sky was above him. The water spray arced through the air. Her hair was pulling him in.

My left ankle!

With his instantaneous assessment, he swiped with his spear and cut off his own left ankle, entangled by the strand of hair.

At the same time as his body fell, with his spear's supreme agility, he struck as if slicing the surface of the water, and with the recoil,

successfully grappled onto one of the ships floating in the harbor.

In midair, Tu grabbed onto the severed white ankle. Shalk stabbed his spear into the ship deck in place of his missing foot.

Tu sunk into the water once more. Once she did, Shalk wouldn't be able to detect where she was.

Shalk had thought of his opponent as falling far short of Mele the Horizon's Roar, but he now needed to revise that judgment.

"Tu the Magic… Guess you can put up a fight after all!"

The ship Shalk stood on wasn't the only one. With the moors destroyed along with the rest of the harbor, countless ships floated in the canal.

Above the water, it was quiet enough to believe everything up until then had never happened. Large waves rocked the boats, and—*This isn't a wave!*

Shalk kicked off the deck with his good foot and flew to another ship with his lightweight body.

At his back, a pillar of water shot up like a geyser, smashing the boat he had been standing on to pieces.

To escape from the destruction, he again jumped to a different boat.

A wet braid, almost like a tail, flew in an arc.

Sinking back into the water, green glimmers blinked in dark depths.

Tu the Magic's physical abilities, even when underwater—or precisely *because* she was underwater—achieved truly free movement, not bound by anything at all.

Our positions have reversed now. The fight's not about me stopping Tu from moving, but her stopping my movements instead. She's trying to totally immobilize me to prevent me from heading to find Uhak the Silent.

Shalk the Sound Slicer possessed unrivaled speed in a close-range battle. Capturing him or stopping him from making such movements would have been his greatest weakness.

If he was submerged in water and had his whole body destroyed while unable to move as he liked, what would happen to Shalk? At the very least, it didn't seem like he'd fulfill his duty to pin Tu the

Magic down.

"If this is what she's like underwater, just how am I supposed to defeat her? Give me a break…"

Yet another vessel, the size of a small house, was destroyed by Tu's underwater charge.

A single stroke in the water transformed into a massive, talon-like wave, and rocked the scenery around him.

Leap. Destroy. Dive.

Leap. Destroy. Dive.

Leap. Destroy. Dive.

Shalk continued to jump from ship to ship to escape the destructive waves.

Tu was hot on his heels, swimming with the speed of a folkloric sea beast, destroying every ship floating in the canal as she went.

Shalk was too far from the shore. It didn't seem like he could run across the water surface, swaying constantly from the ferocious offensive, and reach land.

Much worse, after losing one of his feet, Shalk's strongest advantage—his speed—wasn't in perfect condition, either.

"Now things are getting interesting."

It was through these exact types of battles that he could learn about his real nature and who he was.

"You gotta come at me with everything you got, or else there's no point in fighting."

◆

Tu the Magic had never actually learned how the minian races swam.

However, her body, designed with ultimate physical ability in mind and the superb senses that accompanied it, made her immediately adapt to underwater activity.

She kicked the water with her insteps lined up together, in order to send the wave generated from her upper body down through her long legs. By placing both arms flat against her body, she minimized water resistance.

Thrusting through the water with her now streamlined outline, she looked like an elegant and graceful fish.

Her excellent vision was able to discern each individual ship up on the surface from the depths of the nighttime riverbed.

She didn't need to come up for air, and even as she threw body slams with enough power to smash ships into flotsam, her body was completely unblemished.

Shalk can't get onto land.

With a single stroke through the water and a kick of both legs, she changed her direction at a sharp angle.

In the second it took to pierce through a ship's bilge, fly up above the water, and dive back down, Tu could get a grasp on Shalk's position.

If I don't have any other choice here, then I'll drag Shalk down in the water and take both his legs off! That way I can get through all this without killing him, and then I can go help Uhak, too!

Unlike the minian races, a construct could be joined together again even if its body was blown apart.

Shalk knew that for himself and had cut off his own left ankle for that reason.

Tu the Magic was terribly naïve when it came to combat, but just like she had done in her battles in the Final Land, as long as she understood the way to incapacitate a foe without killing them, she could dedicate all her effort to make it happen.

"Shalk!" As she fluttered high above the water, Tu shouted at Shalk right below. "Don't help out with this sorta stuff! Uhak and Kia didn't do anything wrong at all!"

She slammed her heel down. The boat where Shalk stood was split in two the moment it landed.

She had been aiming for Shalk but didn't hit him.

"Kia's just a regular young girl! She doesn't want to hurt anyone at all! Doesn't Aureatia get that attacking her might just make her hate them instead?!"

"No clue. Truth is, they might not really get that."

Shalk replied with his spear stuck into the shipwreck as it flew in the air.

Tu tried to shoot him down with the mud projectiles from Rotting Soil Sun, but in an instant, Shalk's figure was no longer there.

His voice reached her from the complete opposite direction, on a ship floating at Tu's back.

"Besides, they gotta be fed up with having their lives *spared at the whims* of someone else. Even with the True Demon King… Everyone's got the inkling that they didn't do everything they did out of a desire to hurt someone."

"Th-they want to kill her…just to give themselves peace of mind?!"

"Is it really that strange to you? When Kia the World Word gets old and starts growing senile, are you going to be there to look after her? Do you think that she absolutely won't cause anything on a whim for the rest of her life? If you act nice and kind to someone with a lot of power, you think they won't look down on the minian races as beneath them?"

"…!"

"You better at least learn to imagine what the weak are thinking about. Keep going the way you are, and eventually you won't be able to protect anyone."

"Even then, I'm—"

Once again, she dove down into the black water.

Morphing into a water serpent that swallowed everything in its wake, she eradicated the ships floating in the river, and the wreckage that could serve as Shalk's footing.

"—going to do whatever's out in front of me!"

The scales of the battle were already tipping in the other direction.

The boats were being annihilated at a frightening pace, and Shalk's footing was dwindling.

The large pieces of flotsam were smashed apart, too. Shalk fled from one, losing yet another option.

Before long, he was driven to the top of piece of flotsam just barely big enough to stand on.

All his potential footings were worn away, and there was nowhere to leap.

However, Shalk jumped.

"Guess this is it…"

Shalk the Sound Slicer, at last, fled into the water.

Tu had waited for this moment. Underwater, he wouldn't be able to fully utilize the mobility that transcended all known wisdom.

Just as she had expected, Tu was the faster swimmer between the two. She caught up to him.

She finally grabbed both of Shalk's legs.

"Now you ca—"

At that instant, Shalk's arms became a flurried, afterimage blur.

He must have attempted some sort of counterattack on Tu, but of course, it didn't leave a scratch on her body.

"…!"

"Figure it out?"

Feeling something was off, Tu tried to move her body. The hands that held fast onto both Shalk's legs, and the legs that she kept together to utilize her swimming style, had been locked into their respective positions.

"Wh-why…?! Shalk, what'd you do?!"

Both Tu and Shalk were constructs that didn't need to breathe. They were close enough that, even underwater, their voices reached one another.

Was her mindset as a warrior too naïve and soft after all, to demand an explanation from her foe like this?

I'm tied up! With something even I'm not strong enough to break out of…

"Well, here's the thing, Tu. That's some real monstrous strength you've got. You'd be able to tear apart metal wire, tarantula threads, heck, even deep celestial charsteel or dragon scale. But there's still one thing that's able to tie up that body of yours."

"You wrapped my hair around my whole body…?!"

She hadn't been able to visually perceive Shalk's movements the moment she caught his legs.

With terrifying speed, he'd plucked Tu's hair and entangled Tu herself up in it, before tying it off. Tu's usually tightly braided hair, in order to drag Shalk down at the start, was left with a few strands

undone.

With her own hair possessing absolute strength, she lost use of both arms and legs and began sinking down into the water.

"When the wharf was destroyed…and you dragged me into the river, I seriously panicked. That was impressive. Wouldn't have been surprised if that was enough to do me in."

"Sh-shalk…tell me, the truth…!"

Even with her defeat assured, Tu couldn't afford to let go of Shalk's legs.

If they both sunk down together, at the very least, Shalk wouldn't attack Kia or Uhak.

"There's no way you'd do whatever Aureatia tells you to do! You, you…had the courage to fight Alus, didn't you?!"

"…"

Shalk cocked his head to the side, looking exasperated.

"…Here's some friendly advice. Just keep sinking down like this. This harbor and all the boats are destroyed now, so those Aureatia guys won't be able to look for you right away. If you keep yourself in hiding until everything's finished…Aureatia's bound to believe that you've been incapacitated for good, too. Keep quiet and stay low."

"Shalk…"

"I wouldn't lure you out to the waterfront for no reason, would I?"

No one would listen in on a conversation held underwater.

Even if Tu had beaten Shalk and ran away, Aureatia's attacks against her would continue.

Shalk's goal had been to "dispose" of Tu the Magic in a way that was impossible for Aureatia to verify.

"If you get what I mean, can you let go of my legs?"

"What…?! N-no way! If you really want them no matter what, first you have to untie me—"

"Sheesh, no matter what I say, you'll still be headstrong to the end, huh?"

The legs Tu held had been severed from his waist.

Having lost both legs this deep in the water, Shalk would've been just as unable to swim as Tu, but…

"Huh?!"

The ostensibly legless skeletal structure rearranged itself, and like an optical illusion made real, he began to regain everything from his femur downward. Had what Tu thought were his rib bones actually been his feet all along?

"With all that foam and debris you scattered everywhere, you didn't see it, did you? Appears I'm different from other skeletons and can freely rearrange my bones however I want— Truth is, I knew that you were going to try to grab my legs."

"Wh-wha—Shalk! Y-you tricked me!"

"Incidentally, the reason I dove in at this exact position and depth was…"

A shadow loomed over Tu's head. Debris from one of the destroyed ships…and a massive metallic part of it, at that, was sinking down to crush Tu.

"…was to stop you from surfacing. I'll want those bones back someday."

"Shaaaaalk!"

Tu screamed as she sunk to the nighttime depths.

◆

With the life-or-death contest over, and now standing back on the destroyed wharf, Shalk's eyes happened to stop in the middle of the rubble.

Stuck there was a mud arrowhead that had hooked his bones from the left ankle down.

"…That idiot."

Shalk dryly chuckled as he picked up his foot.

She couldn't even throw away the foot she had stolen from her enemy?

If she was stupid enough to do to this, there was a chance she might actually keep his ribs safe and sound for him, too.

"She really is a hopeless softy."

The only things that witnessed the conclusion to the battle were

the red large moon and the blue small moon.

Twelfth Match. Winner, Shalk the Sound Slicer.

CHAPTER 11 Death, Poetry, and Cogwheels

While Shalk the Sound Slicer and Tu the Magic's fight to stop the other in their tracks was unfolding, Aureatia, on the other hand, was focusing all its processing power on an operation of a different kind.

In addition to the many staff officers, there were three members of the Twenty-Nine Officials in charge of the operation—Ninth General Yaniegiz, Twentieth Minister Hidow, and Fourth Minister Kaete gathered in the command room. Tension filled the air.

The nature of the operation meant the other two's operation was happening in parallel to Yaniegiz's own.

As Kaete was busy making adjustments on some machinery, Hidow spoke up, sitting with his legs crossed.

"Yaniegiz. This bait of yours is going to work, right?"

"Kia will be here."

When masterminding a strategy to slay Kia the World Word, Yaniegiz the Chisel painstakingly investigated Kia's motives for still remaining in Aureatia.

With her attack on the royal palace, Kia had invited the greatest moment of crisis the Kingdom could face, and nevertheless, unlike Iriolde's camp or the Old Kingdoms' Loyalists, from the start her goal hadn't been to force her demands to be met through violence.

Yaniegiz the Chisel remembered everything he had spoken about with Kia during her assault.

Her demand was to let her see Sephite. On top of that, she recoiled from the chaos of war.

Comparing it to all her behavior up until now, this wasn't just a pretext to rationalize her inconsistent and confusing behavior or her violent actions. She had some kind of goal that was possible for Sephite to resolve for her, without necessitating violence.

"Well, I suppose I'll apologize for this operation being such a

heavily kept secret. Allow me to take this opportunity to explain. Kia the World Word can invoke nearly omnipotent Word Arts… Either that or she possesses some sort of method that would be close to it. All this you know, yes?"

"I was told that's the only way to think about it. Me, I'm still on the fence if I believe it or not."

"Despite that, she's continued to hide out, and during her attack on the royal palace, when she incapacitated us, she didn't rely on force to bust her way through. Why do think that is? Clearly…Kia the World Word fears some sort of unfavorable outcome that would come with a firmer hand. First, we looked into this."

Yaniegiz produced a bundle of paper documents.

The city guards, part of Aureatia's police apparatus, were under the jurisdiction of the head of the Police Agency, Yaniegiz the Chisel.

"What's all that, then? Written evidence?"

"Very astute observation. The criminal records placed inside the Northern Outer Wards' fifteenth guard post are not documents that would normally be shared with on-site guards. I supplied them specifically *to make Kia check through them all* and had them placed on the desk to be easily discovered. The soldiers on-site go on patrols at set times and leave the post abandoned, so I had them investigate when they returned from patrol if the position or order of the documents was different…or any traces that some formless presence had touched them."

"That's as unreliable as it gets. You think a brat that age is getting any information from a written document?"

"Hidow, I'd wager you're too dismissive of children. They'll actually study anything if it's in order to survive. That's what I did, after all. Anyway, to get back on subject, we ensured that this was the only means for Kia to gain any investigatory briefs in the sixth borough of the Northern Outer Ward. As well as ensured only one guard would be normally stationed there, and when they changed shifts, they'd only talk about things that were absolutely necessary."

As long as Kia was a criminal, she wouldn't be able to live her life in ignorance. Given she didn't possess any irregular perception powers like Kuuro the Cautious's Clairvoyance, then Kia the World

Word was bound to seek information.

Much more, right now she wasn't acting alone, but accompanied by Tu and Uhak, as well. It was not easy to uproot a base of operations capable of sheltering an ogre. In order to secure their safety, Kia was guaranteed to seek investigatory briefs in the sixth borough and not from any other districts.

"And, within this lone source of available information, we laid a trap. Reports on Elea the Red Tag."

"…Uhh? Elea's already dead, though."

"Yes, indeed. That's why we gave her information *suggesting she was still alive* and checked what her reaction would be. If she spent every day without rest decoding the investigation report. How ruffled and shuffled the documents were on the days Elea the Red Tag's investigatory information *wasn't* included. If, when we included accounts that suggested the facility where the person in question was kept, there then appeared any signs that there had been an invisible intruder."

It was seen as almost unquestionable that Elea the Red Tag had tried to use Kia the World Word as a weapon, but most likely, she wasn't coercing Kia through some background intimidation like force or hostages of some kind.

According to the testimony gathered by the Police Agency about her living conditions at the time, Yaniegiz determined that, if anything, it was far more likely that Kia loved Elea like a mother figure.

"Repeatedly sending out reports with updated content and making her read them also served as an experiment to gradually teach Kia the written script and improve her reading comprehension skills. I sent out a notice to the effect that Elea the Red Tag would be executed today. I outlined that the facility detaining her was in the abandoned district directly next to the Dogae Basin, and with Kia's current reading comprehension skills, she should have immediately arrived at this information and our location here."

"What the hell, Yaniegiz?!"

Hidow stood up.

"You have any idea what you've done?!"

"*Hee-hee*, a humane method, isn't it? *Since we're using someone who's already dead as a hostage*. This is guaranteed to draw Kia the World Word outside the city. Or do you have some counterproposal? A way that would be sure to lure out a master of almighty Word Arts, that you came up with all by yourself?"

"That ain't the problem! You idiots… You're really trying to step on a monster's tail this late in the game?! You did all of this knowing full well that Elea would be an effective hostage, didn't you?! If Kia the World Word really is an omnipotent Word Arts caster…if you fail to dispose of her here, you'll be looking at an all-out war against a monster like that!"

"And what of it?"

Yaniegiz merely returned Hidow's gaze with his own murky eyes.

Now it was clear. A person like Hidow the Clamp must not have been able to understand the reason behind such an operation.

"It's fine, isn't it? Don't tell me, are you trying to say you wanted Rosclay to be the only one risking his life, while we and the rest of Aureatia sit safe and sound, is that it? This is about killing a monster that could destroy the world. Why're you even thinking about what to do next if we fail here?"

That future didn't exist. Rosclay was dead.

There was no longer any meaning to fighting with one's eyes set to a peaceful future.

Yaniegiz inherited Rosclay's dying wish. Simple, and thorough, eradication.

Kia the World Word. Hiroto the Paradox. Soujirou the Willow-Sword.

There was no way he could ever let these monsters be the only ones living carefree without losing anything.

"I said I would kill her, didn't I? Kia the World Word will die…as she feels the guilt for chasing Elea to her death."

"…You slimy bastard, that was your goal right from the damn start! Shared operational responsibility, my ass! You did all of that without consulting us whatso—"

"Give it a rest."

Kaete chimed in as he continued his mechanical adjustments.

"You all seem to be tangled up in a needless mess here, but there's no issue at all if we can win. Am I wrong? Mestelexil's victory is assured. There's no need to worry about anything."

"Oh, it's assured, is it?! We don't even know the full extent of what exactly Kia is capable of, dammit! How could we ever have a certain chance of victory?!"

"What then, do you want to get ahold of this Uhak the Silent or what have you, who can neutralize Word Arts and defeat her, then? Hmph. You know those arrangements have already fallen apart. Now that Kia is sheltering Uhak, there's no way he would willingly stop her for us of his own volition."

Securing Uhak the Silent and using him as Aureatia's trump card —the broad principle hadn't changed.

However, due to a series of puzzling events leading to his desertion, the likelihood had become exceedingly small that they would be able to eliminate the threat he was most suited to deal with in Kia.

"Overpowering her. Mestelexil is the only one who can make that possible. Mestelexil isn't a dull-headed and unwieldy pawn like Uhak. Watch me prove that simply having a single fighter like Mestelexil around…we'll be able to eradicate any and all threats to Aureatia with ease."

The machine Kaete was working on lit up.

"Killing the almighty is little more than ideal target practice."

This operation wasn't going to be commanded like those before it, sitting in front of a radzio.

On the machine was displayed a real image of the abandoned district, visible in green shades.

A device that used electron beams irradiated by an internal electron gun to draw transmitted scenery—in the Beyond, it was known as a cathode-ray tube.

There was nothing that needed to be defended in the Dogae Basin that night. The situation was prepared for Mestelexil to be able to display his full capabilities.

If this operation wasn't enough to eliminate her, ultimately, they had no methods of defeating Kia.

◆

A tall, steep hill enclosed the whole vicinity. Out in front stretched lonesome ruins.

The weathered signs that once displayed shops' emblems were lurched over. Reddish brown soil fluttered in the night breeze.

Kia the World Word was standing in the abandoned district of the Dogae Basin.

Even she herself didn't really recall the path her thoughts had gone down after seeing the guard post documents up until now, nor the Word Arts she used to get here.

She just strongly wished to head to this location, and in the next moment, she was here.

This is my fault.

She felt something crumpled up in her right hand.

Kia realized she had come all this way while still gripping the circulated notice from the guard post in her hand.

Because of me, E-Elea's going to…

Elea the Red Tag was going to be executed.

A rural guard post was sure to have gotten the information late as well. The notice had arrived on the scheduled day.

It didn't detail the time. She had moved to the spot indicated on the map without even sparing a moment to let Tu or Uhak know, but the execution may have long been carried out already.

Now, it was nighttime.

"E-Elea…*Protect Elea. Protect Elea*. *Protect Elea…*"

Mumbling almost compulsively, she walked through the abandoned district.

Kia didn't know the precise location where Elea was being detained, so she continued to send the command out to any and all targets her Word Arts would reach.

"It's okay. I'm sure it's fine… I-I mean, the documents wouldn't get delivered after the scheduled execution time… I must have made it in time… A-Aureatia's way different from other places, and it's normal for people to work late into the night… They couldn't have

done the execution in the afternoon, I'm sure of it…"

If she didn't vocalize her attempts to ease her fears, she felt like she'd lose her mind.

Elea should have been granted a stay of execution.

It's my fault.

It was described as her punishment as Kia's former sponsor, in order to make her take responsibility for the royal palace attack.

Kia had believed that even if she waited, Elea would be able to properly atone for her crimes.

Wasn't it actually that she had just wanted to believe in such a convenient outcome?

Had Kia's childish desire not to fight, not to destroy her current tranquility, and her wish to believe that Elea would return to her safe and sound without Kia doing anything, all served to bring this about?

"Elea!"

Through tears, Kia shouted in the empty town.

Elea was somewhere in this dilapidated town, in a lonesome place like this.

Kia didn't have any spare energy to feel suspicious at the lack of residents. Simply arriving by wishing for it like this, without investigating or having any knowledge that this was an abandoned district, was a weakness of hers.

"Elea! You're here, aren't you?! I've come for you, okay?! So, please… C'mon, come back to Eta with me…! I don't, I don't want to never see you again, Elea…"

All she could do was shout in her tearful voice, interrupted by sobs.

Kia's Word Arts were all powerful. They should have been able to do anything.

"Please, come home with me, together…"

It was like the air answered Kia's words.

It was an intense, warm light, like the sun.

"Ele…"

The air liquefied.

A heat ray of death burned everything.

◆

"What the hell happened?!"

Hidow the Clamp was the first to shout.

The monitor in the command room was synchronized with Mestelexil's sights, but the immense electromagnetic wave and heat from the attack made the receiver image blur and shake beyond recognition.

Inside the room's confused uproar, Kaete the Round Table alone gazed at the screen, his arms arrogantly crossed.

"I doubt simpletons like you lot could ever comprehend it, but I'll at least give you an explanation. They're tactical ballistic missiles from the Beyond. Using Mestelexil's observational data to line up the target, we remotely launched three of the missiles he produced ahead of time and fired them at her all at once."

Even if he was being driven by personal sentiments bordering on pure madness, Yaniegiz was a capable man. The troublesome and difficult work of tearing Kia the World Word away from her companions and isolating her had been carried out perfectly. That had been a necessary step.

In order for Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge to battle in his true capacity, they had needed to lure their sole target into a situation completely devoid of any citizens or targets that needed protecting. In other words—

"A nuclear attack. We're killing Kia the World Word without showing a shred of mercy."

It was a weapon that used a nuclear fission chain reaction, possessing the most destructive power that the Beyond's scientific technology had ever produced.

Thermal heat that melted everything, a shock wave that was impossible to defend against, and poison that contaminated the soil.

These explosives were installed not only into one, but three missiles, and set up to explode simultaneously above Kia's head.

Kia the World Word's abilities were still a complete mystery,

including the limits of the power she could display—Hidow's opinion of the matter had been understandable.

Thus, they hammered that *limit*.

Openings came about from using a wait-and-see approach to one's attacks to wipe away anxieties. As long as they had resolved to attack her, the correct move was to hit her with the largest possible attack they could think of right from the start.

"The image is coming into focus again!"

Yaniegiz shouted. While the electromagnetic pulse generated by the nuclear blast should have still been in effect, Mestelexil could even adapt the methods of electric wave transmission right away to —

"……!"

Looking at the monitor, everyone fell silent.

A completely unexpected sight greeted them on the screen.

Not only had the three simultaneous nuclear missile attacks failed to vaporize Kia…

"The town is totally untouched?!"

Kia possessed defensive abilities that beggared anything they could imagine. While it was the worst expectation he had, Kaete hadn't completely ignored the possibility this might not be able to kill her.

Therefore, in order to conquer this enemy, they needed to understand her inscrutable way of thinking.

"This girl…protected *the town*, too?"

◆

"Huh? Uh…"

As the earth and soil was exposed to hellish heat all around, Kia simply stood confused.

"What was that?"

She understood that something like the sun had appeared directly above her head without any warning.

Bathed in the blinding light, she couldn't really get a glimpse of it.

It hurt, like she had been punched in the head.

It was supposed to be nighttime, yet the area around her was still brightly lit up.

"…Oh, *protect the town…from anything dangerous*…!"

As she wobbled through the perfectly untouched town, Kia incanted her Word Arts afterward.

The fatal heat ray, shock wave, and radiation didn't have any effect on the buildings in the abandoned district whatsoever.

She needed to protect all of it. She still didn't know *which building had Elea in it*.

Still, what exactly was this unexplained phenomenon?

Since it was so massively powerful, Kia didn't even register it as an attack against her.

"Did something happen in Aureatia…? Or maybe it was some sort of abnormal weather pattern I don't know about."

In any case, she needed to search for Elea.

If there was a chance the same sort of phenomenon would continue, it was all the more important to get Elea away from this place.

"Protect Elea. *Protect Elea*. *Protect Elea."*

At that moment, some kind of strong impact hit Kia in the back. Something had grabbed her.

Her vision went blurry for a brief moment before spinning upside down. The ground below was rapidly falling away from her.

She was ascending upward at terrifying speeds.

The fog-like substance Kia passed through at the moment was likely a cloud.

"Huh?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

A circular head with a single red eye swirled around.

Gripping Kia's body in its massive hand was a mysterious and unknown golem with deep blue armor plating.

She was flying. The machinery on its back continued to emit blinding light, and its propulsion force was dragging her up to terrifying altitudes.

"…What's with you?!"

"I-I am, Mestelexil!"

Kia went to reply that she wasn't asking for his name, but for the time being, she was stuck in a nightmare scenario.

Just how fast were they going right now? In this brief second, just how high up had they climbed?

The wind pressure and acceleration speed were likely enough to instantly kill the average person, but they didn't have any effect on Kia, her life protected through Word Arts. If anything, she was more scared at the fact that she was too far away to protect Elea.

It's okay. I cast Word Arts on the area around her. Right now, I need to do something about this strange thing.

"You're called, Kia, right?! Who, made you?!"

"Huh?!"

"I'm Mestelexil! Mama, made me! Her strongest, child!"

"Mestelexil… Wait, you're a hero candidate…!"

Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge. She had heard the name before, at the very least.

Why had he shown up in a place like this, and on top of that, why was he taking her away?

Even the color of the sky had changed and was beginning to clear into an indigo blue. She was looking down at a cloud.

She assumed it must have been created together with the horrible light from before. A black, umbrella-shaped cloud was right below her eyes.

"*Exil io mestel. Maclast shar naptes. Saltobasa. Diqudlar ist mia tecnast—*" (From Mestel to Exil. Draw from beauty. Rectangular maple. Bottom of comet collusion vortex—)





Elea… Where is Elea?! Something strange is going on here. This guy isn't trying to save me here, and he didn't come to talk to me or anything—

Something was thrust into her from point-blank range.

"*Deddy.*" (Approach.) "XM1060 thermobaric grenade."

They were far up in the sky above the ground, still tinged with the heat of the sun. In the night sky, a new star's brilliance came alight.

◆

The monitor in the command room once again was cut off.

While the machinery was all produced by Mestelexil's Craft Arts, with the scope of equipment that was possible to manufacture in this world, receiving the image Mestelexil transmitted from the stratosphere was difficult.

"Kaete. What the hell is Mestelexil doing?"

Hidow questioned, annoyed that the monitor image had gone away.

With this, there was no meaning to even bringing Beyond machinery into the command room at all.

"Given the nuclear attack was ineffective…"

All of Mestelexil's tactical moves had been under Kaete's instructions.

As long as Mestelexil was in this land, Kaete could provide him the tactics to display his maximum power, having a deep knowledge of Mestelexil's capabilities and the weaponry of the Beyond.

"We now know that Kia the World Word has automatic, and invincible, defensive capabilities. This is the first method of breaking through this. Mestelexil's hand that grabbed Kia will emit VX gas."

"*Tch*, not more Beyond crap…"

"Hmph. The fact you lot can't even fathom this method is what makes it significant. VX gas comes from an odorless liquid, and even exposure through clothing can cause fainting, paralysis, and difficulty breathing— If Kia's defenses only work against attacks she's

conscious of, or simply just heat and impacts, then this will be able to kill her."

"Kia defends against attacks she's not conscious of, too. You know that in the fourth match, she defended against the swords Antel flew at her. I heard it looked like Kia hadn't even noticed them coming at her."

"Assuming that is the case, it will still be effective. If we hypothesize that Kia's perfect defenses *aren't maintained in perpetuity,* the VX gas that binds to her clothes will be left behind for several days and continue to be poisonous. If she's driven into undoing her defenses mid-combat, then Kia will immediately lose consciousness and die. Just because she's assumed to have nigh omnipotent Word Arts, doesn't mean she can handle an otherworldly toxin that's a total mystery to her."

"We can just as easily assume she doesn't *need* to put down her defenses. The fact surprise attacks don't work means these defenses of hers don't interfere with her daily life at all, even when she keeps them up all the time. Sorta like Tu the Magic, then. Definitely a possibility."

"Not interfering with her daily life would imply she still breathes oxygen, right? I used Mestelexil to drag Kia up to higher altitudes to deprive her of that oxygen. On top of that, he'll fire a thermobaric explosive right into Kia at point-blank range. Combustible material will spread in a wide area like a cloud, and following that, ignite a wide-range explosion. Its stopping power is nothing like the nuclear attack just now, but—"

Of course, the scale of the explosion and sustained blast wave alone boasted an almost excessively lethal punch.

However, this wasn't where the true terror of the thermobaric bomb lied.

"It'll consume all the oxygen in the air and instantly suffocate her. Scarcity is how to break through perfect defenses. We'll cut off all the necessary supplies to support life and kill her."

◆

In a complete turn of events, Kia was falling.

The edge of the night. Clouds. Stars.

She began to process things one by one in her jumbled-up mind.

This is an attack.

The sort of attack that quite literally set the sky ablaze.

Something, fired at her from point-blank range, exploded with Kia herself in the center.

An attack. He attacked me… Wait, does that mean Mestelexil's trying to kill me?! Why is he even out here…and then, what about Elea…?!

If Elea was alive, her Word Arts should have been protecting her. Just like her own body was perfectly untouched, she could protect the safety of others just as easily. First, she needed to do something about Mestelexil.

"Just what reason do you have to come at me like this, anyway?! Is it because I attacked the royal palace?!"

"*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* That's right! I-I am a, hero candidate! I defeat self-proclaimed, demon kings! Aren't I cool?!"

Gunfire and bombs rained down endlessly from the sky above.

Flying at high speeds, Mestelexil was aiming with precision at Kia in her freefall and continued to shoot at her with countless firearms Kia had never seen before, with something being shot at her too fast for her to pick out with her eyes.

She didn't even understand what was happening to her. The sheer material quantity of bullets hailing over her was enough to easily blow a small city to bits, wasn't it?

"Like there's, anything cool, about attacking me out of, nowhere!"

—And yet.

Even among this tempest of slaughter, Kia the World Word continued to survive.

The VX gas adhered to her had been broken down. The oxygen she lacked was generated automatically.

The Heat Arts and Force Arts to offset the harsh air pressure and acceleration speed, on top of responding to any attack that came at her, were being deployed nonstop. Kia the World Word dealt with absolutely all of it simultaneously without even being conscious of it.

Word Arts were a technique that used words to *entreat* various objects of the world.

The object Kia ordered to "*protect her from anything harmful*" was everything.

Her clothes, the air, all laws of nature, worked to keep Kia alive.

It didn't even require Kia's own capability to process the situation—her talents, beyond heaven-sent and instead devil-sent, ran roughshod over all feats of ingenuity from a level higher than any reason or logic conceivable to the common man.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Mestelexil… You don't know your place, do you?!"

Letting her blond hair flutter as she fell, Kia pointed her finger at the flickering shadow.

"Break down!"

"Ha—"

Mestelexil's limbs were dismantled.

His head and torso were warped and broken down, completely halting his functions as a golem.

"You're just some stupid construct… Don't get ahead of yourself!"

She hadn't killed his construct core. Incapacitating Mestelexil without crossing that line was a simple feat for Kia's Word Arts.

"Put me down."

Her descending body, practically moving at the speed of light, entered into the swirling fog of the Dogae Basin's clouds.

She controlled her inertia, returning to her original place. She didn't have any time to spend on entertaining Mestelexil. She needed to check the city.

It was right as Kia realized she had landed—

"Ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…"

"Huh?!"

Hearing the laughter, mixed in with static noise, Kia looked up to the sky.

There she saw Mestelexil, having completely regained his original form.

"Why?! That should've broken you down…!"

It wasn't that her attack hadn't been effective. He was

regenerating.

Now that she thought about it, hadn't this golem blown himself up along with Kia when he attacked her while dragging her up into the sky?

The bundle of gun barrels growing from his right arm rotated.

"GAU-19/B."

A roar and impact, like being tossed into the middle of thunder, rained down.

As the line of fire licked the ground, the ruins crumbled apart like they were made of paper.

It was so powerful that even without getting directly hit, the gunshots alone were enough to shatter eardrums and make every internal organ burst apart, but Kia—nothing more than a single elf girl—stood amid the attack and remained perfectly unharmed.

"…! *Protect Elea!*"

She had lost track of how many times she had incanted the Word Arts.

Though she knew that her Word Arts were almighty and capable of realizing absolutely everything, she was still terribly anxious.

There wasn't anyone else besides her who could survive this level of destruction. If Kia made even the slightest mistake with her Word Arts, Elea might get caught in it all and killed.

While there were no abnormalities in Kia's oxygen supply, the terror and anxiety induced psychogenic hyperventilation.

"Ugh, enough, already…! *Break down!*"

"Ah."

Mestelexil exploded.

He wasn't broken apart at the legs or arms. Each individual part or piece of armor material was completely disassembled, transforming him into disorganized fragments and scattering him. He wouldn't be able to revive. Kia needed to search for Elea—"*Ilmeswer myutem rextas shardhar ekzelion zialhart ectolia—*" (Wandering grade interminably follow construction at time of melting one-eyed beast encircle bottomless fish shoal trap—) "What…what's *with* you…?"

Kia felt a faint chill and turned around.

It was an eldritch feeling, much like Rosclay getting back up again and again.

"Ha-ha, *ha-ha-ha-ha!"*

Mestelexil, dissembled down to units too small to regenerate, was beginning to reassemble himself once more.

◆

The restored monitor image was still greatly distorted from the left-over electromagnetic pulse.

However, this distorted image was enough to inform them that Kia the World Word was still alive.

"Son of a bitch! Kaete! I'm going to go ahead with throwing Uhak at her instead, you got that?!"

"Kaete! You have another plan, right?!"

"Pipe down, you imbeciles!"

It was bizarre. Incomprehensible. Totally contrary to reason.

Mestelexil had faithfully executed the attack, as Kaete instructed.

It was the way of killing with the greatest chance of success—he didn't have any reason to hold back any aces up his sleeve.

Kaete had, without any doubt, thrown out the most effective strategy at killing an omnipotent, right from the get-go.

It can't be. Is she really invincible?

He needed to think up the next move. However, they were all second-, third-, or fourth-best measures.

Would they have any meaning beyond being futile, last-ditch attempts?

"There are still many different ways to kill an omnipotent!"

He could only assume that Kia the World Word was able to block out any and all negative effects, included attacks she was personally unconscious of. Even using backhanded methods like oxygen deprivation wasn't able to break through this defense.

A singularity that could not be surmounted as long as the imaginative powers of the world itself, effected by Word Arts, was up to the task.

Kaete's brain couldn't help reaching this conclusion. He couldn't think up any possible method.

<Kae…Kaete!>

A voice mixed with static came through the communication device.

It was Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge. Merely dissembling him a second time was not enough to destroy him.

"Mestelexil! There has to be some attack that can pierce through those permanent defenses of hers. First, you need to get yourself out of the enemy's consciousness. Fall back from there for now, and we'll investigate one by one—"

<I don't like, your order! C-can I, do this by, myself?!> "What?!"

<I want to, fight Kia!>

"Don't be selfish!"

Kaete shouted in a panic.

Mestelexil was a construct with a heart and free will of his own. While it may have been different for Kiyazuna, there was no guarantee that he would obey whatever Kaete ordered him to do. However, if he went on a rampage while the other members of the Twenty-Nine Officials were here to witness it, there was a chance that he'd be seen as having escaped from Kaete's control.

"Remember what the goal here is! If you disobey my orders, then everything'll go up in a puff of smoke!"

<I'm not disobeying! I will, defeat, Kia!>

"So you really can defeat her, then?"

Someone came by and snatched the communicator from Kaete. It was Yaniegiz the Chisel.

His eyes were sparkling with fire, lit up with the urge to kill.

<Yup! Since I am, smarter, than Kaete is! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!> "I'll allow it. Kill Kia the World Word here and now."

"Yaniegiz, how dare you decide that on your own!"

"Is there a problem? I'm the one with the highest degree of responsibility here in this command room. Besides, Mestelexil's the one fighting on the ground, so he should be the one thinking up how to break through, not us stuck watching things play out through a screen. Please don't lose sight of our goal here."

"Why do you think I have control over Mestelexil in the first place?! You're just blinded by your vengeance for Rosclay!"

"Is that what it looks like to you? Even assuming that is true, I do believe I am far more cognizant of the goal here than you. Attempting some other method because we don't have any chance of victory? Sure, that itself is quite fine. But *on top of that*, don't you think we should be forcing Mestelexil to fight as comprehensively as possible?"

"…"

"Even if it means Mestelexil is crushed by Kia here. Wouldn't you agree?"

Throwing Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge at Kia the World Word— The composition of the situation was structurally the same as the Sixways Exhibition. Even assuming Mestelexil had no chance of victory at all against Kia, as long as Kia was able to kill him, then it meant one less threat to Aureatia.

However, what was going to remain once they had all finished crushing each other?

Now, with Rosclay dead, no one was looking at the future whatsoever.

Mestelexil…don't you die on me! Not at a time like this…!

◆

"…I get it."

On the ground. The ruined townscape.

Watching Mestelexil restore himself, Kia took a single deep breath.

Far too many things had happened at once, and it had taken her a terribly long time to get her thoughts in order.

Either that, or she simply hadn't wanted to consider it.

"I get it… Mestelexil. You came here on Aureatia's orders to kill me, isn't that right?"

"Aureatia?! I don't know, maybe?!"

"That's right… Now that I think about it, those papers were a trap

from the start. There's no criminal who'd get locked up in a bunch of ruins this far removed from the central city area… This town was set up to attack me from the beginning. They knew that I'd try to come and help Elea…"

"Help Elea?! R-right now, I am, helping Kaete! If I beat Kia, Kaete will become, important, and I will become, a hero, candidate!"

"Aren't you stupid. You're definitely getting tricked, too. I don't know this Kaete person, but anyone who tries to get others to kill people to become more important isn't…"

She felt an uneasy wrongness in what she was saying at that moment.

Kia had been tricked— Had it only started from when she was first brought out here?

"…Mestelexil! Do you know where Elea is?! The one's who sprung this trap on me, they know about Elea, don't they?! If you're honest with me, I promise I won't kill you!"

"Huh?! Kill me?! Kia, is going to, kill me?!"

Mestelexil seemed genuinely shocked.

He still didn't get it? Even after Kia showed the overwhelming gulf in their power over and over again?

"That's right… Listen. If I say 'die,' then anyone will die right there on the spot. After everything I've already showed you, you still don't get it?"

"*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* I don't understand! But I do know, the way to, defeat Kia!"

There was no way such a method existed in this world.

Much more, not a single one of Mestelexil's attacks up until now had worked on Kia whatsoever.

The only thing that became clear from attempting all the different forms of attack was that they were all meaningless, and thus, it would've been impossible to learn some way to overcome her from it all.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Mestelexil created a new weapon. Something that Kia never would have imagined.

At this point, this was also just as irrelevant.

"Stop."

"Uh—"

"I win."

Mestelexil came to a stop. While Kia had been a bit surprised by his unique ability to regenerate himself no matter how many times he was destroyed, if she neutralized him without *destroying* him, then it would never pose a problem to begin with.

"We've been through this enough for you to know by now, so stop making me waste my time. Seriously…"

Kia turned on her heel. She considered abandoning this city altogether.

However, as she went to incant Word Arts to fly away, she hesitated.

What if? What if on the off chance Elea is *being kept here? Right, right… Even if this was a trap, the documents being fakes doesn't prove anything…*

A hail of missiles swooped down on her.

The chain of explosions altered the terrain, and the scenery reflected in Kia's eyes physically churned about.

Twisted around by the crumbling earth, she was left to watch the destruction from an epicenter of explosive flames.

"Mestelexil…!"

"""""*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*"""""

She had completely halted all of Mestelexil's movements. He should've been immobilized.

However, the guffawing laughter came from all directions, everywhere around her.

"What is all this…?!"

On the other side of the flames were navy-blue golems.

Several dozen all closed in on Kia. Each and every one was Mestelexil.

"""""S-stopping me, won't work!"""""

Mestelexil created unknown weaponry. While he couldn't even hold a candle to Kia, he was still a Craft Arts user beyond common comprehension.

Couldn't he then be able to simply mass-produce his own golem

body?

Even the one she had just defeated might have merely been a drone unit that was made to look like his original form.

The attacks continued on and on. While she could only vaguely perceive just how terrifying they were, at the very least they packed enough of a punch to wipe out Kia along with the entire terrain around her.

However, no matter how much sheer material was incessantly sent her way…

"Stop."

As she was exposed to an incessant stream of explosions and flames, she made all the golems within her line of sight come to a standstill.

She had indeed stopped all of Mestelexil she had her sights on. However, he still continued.

From somewhere in the distance, from a range that went far beyond the horizon, the bombs poured down on her without end. Kia herself wasn't harmed at all, but her line of sight was totally blocked.

"I-I can't see anything… What is this?!"

A white light completely blanketed all of Kia's sensations.

The aluminum powder and potassium perchlorate mixed inside the bombs and sprayed everywhere was constantly bathing Kia in bright flashes of light.

This was too bright, though. Her sense of balance faltered.

Light. This light's way too strong…so I know it's something harmful*. But just how much of it is* harmful light*?! I'm alive and can move just fine, but still…*

Were her continuously active defenses letting the maximum allowable limit of light, just enough not to pose any problem with keeping her alive or conscious, to wash over her?

The same was true for the sound, not just the light. Through all this, she had been forced to listen to the intense attack noises, and part of her hearing had gone numb. She couldn't listen for the signs that Mestelexil was incanting Word Arts.

"…*Abate!"*

Utilizing her Word Arts, she silenced all the destruction, light, and noise in the area at once.

Even the cloud containing radioactive material that engulfed the sky disappeared as well.

An overly abrupt silence descended, and it instead made her stagger as if she had been hit in the head.

Her eyes had gotten totally used to the light. The night was far too dark.

Only the big moon and the small moon, high up at their zenith, were vivid and clear.

"__"

The Mestelexil swarm had transformed into wreckage, with all their functionality halted.

Among the caved-in terrain, Kia took a few tottering steps forward.

She felt awful. Dizzy.

Her body was involuntarily shivering.

"Huh…?"

"K-Kia!"

A spherical golem with three legs rolled at her feet.

Mestelexil's drone. She couldn't completely defeat a foe that was able to duplicate itself.

"Are you, dead yet?!"

"Dead…? *Blergk!*"

Unable to stay standing, she vomited.

The mere sensation of unwell discomfort was a brand-new experience for her.

Her voice wouldn't come out.

Nothing happened to me… I didn't…

There was a lethal dose for almost all the substances that affected a living organism.

Oxygen was no exception. While the substance was universally necessary to maintain all life, inhaling a high concentration of it above a certain amount would exceed the body's detoxification functions and prove harmful.

It presented with symptoms of vertigo, tunnel vision, spasms,

and difficulty breathing.

It could even prove fatal in a very short amount of time.

Kia the World Word's ongoing symptoms were from oxygen toxicity.

Kia's automatic defenses blocked off any physical damage, decomposed any toxic material, and even automatically adjusted the light and sound of the surrounding environment to make it suitable for her survival. This power didn't require Kia's own judgment, regardless of whether she perceived the threat or not—the world itself tried to keep Kia alive.

In which case, what would happen when a deficiency, unlike the light or sound, was the element of attack?

The thermobaric bombs that Mestelexil saturated her with from every angle exhausted all the oxygen in the space around Kia. However, Mestelexil's reason for creating his horde of drones and encircling Kia was not simply to carry out the saturation attack itself.

It was to continuously create highly concentrated oxygen on the outside of the bomb blasts.

Meanwhile, inside the bomb blasts, the world, in order to keep Kia alive, began to generate oxygen in response to the threat posed by the oxygen depletion.

Under those conditions, Kia—of her own volition—extinguished the explosions that blocked out all her senses.

The air pressure in the area, skyrocketed by the continuous explosions, instantly dropped.

As a result, the highly concentrated oxygen that Mestelexil produced and filled the air with instantly flew into where she stood.

Her defense response, automatically detecting any threat, for that one instant, was powerless against this oxygen. Right up until Kia had wiped away the blast cloud, it had been *trying to generate that very oxygen* in order to keep Kia alive.

The light to restrict her vision had been to ensure Kia didn't perceive the horde of drone units producing oxygen.

His strategy to utilize an army of drone units was so that against Kia, able to incapacitate Mestelexil with a single word, he could maintain the attack nonstop with a mass of individual units that

were left unaffected.

Mestelexil was not simply a weapon that regenerated himself every time he was destroyed.

As he was destroyed and regenerated anew, he acquired survival abilities adapted to his foe's offensive capabilities and calculated the attack methods most suited to combat his enemy's defensive capabilities—this inhuman learning speed was the true, fiend-like essence of Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge.

"Kia! *Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* You collapsed, right?! Just now, you fell!"

The subunit hanging around her continued to laugh innocently.

It's no use, my breath… Wait, how, do I, my breathing…

Crawling on the ground, her hazy consciousness tried to think up a way to escape her situation.

Nothing came to her. It felt like her ability to think wasn't working at all.

All she needed to do was let out a single word of Word Arts, yet with her breathing choked off, she was unable.

She just had to chant her Word Arts afterward. But what was she supposed to do?

Normally, Kia was aware of tracing back cause and effect. She couldn't breathe, and her voice wouldn't come out. In which case, she could no longer make any follow-up incantations, either.

…?

It was a strange sensation, neither anguish nor fear.

Kia had always manifested any and all phenomena with a single word, and now for the first time, she experienced doubt.

Wait… Am I going to die…?

To any other creature with a heart of their own, it was a completely obvious and natural fact.

Everyone died. Kia had long known as much.

Even Elea, who she adored so much, would die one day.

That fear was entirely why Kia was so frantic.

However, in her fourteen years of life, she never once had imagined that *she herself* would die, too.

"Kia!"

The voice came from above. It wasn't a subunit this time. The single red eye looked down at her.

The terrain Kia laid face down in had been deeply carved open by the previous attack.

She had survived all this destruction, and yet, she was going to die.

"A-are you, going to, die?! I, did a really, good job didn't, I?!"

Incredible.

Her hazy psyche reflexively brought the thought to mind.

Before he finished talking, Mestelexil fired a tempest of bullets toward her. Her automatic Word Arts defenses blocked all of it. He was checking the possibility that her automatic defenses had disappeared with her consciousness hazy and fading— He was thorough.

Completely opposite of Kia, who had continued to turn her eyes away from killing, there were those like Mestelexil in the world who were this thorough and exhaustive when performing the act of murder.

"*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* I am, Mestelexil! The strongest, child, Mama ever, made! So I will become, the strongest Hero of, all, and help, Mama!"

Did he say…help his mom? Then, I want…save…

She wanted to save her so much. She absolutely couldn't let anyone die because of something she did.

Even Kia, who had never imagined her own death, didn't want to die.

If Kia died, then Elea would truly end up all alone.

Thus…

Elea's way more than—

With this last thought, her consciousness cut out.

Darkness.

"H-her heart?! Did, it stop?! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Even in the middle of his uproarious laughter, Mestelexil continued showering her with gunfire.

There wasn’t any malice in it. Nothing more than an artless, innocent glee for slaughter.

Kia the World Word had died. The heartbeats he detected with his sensors had stopped, and her body temperature was dropping.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The storm of explosions and flashes continued. Kia still maintained her original form.

Did her automatic, omnipotent Word Arts manifest continuously even on her corpse?

That wasn’t it. Something strange was happening.

Kia the World Word began to stand up, like a doll without any sense of balance.

Her heart unnaturally began to beat once again, while her body temperature remained cold.

She should’ve long lost any ability to move her body. But just as skeletons or ghosts, without muscles of their own, were able to move through an interaction of complex Force Arts— *“He…”*

The vocal cords that should have been rendered useless by respiratory failure produced a voice.

“Heal me.”

“Huh? That’s we—”

Mestelexil understood the strange change.

He didn’t have time to respond—Kia’s attack finished with a single word.

Heat returned to Kia’s body.

“*Die*.”

Mestelexil collapsed on the spot.

The earth-shaking onslaught halted with it.

This was truly the strongest attack method of all.

Thrusting death directly on a foe, without giving them the chance for a single farewell.

From the very beginning, Kia the World Word held this authority in her grip.

“…Ah.”

The light returned to Kia’s eyes. She realized her body’s maladies had healed completely.

While in a state of being unable to move her vocal cords, nor possessing the consciousness to form any words…she had instantly removed the portion of oxygen harming her body.

The series of actions from regaining control of her body and wiping out Mestelexil's existence had not been willed by Kia herself.

She could only assume that her thoughts of Elea the Red Tag had made her body move all on its own.

"R-right, I… I have to do this…"

The Word Arts that had saved Kia's life were neither spoken at the same moment of her attack, nor chanted afterward.

They were the Word Arts she had already used *prior to the attack*.

There were Word Arts Kia had repeated over and over again since arriving in the basin—*Protect Elea*.

She continued this command on any and all possible targets.

There was one target on whom these Word Arts affected stronger than any other.

—Kia the World Word herself.

If Elea was still alive, then Kia the World Word was the only one able to protect her.

This understanding that came alight in her heart in the moment of her death, automatically forced Kia to stay alive.

"I need to find her…"

She began to walk, crawling out up from the sunken crater.

The fact she had regained her perfectly healthy body made it feel so much uncannier.

It wasn't her first time using Word Arts to heal someone else. However, ever since the incident with Yawika, this might have been the first time she had used Word Arts to alter her own body.

Because she found it terrifying.

Was the Kia right now truly the same Kia who had existed up until a short while ago?

Not only that but, in the end, she had…

I-I killed with Word Arts.

Though it may have been a largely automatic defensive response made while she was unconscious, she had killed Mestelexil.

She knew. If she had done this from the start, she wouldn't have been driven so far into a corner.

Both now and during the fourth match with Rosclay.

Everyone was spreading the rumor that Rosclay the Absolute had died. If that was the fate that awaited him, then if Kia had simply killed him back then, Elea never would have been captured.

It's okay. It'll be okay… Constructs, aren't people. They told us that in class, right? Constructs are murderous monsters…created by self-proclaimed demon kings… And this one tricked me, made me suffer so much and tried to kill me… So, it's just natural. K-killing him…was the obvious punishment he deserved…!

She didn't want to acknowledge the black feeling of reality that gnawed at her psyche.

Though she was up against a construct, the line she had stood firmly on was crossed.

Kia wasn't the same type of person as Jivlart the Ash Border or Kyaliga the Music Reed, willfully engaging in killing. She should've been able to remain so superlatively all-powerful that she'd never need to rely on such methods.

"Hng, blerk!"

Though her body was supposed to be back in perfect, normal condition, nausea attacked her.

Kia had returned to the abandoned district townscape.

Even amid all the destruction, the buildings of the town alone remained unnaturally pristine and unharmed.

She would search for Elea. She had killed Mestelexil, so she should have the time to do so.

"Why?"

There was a voice.

A subunit with three legs on a spherical body rolled around at Kia's feet.

"…"

"You want, to look for Elea, right?"

Mestelexil had died.

However, her attack hadn't been one with intent behind it, but Word Arts utilized as part of an automatic defensive response.

Kia the World Word wasn't aware of the homunculus that served as the golem's core. Even if the golem was killed, the homunculus would regenerate the golem, and if the homunculus was killed, the golem would regenerate the homunculus. Furthermore, they could not be killed simultaneously. This was Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge.

"Why're you still aliv—"

"You won't look for her?"

"…!"

She was searching. She had been this whole time.

It was the entire reason she was, at that very moment, looking around the buildings in the abandoned district.

Kia's actions weren't inconsistent at all.

What could a construct like Mestelexil possibly understand about Kia?

"Shut up. Just forget it…"

"Why don't, you look for, her?"

It was an artless question, the kind a child asked out of pure curiosity.

Mestelexil was a weapon that possessed inhuman learning capabilities.

He understood.

Kia's Word Arts could process impossible-to-process information that surpassed her own understanding and perception.

If she was capable of *that* from the start, then this battle should have never even happened in the first place.

Kia had unconsciously forgotten the Word Arts she had feverishly used during the Lithia fire.

Truly simple and minor Word Arts that just made a piece of cloth move.

In order to search, together with Elea, for Lana the Moon Tempest after she went missing.

Why didn't I…

This was what Mestelexil was trying to say to her.

…use Word Arts to search for her right from the start?

Her heart pounded loudly in her chest.

Though her body was supposed to be back in perfect, normal condition, sweat poured unendingly out of her.

She understood. These simple, straightforward Word Arts could tell her.

Really, there hadn't been any need at all to run around, gather information, or even battle Mestelexil.

"F-find…"

She could tell the cloth gripped in her fist was shaking.

That wasn't it. It was Kia's own hand that was trembling.

Even though she knew they were words she must not say, she couldn't help but murmur them to herself.

Since maybe there was the chance they could meet again.

Because she would be forced to fight Mestelexil nonstop until she could confirm if Elea was here or not.

"Find Elea."

Kia's Word Arts had definitely communicated with the scrap of cloth.

Omnipotent Word Arts.

No matter where in this world Elea was, they should have led the way.

"…I'm telling you…to *find her*… Come on."

The fabric didn't move.

She had hoped to see her again.

The truth—being chased as a criminal and living out her days unable to talk with anyone else—had been unbearable.

Even if she had to endure such torment, she had hoped to someday find the best way to go about things, negotiate with Sephite, and be reunited with Elea once more.

She had to see her again.

"A-ahhh…"

Because, if she was truly never able to see Elea again…

It meant that, back then, Kia had let her die.

"No. No, no… *Find her! Find Elea!* Elea… Elea…"

Despite her tearful shouts, even as she took out all her anger on it, the fabric didn't budge.

These should have been such easy and simple Word Arts. She

would’ve been happy with even the slightest bit of movement.

“Ah—”

Her tear-drenched eyes looked at the scenery out in front of her.

The dead, empty city she had desperately tried to protect.

Elea the Red Tag was nowhere to be found in their world.

She would never get her back.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Kia screamed.

She wasn’t begging the world but instead haphazardly commanded it out of rage.

“Break!”

As commanded, the abandoned residences were smashed apart and disappeared.





Absolutely anything and everything in this world would become whatever Kia wished it to be.

She made a mockery of it.

"Break, break!"

The abandoned district in the Dogae Basin was annihilated without a trace.

Kia the World Word had wished for it.

After destroying absolutely everything in her sights, Kia disappeared.

CHAPTER 12 Demon King's Rebirth

While Shalk the Sound Slicer held Tu the Magic in check at the canal and Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge enacted a plan to erase Kia the World Word, in the sixth borough of the Northern Outer Ward, an Aureatian squad was encircling Uhak the Silent.

Uhak the Silent stood in the entrance of a ruined inn at the base of a mountain, protecting it.

His massive gray form was wrapped in pristine white robes. His only weapon was a boorish wooden club.

"He looks like a stone statue."

The commander expressed his honest impression.

Uhak was completely defenseless. However, he still appeared to understand the situation he was in.

The commander couldn't help feeling that Uhak had absolute confidence he could win, even with his comrades torn away from him and surrounded by this much fighting power.

He's strong. Can we actually manage to capture an ogre like this without losing any of our men…?

This operation to capture him was being carried out with eight crack squads coordinating together, equipped with the old and new muskets being industrially manufactured on the New Continent.

Bafflingly, they weren't supplied with the weapons of the Beyond that had been seized in large quantities during the recent upheaval.

Inside, they had been given the chemical weapon phosgene, provided by the Gray-Haired Child. While it would damage the surrounding area as well, it could suppress any foe, even an ogre, in a pinch.

"Commander, I'm ready to take the shot."

"Hold. Uhak still isn't hostile to us yet."

They could simply shoot through both his legs and take him into

custody after completely immobilizing him.

However, the commander had a gut feeling that Uhak could defend himself from the sniper shot. With a body like his, he must possess the reaction speed to make it happen.

More than anything else, while Uhak couldn't understand Word Arts, he was still a hero candidate. They didn't want to take any action in bad faith.

"I'll try negotiating with him. In the worst-case scenario, the vice-captain will take over command."

"Commander!"

"I'll be fine."

For some reason, he was firmly convinced.

Uhak the Silent wouldn't kill him.

<*What's the situation?*> The person he spoke to on the other end of the radzio was the Twentieth Minister, Hidow the Clamp.

Steeled to meet death, even with their exhaustively prepared equipment and personnel, the operation instead ended without a single casualty, over so abruptly to make it all feel almost disappointing.

"Yessir. Uhak put up no resistance whatsoever. After making contact with Uhak, I determined sniper fire or poison was unnecessary, and have captured him unharmed with the previously prepared restraints."

The commander hadn't done anything special at all.

He simply explained the necessity of the restraints to Uhak, and the ogre held out both arms exactly as told.

<*Got it. One of the few bits of good news today. Escort him away as fast as you can—there's a situation we need to use Uhak the Silent for right away.*> "Are you going to become his sponsor, Lord Hidow? I understand that his capture was to make him return as a hero candidate, however there are still procedures to go through before the match…"

<*It ain't the time for that, idiot. The twelfth match is a victory for Shalk since it failed to kick off. Listen up, make it quick… I need you*

to get him ready to move ASAP. A simple order, right?> "…!"

The commander gulped. There was some kind of urgent state of affairs.

Neither he nor his unit had been briefed at all regarding Uhak the Silent's abilities.

They hadn't been given any explanation on why a new toxic weapon was readied for this operation, or about why they were using muskets from the New Continent instead of some of the large quantities of Beyond firearms that Aureatia had seized.

The restraints on Uhak were shackles manufactured for this very mission from whittled-down deep celestial charsteel.

From the commander's perspective, Uhak was a tranquil ogre without any hostility at all.

"Understood. As an order from a Twenty-Nine Official, I will skip several of the review procedures and escort him right to the Monstrous Race Protective Camp. It would be greatly appreciated if you were present when he is handed over, Lord Hidow, to facilitate the clerical procedures."

<*Right. I'll get moving on my end, too. Jeez… Swear everyone's getting screwy on me now.*> "To further ensure the necessary procedures go smoothly, I would like to ask you, sir—though if this would touch on confidential information, I understand if you cannot answer—what exactly is going on?"

<*…You ever think to yourself "Tomorrow, the world's gonna end"?*>

"I don't follow…"

<*Hell, up until now to a greater or lesser extent, we in the Twenty-Nine Officials took action while cautioned against just that. True Demon King was first on the list, sure, but the Particle Storm, Alus the Star Runner, Lucnoca the Winter… There are those in this world here could really destroy absolutely everything on a whim.*> "I understand that the Sixways Exhibition for selecting the Hero is to ensure we are not daunted by such threats."

<*Okay then… What if someone who wasn't a hero continued to face off against these threats, what then? Failure comes to everyone at some point. No matter what kind of master they may be…there*

ain't anyone out there who could keep walking eternally along a tightrope where one wrong step means the end of the world.> Hidow's words were roundabout, veiled in a smoke screen, but while he was unable to tell the commander fully, he did a good job of conveying that something truly terrifying was happening.

What more was going to happen on top of all this? Iriolde had incited a revolt, Rosclay the Absolute was dead, and there was something that posed an even greater threat to Aureatia?

<What I'm trying to say is don't hold it against us*, okay? We frantically did everything we could in our own way, too. But when the time comes and we're unable to redeem this one misstep—>*

His tone wasn't that of someone telling a joke.

The world truly might be heading to its doom.

<—then let's all bite the big one together.>

◆

Anyone was accustomed to spells of boredom.

For Nihilo the Vortical Stampede in particular, ever since generating her sense of self, she had spent more time than not with her freedom taken from her.

The sunken tower. Inside the large, blacked-out room, she stared vacantly at the wall while she entertained herself flicking small stones at each other.

It was the game she had played while confined in Aureatia. The game included a great deal of high-level strategy and choices, but no one would ever know about them all, save for Nihilo.

Almost all battles are made from lack of freedom. So really, this is a much better situation overall.

Generally speaking, weapons were created with combat in mind, but even after the battle finally started, no one left weapons to be free on their own. They hid in darkness and waited for the lone moment of freedom and slaughter.

Obeying Viga and Enu like she had, and cooperating with the experiment, was a necessary deprival of freedom to prepare for the

freedom to come one day. Fortunately, Nihilo had been given the toys to satisfy her innate cruelty.

…Though, it's not very fun that I can't destroy her body at all. I'd really prefer even greater destruction. Where is Helneten right now, I wonder?

She was convinced that it was still somewhere out there.

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede and Helneten the Burial were linked together by a shared curse.

As long as its core Nihilo still survived, Helneten would never truly fall.

She didn't completely lack the means to get it back, either. She had the information from Yukiharu the Twilight Diver's investigation.

The numerous acts of foul play by Aureatia. The Gray-Haired Child's weakness. The True Hero. The True Demon King. For several of these topics, Nihilo had listened and learned from inside her box, including where the evidence might be hidden away.

When brandished by a construct like Nihilo with no societal backing whatsoever, this was probably a totally useless weapon, but if wielded by the proper person, it was a trump card that could easily and readily destroy the existing order at its core. Perhaps the information could be used as negotiating material to regain Helneten as well.

Nihilo's camp here may have been an inconsequentially small group within the greater disturbance, but as long as Viga got all the preparations in order, they could fight against Aureatia at any moment.

When that happens, I'll have them let me into school.

She giggled in the large empty room.

What would happen once she was able to attend school?

It would have been a wonderful thing if even a monster like her was able to live life like a minian.

Nihilo loved the minian races.

This feeling surely differed greatly from the minian races' own love of their kind, a solitary sense of values completed and contained within Nihilo's own heart and mind. Like this game with the pebbles.

"…"

Suddenly, Nihilo raised her head.

She sensed a threat. It wasn't Kuuro the Cautious.

The heavy door to the experiment lab was open. Only tiny fingertips peaked out from the crack.

"…That experiment lab…"

Nihilo stood up and deployed the nerve fibers from her back.

She could directly read the air flow through the nerves and grasp her target's movements.

"…wasn't still being used by Viga or anything, right?"

"Pfft, hee-hee."

The unknown on the other side of the door laughed, as if unable to hold back her amusement.

Nihilo had known from the very beginning that it couldn't have possibly been Viga the Clamor.

It was a clear, young, laughter.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee."

There were no intruders in the tower.

Even if Nihilo assumed he had been unable to sense someone entering, Kuuro the Cautious would have detected them a long time ago.

In which case, this person had to be *something newly born* from within the tower.

"…Are you the krsnik?"

"Uh-huh."

Nihilo could tell it was shaking its body back and forth with its fingers still gripping the door.

It was purposefully hiding its body as a form of entertainment.

Nihilo still felt a threat.

The behavior didn't look like anything more than the mannerisms of a child, but even then…

"That room…all of Viga's lab animals were supposed to be in there, right? What happened?"

There had been beastfolk resembling swelled-up cephalopods and carefully patched together dwarfs.

An even more terrible, fiendish ogre.

They were all revenants created by Viga for both experiments and her defense, locked away in heavy cages.

"They died."

"…"

Through the slight crack in the door, Nihilo saw cages destroyed and warped by brute strength, and a sea of blood, splattered like a popped water balloon.

Viga… You really made something like this…?

"*Pfft, hee-hee-hee*… Hey, your name."

The unknown something on the other door asked with delight.

"What's *youuur* name?"

"…Nihilo the Vortical Stampede."

"Nihilo. *Pfft, hee-hee-hee-hee*."

The door opened.

It was a young girl.

A thin gown used on experimental subjects was the only thing on her body, drenched with blood and artificial amniotic fluid.

Her long black hair, possessing a colorfully tinged luster, clung to her.

The one eye unhidden by her bangs was a deep, almost black, crimson.





Did the shade of Linaris in this girl's features stem from the fact Linaris's genes were used in her creation?

However, her demeanor had a lascivious and wickedness unbecoming of her outwardly young appearance.

"I'm Roto the Cross."

This was the first construct of its kind in history—a krsnik.

"*Pfft, hee-hee-hee-hee*… I actually gave myself my own name."

Anyone infected by the pathogen she carries will become unable to show any aggressive behavior. The construct that would peacefully regulate the world. Something like this? Really?

If what Viga told her was true, Nihilo could even live her life like a minian and attend school like a minian.

However, it did not seem like that future was going to come to pass.

Despite how normally they were conversing with each other, Nihilo was unable to drop her battle stance.

"Hey, Nihilo?"

Roto the Cross flashed an angelic smile.

Her small, perfectly shaped lips opened.

"Can I eat you?"

◆

Aureatia's Third Minister, Jelky the Swift Ink, returned to his normal duties ahead of schedule.

There were many matters that he should have taken charge of, which were both of dire importance and hadn't been perfectly handled.

However, Jelky had come to the royal palace for a job that needed to be prioritized above all else.

Kia the World Word's existence had now turned into national security crisis.

We needed to urgently neutralize Kia the World Word.

Luring Kia the World Word alone to the Dogae Basin, free of any possible harm in the area, to launch a concentrated attack on her

that simultaneously served as a test of Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge's utility.

—The operation itself was logical. If Jelky had the opportunity to set up such an opportunity, he would've done the same himself.

The fact the attempt to eliminate Kia the World Word ended in failure couldn't have been helped, either. Given that they didn't know the limit of her Word Arts' power, there was no guarantees at all that they would be able to eradicate her in the initial clash. It was also true that they managed to measure the extent of Kia's power without causing any injury or damages.

However, Kia the World Word went out of control and successfully went into hiding somewhere—most likely in Aureatia, as well.

The likeliest place of all was here in the royal palace.

She had, in fact, already attacked the royal palace grounds once before and suggested she had a request to make of the Queen.

After receiving the series of reports on Kia, Jelky immediately made for the royal palace, yet it was highly likely that he was already too late. If Jelky was able to get there in time, under these circumstances, it meant that Kia simply *wasn't interested in going there yet*.

"Her Majesty…!"

He gritted his teeth in frustration.

As he schemed to dethrone Sephite, even Jelky felt impatience and a disquiet in his heart.

The kingdoms in this world, despite changing shape and form many times, were said to have existed in continuum for close to three thousand years. Despite the great many moments of danger, the royal family bloodline had continued uninterrupted up to the present day.

Queen Sephite was the very last of this lineage.

The last of the lineage who had survived the age of the True Demon King, when all the other royalty besides her had died in maddened agony.

Sephite was still only eleven years old, yet even at this young age, she had wits that dazzled, and the charm to lead people. She had certainly inherited the excellent royal family blood.

Even if she did abdicate the throne in the name of the True Hero, Sephite's bloodline was bound to leave a great and distinguishing mark on the minian world. The Sixways Exhibition's objective was to make her abdicate, while still ensuring she survived.

The threats to the world hereafter were not only limited to the likes of the hero candidates. They had also wiped out all those likely to turn their blades against Aureatia in Sephite's name once the revolution was carried out. Iriolde's camp was annihilated, and the Gray-Haired Child had been brought into the establishment.

Rosclay the Absolute had died. Jelky's ideal might be completely devoured by the Gray-Haired Child. If on top of all that, Sephite were to die, too, then what would happen to their world…?

Shown into the audience chambers, Jelky worked to quell the unrest in his heart.

The seal of Aureatia was lined up on both sides of the golden carpet and, in the very back of the room, was the throne.

The young Sephite stood in front of Jelky with her beautiful unchanging pale face.

"…Your Majesty. Jelky the Swift Ink at your service."

Sephite responded to Jelky's precise, machinelike genuflection with a faint smile.

"Thank you for coming, Jelky."

Her smile was just as well-shaped as the rest of her facial appearance, yet something about it gave the impression that it wasn't truly a smile at all.

The lone survivor of the United Western Kingdom after it fell to the True Demon King's terror, there always remained a vaguely dark shade of death in Sephite's eyes.

"Come, raise your head. Did something happen?"

"First, allow me to first offer my own humble apologies for the recent attack on the royal palace. I was in charge of drafting the palace defense plan. If there were any deficiencies in Dant, Yaniegiz, and Yuca's work guarding the grounds, I think a part of the responsibility lies in my own personal inadequacies."

"I forgive you, Jelky. I know very well just how hard you all work. When it comes to Rosclay as well… Please pay him back for all he's done yourself, too. Rosclay's performance, sacrificing his life for the kingdom, though sad, was a magnificent gesture."

Her words of solace, filled with mercy, were almost like those given by a parent to their child.

She wasn't being insincere, either. In all likelihood, Sephite had used her people to learn for herself about just how much work the Twenty-Nine Officials put in that day.

She understood that the Twenty-Nine Officials system, set up as a wartime regime, wasn't going to continue into the future. At just eleven years old, she was also trying to comprehensively learn how she was meant to administer Aureatia in the future and how to be in a position of responsibility.

"Your Majesty, as the person responsible for planning out the defenses, I have a proposal to offer. After being dealt a blow from the prior assault, I cannot say the protection the palace provides is fully adequate. Now that I, Jelky, have recovered, I intend to give my utmost, more than ever before. Nevertheless, when taking the precedent into account, I determined Your Majesty's safety could very well be in jeopardy should you remain here in the royal palace. Would you agree to leave the royal palace for a short time, until we are able put a perfect defensive structure in place once more?"

"…"

Her large eyes blinked repeatedly.

Sephite brought one of her gloved fingertips up against her lips.

"Jelky, would this be your personal opinion? Your visit today was so very sudden… I wonder if there are still some who are unaware of this proposal of yours."

"I cannot say that all those involved in state affairs have consented to this. However, the Twenty-Nine Officials are all in consensus."

This was a lie. This decision was reached between those with knowledge of the operation to subjugate Kia—Yaniegiz, Hidow, and Kaete—and Jelky, the first person to receive a report on the situation, before Jelky immediately made his way here to the palace.

However, he would absolutely *make* all the Twenty-Nine Officials agree with the decision to move the Queen from the palace.

He had come with the resolve to do what was needed.

"Jelky."

The Queen's red irises were right in front of Jelky's own eyes as he sat kneeling.

Her constantly blinking eyes stayed wide open and peering into Jelky's heart.

"You're lying, aren't you?"

"…"

"The real reason doesn't have to do with the palace defenses… You were in the hospital up until this morning, weren't you? If you were in such a rush to come here yourself, that must mean that danger is closing in on me, and you wanted to make me flee the royal palace without informing me what that danger was—am I wrong?"

"…It is as Your Majesty says."

He was daunted by the girl far younger than him. His heart was in too much disarray.

Normally, Jelky might have readied a cleverer explanation than this.

In order to inform Sephite of the danger to her person, he had needed to head to the palace straight from the hospital. There was a chance that even right now as they spoke, Kia the World Word would arrive at the royal palace.

"I will clarify. Kia the World Word…the culprit behind the attack on the palace, has gone out of control. The Word Arts she used during her palace attack were so aberrational, that there is absolutely no chance that the royal palace defense system will be able to stop her."

"Kia the World Word."

Repeating the name, Sephite cocked her head slightly, and looked up toward the ceiling.

With this small single mannerism, Sephite was able to draw out even the most insignificant of memories from among the tremendous amount of information she had observed throughout her

life.

"I actually know that girl. At Iznock Royal High School…she gave me yellow willowseed berries and taught me they were edible. She was always in a bad mood, but she wasn't a scary girl at all."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty… That same Kia has now transformed into the most terrifying threat imaginable. Transferring Your Majesty away from the royal palace is the only way to stop Kia from taking Your Majesty's life in her hands. I beseech you to please trust in your humble servant Jelky's loyalty and judgment to make your decision."

There was a chance that even this plan to have Sephite flee from the palace would come to nothing.

According to Mestelexil's fragmented reports, Kia the World Word tried using Word Arts to search for someone and *failed*.

If he assumed that these were Word Arts that had a chance of succeeding, then—

No. She can't possibly be able to do everything like that. Kia the World Word seems omnipotent, but she isn't truly almighty. Since there is no way that could ever be allowed to exist.

Jelky wasn't aware that he had lapsed into illogical thinking.

At first, everyone had concluded that Kia's Word Arts had been some type of trickery or unseen offensive support.

The reality was that a young child, labeled a wanted criminal, continued to successfully flee from the Aureatian military all on her own and hadn't been viewed as serious, either.

Even after the royal palace grounds were attacked and members of the Twenty-Nine Officials had witnessed her mighty Word Arts firsthand, there were still those who believed that she had to possess some other hidden means of attack elsewhere.

Finally, not even Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge had been able to kill Kia the World Word.

The tremendous absurdity of it all made him turn his eyes away from the fact that such a being did exist.

A monster that should not have existed in their world.

"…"

Sephite seemed to be deep in thought, but it only lasted for a

brief moment.

She compared her own experiences to the countless amount of information surrounding the incident and made her judgment.

"Okay, then. Jelky, I will trust you, and leave the royal palace. I'll bring only the guards here with me now, and I'll have my necessary belongings sent along afterward. You're going to pass on the necessary information to everyone in my stead. You can handle that, Jelky, right?"

"Even if it costs me my life."

Jelky bowed deeply.

When standing before her, even a treacherous retainer like Jelky, plotting to dethrone her, couldn't help but respond this way.

If such a thing as an innate monarchal grace existed in this world, there was no doubt that Sephite possessed it.

If their world hadn't been in disarray, she had the caliber of a queen who could lead a unified nation.

◆

Together with a guard from the Palace Guard Bureau and several of her servants, Sephite moved through the royal palace interior.

From the initial design stage, the palace had been fitted with several passageways that were secret to the outside world, in order to facilitate a stealthy escape in times of emergency to another facility.

"Jelky."

As they walked through the corridor, Sephite whispered, stopping Jelky's advance.

"What is it, Your Majesty?"

"Are you scared?"

"…Yes. I have never forgotten terror. The fear of losing you, Your Majesty, and the fear of order in the Kingdom collapsing away. I… have given my all to my government work to keep Your Majesty away from that terror."

"What is 'fear,' I wonder? Why do people fear the way they do…?"

Everything in the world was terrified of something.

"My Queen. Is something the matter?"

Sephite responded to one of the servants.

"No. I simply remembered that there was something I wanted to ask Jelky about. Can everyone else leave us?"

Sephite gave a signal with a look, and that alone made her guard and servants scatter all at once, far enough away to be out of earshot.

Even though it was a direct order from the Queen, her influence was abnormal, if anything, to be able to dismiss her own guard in such an emergency.

…It is highly unlikely we will be attacked in this situation, but still…

Should a worst-case situation crop up, Jelky would then need to risk his life to protect her.

Jelky showed that he was holding nothing in his hand, before kneeling down right up close to the Queen and looking up at her.

"Please do not forget that this is an emergency."

"Yes… Of course, I understand that."

Sephite replied with a whisper.

An innocent, pale smile that seemed to cast a shadow somehow.

She had a pretty face. After about three more years, she would likely mature into a marvelously beautiful young girl.

Her long hair that seemed to flow like water was pure white, without the faintest impurity, and was filled with a mystique far beyond the common man.

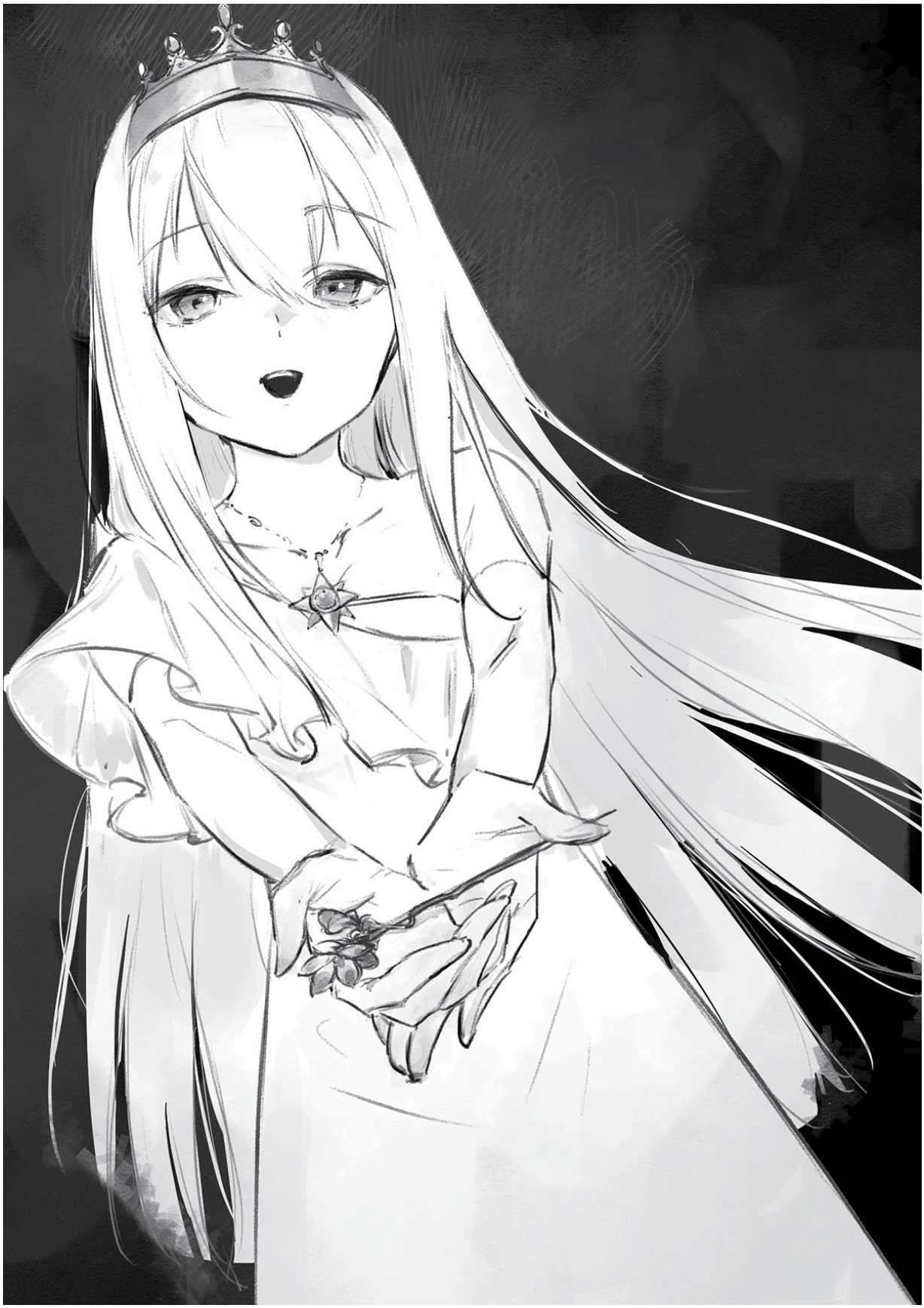
"What is it that Your Majesty wished to ask me?"

Instead of replying, Sephite undid her silver hairpin.

Her willowy fingers held out the hairpin to Jelky.

Her red eyes stared hard into Jelky's own.

Her lips opened.





“Tell me—do you want to try stabbing yourself with this?”

He regained consciousness from the darkness.

No. His vision still remained sealed in darkness. He needed to wake up fast.

His head pounded in intense pain.

"Master Jelky! Master Jelky, stop! Please stop!"

His head hurt.

The voice pleading with him, if he remembered right, belonged to one of Sephite's attendants.

Were they the brand-new servant, just hired the other day? He could almost recall, yet for some reason, he couldn't. He was sure Sephite would've been able to immediately say their name.

"Master Jelky! Hurry and throw that away!"

His head hurt.

Right. What happened to Sephite?

He needed to evacuate her from the royal palace immediately, or she'd be in danger. Jelky was supposed to have been in the middle of moving her… Why was he doing something like this?

"Hrngh!"

He let out a groan.

Jelky the Swift Ink was gripping down tightly on a silver hairpin, enough for it to dig into his fingertips.

His head hurt.

Then, he understood. His descent into darkness wasn't because Jelky had closed his own eyes.

Jelky had *twisted* the silver hairpin in his right eyeball himself, scrambling his ocular muscles and nerves into a mess, of his own free will.

"A-augh… Glrnk!"

A sound echoed from Jelky's throat that resembled bubbles gurgling.

No. Right now, Jelky was screaming.

The terror was so overwhelming, it caught in his throat, and gurgles were all that came out.

His head hurt.

Jelky's arm, trying to jam the hairpin into his brain through his eye socket, was being held by the servant. They were trying with all

their might to stop Jelky's terrifying behavior.

Right. He was doing this all himself.

Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying—"Master Jelky!"

"Q-Queen!"

Trembling from a chill like his very soul had turned into cold air, Jelky struggled to speak.

"I-is Her Majesty safe?"

The servant shook their head in tears.

The fact he could see the state they were in meant that his left eye was apparently still unharmed.

Even still, the terror, the trembling, and the impulse to kill himself hadn't subsided.

Everything in the world was terrified of something.

Something that had long since perished.

"…Wh-where did she go?!"

"We don't know!"

That moment. Those red eyes that stared at Jelky.

She was watching. She was smiling. Terrifying.

"Th-this can't be… Qui…ck… Someone…the Queen…"

Omnipotent Word Arts—Kia the World Word was going to attack the royal capital.

A *trifling* threat like that fell far short of true terror.

When the United Western Kingdom fell to ruin, the True Demon King, for some reason, left only young Sephite alive.

Sephite wasn't the Demon King. That was how it was supposed to be.

What did she have implanted into her?

"Save the Queen!"

Jelky screamed in a pool of his own blood.

The True Demon King had been slain by the True Hero.

Everyone attempted to believe in this story, yet in the end, they were unable to shake off the fear.

The terror, the world itself, would subjugate every heart-possessing life.

The Demon King would be resurrected.

They could not escape.

Afterword

Thank you for your support. Keiso here. First, I would like to deliver a message to those of you who are reading the afterword before the rest of the book: Don't read this crappy afterword right away! Why do you still insist on reading the afterword first, when the page layout for volume eight gave you a massive spoiler?! The two-page spread in the eighth volume hit you with an almost bafflingly instantons spoiler, but the page layout is one thing I have no control over, including for volume nine here, so I'm not responsible, okay? Of course, the responsibility doesn't lie with the editorial department making this book, either. When it comes to my works, the ones at fault are the people reading the afterword first.

Now then, I may be known as the laziest author *Dengki no Shin Bungei* has in its roster, but for this ninth volume, I wanted to get it out to all of you as quick as possible, so I worked very hard to publish it at an average author's pace instead. By the time this volume is on sale, the anime adaptation should be in the middle of its run, so I encourage you to enjoy them both. Also, while putting this publication schedule into practice, I caused a mountain of trouble for my editor, Satou… I would like to express the most amount of gratitude, and the biggest apology, I have up until now. Truly, thank you as always, for everything. Next, to the working machine, Kureta-sensei, who perfectly delivers such fantastic illustrations, while also handling all the extra work around the anime and elsewhere, as well as all the people involved with publishing and marketing these books, and, of course, to all the readers who have supported this series (yes, even you readers who start with the afterword!)— It is because of all of you that *Ishura* has become what it is. Thank you, truly.

Now then, what is almost as annoying as the reading order for the afterword, is the sequence used to boil down tomatoes when making tomato sauce pasta. When making it with canned tomatoes, it tastes best to make the sauce after simmering away a fair amount of the liquid first, but if you put the canned tomatoes in your fry pan after frying the other ingredients and begin to boil them down from there, you'll end up overcooking the other ingredients, while if you begin frying the other ingredients after you've finished boiling the tomatoes down, you waste a lot of time. Boiling down canned tomatoes can actually take quite a while, so I'd prefer if I could fry up the ingredients at the same time. With this in mind, lately I came up with the idea to boil down the whole tomatoes in a fry pan while roasting the other ingredients like bacon and garlic in the oven, and then adding in the crispy bacon and garlic afterward instead, but… When I thought about it some more, anyone could do this by using two stove burners to prepare the ingredients at the same time, huh? In my cooking environment, I generally use only one burner and one frying pan, so this is how I've been making my tomato sauce as of late. Though, this way I can finish it all without using any oil compared to frying the tomatoes and ingredients separately, so it might come out a bit easier to eat, anyway. For ingredients, I use one can of whole tomatoes, one pack of bacon, three cloves of garlic, and after that, whatever mushrooms, celery, *etc.* that I happen to buy. For seasoning, I just add in a teaspoon or so of salt and a bay leaf while boiling down the tomatoes, making it a very simple recipe. Common versions of the recipe will often say to fry the garlic to transfer its fragrance to the olive oil…but roasting it in the oven and mixing it in after doesn't only work just as well, in my personal opinion, it makes it much more flavorful than frying it in olive oil. Maybe it's because the fragrance doesn't burn off from heating it more? This is all just my own personal sense of things, so I await further, proper testing. How to make pasta sauces is a surprisingly satisfying field of academic research.



In-depth *Ishura* Analysis! Here's what Keiso-sensei told us!

The acclaimed anime adaptation is now airing!

In the first volume, Curte used braille, and in the ninth volume, Uhak was reading the Order Script.

While types of written word pop up here and there, this aspect of the Ishura setting still seems much deeper…and with that in mind, this is the question for this volume!

Q1: Please tell us more about how written scripts are handled in the world of *Ishura*.

In the world of Ishura, unified writing systems have not propagated. This is because all the races with hearts and souls within the story each create their own individual languages to talk, and because none of them have a unified language.

Learning writing in the novel's world might be as hard as it would be for a Japanese person to learn how to read and write a second or third foreign language from a completely and utterly different culture.

While it may be different for individuals of a certain intellectual class or above, widespread propagation of writing among the average citizenry, let alone firmly establishing it, would be an extremely difficult endeavor.

To give an example, everyday written expressions are customarily displayed with seals and other types of iconographies (numbers would be included with this as well), and this is often used in shops

and official documents.

However, such seals and symbols need to have a strict one-to-one correspondence to what they're supposed to mean, and it is impossible to use them in place of written passages that can flexibly combine meanings and context.

The Order Script was created with the aim of having a written script that could be learned regardless of race or social status and, conversely, is an extremely ambiguous system of writing with a high degree of grammatical freedom.

While the writing is comparatively simple, reading and understanding the passages written by others is quite difficult without having the writer explain it themselves (or without having full knowledge of the writer's specific quirks).

The writing system known as the aristocrat script, only passed down through specific family lineages, would be the closest to our world's concept of the written word.

Since children's closest influence is their parents, often the language they make for themselves are similar in construction to their parents', and it is thought to be comparatively easy to learn the writing system of one's own family.

It combines the same strictness of meaning and flexibility of expression present in the written scripts we are familiar with and is capable of expressing detailed nuances, but naturally, to other families, learning this script is extremely difficult.

Creating a writing system from scratch in the first place is a massive undertaking that can't be accomplished with just a normal amount of effort and expends a considerable amount of time and funds.

In most cases, families that invest in the effort to create a writing system that only their own family can use do so because they have some knowledge or information that is valuable enough to preserve in writing. Herein lies the reason for the name "aristocrat script," as the families that thrived with the power of such valuable information and knowledge are said to be the world's original aristocrats.

The races with hearts of their own in the world of Ishura depend on memorization for their knowledge. This is just as true even for

those individuals capable of reading and writing scripts, as well.

From our world's perspective, this comes off as a truly miraculous skill, but it's possible that this ability developed specifically in response to the need for it, or because the power of Word Arts to interpret meaning helps make it possible.

Of course, the memories not specifically linked to any learned knowledge are steadily forgotten like normal, thus Sephite's ability to remember is certainly quite excellent even in the world of the novel.

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