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Make It Stop!

I'm Not Strong... It's Just My Sword!

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Make It Stop! I’m Not Strong… It’s Just My Sword! Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

“R-Run!”

The imperial capital was falling into ruin. Terrified, wide-eyed citizens desperately fled from the tens of thousands of aetherborn swarming the city.

“Grooooar!”

The creatures’ howls marked the beginning of the massacre. As one, the monsters descended upon the populace.

Countless screams echoed through the streets.

“Aaaaaaugh!”

“P-Please stop! Don’t eat me!”

“Mommy!”

Claws and fangs tore into flesh, draining the life from their prey. Many of the beasts destroyed their victims in unspeakably atrocious ways, and those who died in an instant were the lucky ones. Acidic, viscous beings known as slimes swallowed their victims whole, condemning them to the torture of being dissolved alive. Wandering, parasitic zombies turned those they bit into their own kind, spreading the infection further and depriving them of the mercy of death. In the face of these supernatural terrors, the people were powerless.

“Why? Why has it come to this?!”

The murmurs of the dying reflected the feelings of all. The city *should* have been a safe place. It was the heart of the great Lemurian Empire, after all, and should have been immediately notified of any approaching aetherborn. How, then, to explain this extraordinary situation? The hordes of creatures had sprung forth not from outside the city’s walls but from within its center. Naught could have forestalled this.

And thus, the curtain rose upon the ultimate tragedy. The sudden, brutal attack plunged the city into chaos, annihilating lives in cold blood.

Humanity, however, would not take this lying down.

“You think we’ll just let you do whatever you want?!” a voice rang out. “Knights! Charge!”

With a battle cry, the magus knights, under their golden-haired commander Iris, rushed onto the stage of the unfolding drama. Wielding weapons infused with aether, they cut through the demonic forces preying upon the people.

“Destroy them! Give it everything you have! Vita, after me!” Iris commanded, clad in light, as she charged at the menacing horde.

“Don’t patronize me!” the young silver-haired knight snapped back. She raced closely behind Iris, clad in wind, the two letting out another battle cry as they ran.

Nothing could so much as scratch them: not the fists of the mighty trolls; nor the claws of the loups-garous, inhumanly agile werewolves; nor the fangs of the bizarre multiheaded chimeras. Knights of renowned prowess, they wielded aethereal arms—weapons imbued with legendary power—and mowed down the threats before them one after another.

“We will protect the peace of our nation!” they cried in unison.

Swords in hand, the two knights rapidly chipped away at the enemy forces.

“Hooray for our elite knights!” The fleeing citizens, roused by the brave display, had seemingly forgotten their despair as they cheered. “They’ll save us! Our deliverance is at hand!”

But just as hope seemed to blossom once more—

“H-Help! Help me!”

A cry echoed through the carnage, stopping the two knights dead in their tracks even at the climax of their assault. Iris and Vita froze at the sight of a cunning, wicked aetherborn—a goblin—gripping a young girl as a human shield. Laughing cruelly, the creature held a stone knife to the base of the child’s neck in a silent threat.

“Damn you, filthy beast!”

“Fiend! How dare you!”

Though the two knights, trembling with anger, knew they had no choice but

to forsake the girl, they hesitated—and that proved their undoing. Beneath their feet, countless tentacles burst forth from the ground—crawling earthworm-like horrors known as ropers.

“What?!”

The aetherborn coiled around the two knights’ limbs, holding them firmly in place and rendering escape impossible.

“Ugh!” Iris groaned.

“Iris! This is...ngh!”

Heat rushed through their bodies, sweat drenching them as mucus flowing from the wormlike creatures seeped into their skin. The women felt like a lethal dose of alcohol had been forced upon them, their thoughts swirling, their limbs feeble. From the depths of their fevered minds, a violent wave of ecstasy gushed forth.

“Damn it! Gaaah!”

Too late they realized that the ropers had excreted an intense and vile aphrodisiac. Their aethereal swords dropped from their hands, stripping them of their power to command light and wind.

Iris still tried to resist, but was already on the verge of unconsciousness. The poison permeating her soft skin violated her nerves, making a mockery of her senses. Through sweat and tears, her cheeks couldn’t help but flush.

Beside her, the strong-willed Vita had lost consciousness between ragged breaths. Younger and of smaller stature, her body had no doubt absorbed the poison more quickly. Iris worried her companion might die of shock.

“Ngh,” she groaned defiantly. “We...won’t...*lose*!”

Alas, humanity’s luck had run out. The two powerful knights were bound, unable to fight the terrors drawing ever closer to them. Faced with the overwhelming number of enemies, the other soldiers fell one after another, and helpless citizens became mere prey. Once bustling and prosperous, the imperial capital lay steeped in blood and terror.

Amid the horror, Iris and the survivors felt a desperate longing. “You

monsters! If only *he* were here, you'd all...!" *He* was their last hope—the hero who would carve a path through this era of despair! Stronger than even mighty Iris and powerful Vita—the ultimate champion! Wings of justice to destroy all evil! If only *he* would come, he would conquer this adversity. Alas, they wished, if only our Crow the Condemner were here!

"Crow..." murmured Iris. But it was futile, this last spark of hope, for even she, as strong as she might be, was about to be consumed.

And then, all at once—

"Enough!" a glorious voice echoed, piercing through the desperation that loomed over the city.

In a flash, a jet-black blade sliced through the aetherborn assaulting Iris, scattering their tainted blood like flower petals and drawing the tragedy to a close.



“Ah!” Iris exclaimed, her eyes widening. The people, too, turned their gazes from the beasts toward a solitary figure. Trembling quietly, none could take their eyes off the swordsman with a black sword in hand.

“You came!” Tears escaped Iris’s eyes. Terror faded away in the face of the man standing gallantly before her.

The aura of despair quickly vanished. No longer did fear remain in the hearts of the citizens. No, it was the aetherborn themselves who trembled, every last one frozen in place. Iris and the others cried out excitedly.

“He came for us! Crow Titus came for us!”

Thunderous clamor resounded throughout the city. The people shouted with joy at the arrival of the most powerful man in all the land.

Thus dawned the hour of reckoning. Spurred on by the multitude’s hopes, the highest-ranked of the imperial magus knights—Crow of the Dark Blade—began to move.

“Let’s do this!” he declared. His voice reverberated alongside his thundering footsteps, so powerful that they cracked the ground beneath his feet.

Crow was upon the enemy army in an instant. With a fierce flash of his blade, he dispatched the surrounding creatures, whose roars of agony echoed across the battlefield. Chunks of tainted flesh scattered through the air.

And so the carnage began. Swinging his sword with ease, he shredded scores upon scores of monsters in mere moments. The people’s gazes followed the movements of the peerless man known as the Condemner, their fear all but forgotten.

“For your crimes against the people, all of you shall pay with your lives!”

Crow’s anger unleashed his superb swordsmanship, each move so swift that even sound seemed to have trouble keeping up. A wall of slashes reduced all around him to pieces in an instant. Such inhuman skill left the monstrous army in disarray.

“Die! No evil can escape my blade!”

His arrival had sealed the aetherborn’s fate. No attacks could touch him—

from ambushes to powerful blows, he avoided them all with ease. Any arm questing for a hostage was sliced to bits in the blink of an eye. Evading flames, gusts, lightning, and invisible curses, he destroyed all who dared oppose him.

"Prepare yourselves!"

Black blade in hand, Crow swiftly moved from foe to foe, striking the necks of creature after creature. As long as evil remained, he would not rest! As long as there was life to protect, he would be unstoppable!

"Embrace your doom, vile fiends!" cried out Crow the Condemner.

For the sake of peace—for the sake of his people—he continued to fight. His heroic figure ignited a fire in the throbbing hearts of the citizens.

Yet, unbeknownst to them...

Ahhhhhh! I don't wanna fight anymore! Make it stop!

Despite the fierce determination in Crow's features, deep within he was screaming and crying. Beneath his cool but meaningless one-liners, he was actually terrified, exhausted, and ready to throw up.

Indeed, Crow—esteemed the world over as the Condemner of All Evil—was in reality nothing more than an ordinary man.

In fact, he was the kind of lowlife who would sneakily slip lost change into his pocket. Risking his life for the sake of others was dead last on his list of priorities, and even in that moment, all he wanted to do was run.

"Grooooar!"

"Come at me, fiend! I'll be your opponent!" *Please don't, actually!*

Why was such a man fighting aetherborn, you ask? Well, that was the doing of the jet-black blade in his right hand, Muramasa.

"*Hey, uh, Muramasa?"* said Crow in his mind. *"All this slashing and running is making me, you know, sore? All over? Like, the 'muscles falling apart' kind of sore all over?*"

"SOULS! SOULS!"

"*Hello?! I'm talking to you!*"

It was no use. All the sword did was repeat “SOULS!” This particular blade was cursed, you see, and consumed the souls of those it killed. Oh, and it could hijack the body of anyone who held it.

Why did I have to go and pick up this stupid nightmare of a sword?! I hate my life...

While his head swirled with such thoughts, Crow kept lopping off enemy heads with magnificent technique, his body completely under the influence of the sword.

I freaked out so bad the first time it took over my body. I almost turned into some kinda serial killer!

A year earlier, Crow Titus had happened upon Muramasa. The instant he’d taken the sword in hand, his life had changed. From that day on, he’d been destined to fight.

I guess the silver lining, if I could call it that, is that Muramasa’s favorite flavor of soul is evil with a dash of wickedness, so it automatically goes for the bad guys.

In other words, the sword had a taste for the souls of criminals, aetherborn, and the like. Thanks to that, Crow had avoided becoming a mass murderer. Furthermore, once Muramasa was satiated, the young man could regain control of his body.

That was not cause for relief, however.

Man... If this thing gets hungry with only civilians nearby, it’ll just go right ahead and help itself to their souls. So I have to keep taking progressively riskier missions. Just my luck...

With the one eye he could freely move, Crow shot a glance behind him. Tens of thousands of civilians and knights were gazing at him in admiration.

Why?! Why me*?! I’m so sick of fighting! Why do* I *have to be the hope of all humanity?! I’m just some dude cursed by a weird sword!*

All the fighting to satisfy Muramasa’s appetite had elevated him to the position of most powerful knight in all the land. Internally, however, Crow was

screaming.

“Oh, Sir Crow, you’re our ray of hope!”

“Fight on, Sir Crow!”

“Save this city like you saved my hometown!”

The uproarious cheers of the crowd and the countless expectant gazes, washing over him like sunlight, made the perfectly ordinary Crow’s stomach churn. Still, he couldn’t tell them that he was just cursed, a mere accessory to his magical blade.

For in truth, he was fighting against his will. All the beheading and snappy one-liners? Just an act, pretending to be a paragon of justice so no one would find out that he was only fighting to satisfy his hungry weapon. He couldn’t simply tell people that his reasons for fighting were incredibly stupid.

Now on the verge of tears, Crow continued to relentlessly battle the aetherborn.

Wahhh... It hurts... I just wanna take it easy! Damn it, this is all Muramasa’s fault! Screw you, stupid piece of scrap!

Crow shot a dirty glare at the sword. The people, meanwhile, upon seeing his fighting stance—both hands at his weapon’s hilt, its tip aimed at his opponents’ throats—got the wrong idea entirely.

“Wow, he’s really going after those aetherborn!” they said. “He’s pissed at them for daring to hurt us!”

Their respect for him only grew—to Crow’s chagrin.

If only I’d left this thing where I found it...

As he fought relentlessly, a sharp look etched upon his features, Crow thought back to the past. To the day, a year earlier, when he’d taken Muramasa in hand and begun his saga as the Condemner.

Chapter 1: The Birth of a Legend (Not)

“Ah man, my hometown’s really gone...”

A year before the assault on the capital, I was by the river at the neighboring village where I’d taken refuge, staring blankly up at the sky.

The year was 3000 AD, and humanity was in a decent bit of trouble.

Horrible beasts known as aetherborn ran rampant, gobbling up humans day after day. They attacked my village, you know! Even “Li’l Crow” got munched on a bit!

Oh, by the way, the reason the world was like that? All because a thousand years earlier, scientists had stumbled upon this unknown energy. It could only be seen by people with powerful so-called psychic abilities, using cutting-edge microscopes, and no one knew where it came from. Due to its mysterious nature, scientists had given it the fantasy name “aether.”

Humanity was running low on fossil fuels, so everyone started researching aether. Within just a few years, they’d figured out how to substitute it for electricity, and even come up with a method of amplifying it. The whole thing was great news for the economy, and the world was abuzz. Everyone thought this would secure humanity’s future. With the problem of energy resolved, surely there would no longer be a need for war. Right?

Well, the festive mood didn’t last long.

One day, accidents happened throughout major aether amplification facilities all over the world. Workers were exposed to highly amplified, maximum density aether, and immediately their bodies began to change.

In Japan, they became oni. In the United States, zombies. In Britain, vampires. People from each country turned into their own local versions of folkloric creatures and began to run rampant. They destroyed the amplification facilities, and the ultra-high density aether spread throughout the world. Living creatures morphed into fantastical monsters: cows became minotaurs, pigs became orcs, chickens became cockatrices, and so on.

That brought about the collapse of society. Ninety-seven percent of the population perished, either turning into monsters, which came to be known as aetherborn, or falling victim to their rampage.

In the thousand years since, the small fraction of humans who hadn't turned despite exposure to aether took the likewise small number of domestic animals that had escaped transformation and hid in remote areas, barely scraping by.

Most science and technology were lost, and civilization basically fell back to the late Middle Ages. Still, humans developed aether-powered weapons, or "aethereal arms," and fought back against the aetherborn. In recent years, countries had been founded in several regions, and people had endeavored to reestablish humanity's dominance.

And yet...

"No matter what state the world's in, bad people will always exist, huh?" I mused.

Sure, it had been aetherborn who'd attacked the villagers, but at their head had been a dark magus—a human wielding aethereal arms for evil. The magus, with his trained creatures, had raided my village, killing the majority of the inhabitants.

I'd gotten away somehow, and the neighboring village had taken me in. Three days later, in true "broken young man whose hometown was destroyed" fashion, I was doing absolutely nothing.

Except, you know, I wasn't actually so broken that I couldn't pick up the pieces.

"I don't really care about my hometown that much. It's not like I had parents or relatives. Or friends. Or a girlfriend, for that matter!"

I mean, I *was* broken, just for a different reason.

Guys my age only looked at me from a distance. Sure, I spoke to people sometimes, but it always felt like they were just talking to me to be nice (girls especially).

"Honestly, though, it's not like I should expect anything else. I'm bad at

speaking to people, when I even speak at all, and I always look like someone just kicked my puppy."

Older people called me "mature for my age," but in reality I was simply a nervous wreck.

The day of the attack, some guys had invited me (awkwardly) to hang out, but I'd told them I was busy and couldn't come. See, with no parents, I'd turned to making a living by caring for the little ones in my neighborhood. So I'd had to work that day.

"No one wants to be friends with some brooding dude who never wants to do anything, anyway. Besides, black hair is unusual around here. People look at me funny, I just know it."

Anyhow, besides the whole "not having relatives" thing, I'd figured something like that raid was bound to happen, so I wasn't *too* distraught. Attacks on rural villages were commonplace in this day and age, and I'd always been the nervous sort.

So I was *way* more prepared than anyone else.

I'd done leg training so I could run away in case of emergency, and figured out a path through which I could escape unseen. That saved my ass, you know.

Well, mine and the kids' and a bunch of my peers'.

"I wanted to escape alone, but..."

When the dark magus appeared, aetherborn in tow, in my heart I was screaming, *Stay away from me!* Because, you know, what with the attackers and all, I was right in the middle of having a bunch of screaming, crying kids clinging to every last bit of me. Their little hands gripped as tight as they could, and I wasn't able to shake them off.

"I mean, what else could I do? I just made a mad dash for it."

Everything went according to plan as we crossed the nearby woods. Running for dear life, we passed through trees, slid down a slope, rushed through a secret passage I'd sneakily dug, and led our pursuers to traps I'd set in advance.

And halfway through all of that, we ran into those guys I mentioned, who'd

fled into that same forest.

For a second, I thought about using them as bait, but then I figured that letting them carry the kids would be a literal load off my shoulders. So, with them all in tow, I somehow made it out alive and well.

Okay, maybe not *well* well, since my rear end had a brief tête-à-tête with the fangs of an aetherborn. (I didn't tell anyone about this part.) I got caked with mud while running, so nobody noticed the hole in my pants, but I'll be damned if it didn't hurt to hell and back.

"Well, then," I reflected. "My butt's still sore, but I think it's about time I drop the whole 'broken young man whose hometown was destroyed' act. I should probably find some work tomorrow." I groaned as I stood up and stretched.

I'll be eighteen next year, I thought. Unlike everyone else, I hadn't lost any relatives, so I'd just get shunned if I kept lazing around.

"Come to think of it, those survivors probably hate me now, huh? I mean, they found out I had an escape plan for myself all ironed out..."

I hope they don't trash-talk me to these villagers, I thought to myself, ready to leave the riverside.

Then I saw it.

Stuck at the river's edge was a cylindrical *something*. Curious, I stepped closer.

"Wait, what's this? A sword?"

The *something* was a jet-black scabbard, a blade still sheathed within. It had an unusual shape, thin and narrow.

Oh, is this a—what was it?—"katana" or something? I think that's what people in the far east used to call these swords way back in the day. I hear they're super cool. And sharp. What was it Fukashi said? "They're very valuable weapons, with blades so gorgeous they look like works of art. Also, we have, like, a hundred of them at home."

Good ol' Fukashi. He lived in my neighborhood and lied *all* the time. Also, he wasn't among the guys I helped out, so he was probably dead.

“Now then, let’s see what it’s actually like, shall we?”

I promptly picked up the loot and placed my hand on the long scabbard. What would the blade *really* be like? If Fukashi (rest in peace) had lied about the whole “work of art” thing too, he was *definitely* going to hell.

Granted, this thing was lying around in a river, so it’s probably rusty.

“Welp, let’s just unsheathe it and give it a—”

The Vantablack blade appeared, and *a jolt of pain coursed through my very soul!*

I groaned. It felt as though the sword had just stabbed right through me! I was in such agony I could barely stand. Surely I would collapse right then and there from the pain!

Except I didn’t.

“I-I can’t move my body!” I yelled.

My brain was screaming, “Get on your knees!” but my legs were like, “Nah.” Instead, I stood, back straight as a ruler. My muscles all tensed, and even the way my feet were planted on the ground shifted. Suddenly, I was standing tall, my stance not unlike an elite warrior’s.

“My body’s... Something’s not... Wait, what?! Whoa!”

Before I could finish my sentence, my legs rudely interrupted me by taking off running at full speed, my muscles moving of their own accord.



“Wh-What the heeell?!” I screamed, dashing toward the village faster than I’d ever run in my life. “H-H-How is this happeniiing?!”

Jet-black sword in hand, I was about to stir things up *big-time*.

Chapter 2: The Carnage of Dáinsleif, the Crimson Thirst

“It’s no use.” In the assembly hall, the air was thick with gloom as the village’s chief and its adult men discussed what their defensive measures should be. “No matter what strategy we come up with, we’ll never stand a chance against a dark magus.”

After the destruction of Titus Village, Crow’s hometown, the villainous dark magus that had spearheaded it was still at large. Their village could be attacked anytime.

Though the men offered their opinions, their ideas were naive at best, and the chief flatly refused them all. They’d been at this for three days now.

“Don’t mistake them for the likes of bandits,” said the chief. “You know full well the threat posed by the aethereal arms they wield.”

“Y-You mean those weapons that gained powers when touched by aether, right? The stuff of legends and myths?” said one of the village men. “I’ve never seen one myself, but...”

“Indeed,” confirmed the chief.

Aethereal arms—humanity’s final trump card! A thousand years before, the highly concentrated aether that had spread throughout the land had affected not only living creatures but also a number of objects—remnants of legendary items once believed to have special powers.

“Originally, they were ancient relics,” the chief explained. “Practically none of them are intact now, of course—mostly just fragments. However, modifying *ordinary* pieces of equipment with those fragments gives them a fraction of that legendary power.”

Said power was immense.

The people, driven to the brink of extinction, had taken up “aethereal arms”—thus named because aether granted them unusual abilities—and fought

back against the threat of the aetherborn. Thus humans were finally able to regain their former authority. However...

“Damn those dark magi! Those weapons are humanity’s hope! How dare they use them for selfish gain!” muttered the chief in disgust.

No longer facing the danger of eradication, humanity could once again afford the luxury of indulgence. Many emerged who were willing and able to commit violent crime. The dark magi were the prime example of that, their actions growing more and more brutal with time.

“The man who attacked Titus Village in particular allegedly employed a large number of goblins. If he attacked us, we wouldn’t stand a chance,” the chief said. “We need to call upon the magus knights! They wield traditional aethereal arms to protect the royal family! I’m sure they could—”

“I’m sorry, what?” a voice objected. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, a week away from the nearest town with a knights’ outpost! Besides, what happens if the messenger runs into aetherborn on the way there?!”

“That’s right!” agreed several other villagers. Each had their own objections to add:

“Even assuming we manage to petition them safely, Chief, who’s to say the village won’t get attacked before the knights even get here?!”

“We barely even have any manpower! We don’t have anyone to spare for this fool’s errand!”

“We need to think of some way to resist the bastard ourselves, right here! If we all work together, I’m sure we can do it!”

While the villagers, especially the younger ones, were excited at the prospect of handling the situation themselves, the chief remained obstinate.

“Don’t underestimate an arms wielder!” he shouted. “I’ve witnessed firsthand the knight they call the Crusher destroy an entire nest of aetherborn! There’s no way ordinary people like us could withstand that sort of power! *And* our foe has those creatures on his side!”

“Then we attack him in his sleep!” a villager remarked.

“How, you nitwit?! We don’t even know where he is!”

“We’ll just go and find him, then!”

Angry shouts echoed throughout the assembly hall. Confused in the face of the unknown, people ranted and raved at one another.

“Whatever! You’re a coward, Chief! That lad—Crow, I think his name was—managed to make it here with a bunch of kids, right? Worse comes to worst, we should at least be able to run away too, then!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You think anyone but him could pull that off?!” the chief snapped back, all but screaming at this point. Such behavior was unlike him, and the men shut up.

“I’m sure we’ve all heard the rumors of Crow, the young prodigy of Titus,” said the chief.

The young man was famous even in that neighboring village. Calm, sagacious, not a hint of childish selfishness in him—so they said. At a very young age, he was already working diligently. Not a single person thought ill of him.

“The other young people he rescued say he seems mature, and everyone respects him. They said girls are so taken with the young man that they’re too nervous to even speak to him,” the chief went on, his voice more passionate with every word. “They were crying, both from gratitude to Crow and at their own inadequacy! For while they ran away to save their own skin, with no regard for anyone else, Crow saved the young children! While his peers goofed off, he was training with everything he had! He even secured an escape route for everyone! They were quite ashamed of themselves!”

The men remained quiet as the chief told his tale—the tale of Crow’s courage to step out beyond the safety of the village, braving those places where aetherborn lurked, to secure an escape route for everyone. Of his heroism, as he used his own body as a shield to protect others from the attackers.

Now the men felt mortified. Unlike Crow, they were merely panicking at the last minute, raising their voices at their fellows. How pathetic they were!

“Even someone of his caliber could only get the children to safety. As the dark magus attacked the other villagers, it was all he could do to desperately run

from their goblin minions. And you all mean to tell me you can say, without a shadow of a doubt, that *you* could pull off such a life-threatening getaway?! You mean to tell me you'll *attack* the dark magus?!"

Everyone stood in awkward silence, not daring to say a word. Getting so many to safety had been an incredible feat. They all understood full well that the young man could only have done it thanks to his kindness, wit, and meticulous planning.

"Man, compared to that boy..."

"Yeah, we don't stand a chance."

It ill befitted grown men to hatch a reckless plan based on petty squabbles and bravado. They had to follow that young man's example!

But of course, this was all a misunderstanding on their part.

Saving the children had been incidental. All of Crow's hard work had been, without question, directed simply at saving his own hide. Though he might have appeared mature, he was just terrible at communication and didn't speak much. Frankly, all he had was a certain air and look about him, nothing more! On the inside, he was just a lazy, good-for-nothing guy.

Unaware of this, the villagers reconciled with one another over the tale of Crow's alleged exploits.

"S-Sorry, chief. I got carried away and called you a coward. That was rude of me."

"It's fine," the chief replied. "I was too stubborn, myself."

The rage melted away from the atmosphere. Everyone regained their composure and turned to constructive discussion on how to handle the issue.

"Why don't we ask Crow's opinion? He seemed pretty down when I saw him, but..."

"Mm, he's a kind young man," the chief said. "I'm sure his heart aches over his inability to save all of the villagers. Still, I'm certain he'll have good ideas."

The discussion had hardly begun anew when a desperate cry rang out.

“G-Goblins! An entire group of them!” a villager yelled from outside the assembly hall.

Cries of “What?!” and “It can’t be!” arose. The men immediately leaped to their feet and ran out of the hall to investigate. Barreling down a nearby hill was a group of green humanoids—goblins. Once monkeys but now corrupted by aether, these aetherborn stood at barely a child’s height. Their brutality, however, was unfathomable.

“No... This is exactly what we feared!”

If only they had acted sooner! Bitter regret gripped their hearts, but now was not the time to be paralyzed with fear.

“Everyone, run!” the village chief shouted. “Save the children!”

The adults were determined to see to it that the children had a future, just like young Crow had. And so, they took off running—

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! And where do *you* losers think you’re going?!”

A powerful strike! As a voice rang out from above, a man was cleft in twain. He fell with a gurgle, a mist of fresh blood spraying those nearby!

“What?!” It took the village chief and the others a moment to realize what had happened. Bathed in the blood of their dead neighbor, who they’d just been speaking to, they quickly fell into a panic and screamed.

“Gah ha ha! Grown men, shaking in their boots like little children! You’re all pathetic!”

A skeletal man stood before the villagers, mocking them with a crude sneer. His cheeks were gaunt, his eye sockets hollow, and his body as thin as a dead branch. Despite this, in his hand was a large blade, longer than the man was tall.

“You’re... Wait, that sword in your hand... Don’t tell me...!”

The blade was a wondrous sight to behold, emanating a faint crimson light. It could be no ordinary weapon.

“Is that...an aethereal arm?!”

“You bet it is!” said the gaunt man. “This is my partner, Dáinsleif, the Crimson

Thirst!”

At the man’s words, they beheld a new and bizarre sight: fresh blood swirled up from the remains of the deceased villager. As if moving of its own will, the blood was sucked into Dáinsleif’s blade.

“Ahhh! Here it comes, here it comes, here it comes! Ohhh, that feels *good!* That feels sooo good!” the skeletal man shouted in ecstasy.

A sound akin to the beating of a heart emanated from the sword. At the same time, the man’s muscles swelled, his entire body taking on a grotesque, gigantic shape. Only his face remained the same.

“What the...?!”

“Geh heh heh! That’s my partner’s power! The story goes that Dáinsleif has a thirst for blood and mayhem! It consumes the blood of those it cuts down to give me temporary strength!” the man explained, and laughed maniacally as he leaned backwards.

His eyes gleaming brightly, the man turned his cruel gaze to the villagers, whom he saw as little more than prey.

“Now, then: time for you losers to become dinner!” he said, letting out a vile cry as he raised his bloodstained blade.

“No!” the villagers cried out at the prospect of having their lives consumed.

But just then, a voice rang out.

“Stop this! Now!”

Shocked, the skeletal man lunged to the side and lifted his sword to shield his chest, just in time to catch a powerful thrust to its center. The giant flew back an astonishing distance—over ten meters—and groaned. “Wh-Who the hell are you?!”

“What?!” the village elder exclaimed. “Wait, you’re...” He couldn’t believe his eyes. “Crow?!”

Standing before their wide gazes was young Crow, clutching a night-black blade in his hand. He shot a brief, cool, dashing glance at the villagers before turning in fury upon the skeletal man.

“Evildoer! For the sin of robbing me of my home, I hereby deliver judgment!”

Crow’s voice reverberated as he announced the man’s sentence, his majestic visage inspiring confidence in the hearts of the villagers. He was the one, the man, the *hero* to save them all!

(Spoiler: No. No, he wasn’t.)

Chapter 3: The Awakening of Muramasa, the Black Reaper

“Please! I’m begging you! Stop! Noooo!”

I was racing down the road to the village against my will, totally unaware that I was about to fight some jacked skeletal guy. My legs were swollen and sore, and I was wheezing, already completely out of breath, though I’d hardly been running more than a few minutes. Yet my feet kept going at an all-out sprint, speeding along like a hardy war veteran.

And in my hand was a deadly black blade.

“A-Are you doing this?! Is this your fault?!” I asked the sword. It was after I’d picked up the blade that my body had started doing its own thing, after all. What else could it have been? “What kinda weapon controls people?! Are you one of those aethereal arm things?! What do you think you’re doing to my body, dude?! Hey!”

My frantic cries went unanswered. I mean, of course they did. It’s not like swords have mouths or anything. But seeing how my feet were just doing their own thing, zooming along the shortest path to the village, it was clear the thing had a will of its own.

My body rushed past the village entrance at full speed, pointing the blade at the villagers, who all looked like they had their panties in a twist over some business or another.

“Whoa, hey! You’re not seriously gonna cut these people down, are you?!” I said to myself.

I felt some sort of alien intent form in my utterly horrified heart.

“HUNGRY. NEED TO CUT—EAT—SOULS!”

Yep, that confirmed it. That was definitely the will of the sword in my right hand.

“Wait wait wait, no! Are you actually cursed?! And *you eat* souls*?! You’re*

seriously that vicious?! Ah, shit!”

Okay, yeah. That stupid-ass sword absolutely took the cake as one of the most dangerous aethereal arms out there, cursing its wielder and driving them crazy!

“EAT! SOULS! EAT!”

“Eat something healthier, dumbass!”

I tried to reason with it, but the thing would not stop complaining. It compelled me to lower my body into a thrusting stance and close in on the villagers.

Oh. Oh no. If I cut someone down like this... If people figure out I’m cursed with this thing, it’s game over! Bad end! Off with my head! Please, anything but that!

All I wanted was an ordinary life. You know, with a substantial amount of money and a moderately attractive girlfriend, living in a land without any aetherborn, just chilling in peace! Perfectly normal.

Hard pass on the execution ending!

“Stop this! Now!” I yelled, straining with every last bit of strength I had to stop my body from committing murder. My scream was so desperate that it echoed throughout the whole village.

I struggled in vain, however. My body rushed toward the villagers, unstoppable, under the sword’s thrall.

Nooo!

And then, just before it actually attacked anyone—

“OH. THAT *ONE LOOKS TASTIER.”*

“Say what now?”

My trajectory shifted slightly, and I just barely missed the villagers.

“Guh!” someone groaned.

Wha...?

The sword had thrust itself at a skeletal, jacked man standing in the middle of

the village.

So it did *attack someone! Oh, but he parried it with a huge sword... Wait a sec! Isn't this the black magus that attacked my hometown?! What's* he *doing here?!*

"Wh-Who the hell are you?!" the man demanded.

"What?! Wait, you're...*Crow*?!" asked the village chief in bewilderment.

The chief, the other villagers, and the man who'd somehow parried my thrust were all staring at me. Everyone was drenched in blood, and something that looked like the dead body of a villager was at their feet.

Oh...

Everything clicked. The village was in the middle of being attacked by the dark magus. That must've been why the villagers were kicking up such a fuss.

So this garbage sword changed targets for some reason and attacked the jacked skeleton dude. And it...saved the village chief and the others from being killed? Okay.

It was a total coincidence, mind you, but I knew I could use the situation to my advantage. Even if it did suck to try to intimidate a dark magus, and my butt was puckering so hard you couldn't thread a hair through it.

Whatever. What's done is done. All that matters is I can use this douchebag to keep everyone from realizing I'm being controlled by a cursed sword! I just need to exude an overwhelming aura of anger and try to sound as cool as humanly possible!

"Evildoer! For the sin of robbing me of my home, I hereby deliver judgment!" I decreed, flashing a perfect glare at the muscular skeleton. I would pretend to be a condemner of all evil, make it look like I was willingly trying to cut down the wicked man!

A genius strategy, if I do say so myself.

Except all my rave reviews are a facade! I can only willingly move from the neck up! And I'm not angry at all—I just want to run away! Why me?!

"Psh! Mind your tongue, punk!" the skeletal man yelled at me. "I remember

you! You were in that other village I attacked! You saved those little kids, didn't you?! I missed out on that tasty, tasty child blood because of *your* ass!"

Eep! That's one intense glare! And his muscles are bulging even more!

"Hey! You! Goblins!" he shouted. "It's this little shit's fault we missed dessert! You all just gonna sit there and let that go? Huh?!"

"Graaar!" the goblins roared in response.

The swarm of cunning predators came running to him—the very same creatures who had violated my ass a few days before, mind you. I was about ready to shit my pants.

"Psh, look at you, trying to act all cool and shit. Bet that sword's the source of all that confidence," the man said.

Ah. So he'd noticed the dumb sword.

The source of my confidence? The source of all evil, more like!

"Heh heh! Don't get cocky just because of some aethereal garbage you found somewhere," he sneered.

Cocky? Me? Trust me, I'd like nothing more than to drop the damn thing.

Also, the only reason my body wasn't moving was because the demonic sword was busy getting a read on the situation. It hadn't killed the dude with that first thrust, so this time it was focusing its strength.

In fact, it was pushing my feet so hard against the ground my bones were creaking. *Guess it's getting ready to swoop in and one-hit kill this guy,* I thought.

"Too bad for you that aethereal arms have different power levels! And Dáinsleif here is better!" he bragged, lifting his huge crimson sword as some kind of red, blood-like phosphorescence oozed from its blade.

"Geh heh heh! Look how it overflows with magic power! Your dinky little sword doesn't even glow! Poor baby found himself a shit-tier weapon!" said the dark magus, cackling.

I glanced at the village chief, who knew a lot about that kinda stuff. He was hanging his head dejectedly.

Oh, I see. So this weapon is shit-tier. And it curses its wielder on top of that. Cool, cool. I couldn't have chosen a worse weapon to pick up. But you know what?

"Silence, filth," I said, sounding as assertive and confident as I could manage.

"What was that?!"

It wasn't like I could just apologize to that guy and we'd just kiss and make up, anyway. Besides, the sword in my right hand was raring to go. At that point, one of us wasn't gonna make it out alive.

"You damn punk! That's *it*! Get him, goblins! Get his ass!" yelled the dark magus. He'd finally snapped.

Obeying his command, the vicious green creatures let out a roar and rushed toward me, like ants swarming their prey.

Honestly, I was terrified.

But, if I was going to hide the fact I was cursed and, more importantly, get myself out of that situation, I had no choice but to fight. I *had* to become a paragon of justice. A condemner of evil.

"Embrace your doom, vile fiend!"

As I uttered those words, I stopped trying to resist the sword's influence.

"Fine! Use me, but do it well, you hear?"

For the sake of the future, for the sake of peace, I surrendered myself fully to the black blade of death. And, in that moment, a voice reverberated deep within my soul.

"MY PUPPET. SAY MY NAME. CARVE IT INTO YOUR SOUL."

"Muramasa, the Black Reaper!"

The moment I uttered those words, my movements transcended the limits of human ability. Running so fast the ground cracked open beneath my feet, I closed the distance between myself and the goblin horde in an instant.

"Die."

With one flash of the sword, so blindingly fast that sound itself couldn't keep

up, I cut multiple enemies in half.

The remaining goblins froze in place. Whether they stopped from the shock of their fellows' deaths or in an attempt to preserve their lives, I don't know, but it left their guard wide open for me. And with the level of power I had, they didn't stand a chance.

Two, four, six, eight more flashes. My arms moved in every direction with each step forward, reducing the goblin horde to chunks of flesh and blood, cutting through hundreds of them in mere seconds.

"Wh-What the hell are you?! Stay away! Stay the hell away from me!" yelled the dark magus as I drew closer. He brandished his crimson-red blade, sending a powerful blood-hued streak flying in my direction. "Die! Die! Die die diiie!"

He kept slashing, and arc after reddish arc flew toward me. It looked like a wall of blood closing in on me and was, frankly, horrifying. Which was exactly why I chose to do absolutely nothing.

As I cried internally, keenly aware of just how much exhaustion was setting in, my body filled with even *more* power. Muramasa made short work of the curtain of red blades hurtling at me, and my feet finally closed the distance between myself and the dark magus. I was right up in his face.

"Wh-What?!" he yelled, his eyes wide. Reflected in them, I stood, blade in hand, a veritable god of war.

I wondered if this was what I looked like to other people. I didn't want to fight—and that just happened to also be the reason I was strong. It was only when I'd completely given up control of my body that the Black Reaper's power over it had reached its apex. My elite warrior-level movements had become even more precise, and despite not having any special abilities, I'd cornered the black magus.

C'mon! My muscles are falling apart! Just die already!

"Eeek! I'm sorry! Forgive me!"

Just as he was about to meet his end, the man finally broke down. The overflowing malice from when he'd first attacked the village, or when he destroyed my hometown, was nowhere to be found. He was crying, frantically

babbling, begging for his life.

"I-I-I didn't mean to do any of those evil things! I was being controlled by this weapon! You've heard about things that curse people and drive them mad, right?! Yeah! That's what this was! My body just moved on its own!"

Uh, sorry, bud. I don't think any of that makes a difference. I'm *cursed, you see.*

"Enough. Die."

"Eeeeek!"

And then, with one final flash, the black blade sliced through the man's neck, cutting his head clean off. It was done.

Now, for a brief interlude, allow me to explain how our strategic decision-making went.

I was like, "I'll do my best to stare off into the distance during combat!"

And the sword was like, "..."

Yeah, our strategy was garbage.

Chapter 4: The Start of a Journey (I Didn't Want)

After the black magus's death, I unexpectedly found myself at the controls of my body again.

My face twisted as I dropped limply to the ground. Every last fiber of my muscles was torn to bits from the sheer force of my earlier movements. Standing up was no longer an option.

"Crow! Are you okay?!" someone shouted.

"Boy!" an older man yelled.

"Mister!" a child cried out.

The villagers, their chief, and the kids I'd helped from my hometown all came running over.

Relief filled me. "Oh... Everyone... I'm so glad..."

It didn't look like they'd realized I was being controlled by a magical sword. They wouldn't have approached me otherwise. Pretending to be a condemner of evil and making it look like I'd been fighting of my own accord had paid off.

Fortunately, they also didn't seem able to see or hear something else that was happening.

"Help meee," someone cried out.

"Graaaar," a small voice whimpered.

Cries of agony pierced my ears, one after another. From the corpses of the dark magus and his goblin followers, faint figures that were the spitting images of their bodies—their souls, perhaps—floated up. My magic sword instantly absorbed them.

"Ow! Ow! Aaaagh!" one yelled.

Immediately after came crunching sounds, as if flesh and bones were being devoured. The sword was undeniably feasting upon the souls that had

disappeared into its blade.

Muramasa, the Black Reaper.

My sword is scary as shit, I thought to myself as I slipped into unconsciousness.

***

"C-Crow!" the village elder cried out, "What do you mean, you're leaving?!"

It had been a day since the attack. I stood at the village entrance, a lingering feeling of exhaustion weighing down on me. Behind me were the village chief and the others, all bewildered.

"Crow, wait!" pleaded another villager.

Everyone was worried about me. I mean, it made sense. To them, I was a hero. My peers from back home had gone from actively disliking me to having a rather neutral view of yours truly, and everyone else seemed to actually like me now.

If I'm being honest, I'd have loved to live in that village, with people fawning all over me, forever. At that point, I'd definitely be able to get a cute girlfriend. Also, my every muscle was aching, so I was in terrible shape. But I had more pressing concerns.

"Forgive me. I cannot stay here," I said, fully resolved to leave, and took a few slow steps away.

"But why? At least tell us the reason!"

The reason? Duh. It's this idiot sword at my hip! Muramasa!

"SOULS. SOULS!"

"You be quiet!" I yelled inside my head at the soul-obsessed fiend of a sword.

The damn thing had eaten all those goblins and that black magus, but apparently, it'd digested them overnight! Come morning, it was already going on and on about souls this and souls that. What was it, a hungry toddler or something?

Well, at least it hasn't reached the point where it takes control of my body just

yet.

I could still move my body of my own volition, but if I didn't focus my strength into my arm, Muramasa would try to turn on the villagers. Earlier, I'd figured, "I'll just throw it away," but the thing had tried to cut my damn head off! State-of-the-art trash, truly.

So I knew I had to get the hell out of there before things took a turn for the worse. *But* if I was honest and told people I was cursed, who knew what kinds of things they'd say behind my back?! I couldn't have *that*.

Putting on my best serious face once again, I turned to the villagers one last time.

"We don't know whether there's anyone who'd want revenge for what happened to that dark magus. If there is, and I stayed, this village would get caught in the cross fire," I declared.

"Th-That's..."

"More than anything, however, I have been blessed with the power of an aethereal arm," I announced, raising my blade. "To ensure that good, virtuous people need never shed another tear, I will use this power to destroy all evil!"

Heh heh heh. This should definitely give me an out.

Plus, I had the whole "destroyed hometown" thing going for me. I'd come up with the "condemner" spiel on a whim, but man, it sure was handy.

"Crow..."

"Lastly, I've heard one needs a permit from the government to wield aethereal arms. As such, I'll head to the imperial capital to obtain one."

Yep. They were highly lethal, after all. Wielding one of those weapons without a license was a crime, and good guy Crow would *never* commit a crime.

Well, there *was* the small detail of how to walk into the very crowded imperial capital carrying a murderous sword, but I supposed I could secretly hunt down aetherborn to keep it full.

Yes, it's illegal to wield it without a permit, but if a law is broken in the forest with no one around to witness it, does it make a crime? I think not. And after I

get the permit, I can live quietly in a secluded place and figure out how to break the curse. So went my train of thought.

"Besides, I cannot simply ignore *this,*" I told the villagers, casting a glance at Dáinsleif, the black magus's sword, now strapped to my back.

Ignoring the fact it was heavy as all shit, the sword wasn't all that bad. Sure, it'd been annoying as hell at first, all "Gimme blood!" and whatnot, but a good smack from Muramasa had shut it right up.

Though that jacked skeleton dude did say Dáinsleif is the better of the two. Maybe it's just humble. I do love it when swords are nice and reasonable.

"Aethereal arms are a scarce military resource. That it may be wielded in the name of peace, I will bring it to the capital," I said.

What I *meant* was that I'd heard they paid you good money to turn these in to the powers that be. And I wasn't about to pass that up.

"Ah, I see," the village chief said. "Truly, you're an upstanding boy."

"Well..." I trailed off modestly, like the shining example of a citizen I was.

With that, there were no more questions. The villagers, casting many a glance upon me, escorted me out of the village.

"You're always welcome here if you ever need a place to rest, my boy," the chief said.

"Thank you, Chief. Till our paths cross again," I replied, doing my best to hide any signs of the soreness in my muscles as I set out.

I wanna go back already...

I hoped that by the time I returned, I'd have kissed Muramasa goodbye and be able to drop the "condemner of all evil" act to boot. It was exhausting, first of all. But more than that, if I got famous for it, people might start asking me to deal with some really nasty shit. Heaven forbid!

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"Truly a marvelous young man, that Crow!" the village chief murmured quietly to himself as he and the others watched the black-haired youth's figure

disappear off into the distance.

The sight of Crow brutally slaughtering the dark magus and his goblin posse the day before had been terrifying, even to those he'd saved. The young man had clearly been overcome by an explosive fit of emotion, and the swordsmanship he'd displayed was at such a high level that his own body could've been destroyed. The power he'd unleashed seemed extraordinary.

"Oh... Everyone... I'm so glad..." he'd said, pleased to see that the villagers were safe. Knowing he'd fought while earnestly wishing for peace had made the horror lift from their hearts.

It had all been to protect the helpless villagers—to ensure that never again would the tragedy of his home be repeated—that he'd fought with righteous fury. They'd all had nothing but gratitude for him as he'd faded out of consciousness the moment the battle ended.

And then, the next day, Crow had abruptly decided to set out on a journey. Though surprised, each knew deep down why he'd chosen to do so. He'd become the "Condemner," the wings of justice to vanquish evil, and it was time for him to take flight.

"Chief!"

The youths from Crow's village, full of conviction, approached the village elder after he'd seen the young hero off.

"We believe that guy—no, that *man* will continue to face terrible dangers as he seeks to ensure that no one ever has to lose their hometown again," they said.

"Likely," the chief reflected.

"Shouldn't we tell the nearby villages the tale of Crow the Condemner, then?!" they asked, their eyes burning bright with the passion of their fervent desires. "If we tell his story, people might help him on his journey! Maybe we can repay our debt to him that way! We know we're weak, but...we just can't stand the thought of sitting idly by!"

The chief stood silently, deeply moved by their words. Crow's courage and kindness had lit a fire in their young hearts, he realized. Once again, he had to

salute the young man, for what the world needed most in that moment was a hero like him.

“All right, then! Let us write poems, or even books, about him! Let’s get the story of Crow the Condemner out there!”

“Hell yeah!”

Laughing for joy, their faces alight, the youths were soon joined by the other villagers, who were eager to lend their assistance.

Thus, from a small ripple in that rural village, word about Crow’s deeds began to make waves all across the land.

Which was *terrible* news for the man in question.

He was no “Condemner.” There wasn’t a shred of bravery nor kindness in his heart. It’d all been an act, improvised on the spur of the moment, to hide the fact he was cursed.

The villagers, however, remained oblivious, and innocently made plans to spread the word about the young man’s exploits.

“All right! Let’s write a song, or something!”

“Great idea!”

He’d only been relieved that they hadn’t divined his secret. But misinterpreting his reaction as joy for their safety, they became completely smitten with him—essentially, he now had a fan club. Not only that, the youths from his old village, who Crow had thought were indifferent toward him, had actually gone from liking him to adoring him without limits. They would eventually become bards and performers, traveling the world to sing his praises!

Meanwhile, completely unaware of the villagers’ excitement...

“Aw man, I gotta sleep outside today, huh? I hate bugs...” Crow whined to himself.

Things only grew more ridiculous from there.

Chapter 5: The Fated Meeting (I Never Asked For)

It had been a week since I'd left the village.

You know, I'd thought I'd just head south toward the capital. I knew it was pretty far, but I'd figured I'd just suck it up and walk and eventually get there. But—

"Um, Muramasa, sir?" I called out between ragged breaths, "That's *east*, you know! Can you, like, *not* dash off in the completely wrong direction?!"

"SOULS. SOULS!"

"Why do I even bother?"

I was dashing at full speed through the dimly lit forest because—you guessed it!—whenever good ol' Muramasa got hungry, it would make me take off running toward the nearest powerful aetherborn. Which, of course, meant I couldn't reach my destination at all, and my body was in shambles.

"Why you gotta be that way, dude? I'm terrified of fighting those things!"

Whenever Muramasa was in control, I was strong. I could just stare off into space and take down monsters, no problem. That, however, did not change the fact that it was my body, not me, doing all the fighting. Every time a claw or fang just barely missed me, my life flashed before my eyes.

"One of these days I may end up with a gash or five," I mumbled, catching my breath and letting out a sigh.

Granted, at this rate, I may not have any muscles left to injure by the time an aetherborn gets to me.

Every day was just an endless loop of me dragging my tired body south as best as I could while Muramasa was full, and then running off in a random direction to fight stuff when it got hungry again. I was already at my limit.

Hmm. I guess I could *fight stuff on my own whenever I'm able to move. That*

way, Muramasa wouldn't go hungry, but... Nah, that's way too risky.

I mean, I was just a regular dude. Trying that just to get myself killed would've been *very* stupid.

If only I could get myself a carriage or something. That way, I could cover a lot of ground whenever I'm able to move freely. But oh well, the only place where I'd ever manage to get one would be in the safe zone near the capital anyhow.

You know, it would have been *great* if I could head that way.

"SOUL!" Muramasa announced excitedly. That had to mean its prey was close by.

My legs picked up the pace as I (unwillingly) ran through the forest. What kind of aetherborn would I fight next, I wondered? Much to my horror, it seemed like the stronger it was, the better it tasted to the sword.

"Damn it all! Is *this* how it ends?!" a female voice suddenly rang out, interrupting my train of thought.

As I crossed the dense thicket, I saw an enormous minotaur—half-bull and half-man—about to bash a young woman's skull in. My eyes widened in shock.

Not because she was about to be killed, mind you. More because of how striking she looked. She seemed somewhere in her twenties, with long golden hair and piercing blue eyes. Her skin was pale and her lips tinged with peach, and—

What am I doing?! Now's not the time to gawk at her face!

Ahem. More because of what she was *wearing*. Yes, that.

She was clad in a white military uniform, you see. I'd heard of that before. It was the type of uniform worn by magus knights—magic-wielding soldiers in the service of the imperial army. They were like the police officers of this era, taking down dangerous aetherborn, eradicating dark magi who misused aethereal arms, and stuff like that.

Which meant this was *bad*.

Oh no. Oh no no no! If she sees me using an aethereal arm without a permit, I'm royally screwed!

My body did not share my concerns, sadly, and went straight for the beast. Dear Muramasa's number one priority, as ever, was its stomach. As if I didn't care that I might get arrested, I drew the bizarre jet-black blade. You know, the one that looks *without a shadow of a doubt* like an aethereal arm? That one. Thanks a lot, me.

"Ugh, whatever! Go get it, Muramasa! I'll just wait for the perfect time to bust out a cool one-liner for my 'Condemner' act!"

Whether that'd get me off the hook for illegal possession of an aethereal arm was anyone's guess, but my mouth was the only thing I could use at the moment. So use it I would!

The minotaur saw me closing in and let out a surprised snort. Too late, however. My body leaped a great distance forward (bones creaking, by the way) and, as soon as the beast's neck was within reach—

"Embrace your doom, vile fiend!"

A single flash of the magical blade, and it was done. The beast's head fell from its body. Another life reaped.

And then I landed. Wrong. And my ankle made a loud snapping sound.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh! Fuuuuuuck me, that hurts! Did the exhaustion finally screw my legs up completely?!

Honestly, I wanted to cry. Still, I put on my best heroic face and fought back the tears as I glared at the demon's falling corpse. I had to put on my Condemner act for the blonde lady knight, after all.

"By my blade, your judgment has been delivered! For the sin of attempting to cut down this fairest of blossoms, in the name of the gods, I have done the same unto you!" I declared, my expression as sharp as I could manage.

Well, Ms. Lady Knight?! How's that *for an epic speech?! Personally I'd give it 50 points for the "judgment by my blade" bit and another 50 for the whole "doing unto you what you do unto others" thing! Perfect 100, if you ask me! Right?!*

"F-Fairest of blossoms?! Me?! The woman no one wants to date?!"



Aw, she's blushing so hard! That's really cute, and—wait, what kind of reaction is that?!

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"Embrace your doom, vile fiend!"

Oh. My. Stars.

The sudden appearance of the gallant young man with the dark hair captured the heart of magus knight Iris Zehirete.

From her childhood days as a simple village girl, she had always been captivated by tales of heroic knights—King Arthur, Charlemagne, Cú Chulainn. How brave they were, wielding their blades for the sake of their people! Young Iris's eyes sparkled with each turn of the page. She'd desperately wanted to be like them. Not a beloved princess, but a knight!

She'd gone from swinging a wooden sword with the village boys, to apologizing to her parents—who'd tearfully begged her to act more like a girl—and then stealing away from home, to finding a mentor on the road and going into training, to finally attaining the title of magus knight.

Twenty years later, she'd made her dream come true. Now a qualified knight, she was determined to press on, doing everything she could for her people. She had volunteered for mission after mission, traveled from place to place, and fought, fought, fought some more! She had advanced up the ranks with such focus that, behind her back, people whispered of the "spinster knight engaged to her work" who had "abandoned feminine joys." Then she'd fought even harder, stubbornly clinging to the idea that this was how she wanted to live her life, that this was fine. Just fine.

And she'd just been summarily defeated.

Exhausted from taking down a large number of aetherborn, Iris had been too hurt to move when the minotaur caught her by surprise.

Damn...it.

For her to miscalculate *this* badly was extremely unusual, but bound to happen over the course of thousands of battles. Lady Luck had finally caught up

with the relentless knight.

Iris thought back on the minotaur—snorting, raising its powerful fist, ready to strike her down. All knights were fated to meet the same end, for those who sowed death on the battlefield would one day eventually reap it.

“Damn it all! Is this how it ends?!” she wondered aloud.

Her path as a knight, her life—far too dreary, looking back—was about to come to a close.

If I’d known this was how it would all end, I’d have tried my hand at love, at least once...

She pictured falling in love with someone, becoming their significant other, wearing a beautiful white dress, and spending her life in wedded bliss—a foolish fantasy. No one would ever be attracted to such a straitlaced woman who knew only how to fight.

Still, she loathed the thought of dying alone. It was too late, she knew, but regret welled up in her heart all the same, her body trembling in fear of death.

And then, just as she was about to meet her end, the beast’s head went flying.

What the...?

Time seemed to stop in that moment. There before her stood a young man with raven hair, wielding a pure black sword. And he’d just cut down her doom.

She could not take her eyes off of him.

This man...

Bewildered, Iris gawked at the dashing young figure, who resembled nothing so well as the knights she had dreamed of as a child.

Who might this man be?!

The hands of time resumed their ticking. With a spurt of fresh blood, the beast’s severed head dropped to the ground. Its massive body followed with a dull thud. The young man landed between the bull-like creature and herself, gazing upon its corpse in a dignified manner.

“By my blade, your judgment has been delivered! For the sin of attempting to cut down this fairest of blossoms, in the name of the gods, I have done the same unto you!”

Iris was *stunned*.

He’d called *her* the fairest of blossoms! Her! The least charming woman in the entire history of mankind!

Panicked, her brain having turned to mush, Iris carelessly voiced her thought, much to her embarrassment. How could this man say such things with a straight face? How could he make fun of her like that? She wanted to be angry at him, but—

Fairest of blossoms!

Iris couldn’t help the smile growing on her face, her heart beating so wildly in her chest that she all but forgot the danger she’d just been in.

It turned out that the words Crow had come up with on the fly had dealt a critical hit to her heart. He became the first love of Iris of the White Blade, Vice-Captain of the Imperial Order of Magus Knights.

And he didn’t have the *slightest* idea.

***

“I see,” Iris said between sobs. “So after your hometown was destroyed, you set out on a journey to protect the people from evil?!”

“That’s right.”

Damn, she’s bawling really hard.

A few minutes had passed. I was taking a short breather alongside the magus knight, whose name was Iris. We were still in the middle of the forest, but the odds of aetherborn approaching us were low, since she had whipped out a bunch of “warding talismans” and laid them out in all directions.

See, a thousand years ago, these charms had been a total scam. But, you know, aether happened, and now they actually worked. They were one-use-only, but nevertheless decently effective.

“So, Lady Iris, about my unauthorized use of an aethereal arm...”

“Please, there’s no need for formalities. Call me Iris!”

“Uh...”

No! Nothing about that is okay! Like, first of all, she’s older than me, and second of all, if I heard that right, she’s a super high-ranking knight! Wait, but what if she gets mad at me for refusing her request to drop the formalities?! If she does, there’s no way in hell she’ll let me off the hook! Okay, okay. Breathe. I got this.

“Very well, then, Iris. Is this better?” I asked.

“Yes, very much so!” Iris replied, smiling widely.

Okay, phew. This lady’s gonna be the death of me.

“Now then, Crow: it is indeed a crime to use an aethereal arm without the necessary qualifications. Even if you have never hurt anyone, a felony is a felony,” she said.

“Which means...” I trailed off, lamenting to myself, *Noooooooooo! You were supposed to let me off the hook!*

Beneath my perfectly composed exterior, I was fighting back tears. This was it. I was going to go from Condemner to condemned. Adieu, my dream of considerable riches and a moderately attractive girlfriend!

Wait. If I’m in jail, I can’t hunt aetherborn, can I? That’s bad, right?! I mean, we’re talking about Muramasa here. I’m pretty sure this thing will get hungry, take control of my body while I’m in prison, and force me to go fetch it. And then I’ll be an escaped prisoner and *mass murderer, which would make me an enemy of the state, which would... Oh no. Nope nope nope. Okay, screw acting cool!*

“Iris, I—”

I was about to drop the stupid “Condemner” act, cry about how I didn’t mean anything by it, and grovel for forgiveness.

“However,” Iris cut in, stopping me before I could say anything else, “there is one situation in which a civilian would not be charged with a crime if they were to wield an aethereal arm. And that would be if said civilian were the

apprentice of a magus knight.”

“What?” I exclaimed, completely taken aback. What was she talking about?

“Provided that you have permission from your mentor, you’re good to go. Otherwise, you can’t do practice drills with your weapon.”

“But, Iris, I don’t have a magus knight mentor—”

Wait a second.

“Are you...covering for me?!” I asked, incredulous.

“Why, Crow, I don’t know what you mean. You’ve always been my apprentice,” she replied innocently.

I was so moved that I unwittingly took Iris’s hand, and she yelped in surprise. Being touched by gloomy criminal scum like me would indeed be frightening, I figured. Still, I couldn’t help it. I’d really thought I was done for. The fact she was willing to protect me, a complete stranger, had me beside myself with gratitude.

Gripping her pale hand tightly, I gazed into those beautiful eyes.

“Thank you. Thank you, Iris! I will never forget what you have done for me. I swear I will repay you, even if it takes me the rest of my life!”

“The rest of your life?!” she repeated, her hand trembling in mine.

Oops! I guess I went too far with the whole “rest of my life” bit. Of course she’d be taken aback.

Still, I was so deeply moved that I *had* to say that.

“U-Um, Crow, you’ve, um, been gripping my hand, um, really tightly? Is this how men—” Iris began.

“Oh! Forgive me,” I interrupted. “I just... I didn’t think I’d meet such a lovely woman.”

“Lovely?!”

“I normally wouldn’t use quite so much strength, but I... My apologies, I must not be thinking straight.”

“You’re not thinking straight?! Because of me?!”

Another squeal escaped Iris’s lips. *She’s probably not used to praise,* I thought to myself. *She looks so embarrassed. That’s unfortunate... She’s such a great person. I’d praise her every day if I could.*

“Truly, I am elated to have met you, Iris!”

“Wow...!”

And thus, thanks to Iris, I managed to avoid criminal charges. To think I’d been worried about what could happen! I didn’t get caught at all! Huzzah!

Now everything’s gonna be just fine! Ha ha ha!

Meanwhile, far outside the realm of anything Crow was expecting...

I’m going to snatch this man up! Iris thought. *He’s going to marry me, whether he likes it or not!*

Chapter 6: The Bonds We Forge (with Money)

After meeting Iris, the magus knight, I found myself sitting next to her in her covered wagon, which kept rocking us back and forth. Sometimes we bumped shoulders, and every time, she would blush and look apologetic.

“I’m sorry about the cramped space,” she said. “I expected to be traveling alone.”

“Oh, I’m grateful enough that you allowed me to ride alongside you,” I replied.

The wagon was stocked with large amounts of food and other supplies. Apparently, Iris regularly went on long expeditions, and was planning on heading to some other places after dealing with the demons here. Unlike me, she wasn’t cursed. Just reckless.

“I didn’t expect to be caught off guard,” she sighed. “Must’ve been more tired than I thought. If you hadn’t come along, Crow, I would have died. You have my gratitude.”

“Please, think nothing of it. I don’t know what *I* would have done if I hadn’t met you, Iris.” I’d avoided the execution ending thanks to her, after all. What else could I be except endlessly grateful? Besides, my body had been at its limit. Without her, I’d probably have ended up dead in a field long before reaching the capital. Ah, wagons! I love wagons!

“By the way, we’re going quite fast,” I remarked. “Is that thanks to this aetherborn’s power?” I glanced at the white beast pulling the wagon. On its head was a single, magnificent horn. “That’s a unicorn, isn’t it? The mutated form of a horse?” I asked. “I’m amazed it can pull this much weight, especially with Dáinsleif as part of the cargo.”

“That’s right! Unicorns are many times faster and stronger than regular horses. My Unicoco is particularly outstanding!” Iris declared, proudly puffing her chest.

Holy crap, those are huge*! Also, her naming skills could use some work.*

There was no coachman, so the unicorn was just doing its own thing. Supposedly, they were clever creatures, and would take the shortest path possible to a destination, provided that they knew the way.

I told Iris how smart the animal seemed to me, and she chuckled uncomfortably and said, “Yes, it’s just a little cold to anyone who isn’t a maiden.”

Gross. “How’s a horse this sexist?” I asked.

“Well, that’s how the legend went, so the aether’s influence must have made that part of the story come true,” she explained. “It’s a shame, to be sure, but they are unusual among aetherborn in that they don’t eat people, which makes them quite useful to us knights.”

Ah, yes. The part about them not eating people *was* kind of important, wasn’t it?

Unlike dark magi, who made unscrupulous use of goblins and the like, magus knights were keepers of the peace. They couldn’t exactly make use of aetherborn that posed a danger to people. I mean, the headquarters of their chivalric order stood smack in the middle of the capital. It’d be disastrous if the damned things ran rampant.

“Makes sense,” I mused. “By the way, Iris...”

“Y-Yes?” Iris squeaked.

She’d been massaging a liquid onto my leg for some time, her hands making a sloshing sound against my skin.

“That’s a potion, you said?” I asked. “I hear they speed up healing.”

“Yes! They’re effective when taken by mouth, but they work even better if you apply them directly onto the injury, so...” She rubbed my ankle with her slippery hands, her gaze trailing up my leg.

See, when we’d climbed onto the wagon, I’d confessed to her that I’d injured my foot in battle earlier.

“Wait, are you all right?! Don’t tell me—you pushed through the pain to save

me?!” she’d asked, panicked, before trying to shove the bottle she’d been drinking out of into my mouth. “Don’t take any unnecessary risks! Now drink! Go on, in one gulp! Like a baby suckling on a nipple!”

“I, uh, Iris?!” In the end, I’d vehemently refused. I mean, drinking straight from her bottle, really?

“Oh!” Iris had exclaimed, coming to her senses. Fidgeting, she continued, “Y-You’re right! That *would* be an indirect kiss, wouldn’t it?! Oh, silly me, I was so panicked that I just...!”

Aw, she’s such a nice person. She’s so worried about me that she can’t think straight!

After that, we’d decided to just apply the potion directly.

“But you know,” I said, “you don’t need to apply it *for* me.”

“What are you saying?!” she demanded, incredulous. “You hurt your leg because of me! This is the least I can do! And though it may just be pretend, I’m still your mentor! It’s my duty to take care of my apprentice!”

“Iris...” *Man, she’s so nice!* That’s *why she’s looking at my injury so intently! Silly me,* I thought.

“Which means, Crow, you can leave these things to me. If you’re hurting anywhere else, tell me. As your mentor—um, yes! As your *mentor,* I’ll do what I can to treat you!”

“I see. In that case, please do,” I said, taking off my hood and undershirt, revealing my abs.

I mean, she’d told me to, right? It would’ve been impolite to refuse her offer.

“Wait, wha—?! Crow! What are you doing?!”

“Well, see, I was in a series of battles earlier, and I’m actually sore all over. I would appreciate it if you could apply the potion to my upper body as well.”

“Whaaaaaat?!” Iris exclaimed *really* loudly, her face red as a boiled octopus.

Oh, right. She’s a bit shy, isn’t she?

An honorable woman such as her probably wouldn’t think anything even

remotely weird about seeing me half naked, but it stood to reason she'd still be uncomfortable touching me.

Crap! I messed up!

"My apologies. I shouldn't have asked—"

"Not at all!!!" she interjected *very* emphatically, prompting a shudder from Unicoco. "I-I-I'm your mentor! Iris of the White Blade! How rude of you to assume you shouldn't have asked!"

"Ah. In that case, please go ahead."

She doesn't mind at all! What a relief!

I scooted closer and leaned in, offering her my chest, which was at her eye level since I was taller.

"Whuh, wha—?! I-It's so thick! So tight! So amazi..."

Well, it made sense she was impressed. I used to exercise a lot, you know. All the long-distance running, carrying kids around, and whatnot. On top of that, I'd been pushing myself to the limit this past week, exercising constantly without rest, so I was probably extra toned.

"W-Wow!" she concluded.

Her gaze could've burned a hole through me. I figured she must've been checking me out carefully to gauge which of my muscles were damaged, and to what extent. I could respect that. A lot.

"Please, my mentor," I said, "feel free to touch me wherever you'd like. My legs, my chest, my abs, my back..."

"Y-Yesh!" she replied, fumbling her words a little.

And thus, on our way to the nearest village, my pure, selfless, kind mentor, ever so generous to her disciple, provided me with *ample* healing.

She also gave me some money afterward. No idea why.

The two characters moments later:

“Did she give me money because she noticed I’m broke? Aww, my mentor’s so nice!”

—Titus, Crow *+100 HP* Maxed-out physical condition

“I *have* to do it! It wouldn’t feel right otherwise!”

—Zehirete, Iris *+1,000,000 Spirit* Lost all reasoning ability

And that’s the story of how Crow became a sugar baby.

Chapter 7: Overnight Stay (He's a Minor, Iris!)

Iris had put so much effort into massaging me with the potion that now she was struggling, pressing down on her chest to try and catch her breath.

I wonder if she's feeling sick? "Are you all right, Iris? If you're unwell, perhaps you should lie down. You could lay your head on my lap, if that would help," I suggested.

"On your lap?!" she blurted out. "No, no, it's fine! If I do that, I'll have an even harder time breathing!"

"Why?" I asked, confused.

"It doesn't matter! Can't do it, end of story! Wait, I mean, not *end* end of story, exactly," she babbled. "Just, right now I'm at my limit in a lot of ways, so I can't, but we could certainly talk about it some other time, and... Ugh, enough about that! Look, there's the village!"

After we crossed the grove, a fairly sizable settlement came into view. It was quite a remarkable place! Lots of sturdy buildings lining the streets, all pretty big and relatively shiny. Nothing like the village where I'd once lived.

"That's LaVolle Village," Iris explained. "It was established recently to act as a point of connection between the bigger cities. It's almost sundown, so we'll be staying there for the night."

Ooh, we're staying at an inn! Aw man, she's so nice!

After a week of being forced to live out in the open, I was sick and tired of camping out on grassy ground. I felt nothing but gratitude.

I haven't slept in a bed in such a long time! I'm so— Wait.

There was a problem, I realized.

Who's to say I won't attack someone because of Muramasa?! Should I really be going somewhere with so many people?! Oh, man... This could be bad...

I mean, I'd kind of fed the sword a minotaur in the process of saving Iris, so it hadn't been whining about souls, and I could move on my own. That, however, didn't mean things would stay this way. If the damn thing suddenly got hungry and took over my body, it could strike at an innocent villager, and then *boom*, game over! Instantly a criminal!

I can't allow that to happen! But my body's gonna give out if I keep living in the wild like this.

My thoughts raced as the wagon pulled up to the village.

Okay, so, to get a permit, I need to get inside the capital one way or another. Spending the night here, with people around, could be a practice run to steel my nerves, right? All right, it's settled. I'll do it! I mean, I could *come up with a bunch of excuses as to why I need to stay out in the wild, but that'd look pretty weird, right?*

I did, however, need to take precautions, just in case Muramasa took over and I needed to be stopped.

"Iris, may I ask a favor of you?" I asked.

"Hm? What is it?" Iris replied, tilting her head curiously.

"Please, would you share a room with me?"

"Bwuh?!" she exclaimed, her cheeks once again turning a bright shade of red.

***

Am I dreaming?

The life of Iris Zehirete, now a female knight, had been insipid. As a child, she'd brandish her little sword around, longing for knighthood. After achieving her dream and becoming a magus knight, she'd dedicated herself to her work.

Before she knew it, she was in her late twenties, not having made a single male friend.

I'd figured I could no longer find happiness as a woman, which in turn made me devote myself to my job even more, but now...

Iris was confused, unable to process what this meant. Was this real? Why was

this happening?

"How's this, Iris?" asked Crow. "This is my first time massaging someone, so I hope I'm not hurting you."

"Oh, y-you're fine! This feels great!"

Why was there a handsome, virile young man massaging her? Why was she sharing a room with such a wonderful specimen, despite never having been with a man at all? And *why* was he still a teenager?!

Iris felt like her brain was about to boil over from all these sudden twists and turns. Sprawled across the king-size bed as Crow massaged her back, she was squirming with pleasure.

Ohhh! ≡ A man's hands are so warm and strong! J-Just his touch makes something in my belly moisten! Hnngh! ≡

She was all but melting into a sloppy mess on the bed.

As he'd said, Crow was not used to this sort of thing, and so the massage itself was clearly the work of an amateur—but Iris couldn't have cared less. For someone as unpopular as she was, just being touched by a young, strong, splendid young man was more than enough.

And since she wasn't used to being touched at all, this made her feel *extremely* aroused.

"See, I don't have parents," Crow was saying, "so I've never really touched a woman before. Or given anyone a massage, really."

What? Is he serious?! Iris wondered. As daring as he was in speech and mannerisms, she'd been absolutely certain he'd had experience with women. *Wait, so despite all his composure and maturity, he's actually inexperienced? Oh dear, what an absolute sin... Hee hee hee...!*

Iris pushed her face down onto the bed, fully aware that the look on it right now wasn't at all suitable for a knight. Try as she might to act like the calm and collected older woman, she was powerless in the face of the ongoing, relentless onslaught of female hormones. Hell, she felt like she might even be able to lactate if she tried hard enough.

Yeah, she was pretty much in heat for Crow.

“Um, Iris?” Crow called out. “There’s some sort of sweet smell coming from your body...”

“Y-You must be imagining it!” Iris blurted out in response. “Anyway, I was quite shocked, you know, that you suddenly asked to share a room with me.”

His incredibly straightforward request had taken her by surprise, but Crow had said that, as thanks for her having become his mentor, he’d like to act as her bodyguard and attendant. Iris felt a tinge of disappointment, but she’d nevertheless accepted his solicitude.

And thus they’d agreed to share a room, but...

“I’m sorry, Iris. I thought they’d have twin rooms available,” he’d said, apologetically.

“Oh, it’s fine! What a tragedy, though, right?!” she’d exclaimed, secretly grateful for the blessing.

Tee hee! Lucky me! I get to sleep with Crow! And maybe, just maybe, you know, pretend to accidentally touch him, or rub up against him, and just happen *to seduce him!*

Iris’s mind had been completely taken over by appetites of the flesh. Just a few hours ago, she’d been a pure, innocent knight...until she met Crow, who (was completely unaware that he) had sexually enticed her, and now the arousal was causing her brain to rot.

Which was probably why it had taken her so long to notice something else.

“Crow, would you please massage the front as w—Guh?!”

When she tried to turn her body over, Iris realized she couldn’t move. Paralysis was rapidly overtaking her nerves. Not only that, besides the scent coming from her own body, there was something else—a sweet aroma wafting in through the window.

“This is—”

As the dusk deepened, Iris realized—too late—the danger the village was in.

Chapter 8: Move Your Ass, Crow!

"My...body," I uttered, shocked. *What's happening?!*

As I massaged Iris to return her earlier favor, my fingertips suddenly slowed, my joints straining to move at all. I wondered if I'd come down with some kind of illness, but Iris was also spasming, her mouth agape, so I wasn't the only one acting weird.

"C-Crow, I think..." Iris was struggling to talk. "This must be the work of an aetherborn! There must be one outside, blowing toxic pollen into the room!"

"What?!" *Come to think of it, there* was *some kind of sweet smell in the air while I was massaging her... I was sniffing it because it smelled so good, like ninety percent milk and ten percent flowers! That was poison?! Ah shit, I gotta close the window!*

Straining to drag my paralyzed legs toward the window, I was greeted by a bizarre sight.

"Ah ha ha ha! Come now, my lovelies! I will eat you all!"

Looking out the window, I saw a giant red flower, bigger than a house, blooming in the middle of the village. From its center sprouted a grotesque green woman.

Wait, I've read about that! That's an alraune—a powerful plant aetherborn that kills people with its poisonous paralyzing pollen and countless vines!

According to the book I'd read, it typically took several magus knights to take one down. Alraune were said to grow underground for decades until fully mature, then go on a rampage.

Come to think of it, didn't Iris say this village was established recently? Dude, they built a village on top of an alraune's seed?! For real?!

And the damn thing just had to sprout right when I got here! Seriously, how unlucky can one man be?! It was my first chance in a while to get a proper night's rest, dammit!

“Now then, who shall I eat first?” the creature mused.

Vines sprouted from beneath the ground, probing into various buildings throughout the village. Shortly after, the alraune drew them back, now coiled around villagers and travelers who cried out in anguish.

“H-Help me...”

“I can’t move!”

“Wh-Wh-What’s going on?!”

They all seemed to be affected by the paralyzing pollen and couldn’t break free of the vines. They spasmed pitifully, unable to take their eyes off the creature.

“Ah ha ha! You all look so tasty! ≡” Her dainty little mouth expanded into a grotesque maw lined with vicious, uneven teeth. The people cried out in terror at the prospect of being gnawed on by *that* thing.

Holy crap... It looks human, but that’s an aetherborn, all right! I thought to myself, terrified. *Okay, now what?*

I considered how to escape. Like, yes, it was very tragic for everyone she was about to eat, but how would one even fight that thing? They wouldn’t, that’s how.

Granted, I was barely able to move at this point. Paralyzing poison was *cheating*, I tell you.

Uhhh, I don’t think I can use my limbs, but maybe I can crawl around like a caterpillar? I could drag Iris along by the mouth and escape somehow, I was thinking to myself, when a voice reverberated deep within me.

“SOUL. SOUL. SOUL!”

Huh?

And of course, my body started moving. Why wouldn’t it?

Against my will, my weakened feet stomped the ground with a thud, my trembling arms gripping the black blade. With every movement, my nerves defied the paralyzing agent, sending jolts of pain coursing through me.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaugh! M-Muramasa?! Wait! Stop trying to control my body! Don’t force me to move! Hey!”

Scream as I might internally, Muramasa, the soul glutton, wouldn’t listen. Because of *course* it wouldn’t. The alraune was powerful prey, and the sword was ready to pounce, forcing my foot onto the window frame.

“Wait, no, you can’t jump out the window*! The landing’s gonna hurt my ankle! Also, honestly, can we just* not *move, please?! My nerves are being torn apart! It’s driving me nuts! For real!”*

“SILENCE!”

“What the—”

Seriously, that thing! What the hell was its problem? How rude of it to tell me to shut up when I was trying really hard to explain the situation! Honestly, that sword needed to work on its personality!

“I’ll *kill* you!” I exclaimed, letting slip my overwhelming hatred for the blade.

No, but really. Someday the demon sword’s curse would be lifted, I would be free from its clutches, and kick the crap out of that stupid piece of crap! *And* flush it down the toilet!

“SOOOUL!”

“Fuck you, stupid thing! I’ll make you regret this!”

Listen, it was making me move *and* jump out a damn window. I was *upset*, okay?

***

“I’ll *kill* you!”

The alraune froze, bewildered, at the overwhelming venom dripping from those words. Its body temperature dropped and it shuddered, goosebumps forming on its green skin.

A figure emerged from a window the aetherborn had neglected to attack. The Condemner descended, void-black sword in hand, majestically swooping down upon the creature.

He seemed...half-invalid.

The poison was doubtlessly affecting him. His limbs were trembling, and he could barely stand.

His eyes, however, told a different story.

“How dare you attack these people, you abomination!” the young man exclaimed, casting a piercing, murderous glare at the creature.

“Eek!” the alraune yelped, taken aback by the sheer force of the hatred burning in his eyes.

He took one step forward, drawing closer to the aetherborn. Then another.

The man *should’ve* been under the effect of the toxin. His nerves *should* be numb, his every muscle stiff.

Yet he did not stop. Gripping his sword, onward he came.

“Wicked, evil, despicable creature!” the dark-haired swordsman declared. “How dare you taint this place with your vile poison! How dare you laugh at the good, helpless people of this village and attempt to devour them! I, Crow Titus, will make you *pay*!”

His overflowing fury froze the aetherborn in its tracks.

The astonished citizens gasped. They’d been ready to die, resigned to the fact they’d be eaten alive, unable to move a single muscle. But a savior had magically appeared before them, aethereal arm in hand, bringing the light of hope to their eyes once more.

“That strange blade must be an aethereal arm!” someone exclaimed. “With that, he can fight the aetherborn!”

“That must be the disciple of Lady Iris! They came to our inn together!”

“Iris of the White Blade has a disciple?!”

It was as though the people, their spirits revitalized, had forgotten their terror. Their uplifted spirits made the alraune’s aetherborn instincts scream.

“Lowly human! How *dare* you threaten me! I will *not* be defeated by the likes of *you*!” she shouted. With a shriek, she let loose a blast of vines, seeking to

bind this insolent human, humiliate him, and beat him to death. Yet—

“Too slow.”

For a moment, the sword in his hand blurred. The vines fell to pieces in a flash, scattering around the stunned aetherborn.

“Wh-What?!” she exclaimed. *Impossible! It cannot be!*

What manner of swordsmanship was that? How could he—under the effect of her poison—cut through her vines so quickly? Just how much rage seethed within this man, enabling him to do so despite the paralysis? The aetherborn’s mind raced with such fearful thoughts.

And then she snapped, letting out an ear-splitting screech.

“Youuu! What the hell are you?!” she demanded.

The alraune grew as many vines as her stockpiled nutrients would allow, swinging them wildly at Crow.

“Die! Die! Diiiiiie!”

No longer in the mood to attack the villagers, she turned, hell-bent on killing the young man, frantically whipping at him with her vines.

Not a single strike landed, however.

Instead, her vines struck the nearby homes, their walls collapsing as Crow quietly drew closer.

“You cannot kill me,” he intoned. “For disrupting the peace of these upstanding people, you will be judged by my hand!”

It was as though a wall of slashing swords defended him. The vines attempting to attack him were instantly cut to pieces. None could reach the young swordsman.

“Eek!” the aetherborn shrieked frantically. “Stay away from me! Don’t come any closer, you monster!” Crow possessed a supernaturally strong will to fight, and in the eyes of the alraune, inhuman though she was, *he* was the monster. *He’s not normal*, she thought. *I’m going to die. He’s going to kill me!*

Her mind swirling with such thoughts, she continued her rampage, but her

attacks gradually grew slower. Sprouting so many vines had drained her stockpiled nutrients. Each vine sprouted thinner than the last, and each new wave had fewer and fewer of them.

Thus did her end come. The moment her vigorous frenzy fell off, Crow took a forceful step forward.

“Embrace your doom, vile fiend!”

The sword sliced through her neck in an instant. As the moon rose in the night sky, the malignant flower faded from existence like the memory of a dream.

And—

Wahhhhhh! Finally the damn thing’s gone!!!

The alraune had met her end in terror of Crow’s murderous wrath. Except there had been no such thing.

Crow didn’t have a lick of willpower within him. No, it had all been the doing of his magical puppeteering blade, Muramasa. In fact, his initial threat to kill someone had been directed at the sword!

Of course, the aetherborn had no means of knowing this preposterous truth. Nor did the people who crowded around.

“Oh, Mr. Crow!”

“Our protector! Our savior!”

“We’re alive, thanks to you!”

The people’s eyes lit up as they cheered. To them, Crow was a hero—he’d saved their lives, after all. They couldn’t possibly know their savior was nothing but a stupid puppet. All the cool one-liners he’d been spouting certainly didn’t help.

Historians would go on to write about that momentous day in the village’s records—a waste of perfectly good paper.

Interlude: Infatuation (Starring Iris!)

The village of LaVolle had thus been saved.

Fortunately, no one had died, despite the aetherborn that had sprouted in the middle of the village. Thanks to Crow's efforts, no one had fallen prey to it. Given how powerful alraune tend to be, that was nothing short of a miracle.

Among the people, those who had been spared the effects of the paralyzing toxin tended to the afflicted with haste and administered the antidote. As a result, all the cases of poison would be cured by the following morning.

One might think this meant no one was wounded, but no.

"Crow..." Iris murmured, quietly gazing at Crow's convalescent form.

He lay on a bed in an infirmary room, an IV attached to his arm. As she watched the mixture of antidote and saline solution drip, she thought back on the doctor's words.

"His condition is critical," he'd said. "There is a possibility he may sustain permanent damage and, in a worst-case scenario, he may not survive."

According to the doctor, it was likely that the strenuous movement had caused the poison to mix with his bloodstream and consequently penetrate deep into his organs.

Iris had cried out in despair at the news.

Though the medical staff had done everything they could, the sole treatment option they could offer was to keep him sweating profusely while administering the intravenous drip in order to eradicate the poison.

It was a race against time. The only way to save the young man was a thorough overnight detox, before the poison could cause organ failure.

To that end, many braziers had been placed in the room, bringing the heat to an oppressive level. Crow's forehead glistened with sweat, and Iris's golden locks clung to her damp skin.

"Hey, Crow," Iris murmured, "This made me realize something. First that

minotaur caught me off guard, then I failed to notice the alraune's poison." She hesitated. "I understand now. I'm not as sharp as I used to be."

Iris gazed down at her hands. She was already in her late twenties, and she knew her combat skills were waning.

"You, in contrast, are young and full of strength," she continued. "You resisted the effects of the poison through the sheer force of your righteous wrath. I doubt I could've done the same, even in my youth."

She reached out her hand to gently stroke the young man's forehead. His sweat bathed her palm, but this didn't bother her. Crow Titus had fought to the limit and collapsed. That was why he was now sweating profusely. There was nothing dirty about that.

"I respect you, Crow. Not as a woman— No, as a woman and a knight both. I think fondly of you."

Smiling softly, Iris expressed her heartfelt feelings. It didn't matter how briefly they'd known each other. No, she had seen enough in that one night to understand the kind of man he was. A true knight, risking life and limb to fight with righteous anger for those in need.

Iris Zehirete had fallen in love.

"So you see, Crow," she said quietly, "I want to help you, even if I have to do something shameful."

Enamored with the young man, Iris was determined to help ensure his survival and future—whatever that took.

And so—

"Sleep well, Crow."

Iris removed her hair clip and climbed onto the bed where Crow slept. Snuggling close to him, she gingerly embraced his body.

With a chuckle, she whispered, her voice a mix of kindness and pain, "This should make you sweat even more, don't you think?"

Iris was still on the mend, her strength not yet fully recovered from the minotaur's surprise attack days earlier. The sweltering heat all but gnawed at

her weakened body, drenching her in perspiration and eliciting a groan from her lips.

Still, unconcerned for her own condition, she began to wipe at Crow's sweat as she held him.

He couldn't die at a place like this.

"Crow, my beloved boy," she murmured, "Someday, you will be known by many. I fully believe that."

With those words, she tenderly pulled at his head, cradling it in her soft chest. She earnestly wished that the gentle feel of his breath on her skin would last until the morning light.

"I would share my own life with you if I could, Crow. So please, stay safe, and wake up soon."

Holding those feelings close to her heart, Iris tended to him throughout the night.

Chapter 9: Love, Hate, and Fragarach the Vengeful Gale

What wonderful weather today! Ah, the sunlight feels wonderful on my skin!

Iris and I were traveling across the country in her wagon. The sun was warm, and I was in a great mood that day. I mean, yeah, apparently I'd been in a terrible state the previous night, what with the paralyzing agent circulating in my system, but I'd woken up feeling completely refreshed.

So, after receiving a whole bunch of gifts from everyone at LaVolle, we'd set off once more!

Iris, on the other hand, didn't look too good. "Ugh," she groaned. Her face was bright red, and she kept staring at her feet.

"Looking back," she said quietly with a sigh, "that was entirely too audacious of me! I mean, yes, I merely wanted to contribute to the treatment, but snuggling up to a boy on a bed is just... Ohh..."

She'd been mumbling and muttering like this all day.

"But you know, his body was just so hot, and tight, and amazing! So that's how it feels to have a young man in your arms... Wait, no, no! What am I thinking?! That's just obscene! What happened last night was *strictly* therapeutic! I simply had his best interests in mind! Ughhh!"

Iris buried her face in her hands and began shaking her head. As adorable as her strange behavior was, it was about time we had a chat.

I clasped her hands, maybe a little too tightly, and turned her to face me.

"Pull yourself together, Iris!" I said.

"Wha?! C-Crow?!"

Yep, that's me.

"Hey. You've been acting odd since morning. Did something happen?"

"Huh?! N-No, nothing! It's just, um, I'm a bit ashamed of what I did last night,

and I'm thinking about how I didn't think that I could've thought of a more appropriate way to do it, and..."

Ashamed? What does she mean by that? I was with her all day yesterday, and I don't think there was anything to be embarrassed about.

I mean, maybe she had something weighing on her conscience, but I wasn't about to inquire.

"Iris. I won't ask you what it is you're ashamed of. I will, however, say that I find you to be a wonderful woman," I said.

"A-A wonderful woman?!" she repeated.

"Yes. You're beautiful, classy, kind...someone to look up to, I think. So, please: I don't know the details, but don't be so hard on yourself. I cherish and appreciate you."

"Wow," she uttered, her eyes filled with emotion. I was glad to see her so happy.

Honestly, it was a little embarrassing for me to say such a corny line to a woman, but if that was what it took to cheer her up, it was worth the shame. I was forever indebted to her for not treating me like a criminal, after all.

Iris chuckled. "Thank you, Crow. I couldn't have picked a better apprentice," she said.

"I'm glad to have met such an amazing mentor, myself," I replied.

In the cramped wagon, we held hands, smiling at one another. I was happy to have helped such an angelic person feel a little better.

As soon as we crossed the thicket, Iris pointed ahead. "Oh, Crow, look! That's the Spirit Wall of Berlin!"

I turned and saw a translucent, iridescent wall stretching across the field, resembling an aurora.

"A thousand years ago, there was a wall in a city called Berlin that divided the people," she explained. "Under the influence of the aether, what remained of the wall gained the power to divide the land. Now you can create an immaterial barrier just by making a piece of the wall into a powder and sprinkling it on the

ground.”

“Ah, so that’s how that long wall came to be.” *Wow! I’d never left my hometown much, so I had no idea.*

“So you see, thanks to that, aetherborn can no longer approach the imperial capital, and... Well, it’s not as great as it sounds.” Iris’s face fell as she continued, “I used to live in an outer village, myself. In recent years, the number of aetherborn has decreased even in the outer regions, but you’ll still find quite a few of them there. In comparison, the ‘safe zone’—that is, the area surrounding the capital, on the other side of that wall—is quite peaceful. People are so free of worry that they can afford to discriminate against others.”

“What?” *Discriminate? What does she mean?*

“Because their lives aren’t in any danger, they can indulge in things like the pursuit of knowledge and fashion,” she explained. “So to them, the people from outside the barrier—who have other, more pressing matters to worry about—are uncivilized savages. They call them names and hold them in contempt.”

“That’s terrible,” I said. *Hey, they can’t treat me like a savage! I’m cursed by a murderous sword from hell, you know! It’ll make me cut their sorry asses to pieces! Bastards.*

Oh, uh, that wasn’t savage of me at all, right? Right.

“Be ready, Crow. Not that everyone is that way, but there are some who would belittle you,” she warned me. “There’s this one colleague of mine in particular. She’s new to knighthood, you see, and she’s quite cruel. She seems to take issue with me and insists on antagonizing me every chance she gets.”

“You can’t be serious,” I said, incredulous. What kind of asshole would look down on an angel like Iris? Unacceptable!

The fury I felt must’ve been reflected in my features, because Iris smiled and asked charmingly, “Are you angry for my sake?”

Of course I was! I owed her a great debt!

She chuckled and continued, “I’m flattered, but pay it no mind. She’s from a noble family. Not someone you want to deal with in any capacity.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll just have to get back at her while no one’s looking,” I declared.

“Hey! You can’t do that,” she said, grinning widely.

Oh hell yeah, she loved my joke! She’s so adorable when she smiles! I love you, Iris! “That may have been a jest, Iris, but if any nobles truly do mean to harm you, please tell me. I’ll take care of it, I promise.” *By lifting you onto my back and running the hell away, for instance.*

“Oh, Crow!” she exclaimed bashfully. She seemed happy. Smiles really did suit her.

I was beaming back at my beloved mentor when the sound of pounding footsteps snapped me out of my reverie. Up ahead, a figure was charging straight at us at ultra-high speed, a huge cloud of dust trailing behind them.

“What in the world is *that*?” I asked, dumbfounded.

On second glance, I could make out the shape of a petite young woman. She wore the same white military uniform as Iris, so she had to be a magus knight. (Though the skirt was on the short side and her shoulders were exposed. Kind of indecent, really.)

With silver hair and red eyes, she was strikingly pretty. Or she would have been, were her eyes not wide open and bloodshot, and the look on her face not absolutely demonic.

Wh-What the hell?! What’s with that girl?!

“Yooooooouuuuuu!” the mystery person shrieked. She was gripping a dagger enveloped in a purple glow and glaring straight at me.

Wait, she’s coming for me?!

“O Fragarach, the Vengeful Gale!” she chanted, “Bless me with the power of wind!”

Now the girl appeared to be a hurricane incarnate. Wind raged at her back, and she accelerated wildly, flying directly toward the wagon.

“Haaaaah! Diiiiiie!”

Using the unicorn's head as a stepping stool, she swiftly charged forward. Before I could react, she was within inches of me, and dodging was no longer an option.

Wait! Is this how I die?! Without even knowing what's happening?! My thoughts raced in the face of death. *Why?* echoed over and over in my mind, along with *Who the hell is she?* and *Did I do something to her? Is that why she wants to kill me?*

There was no time to voice any of my questions. The silver-haired girl's blade was about to pierce my abdomen.

Ahhhhhhhh! Am I gonna die?!

Just as I was about to scream in terror, however—

"NEGATIVE EMOTION EXPLOSION. SOUL!"

A malicious voice echoed in my heart. Immediately, I went into homicidal maniac mode.

"Eek!" the girl yelped.

Next thing I knew, I was twisting the hand the girl was holding her dagger with, *hard*. I grabbed her by the collar with one hand, then dragged her out of the wagon.

She moaned and groaned, but my body was not letting up. My knee pressed down on her chest, and my free hand drew the blade at my hip. And thus, the sword plunged toward the girl's pale throat—

"Stop it, Muramasa, you idiot!" I yelled internally, putting all of my strength into keeping my arm at bay, barely stopping the blade from reaching her neck.

Oh. Oh thank god, I thought. Still full of aetherborn souls, Muramasa seemingly couldn't take complete control of me. I didn't have to be a murderer. All good.

"Eeeeek!" the girl shrieked in terror. A moment later, she began to tremble, tears spilling from her eyes as she realized she'd been about to get killed.

Seriously? I was the one who should've been crying! I'd almost peed my pants!

But all right, my mentor Iris *was* there, after all. I put on my best stoic hero face, then asked, “Who the hell are you? Why were you trying to kill me?”

“Eep!” my attacker squeaked. She didn’t answer, only stared at me, wide-eyed and shaking.

Also, I was pretty sure I had managed to avoid soiling myself (barely). So what was that strange smell?

Oh. Uh, sorry.

“Let her go, Crow,” Iris said, tapping me on the shoulder. She checked to make sure I wasn’t injured, then let out a relieved sigh. “That move demonstrated amazing technique. Well done!”

Not that I minded the praise, but that had been Muramasa, not me.

“Now, then,” Iris began, confiscating the girl’s dagger. “Vita. Mind explaining what in the world you were trying to do?!”

“Eeeeeek!” the girl shrieked in response.

Iris glared at her, with the scariest gaze I’d ever seen. She was *really* pissed.

“Iris, who is this girl?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s Vita von Kaambl,” Iris explained. “The ill-tempered colleague I was just telling you about.”

Chapter 10: Vita's Brain, Wrecked

"Ha ha ha! Of *course* the vice-captain is wandering the fields again today! She's like a puppy!"

Vita von Kaambl, the prodigious daughter of a military noble house, lay in wait by the Spirit Wall for a certain woman. Her manner of speech was elegant, but steeped in scorn.

"I know you're in this area for a mission, Iris!" Vita said, malice evident on her features at the thought of Iris of the White Blade.

Iris Zehirete. One of the strongest and most skilled knights, slayer of countless aetherborn. A renowned hero who, through her boundless determination and innumerable battles, had risen to the rank of vice-captain while still in her twenties.

Skill wasn't all she had, however. She was also remarkably beautiful, a fact that had earned her the adoration of the citizenry. Nevertheless, Vita had no love for her.

"I can't stand her!" Vita exclaimed, gnawing on her nail, her youthful beauty twisted by hatred.

To her—and to the other military nobility—the woman was a nuisance. A savage, a nobody from nowhere important. How the likes of a simple village girl could possibly be stronger than them, they couldn't fathom. It was *them*, and *their* outstanding ability, that had been supporting the country on their shoulders, and they would not stand for such a disgrace. They would not allow themselves to be looked down upon like this.

"So you see, Vita," they'd told her, "you must surpass that woman."

The members of House Kaambl had given young Vita extensive combat education. She was the youngest of the family, the least important of them all. For this reason, her older relatives, willing to risk the consequences, had put her through grueling training. Day after day, she'd trained so intensely that even her urine turned bloodred.

Thus, at the age of thirteen, Vita had become the youngest magus knight ever. Her twisted knighthood came not from a desire to defend her country, but from the drive to secure power.

“Iris, Iris,” she said to herself. “Just hurry and come resupply or whatever it is already! I do so wish to torment you!”

Those who had raised her despised Iris, and so Vita had also grown to hate her. In fact, her loathing was even greater than that of her relatives. Her first few months since being knighted were spent incessantly harassing the older woman. She’d signed on for missions that barely suited her so she could stay close to Iris (to whom she pretended it was all a coincidence), just for the opportunity to keep barraging her with sarcastic, biting remarks that barely fell short of abuse.

Vita thought back on how Iris looked at her each time, as if gazing at filth, and her chest heaved, her breaths coming in long, hot huffs. What a wonderful feeling it was! How frustrated Iris must have been, unable to say anything! The girl could hardly contain herself as she contemplated the position her superior was in.

Vice-captain though Iris might’ve been, as a member of the influential House Kaambl, Vita had the upper hand through her social standing. With the other soldiers on the younger woman’s side, Iris had no choice but to take the abuse quietly.

“Hee hee hee! Oh, my dearest vice-captain, I’ll chase you down to the ends of the Earth itself! ≡”

She was determined to harass Iris until she finally surpassed her in skill. And when the time came, the blonde knight would fall to pieces, utterly shattered. At that thought, Vita wanted to burst into laughter.

Fantasies of that future were Vita’s greatest pleasure in life.

This terrible excuse for a knight had been standing by the wall for six hours by now, waiting for her chance to abuse Iris, when her nose began to twitch.

“Mmm! ≡” she hummed, sniffing the air.

She could smell that woman’s scent. Iris was headed her way. She could feel

it.

“Here she comes! ≡” Her face lit up, and her whole body exuded a sweet fragrance.

Ah, how shall I make fun of you this time? Vita wondered. *Perhaps I could tell you all about the innumerable times I’ve been hit on? Poor, poor Iris! How vexing it must be for you that I’m so popular with men at my age! Of course, I’m still quite short, but you see, my chest has grown significantly in size since I started harassing you! Why, I’m already an F cup! Men come to me in droves! Naturally, I ignore them all, but still!*

Now you, by comparison, have no tales of romance to share, which of course surprises a grand total of nobody, since you’re always on assignment, going from here to there to who knows where, and let’s not forget that I endeavor diligently to harass and crush any man who dares to look your way so you’ll spend the rest of your miserable single life not knowing what to do with your useless J cups (yes, I looked it up), ah ha ha ha ha!

Yes, a splendid idea. Perhaps she would tell Iris just that, albeit in less direct terms.

How would Iris react? Vita could hardly wait.

“Oh, vice-captain, won’t you please hurry? ≡” she pleaded, jumping up and down with anticipation. *Be still, my beating heart!*

When Iris’s wagon crossed the thicket and came into view, Vita moaned excitedly, straining her eyes to take a gander at the older knight, and—

“Wha—”

Inside the wagon were Iris, her cheeks flushed, and a young man Vita had never seen before. They were smiling at each other in an intimate manner.

“Excuse me?”

Vita tensed up, her daydreams coming to an abrupt halt. In her now lucid mind, something shattered.

“*Excuse* me, vice-captain?! *What?!*”

As the unicorn-powered wagon drew closer, the scene came more clearly into

view. *That* Iris—that scornful, sour-faced woman—was conversing with a young man and looking happier than Vita had ever seen!

“Oh...” The silver-haired knight snapped. “Yooooooouuuuuu!” she shrieked.

She began a mad dash toward the wagon, her feet moving of their own accord, her chest aflame with incomprehensible fury. Without a hint of hesitation, Vita drew her aethereal dagger.

“O Fragarach, the Vengeful Gale!” she chanted. “Bless me with the power of wind!”

An ominous wind started to blow from her back, propelling her forward.

Fragarach was a legendary weapon from Celtic mythology. It was said to grant the wielder command over the wind and to exact retribution for deep-seated grudges. In other words, the dagger’s power grew in proportion to the strength of the owner’s hatred.

“Haaaaah! Diiiiiie!” she yelled, her voice reverberating with resentment.

Powered by her strongest gale yet, Vita was upon the wagon within moments. She had never felt so much bitterness before. Who the hell was that bastard sitting next to Iris?

Ridiculous! Preposterous! Absurd! What is this nonsense?! That horrid woman, Iris of the White Blade, is a lone wolf! Incorruptible, collected, overwhelmingly zealous, and powerful! The supreme knight! How dare you make her look like that! Who do you think you are?! Eat shit and die, asshole!

The inexplicable explosion of wrath in Vita’s heart brought her face-to-face with the unknown man. There was no way he could dodge her attack.

Die! Die, die, die, die, die! A nobody like you isn’t worthy of Iris! Only someone of the same caliber as her belongs at her side! Go to hell!

As the young knight was about to thrust her vengeful blade at the man, she felt an unexpected jolt of pain in her arm, eliciting a yelp from her lips. Suddenly, the man was twisting the hand she held the dagger with, as if time had stopped for him alone.

Huh?! When did he—

The man was as merciless as he was swift, gripping her by the collar and dragging her out of the wagon with him.

“Eek!” she yelped in surprise as he slammed her against the ground at incredible speed.

What a disgrace! Vita was lauded as a genius, despite being the youngest among the knights, and she’d been so certain she was already close to Iris’s level! How could she have been beaten so easily?

Bastard, bastard, bastard! How dare you, how dare you, how dare *you do this to me!* she thought, her anger rising as the man overwhelmed her. *I’ll kill you! Destroy you! You won’t get away with this, you filthy, worthless peasant!*

The flames of her fury were soon quelled, however, when the dark-haired man pressed down on her with his knee, then drew his sword without hesitation.

What?

It dawned on Vita that he was about to kill her himself.

Whaaat? No, wait wait wait! You can’t just murder people! Hey!

She had no time to put her thoughts into words before the man brought his black blade down onto her throat.

No! No no no, waaaaaait!

Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes, memories of her childhood racing through her mind as she began to sweat profusely. Death was upon her, and she could do nothing to escape it.

Noooooooooo!

Just as Vita braced for the end, the blade about to pierce her throat, the man’s hand came to an abrupt stop. The very tip of the sword just barely grazed the top layer of her skin.

“Eeeeek!”

I’m...alive...

As she realized she’d been spared for the moment, her body went limp, warm

liquid wetting her crotch. It was horrendously embarrassing, but she'd been unable to stop it.

"Who the hell are you?" the man demanded, his gaze stone-cold. "Why were you trying to kill me?"

"Eep!" Vita squeaked, once again consumed by fear.

She tried to speak, but her tongue wouldn't move. Shock had silenced even someone as arrogant and wicked as she.

Nooo! I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm so dead! If I don't say anything, he'll slit my throat for sure!

Terrified, Vita instinctively looked at Iris, her eyes pleading for help.

You can't let him kill a junior knight! You're the vice-captain! Help me!

"Let her go, Crow," Iris told the raven-haired man.

Vita's wish was granted. The man stepped away from her, obediently following Iris's order. Why? What kind of relationship did they have?

I-I'm saved, she thought, releasing the last of her tension.

She'd never seen a man so terrifying. His face had been fully devoid of any emotion, and he'd moved with full intent to kill her. Frightening—far too frightening!

No matter how powerful he might've been, however, under Iris's protection, Vita felt safe.

Thank goodness.

"Vita," Iris snapped, interrupting the young girl's thoughts. "Mind explaining what in the world you were trying to do?!"

"Eeeeeek!" was all Vita managed in response as Iris's murderous gaze pierced through her.

She was *really* pissed.

Iris didn't just have the usual sour look on her face—she looked like she'd *actually* snapped and *seriously* meant to kill her. Clearly, forgiveness was not in the cards. The blonde knight's fury toward Vita was astonishing, her expression

something the younger knight had never seen before.

And thus Vita von Kaambl was taken into custody, both for using an aethereal arm against a civilian and for attempted murder. As soon as they stepped into the city, Iris summoned the guards and had Vita detained, mercilessly commanding them to throw her in jail.

“Men! Arrest this girl at once!”

“Yes, my lady!”

“Wahhhh! Iris, please...!” Vita pleaded.

So, what the hell *was that girl’s problem?!* Crow wondered to himself as he watched the beautiful young knight get dragged away, sobbing and whining.

Crow had been seducing Iris.

And he had no idea.

Moreover, young Vita’s brain, full of distorted feelings for Iris, was in shambles—because of him.

And he had no idea.

Have I done something wrong?! he asked himself, his face locked into its usual sharp expression.

Crow’s countenance radiated a manliness so intense that the guards Iris had summoned shuddered. *He was almost killed, but he doesn’t feel anything!* they thought. *He turned the tables on the genius of House Kaambl! What in the world is he?!*

And he had no idea.

Utterly bewildered, he headed off to visit the city’s branch of the Imperial Order of Magus Knights.

“Breaking news! Heroine #2 has been revealed!”

“News flash! Heroine #2 has been arrested!”

“Well, this concludes today’s news!”

Chapter 11: Crow, the Total Noob

On each of the four sides of the Spirit Wall of Berlin that surrounded the imperial capital was one of the Four Cardinal Cities: the Eastern City of Yato-ura; the Western City of Sandia; the Southern City of Averoigne; and the Northern City of Salem.

Each city acted as a checkpoint, and travelers were required to pay an enormous sum to proceed to the capital. Simply paying, however, wouldn't guarantee passage. Those hoping to be allowed through had to wait in the city for several weeks while background and character checks were conducted. If the travelers didn't pass these, they were expelled.

This system kept ill-intentioned people out of the capital. (Iris looked so cute as she proudly told me all about this!) Since these were very important cities, each of them had its own branch of the Imperial Order of Magus Knights.

After Vita's attack, Iris had taken me to the branch of magus knights in Salem.

"Welcome to the Salem branch, Crow. As my apprentice, you need to meet the local commander," she'd said.

So here I was in the reception parlor, sitting on a fluffy couch and sipping the drink Iris had made up for me. Delicious!

"H-How's the tea, Crow? I brewed it with care! Is it...tasty?" Iris asked nervously.

"Quite! I could drink it every day," I replied.

Iris seemed surprised. She looked adorable with her bright red cheeks! The compliment must've made her really happy.

"E-E-E-Every day?! Oh, you, you, you...!" Iris stuttered, jabbing me firmly in the shoulder. (Ow.)

I chuckled, greatly enjoying the moment of calm. Lazing around doing nothing truly *was* the dream! I was a pacifist, you know. So sick of combat.

Given the chance, I'd like to stop pretending to be a "condemner" and just

take it easy with Iris, living once more as the real Crow—the gloomy, shy boy who hated the spotlight and was tired of one-liners and stoic faces.

"Looks like the commander is running late. You know, Iris, I've been hoping to deepen my relationship with you, so this could be a good opportunity." I said, eager to be a better apprentice to my mentor.

"Deepen our relationship?!" she exclaimed.

Iris and I had been waiting (and waiting, and waiting), but at that moment the door to the reception room burst open.

"H-H-H-Hey, you!" someone sputtered angrily in a husky voice as they barged in wearing a white robe.

I was shocked by their face: skin pale as a corpse, and deep, dark circles under their eyes. Was this the captain? No way, right?

A magus knight commander must be a really powerful warrior. Whoever this is looks puny.

No military uniform, sickly as all hell, spindly and short. Maybe this wasn't a knight at all, let alone the commander. A low-ranking scientist, perhaps?

Their shaggy hair was brown, mixed with some gray, and they hadn't even bothered to comb it. What the hell?

Late teens, maybe? I doubt this is anyone important. Also, what gender is *this person, anyway?*

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-You're Crow, right?! You bastard! How dare you sit there without a care in the world?!" they shouted abruptly.

Seriously, what?

I involuntarily tilted my head, which apparently only served to make the robe-wearing stranger even angrier. He (was it a he?) leaned over the desk, his(?) face within inches of mine.

"You! Drop the assault charges against Lady Vita immediately! *Right now!*" he yelled.

"What?" Iris and I exclaimed in unison.

What had this person just said? Drop the charges against that girl, Vita? The one who had randomly tried to kill me? He wanted me to declare her *innocent*?

It was so outrageous even Iris stood, enraged at his words.

“Hey, Hypno!” she said. “What’s the meaning of this?! She nearly murdered Crow!”

“I-I mean, he’s alive, isn’t he? So it doesn’t matter what she did, does it?” the guy replied. “And Iris, you *do* realize she’s the daughter of Marquis Kaambl?! Not only does his family produce countless *outstanding* knights, they *also* provide ample funding for aethereal arms research! If they find out one of their own is considered a criminal in this city, why, that’ll be the end of our budget!”

“So you want us to pretend that nothing happened?! Don’t be absurd!”

Iris was fuming. She punched the desk, and it shattered. Scary.

Oh, so this little researcher’s name is Hypno. What kind of sordid reasoning is that, anyway? I reflected pensively, calmer now that Iris had gotten angry in my stead.

So, Vita was the daughter of his sponsor, and he wanted her pardoned. Understandable, really, but also really selfish, no?

“Ugh!” Hypno groaned. “Of *course* she’ll be reprimanded! I’ll even make a backroom deal with the Kaambl family to get reparations! So, Crow or whoever, let’s just call all of that a big misunderstanding! You want the money, right?! Yeah?!” he insisted, his eyes bloodshot.

Really? This guy could just suggest a backroom deal like that?

Hmm, I considered silently. *I don’t know about this. Magus knights have been fighting aetherborn for, like,* ever *at this point. You could call them protectors of justice. It’s hard to imagine them being so plainly corrupt. Also, if this Vita girl is the daughter of a nobleman, why the hell would she try to kill me? Something’s not adding up.*

She was a noble’s child, meaning her family’s name and honor rode on her actions, right? Would someone like that really commit a crime, just like that? I certainly didn’t recall doing anything that would cause her to resent me.

Lastly, where is *this commander? Do they make it a habit of not showing up to — Wait a minute.*

It was then that I—the (world's only) possessor of a Grade A Room Reader certificate (self-awarded), earned via my extensive(ly subjective) experience analyzing the atmosphere and facial expressions of those I'd encountered in my (depressing) life—understood *everything*.

I definitely had things figured out now!

The commander must be testing me! I realized.

Yes! It was clearly all staged!

First, Vita attacked me, testing my reflexes and ability to think on my feet!

Dark magi and aetherborn were cunning creatures, after all. Surely being attacked without warning was a daily occurrence for the knights! *That* was why Vita had come after me. Surely she'd have stopped in the nick of time, had I not been able to react!

Iris didn't seem aware of this, and her reactions had seemed perfectly genuine. She likely hadn't been told about the test so that it would look as authentic as possible!

So Hypno's just yelling to test my sense of justice! He wants to see how I'll respond!

Which meant I couldn't give in to greed and just pardon Vita—why, that would be a spectacular failure on my part!

What's the answer, then? I pondered. *Should I say something like "In your dreams, you rotten bastard!" and kick his ass? Hmm. That'd be pretty macho of me, but I'm sure there are other options.*

I was incredibly calm at that moment. I had no idea what the Kaambl family was really like, but this test sure made them out to be the scum of the earth. Because, I mean, if they *were* upstanding people and Vita went around causing problems, Hypno wouldn't need to worry about his research funding or whatever. There was no way they'd be that spiteful.

"So, Crow?!" Hypno exclaimed. "Money's great, right?! I'll do what I can to

get you enough to live off of for a year! So let's pretend that never happened, okay?! You pardon Lady Vita, I'm happy, you're happy! Let go of your grudges! Think of the future! Hatred won't do anything good, don't you agree?!"

I see! This is a trap! Hypno comes in, conspicuously acting like worthless trash, but he's not evil*, oh no! He's been* corrupted *by evil! Meaning he, too, is a victim and needs saving!*

"Hey!" he said. "Are you listening to me?!"

The truth was within my grasp. See, magus knights had permission to use powerful aethereal arms. Therefore, they needed to be extra careful when passing judgment. Hypno, playing the role of total scum, was trying to tell me the meaning of *true* evil!

I've got this, commander! The answer's simple!

"Listen to me, damn it! Stop ignoring me!" Hypno demanded, grabbing me by the collar. His eyes were filled with tears at not being taken seriously. What an amazing actor!

There was only one proper response to that. *All right, my turn! Check out my specialty—the Condemner act!*

Consciously relaxing at the right moment in order to make a loud noise (but not hurt him too much), I swung my hand, and—*smack!*—I slapped him on the cheek, as hard as I could!

"Wha— Huh?! What?!" Hypno exclaimed in shock.

"Calm down, Hypno! Remember what justice is!" I said, pulling the confused Hypno's skinny frame into a bear hug!

"What the hell?!" he shrieked, losing any semblance of composure.

"Crow, what are you doing?!" Iris yelled behind me, her voice cracking.

Ignoring her for the time being, I addressed Hypno. "I'm not angry at you, Hypno. I know this must've been difficult for you."

"Huh?!" he uttered, his delicate shoulders shuddering.

I continued speaking, deliberately sounding as sweet and gentle as I could to

comfort his wounded heart. “I can tell from your words and actions that you’ve been desperately trying to avoid stepping on the nobility’s toes. Surely you’ve had to give in to humiliating demands. They kept you reliant on them, making it impossible for you to disobey. Isn’t that right?”

“I— That’s—” he mumbled.

He didn’t deny it. I knew it! That *was* the premise of this role-play!

If he’s affiliated with the good and just knights, there’s no way he was corrupt from the start. I’m sure the idea here is that his time with them gradually tainted his morals.

That must’ve been how he ended up such a twisted character! Just a few words wouldn’t have been enough to reform him, though.

If I were to wager a guess, he’s going to turn red with anger and—

“Don’t talk as if you knew anything about me!” he said.

See? Angry! I knew it.

And, predictably, he pushed me away, breaking the hug. Perfect timing, since I’d just loosened my grip on him.

Go ahead, Hypno! Say your piece!

“How *dare* you act like you know me,” he began. “Yeah, that’s right! I’m just the nobility’s lapdog! Twenty years after first covering up the crimes of some noble’s kid, I’m the farthest thing from a paragon of justice! I know that, all right?!”

Wait, twenty years?! Hypno’s been working for twenty years*?!*

No way. He looked like he was in his (or maybe her—the jury was still out) late teens at most! Who in their right mind would cast him in that role?

Well, maybe he messed up his line. Might’ve meant two years, not twenty. Yeah, I’ll let it slide.

“But, you know, being corrupt comes with a whole heap of benefits!” Hypno said. “So drop the righteous prick attitude and be smart about this, Crow! Say you’ll drop the charges against Lady Vita and you’ll get your—”

“Very well,” I interjected.

“—money... Wait, what?!” Hypno looked incredulous that I’d agreed, even though he was the one who’d suggested it in the first place.

Iris, too, demanded, “Why?!” Her features were twisted with astonished disgust.

Hey now, don’t get me wrong, you guys.

“Young Vita has my forgiveness. Arrange for her to be released promptly,” I stated.

Hypno burst into laughter. “That’s what I’m talking about, Crow! It’s settled, then! Now, as for the money—”

“It won’t be necessary.”

“It...won’t?” Hypno echoed, puzzled.

I continued, “It’s not out of greed that I forgive her. Hypno, House Kaambl is rather corrupt, is it not? Do you truly believe that such a family could provide a child with an upstanding education?”

“Uh, I... No, I guess not.” he replied. “In fact, I’ve heard that Vita has had quite the twisted upbringing...”

“I figured as much,” I said. “In which case, I forgive her wholeheartedly. A girl like her is a national treasure to be protected.”

Hypno staggered, his eyes narrowing as though he were looking at something dazzlingly bright. I figured he had no more reason to lash out at me, now that the plot point of his funding being cut if Vita was accused of a crime had been resolved. He no longer needed to spout nonsense to secure his future, so surely we could have a proper, open conversation now.

“Doing that for someone who tried to kill you, only because she’s a child, is just...” He tried again. “Protecting her like that simply makes—”

“No sense?” I interrupted.

“No sense,” Hypno agreed. “I was being irrational, yet you didn’t raise your voice, and you understood my situation. You’re a weird one. Weirdly nice,” he

said in a husky voice, tinged with melancholy.

I felt a profound sense of self-loathing reflected in his eyes.

“What a kind soul you are, Crow,” Hypno said. “You’re like a knight straight out of a fairy tale. No wonder you’re the secret apprentice to Iris, who’s so obsessed with knights she completely missed her chance to get married.”

“Who’s obsessed with what now?!” Iris protested at the sudden insult.

Hypno, however, paid her no mind. He was looking straight at me, the dark circles under his eyes becoming damp.

“Ugh, damn it!” he cried out in frustration. “Unlike you, I left the straight and narrow! All I’ll ever be is a lapdog for House Kaambl!”

“I see,” I said.

“I can’t do anything about it! I have to mind my position! And unlike Vita, who’s still young, I’ve dirtied my hands far too much!”

“I see,” I repeated.

“Yeah, that’s right!” he exclaimed shakily. “So it doesn’t matter what you say now! I have no choice but to carry on as their lapdog! I’m already far too rotten to—”

“That’s not true!” I declared flatly.

Lifting his chin with my fingers, I brought our faces closer together, eliciting a high-pitched squeak from Hypno (and from Iris, for some reason).

Hah! Bet he was petrified to see my sour face up close. Good, that meant he’d listen closely to my every word.

“Lapdog or not, you must not resign to being corrupt,” I told him. “Don’t forget the righteousness in your heart. Sharpen your fangs in secret.”

“M-My fangs?”

“Exactly. Use the money the Kaambls send you to polish your skills. Strengthen your influence. Make powerful connections and, someday, rise to the top. Become not the dog that grovels at their feet, but the wolf that can devour them whole!”

“That’s not so simple—”

“You have the means to turn the tables,” I explained. “It’s Vita. Do everything in your power to steer her toward a righteous path, Hypno. Devote your life to making her a virtuous knight. Make amends for all your wrongdoing.” What would happen if he did that? Glad you asked. It’s simple, really. “Once she has awakened to justice, no doubt she will denounce her family’s misdeeds. It will lead to an internal struggle, invariably weakening House Kaambl’s position.”

“So you’re saying I can strengthen my position and weaken theirs?!”

“That’s right. Now go, and use your newly empowered voice to assist Vita! Bring that great evil to justice!”

Hypno trembled, his lips contorting. After a brief pause, he burst into laughter, clutching his stomach.

“Pfft, ha ha ha ha! What is it with you?! Here I am, thinking you’re a great guy, and next thing I know you’re telling me how to destroy that family! Wouldn’t I just go down with their ship, anyway?!”

“Perhaps. But assisting in the accusations against them would surely get you a reduced sentence. Besides, you’re a researcher, no? With your skills, you can start anew.”

“Of course, of course!” he said, still laughing, his white coat fluttering like a dress skirt.

The corruption lifted from his features, and a faint light returned to his dulled eyes.

Wow, what an incredible performance. Well, I’m sure at this point I’ve passed the test, right? You can relax and give me the thumbs-up now, right, commander? Where are you watching from, anyway?

I directed my thoughts at the as-of-yet unseen man(?). Surely he(?) had put me through this surprise test because I was Iris’s apprentice.

The world’s full of strange aethereal arms. Maybe he has something similar to those things people used a thousand years ago—wiretaps, was it? Yeah, those. Could be that he used one to keep tabs on us. Maybe it was installed in the

wagon, I mused. *Who knows, he may even have caught on that we're not actually mentor and disciple.*

Despite this, the mysterious commander, rather than judging me for the unauthorized use of an aethereal arm, had chosen to test me instead. He'd wanted to see if I was qualified to be the disciple of an angel like Iris.

Thank you, commander!

With gratitude in my heart, I decided it was time to end the skit. Perhaps I'd say I knew it'd all been a test, impressing him with my deductive abilities.

"Now then, Hypno. Please send Vita my thanks for her part in the fake attack. It was good practice," I requested.

"Pfft, fake? Oh, I see! You're going to claim she's innocent because it was all a training exercise!"

Oh, he's still acting? Aw, come on, enough's enough already. Let's all drop the act and be friends, eh? And you can come out too, Mr. Commander!

Iris turned to me, a proud look on her face, and announced, "Heh! That's my Crow! You even brought the light back to rotten ol' Commander Hypno's eyes!"

Ah, of course, rotten ol' Commander Hypno. Wait, Commander Hypno*?!*

I was absolutely floored.

Hypno smiled at me, a blush on his cheeks, and said, "I thought I was destined to a life of sin, but you've given me the most pleasant of dreams! I like you, Crow. As commander of the Salem branch, I'll put in a stellar recommendation for you to join the knights."

Whaaaaaaat?! This *guy was the commander all along?! Wait, this* wasn't *a test? This was* for real*?*

No way. That *had* to be a prank, right?

Right?

"Breaking news! We regret to inform you that Crow, a total noob, slapped the commander within two minutes of them meeting, then proposed the downfall of a noble family and went on to become a legend!"

Chapter 12: The Road to Virtue (Not a Dream, BTW)

“How did it come to thiiis?” Vita whined between sobs and sniffles.

The young silver-haired girl sat in a filthy prison cell, certain that she was no longer a knight. No, she was a miscreant, a danger to society, *and* a fool. Charged with the attempted murder of a civilian—with an aethereal arm, no less—she was certain to face severe repercussions, no matter how much she protested.

“Why did I do that?” she asked herself thousands of times over. No matter how hard she tried, however, she could not wrap her head around it. Seeing that man next to Iris had inexplicably made her blood boil.

Her head had been filled with thoughts such as, *I don’t care about honor or family name—all I need is to destroy him!* and *Only a great man at the peak of military prowess and strength of character is allowed near Iris!*

The frenzied rage had consumed Vita’s sense of reason. She’d found herself gripping her blade, lunging at the strange man with greater strength than she’d ever displayed—but it had all been for naught.

“Ugh,” she groaned, “Damn that man! Crow, was it? How *dare* he defeat me so easily!”

For Vita had been brought down in an instant. Her abusive upbringing had made her believe she was the most powerful of all knights—and she’d been proud of it. Until now, when she’d been summarily crushed.

“Crooow...!”

Given the chance, she would’ve challenged him a second time.

Iris having beat her would at least have made sense. The vice-captain was one of the most powerful people in the country, after all—a genius who had become a first-class knight in her teens and earned herself the nickname “Iris of the White Blade.” An opponent so fierce that even the people of House Kaambl

had given up on surpassing her. Losing to her would have only been logical.

Losing to a complete nobody like Crow? Absolutely unacceptable.

Someday, she'd fight him again. Vita would make that poker face of his twist and grimace until he admitted defeat.

Despite all of her fury, however, she knew it would never come to pass.

"Heh, ha ha. That day will never come, will it?" she said to herself. "I'm finished. Convicted criminals cannot wield aethereal arms."

Any sane person would have agreed that those hopes were mere delusions. She knew full well that she no longer had a future.

If it had been a minor incident, Commander Hypno could surely make it go away, like the good dog he is. But this? This was far too severe.

Attempted murder with an aethereal arm alone would be a serious felony. On top of that, however, the target had been an associate of Iris, vice-captain of the magus knights.

It was hopeless. Hypno could try to interfere, but Iris would never allow it.

If...If only Crow would say it was all a big misunderstanding.

Vita shook her head, finding herself ridiculous for even entertaining the thought. There was no chance things would turn out that way. Why would anyone protect their would-be murderer?

"Ahh, I am finished! Finished!" she lamented, pressing her face to her knees.

She'd been such a fool! Vita almost wished death would take her.

As she despaired over her lost future, however, a husky voice broke into her thoughts:

"Lady Vita. You're free to go."

Vita lifted her head in surprise. The door to her cell had been opened, and there stood Hypno, loyal lapdog of the Kaambl family.

"What?! Hypno?!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock.

It was definitely the commander standing before her, but much primmer than

she remembered. One might almost have mistaken Hypno for a younger, prettier doppelgänger—with a pale but far less corpse-like complexion, barely any sign of those deep dark circles under the eyes, and a freshly washed outfit.

"What in the world happened to— Wait. Did you say I'm free to go?!"

"Indeed. Quickly, now."

Vita thought it must be some kind of joke, but Hypno, key in hand, truly had opened the door to her cell.

"Come." Approaching her slowly, Hypno stopped before Vita, who sat slumped over, and extended a hand, thin and small, from the sleeve of the baggy lab coat.

Staring at it, the young knight asked once again, "Um, what do you mean, I'm free? What in blazes did you do?!"

"Nothing," Hypno replied simply. "The man you tried to kill... Crow, his name is. He told me to pretend it was all a training exercise, and dropped all charges against you."

"He did *what*?!"

Preposterous. That made no sense! What kind of idiot forgave someone who'd tried to murder them? Her family had never told her such softhearted people existed! House Kaambl had drilled into Vita's mind, "All people are self-serving. You should think of those not of our blood as no better than wild dogs."

She could not believe Hypno's words.

"Oh, I see," she said, her voice filled with malice as she pushed herself to her feet. "Hah. Ah ha ha ha ha. Oh, Hypno, quit it with the odd jokes! You bribed him, didn't you?! That's why he gave in!"

Yes, that *had* to be it.

"Oh, or perhaps you offered him beautiful women!" she continued, criticizing Crow as if to convince herself. "He'd probably make a move on that boring square Iris, so I'm sure that brainless, horny sleazebag would have relations with just about any pretty woman! Yes, he's scum, just like you!"

"Silence," Hypno snapped, cutting off Vita's string of insults.

Vita was shocked—never before had she heard the commander say anything with such fury. That was not the kind of thing a dog should be saying to a daughter of House Kaambl. *How dare you! You're just a slave to my family!* Hypno could not *possibly* be angry with her for having mocked that man, right? This was not the person she knew.

Hypno's just a parasite who drops by the estate to flatter my family and curry favor with them. A dog who has long since lost any sense of honor. That's who I know him to be.

The commander was supposed to be scum, a poor excuse for a servant.

Vita was more baffled by the minute.

"Lady Vita, Crow has decided to pardon you because you're still a child. He wants no compensation. You must not mock him like that."

"He wants to drop the murder charges because I'm a child? That can't be true __"

"It can't. But it is."

With a start, Vita noticed that the rotten dog didn't just appear revitalized. Hypno's once corrupt gaze had a faint spark, and...was that a kind smile she saw? This was unprecedented.

"Hypno, what's going on? What did you and that bast—I mean, you and Crow talk about?"

Though the young girl had never taken an interest in her family's lapdog, she had a burning need to know what that man had done to and for Hypno.

The commander chuckled before replying, "I thought you might ask, so I had everyone else leave. Very well, I'll tell you."

Hypno spoke slowly, with a face like that of a beautiful teenage maiden experiencing love for the first time.

"He told me not to forget the righteousness in my heart, you see..."

Vita could hardly believe her ears as the story unfolded.

Crow had slapped the corrupt Hypno—who was at the helm of the Salem

division, a position many would surely respect—without any hesitation or fear in his eyes. Then, without any show of anger, he'd consoled the commander with an embrace, fully sympathetic to Hypno's plight. He'd said Vita should be protected and pardoned, and he'd refused the offer of the Kaambls' dirty money. And he'd told the commander that, if leaving the life of a lapdog behind wasn't an option, the choice remained to become a wolf, sharp fangs and all.

And—

"Excuse me, *what*?! He wants me to become a righteous knight and destroy House Kaambl from within?!" Vita exclaimed with a shudder.

How could that man suggest such a plan to Hypno, whom he'd just met? Preposterous! Reckless! *Exceedingly* foolish!

"That's what he said," the commander replied. "The look in his eyes told me he meant all of it."

"Absurd!" Vita knew that if her relatives caught wind of this, both Hypno and that man would be summarily dealt with. The great heroes of House Kaambl would soon step in, and no doubt it'd all culminate in a fight to the death.

This man, Crow, said such things knowing what the consequences would be?! What manner of rash fool is he?!

Corruption among the wealthy had always existed. Commoners like him should stay out of it all! This was madness!

Vita's mind swirled as she internally disparaged Crow.

"Dashing, don't you think?" Hypno said, interrupting her train of thought. "Crow proposed the downfall of a military family in one fell swoop with a righteous, solid plan! Absolutely exciting, is it not?!"

The young girl was in shock. This was something straight out of a storybook! A knight from far away, journeying forth with only a sword at his side. With courage and justice burning bright in his heart, he gathered allies and fought against the great evils of the world!

This cheap—but nevertheless exciting—tale played out in Vita's mind.

"Should you even be telling me all this?" she asked.

“Oh, probably not, huh? It’d be the end of the road for me if you ratted me out,” Hypno replied.

“What?!” Vita shrieked, sounding nearly hysterical. She wondered, bewildered, if Hypno had come unhinged.

But no. Completely serious, the commander laid a pale hand on Vita’s shoulder. Under better lighting, Hypno’s comely looks would’ve captured the hearts of men and women alike.

“H-Hypno?!”

“Vita, listen to me. This is my way of showing my resolve. Thanks to Crow, I once again want to walk the path of justice,” Hypno explained, eyes shining. “He told me to risk my life to steer you toward righteousness. And to that end, I will truly entrust my life to you, and say goodbye to my former corrupt self for good.”

Such zeal reminded Vita of a tale she’d once heard.

There once was a great hero, forced to retire due to injury... Hypno, the Crusher!

Over twenty years ago, the now corrupt commander had been a zealous, righteous knight.

“Now, Vita. If you tell your shitty family about me, I’ll be done for,” Hypno explained. “And, of course, Crow will be too, although I’m sure he’s prepared for that possibility. So, what will it be?”

“H-Huh?!”

“I’m asking what you’re going to do. Will you carry on as a slave to your vile family and become corrupt as I did? Or will you aim to become a virtuous and just knight, and join me in seeking the light?”

“What?”

Young Vita felt caught. The right choice was clearly the latter, of course, but loyalty to House Kaambl had been drilled into her since childhood.

Her body vividly remembered the pain of the lashings.

“I... I...” She hesitated, her voice trembling with shame.

Surely Crow would have not wavered, choosing to walk the path of light. *Compared to him, I’m...*

Vita stood dumbfounded, tears welling in her eyes.

Hypno gently pulled the young girl into a hug. “It’s all right, Vita. That’s good enough for now,” the commander said, petting her head comfortingly.

It was the first time an adult had done that for her.

“It’s...enough?”

“Yes. You were conflicted, ashamed of yourself for not choosing the latter. You even shed tears,” Hypno explained. “If you truly were a slave to your family, you wouldn’t have given it any thought at all.”

The silver-haired girl’s eyes widened at those words. Hypno was right. She *had* been conflicted. Postponing a choice was, itself, a choice. This was the first time Vita had defied House Kaambl’s wicked ways.

Hypno offered her a sincere smile in response to such an incredible feat.

“Congratulations,” the commander said. “And thank you, Vita. Thanks to you, I’ll live. Fighting House Kaambl head-on would’ve been a fool’s errand.”

“It’s true. Mine is quite the terrifying family. I might not be of any help to you with bringing it down, you know.”

“Perhaps not now,” Hypno mused. “As you rise through the ranks as a knight, however, your words will bear more weight. If, when that time comes, you tell everyone what worthless scum House Kaambl truly is, you could cause quite a stir, I think.”

“Saying something like that is far too scary! I could never!” Vita declared.

“I’ll teach you courage, Vita, so come with me. We’ll head toward the light, together.”

Releasing her from the embrace, Hypno held out a hand to the young knight once more.



Hesitantly, but firmly, Vita took the hand before her.

“Hah! You’d better teach me well, then, if you don’t want me to tell on you,” she said. “And mind you, my objective is still to surpass Iris. Even before my family said anything, I never liked her as a woman—nor her enormous assets, for that matter. I’ll keep applying myself and become the strongest knight there is!”

“Ha ha ha, wonderful! That’s the spirit! If you become strong and rise to the top within your house, why, that’ll solve all our problems, now, won’t it?”

The pact was sealed. Two souls, previously fallen to darkness, had begun to walk a different path in life thanks to a certain man.

Whether that was a good thing remained to be seen—perhaps it would lead them both to ruin.

Still, Vita chuckled at Hypno, who laughed brightly in return. With heartfelt smiles, they began the arduous task of breaking free from the fetters that bound them.

Thus did House Kaambl’s authority begin to waver. And it was all thanks to Crow.

Oh, and speaking of Crow...

Aaaaaaaah! What do I do, what do I do?! I thought it was all staged! I didn’t think I was actually *suggesting to overthrow a noble family! Auuuugh!* he said to himself, agonizing in his bed at the local inn.

Everything he’d said and done had been because he’d assumed it’d all been a prank by the commander, whom he thought he’d yet to meet!

I’m screwed! I’m so, so screwed! he panicked. Not that it would do him any good at this point.

Knowing he couldn’t claim it had all been a misunderstanding, Crow thought, *Oh, I know! This is all a dream! When I wake up, none of that will have happened! Okay, g’night!*

And so, spouting nonsense, he half-heartedly settled on escapism to solve his problems, then drifted into unconsciousness and started snoozing, the absolute

bastard.

“I just need to sleep it all off!” Crow told himself. “Then it’ll all go away!”

(Spoiler: it did not go away.)

Chapter 13: Our True Battle Starts Now!

“Wahhh!”

The day after I magnificently stuffed both my feet into my mouth, I was relaxing by hunting aetherborn in the woods near the city (by which I mean Muramasa was making me do it).

“Nooo! Noooooo!” I wept.

“Grg!” a goblin or something gurgled.

As I continued involuntarily cutting down goblins and other such creatures, my thoughts raced along the lines of *What the hell do I do now?!*

“Man, I *seriously* blew it. That Hypno dude totally ate up my ‘Kick House Kaambl’s ass!’ speech. Why couldn’t he just, like, not hear it?”

I really, really, *really* regretted everything.

Apparently, the Kaambl family were marquises. That’s super high up as far as nobility ranks go! And if Hypno’s rebellion failed and he told people he was enticed by some jackass named Crow, I’d be done for!

That wasn’t the only thing I was fretting about either.

“And I had to go and tell him to release that Vita kid too. She’s a menace, dude.”

Not only was the whole thing *not* a prank, I still had no clue why she’d attacked me. I just *had* to act cool and open my big mouth to say I forgave her and that she was a national treasure to be protected and all that nonsense. Idiot! Moron!

And of course, now that I’d sent Vita on a nice tour of a prison cell, she definitely hated my guts even more. By now, she was likely sharpening a kitchen knife with murder in her eyes, waiting to get back at me. Hooray.

“I wonder what’s going on with Vita right now,” I asked myself aloud.

“Crow, are you *worried* about me?!” A voice rang out from behind nearby

bushes, followed by the sound of someone's footsteps as they approached.

Her pretty little face nearly made me jump out of my skin.

"Vita!" I exclaimed.

"Y-Yes, that would be me," she said.

Speak of the (silver-haired she-)devil (who almost killed me yesterday) and all that.

"Eeeeeeeeeek! I'm done for! Muramasa, help!"

"FULL. SLEEPY..."

"You're full now, *of all times?! Also, don't go to sleep right after eating! Hey! Wake up, asshole!"*

My inner attempts at communication went unanswered, however. Instead, something seemed to pop in my head, and I could no longer speak to Muramasa. Basically, the sword version of "talk to the hand." Tyranny, I tell you!

Oh no. Now what?

I braced myself to try and hold my own against Vita in my wimpy, sans-cursed-sword state, but—

"M-My sincerest apologies for my behavior yesterday!" she said, straightening herself before bowing her head vigorously.

I stared at her in awe. She'd come to apologize to me? *Really*?

"I'll be fully honest," she continued. "Something came over me, and...I truly did mean to kill you!"

That confirmed it. It hadn't been an act, and if Muramasa hadn't intervened, I'd have been toast. Eep!

"S-Still, not only did you forgive my indiscretion, you're also concerned for my well-being!"

"That's..." *Not true! Not true at all!*

I only said I forgave her because I thought she wasn't actually gonna do me

harm. And I hadn't said that just now out of concern for her! I was just scared, wondering how she was going to attack me!

Also, who tries to justify a crime by saying something came over them?! Have some introspection, dammit! Also, pay me damages, please and thank you!

Not that I would actually have said any of that out loud, scaredy-cat that I was.

"Heh. It gladdens me to see you well," I said instead. "I truly was worried about you, Vita."

"Oh, Crow...!"

Offering her my best dashing smile, I feigned concern. I couldn't even properly scold someone younger than me. Pathetic.

Vita chuckled and said, "You're strong and kind alike, Crow. Silly me! Why did I ever try to do that to you?"

"Please, don't worry about it. It's all water under the bridge now." *I'm not either of those things! Scratch under the surface and it's all trash! Also, can you, like, show some contrition?!*

Screaming internally, I kept up the "calm, cool, and collected" act on the outside. At least we'd made up, ostensibly. What a relief.

"Tee hee... Oh, Crow... ≡"

Wait. Did I just sense something even scarier than murderous intent emanating from her? Dude, this girl's terrifying!

I decided to stay wary of her for the time being.

"Oh, Crow, I nearly forgot," Vita said. "I have a message for you from Commander Hypno."

"A message?" I asked.

"It's about your aethereal arm, Muramasa," she said nonchalantly.

"Oh."

Noooooooo! I screamed at the top of my mental lungs. *It's over! It's all oveeeeeeer!*

Heartbreaking news! Our protagonist is done for!

Thank you for reading!

(BAD END)

Chapter 14: The Legend of the Legend of Crow

“And then, and then— He had this look of utter anguish on his face, and said he was worried about me! Oh, he has such an unbelievably golden heart! ≡”

“Oh my! I’m envious! Hey Crow, I want you to feel that way about me too!”

Yes, hello. Crow in question here. I was sandwiched between the silver-haired girl Vita and the robed beauty (???) Hypno as we trudged our way down a corridor at the division headquarters. We passed members of the staff along the way, who shot envious glances at us. How nice of them.

“By the way, Hypno,” I said, “you look so much better than before.”

I mean, I’d thought the commander looked beautiful—uh, handsome?—before, but now that all the rough edges had been smoothed out, I was stunned.

“Well,” he (?) replied, “now that I’ve decided to be an upstanding member of society, I figured working on my appearance was a good place to start.”

“I see...”

Upstanding, huh? Which meant he wasn’t going to turn a blind eye to irregularities anymore, right? Such as, say, me and my curse?

“This way.”

Oh man, oh man...

I started walking down a set of stairs as Hypno instructed. Despite being the commander, he had personally waited at the door for me to arrive, and was now escorting me to his laboratory. How nice of him!

Wait, that’s not nice at all! I’m in some deep shit here! Underground, I have no escape! They’re gonna lock me up and interrogate the hell out of me!

My face retained its composure, but my brain did not.

Muramasa is a murderous sword. When it’s hungry, it takes over my body and

goes berserk. Safe as putting your hand in a hive full of angry wasps. So if he wants to talk to me about it, that must mean... Crap, does he know about its true nature?!

My act was perfect. I was sure of it. No one should've noticed I was possessed. If there was any lore about the sword to be found in literature, however, I was screwed six ways from Sunday.

I think a bunch of books were lost in the chaos a thousand years ago, but some survived, so I mean... But wait, based on its name, Muramasa comes from somewhere in the far east, right? Like, what was it, Jepan? Japon? Anyway, it was an island country, which made escaping the aetherborn difficult. I hear just about everyone died. So their books probably didn't survive. Yeah!

I tried to calm myself down somehow. *Okay. If they knew Muramasa was dangerous, they'd stay away from me as its wielder. But nope, Hypno's just happily pulling me along by the hand. There's no way he knows anything! No way!*

"Here we are! My lab. Have a seat on that couch over there. Oh, and put Muramasa on the desk, please."

"Understood," I said, putting the sword down as instructed.

Hypno stared intently at Muramasa, muttering "Huh" as he poked and prodded it. He showed no signs of fear at all.

I knew it! He doesn't know anything! I'm a master of deception! Ha ha ha!

"So this is Muramasa, the murderous cursed blade. It looks so cool!"

Ha ha... Ha?! Did he just call it a murderous cursed blade?!

"You want to touch Crow's sword too, Vita?" Hypno asked. "We don't get a chance like this every day, so perhaps we could remove it from its scabbard."

"Wow! It's so scary and dark! Sharp too!" the young girl exclaimed in awe.

Hey! Don't make her touch it!

What kind of maniac gets all touchy-feely with a sword they *know* to be cursed *and* murderous?!

“All right, I’m satisfied,” Hypno said, straightening himself and looking right at me. “Now, Crow...”

Woe is me, I quietly thought to myself. *They know about Muramasa’s true nature. It’s over.*

As a researcher and a commander, surely he had easy access to valuable, ancient writings. Muramasa must have been mentioned somewhere. He must’ve known I was possessed.

Execution time.

“Crow...”

Ha ha, oh man, he’s staring at me. Am I a live test subject? I am, aren’t I?

It’d explain why he was acting so friendly with me. All calculated so I’d be a willing participant in an experiment.

I guess it beats being executed. Wait, no, I don’t want to be executed or *experimented on! Iris, save meee!*

I was about ready to drop the facade and start screaming and crying when Hypno took my hand in his.

Huh?

“Incredible!” he exclaimed. “There’s no mistaking it. You’re the greatest myth conqueror since the captain of the magus knights!”

“Myth...conqueror?” I asked, confused.

Noticing my bewilderment, he pulled his hand back with an apology.

“Allow me to explain,” he continued. “The truth is, all aethereal arms bend their wielders’ wills. That includes, say, those we call holy blades, for instance.”

According to Hypno, all aethereal arms were inherently foul.

“Due to the effects of the aether that spread all across the world, weapons of legend became real. If a sword was said to produce fire, for instance, it became able to actually do so. Do you follow?”

“Yes...”

“But see, therein lies the problem,” he continued. “In folklore, a weapon and its wielder appear as a ‘set,’ so to speak. Meaning that people at the time, who were familiar with the myths and legends, would remember Excalibur as King Arthur’s sword. Or, say, Balmung as Siegfried’s sword.”

Oh, that makes sense, and— Wait.

“You understand, yes? Aethereal arms are a manifestation of people’s beliefs about them. This means that the wielder of an arm takes on the personality of its original owner.”

Uh, excuse me, what the actual *hell?! That’s horrifying! You’re telling me people aren’t themselves when they wield those weapons?! That’s me!* I’m *people!*

In short, it wasn’t the sword that was murderous. *I* was murderous!

“That’s why, as a rule, a magus knight isn’t allowed to wield more than one arm. That’s how twisted their mind can get,” he told me. “Also, you don’t want an evil person wielding a holy sword, for instance. If the new owner’s personality is too far removed from the original wielder’s, they’ll go mad and die.”

“Die?!” *Holy shit!* I mean, I wasn’t exactly a man of character, you know? It was probably a good idea for me to stay far, far away from holy blades. And with how gloomy I was, any weapons belonging to extroverted balls of sunshine were also no good. Not that I knew of any extroverted balls of sunshine in myths and legends, but you know.

“Which brings us to the main point,” he continued. “Legend has it that this sword is cursed, which means it’s dangerously corrupt. While it’s unclear who its original wielder was, anyone with a weak will who comes in contact with it will immediately turn into a bloodthirsty murderer. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard the arm you wield is Muramasa. According to what scarce Japanese literature remains, this can be considered one of the most vicious cursed swords known to man. And with how foul it is, it should’ve turned you into a wicked madman, and yet...it didn’t.”

Hypno smiled at me—as did Vita, sitting next to him.

“Crow,” he said. “You saved us with your heartfelt words. A wicked man would have never suggested we should live righteously.”

“It’s true,” the young girl agreed. “If you really were a murderer, you would’ve killed me yesterday. I have no doubts you’re of sound mind.”

The two looked at me with trusting eyes and offered Muramasa back to me.

Hypno chuckled. “Besides, I felt such calm from the blade. It’s like an infant, sleeping peacefully. The other cursed weapon you brought us, the Dáinsleif, was also docile as a trained puppy.”

“Did you know that some arms have a personality of sorts, Crow?” Vita asked me. “When you touch them, you can tell how they feel by the aether emanating from them. Dangerous arms all give off a terrifying sense of bloodlust, but both of yours were serene. It’s like they’ve found their true wielder.”

Hypno had one last thing to say as I took the blade from their hands.

“There are those who truly make an arm theirs, and transcend even curses. Among the knights, we call them ‘myth conquerors.’ And you’re one of them, Crow!” Hypno said, beaming.

Vita also praised me. “I never expected one other than our captain to surface! You can even wield cursed swords with impunity!”

Mm-hmm. Except, you know, *not true*!

Muramasa’s just sleeping because it’s full! And Dáinsleif quieted down because I smacked it with Muramasa! I’m literally just *cursed!*

Not that I could tell them any of that.

“I see. I’m a myth conqueror!” I said instead, slapping a surprised look on my face.

And thus, on that day, through a series of misunderstandings by those around me, I was elevated to legendary status.

(Yeah—legendary *trash*!)

Chapter 15: Iris Falls Hook, Line, and Sinker

“So, Crow, you’re a myth conqueror, just like our captain? I was shocked when Hypno told me!”

“So it would seem.” *Not!*

After this shocking(ly false) revelation, Iris and I were walking around the bustling streets of Salem.

The city was incredibly lively, with countless people browsing the rows and rows of shops. Who knew so many humans existed?

“Crow, you seem a bit pale. Are you not good with crowds?”

“It’s just so different from the rural town where I was born. This many people makes my head spin.” *I’m too delicate for this, okay?*

“Ha ha! This is one of the cardinal cities bordering the inner and outer zones. People come here to sightsee from both areas, so it gets even livelier than the capital.”

“Fascinating!” *Huh, so it’s like a gathering spot between city and country folks. Neat!* No wonder everyone seemed so excited. Maybe somewhere in the city, love was even blooming between people of different social statuses! *Not that it’d ever happen to me. Tragic.*

“The rich and powerful don’t usually visit, though. Since it’s a border city, aetherborn sometimes break in, and there’s always the possibility of a shady character hiding in the shadows,” she went on. “Besides, most nobles look down on people from the outer zone, so be careful when you go to the capital, okay?”

Iris leaned forward, pointing a finger straight at my nose. *She’s so cute! Her chest’s jiggling. I love it.*

“Understood,” I replied. “By the way, I’m surprised we can head to the capital so soon.”

“It *is* unusually quick, isn’t it? I didn’t expect us to get a travel permit on the

heels of what happened yesterday."

Yep. Turns out I was going to the capital tomorrow. So we'd gone shopping to prepare for the trip. After crossing the checkpoint in this city, it would still take several days to reach the capital, apparently. I had to buy some underwear and stuff.

Also, my butt was still sore from that sneaky goblin bite, so I wanted some quality medicine too.

"Do you know where the pharmacy is?" I asked.

"Ohh. Smart move, Crow! It may be just a few days' trip, but you never know what might happen!"

Uh, I dunno about smart. My ass just hurts. But that sounded lame, so instead I went with a cool "We can't afford to be careless," and nodded.

Though if you looked up "careless" in the dictionary, you'd just see a picture of me.

Iris chuckled and replied, "You're so dependable, just like Hypno. The two of you are strong and smart in equal measure. Compared to you, I'm..." She trailed off, her expression suddenly darkening.

What's wrong?!

"Listen, Crow. Getting to the capital isn't easy, you know? Commander Hypno worked very hard for this. It took not only negotiating with multiple people but also convincing them that you're a myth conqueror to get you a next-day permit like that." Iris muttered something under her breath about how she'd thought of the commander as rotten up until just the day before, but that in fact Hypno was quite the amazing person. She sounded somewhat sad, or perhaps conflicted.

"In comparison, I'm just a fool whose only talent is the sword. I'm bad with flattery, and powerful people absolutely hate me. Calling yourself my apprentice is more likely to hinder your chances at a permit than anything," she said with a heavy sigh. "And my failures don't stop there. I didn't know about Muramasa's wicked nature, so I didn't realize how incredible it is that you can wield it with ease. I'm a disgrace."

I can't wield it with ease at all! It controls me, like, all the time! If anything, Hypno's the disgrace, jumping to weird and entirely wrong conclusions!

"Compared to me, the commander is stylish, youthful, and beautiful. The only downsides were those dark circles under the eyes and the sloppiness, and now those are gone too and Hypno just looks like a teenage girl! I guess someone that dainty and cute would be better suited to be by your side. I mean, I don't know what the commander's gender is, but... Ugh!"

Iris went on and on, getting gloomier and gloomier with each word. "And then, under the guise of helping with your treatment, I went and did *that* to you while you slept. Well, I mean, I *was* serious at the time, but thinking back, a woman almost in her thirties cuddling a teenage boy like that is just... Aaaaargh!"

Muttering and mumbling to herself, Iris dropped to her knees.

Could it be... *She feels like a failure as a mentor?!*

Was she in low spirits because, as my mentor, she felt like *she* should be the one supporting her apprentice?! Was she jealous of what Hypno had done for me?!

Wow, what an amazing person!

She was already an SSS-rank good person just for being willing to help me! And now she reacts like this when someone comes along and helps me more?! What an absolute angel!

Truly, she was a certified SSSSSS-rank good person! She gets a Crow body pillow as a prize! *Not that she wants one!*

As her apprentice, I simply *had* to convey these feelings to her! *Okay, no being shy, now! Here we go!*

In front of a bunch of people, I firmly took hold of Iris's shoulders.

"Wh— Crow?!"

"Listen to me, Iris. This is important."

"Huh?!" Iris exclaimed in surprise, so loud that she drew the attention of the passersby.

I didn't falter, however. Looking straight into her blue eyes, I said, "Iris. I don't like to rank people in terms of who I love more. I find it incredibly disrespectful, actually. But..."

I leaned in closer to her face, drawing a surprised yelp from her lips and a loud "Ooh!" from people around us.

"To lift your spirits, however, I feel obligated to tell you this, just this once. Even more than I do Hypno, Iris, I love *you*."

"Whaaaat?!" Iris exclaimed conspicuously, her face bright red.

The people around us yelled, "He said it!" and erupted into thunderous applause.

Aw, look at them, inspired by my deep love for my mentor!

"You gotta show it, bro!" someone yelled.

"Pop the question!" shouted another.

"Kiss her, dude! Kiss her!" exclaimed a third.

Wait, what?! Pop the question?! Kiss her?! What the hell are they going on about?! All I said was that I loved Iris as a mentor, and—wait. *Did I forget the "as a mentor" part?!*

No wonder all the clueless bystanders thought it was a love confession!

Ah, shit, I'm such an idiot! This is so embarrassing! Time to exit stage left! I could buy my ass medicine some other time!

"It seems I've attracted some unwanted attention. My apologies, Iris. Let's go."

"Huh? Huh?!"

I put an arm around the dumbfounded Iris and lifted her, princess style, before taking off running to look for a less crowded place.

"Wait! Crow! What are you doing?!"

Whoops. I must've startled her by picking her up all of a sudden. The bystanders also let out a surprised "Whoaaaaa!" for some reason.

They were all like, “He confessed publicly *and* used that technique?!” and “That’s the carrying style spoken of in the legends of a thousand years ago!” and “He’s going to run through the city like *that*?!” “Okay but, like, what if there’s actually a ten-year age gap between them, and, say, the woman’s a workaholic with no experience in romance, anxious about being able to marry at her age, and secretly, like, an ultrahorny virgin?! If someone like that suddenly got hit with *that* kinda love confession, she’d lose her mind, man!” *and* I had no idea what they were going on about.

First of all, as a country boy, I didn’t know a thing about legends. Second, Iris was way too amazing to be full-on horny. Third, even if she *were*, there was no way she’d go out with a loser like me.

“Dude, that black-haired guy is something else!” “What a legend!” “That was epic!”

I kept running past all the flabbergasted people, mentally sighing at how messy things had gotten.

It’s gonna be hard to clear up the misunderstanding with all those people. Fuck me, dude. Iris must be annoyed too, what with some brooding loser like me seemingly confessing to her, I thought as I ran. *How do I undo this mess? Ugh, I can’t think of anything!*

This was way too difficult for my tiny brain. I gave up.

Well, a wonder lasts but nine days and all that. People will forget soon, I’m sure, I finally convinced myself.

There was also the matter of how Iris herself would take my confession-like non-confession.

Whatever, it’ll be fine! I’ve been very clear about my appreciation for her as a master this whole time! So I’m sure she fully understood it as me saying I loved her as a mentor! Yep!

This was the kind, wise Iris, after all. There’s no way she’d have taken that in a weird way! Right?

“C-Crow, about what you said earlier,” Iris began, her voice shaky.

Hm? Oh, she must be mad at me for forgetting some words and causing people around us to misunderstand!

I was terribly sorry.

“I’ve caused you great embarrassment,” I said. “I’ll take full responsibility.” *Maybe I’ll treat her to dinner as an apology. Yeah.*

“R-Responsibility?! Y-You mean... Whaaat?!” Iris exclaimed, really loudly for some reason. Her face turned as red as it could get, and then she fainted, like something in her had snapped.

Wait, is she okay?! “Hey! Iris! Are you—oh, she’s sleeping peacefully, smiling like she’s in heaven.”

It didn’t look like she was feeling sick.

Hm, I thought, *she must be exhausted, then. I’ll carry her back to the inn.*

I decided to walk so as to not wake her up. Look at me, all thoughtful and shit. Heh!

Anyway...

I glanced down at my mentor, sound asleep in my arms.

What a beautiful woman she was! Normally, she was cool and dignified, but asleep like this, she looked like a princess. Way out of the league of a plain nobody like me. If I confessed to someone like her, I’d get shot down immediately and probably called a nuisance—the rejection to end all rejections!

“Since that didn’t happen, I’m sure she understood I meant love between mentor and disciple and not romantic love. Phew.”

I’d been playing the part of a good devoted apprentice this whole time, so it was a huge relief that she hadn’t misinterpreted me.

Placing my full trust in how we’d previously interacted, I continued my walk across the city.

Meanwhile, inside Iris’s brain...

He confessed to meeeeeeeee! I-I wuv you too, Crow!

Yeah, she totally took it as romantic.

Chapter 16: The Curtain Rises (Weirdly)

Why is this happeniiiiiiing?!

After bringing Iris to the inn, I found myself dashing across the city's rooftops for some reason.

Leaping from building to building, I pushed on at full speed toward...who knows? Also, I was about to lose my shit. This was scary! What if I fell?!

I wasn't doing it out of my own will, of course. Once again, it was the doing of the stupid-ass sword at my hip, Muramasa.

"Muramasa! Come on! What are you making me do now*?!"*

I'd been sleeping like a log, and then suddenly I was jolted awake and my body got taken over. Seriously, what the hell?

Obviously, I was attracting attention, and everyone was staring at me as they passed me by on the streets of Salem.

"Whoa! What's with that guy?! That dark-haired dude is running like crazy from roof to roof!"

"Hey! What are you doing?! Is this some kinda act?!"

"Wait, isn't that the *total legend* who dove headfirst into that crazy in-love thing?!"

I was *so* embarrassed.

I was a gloomy introvert! I didn't like being the center of attention! Could that sword please stop doing weird shit to my body already?!

"Uh, by the way, where are you taking me, Muramasa? This is the way to the inner exit..."

The inner exit led to the imperial capital—opposite from where I'd come in. What business did the damn thing have there? If it was hungry for aetherborn souls, shouldn't it have been heading to the *outer* zone? Why was it heading for the safe zone, where there were practically no aetherborn to be found?

“QUALITY. SOUL!”

“Huh?!”

Muramasa, squealing with delight, made me run even faster. Dashing through the rooftops at ultrahigh speed, leaping full steam ahead across gaps many meters wide, and occasionally bursting through random strangers’ windows, I took the shortest, fastest path possible toward the inner exit!

My feet hurt! I was freaking out! People whose rooms I barged into were yelling at me! It was just awful!

“Ugh, come on! This is gonna be a problem later! Hey!”

“SOUL. SOUL!”

And then, when I jumped onto the next building—

Wait, there’s no next building!

Next thing I knew, I was past the buildings and at the fountain plaza. Just past it stood the inner gate, toward which I went sailing through the air. A terrifying floating feeling enveloped me.

Ahhhhhhhh! I’m falling! I’m dead, I’m dead, I’m so dead!

When I’d killed that one minotaur, Muramasa had forced me to land from pretty high up, but this was even higher up—and the ground below was cobblestone!

This is it! I’m a goner! This stupid piece of shit sword is gonna kill me!

I was falling and about to start crying when Muramasa started speaking to my soul, in unusually complicated words.

“ATTEMPTING POSTURE CONTROL. WORST-CASE SCENARIO: SIMPLE BONE FRACTURE.”

“What do you mean, ‘simple’ bone fracture?! That’s a major injury, damn you!” “Bastaaaaaard!” I snapped out loud, my anger boiling over.

What the hell did that asshole think it was doing?! That was *my* body it was wrecking!

As I screamed at it, my arm involuntarily raised Muramasa, and *slash*!

“Gwahhhhh!” screamed the black-robed man below me as the sword sliced him clean in half.

Oh. Oh no. Ohhhh no. I killed that guy. I killed *that guy! Ahhhhhhhhhh!*

I’d just murdered a complete stranger!

Thanks to this person, who’d stood in the sword’s way as I landed and thus softened my impact, my ankle only got sprained instead of fractured. (Still hurt, though.) But never mind that! I was *screwed*!

“Wh-Who the hell are you?!” yelled a man.

“How dare you!” shouted another.

“You won’t get away with this!” threatened a third.

I figured they must’ve been with the guy I killed, since they were all wearing the same outfit. Also, they were *pissed*. *And* there were literal dozens of them, all in black military uniforms. They didn’t seem to be with the knights.

Wait, are they foreign military?!

They were on their way back from the capital, so maybe they’d gone there on official business or something?! And I’d just attacked them. Which made that a *major* international incident. Oh *fuck.*

I had just become a *proper* criminal.

“You. Stupid. Dipshit. Goddamn. Idiot! You just ruined my life, you moron! Asshole!”

What had I ever done to deserve being cursed by this thing? I was so angry at the demon sword that my gaze got sharper, and my breathing grew ragged and wild, like a beast’s.

I glared at Muramasa, held out in front of me, and the black-robed dudes flinched and went, “Gah!”

What were they getting scared for? I was just angry at the damn sword!

Ugh, I’m being so rude to these people, and... Huh?

That was when I noticed a figure covered in blood, in the center of the group of black-robed men, lying at their feet.

That silver hair... No way!

“Crow...!” the fallen figure said with a groan.

Vita. It was *Vita*. What the hell was she doing there?!

Wait, what? Why are these black-robed dudes stomping a young girl like her? Don’t tell me...

“Be careful, Crow! These men are dark magi! They’re dangerous!”

Oh, so they are!

Everything clicked into place. The rest was easy! All I had to do was act like I’d known the first dude I’d cut down was evil, and then pretend I was mad at the other guys instead of Muramasa, and then—

“Outsiders! You *dare* torture a young girl and disturb the peace of this city?! I hereby condemn you for your sins!”

—say the coolest one-liner I could think of while looking as dashing as humanly possible!

“Oh! Ohhhh, Crow! Crow...! ≡” Vita squealed, her eyes sparkling. She must’ve been really happy that I’d swooped in to save her.

Now nobody will realize I’m being controlled by the sword. Score! No problem! Now, then...

“DELICIOUS. WICKED. SOUL. EAT! EAT! EAT!”

“Bon appétit, Muramasa! I’ll just...be here. Existing. Yeah.”

Relaxing every muscle not on my face, I left everything to the sword.

“O-Okay, but, like, what if this girl happened to have, I don’t know, a warped upbringing and, say, a dependent, love-hate relationship with one specific individual, and then got exposed to, like, an idealized version of a knight in shining armor coming to her rescue at the height of puberty? She’d lose her mind, man!”

—An average person witnessing Vita’s rescue

Chapter 17: Assault

“All right! Here I go!”

Full of energy, the silver-haired young girl strolled through the crowded streets.

Originally, Vita hadn’t been very motivated. She was from the knights’ main headquarters, and had come to Salem on patrol duty as an elite knight.

Given that there was a division of the Imperial Order of Magus Knights in the city, naturally there were quite a few knights stationed there. However, the majority of them belonged to the junior sixth and fifth classes or intermediate fourth and third classes. Elite knights of the second and first classes, like Vita, were assigned to the headquarters at the imperial capital, the better to handle any dangers to the royal family.

If all of the powerful knights were stationed there, however, there would be backlash from other regions—they’d claim that the government cared little for any areas other than the capital. Partly for show, then, higher-ranked knights were routinely sent to patrol other cities.

“Main street, clear! Back alleys, clear!” Vita declared with enthusiasm. “Ooh, a kitty!” she exclaimed, energetically pointing a finger.

Truthfully, until recently, Vita’d thought patrolling a meaningless job. Most criminals were dealt with by the local police or the lower-ranked knights. No ruffian would deliberately cause problems while an elite knight roamed the streets.

The old Vita, upon hearing that Iris—the object of her scorn—was patrolling an area to eradicate aetherborn, had taken on the same job just to meet the vice-captain “by chance” and then get under her skin.

That *had* been the plan, but now Vita was trying to become a better person.

“Will working hard like this set me on the path of righteousness?” she mused sadly to herself.

Vita's early upbringing had been normal. As the child of a military family, she too had looked up to the ideal of a knight as a protector of justice.

Instead, the Kaambl family had decided to make her into a protector of their own authority, a knight whose raison d'être was to surpass Iris.

Thus had begun the corruption of Vita's ideals. All the Kaambls asked of her was to be fiercely loyal to her family and a strong fighter. Her education was best described as military drills. In exchange for power, the young girl had lost her sense of virtue, and her life was emptied of hope. She had no desire to protect the people.

Yet, despite her failings, someone had shown concern for her.

"I wonder what's going on with Vita right now," she'd heard Crow say. He'd not only forgiven her for trying to kill him, he'd also been worried about her.

Oh, Crow, Vita thought. *Now that I've met you, my mind's a mess.*

The idea of defying House Kaambl terrified her, and she still felt a deeply ingrained hatred for Iris. Both of those feelings had been thoroughly and literally whipped into her, and she couldn't easily let them go.

Still, Vita remembered the joy of being loved and cherished by someone, and hoped to offer that same joy to the people. She longed to be a knight of justice.

I want to be that way too. I want to become a knight who can protect people, bring smiles to their faces. I want to be just like Crow!

With these aspirations blossoming in her heart, Vita began to take her patrol duty seriously. As she walked the streets, she investigated every nook and cranny, intervening in minor disputes between citizens and offering a helping hand to anyone who seemed lost or troubled.

The young knight actively toiled to solve problems she'd previously ignored with excuses such as "Too much of a hassle," "The police will handle it," and "A noble lady like me can't be bothered with the rabble."

For their part, people appreciated the young knight's earnestness.

"Look at you, little lady, working hard!"

"Thanks for all the help!"

“Thank you, miss!”

Such words of admiration and gratitude, along with the carefree smiles of the people, tugged at Vita’s heartstrings. “Oh, please, it was nothing!”

Vita found herself smiling effortlessly, her spirits high as she went from place to place. It felt good working hard not to bring someone down but to lift others up. Doing something she could be proud of made her heart sing.

After all that time, Vita was finally savoring the joys of being a knight.

“Now, where to next? Hm...”

After crossing the shopping district, Vita reached a beautiful fountain square. Without realizing, she’d completed her patrol of the entire city and arrived at the inner gates. Well-dressed people crossed into the city one after the other.

“Oh. I guess that’s the end of today’s patrol,” she realized, shrugging her shoulders.

People from the land around the capital were passing through the inner gate. Troublemakers would often try to cross through the outer gate, but the odds of one entering through the inner gate were slim to none.

It’s not that there are no evil people in the capital, she mused, *but that the outer world is dangerous, rife with aetherborn, and low on resources. There’s nothing to be gained from venturing outside, away from the capital.* For this reason, neither Vita nor the local police were particularly wary of visitors coming through the inner gate. Nevertheless, she figured she would do her due diligence and perform a final check.

“Pickpockets accosting people coming in from the inner side are more of a concern, though... Hm, it doesn’t seem there are any right now. Okay then!” she exclaimed, raising her hands enthusiastically. “Time for my second patrol!”

Turning her back to the gate, she was ready to set off again when she heard a stranger behind her.

“You. You’re a knight, right? How convenient.”

“Huh?”

At that moment, Vita felt a sharp jolt of pain in her back, and she groaned in

anguish. The tip of a blade protruded from her chest. Fresh blood gushed from her mouth and torso, and her field of vision dimmed in an instant. As the blade was pulled from her body, a harsh kick connected with her back, sending her tumbling awkwardly across the square.

Coughing and choking, the young girl found it difficult to breathe. Her heart, it seemed, hadn't been damaged, but the blade had pierced right through a lung. With every desperate breath, blood bubbled forth from her chest.

What's happening?! Vita asked herself, bewildered. Moments ago, she'd been peacefully going about her day. What could've happened all of a sudden?

As she lay on the ground, screams pierced her ears. "Wh-Who the hell are these people?! Aaaaaargh!"

Through her foggy vision, Vita saw a group of people pouring through the inner gate and mowing down the shrieking citizens with aethereal arms.

"What's...going...on?" she muttered, dazed.

The city, overflowing with smiles mere moments ago, had turned into a hellscape.

"Oh?" exclaimed the man who had just stabbed her. "You're still breathing, are you? Just as well." He raised his voice and called out, "Hey, some of you get over here!"

At that, a number of people—all wearing unfamiliar black military uniforms—gathered around Vita.

"Wh-Who are you people?!" she asked, her voice shaky. Between the pain and the malicious gazes of the people around her, her young heart cowered in fear. Yet terrified though she was, Vita's pride would not allow her to show fear to evildoers like these. "Why are you attacking this city?! Tell me what it is you're after, filth!" she roared, her voice strong and steady as she glared back at them.

If she could draw attention to herself, it'd make it easier for people to escape, she thought.

"You little... Did you just call us filth?!"

The men began to kick at her fallen form, angrily yelling things like “Fuck you!” and “Get off your high horse, brat!” With no regard for her already-serious injury, they struck her violently as one, murder in their eyes.

Pain and shock coursed through her veins, clouding her consciousness. Still, she resisted, demanding, “Ugh! T-Tell me, you...bastards! Who...are you?!”

Vita held back her cries, telling herself, *It doesn’t hurt. It’s not that bad*. For better or worse, her abusive upbringing had borne fruit. Valiantly pushing through the unbearable pain, she continued to yell at the villains.

She hoped the people would manage to escape and call for her comrades. Surely they would come to her aid!

“Hah! What a good little knight you are,” said the man who’d stabbed her. “All this torment and you won’t even cry? Very well, then.” He turned to the other men. “Stop, all of you! Let’s reward the noble lady here by telling her who we are, shall we?”

To Vita, he looked like a ravenous fox, his upturned eyes glinting with aggression.

Gesturing at the seven-pointed star badge on his black uniform, he shouted at the breathless young girl, “We are Wanpurgis, the Order of the Black Star! We’ll bring true equality to this world!”

“W-Wanpurgis?”

Oddly enough, Vita had heard the name before.

Some time ago, while passing by the parlor at the Kaambl residence, she’d overheard her father speaking to someone. Vita had no taste for eavesdropping—being discovered meant severe corporal punishment—and so she’d left immediately. But one word had caught her ear.

Wanpurgis, she echoed in her mind, puzzled. *Why the same word from that day?*

Oblivious to her confusion, the man continued, “A thousand years ago, the deluge of aether turned the supernatural into reality! People, once driven to the brink of extinction, used that power to fight the aetherborn and eventually

restored humanity's dominance, even reestablishing nations! Ah, the marvelous resilience of mankind!" the fox-eyed man said in an almost singsong tone, offering heartfelt praise to the people of the past.

"Now we have achieved some level of peace once more," he went on. "But say, little knight, there are a lot of corrupt people in this era, wouldn't you agree?! Rotten noblemen, waving their authority around, riding on the coattails of their ancestors' glory!"

Vita couldn't deny the man's words. She was, after all, the descendant of a corrupt noble family herself.

"You know what comes next, don't you?" the man asked. "That's right. Humans began to stabilize, and as a result, this repulsive inequality was born! The Spirit Wall of Berlin divides us between inner and outer zones, allowing the chosen to live carefree within its boundaries. Disgusting, don't you agree?!"

"I..." Vita faltered. The man spoke like a prophet, and the girl found herself nodding at his words.

She'd been certain that they were simple villains, come to sow chaos, to loot and plunder. And yet...

"We were born in the outer zone, you see. Day after day, we lived in fear of the aetherborn, longing for that peaceful capital far, far away! So much jealousy! So much envy! Not one night went by when we didn't lament living in our miserable village! Why couldn't *we* be the ones to live in safety?!"

Tears began to stream down the fox-eyed man's face, and the others nodded firmly, as if overcome by emotion themselves.

*What...*are *these people?*

They were nothing like what Vita had imagined evil to be. These men had a solid rationale, understandable circumstances, and bonds with their fellows.

As she teetered on the edge of unconsciousness, the young girl thought that maybe, if they had their own sense of righteousness in their hearts, they might be open to conversation.

"And then," the man continued, "fate brought us and our great leader

together. He told us, ‘Let us destroy it all. Crush the four cardinal cities to dust, lead an army of aetherborn into the capital, and have them all share in our anguish!’ Marvelous! Truly the righteous hammer of justice we sought!”

“What?” Vita exclaimed, startled. She understood then that the justice they spoke of was nothing like her idea of it.

Conversation was *not* an option.

“Ten years have passed. Steadily, diligently, we’ve prepared for this day, and the time for action has finally come!” the man exclaimed zealously. “Now, my friends, let us destroy everything in sight! Let us create peace through violence! Carve the despair we have felt into every last one of them!”

The black-clad men roared, their bloodshot eyes shining with frenzied madness.

Rationale? Circumstances? Bonds? All an illusion, Vita realized. These people were drunk on violence, nothing more. Lunatics, deluding themselves into thinking they’d be the ones to bring about change to the nation.

“Righteous hammer of justice?” she spat with her last ounce of energy. “Don’t make me laugh. You’re nothing but filth!”

The fox-eyed man cocked his head back at Vita’s words, disgusted.

“A pretty thing like you must be the daughter of a military aristocrat, no? Someone like *you* would never understand our ideals,” the man said, thrusting his arm at the young girl.

Around his wrist was a bracelet adorned with a gray stone, from which a faint hint of aether emanated.

“Ah, but we don’t want you dead before I introduce myself, do we? I am Nya Vincent, one of the Wanpurgis’s Seven!”

As he shouted his name, more aether gushed forth from his bracelet, and a gray, smoky phosphorescence oozed down toward Vita.

“Drown in despair, girl!”

Vita shrieked as the man slowly approached her.

Blood loss had already rendered her immobile, and the black-clad men had also stomped on her arms, legs, and back. She couldn't so much as move a muscle, let alone grip her dagger's hilt to activate its powers. They had her completely cornered.

"I can tell looking at you that your body is toned despite your age. Now, you and I will—"

What was he going to do to her? Vita didn't know. She didn't *want* to know. All she could do was tremble in fear, waiting for despair to strike.

"Nooo!" she screamed.

And in that moment, just as she was about to fall prey to evil, an angry cry reverberated from the heavens!

"Bastaaaaaard!"

"Gwahhhhh!" With a single flash of a blade, the fox-eyed man was cleft in twain, the two halves of his body sliding apart as a geyser of blood gushed forth!

The other men in black, reacting a moment too late to the sudden assault, shouted in anger.

"Wh-Who the hell are you?!"

"How dare you!"

Instead of faltering, however, *he* glared at the men with transcendental rage, making them recoil.

Vita felt it deep within her heart. This was what righteous anger truly was! *He* was the righteous knight she had dreamed of as a child!

Shedding tears of relief, the young knight groaned and yelled out the name of her savior, "Crow...!" He'd really come for her! At the brink of despair, he'd come to her rescue! "Be careful, Crow!" she cried out. "These men are dark magi! They're dangerous!"

There were dozens of them, all wielding what seemed to be aethereal arms. Far too dangerous for one man to handle alone.

However, despite the very warning she'd given him, Vita couldn't think of anything that could cow Crow's spirit. Instead, the fire in his heart burned even brighter, and he declared, "Outsiders! You *dare* torture a young girl and disturb the peace of this city?! I hereby condemn you for your sins!"

His words sent something like an electrical current coursing through Vita's body, a sensation so sweet it nullified the pain in her chest. Before the dignified, heroic young man, Vita lay entranced, having all but forgotten her predicament.

"Oh! Ohhhh, Crow! Crow...! ≡"

She had, without a shadow of a doubt, fallen completely and utterly in love with him.

The young knight no longer had eyes for anything else. A future where she would be safely cradled in the brave hero's strong arms was all she could envision.

"Perish!"

The fierce battle that followed drove Vita's heart rate to its limit.

Crow danced across the battlefield, undaunted, unflinching—slicing, cutting, and slashing without hesitation, as though he had no regard for his own body. Unparalleled, black blade in hand, he was the very picture of carnage.

Terrified, the men in black pushed their aethereal arms to the limit, and exhausting the weapons' aether was the least of their concerns. They unleashed fire, lightning, and ice in an astonishing storm of attacks, far more powerful than what was necessary to kill a single man.

None of it made Crow hesitate. He launched himself at his enemies, in what could only be described as a suicide charge.

With a deafening roar, the black-haired swordsman unleashed a flurry of slashes at his opponents. One after another, he annihilated the wicked men, unfazed even as many of their attacks grazed him.

On her hands and knees, Vita gazed up at Crow as if looking upon a god, unable to contain her feelings for him.

Ah, I don't know whether I can be a righteous knight. But I want to be a

woman fit to stand at your side!

The young knight's feelings were running wild. Respect turned to love, and love turned to passion. Energized by her newfound feelings, she gripped the aethereal blade at her waist, chanting, "Awaken, o Fragarach, the Vengeful Gale!"

Instantly, violet gales began to flurry around her.

Moments ago, she hadn't been able to lift a single finger. She was losing blood and out of air, her heart about to stop. Now, however, it didn't matter.

I don't care about any of that! If I don't at least put up a fight, I'll never be worthy of Crow!

Gathering the last of her strength, clad in wind, the young girl made a mad dash for the last remaining enemies—a group of men in black who had cunningly been trying to attack Crow from his blind spot—thrusting at them in a murderous rage.

"Diiiiiie!"

With a flash of her wind blade, before the men even had a chance to react, she slashed off their heads, scattering fresh, wicked blood everywhere.

A sense of accomplishment as a knight filled her young heart.

"I-I did it... I got them..." she heaved, having reached her limit.

Vita collapsed where she stood. Before she hit the stone pavement, however, a pair of strong arms caught her.

"C-Crow..."

"You've done well, Vita. You have my thanks," Crow said with a smile.

"Oh...!" Those words made tears flow freely from her eyes. Her vision, already compromised by the blood loss, blurred even further. "I-I'm the one...who should thank you, Crow..."

Vita was immensely grateful. He hadn't just rescued her from being fated to walk the path of darkness—he'd also rescued her from a deadly fate. What a wonderful man!

The young girl poured all of her gratitude, all of her feelings, into a heartfelt smile of her own.

But at the same moment Crow had uttered those words—

Dude, seriously, thank you*! My whole body's crumbling to dust! Do you know how hard it is to fight like that?! I'm sooo grateful! You saved me, even in the condition you're in!*

Crow was probably more grateful to Vita than she was to him.

His heroic act but a facade, he'd actually been forced to descend upon the group of enemies, holding back tears as he swung his blade around, mentally arguing with his sword all the while.

"*Ah shit, my muscles are tattered! Also, I keep getting hit everywhere! That hurts! What happened to keeping me safe, Muramasa?!"*

"VESSEL. YOUR PHYSIQUE IS INSUFFICIENT. UNFORTUNATE."

"What did you just say to me?! Say that again, I dare you!"

As Vita expressed her gratitude, she had no inkling of the absurd goings-on inside the man before her.

Chapter 18: Enter the Condemner

“It seems that their organization is called Wanpurgis, the Order of the Black Star.”

After we’d dispatched men in black, Vita—hovering on the brink of death—told me about our foes. She said they, under the pretense of “wanting to equalize the pain between inner and outer citizens,” sought to destroy the four cardinal cities and create a path for aetherborn to cross into the capital.

It made sense. Those cities were the only gaps in the Spirit Wall that isolated the inner zone from the outside world. Surely the government understood this as well, since they’d established divisions in each city and stationed knights there.

Vita continued, coughing. “There were far more enemy dark magi than there are knights in the Salem division... If you hadn’t taken them down, Crow, the city truly would have fallen!”

Despite her shallow breaths, Vita still praised me. I mean, it’s not that I wasn’t grateful, just...

I don’t think this is over just yet. Muramasa’s all antsy at my hip, after all.

The sword was full enough to not take over my body, but it’d been whining for a while now.

“DARK. EVIL. SOUL!”

“Wow, you’re so full of energy! That makes a whopping one of us! Don’t mind me. I’m just gonna disintegrate over here.”

The sword moved to the beat of its own drum, as always. It thought evil souls, like those of aetherborn and dark magi, were tastier. Maybe evil was kind of like fat? The fattier the meat, the tastier, after all.

For this guy to be kicking up such a giant fuss after having killed so many people, someone *hella* evil had to be nearby.

And I *really* didn’t want to fight anymore. I was sore *all* over.

“Crow? You have a rather grim frown on your face...”

“Mm,” I said, “It’s just a hunch, but I feel like we’re not out of the woods yet.”

“Huh? That...” Vita coughed before continuing, “What do you mean?”

Before I could answer, a group of people came running from the direction of the city center, waving their hands and shouting “Hey!” to get our attention.

They wore white military uniforms, signaling that they were the magus knights with the local division. Likely they’d heard the commotion and come to offer support.

“You’re... Lady Vita, an elite knight, and... Lady Iris’s apprentice, was it? The enemy—wait, you’ve wiped them all out?!”

“Did you two do it all by yourselves?!”

“Hey! This girl Vita—she’s badly injured!”

As soon as they realized how severe Vita’s condition was, several people came running to her side with potions. I figured she was in good hands now. And with this many people, they should easily be able to scout out any enemies still lurking about.

“Vita,” I said, “leave the rest to us. You should go to the division’s infirmary and rest—”

A sudden realization interrupted my words.

A commotion in front of the gate means all of the knights would be coming this way, right? Which means the manpower at the division’s headquarters would be...!

That had to be the enemy’s goal!

Thanks to Muramasa, I knew there were still enemies *somewhere*, so I was sure of it!

Pointing in the direction of the division’s headquarters, I yelled out to the knights, “Go back now! This is a diversion! Their real aim is the Salem division!”

The moment I finished saying that, a resounding boom rang out. With a massive explosion, part of the division headquarters went up in flames!

I knew it!

And the next moment, my sore, creaky, sprained legs took off at breakneck speed!

To avoid the crowd, I climbed atop the buildings once more, darting across the skies of Salem with no regard for the danger!

Not that I wanted to.

“EAT! EAT! SOOOOOULS!”

“Seriously, Muramasa?! Again?!”

***

“We’ve been had. This was their true objective all along.”

The division’s headquarters had turned hellish.

Flames raged throughout the building. Black smoke billowed from the holes in the ceiling. Many of the knights and staff had been charred beyond recognition.

Amid the inferno, Hypno, holding a dark gray axe, glared at a heavily scarred woman, dressed in black and with long red hair.

“I can’t believe Karen of the Scarlet Blade, of all people, would fall so far as to become a dark magus,” the commander said.

“Shut up,” the woman snapped. “Don’t act like you know anything about me, Hypno.”

Karen had a refined look to her, but terrible burn scars could be seen on her face, hands, and other exposed parts of her skin.

“You retired from your injuries yourself, no?” she spat. “Stop trying so hard for this damn country! Give me your aethereal arm and get out of my sight!”

Hypno watched as the woman snatched the sword of a nearby fallen knight and deposited it into a pouch at her waist—far too small for the weapon’s size. Still, the blade slid right in, as if it had been absorbed into the fourth dimension.

“A storage device that ignores mass... Is that Fionn mac Cumhaill’s treasure bag? Our nation’s most prized treasure, thought long lost! How do you—”

“Who knows?” the woman said nonchalantly, pointing her flaming sword at the commander. “And who cares? What I want to know is what *you’re* going to do, Hypno. Are you handing over your weapon and turning tail? Or would you rather have my Surtr burn you alive?”

The tip of her red-hot blade emitted a blazing beam of light, and Karen traced it from Hypno’s chest to his lower abdomen, exposing smooth, white skin as the fibers of the commander’s outfit burned away.

“Urgh...”

The woman laughed, her voice a mix of mockery and hatred. “Ah ha ha! I’ve always wanted to see it. So it’s not just your face that’s pretty—your body is too! Completely unlike mine, charred for the sake of this country.”

As its wielder’s rage grew, the flaming sword ran even hotter.

“That fateful day, twenty years ago, spelled the end for me as a woman, and for your ability to fight,” she spat. “And yet you remain a loyal dog of Lemuria!”

Even as Karen spoke to her old comrade, the heat from the flames became so intense that objects around them began to melt.

“Hypno! You’re just a filthy dog to the nobility now, aren’t you?! If you’re going to waste your life away anyway, then come with me!”

Amid the flames, she reached out a hand to Hypno—an invitation to join her in damnation as a dark magus, to help her destroy the empire.

The commander looked at her with a hint of surprise and a quiet head shake. “I’m sorry, Karen. Your invitation comes a little too late.”

“What?!” she screamed in shock, the flames running wilder still around her. “The fuck are you talking about?!”

“You’re right. I’ve been wasting my life away,” Hypno said. “I kept on serving this country, believing that someday it would get better. The more peaceful the inner zone became, however, the more corruption spread. After all the ridiculous demands, I reached the end of my rope.”

“Then why?”

“I recently met this remarkable young man named Crow, you see,” Hypno

explained. “He set my heart alight once more.”

The commander strongly believed that the young man could truly change the country for the better. That he would condemn the corrupt and illuminate the way to a brighter future.

“So I’m sorry, Karen, but I cannot go with you. I don’t want to destroy this country. I want to build it anew with Crow!”

“Hypnooo!” she growled furiously.

The woman reached into the magic bag at her waist, pulling out a second, giant crimson blade.

“Have it your way! If you’re not with me, you’re against me! You’re *dead*!”

“That’s...Dáinsleif, the Crimson Thirst?!” The blade Crow’d turned in had been stolen, and once again fallen into the hands of an evildoer!

“I remember you in your prime,” Karen explained. “So I figure going the extra mile to crush you can’t hurt.”

“Karen, wielding two aethereal swords at the same time isn’t wise,” Hypno warned.

“The words of a cornered rat!” Karen snapped. “I’ve killed all the other knights in this building. The ones that left for the gate are probably going at it with Nya’s group. Maybe they’re all fucking dead!”

The woman let out a loud, wicked cackle. Pitiful, Hypno thought. She’d once been a defender of the kingdom. How far she’d fallen.

“Now scream in terror for me, Hypno! I’ll stain that pretty face of yours with fear!” Karen yelled.

She brandished her swords, lunging mercilessly at her former comrade. Hypno, in turn, quietly gazed upwards.

“I have no reason to be afraid,” the commander said.

“What?!”

“You see,” Hypno began. “In times of trouble, heroes come to save the day.”

The next moment, a man swooped down from the skies above the collapsed

building. Swinging his jet-black blade, he repelled Karen's attack!

It was *him*!

"Crow!" Hypno exclaimed. "You came!"

"Leave the rest to me."

The raven-haired swordsman entered the fray!

And he did so by dropping from a height of many, *many* meters.

My leeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeegs!!!

Chapter 19: The Fierce Battle Draws to a Close

"*You*! You're Crow, aren't you?!"

Eeeeeeeeeeeek! This lady's seriously angry!

Hello, everyone! It's me, Crow.

You know, this season had been particularly hot. Just like the place where I was! It was hot as hell!

Like, we're talking raging-fire levels of hot! A sea of flames! *Everywhere*!

It was sweltering in there, but that wasn't all—oh, no. Not only was I cooking alive, it was hard to breathe, *and* I was still sore all over.

Did Muramasa care? Of course not. Let's just barge right into the *flaming building*.

"Um, Muramasa? I guess you did *kind of save Hypno and I got to look cool and everything, but you know... What if I'd died? Would it have killed you to consider that possibility?"*

"SOUL! SOUL!"

"Asshole."

Of course it didn't listen. It was busy drooling over the redhead in front of us (like, literally, because it wanted to eat her), so yeah. Instead, it just forced me into a valiant fighting stance, eager to have a go at it.

"Tch, no openings. Well-trained, for a greenhorn."

"Well..." *Not really.*

The sword was making me do it, all right? I mean, yeah, I'd trained a *little*, but not elite-warrior level like this thing seemed to think! My muscles were at their limit all the time, every time!

Ugh! I wanted to turbo kick that stupid jerk in its sword-face, just once!

Infuriating!

“Hmph. That perfect posture, that murderous glint in your eye... I see why Hypno holds you in such high regard.”

Uh, no?! I’m not mad at you*, lady! I’m mad at Muramasa!*

“Fine by me! That only fuels my fire!”

No! Fire bad! Put it out!

The redhead couldn’t hear my thoughts, obviously, so she just mercilessly slashed right at me!

A flaming sword in her right hand, and a crimson blade in her left— *Wait, that’s Dáinsleif! Why’d you go and get stolen, dumbass?!*

“Die die diiiiiiie!” the woman shrieked, unleashing a flurry of slashes in my direction.

The flaming blade and the bloodsucking blade alike danced in the air, trying to obliterate me. And to dodge them, Muramasa yet again controlled my body with wild abandon.

Aaaaaaugh! I’m getting dizyyyyy!

I leaped, crouched, backflipped, and spun my way out of her attack range, over and over. And whenever there was an opening, I’d strike, slashing at twice the speed to counter her two blades.

I’m seriously gonna die! These moves are too much! The nausea is killing me! My arms are killing *me!*

Well, I was always slashing things at crazy speeds, but it really did feel like my arms were gonna get obliterated.

I roared at her. *It hurts! Everything hurts!*

“Ugh! How is it that you can withstand *me*?!” Karen shouted.

Despite the unbearable pain, I *was* actually doing pretty okay fighting her. Hell, I was even pushing her back.

She had *two* aethereal arms, both possessing incredible power, and she was an amazingly skilled fighter. Still, her movements somehow felt awkward.

“I see. You’re not used to dual-wielding, are you?!” I guessed.

With a grunt, she barely held up Dáinsleif in time to parry a downward slash.



Oh wow, good work, Dáin! Sorry I called you a dumbass for getting stolen! You're nothing like Muramasa! Who's a good sword?!

I could take advantage of the situation, you see.

My enemy was super skilled, but while controlled by Muramasa, I was hella powerful too (even though it kinda destroyed my body). In a clash between two elite fighters, using an unfamiliar style can cost you your life.

"Fuck!"

Karen must've realized that, because she tried to let go of Dáinsleif. However —

"Haaaaaah!" I shouted.

Slash! Slice! Cut! Hack! Rend! Muramasa struck at her relentlessly, again and again, as if to stop her from parting with the crimson blade, rendering her unable to drop her defensive posture.

"Mmph!"

One final, fierce flash of the pitch-black blade was all it took, and Dáinsleif, weakened from Muramasa's onslaught, split clean in half.

Karen instantly leaped back, but not fast enough—the blade tore her torso open, chest to abdomen, causing a crimson arc to gush forth.

She bellowed, "Fuck! Damn it!"

The woman stabbed her flaming sword into the ground. A wall of flames formed at her feet, and the heat was so excruciating that it felt as though it was searing my skin even from a distance. Before it could reach me, my body pulled back.

So that bastard of a sword had known how to retreat all along!

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*! How *dare* you get in my way! I'm the great Karen! I'm supposed to *destroy* this country!"

Ugh, shut up *already! I'm gonna break at this rate!*

I couldn't take much more pain, okay?!

Muramasa, however, ignored the furious Karen (and my pain, obviously) and stomped my feet so hard my joints all creaked.

Oh, I get it. He's gonna wind up and make me kamikaze through the wall of fire at full speed, then land a hit on Karen before I burn to a crisp. I guess that's a plan, and... Wait, no, that's a horrible plan! I'm gonna get burned for sure! Even if I make it out alive, I'm gonna be covered in burns! Nope! No no no!

"Enough. We don't need to fight," I said.

"What?!"

I'm just gonna negotiate a truce! Yeah! I'll get her to back down while Muramasa's getting ready!

"Your name is Karen, correct? I can see in your eyes that you have your own reasons for doing this."

She remained silent.

I mean, I said that, but the truth is, I had *no* idea whether or not she had her own reasons. I just blurted out the first thing that came to mind!

She'd probably have killed me if I told her that, though, so I carried on with the "I understand how you feel" shpiel.

"I don't know what happened exactly, but your gaze tells me that you once believed in justice. Am I wrong?" *Please say I'm right!*

"No, it is as you say. I was once a magus knight."

"I see." *Yes!* Hell yeah, my gamble paid off! So something *did* happen that corrupted her!

That meant I should be able to persuade her! If she'd been wicked from the start, that would've been different, but if she'd once been heroic, there was room for dialogue!

"Then—"

I was about to try and talk things out when suddenly, a shadow loomed over us, and a ragged-looking girl descended upon Karen.

Who the—

“Hey, Karen! Let’s get the hell out of here! That black-haired guy is a monster!” the girl said in a harsh, masculine tone as she scooped Karen up into her arms.

Her appearance was exceedingly ordinary. She wasn’t wearing the Wanpurgis’s black uniform, and had plain gray hair. Girls like her were a dime a dozen.

The only things about her that stood out were the fact she was covered in wounds, and...the stone bracelet wrapped around her wrist.

Wait, what? That looks like the bracelet the guy I cut in half earlier was wearing!

Ignoring my astonishment, and with a display of incredible acrobatics, she zigzagged her way up toward a hole in the ceiling and escaped with Karen.

I thought for a moment she must be amazingly athletic, and then I realized her legs were snapping and creaking just like mine. A kindred soul!

The girl clicked her tongue. “Tsk. I guess I can’t expect much more from a commoner. If only I’d managed to take over that silver-haired girl’s body...”

“Hey!” Karen demanded. “Nya! Is that you?! Where’s everyone else?!”

“They’re all dead!” Nya replied. “That black-haired guy killed them all! The knights we lured out will be back any second!”

From their conversation, I could tell they were allies.

Man, I’m so glad we settled that without a fight—

“SOUL!”

“Oh, come on*!”*

Muramasa’s hungry ass wouldn’t just let the enemy escape, of course. It immediately made me give chase and mimic the girl’s leg-breaking movements toward the ceiling. Ow!

“Fucking monster! He’s after us!”

“Haaaaaah!” *It hurts! Everything hurts! I don’t wanna go after them!*

Roaring in pain, I tried to catch up with the pair.

In response, the Nya girl loudly clicked her tongue again as she leaped from rooftop to rooftop. She pulled out a bunch of talismans from her pocket and scattered them across Salem's skies.

Huh?

"I collected these from my old body! Time to use them!" She began chanting. "*Kyu-kyu nyo ritsu ryo!*"

At the girl's command, dark energy began to overflow from all the talismans. Dancing in midair, the streams of energy swelled, shifted, and took the shape of giant ogres, all of which descended upon the surrounding area.

Wait, what? What the hell is *that?! Nya, what are you doing?!*

"Go, my ogres! Kill him!"

"Graaaah!" the ogres bellowed, all charging at me at once.

Muramasa sliced through the neck of one of them in an instant, but less than a second later, several of the others swung their fists at me. Though I managed to leap my way to safety, my body was slowly shutting down.

Panting heavily, I realized I was reaching my physical limit. Having fought in the middle of a raging fire, I was on the verge of oxygen deprivation. My joints were in severe pain, and my muscles were burning painfully hot. If you cut my skin open, all you'd see underneath was an inflamed, tattered mess.

"Wh-What's with these things?!"

"Backup! Call for back— Aaaargh!"

Shrieks rose from below as the ogres rampaged with delight. Stunned at their sudden appearance, many people got trampled underfoot. Knights who charged at the monsters were swatted away like flies.

I was just barely managing to dodge their many attacks, but ultimately it was hopeless. My body was battered to the point it could no longer follow Muramasa's orders.

I was going to die.

"Haah... Damn it..."

“ALAS... VESSEL...” Even the sword had given up.

As freedom returned to my body, my knees felt like they were about to buckle.

“I can’t...move. Is this...it?”

What about my dreams of living in peace? Of getting rich? Of finding a pretty bride? Was this the end of them all?

Ah, fuck it! I thought. *If this is how it’s gonna be, I’ll at least die a legend! My death’s gonna be so cool kids are gonna read about it in their goddamn textbooks!*

That was *it*! I was *done*!

Ignoring my body’s limits, I took up the sword of my own will!

Maybe some of Muramasa’s influence remained, because I managed to assume the stance of a warrior, confusing the ogres for a moment.

“Embrace...your doom, vile...*fiends*!” I yelled at the creatures, loud enough for the townspeople and knights to hear me too.

I would wear the mask of Condemner to the bitter end!

“Come at me, bastards! I’m still alive! As long as I draw breath, you’ll never have your way!”

With a battle cry, and under no compulsion, I charged! I leaped atop an ogre’s head and plunged Muramasa through its skull, twisting it in over and over again!

“Graaaah?!” the giant ogre roared in confusion. Hearing its cries, the other ogres lunged at me.

There was nothing I could do.

Ha ha... I’m finished. My body’s seriously done.

Still, I held out my sword at the enemy. I couldn’t move a finger, but I kept up the Condemner act.

“Graaaaaah!” The ogres’ fists flew at me all at once. I was about to be massacred.

And then—

“Crow! I’m with you!”

A blade of light cut through the approaching ogres!

Chapter 20: Crow's Garbage Harem

"Graaaah!"

In that moment, every eye in the area was gazing up at her—a blonde female knight, standing atop a building, wielding a white blade. Even the evil ogres froze in place, dumbfounded in the face of her imposing presence.

"You've been quite reckless, haven't you?"

Pulses of aethereal energy rained down from above as she descended, clad in light. Vice-Captain Iris of the White Blade, one of the most powerful magus knights in all the empire, was about to show us how mighty she really was.

Quietly, she readied her blade.

"Shine on, Excalibur, the Radiant Blossom!"

In an instant, Iris had become a blade of light, her figure vanishing as a radiant beam cut through the ogres. A moment later, she reappeared, and the creatures in the light's path fell to pieces.

Wait, did she just cut through a bunch of them in seconds?!

She was astonishingly puissant. Though many ogres still remained, her presence all but assured our victory.

Damn, Iris, you're strong as hell!

***

Three days had passed since the attack.

Or maybe I should say three days had passed me by.

See, when Iris joined the fray, I'd *thought* I was gonna pass out, but then I rampaged instead. Was made to, at any rate.

As she'd zoomed right through all those ogres, killing them one after the other, Muramasa had kicked up a fuss, all *"HUH?! OGRE! SOUL! MINE!"* and forced me to move.

And then I'd begun fighting again, albeit much more sluggishly than usual.

Fortunately, thanks to Iris's overwhelming power and the hard work of the other knights, we managed to get through the fight with everyone alive. Otherwise, I'd have died to the ogres' counterattack.

In the end, my spirits had been so high that I'd stood back-to-back with a very sparkly-eyed Iris, and we'd triumphantly announced in unison, "We'll protect the peace of this nation!"

She supposedly loved knight tales, so it made sense she'd always wanted to be in that kinda fierce situation.

So, after the battle, I collapsed at last and passed the hell out for three days straight. When I finally woke up, I was in bed at the local infirmary.

"So you see, Crow, all of your muscles were torn. Even the doctor was in shock, you know? Also, your limbs were all about to fracture from stress. You pushed yourself too hard..."

"Heh. I don't care how hard I have to push myself if it means protecting precious lives." *I do care, actually. I would prefer not to.*

"Oh! ≡"

For some reason, Vita had snuck into my bed. And so there we were, two fellow injured warriors, chatting away.

Man, we were both doing pretty great, all things considered. Those potion things the knights (and rich people) had at their disposal really were amazing.

Sure, medical technology may have been garbage compared to a thousand years ago, but this fantasy medicine was definitely worth writing home about.

One swig would speed up your healing tremendously, and applying it to a wound made it heal ten times faster. Iris may have casually slathered some all over me, but apparently, a single vial fetched an insane price on the market. She sure didn't cut corners...

"Vita, what happened to the two Wanpurgis members?"

"Oh, them? They ran off to the outer zone and haven't been seen since," Vita answered, her expression darkening. She clung to my chest, lamenting, "It's all my fault. If only I was of more help..."

Huh. Maybe she thinks of me as an older brother.

So, Karen and Nya had gotten away. They were probably going to attack again somewhere else. That sucked.

“Crow!” a voice rang out. “I heard you’re awake!”

The door to my infirmary room burst open, and Iris barged in, all smiles and sparkles.

Until she saw Vita clinging to me, at which point she shrieked like she’d seen a snake.

“Vita von Kaambl! What do you think you’re doing, clinging to Crow?!”

“Ooooh! Vice-Captain! It’s been *such* a long time! But can you not see we’re two *young* lovebirds having some *private* time together? I *must* insist that you read the room!” Vita said, suddenly bursting with energy.

“What did you say?!” Iris snapped, fuming.

What the hell’s happening? This is a place of healing, you guys! Keep your voices down!

“Vita! Get away from Crow right this instant! Don’t act like a femme fatale when you’re barely out of your diapers! I’ll kick your ass!”

“Eeeek! Oh Crow, I’m sooo scared! Don’t you think it’s sad that the strongest knight *ever*, who’s only ever been stewing away, too *chicken* to work on her *feminine* charms, suddenly has her panties in a twist over a *much younger* rival? Ooh, maybe we should get off her lawn before she chucks her dentures at us!”

“D-Dentures?! I’m not *that* old yet! And I’ll show you what a *real* woman’s feminine charms look like! H-Hyah!” Iris exclaimed, instantly hopping onto my bed as well.

What the hell are they doing?!

“Hah! How’s this, Vita? Impressed yet?”

“Can you go back to being a coward, please?!”

“What’s that supposed to mean, you little brat?! I’d be much nicer to you if not for your foul mouth, you know!”

“Who says I want *you* to be nice to me?!”

Each clinging to one side of me, the two glared fiercely at one another. You’d think being sandwiched between them would be a nice-smelling, soft, happy place, but nope.

An onlooker might’ve thought I was a ladykiller, but the truth was, Vita was just grateful I’d saved her life, and Iris was just being competitive.

When a girl’s in love, even just touching her crush’s hand is nerve-racking, I hear. So the two of them clinging to me like this must mean they don’t even see me as a man.

See, I’m a reasonable guy. Lots of self-control. I wasn’t about to jump to any weird conclusions.

“Crow! Let’s go for a walk around the city once you recover! I’ll give you an allowance!”

“Back off, Vice-Captain! Crow’s coming with *me*! Right, Crow? *I’ll* give you an allowance!”

Oh. So not only do they not see me as a man, they see me as a little kid. Okay, then.

The two started fighting over who’d get to give me an allowance, weirdly enough. Both of them were pressing up against me, snarling and yelling at one another point-blank. I’d never realized Iris had such a childish side to her.



Iris sniffed the air. “Hey! Vita! I can smell your sweet stink on Crow! Don’t tell me you marked him by rubbing up on him while he was unconscious!”

“Wh-What?!” Vita protested. “I’m not that kind of deviant! And now that I think about it, Vice-Captain, when Crow tackled me to the ground I could smell *your* stink all over him! What was *that* all about, huh?!”

“Sh-Shut up! Silence, you perv!”

Their argument got even more heated. I had no clue what they were talking about, but they kept yelling “Pervert!” back and forth at one another. *What’s with them?*

I instinctively looked away from them, at the demon sword resting in a corner of the room.

“VESSEL! RISE! SOUL!”

“Yeah, yeah, you do you, Muramasa.”

Demon swords will be demon swords, I figured. The thing was so hungry it was trembling. Since when could it do that?

“Enough! Stay away from Crow, you loli harlot!”

“*You* stay away from Crow, you horny monster!”

“SOUL!”

And that was how two lady knights and one vibrating sword made such a racket that I got kicked out of the infirmary in two seconds flat.

Chapter 21: Dawn After the Storm

After the attack on the Northern City of Salem, the fiery swordswoman Karen and the ashen-haired girl Nya walked together in a gloomy cave.

Propping up one another, they carefully made their way forward, under the watchful gaze of a group of bats nesting in the ceiling.

“Ugh, that Crow guy got us good. Wanpurgis can’t ignore the threat a great warrior like him poses,” Karen remarked.

“I’d rather not have to deal with him ever again,” Nya replied. “He doesn’t look like it, but the guy’s a monster.”

One somber, the other annoyed, the pair discussed Crow—unbeknownst to them, neither a great warrior nor a monster, just a sad loser under the thrall of a cursed sword.

The two nodded to one another, agreeing to be more careful next time.

“We’ll need to be mindful of him. He’s a force to be reckoned with, just like Iris of the White Blade,” Karen said. “Also, Nya, you look really cute now. I had no idea who you were at first.”

The swordswoman had only just fully taken in the appearance of her fellow Seven member, whom she’d known for ten years. Unlike the hoodlum from before, she(?) now looked like a nondescript young girl. All the two forms had in common was the fox-like eyes, naturally slanted due to Nya’s strong personality.

“Hey! Stop staring, stupid!” Nya snapped, turning away in embarrassment from her(?) colleague’s tepid gaze and clicking her tongue. “It was the best I could do in an emergency. It’s not like I wanted a woman’s body. Well, not a talentless woman’s body, anyway.”

“Huh, so you wouldn’t have minded a talented woman’s body?” Karen asked, a bit taken aback by the unexpected statement.

“Obviously,” Nya responded. Blushing dreamily, she continued, “It’s

embarrassing, sure. But if it means I can be of service to our great leader, then that's enough for me. I'll accept any humiliation if I can be a cornerstone for the glorious future he's building."

"Yikes. There's the religious fanatic I know," Karen said.

"What do you mean, 'yikes'?! Rude bitch!" Nya retorted, puffing her cheeks up angrily.

Karen turned her gaze to the stone bracelet on the girl's wrist. *Tamamo-no-mae, the Ashen Killing Stone. Such an outlandish aethereal arm,* she mused.

The stone's powers were that of soul preservation and possession. Its wearer's soul was contained not in their body, but within the bracelet itself, which could be put on another person to take over their entire existence.

Nya had once told her, "People whose minds and bodies are in shambles are more likely to give in to possession without resisting." Karen had sighed and remarked that this was extremely creepy.

"Say, after your old body was suddenly killed, you snuck onto the body of a dying local girl, right? How did you do that when your previous vessel was already dead?"

"Oh, I didn't mention? Even without a body, I can at least make the bracelet vibrate," Nya explained. "So I just went *brrrrrrr* all the way to the girl's body."

"Gross," Karen said.

"Did you just call me gross?!" Nya snapped.

Startled by the angry voice echoing throughout the cave, the bats flapped their wings in unison.

"*Also*, Karen, don't disrespect our great leader like that!"

"Oh, I respect him, all right—fear him too. I've known him for twenty years, after all. Unlike *some* people he only recruited ten years ago."

"Aaaaaaargh! I'm so jealoooooous!"

Despite their argument, the atmosphere between the two was friendly. To a casual observer, they would look like sisters, rather than dangerous terrorists

who had nearly destroyed a major city.

When they'd made their way halfway into the cave, a voice suddenly rang out, "Hey, you two! You made it back in one piece!"

A bat crossed their field of vision, and suddenly the scenery around them began to change.

The ground they'd been treading on shifted into a red carpet, and the dark cave stretching before them was now a dignified throne room.

"Wait, you're not in one piece at all! Karen's cut open, and Nya is...adorable? What the hell?"

A middle-aged man sat on the throne before them. His voice, though perplexed and rough, was clearly tinged with concern.

"Master, we have returned," the two said in unison, getting down on one knee and bowing in reverence, ignoring their wounds.

The man, flustered, exclaimed, "This is no time for formalities!" He rushed over to them. "Forget that! Go get treated! And you, Karen, mind your movements! Your guts might spill out or something!"

"But Master Vortigern, we can ill afford to not show respect to our organization's great leader."

Indeed. The man was Vortigern, leader of Wanpurgis, the Order of the Black Star.

Glancing at him gave the impression that the years had taken a toll on his appearance. He looked like he'd once been dashing, but now his skin had lost its luster, his jaw was covered in stubble, and wrinkles had begun to form around his eyes. His dull, sooty golden hair was long and unkempt. The man looked like a grizzled lion who had been cast out of its pride.

Karen would never underestimate him, however. Even just speaking to him made her break out into a cold sweat.

I was almost fooled at first. He looks like some nice old dude, but no.

It had been this very man who had orchestrated the attack on the Four Cardinal Cities, after all. He was a bona fide destroyer. Reminded of this fact,

Karen bowed her head even lower.

“Hey, Karen! I told you, no formalities! Your guts are about to spill out! And your chest too, sort of!”

“I don’t mind it if you see my chest. It’s covered in burn scars anyway.”

“What? Don’t say stuff like that!” Vortigern protested. “Hey, Nya, back me up here! She’s being all weird and sensitive with me.”

Instead of getting the help he sought, the man was baffled to see the (now) young girl burst into a waterfall of tears, forming a puddle at her feet.

“P-Please, forgive us! We ran into an unexpectedly formidable foe, and we couldn’t destroy Salem!” Nya wailed, sobbing violently and clinging to her master’s leg.

“Nya! Hey, Nya?!”

Flustered and confused, Vortigern considered asking Karen for help, but she was just bowing her head even lower.

Her intestines peeking out from her wound, she declared, “My apologies, Master. We’ve suffered a crushing defeat.”

The atmosphere grew more and more awkward as the two severely wounded women kept expressing their regret.

“You two, I swear...” Vortigern said, sighing.

Grabbing them by the scruff of their necks, he made the two stand upright, put a hand on each of their shoulders, and gazed straight into their eyes.

“You failed your mission, you said. Very well. Both of you should indeed repent. Your allies may blame you for your failures, yes. You’ll have to accept and endure that as your punishment. Today, you two wallow in defeat,” he said, confronting them with their failure instead of coddling them.

But then he suddenly grinned widely, roughly petting their heads.

“Whoa!”

“Master?!”

“Seriously, though, relax, both of you!” Vortigern exclaimed merrily. “Sure,

Salem still stands, but the other three cities? Gone. The empire's in for a really bad time!"

***

"Hey! Is that black-haired guy with Iris of the White Blade—"

"Yes! The dude who fought the ogres!"

"Yeah! *And* he killed a whole bunch of those dark magi!"

Three days after the attack, I was kicked out of the infirmary.

Walking around the city with Iris, I secretly thought, *Crap! This sucks! We're attracting so much attention!*

Yep. Everywhere I went, people who knew about what I'd done would stare at me. Which was bad. Like, really bad. It was the kind of attention I *absolutely* did not want.

All of them thought really highly of me. They thought I was skilled. It was awful!

I'm just a regular guy, I reminded myself. *All I did was train a little! I'm a weakling with almost no combat skills! Muramasa, the Sable Specter or whatever, is the only reason I can fight all these powerful enemies!*

What had happened was that, prepared to die, I'd gone and done something incredibly stupid. Under normal circumstances, I was but an amateur.

What would people think of me if I became a knight?

I was sure they'd be like, "Wow, Crow, you're so strong! Now go and hunt down big-name criminals and powerful aetherborn!"

Please, no! I'd just mess up and die!

I'd cut it really close three days ago. After having been made to fight repeatedly, I'd seriously almost died.

And so my dumb ass had just *had* to go and think, *If I'm gonna die, I'll do it in style!* and pull the Condemner act in front of a whole damn crowd.

I sighed. *On top of that, people think I'm a—what was it—"myth conqueror"? Someone who's unaffected by aethereal arms? Which I'm not! I'm barely*

holding Muramasa back right now!

Despondent, I tightened my grip on the sword's hilt.

Cutting down nearly a hundred foes between dark magi and ogres had at least somewhat satisfied the sword's hunger. (And sometimes it made a gagging sound, then swallowed. What the hell was it doing? Ruminating on souls?!)

It was, however, horribly fuel-inefficient, and it had already started kicking up a fuss, yelling about souls this and souls that, trying to wrestle control from me. If I didn't keep a tight grip on the damn thing, it might make me draw it.

Sadly, my hand was getting tired and starting to tremble.

Ugh, come on. What have I gotten myself into?

Cutting through my pessimism, a beautiful white hand clasped my own, still shaking against the blade's hilt.

"You're so kind, Crow."

Next thing I knew, Iris was gazing at me with understanding in her eyes. *Huh?*

"Those sad eyes, those trembling hands... You regret having been unable to save everyone, don't you? I can tell."

So *that's* what she thought.

"Yes..." *No!*

Listen, yeah, saving everyone would've been best, but with that many people attacking the city? Impossible. Casualties had been inevitable!

First of all, nobody would've thought criminals would come in not from the outer zone, but from the supposedly peaceful inner zone. The gatekeepers had probably thought so too, and that's why they'd just let everyone in.

"Crow, Hypno will likely fill you in, but allow me to say this first. The Lemurian Empire is currently facing a dire crisis."

Right, yeah. The other cities had probably been attacked too, and all that.

News hadn't reached Salem yet, but one or two of them had probably fallen. And if the other cities had been invaded from the inner zone too, the capital's safety was already compromised. People would want to know who had let the

evildoers in, why nobody had noticed them sooner, and so forth.

"So you see, we'll probably be apart for a while due to work. I wanted to give you an answer before that happens."

Iris offered me a resolute smile.

"I love you too, Crow!"

I'm sorry, what?

Her sudden, shocking statement sent the people around us into a tizzy.

I mean, yeah! The famous Iris had just boldly confessed to someone! Of course people would be surprised! *I* was surprised! More than anyone!

What the hell?!

Wait, no, that can't... Oh, right, yeah! This is about that "confession" I made when we were out shopping! When I said I loved her "as a mentor"!

Granted, I'd gone and forgotten to add the "as a mentor" bit, but I was sure that based on context and our previous interactions, she'd understood it as that. Which had to mean she was now telling me that she loved me "as an apprentice"!

Phew. For a second, I thought she meant romantically.

Of course she wouldn't have.

Other than calling her the "fairest of blossoms" when we'd first met, I hadn't said a single thing to her that could've been interpreted that way. Also, we'd known each other for what, a couple of days? There was no way she could've fallen for me unless I'd landed a bunch of critical hits to her heart. And I had no idea how to do that.

"Iris... How brazen of you to say this in front of so many people," I murmured.

All the eyes on us were giving me the heebie-jeebies. I tried to keep my face stoic, but I could feel my cheeks growing hot.

Seriously, why'd she have to go and say that in public?!

And she'd left out the "as an apprentice" part too! How were people *not* supposed to get the wrong idea?!

At my embarrassment, she blushed and grinned mischievously.

“Didn’t *you* say it publicly too? I’m just delivering a little taste of your own medicine,” she said.

“Huh?”

Ohhh! *That* was what she’d meant!

She’d said it in public and left words out on purpose *to* cause a misunderstanding and get back at me! It’d been deliberate!

Iris, you little devil! I’d thought she was an angel, but she’d done such a childish thing! She had the perfect mixture of light and dark!

“Now, we should get going,” she said. “Hypno’s waiting for you.”

“Right,” I replied.

Iris, a satisfied look on her face, led the way back to the division.

The two of us, mentor and apprentice, merrily strode along the streets of Salem.

***

Because of the attack, the building that housed the Salem division was largely in ruins, and so they’d rented a place nearby, where Iris and I were to meet with Hypno.

We each took a seat on a cheap chair, and gathered around a table.

“Now, about why you’re here— Wait, Iris, what’s with the intense aura of happiness around you?”

“You must be imagining it, Hypno,” Iris said.

Hypno forced an awkward smile at her in response. It *did* kinda look like flowers might start blooming around her any second.

In contrast, Hypno looked exhausted. Not as much as when I first met him(?), mind you, but he looked like he had a lot going on.

Didn’t he get smacked around by that Karen lady? Was he okay?

“You were wounded in your fight with Karen, weren’t you?” I asked. “Are you

all right?”

“Mm. Don’t worry about me, Crow. You saved me before I got too seriously injured,” Hypno replied. “Speaking of which, you’re the one who seems to be in bad shape. Sorry about this.”

Huh? Why was Hypno suddenly apologizing to me?

“See, I asked the doctor to send you this way as soon as you were able to move.”

Ohhh. *That* was why they’d kicked me out of the infirmary so fast. I guess it made sense that they wouldn’t kick a recently awoken patient out just because visitors were being loud.

“Now then, Crow. I’ll start with the current situation in our country.” His expression turned serious. “We have yet to inform the citizenry, so please be mindful.”

Okay.

“I won’t mince words,” he continued. “Salem is the only cardinal city that managed to fend off Wanpurgis’s attack. The other three have fallen, and aetherborn have breached the previously safe inner zone.”

“Truly?” Seriously? Wasn’t this national crisis-level stuff?!

As I panicked internally, Iris pitched in, “It’s solid intel. After the attack, I personally went to each city to confirm their status. Excalibur—my aethereal arm, that is—has the power to emit light. By using the flow of aether to propel myself, I can move faster than the swiftest of horses,” she explained, puffing up her (ample) chest proudly.

So that was how she’d cut down all those ogres so quickly.

A horse would’ve taken several days to reach each of the cities, but it’d taken her no time at all.

“Back to the topic at hand,” Iris continued. “I reported the situation to the capital afterward. Presently, the knights’ headquarters is deploying troops to the city’s perimeter and preparing to intercept the aetherborn. They’re crafty creatures, however, and few would be naive enough to attack the capital

directly. Most would build nests throughout the inner zone, and try to sneak into the city via, say, the sewer system. They must be hunted down and eliminated."

There was much that needed to be done, Iris said, sounding a bit tired. On second glance, her hair looked a bit disheveled too.

From what she was saying, it sounded like she'd had a lot to do while I was asleep.

Regardless of what speed she could move at, she was still human. All that running around would've fatigued her, no doubt.

I mean, back when we'd first met, she'd been ambushed and nearly killed.

"We've also searched for the perpetrators of the attacks, but what tracks we could discover ended abruptly, for no discernible reason. Finding these people has proven to be quite the challenge. We may have been able to protect Salem, but otherwise, this has been a crushing defeat for the empire," Iris said, sighing heavily, her aura of happiness entirely replaced by an air of exhaustion and defeat.

I see, I thought. *So that's the situation in the country right now. If Wanpurgis attacks again, we're totally screwed.*

"Well then, Crow," Hypno cut in, "Vice-Captain Iris has a lot on her plate, as you can see, and so..."

He placed a case on the table and opened it, revealing a pure-white uniform.

"This is..."

"A magus knight's uniform, yes," Hypno said. "Typically, in order to formally become a magus knight, one must pass exams and interviews in the capital, then undergo a knighting ceremony and swear fealty to the emperor. But, given the circumstances, the Vice-Captain here, along with Captain Blackmore, decided to petition the emperor to allow them to make use of capable personnel—that is, you—immediately. Of course, I personally wrote a letter of recommendation as well."

I see. So this was the result.

Hypno, with the uniform in his hands, prompted me to stand.

“It wasn’t easy, but we managed to obtain his approval, under a few conditions,” he explained. “First, if a new knight shows any disloyalty toward the imperial family, those who have vouched for them will be summarily punished. Second, if their capability proves to be insufficient, there will also be punishment. Lastly, they must start as sixth class—the lowest possible. These shouldn’t pose a problem for you, though, Crow. Right, Iris?”

“Yes. We believe in you,” Iris agreed.

The two looked at me, trust evident in their eyes. They took the uniform’s open jacket and placed it over my shoulders and back.

“We’re counting on you, Crow,” Hypno said.

“From today on, you’re a knight,” Iris declared.

The spotless white fabric fluttered.

And thus, thanks to the trust that both of them—and a captain I’d never met—had placed in me, I officially became a magus knight.

“A knight,” I murmured.

A special exception being made for me was bewildering, yes, but for once, I was actually motivated. I mean, I was still a man, you know? I hated fighting, sure, but I hated the thought of my beloved Iris getting injured and collapsing even more.

Besides, I was doomed to fight either way because of Muramasa. By fulfilling my duties as a knight, I’d be able to indirectly take some of the load off Iris’s shoulders. I wanted that, I really did.

“Leave it to me. On my blade, I will protect this country. I will protect Iris,” I declared.

“What?!” Iris yelped, blushing.

“Wow, *someone’s* a show-off,” Hypno teased.

The atmosphere in the temporary reception office brightened.

Once peace’s restored, I wanna hang out with everyone. Vita too. Have some

fun, I thought. *All righty, then! Knighthood, here I come!*

This much motivation was unusual for me. Yes, I did want to help Iris, but there was another reason too.

They said, "They must all start as sixth class—the lowest possible," right? Thanks, Mr. Emperor, sir! Now I don't have to worry about being a knight!

One might've thought being assigned to such a low class would be humiliating. I was incredibly strong under Muramasa's control, after all. However, I was actually *relieved.*

There was no way they'd send a low-class knight on dangerous missions, right?

Heh heh! I'll take on all the missions to hunt down the wimpy ones! I mean, yeah, I'll probably get sore, but hey. If I'm not at risk of dying, I'll gladly do it!

My defenses were pristine when Muramasa was at the helm. Weak aetherborn and small-time criminals wouldn't be able to catch me off guard, so it was perfect!

That'll free up the other knights, making things easier for Iris!

"Oh! By the way, Crow. A uniform isn't all I have for you," Hypno said.

"There's more?" I asked.

He clapped his hands, and several members of the staff walked in with a tray...filled with several ominous-looking pieces of equipment. *Wait, what?!*

"Now that you're a knight, we can finally give you the aethereal arms in our possession," Hypno explained. "Well, the powerful, problematic, cursed ones, anyway. But, since you're a myth conqueror, that shouldn't be an issue!"

Huh? Wait, wait, that's not even true!

"Shall we tell him about *that*, Iris?" Hypno asked.

"Yes!" Iris said excitedly, sharply smacking my shoulder. "You'll love this, Crow! See, His Majesty is quite close with the military aristocracy, so having yet another commoner rise through the ranks like I did would cause backlash. That's why you were given the lowest possible class. Normally, that'd mean

you'd only be sent on easy missions, but...look at *this*!"

Iris pulled out a second, sealed letter from her breast pocket, written under Captain Blackmore's name.

"It reads, 'Given that you're Vice-Captain Iris's apprentice, and considering both your stellar efforts during the attack and your status as a myth conqueror, you are hereby granted permission to undertake missions above your rank.' Isn't that great, Crow?! You can keep fighting for peace!"

Whaaaaaaaaaat?!

Wh-What was this captain doing?! This was the *exact opposite* of what I wanted!

"The captain has assigned a number of difficult missions to us, so you can start with those! As the Condemner, you must be elated!" Iris said.

"Best of luck!" Hypno exclaimed. "Oh, and since you're a myth conqueror, you should bring the cursed arms with you!"

Smiling, Iris handed me the mission papers, and Hypno pushed the ominous arms at me.

They were excitedly volunteering me for things I did not want, and I screamed internally.

Why is this happeniiiiiing?!

"Breaking news! Hell exists, and Crow is in it!"

Chapter 22: Muramasa the Controlling Boyfriend

“SOULS! SOULS! SOULS!”

“Muramasaaa,” I whined, “Can you please stop it with the whole ‘sprinting at full speed’ thing?”

“SILENCE!”

“Whaaat?!”

A day after I’d become a knight, I was running through the woods in the inner zone, in tears.

Rather, I was being made to run—which, I mean, nothing unusual, fine, whatever.

(It wasn’t really fine, nor was it really whatever.)

So this is the inner zone, I thought. *It’s so big it’s hard to believe this is on the other side of the wall...*

Iris had told me that, on horseback, it took a week to travel from end to end.

It was said that, long ago, people walled off an extensive area and exterminated the aetherborn within, thus making it secure for people to live in —the so-called “safe zone.” Impressive!

And that’s where I was! The safe zone! Except, you know, for one minor detail.

“Grrrrr...”

I could feel it. Within the dimly lit forest, between the trees, many aetherborn stared at me.

So much for the myth of safety.

Aetherborn had rushed in through the destroyed cities and were now lurking everywhere.

“Those creatures *do* like killing people,” I mused out loud. “They probably wasted no time once they realized they could cross into the inner zone, where humans are plentiful.”

In many myths and legends, monstrous creatures played the part of villains and the scourge of humanity. When they’d manifested in reality, it hadn’t been just their physical forms—their roles in the stories had too, turning them into extremely dangerous beings which killed humans for fun.

Pain in the ass.

“Sure is nice to not have to feel guilty about killing these things. Now then, you guys, do your thing!”

My body went into battle mode and I leaped into the air, pulling out several knives from my coat’s inside pocket and flinging them at the aetherborn lurking nearby!

“Awoo?!” echoed a confused, doglike cry.

A group of wolflike creatures—werewolves—emerged from the bushes. Clever and physically capable, they were nasty, nasty things. They were also covered in thick fur, so my knives weren’t enough to bring them down.

“Grooooar!”

The pain only made them falter momentarily. Enraged, they tried to pounce on me.

Keyword: “tried.”

“You’ve been stabbed, dudes. It’s over. Hey, Dáinsleif? Feast away!”

“BLOOD!”



The next second, the werewolves collapsed to their knees, the color draining from their bloodshot eyes as their movements slowed.

In contrast, strength surged through my body.

“These are all part of Dáinsleif, the Crimson Thirst, see. It’s a bloodsucking, chaotic arm that leeches blood from its prey to strengthen its wielder. That is, me.”

Although, well, given that for various reasons it was now black instead of red, maybe I should’ve renamed it “Dáinsleif, the Black Thirst” or something.

After the once-huge sword had gotten bisected, Hypno had fashioned half of it into forty-seven knives.

That swordswoman, Karen, had taken the other half—the hilt end—and so Dáinsleif was smaller and weaker than in its original form. But its ability to drain blood and strengthen me was still convenient.

I pulled out Muramasa and hacked away at the werewolves at superspeed. Merciless as always.

Pained howls echoed as I cut them down. Those that had managed to avoid being stabbed realized they didn’t stand a chance and turned tail, kicking at the ground with their powerful legs and retreating blindingly fast.

“You’re not going to let them get away, right, Aethon?”

“LIVEEEEER!”

The next moment, a black chain shot out from my left sleeve, its sharp, beak-like tip flying through the air. It pierced through the fleeing werewolves’ abdomens one after the other, and loud cries echoed throughout the forest.

“And *this* is Aethon, the Sable Tormenter. The story goes that it captures its prey and tortures it by pecking at its liver. It’s kind of creepy, honestly...”

Apparently, the chain had originally been formed from a set of punishments given to some god named Prometheus.

Usually, it looked like an ordinary chain bracelet, but when it saw prey, it did this. And for some reason, it could stretch like crazy and liked to charge straight

for its target's liver. I mean, I like offal too, so I get it.

"Now, what next— Huh?!"

Next thing I knew, my body was moving of its own accord.

Focusing the energy I'd gotten from Dáinsleif's blood meal, I yanked the chain back, pulling all the skewered werewolves toward me!

"Graaaah?!" a werewolf roared in confusion.

"Guh!" I groaned in pain.

They were so heavy that my lower back cracked (ow!), but the rest of me gave zero shits and flung the chain upwards. Like fish being reeled in, the werewolves whipped through the air, unable to escape.

"Do the honors, Arash!"

"SCATTER LIKE BLOSSOMS!"

Pulling the chain back into my sleeve, I drew a large-caliber, pitch-black gun. Dark energy gathered at its muzzle—which totally creeped me out—and I pointed it at the werewolves.

"Please, *please* die in one shot, you guys!" I pleaded as I pulled the trigger.

A tremendous blast of destructive energy shot into the air, engulfing the werewolves in an instant and reducing them to smithereens.

Such incredible power made it seem like a supremely powerful weapon, but it came with a tiny little caveat.

"This is Arash, the Death Shot! Its powers are uh, annihilation, and— Eugh?!"

The hand I held the gun with twisted, and the muzzle slowly turned toward me as I began to pull the trigger.

And that was Arash's second thing. Annihilation, then self-destruction. Originally a bow, this weapon demanded the user's life in exchange for its high power, the damn thing! What a bastard!

"FEAR ME, ARCHER! DESPAIR IN SUICIDE!"

"Eat shit and die, asshole!" *Dammit! This stupid-ass gun's gonna kill me!*

I was within one millimeter of actually pulling the trigger and biting the dust when—

“ARASH. MY UNDERLING. DO NOT. KILL. THE VESSEL.”

Muramasa intervened. My already-twisted hand twisted even more (oww!) but at least the gun wasn’t aiming at me anymore.

Trembling, my arm holstered the gun again, and finally, my body was free to move once more.

“I-I seriously thought I was toast!”

Sighing in relief, I collapsed to my knees. Being killed by enemies was one thing, but being done in by my own damn weapons? Fuck me, dude.

Worst. Job. Ever.

“Ugh... Anyway, at least that’s one thing out of the way, I guess...”

I pulled a piece of paper out of my breast pocket that read “100/100.” It was a mission file sent by the captain of the knights that said, “Intelligent humanoid species are dangerous if left unchecked. Defeat 100 of them.”

It seemed to have been made using the same technology as those talismans Iris had, and the words would wriggle and automatically count the number of enemies I defeated. Pretty impressive.

“I still have a lot of missions to work on, though,” I said with a nervous sigh. “Why do I have to do them while lugging around all this cursed garbage?”

That demon of a sword, Muramasa, vibrated at me in encouragement, which was kind of unusual.

“I. LEAD. UNDERLINGS. RELAX!”

“Sure! Except for the part where they *almost killed me just now*!” I retorted, not feeling reassured in the slightest.

I was so pissed I wanted to stab Muramasa into a nearby pile of werewolf dung, but I didn’t. The thing had tried to cut off my head that one time I’d tried to flush it down the toilet, after all.

Also, yeah, I’d almost been made to kill myself a moment ago, but Muramasa

hadn't really taken over my mind or anything. I could still hear it yakking about wanting this and that, but that was it. It had protected me, sort of. But man...

"Now listen here, Muramasa! Sure, it's thanks to you I can keep these problem children in line, but you *do* realize that it's *your* fault I got them in the first place, right?" I snapped, scolding the sword.

It didn't even react, ignoring me completely.

Annoyed, I found my thoughts reflecting back on what had happened the other day...

***

After I'd become a magus knight, Hypno had merrily foisted a bunch of cursed arms upon me.

"First things first! Here you go—forty-seven Dáinsleifs! The sword broke during your fight with Karen, so I took the blade part and made all these knives!" Hypno said triumphantly, puffing up his (I think?) chest (barely anything to puff, honestly).

Hypno made a stark contrast with the teary-eyed member of the staff who was presenting me with a tray. On the latter lay a number of sharp weapons emitting an ominous aura, almost like a bloody mist. Yikes!

"See, Karen is full of hatred, so when she picked these up, they regained their brutality. But to our resident myth conqueror, that's a nonissue! Now, please stash them in your coat's numerous pockets!"

"Um, Hypno..."

I was *not* a myth conqueror! That was a *misunderstanding*! I couldn't just accept those things!

Or so I would've told him, if Muramasa hadn't suddenly started vibrating, going *"ENHANCE! COMBAT! STRENGTH! EFFICIENT! SOUL! PREDATION!"* and taking complete control of my arms, picking up the daggers one after another.

I threw them into the air and spread open my coat. The falling knives slid into the pockets Hypno had prepared—a perfect fit—and he(?) squealed in delight.

"Muramasa! Don't be a show-off! What are you doing?! Also, didn't you hear

that these have regained their brutality?! I can't just accept— Ngh?!"

My soul shuddered.

A pale blue mass—my soul, probably?—floated in my mind, and a large number of crimson blades were heading toward it, all shouting *"BLOOD! BLOOD!"* in unison as they tried to stab into it. They were trying to curse me like Muramasa had, I figured.

Completely unaware of the strange goings-on, Hypno approached me with a smile and said, "Here, take these too!" Cheerfully, he held out two weapons to me. "Come on, come on! You'll take Aethon and Arash too, right? These two are incredibly wicked! One has an insatiable appetite for liver, and the other makes you want to die after firing it! Outrageous, right?!"

What the actual hell?! These are total *shit!*

Despite the terror in my heart, I took the remaining arms as well, wrapping the chain around my left arm and putting on the gun's holster before slipping it inside.

Immediately, my soul began to shudder even harder, and a tin-colored chain and a tawny arrow also manifested inside my spiritual plane.

"BLOOD! BLOOD!"

"VISCERA! LIVEEER!"

"SCATTER LIKE BLOSSOMS! DESPAIR IN SUICIDE!"

My heart was overflowing with evil intent! The cursed arms surrounded my soul, lunging at it all at once to try and claim it for themselves! However—

"PERMISSION. TO SEIZE. DENIED!"

Black blades sprung forth from all over me, and began stabbing at the cursed arms!

The weapons slowly got sucked into my soul. Crunching and squelching noises echoed within me as they were greedily devoured.

"UNDERLING. SUBJUGATION. COMPLETE."

In an instant, all the weapons I had on me turned black, prompting a loud and

surprised “Whoa!” from Hypno.

“You’re the real deal, Crow!” he declared. “The evil arms all turned black, as if dyed by your strong will to eradicate all evil! Wooow!”

He was excited. Overjoyed, even.

I, uh, wasn’t. All the color had drained from my mental cheeks. Terrified, I glanced at Muramasa.

“Y-You can actually straight-up control cursed arms too?! Are you for real?!”

The mere thought of that amount of power made me shudder. I’d dreamed of breaking free from this thing’s control someday, but never in a million years had I thought it had this much power!

“Wait, so even if I find a way to break free from your curse and get rid of you... Won’t I just get immediately cursed by the other arms?”

“BINGO.”

“What do you mean, ‘bingo?!’ You knew*, and you still had me take the other arms?! You cheating bastard!”*

And so I fell right into Muramasa’s trap, becoming even less able to escape its clutches!

Poor Crow, unable to get away from his controlling boyfriend!

Chapter 23: Magnum Opus

“F-Finally, the city... I’m so sick of sleeping outdoors...”

It’d been three days since I’d left Salem. Carrying a giant bag, I stopped by a certain city.

So this is Sirius City, huh? “The Great Wolf.” One of the seven cities surrounding the capital.

I looked around with a straight face, but internally I was going, *Whoooa, so this is what a big city looks like...*

Iris had told me that there were seven great cities surrounding the imperial capital, all of which were as well developed as the capital itself: Sirius, the Great Wolf; Procyon, the Wise Wolf; Castor, the Brave Twin; Pollux, the Loving Twin; Capella, the Loyal Retainer; Aldebaran, the Stout Bull; and Orion, the Celestial Bow.

Naturally, the roads were paved with stone, the buildings were gorgeous, the people were stylish... The place was far removed from the life of a country bumpkin like me.

If I were wearing my own clothes, I’d be a laughingstock. I’m so glad they gave me a military uniform, I thought, catching a glance of my own reflection in a shop’s window display.

Wearing that white military coat, I had an air of authority.

It’d pretty much gotten me a free pass into the city. The guards, on edge from the perilous situation we were all in, had all relaxed and meekly gone, “Oh, a knight! By all means, sir, go on in!” once they’d seen my outfit.

They’d performed a simple baggage inspection, but that had been it. Magus knights sure were a big deal.

Even the people who live here bow their heads slightly when they pass me.

Also, my clothes were incredibly functional. Hypno had said, “These are completely different from regular clothes, you know. They’re made with thread

fashioned from Arachne silk. You know, the giant spider aetherborn?"

And boy, was he(?) right! These clothes were resilient, perfectly breathable, self-cleaning, self-repairing... So many features! Wow!

Some aetherborn secretions and body parts can be super useful, huh?

Unlike the horrible, tyrannical sword at my waist, Muramasa. I had *words* to exchange with that thing.

"Even aetherborn are contributing to society, you know. But what do you *do? You just go around causing trouble to score some souls! What kinda life is that? Hey, let's quit the violence already, hmm? Sure, go ahead and do whatever with my body, but we should just find ourselves some honest work—"*

"SILENCE! I AM THE MASTER. YOU ARE MY FLESH SLAVE. DO NOT GIVE ME ORDERS!"

"Excuse me, what*? Master?* Flesh slave? *I'll fucking* kill *you!"* I snapped internally, losing my temper with that cocky garbage-ass sword.

I was in the middle of lecturing it, dammit! How *dare* it!

"I've had it with you, you worthless piece of shit! I'm gonna find some dog poop on the roadside and stick you into it! It'll be the world's worst sculpture, and I'm gonna title it 'The Freak's Fate'! Watch me!"

"HOW DARE YOU!"

"Keep your filthy paws off me! I'm making you into my magnum opus before you get the chance to take over!"

Fully planning on turning Muramasa into an *objet de merde*, I angrily yanked it out of its scabbard.

And then a voice from behind me went, "Eek!"

I turned around to see a girl with light pink hair standing there.

"Hey! I'm not an enemy! Put away that foul thing!" She was wearing the female version of the knights' uniform, so she must've been a magus knight too. Flailing her arms around, she yelled, "I'm sorry I snuck up on you!"

She did? I had no idea...

I'd only drawn Muramasa so I could stab it into some roadside poop. Guess I'd caused a misunderstanding. How rude of me.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to startle you," I said, sheathing the pitch-black blade.

With that, she calmed down, letting out a sigh of relief as she turned to face me. Pressing a hand down on her chest as if to catch her bearings, she said, "You know, for a sixth-class, you're really perceptive. Your name's Crow, right?"

"H-How did you—"

"You're the talk of the city," she explained. "Everyone's going on about how Iris of the White Blade suddenly has a disciple."

Oof. My personal info's making the rounds?

Strangers knowing about me felt weird. Kinda embarrassing, really.

As I busied myself with such thoughts, the pink-haired girl pointed a finger at me. "Anyway, since you're sixth-class, I'm your superior! So you come with me! I, Tiana, will show you to the division!"

With a confident stride, Tiana led the way. It was kind of arbitrary, but I appreciated the guidance either way.

I had no idea why she'd snuck up on me, but I sure was glad to have met someone so nice!

***

"How *dare* he become a knight without even needing to take the admission tests! I'll teach him a lesson!" The loud, scummy remark echoed throughout the city.

Fifth-class knight Tiana had been furious that day, after hearing certain rumors earlier that morning.

Apparently, the powerful knight Iris of the White Blade had found herself a secret apprentice out in the boonies, and he'd been knighted.

Apparently, as her apprentice, he hadn't even needed to take the notoriously difficult qualification tests to join the knighthood.

Apparently, despite having joined with great fanfare, he wasn't even that good, since he'd started as a sixth-class knight, the lowest possible.

He was a young man with black hair and an even blacker sword, they said.

Upon hearing these rumors, Tiana formed an immediate impression of him: *In short, this black-haired jerk is trash and made his way up through connections. I'll just have to teach him a lesson, won't I?*

"I'm so mad!" she fumed. "I failed the admission tests *three times*!"

The tests one had to pass to become a magus knight were extremely strict. Candidates were made to run dozens of kilometers carrying their equipment, and even to fight packs of aetherborn. They had to risk life and limb.

Skipping them because one's mentor was famous? Ridiculous.

"That's *it*! I'm gonna secretly spit on that Crow guy's back every day! Just you wait!"

Repeatedly muttering about how mad she was, Tiana made her way to the city's gates.

The Lemurian Empire was in dire straits at the moment. Three of the Four Cardinal Cities had fallen, and aetherborn had invaded the inner zone. To exterminate them, low-ranking knights like Tiana had to patrol the city's surroundings every day.

As she neared the gate, she switched her focus.

"All right, forget that bastard. Gotta get to work. Although...there aren't that many aetherborn around here, are there?"

It made her job easier, so she didn't think too deeply about it.

The reality of it was that a *certain* man had been hunting down all the aetherborn in the area.

"Nothing beats some peace and quiet, I guess. Wait, what?"

On her way out the gate, Tiana passed a knight entering the city. The sight of his black hair made her gasp—could he be the one everyone was talking about?

"Black hair's pretty unusual," she muttered to herself. "Though it *was*

commonplace a thousand years ago.”

After the flood of high-concentration aether a millennium ago, the humans who hadn’t mutated into aetherborn had undergone one particular change—their hair and eye colors had taken on otherwise unheard-of hues. Tiana’s light pink hair, for instance, would have been something straight out of a fantasy tale back then.

Most likely, this change had also been due to the aether’s influence as it turned fantasy into reality.

“His sword’s black all the way to the hilt. There’s no mistaking it—that *has* to be Crow!”

She immediately sprung into action.

Tiana took pride in her soft, stealthy steps. She snuck up on Crow from behind.

Tee hee hee. Low-ranked knights like us are mainly responsible for locating and hunting down weak aetherborn. If we run into a strong one, we’re supposed to sneak away and leave it to the middle-or higher-ranked knights. To that end, Tiana had perfected her stealth techniques. She drew closer still, without making a single sound.

Now, what to do? Spit on his back? Bite his ear, make him yelp in pain? Mess up his hair and embarrass him?!

She could think of many, many ways to abuse him. Tiana reveled in her lack of morality, even as she wondered if she’d always been this wicked.

And then, just as she was about to fully close the distance between her and Crow—

He drew his blade.

“Eek!” she yelped.

At the same moment, a strong sense of rage emanating from his back hit her like a ton of bricks. It was as though he was intent on sending his worst enemy to the pits of hell.

Yikes! Who the hell is *this guy?!*

Tiana’s heart thumped wildly in her chest and her knees grew weak.

What the heck?! They said he was a wimpy sixth-class knight!

The instant reaction to her silent, sneaky approach. The speed with which he’d drawn his sword. The aura of rage that had frozen her in her tracks. All this could only mean one thing:

He’s gonna kill me! He’s gonna mistake me for an enemy and kill me!

In a split-second decision, trembling at the jet-black blade, Tiana yelled out, “Hey! I’m not an enemy!”

Her plan to bully him into submission was a massive failure.

And thus, Tiana acted like a higher-ranked knight ordinarily would, unaware that the true reason the man before her had furiously drawn his sword was a 3 IQ “I’m gonna shove this treacherous-ass sword into a pile of poop!”

Chapter 24: Fix Those Relationships, Crow!

“Hello! Is the commander here?! I brought that one black-haired dude!”

You don’t have to say it like that...

After I met Tiana, she brought me to the local knights’ division, where I was supposed to meet with their commander.

Captain Blackmore had instructed me to do so. His instructions read, “I’ve arranged for you to speak with the Sirius City division’s commander. Go there once you’ve completed your duty.”

Man, meeting important people like this makes me nervous. What if they’re scary?!

But as I fretted internally, Tiana yelled out, “Commander?! I’m coming in!”

Wh-What?

She didn’t wait for an answer, and just barged right into the commander’s office!

“Wh— Tiana?!” shouted a woman who sat in the back, surprised.

That’s the commander, I guess?

Tiana darted toward the woman, exclaiming, “I knew you were in here, mama! Mamaaa! ≡” and throwing her arms around her, smiling.

Uh... Mama? What?

***

“Sorry you had to see that,” the commander said. “My name’s Fiana von Alithlai. I’m the commander of this division...and the mother of this idiot child.”

“Mamaaa!” Tiana whined.

Commander Fiana had politely greeted me, and Tiana was next to her, holding her head (which her mother had just summarily thwacked) in tears. Quite the contrasting mother and daughter pair.

Hmm. The air around them feels totally different, despite how alike they look.

They could've honestly passed for sisters. Fiana looked like a more refined, narrow-eyed version of Tiana, who had a plump figure and bright, round eyes. They had the same peach-colored hair, so it could be hard to tell them apart from a distance.

"Sir Crow, was it?" Fiana began. "Was my idiot child rude to you? I fear I may have coddled her too much. She can be selfish, lazy, inconsiderate, and sometimes act without thinking, like just now."

Ouch.

"For instance, perhaps she made outrageous assumptions and tried to pick on you, since you're a rookie?" Fiana suggested, causing Tiana's shoulders to shudder *very* conspicuously.

Huh? Why did she shudder? She's been nothing but nice to me.

I answered honestly. "Please be at ease, Commander Fiana. She's quite kind."

"Kind? *This* kid?" Fiana asked, incredulous.

"Indeed. She reached out to me when I was lost, and kindly led me here."

I was really grateful. I had a severe case of resting bitch face, after all. Not a lot of people would've willingly approached me! All the girls back at my village hadn't even been able to make eye contact with me.

But Miss Tiana wasn't like that! She'd not only come close to me, she'd guided me through the streets even though I'd scared her initially!

"She introduced me to an excellent restaurant, a well-stocked general store, and even a gathering spot for cats on the way here. I'm grateful for her kindness."

"Well, she was probably just killing time wandering around and shirking her patrol duties..."

Well, that just made my dear Tiana sound like a terrible person! That was a little rude, no?! See, Tiana even grunted! That must've hurt her feelings!

Anyone who was ever nice to me had my unconditional support! And so I

protested!

“Commander Fiana, with all due respect, casting doubt on your daughter’s actions without verifying the truth of the matter seems rather questionable,” I said.

“W-Well, I...”

“I’ve only just met your daughter, and so I don’t know what kind of person she’s been until now. However, to me, she’s been kind and cheerful, and I respect her seniority,” I declared assertively. *As her mother, you should respect her for who she is now, rather than who she’s been!*

“Huh?!” the commander exclaimed, turning pale.

I must’ve struck a chord with her. After a moment, she looked at her daughter and bowed her head, seemingly realizing her mistake.

“I-I’m sorry, Tiana. I’ve made terrible accusations about you based on the image I’ve had of you until now,” Fiana said. “I had deemed you the failure to end all failures just because of how you’re not only missing several screws, but also weak and harbor many complexes, and because of how a few months ago, you told the youngest knight ever, Vita of House Kaambl, that she’d only joined the knights because of ‘nepotism,’ and that you were going to ‘punish’ her, then picked a fight, got beaten up, and started crying in front of someone younger than you despite being the daughter of a military family yourself...”

Trembling, the commander offered her daughter a heartfelt apology, believing that she should first and foremost believe in the possibility that Tiana had changed her ways.

In response, Tiana, twitching for some reason, said, “Y-Yeah! I’m a changed woman! I wasn’t thinking of picking on a newcomer or slacking off, like, at all!”

“That’s wonderful news, Tiana!” the commander replied. “I thought you were beyond salvation! This means you’re going to train diligently from today on, right?! You’ll devote yourself to your studies, and to your etiquette lessons as a noblewoman, right?!”

“Y-Yeah! Totally!” Tiana said, loudly breaking into tears for some reason.

Ah, it must've been because her mother finally believed in her! Those were tears of joy!

"Tiana!" Fiana exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears as she put her arms around her daughter.

"Mamaaa!" Tiana said, sobbing as she embraced her mother in turn.

Aww! Watching such a heartwarming scene made me feel all warm and fuzzy!

"Breaking news! Crow, a total noob, improved Commander Fiana's family relations within one minute of meeting her!"

"He was seen beaming and exclaiming, quote, 'Aw, Tiana must be so happy!'"

Chapter 25: Crow Needs Me!

“Sir Crow, Captain Blackmore has ordered me to look after you. Please, do not hesitate to ask should you need anything,” Fiana said, smiling brightly.

Clearly, she was glad to see some positive change in her daughter!

“In that case, would you mind checking these for me?” I asked, handing her my mission papers. “The captain requested that I report to you when I’d completed my assignment, Commander Fiana.”

“Sure, I’ll take these, then. Let’s see here...” she began, looking over the files. Her eyes widened in shock. “Wait, what?!”

Miss Tiana, who stood next to her, seemed startled that “mama” had raised her voice.

“S-Sir Crow, you received these missions three days ago, correct? And you’ve already completed them all?!” A number of papers dropped from the commander’s trembling hands.

The various documents noted results that far exceeded the requested number of kills:

Subjugation of cunning humanoid aetherborn: 324/100

Subjugation of swift, four-legged animalistic aetherborn: 215/100

Subjugation of plantlike aetherborn masquerading as nature: 156/100

Subjugation of fast-reproducing insectoid aetherborn: 413/200

Catching sight of these numbers, Miss Tiana let out a loud yelp.

“Whaaat?” she exclaimed, incredulous. “What the heck? Wait, does this mean that the reason why we haven’t had many aetherborn around is...”

“You, Sir Crow,” Fiana said, finishing her sentence for her.

Mother and daughter stood dumbfounded. I, on the other hand, didn’t really see a reason to be that proud.

It's not like I did it because I wanted *to! Muramasa just ran rampant!*

I didn't want to think about the last few days anymore, what with all my cursed arms squealing about their favorite foods while forcing me into battle. Except for Arash, I guess, who—despite not eating anything—just egged me on like *"FIGHT! FIGHT!"* because it wanted to watch me die.

What kind of high-grade jackass weapon wants to make its wielder commit suicide after using it, just because it *enjoys* watching them die on the battlefield? What the hell?!

Thanks to all that, I had barely gotten any sleep lately, and my face probably looked even more sour than usual.

Can't even sleep unless all the cursed arms are satisfied. Really cool.

It was like I was a single parent to a bunch of awful kids, and I was sick of it. My rage toward Muramasa—who had caused this situation in the first place—boiled anew.

I couldn't tell them that was why I was struggling, though, so back to sharp-faced Condemner mode I went.

"Requested kill counts mean nothing to me. I see evil, I destroy it. That's my personal code."

The pair of -Anas stared at me, wide-eyed. I figured that ought to have dispelled any bad impression they had of me. They now knew me as Crow, the highly motivated and eager newcomer who exceeded societal expectations.

Finally, I placed the stupidly huge bag I'd been carrying before Commander Fiana.

"These are the aetherborn parts I was ordered to collect. Please confirm that they're all accounted for," I requested.

"V-Very well," she replied. "Now then, Sir Crow, our division has lodging rooms. You should get some rest."

"Thank you very much," I said, briskly bowing my head before excusing myself from the commander's office.

Man, I hadn't slept in a bed in *so* long! I couldn't wait!

***

“Requested kill counts mean nothing to me. I see evil, I destroy it. That’s my personal code.”

At those words, a chill ran down the spines of Fiana and Tiana. They stood amazed at the overwhelming air of rage surrounding the young man.

After exchanging a few words with them, Crow left the room, taking the wrathful aura with him.

“What the hell even *is* that guy?!” Tiana exclaimed, on the verge of tears. “He’s the furthest thing from some nepo sixth-grader!”

The younger knight was dismayed. She couldn’t tell her mother, but his terrifying nature had intimidated her since the moment she’d tried to play a prank on him.

“Mama, who *is* he?”

Fiana, having heard about Crow the Condemner’s background from Vice-Captain Iris, began to explain.

“It’s no wonder he holds evil in such contempt. His hometown was destroyed by a dark magus and a host of aetherborn,” she said quietly.

The commander explained that, originally, Crow had been discovered by Iris in the outer zone, and she’d secretly taken him on as a disciple and begun training him. Since not many saw the vice-captain in a positive light, Iris had thought it prudent to keep their connection hidden.

After that—so the story went—he’d gradually grown stronger. Until one day, when tragedy struck.

“You said his hometown was destroyed,” Tiana murmured.

“It was,” her mother confirmed. “Apparently, only Sir Crow and the youths he rescued survived the assault.”

Fiana figured that must’ve been the moment he’d become the Condemner.

Afterward, he’d happened upon an aethereal arm and, in a fit of rage, obliterated the dark magus who had attacked his hometown.

He'd gone on to join his mentor, Iris; eliminate the alraune that had sprouted in the middle of the village of LaVolle with zero casualties; and play a major role in the recent attack on the Four Cardinal Cities. Word had it that, despite his fraying muscles, he'd fought with the ferocity of a war god, helping to defend Salem.

"Crow is fiercely passionate about justice," Fiana continued. "They say he has an indomitable spirit, and is a myth conqueror just like our captain."

"Wait, you mean he can use cursed arms?!" Tiana exclaimed with another shudder.

Ah, such a sorrowful and passionate knight! She felt her chest tighten at the thought of how different she was from him.

I don't have a sad backstory. I just happened to be born into a military family. Becoming a knight was only natural.

Thinking back, Tiana realized she'd just gone with the flow and started her military training—but had soon realized she had little aptitude for it.

Still, I didn't want to disappoint mama. I managed to just barely pass after three failed attempts, and then got promoted from the lowest possible rank to fifth-class, but...

That was her limit. A low-ranking knight was all she'd ever amounted to. She pitied herself for it. Having lost what little motivation she'd once had, she'd stopped training, reduced to a petty woman who would bully rookies she didn't like.

Crow, in comparison, is so...

It was clear from the number of aetherborn he'd killed that he wasn't ordinary. No matter how strong he may have been, he couldn't have gotten those results unless he'd fought relentlessly, with no breaks or sleep.

Tiana could only be astonished by the young man's hatred for evil, so fiery it threatened to consume even Crow himself.

"What's going on with him, anyway?" she wondered aloud. "I heard he was made sixth-class because he joined through connections, not skill."

“Likely slander spread by some noble. Many think poorly of Iris and others like her, who are from the outer zone,” Fiana said, sighing deeply at the pointless gossip. “His existence was originally meant to be kept a secret, known only to the upper echelons. Myth conquerors are powerful, after all, and if our enemies found out, he’d have a target on his back.”

Yet the higher-ups had spread derogatory information, drawing unnecessary attention to him. What could their intention have been? And they had seemingly hidden his status as a myth conqueror to damage his reputation, but that too had put him in jeopardy.

Harsh as he might’ve been, Crow fought for peace. Fiana was disgusted by the lows the nobility would stoop to.

“I’m certain Sir Crow will continue to encounter many hardships,” she said. “I told you all this for a reason, Tiana. I want you to support him.”

“Huh?! Me?! Support *him*?!”

“Yes. I would’ve never shared this information with the person you were before today, but Sir Crow told me that, as your mother, I should believe in you. And so believe in you I shall,” the commander explained, smiling softly as she placed a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “You have your orders, Tiana. Look after him, even if only while he’s in this city. I’ll assist you.”

“Y-Yes, Commander!” the younger knight exclaimed, nodding firmly despite her frayed nerves.

She really wanted to refuse and tell her mother that she was still a good-for-nothing loser. Not only that, Crow terrified her. She feared that one day he would strike her down for being so worthless, like he nearly had when she’d approached him from behind.

And yet...

It’s thanks to him that mama believes in me again. At first, I thought he should’ve minded his own business, but...

Tiana was happy. Yes, all this had put her under a great deal of pressure, and she wasn’t sure she could be of any use no matter how hard she tried, but still she wanted to live up to her mother’s trust.

If nothing else, she wanted to repay Crow for getting Fiana to believe in her again.

“At the pace he’s going, he’s probably gonna overdo it and get himself killed. As his senior, I’ll have to teach him to enjoy some casual playtime too!”

“Hah! *That* I know I can trust you with. I’ll leave it to you, Tiana.”

Mother and daughter shared a chuckle at the thought of the overly serious young man.

Speaking of whom—

“Duuuuude, this bed’s sooooo soft! Best bed *ever*!” Crow exclaimed, sinking into the bed with a goofy smile on his face like the trash he was.

He didn’t look at *all* like a condemner, threatened to be consumed by his own passion, like the two knights feared.

“I already took a shower, so sleep time! Nighty-night, everyone!”

“SOULS!”

“BLOOD!”

“GUTS! KIDNEYS!”

“SCATTER! SUICIDE!”

“Yeah, yeah. G’night.”

As used to the wicked screaming as he had become, Crow ignored them and snuggled under the covers. Unaware he’d made the mother and daughter duo so worried that they felt they *had* to support him, he drifted off into blissful sleep.

Oh yeah, the pair of -Anas started giving him an allowance.

Chapter 26: Signs of a New Disturbance

“All righty, newbie! On to the next store!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Tiana led me by the hand as we walked through the streets of Sirius City. Yesterday she’d only shown me around, but today she happily stopped by the various stores to eat and shop.

“They sell troll ice cream over there!” she told me. “It’s super stretchy and fun! It has troll muscle fibers mixed in!”

“Is it good?” I asked.

“Awful!” she exclaimed, laughing heartily. I caught a glimpse of her slightly protruding fangs. Cute!

Man, I knew she was a good person. Can’t believe she actually asked me to hang out!

Earlier that morning, I’d been hunting down aetherborn on the outskirts of the city to feed Muramasa and the others when Tiana came running after me, ordering, “No hunting! Not today! You and I are gonna hang out!”

I was so moved! No girl my age had ever wanted to hang out with me!

“C’mon, Crow, get a move on! Or are you out of money already? The money mama and I gave you should last you three days’ worth of messing around!”

“Oh, no, I’m good on money. Iris, Vita, and Hypno also gave me some.”

“I’m sorry, what? The vice-captain, a genius knight, *and* a former elite knight?!”

Yep. All of them. People just kept giving me money for some reason. Did I look *that* poor? Granted, I *was*, but you know. And the payment for the missions I’d completed wasn’t due for another few days, so...

It’s me, Crow, the man whose wallet smells like women. I think there’s a word for people like me. What was it? “Gigolo”?

“Wow. And mama’s the commander of the Sirius division too! Everyone around you is so impressive...except for me,” Tiana murmured with a somber expression, oblivious to my inner thoughts. Taking a bite out of a skewer we’d bought from a street stall, she quietly asked, “Hey, Crow. Do you think there’s any meaning to being a weak knight?”

“Pardon?”

What was with her all of a sudden?

“You know, unlike you and the people around you, I’m a measly fifth-class knight. I’m well aware I don’t have a whole lot of potential,” she explained nonchalantly. “All someone like me can do is pester a hardworking newbie, who willingly goes out to hunt aetherborn, and drag him around town to try different foods. Someone else would’ve been able to help you hunt and stuff.” Tiana shrugged. “*I* wouldn’t be able to keep up with the insane speed at which you’ve been cutting enemies down.”

She stood before me, staring straight into my eyes.

“Hey, Crow. If I’m bothering you, tell me, okay?”

“Why would you say that?” I asked, confused.

“I mean, if push came to shove, I wouldn’t be able to save anyone. Yet here I am, taking up the time of someone who does, in fact, save people. Isn’t that wrong of me?” she said, smiling sadly.

Ah. So that was what she was hung up on.

“Oh, by the way! If you’re going back to hunting, stop by the division first for some healing potions! And bring some bandages too—”

“Tiana,” I cut in, taking both of her hands in mine.

“Fweh?!”

“Listen to me, Tiana. I’m very grateful to you.”

That’s right! I didn’t think she was bothering me at all! Quite the opposite, actually.

“I have to keep fighting due to circumstances beyond my control,” I explained.

“Even in my free time, I succumb to bloodlust and hunt down aetherborn and dark magi. That’s the kind of sad man I’ve become.”

“But... Your hometown was destroyed, so you want revenge, right?” Tiana asked.

“Yes.” *No!* My cursed arms were just total pests. Even if I tried to keep them fed, they just kicked up a fuss in my soul. Pain in the ass.

So, when I had the energy, it was easier to just go along and let them eat their fill than to try to resist them. Naturally, I ended up feeling like these things were controlling my life.

“That’s why, Tiana, even if you did so forcibly, I’m deeply grateful to you for pulling me away from fighting and allowing me to enjoy an ordinary day.”

“What?! You can’t be serious!”

“I’m quite serious.” I really was! See, I’d been wasting my youth away. Tiana got 100 points of gratitude from me for inviting me to hang out and pulling me out of my barren, ashen days! She could exchange those for a Crow body pillow set. Also, she was awarded the title of Angel #2, second only to Iris!

“You called yourself a weak knight, unable to save anyone. You’re wrong. It takes strength to reach out to someone like me,” I said to a stunned Tiana. “And you protected my heart from its bloodthirst. I respect you.”

Tears began to stream down her face. She made a valiant effort to hold them back, to no avail.

“Wh-What the hell!” she exclaimed, her tears coming in large drops, one after the other. “You haven’t cracked a single smile this whole time! I was so worried I was actually bothering you!”

“Oh. I apologize. I was simply nervous,” I explained. “I’ve never had any luck with girls my age before.”

“Liar!” she retorted. “A dark, brooding type like you? Girls would be all over that!”

No, really, it was true. I’d never had any luck with girls! Why *would* they prefer gloomy dudes? What kinda logic was that?

Even that guy from back home, Fukashi (RIP?), had told me, “Crow, girls fawn all over dudes who never stop smiling. You know, like me!”

I mean, he didn’t so much smile as smirk, really, and it was the creepiest smirk ever, but oh well.

Tiana sighed. “All right, then. It’s enough for me that you’re having fun. Thanks for praising me, despite my failings,” she said, smiling brightly.

Good. Cheery smiles suited her best. And they were soothing to my soul!

“You know,” I said with a chuckle, “being with you calms me down.”

“H-Huh?! What’s with the flirting all of a sudden?! What are you, stupid?!”

She was blushing for some reason. And I wasn’t trying to flirt or anything. What was *that* about?

“I’m only expressing my honest feelings,” I replied.

She let out a loud, bewildered sound. “Hmmmmm?!”

Iris would react like that too, sometimes. Maybe it was the latest trend among girls?

Anyway, in the middle of our friendly moment, Muramasa—at my hip as always—suddenly got fussy. A sickly-sweet male voice rang out. “Ah, how marvelous youth is!”

Tiana and I looked in the direction the voice had come from. A middle-aged man stood there, dressed in extravagant clothing. Who the hell?

“Crow! Straighten yourself!” Tiana commanded sharply. Her smile was gone, replaced by a tense expression as she stared at the fancy man.

I obeyed and quickly straightened my back.

“Oh? For an outer dweller, you seem to know some etiquette,” the man said, looking me up and down as if measuring my worth. He bowed gracefully after a moment, and said, “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Superbius, prime minister of this country.”

Prime minister?! That’s, like, really high-ranking, I think?! Why is someone so important here?! Crap, what do I do?!

My nerves were shot. I wasn't good with authority!

"Now, Crow, I've heard a great deal about you," he said. "You're the famous Iris's disciple, *and* a myth conqueror as well, yes? Why, you may as well have been chosen by the heavens! I've become quite a fan, you see. I came here to meet you."

Wait, he did?!

Wow! What a massive honor that was! I was neither Iris's pupil nor a myth thingy, but that didn't matter! He liked me! That meant I liked him back, period!

Now what?! Do I shake his hand?!

"On that note, Crow, I would like to see your legend soar to even greater heights," he stated, rummaging through his breast pocket.

Ooh, what's he gonna give me? Is it candy? Tell me it's candy.

In a complete betrayal of my sugary expectations, he handed me a mission order instead. Man.



“Crow Titus, sixth-class knight! I hereby order you to hunt down, alone, the strongest of all aetherborn—a dragon. You’ll do it, won’t you? ≡”

Wait. No. What? Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!

Hunt down a dragon?! *Alone?!* Was this guy *nuts*?!

Afterword

A cute author has arriiiiiived!

Nice to meet everyone I've never met! Mazi Manzi here!!!

I'm a cute virtual Twitter girl, and I show my face and speak there! Look me up!

@mazomanzi ← This is my Twitter account! Yay!!!

Like with every other work I've released lately, I don't have time to write afterwords anymore, so I'm just gonna hastily scribble something down and add lots of exclamation marks to pad the character count!!! Which means...

This is mostly copy-pasted!!!

Copy-paste all the time every time!!!

So, how'd you like *Make It Stop!*?!!!

It's a story about internally screaming, self-proclaimed gloomy boy Crow-kun, who has zero skills but also mad skills, and the crazy situation he finds himself stuck in!!! He's kinda garbage but a good guy if you squint, so give him some love, okay?!

Also, I'm a Twitter addict, so if you write your thoughts on *Make It Stop!* on Twitter I'll go and find them, promise!

I'll show you my boobs so please advertise on social media and stuff! (´;ω;`)

Also also, to everyone who read the web novel and then bought the book too, thank you so much!!!!!!!! Everyone who had no idea it existed but liked the cover or the title and bought it on a whim: it was destiny that brought us together!!! I'm a cute J-cup cat-eared virtual maid on Twitter, so if you send me a pic of the book you bought I'll go "omg onii-chan ≡" at you!!!!!!!!! Please make sure you rec *Make It Stop!* to all your friends, family, acquaintances, neighborhood elementary schoolers, and random strangers in obscure internet threads in exchange for a cute little sister who's also a big tiddy maid!!!!!!!! Thanks!!! Post it on Twitter and I'll react!!!

And once again! I'd like to take the opportunity and thank everyone who sent me art on Twitter and bought me food from my Amaz*n wish list (aka the list of things I wanna eat before I die)!!!!!!

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I wuv you! (´;ω;`)

Mazi Manzi