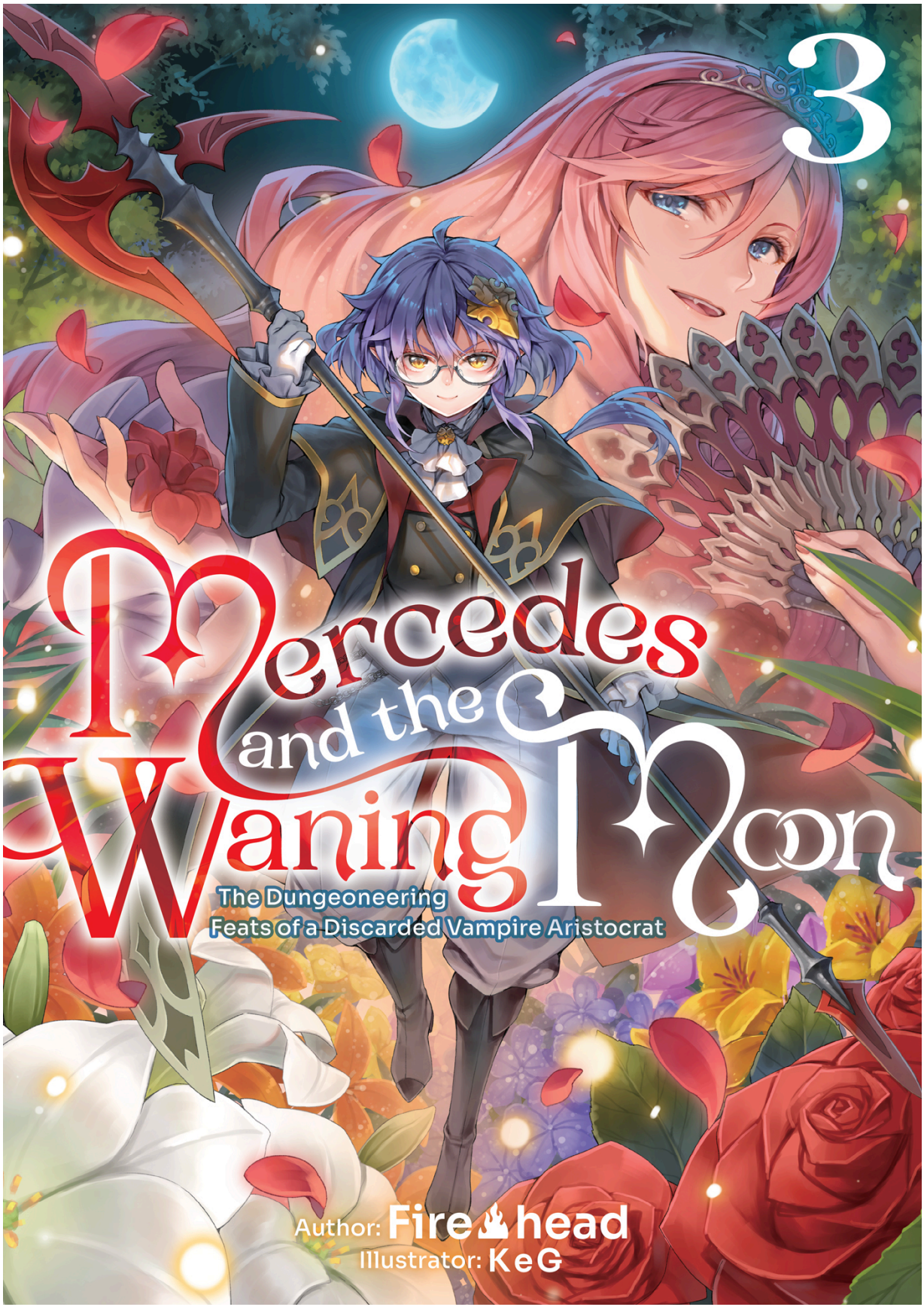

3
Mercedes and the Waning Moon
The Dungeoneering Feats of a Discarded Vampire Aristocrat
Author: Fire head
Illustrator: KeG


3
Mercedes and the Waning Moon
The Dungeoneering Feats of a Discarded Vampire Aristocrat
Author: Firehead
Illustrator: KeG





characters

MERCEDES

Our heroine, a former Japanese office worker who has been reincarnated as a vampire. She dedicates her life to escaping poverty, becoming a Seeker at just ten years old. Her goal is to conquer every dungeon, and she continues to recruit monster companions with her freakish physical strength. She trusts monsters more than humans.



His rightful heir

MERCEDES'S COMPANIONS

BENKEI



A humanoid monster with six arms. He can speak the languages of both humans and monsters, making him an apt interpreter. Despite being quite reliable in battle, he rarely gets any time in the sun outside of fights, which secretly bothers him.

KURO



A black wolf measuring three meters long. Despite being incapable of human speech, he's still smart enough to communicate. Mercedes sometimes uses him as a mount in battle.

SHUFU



A three-meter-tall demon. He joined Mercedes's crew as Margaret and her mother's guard, but for some reason he spends his time cooking instead.

ZWÖLF



The AI that manages Mercedes's dungeon. She provides knowledge to Mercedes, but there's a limit to what she can share.

CHIRPY



A hawk monster.
He's highly valued for his transportation capabilities, but those are heavily restricted in the dungeons, where he's rarely utilized.



BERNHARD

Mercedes's cold and emotionless father who rules over the largest town in the vampiric nation of Orcus.

Using her father



HANNAH

Bernhard's elder sister (and Mercedes's aunt). She's the head of Orcus's clandestine forces, but she regularly attends school with Mercedes.



BUNBUN

Hannah's monster. He always has a cigar in his mouth. Despite his unthreatening appearance, he's surprisingly strong when armed.



SIEGLINDE

Mercedes's only classmate who doesn't fear her. She's the first princess of the Kingdom of Orcus and the inheritor of the royal family's dungeon.



GUSTAV

A teacher at Edelrot Academy. Recognized as a hero for his efforts during the war with the Chimäre.



TREIN

The president of Trein Industries who has a sixth sense for money. Mercedes once offered him some chocolate when rescuing him from a dungeon, and he was so moved by the taste he started to sell it.

THE GRUNEWALD FAMILY



FELIX

Mercedes's elder brother who wishes to be recognized as Bernhard's heir.



BORIS

Mercedes's elder brother who causes a commotion at Felix's birthday party. His whereabouts are unknown.



GOTTFRIED

Mercedes's elder brother who has no interest in being heir because he wants to live a quiet life instead.



MONIKA

Mercedes's little sister who loves her as her "grand, beautiful big sister."

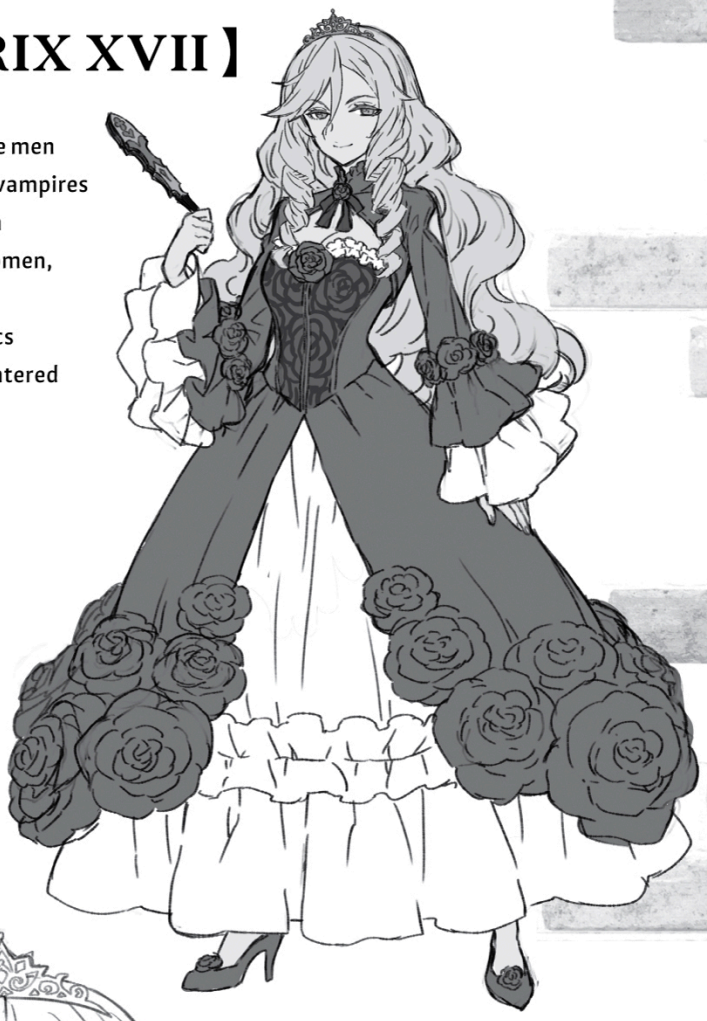


MARGARET

Mercedes's little sister, who Mercedes teaches how to read, write, and make money using her artistic talents.

【BEATRIX XVII】

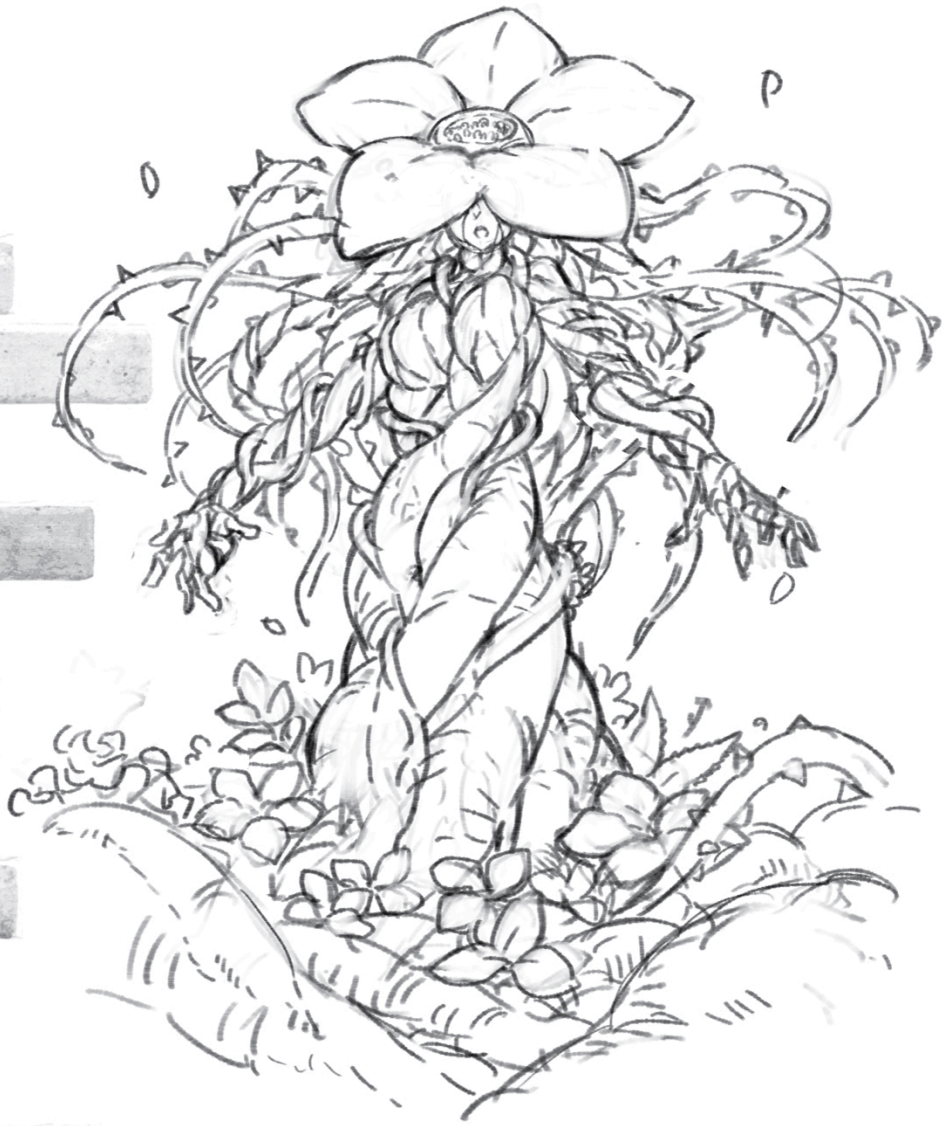
Race: Vampire
Creed: Women above men
Aspiration: To unite vampires under a single nation
Likes: The strong, women, flowers, and ruling
Dislikes: Men and orcs
Personality: Self-centered and cunning











【PARADIES】

A dungeon Guardian covered in flowers and trees.
It spouted a similar line as the Schwarz Historie to
the Seeker who chose to enter its room of trial, but
it admitted that was just for fun and not necessary.



【FELIX GRUNEWALD】

Race: Vampire
Creed: To not bring shame to the Grunewald name
Aspiration: To be recognized by his father
Likes: His parents and country
Dislikes: His own weakness
Personality: Serious, both in a good sense and a bad sense







【FREDERICK BECKENBAUER】

Race: Vampire

Creed: You mustn't place faith in perpetual ages, as yours may never come

Aspiration: To find somewhere he belongs

Likes: The academy

Dislikes: Geniuses, youth, perpetual ages, those who look down on him, those who try to deprive him of the place he belongs, and his own body

Personality: Perfectly embodies an inferiority complex (though it's only natural given his circumstances...)

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Characters
4. Chapter 55: Thus Begins the Second Year
5. Chapter 56: The Supervisors
6. Chapter 57: Switcheroo
7. Chapter 58: Empress Beatrix
8. Chapter 59: The Man Despised by Destiny
9. Chapter 60: Instinctual Fear
10. Chapter 61: He Had No Other Choice
11. Chapter 62: Frederick Resists
12. Chapter 63: The Giant Who Gouges Hearts
13. Chapter 64: To the Empire
14. Chapter 65: A Twisted Nation
15. Chapter 66: Orcs Are a Female Knight's Worst Nightmare
16. Chapter 67: The Empress and the Odd One
17. Chapter 68: A Battle Between Masters
18. Chapter 69: Monsters Summoned
19. Chapter 70: The Difference Between Them
20. Chapter 71: I Don't Need That Right
21. Chapter 72: The Body Double
22. Chapter 73: The Transference Ceremony
23. Chapter 74: A New Magic
24. Chapter 75: An Evolutionary Dead End
25. Parent and Child
26. Benkei's Struggles
27. A Humble Victory Celebration
28. Afterword
29. Bonus High-Resolution Illustrations
30. About J-Novel Club

31. Copyright

Chapter 55: Thus Begins the Second Year

People have feared the dark since times of old, believing creatures unhuman stalked the night. But in a world of the unhuman, night belonged to the people. The Red Planet harbored four such species: the prosperous Elfe skilled in magic, the Chimäre beastmen, the winged Vogel who soared through the skies, and the light-hating vampires who ruled the night. One such vampire was a young girl named Mercedes Grunewald, and this year, she had turned twelve years old.

Although she was born as the eldest daughter of a duke, her lot in life was hardly blessed. Her father, Bernhard Grunewald, shunned his concubines and their children, abandoning them in an old, dilapidated mansion. Still, Mercedes's birthright as a possible heir meant he provided them with funds—the bare amount to support her and her mother. But the moment he decided on an heir that wasn't Mercedes, she, her mother, and their loving maid were to be thrown to the wolves.

At least, that was what Mercedes assumed, so she set her sights on the sole job accessible to anyone—that of a Seeker. She would travel and conquer dungeons, garnering the strength needed to support herself on her own. And it went well for her. She gained an Asura ogre named Benkei and schwarz wolfang named Kuro as companions, as well as complete control of one of this world's numerous dungeons.

However, fate has a way of defying one's expectations. Despite finally gaining everything she needed to live independently from her father, she'd accidentally caught his attention. As a result, Mercedes and her mother, her sisters Monika and Margaret, and her older brothers Gottfried and Felix all began to live under one roof at the

Grunewalds' main manor.

Well, that just meant she had to use these circumstances to her advantage. Having switched gears, she enrolled in Edelrot Academy a year ago, dedicating herself to her studies and reaching new heights in order to one day live without Bernhard—or perhaps, to one day fight him should their superficially amicable relationship turn sour.

However, during her school days, she became embroiled in a struggle for the throne, and the combined efforts of her and her father ousted the foolish king, instating the true heir, Princess Sieglinde, in his place.

Once the chaos had subsided, Mercedes shifted her focus to increasing her magical capabilities. Dungeon owners could carry their dungeons around as weapons and command the monsters inside as they pleased. Thus, she summoned a goblin hexer—a skilled magician—as her tutor and began her training, though she saw no immediate results. Wanting to maintain her nimble frame, she shirked the method of increasing magical power that the goblin had adopted—gaining fat—and decided to use the same method as her classmate and aunt, Hannah. In other words, she would store mana, but not mass.

According to Zwölf, her dungeon's administrator, all matter both organic and inorganic was comprised of nanomachines. Therefore, this world wasn't natural, but man-made—but that could be ignored for now. More importantly, these nanomachines were colloquially known as mana, a substance manipulated to produce magic. By commanding the mana in the air, one could produce fire or ice, but that required using one's magic stores. By expending one's own mana, one could produce a variety of phenomena—in other words, magic.

Magic operated on an incredibly simple principle: the more mass one had, the more magic they could use. "Magical strength" was the measure of mana one could store, and while spent mana could be replenished with food, having more mass really did make certain people better suited for magic.

However, Mercedes knew that increasing her weight would dull

her movement, so she opted to store her mana as mana, not as mass to increase her magical strength.

While she boasted some slight success, though, things were not as easy as she hoped. She felt no closer to awakening her derivative affinities, and she was resigned to strengthening her gravity and wind magic while she waited.

The time passed quickly, and in a flash, the new school year had reared its head. Mercedes was a second year and Felix a sixth year. This time, their younger sisters Monika and Margaret would be attending as new students as well. As for Gottfried, well... Unfortunately, his age proved an issue. He was a year older than Mercedes, but he had no chance of keeping up with a third-year class. Thus, he was left to study at the manor all by his lonesome.

This family suffered many tragedies, and perhaps it was Gottfried who had it worst.

After the entrance exams, Monika was placed in Class A and Margaret Class C. While Margaret scored at the top of her class on her written exams, she performed poorly on the practical section. She really just wasn't suited for anything ruffian.

Still, a pass was a pass, and all she needed was to make up some ground.

***

"Next month, we will be testing your practical skills with an expedition to Blut. You will go on many excursions in your lives, and if any of you choose to become Seekers, you'll have to traverse remote lands, as well as ration your provisions and manage your stamina inside the dungeons. And if you manage to become the lord of a domain, you will need to lead hunts against bandits and monsters. Not to mention, feet are a merchant's lifeline considering how often they have to travel between towns. So, with all that being said, you will be following a certain course to Blut, and while we will be providing you with funds, you will have to choose your supplies, consider your routes, and prepare accordingly. You are free to discuss things with your classmates, but bringing outside provisions

and supplies is strictly prohibited," announced Gustav Balt, the homeroom teacher of the top-scoring Class A, as Mercedes quietly listened along.

So, their first practical test of the year would be an expedition. Just as Gustav had stated, the majority of occupations in this world required using your feet. This wasn't earth, and there was no internet—you couldn't work from home. Acquiring any information meant walking where you needed on your own two feet.

In this test, Mercedes's biggest disadvantage was the fact she couldn't use any pre-owned supplies. Still, it was a necessary handicap, as otherwise, the richest students would dominate effortlessly.

Thus, the students had a month to decide what they needed. The test had begun far before the excursion, and likely, a uniform—including shoes—would be provided by the academy.

"Let me describe the scenario. Bandits have attacked a neighboring town, which has called for help. Typical travel routes have fallen under bandit control, so you will be forced to use unconventional ones. You can take any route you wish, but set one foot on the traditional highway and you'll fail immediately. Of course, the town has requested expedient aid, so swiftness is a priority, but bear in mind you won't be of any help to them if you arrive exhausted and barely standing. You'll need to balance speed and stamina."

"What do you think we should buy, Mercedes? I've honestly got no clue." As soon as Gustav had concluded his lecture, students promptly began discussing their strategies among their friends, and Sieglinde had immediately approached Mercedes, ready to borrow her wisdom.

Hannah sat beside them snickering, and she clearly had no intention of offering any advice herself. The two girls would have to figure this one out on their own.

"It depends on whether you want to buy a monster to serve as your legs or use your money for purchasing provisions. Every single monetary choice you make will change your strategy. If you buy an agile monster, you won't be able to buy much sustenance, which

means you'll get there fast but be too famished to fight. At the same time, focusing your funds on food will get you there in good shape, but given the scenario, taking too long means failure."

"What about using a winged monster that can fly you straight to Blut?"

"I considered that myself, but one big enough to carry a vampire would be expensive. I doubt we could afford it with the funds we've been provided."

This exercise required maintaining a reasonable speed while retaining enough stamina to fight upon arrival. The staff had provided the students with funds, but they were tasked with figuring out everything else on their own. In just a year, the academic rigor had spiked dramatically.

"The neighboring city of Blut... By carriage, it'd be two and a half days, and probably twice that on foot. Even if we were to purchase an agile monster to act as a mount, the journey would still take at least a day, and we'd need to feed that monster too. The cost would be exorbitant, and directing our funds at a monster would probably just result in it losing steam in the middle of the journey," said Sieglinde, staring at a map while pondering her strategy.

This test could be a walk in the park for Mercedes if she so desired. She had been making the journey between Blut and the capital city of Abendrot for over a year now. Testing her skills after all that time seemed pointless. As long as she utilized her gravity magic to dash along at the speed of sound, the distance was negligible. If a carriage traveled at ten kilometers per hour and reached Abendrot in about two and a half days, then the distance between Blut and the capital was roughly six hundred kilometers. Of course, this calculation assumed the carriage was traveling constantly, but in reality, the horses had to rest. The real distance was even shorter.

On the other hand, Mercedes could travel at the speed of sound—roughly 1,200 kilometers per hour. If she wanted, she could reach Blut in just thirty minutes and make a round trip in an hour. There was no need to worry about starvation, so there was no need to purchase any provisions either. And of course, she'd arrive ready to

fight.

Still, that would undermine the point of this test; it wasn't about the journey as much as how students decided to allocate their funds. So, she decided to put aside her magic and do this expedition the hard way. No taking the easy route; she wanted to gain as much valuable experience as possible, which meant putting in some effort.

Once classes had concluded, the trio went out into town to window-shop for the items they'd need. For provisions, cheap, filling goods were ideal, but they couldn't weigh them down and affect their speed. The majority of students immediately ran to purchase bottles of blood, an apt example of how much vampires relied on the substance.

"What about chocolate? I hear it's filling."

"Forget it. It's way too expensive."

Sieglinde's mind immediately jumped to chocolate, a substance Mercedes had invented as her own provisions for dungeon-diving using knowledge from her previous life. She later sold the manufacturing method to Trein Industries, and as a result, chocolate had become a highly coveted treat of nobility, a far cry from the shelf-stable provision Mercedes had originally imagined it to be. Trein had opted to sell the product at luxury prices, undermining the product's original intent. Now, it was far too expensive to serve as real sustenance.

While Mercedes could purchase the product for cheap as its inventor, she still had a hefty supply from Trein stowed away in her dungeon. Oddly, foods stored in dungeons never expired, and the nanomachines that usually broke down matter abandoned in the dungeon instead preserved it.

However, once again, utilizing that supply would run afoul of the rules.

"Canned goods are pricey too, though it seems like they're starting to get cheaper," muttered Hannah as she inspected the price tag at one of the shops. Mercedes had sold the manufacturing method of these to Trein as well, again with the intent of creating shelf-stable provisions. Unfortunately, these were costly as well. Seafaring vampires dominated the market, ramping up demand and

thus driving up costs. Since storing cans didn't require black pepper or ice magic stones, they served as the perfect food during long maritime voyages. It was only natural the product had hit it big with sailors.

However, the success of canned goods had come at the demise of black pepper, which was once a luxury item itself. The price plummeted, and it was now only slightly more expensive than other spices, leaving the merchants who sold it in tears.

"We need to preserve our legs as well. I wonder if there's anything that can help with that?"

"There are plenty of options, Your Highness. You could buy shoes imbued with wind magic stones that can have you effortlessly jumping through the air, or use ice magic or magic stones to freeze the road ahead of you and slide along. Earth magic stones could help you create new shortcuts."

"But you're not going to tell me which option is most effective, are you?"

"Of course not! What'd be the point of this test if I just gave you the answers? The ideas I offered you were the obvious ones."

Hannah really was a softie. Despite claiming she wouldn't be offering any advice, she served it right up. But in the end, even she didn't present the answers.

Sieglinde walked through the store, pondering her predicament.

Chapter 56: The Supervisors

The day of the expedition was now upon them, and the students were tasked with making the six-hundred-kilometer journey to the neighboring town. The academy had prohibited use of the traditional highway, which all students would have naturally opted for otherwise. It had been constructed around the easiest path as decided by their forefathers, and it naturally *was* the easiest path. But using it would devolve the test into a simple race, undermining its point. Thus, it was written in the scenario that bandits had overrun the highways, and students were forced to take detours over rougher terrain.

"I see everyone went the monster route," remarked Sieglinde as she observed her classmates.

"Not everyone, but that's probably because their classmates bought up all the useful ones," answered Hannah, sounding as if she had predicted this outcome.

Each student had been provided twenty thousand yerks, and since there were twenty students in the class, the school had donated four hundred thousand yerks in total. At first, this seemed quite exorbitant to Mercedes, but considering they received much more than that from the students' parents in tuition, they could clearly afford it. But given that Mercedes had bought her krylia—her own packmonster—for three hundred thousand yerks, twenty thousand really was a paltry sum.

However, monster prices spanned the gamut, and monsters big enough to carry people were often sold at the price of hamsters. In fact, one of the most popular monsters among the students was the gigantisch hamster, which was just what the name suggested—a hamster the size of a tiger. That explained why it was as cheap as a family pet.

Gigantisch hamsters were nocturnal, friendly, and big enough to

carry a person on their backs. They also boasted high stamina, being able to run for up to three hours straight. They cost only five thousand yerks—a result of the fact they multiplied like rabbits—meaning a child could buy one with their allowance. They stored items in their cheeks but wouldn't swallow what wasn't food, meaning you could store your food and provisions in their mouths using a special bag as well.

However, there were also many drawbacks. They lacked intelligence, meaning they often didn't understand orders, and were scaredy-cats who would easily panic and run in the opposite direction. They were also famous for stuffing their owners in their cheeks just for fun. But considering they were more of a pet than a battle companion or mount, perhaps they should get a pass for that.

Sieglinde had opted to buy one herself and was currently struggling with communication. "Listen, Hamsuke. Go that way. No, the other way!"

The hamster immediately tried to walk off on its own. It wasn't going to be easy for Sieglinde.

Rather than buy a cheap monster, Mercedes had decided to travel the course on her own, allocating all her funds to provisions. Hannah had opted for a similar route, and she must have been confident in her physical abilities. One other student, Dodo Riotte, lacked a monster as well. She was currently stretching her feet.

"Before the test begins, we will be assigning an upperclassman to each of you to act as a supervisor. Let them know if you want to throw in the towel," announced Gustav as the upperclassmen swarmed in.

Evidently, they weren't going to let the second-years travel on their own. Doing so would obviously create significant problems.

Among the upperclassmen were Felix, Hannah's sons, and Hartmann, who was the leader of the Thick Fogs, as well as Goetz Hölderlin, that delinquent Mercedes once had the displeasure of chatting with. Assignments had already been determined, and Felix had been assigned to Sieglinde. Apparently, pairings had been based on grades. One of Hannah's sons had been assigned to Hannah herself, leaving them clearly flummoxed and unsure which of them

was *really* the supervisor here.

As for Mercedes...

"O-Oh, long time no see."

...she had been assigned Hartmann Hartmann, the leader of the Thick Fogs and the young man who had once foolishly tried to threaten her. However, Hannah had caught him in the act, earning him a punishment and Mercedes his ire; she wasn't too happy with the predicament either. Either way, this was a test, and it wasn't her right to intervene.

For this exercise, Mercedes had chosen to traverse the towering rocky mountain that separated Blut and Abendrot. It was teeming with monsters, and its roads were too treacherous for carriages. Most merchants stayed far away, so the traditional highway went around the mountain to its right, though taking it was strictly prohibited for the students. Most had decided to divert to the route at the mountain's left, which was unmaintained and poorly fit for travel.

However, Mercedes had decided not to go around the mountain, but over. She hopped up the rocks, leaving her supervisor panting behind her. As one of Hannah's students, his agility was plenty refined. He wasn't just some pampered rich boy after all.

"H-Hey! How am I...supposed to keep up with all your leaping?! G-Give me...a break!"

"Why? I don't need a break."

"You might...feel fine now, but," he said before stopping to catch his breath, "you'll regret it later!" He coughed. "Y-You should rest!"

"I'll rest when I need to."

Mercedes's supervisor was already begging for a break, but that wasn't part of his job. It was up to her to decide what pace they went at and how they expended their stamina; his responsibility was to simply watch over her and make sure she was safe. That meant any advice was against the rules, and Mercedes had no need to factor his comfort in her decisions.

She continued along, leaving Hartmann in tears.

***

Sieglinde was traversing the usual detour on Hamsuke's back. There were both woodlands and fields, and she had opted for the latter. Her methods were orthodox, the sort this serious princess tended to choose. Felix followed some distance behind her on a horse provided by the academy, making sure he didn't get too close.

At times, Hamsuke strayed off course or got distracted stuffing his face with nuts he found. Despite this lost time, though, Sieglinde made steady progress.

Princess Sieglinde seems to be doing fine for now. She has sound judgment and quick wits, and she prepared thoroughly beforehand. At this pace, she'll be there in two days.

As supervisors, Felix and the others had three main tasks. The first was to serve as a contingency in the event of unforeseen circumstances, such as encounters with monsters or bandits that the underclassmen couldn't handle on their own.

The second was to handle any requests to forfeit. If a student decided they were unfit to continue, it was the supervisor's job to take them to safety.

The last was to judge their performance. It was the supervisors who observed how they did and noted their judgmental capabilities.

Felix had already appraised Sieglinde's performance as outstanding. She chose her route well, and she was clearly at the top of her class. But most impressive was that she operated according to the limits of her knowledge.

Mercedes headed for the mountain, didn't she? She can't actually be planning on climbing it. But knowing her, she'll probably get through it in a flash. I don't envy Hartmann one bit.

His sister was acting the oddball as always, and he had spotted her heading straight for the rocky mountains early on. Not to mention she wasn't even using a monster. She planned to hike the full distance on her own two feet.

Only three students had opted to forgo purchasing a monster: Mercedes, Hannah, and Dodo Riotte. Currently, Hannah was in the center of the pack among those who opted for the usual route, though that was likely on purpose. Meanwhile, Dodo was using wind magic to walk through the air, kicking and fluttering her feet in a

ditzy display as she flew away. Sometimes, she'd wrap her beloved whip around a tree branch and use the recoil to jump from treetop to treetop in some three-dimensional maneuvering. Compared to such questionable methods, Sieglinde's were proper and reasonable.

"Hmm? What's that?" Suddenly, Sieglinde noticed something approaching from ahead—white cloaks on horseback. No matter how Felix spun it, this didn't seem like a coincidence.

"Watch out!" Immediately realizing something was off, he drew his sword and overtook Sieglinde. He had seen those white cloaks before. They were the clandestine forces of the Beatrix Empire. Since their white garb stood out in the night's darkness, they didn't seem very clandestine, but...they were still the clandestine forces, nevertheless, and their target was clearly Sieglinde. Felix was shocked to see them attack in the middle of the night.

"Run, Your Highness! I'll fend them off!" He couldn't let them get a hold of the princess. Felix stepped forward to hide Sieglinde, confronting the white cloaks. If this was truly a chance encounter, there was nothing to worry about. They'd simply pass by.

However, the white cloaks were clearly galloping straight for them, and it was obvious they wouldn't leave without a fight. They didn't seem willing to talk either. They pulled out their swords in unison, rushing toward the uninvited guest with bloodlust in their eyes.

"Stop! What is it you want? Money? Magic stones?"

"Discussion is futile!"

Felix had considered handing over supplies as a possible way out of this, but they clearly weren't interested. Realizing that failure to retaliate meant death, he was forced to draw his own sword. He was prepared to fight against the white cloaks if necessary.

It was five against one, meaning the odds were stacked against Felix. But he had no other choice. He couldn't let the princess fall into their hands. "If you approach, be prepared to lose a limb or two!"

The five urged their horses forward, letting their white cloaks billow in the wind. Sieglinde and Felix were all alone, meaning it was up to him to fight and protect her. Having steeled his resolve, he

urged his own horse forward—or at least pretended to. He erected a magic wall of fog before him and turned around, picking up a shocked Sieglinde off her hamster, placing her on his steed, and shoving something in Hamsuke's mouth before retreating at full speed.

Hamsuke didn't seem to notice Sieglinde's absence. He continued on his path toward Blut.



Felix had deemed his top priority to be Sieglinde's safety. He was willing to fight, but strictly as a last resort. Instead, he chose to flee. Luckily, the excursion had just begun, and they weren't too far from the starting line. He'd protect Sieglinde by bringing her back to the academy; his taunting words had only been a bluff.

So they are chasing us!

However, he wasn't so naive as to think he'd be able to shake them off their tails. The white cloaks immediately followed after Felix, their horses galloping with all their might. Luckily, none seemed to be preparing to shoot any arrows. At the very least, Sieglinde was safe for now.

However, their horse was traveling slower—the natural consequence of two people riding. But that just meant he had to make up that ground himself.

"Freeze!"

Felix cast a spell behind them, wetting the path, then quickly freezing it over with another spell. A skilled magician would have been able to freeze the entire ground at once, but controlling derivative affinities was difficult. His father could control metal at will, but he was an exception.

At the very least, Felix had been able to create a frozen road in steps by first casting water magic, which was a feat in its own right. And it proved effective. The horses following them began to slip on their hooves, causing them to lose control and widening the gap between them instantly.

However, the two of them weren't quite out of hot water yet. Next, he cast the same fog spell from earlier. It could only obscure their pursuers' visions, but it was better than nothing. He was hoping it would inspire fear of a possible trap or attack, slowing them down further.

Felix Grunewald was no genius, but he was relatively talented. While yet inexperienced, he could use spells from his derivative affinities that were beyond others his age, though that was only thanks to his hard work. His main affinities were fire and water, the latter being his main. And while it was a shame they did not match the earth and wind affinities of his father, water magic was

particularly useful and suited a jack-of-all-trades like Felix well. It allowed him to shake off their pursuers and safely return to the starting line, and while it was now empty, they were almost at the capital. They would be safe.

Still, he couldn't let down his guard quite yet. His focus had already begun to fade, and he purposefully put it back together as he galloped toward Abendrot. The moment you were assured of your victory was when you were most in danger—focus had to be maintained at all times.

"Deary me! I didn't realize some students had been left behind!"

That voice reflexively put Felix on guard, but once he recognized who it belonged to, a wave of relief washed over him. Before him was a tottering old man, Principal Frederick. But what was he doing here?

As soon as that question crossed Felix's mind, he realized he only needed to ask. "Perfect timing, Principal Frederick! A group of men in white cloaks attacked the princess!"

"Oho, that does sound quite frightening."

"I believe they're from Beatrix. They'll soon be upon us."

"I see, I see..." Frederick was eerily calm. But that was perhaps what made him so fit to serve as the school's principal. He could maintain his composure in any circumstance.

However, for some reason, Felix didn't find this reassuring, but ominous. "In any case, we need to get back inside Abendrot."

"Relax. How about some tea?"

"How can you possibly be so calm?!" This was no time to relax! Sure, composure was a virtue, but this was hardly that—it was just wasting time. Being composed didn't mean having an empty head.

"I bought some excellent tea leaves recently. Let's relax and take our time. I'll go and brew us a batch."

"Did you hear what I just said?!"

"Of course I did, my boy. Assailants from a rival country are chasing you. That really is quite the predicament," he remarked—but despite acknowledging that, he wasn't jumping into action. Instead, he slowly took some teacups out of his bag. It was the spitting image of a senile old man.

Even Felix couldn't quell his rage. Their enemies were approaching as they spoke. This was no time to sit around. "Forget it!"

After a moment's pondering, Felix opted to leave. Sure, he was worried about the principal, but Sieglinde was the top priority. If the white cloaks were after her, they'd likely ignore Frederick.

However, as soon as Felix urged his horse forward, a giant tree sprung up to block his path.

"What?!"

"Oho ho! There's no need to rush, my boy. It's not good to be short-tempered while you're still young." Apparently, this obstruction had been Frederick's doing.

Felix had never heard of any spells that could create plants out of thin air. He must have been using an item, but that wasn't important here. He needed to know *why* Frederick had stopped them.

"What are you trying here, Principal Frederick?"

"I discovered this plant in my youth, back when I'd explore lands unknown. Amazingly, it can turn into a plant in one moment and back into a seed the next! Perhaps it's a monster, but after many years of tedious research, I discovered a way to control it at will."

"Who cares about that?! Why did you stop us?!"

"Why? My, I do wonder... Why *did* I stop you...?" responded Frederick, dodging the question with a chuckle. He kept silent for a moment, but finally, he clapped his hands as if he'd suddenly remembered the answer. "Ah, that's right! The tea! I bought some excellent tea leaves recently. Let's relax and take our time. I'll go and brew us a batch."

Felix could only scream in frustration. *This damn senile old man!*

He had already reached the limits of his patience. Usually, he'd cover himself with a laugh, but this was hardly the time for that. At this point, Frederick had to be acting with ill intent, but frustratingly, it was near impossible to tell whether he was doing it on purpose. Was he beginning to lose it, or was this a part of some deliberate plan? Felix just couldn't tell. But perhaps his belief that their principal would never work with their enemies was coloring his thinking.

Felix was a serious young man, but that was exactly why he couldn't make up his mind. He couldn't neutralize Frederick as long as there was a chance he wasn't acting maliciously. Mercedes and Bernhard would have never fallen for such tricks. It didn't matter the intent; as soon as they determined someone was in their way, they'd crush them for that reason alone. Whether that person was friend or foe was trivial, as the moment they got in the way, they morphed into a useless friend—in their view, an enemy.

However, Felix couldn't view it that way. He was kind to his core—a serious man with a conscience. His judgments were sound, and he had a good head on his shoulders. Secretly, he had already realized it was possible Frederick was a traitor.

Yet, he couldn't shake the possibility that he really had just gone senile, or he had some other plan up his leaves. That was his downfall.

"You really are green around the ears, huh? Time is up, my boy. Hand the princess over."

In the end, Felix was only convinced Frederick was a foe once the man had admitted so himself.

Chapter 57: Switcheroo

Felix and the princess had fallen for Frederick's trap, and now, the white cloaks were loading them up in a carriage headed for the Beatrix Empire. Their arms and legs were bound together, and since their weapons had been confiscated, they had no way to resist.

The white cloaks proceeded cautiously but quickly, wary of any potential surprise attacks. Felix concluded their main forces were likely waiting for them near the border.

"You've found yourself in quite the pickle, boy. But since we're only after the princess, we'll let you go before we cross the border."

"But captain! The officer's orders were to kill any who got in our way."

"And no one did. This young man simply entered our carriage by mistake, right?"

"R-Right!"

The white cloaks seemed to be having some sort of discussion, but Felix couldn't care less. He had failed to protect the princess, not to mention that the principal of Edelrot had been a double agent. Felix had happily been dancing on the palms of their hands, too dumb to see through it. The weight of that knowledge killed his spirits.

"What's...going to happen to Her Highness?" asked Felix.

"Dunno. Well, they told us not to injure her, so I doubt anything bad will happen," answered the white cloak whom the other had earlier referred to as "captain." Despite his title, he was nothing more than the leader of a single squad of clandestine forces. He was likely ignorant of the exact goal behind this operation.

"Keep this between us, but our empire is a matriarchy—one where women are placed above men. As a woman, a royal, and someone capable of wielding a royal weapon, it's safe to assume she'll be treated well. There are rumors that the whole lot of us men

will be banished from the country, and while I don't think that'll happen, that ought to give you an idea of just how much our empress despises us. We'll let you go before we cross the border. You'd probably be killed otherwise."

Well, that sounded terrifying. Why did the people at the top always harbor such extreme views? Bernhard was another prime example. Was that just a necessary trait to be a leader?

In any case, Felix couldn't hop off this train now. His absence would mean that Sieglinde would be entering enemy territory alone. She'd be terribly lonely and frightened.

Felix didn't imagine his presence would be very reassuring, but he wasn't so heartless as to let a young girl head into the enemy's homeland alone. And look! Sieglinde was always so brave, but she'd been silent the entire trip. She was clearly terrified, and Felix pitied her. He couldn't imagine the depths of her fear.

However, while that thought ran through Felix's mind, the white cloaks exited the room. Yes, this was a carriage, but a separate small space had been sectioned off to bar them from escape. The door was shut and locked, meaning there was truly no way out.

"Listen, Your Highness. I gave a letter to your monster companion before our escape. If all goes well, that monster will arrive in Blut, and a rescue squad will be dispatched."

Sieglinde remained silent.

While on the run, Felix had slipped a pouch into the mouth of Sieglinde's gigantisch hamster, which contained an emergency letter requesting their rescue. As long as the hamster didn't spit out the pouch or stray off course, the letter would be delivered. The only problem was...these hamsters weren't very intelligent, and it seemed much more likely that it would wander off in some random direction and start living in the wild.

Sieglinde shook her head. "Hmm... I'll give you about twenty points, then. It's great you were able to think so quickly in that situation, but there's no way that hamster will arrive in Blut without its master." Her response was shockingly calm, lacking even a hint of fear. In fact, she was composed enough to give Felix an unfavorable review of his work.

Felix sensed that something was clearly off here and stared into Sieglinde's eyes. That was when her supposedly bound hands freely yanked the wig off her head, revealing a smug Hannah flashing two peace signs in his face.

What the heck?!

"We did a little switcheroo!" Of course, Hannah hadn't uttered those words, but that smug look did all the talking for her.

***

No conspiracy had ever gone entirely to plan. Frederick had failed to predict Sieglinde and Hannah would switch places, but Hannah had failed to predict some things herself.

Exactly according to the plan, Sieglinde—who was dressed as Hannah—ran through the field without a monster. Actually, that wasn't quite right. A closer look would reveal one at her feet. It was a turtle monster, and she placed one foot on its back and slid through the field.

These monsters were the species known as Steiff Brise Schildkröte, and they were amazingly cool in name only. They were only about the size of a shoe, but they boasted incredible power and speed, reaching up to eighty kilometers per hour. They also had the horsepower to carry a full-grown man on their back and travel all morning and day. They were cheap enough for a child to afford, and they were quite popular among them since they weren't dangerous either.

In fact, racing on their backs was a rather common amusement, with events being held multiple times throughout the year. The only problem was that air resistance and other side effects of high-speed travel easily knocked a person off-balance and off their turtle. Even tying them to your shoes wasn't enough to escape a fall, so it was necessary to use a magic stone imbibed with wind to neutralize the air resistance. They also lacked the intelligence to listen to human demands, making them terrible mounts.

More than anything, though, they were just *terribly* ugly. Shops in the capital didn't stock any of them, but Hannah had managed to

purchase one from another city. No rule stated that supplies had to be purchased from Abendrot, only that they had to stay within the price of the provided funds.

Thus, Hannah had switched places with Sieglinde and Hamsuke right before the test began, put on a disguise, and headed out in the field. But she hadn't predicted the white cloaks would attack; she simply knew that such a long journey—while temporary—would leave Sieglinde vulnerable with only a single supervisor to watch over her. And since she had been lucky enough to have been assigned to supervise her son, she forced him to let her switch places. She had managed to thoroughly deceive both Felix and the white cloaks, successfully protecting Sieglinde.

All of that had gone according to plan, though. So what hadn't?

That would be the gigantisch hamster—more specifically, the actions Hamsuke had taken upon losing his master. Once Hannah had disappeared, he shockingly used his sense of smell to return to his *real* master, Sieglinde.

"Huh? Is that Hamsuke? But where's Hannah?"

As soon as Sieglinde had stopped what she was doing, Hamsuke jumped on her and took her head in his mouth in a display of affection. This caused her to panic, but with her upper half stuck in his mouth, she naturally discovered the pouch that had been placed inside. She grabbed it, pried herself out from the hamster's mouth, and opened it. Then, she read the letter and discovered someone was under enemy attack and had requested aid.

Of course, Felix hadn't written this letter on the spot—similar letters had been given to all the supervisors to use in case of emergency. Because of that, she had no way of knowing who had sent it, but it wasn't hard for her to figure out that the white cloaks were behind this attack. In other words, Hannah, disguised as her, and Felix, Mercedes's brother, had fallen into enemy hands.

"How terrible! I can't just stand here and do nothing!" Sieglinde was a woman with a strong sense of responsibility and an even stronger sense of justice. She found the idea of abandoning the woman who had taken her place intolerable, so she immediately jumped off the turtle and onto Hamsuke to retrace her steps.

“Hamsuke, take me to their assailants!”

“Waaaaait! Where are you going, Your Highness?!” Of course, Hannah’s son began to panic. His name was Gallo Burger, which unfortunately sounded awfully similar to an instrument of execution. In any case, he had no idea what to make of Sieglinde’s sudden reversal and hurried off after her.

“Hmm.” At the same time, Mercedes had just reached the top of the mountain. Her right hand was occupied with an exhausted Hartmann, foaming at the mouth while being carried like a cat.

From her vantage point, she could see a carriage led by the white cloaks. She was unaware of Hannah and Sieglinde’s switcheroo, but no matter the white cloaks’ mission, she knew she couldn’t let them do as they pleased.

“Again with those white cloaks... I don’t know why they’re here, but I guess I’ll have to deal with them. I need to change course.”

Thus, Mercedes shifted her plans, and now, she was off to crush these white cloaks.

***

After discovering that Hannah and Felix had been captured, Sieglinde had Hamsuke follow their enemies’ tracks by scent. Hamsters had strong senses of smell, and they could distinguish territories and follow tracks using their noses alone. They also boasted high stamina, as wild ones would travel over ten kilometers in a single day in search of food. And that was just normal hamsters—the one Sieglinde rode was big enough to carry a whole vampire. It could travel much farther than the average hamster and could easily withstand trips across nations.

Gigantisch hamsters didn’t come from dungeons. Instead, they had been created via selective breeding done over generations to monsters Seekers had recovered, purposefully making them into friendly pets. They were thoroughly domesticated and would never attack a vampire, but they retained their stamina and olfactory senses. Thus, Hamsuke easily led Sieglinde to the white cloaks.

Given the description, these hamsters may seem like the perfect

mounts. They could travel vast distances at high speeds and boasted great stamina, surpassing even horses in those areas. But for some reason, no one considered them as a possible replacement for a horse.

They cost only five thousand yerks and were cheap enough that children could afford them. This was partly because they multiplied like rabbits, so there were plenty to go around. If the military had formally adopted them for combat use, given their utility as mounts, there would have been more scarcity, but the military hadn't—and for one incredibly simple reason.

"All right, Hamsuke. We're getting close to our enemies. Slow down...and... Hey! Stop, Hamsuke! Stoooooop!"

You see, gigantisch hamsters were amazingly stupid. A pull on the reins was all it took for horses to understand their rider's orders and move in the right direction. You could even make them stop.

However, that didn't work with gigantisch hamsters. Selective breeding had given them the ability to just barely comprehend simple orders, but once those orders grew even the slightest bit complicated, it was over. If you told them where to go, they'd head there, but they wouldn't pay attention to the road they took. They'd stick their heads into caves obviously too narrow to traverse, getting themselves stuck. And sometimes, they'd even rush straight into obstacles with their riders still on their backs. If there was a seed on the ground, they'd pop it into their mouths, and occasionally, their instincts would lead them back home to store that seed with the other food they had gathered.

Obviously, they couldn't follow any detailed orders, and if their master told them to head for their assailants, that was all they'd do.

Thus, Hamsuke ran straight for the white cloaks' carriage with Sieglinde still on his back.

"Captain! Someone's chasing us on a hamster!"

"Huh?! We were already discovered?!"

Their prey had come rushing toward them of her own accord, but they were none the wiser. After all, they were under the impression they had already captured Sieglinde. There was no way they could have predicted that she had switched places with someone else,

much less that she herself would come rushing toward them afterward.

So, they opted to pick up their speed in an attempt to shake off their pursuer. Hamsuke was faster than a horse, but the white cloaks had maintained their composure and thrown some nuts on the road. Hamsuke stopped in his tracks. Now, the only thing on his mind was stuffing his cheeks with nuts.

"H-Hamsuke! I told you to stop, but not *completely*! I'll give you all the nuts you want later, so keep following them!"

Unfortunately, Hamsuke wasn't listening. He fervently shoved nuts in his mouth and made no move to pursue the carriage. He had probably long forgotten about it anyway.

Sieglinde was still stuck on his back, and she watched as the carriage disappeared farther and farther into the distance until eventually, she couldn't see it at all. This was incredibly tragic for Sieglinde, but even more so for Felix. While he was supposed to be let free before they crossed the border into Beatrix, Sieglinde's pursuit had deprived the white cloaks of the opportunity to do so. Thus, they rode over the border with Felix still on board.

It was only later that Mercedes arrived to find the princess hanging her head in defeat. "What are you doing here, Hannah?"

"O-Oh, Mercedes. You see... It seems like Hannah, who switched places with me, and Felix have been captured."

"Huh?"

"Huh? O-Oh! Sorry. It's me!" Sieglinde pulled the wig off her head.

"Oh, you're Sieglinde. But why are you dressed as Hannah...? Sorry, but could you fill me in?"

Once she had heard the full story, Mercedes determined that failing to catch up to the carriage had actually been a blessing in disguise. If Hannah had taken the princess's place, she had almost assuredly been captured on purpose. Shaking the white cloaks off her tail would have been easy for her, which meant she must have been trying to conduct reconnaissance—in other words, she purposefully fell into their hands to gather intel. And she wasn't stupid enough to get caught without leaving hints behind either. She

had likely left something where their enemies wouldn't think to look.

"We're heading back, Sieglinde."

"Huh?! But..."

"Chasing after them now won't fix anything. Let's withdraw and plan our next move."

Mercedes knew Sieglinde wanted to rush in to save them, but heading into a fight without a strategy would just make them pigs ripe for the slaughter. Not to mention, they'd be getting in Hannah's way if she had some trick up her sleeve. Thus, she concluded that the best option was to sit and wait, and she decided to leave Hannah and Felix to the wolves for the time being.

***

Sieglinde returned to her original route and resumed the test, but Mercedes headed in the opposite direction. She was looking for the path Hannah had traveled. She undoubtedly had left something behind, and Mercedes had the time to retrieve it.

When she finally arrived at the starting line, she discovered some peculiar tracks.

Huh? The ground's dug up, like a large tree was dragged over it. No, rather than dragged, it's more like...

The tracks looked as if a tree had been picked up from the roots and taken elsewhere, but that would be impossible. Not to mention, the grass around the marks had withered, as if their nutrients had been absorbed by something. All of this left Mercedes with a sense of foreboding she couldn't ignore.

"Hmm?"

The nearby brush began to rustle, and a rabbit with a scar over one eye popped out. It was Bunbun. Mercedes put the pieces together instantly, and she couldn't help but be in awe of Hannah's genius. She must have hidden Bunbun here from the start. He was a monster native to these parts, and since vampires wouldn't know how to distinguish the species, he could pretend to be a wild monster should anyone notice him.

Bunbun approached Mercedes and twitched his nose. He was

clearly trying to tell her something.

"Come out, Benkei." Mercedes summoned Benkei from her dungeon to interpret. She had him stand in front of Bunbun, who then told him something.

Benkei nodded along pensively, eventually turning to Mercedes with a scowl. "Master, this rabbit is not saying anything. This is not a matter of interpretation."

Mercedes was silent.

You see, rabbits lacked vocal cords. They couldn't bark or meow like a dog or a cat. Anyone who had raised a pet rabbit would recognize their characteristic squeaks, but they weren't so much speaking as they were simply making noise. Therefore, this was not a matter of language. Bunbun spoke no monster languages, so naturally, Benkei couldn't interpret his mutterings.

Eventually, Bunbun started to get impatient and began to kick at the ground. Still, the others had no way of knowing what he was trying to convey.

"Hmm..." Mercedes returned Benkei to her dungeon, folded her arms, and began to ponder her predicament. At the very least, Bunbun was intelligent enough to understand human speech. Therefore, her only option was to ask yes or no questions and have Bunbun either shake his head or nod in response.

Honestly, Hannah seemed smart, but she could really be a ditz. It was great she left a messenger behind, but why did she choose one incapable of communicating?

"I'll ask the questions, then. If the answer is yes, nod your head up and down. If the answer is no, shake it side to side."

Of course, Bunbun was silent, but he nodded as if he understood her orders. Then, he suddenly picked up a twig and scratched some lines into the ground. They read: "My master was kidnapped. Edelrot's principal is the culprit."

So he could do this all along? Mercedes gave him a light punch on the head.

Chapter 58: Empress Beatrix

The carriage Felix was inside had crossed over the border, and after rendezvousing with some soldiers, they had now arrived in Beatrix's capital. The white cloaks had originally planned on setting Felix free, but they no longer had the leeway to. Their carriage was now fully surrounded by soldiers, so doing that would only get the white cloaks labeled as traitors and executed.

Forgive us, boy. I want to keep my own head too, the captain silently apologized as the carriage continued on its journey. Finally, it arrived at the palace and stopped.

"Step outside, Princess Sieglinde," said the captain of the squad of soldiers. In Beatrix, the army consisted only of women, and the soldiers were dressed in black armor—a color which was regarded as sacred in this land.

Black was the color of the night and was thus revered by all vampires. Meanwhile, white symbolized the detestable morning. The fact the white cloaks had been forced to wear such a color—especially considering how eye-catching it was in the dead of night—spoke to men's low status in this nation.

The soldiers' leader was a chivalrous woman named Rose. She had hair the color of blood that reached her hips, refined features, and well-balanced proportions. There was a sense of nobility in the way she carried herself, and she exuded an aura of dependability. She seemed capable of defeating anything besides an orc.

She opened the door to the locked room Sieglinde was in and peered inside. There, she found a girl with white hair, just as the reports had specified. She seemed a bit smaller than what she had heard, but her height was perfectly normal for a twelve-year-old girl.

Next to her was another young woman who was sitting on the ground, hanging her head. She was blonde, and while her features were androgynous, she was nevertheless beautiful.

"Hmm. So we have the princess...and one more. Who is this girl?"

Huuuh?! One more?! There was definitely a dude with her! Was I wrong?! The captain of the white cloaks was beginning to panic. When he had captured the two, the princess's companion had *definitely* been a man. Yet right now, there was a woman. Sure, the boy's features had been androgynous, but the captain highly doubted that he had been stupid enough to mistake a girl for a guy.

"Sh-She is a student who interfered when we attempted to capture the princess."

"I see! Even if she is our enemy, I must commend her bravery."

"But, if I remember right, sh-she was definitely a dude..."

"You idiot!" Rose raised her voice at the white cloaks' captain and pointed at the girl(?). "What about this adorable young lady looked like a man?! Are you blind?! She may be androgynous, but you have to be absolute scum to mistake her for a man!"

"N-No, I mean... My sincerest apologies!"

The captain of the white cloaks had his grievances, but anything he said now would only be interpreted as an excuse, and having realized this, he had no choice but to remain silent. In Beatrix, a man's testimony had little sway. If an army captain like Rose said he was in the wrong, that was that. In fact, the other soldiers had already begun to glare at him, their gazes overflowing with contempt.

The white cloaks had been used as expendable pawns—it was clear that their lives were considered next to worthless. Should Rose kill him right here and now, she'd simply be acquitted. Thus, his only option was to admit his "mistake," apologize, and pray he'd make it out of this alive.

"You may go."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The white cloaks hurried off. They felt like they were under the gun, and it probably wasn't just their imagination.

Rose turned to the girl(?) and gave her a reassuring smile. "There is nothing to fear, brave young warrior. We respect courage, and while we won't be able to return you to your home immediately, I promise we will not treat you harshly." The young girl seemed to be

trembling in fright, so Rose treated her with compassion.

However, of course, she had been mistaken about that. The girl(?) was *not* trembling in fear, but in humiliation.

Just a few hours beforehand, when Hannah realized she had missed the opportunity to set Felix free, she approached him with a whisper. "It's time for plan B, Felix."

"R-Right..."

"The white cloaks already admitted as much, but at this rate, you'll be executed as soon as we arrive. The Beatrix Empire is a matriarchy where men are deprived of basic human rights. The way they deal with their prisoners of war is crazy too. The girls are treated kindly, but the men are just killed."

This country was terrible—Felix thought that with all his heart.

"So, I'm gonna turn you into a girl, okay?"

"*Huh?*"

Felix couldn't immediately comprehend the odd words that had fallen from Hannah's lips. *A girl? Turn who into one? Me?*

While Felix was left flabbergasted, Hannah took out some makeup brushes and a sewing kit and made her way over to him. "I always thought you'd look great if you tried cross-dressing! Don't worry about a thing and leave everything to me!"

"Huh?! Um, but..."

"We don't have a lot of time, so I'll be quick! They'll ask questions if you're wearing the male uniform, so I'll go ahead and make that up too."



Hannah tore the pants off a frightened Felix, cut them up, and sewed them back into a skirt. Then, she applied some makeup, turning Felix into a girl with shocking speed and dexterity. In the end, Felix had become a gallant young woman capable of drawing anyone's attention. He'd have looked great dressed as a knight and would have definitely earned the stamp of approval from an orc, a natural sommelier of female knights.

Right now, Felix had been brought to the audience chamber. Of course, he had been tied up to make sure he didn't try anything, but the sight looked oddly suggestive. A number of female knights looked his way and let out sighs of approval, sending shivers up his back.

This was humiliating. Plain embarrassing. Felix had always taken great pride in his position as eldest son of House Grunewald, and always tried to be an absolute gentleman.

What about now, though? He was dressed like a girl, and the surrounding women were staring him down with lust in their eyes. He wanted to cry.

"So you're Princess Sieglinde. Let me see your face." Empress Beatrix XVII had peach-colored hair that reached down her back. At 180 centimeters tall, she was quite tall for a woman. She had sharp, blue eyes, a long nose, and altogether mature features that exuded feminine allure. Her dress exposed her cleavage, and she held a fan that must have been imported from abroad.

"Do you understand the gravity of your actions?! This is a diplomatic nightmare!" Hannah had completely discarded her usual ditzy demeanor and morphed into Sieglinde. She knew that someone who feared the consequences wouldn't do such a thing in the first place, and she was well aware it was a stupid thing to point out. Yet, she did so anyway, as it was what an ignorant twelve-year-old would have done.

"I see you're still quite young, princess. Of course I know that. I'm prepared to crush your rotten land. This has already long exceeded a matter of diplomacy."

Well, I can't deny the fact that Orcus is rotten.

There was truth in Beatrix's words. Yes, Orcus was rotten, and as

someone who operated in its shadows, Hannah knew that well. The upper echelons of Orcus's society were filled with scum. The previous king had been an idiot, and the new king had since been executed as a traitor. Sieglinde was of upright character, but she was so upright there was a chance she'd walk the same path as her grandfather.

Had the Beatrix Empire not been a matriarchy built upon the subjugation of men, Hannah might have considered it better to come under their rule. Last year's cleansing had improved Orcus's situation, but there was still festering corruption. In that sense, Empress Beatrix was more capable than Hannah's own rulers. Backed by the dungeons, the empress had created a hierarchical society governed only by those under her patronage. Democracy could protect against rotten despots—at least, letting them lead for long—but if the people were idiots, they'd only produce a leader on their level. "Equality" was a nice term, but it meant a lack of a united direction. The country would only continue to stray off course.

Meanwhile, a monarchy had a united goal they could work toward quicker, even if an incompetent monarch would destroy their nation in an instant. With a competent leader, monarchy surpassed democracy, and considering how Empress Beatrix had united her empire, she was certainly competent. But that only held true if you removed her ideals from the equation.

"By the way... I have a proposal for your companion. How would you like to become one of my lovers? I'll make sure to treat you well."

"Y-You've got to be kidding me!"

"There's no need to be afraid. I'm skilled with my hands. I'll show you the heights of pleasure."

"What a joke! I'd rather die than suffer such shame!"

Beatrix giggled. "You're adorable! I'll have fun breaking down a stubborn girl like you."

Hannah was fed up now. She reverted her gaze to Beatrix and watched her lick her lips as if appraising her new prey. Of course, the empress's eyes were locked on Felix. Unfortunately, he was her type.

Wow, she's actually serious. Like dead *serious.* Hopefully, Mercedes would quickly rendezvous with Bunbun and send a rescue squad. Their time may have been running out faster than Hannah had thought...at least regarding Felix's chastity.

In any case, she wished with all her heart that help would arrive before Felix was begging for death. If the situation necessitated it, Hannah was ready to throw her reconnaissance to the wind and escape with him.

Chapter 59: The Man Despised by Destiny

Frederick Beckenbauer had once believed he was destiny's chosen one, not that there were any particular reasons or events that made him think so. He was simply convinced he was all-powerful—as many young people were—and was self-conceited enough to think he was special. As his belief in his own superiority was stronger than the average person's, he truly was phenomenal in his youth. His mind worked quicker than his peers, and he had never lost in a mock battle either.

Perhaps the fact he was the eldest son of a baron encouraged this hubris as well. His servants loyally followed his demands, and the common folk indiscriminately bowed in his presence. Having been raised in such an environment, it would be near impossible not to develop an ego.

Not to mention, he was also blessed when it came to physical appearance. He was a man of peerless beauty—well, perhaps not, but his looks at least ranked near the bottom of the top percentile. Thus, he was naturally popular with the ladies, and Frederick accepted this as a simple fact of life.

When he enrolled in Edelrot, he was unsurprisingly placed in Class A, where the top students were gathered. Back then, he was called a genius, and his grades continued to stay at the top of his class. During the hunting tournament, he was even invited to join an upperclassman's faction despite still being in his first year. Everyone thought his future would be bright.

Once he was fourteen, he fell down the path of philandering, so much so that he and his friends would brag about the number of women they had slept with.

Frederick performed admirably for an underclassman in the

hunting tournament and lost to none of his peers in the martial arts tournament. He developed faster than his classmates, was blessed in his build, and could sometimes even prove victorious against the upperclassmen.

When it came to his classmate, the girl permanently stuck in the body of a child...he looked down on her. He believed in the very depths of his soul that she was a woman cursed by fate.

A prodigy at ten, a genius at fifteen, a common man past twenty. Frederick didn't know who had spoken those words, but perhaps he fell into that category. He had believed he was chosen by fate—no, he had merely *wanted* to believe it. But when he was seventeen, he was forced back to reality. He dropped out of Class A. His performance in the hunting tournament diminished, and he could no longer beat his classmates in the martial arts tournament. In fact, he even began to lose to his underclassmen.

No, his skills hadn't worsened. Others had simply caught up to him, and eventually they overtook him. Frederick was no genius, just an early bloomer. In the end, his skills paled in comparison to his peers. By the time he had graduated the academy, he had fallen down into Class C and entered the adult world as nothing but an average man.

Meanwhile, Hannah—the girl he so belittled—graduated at the top of Class A. It only fueled his resentment. At some point, Hannah had begun to march laps ahead, and now he would never catch up to her.

However, that still just made him average. Not *below* average! Lady Luck held him in no special regard—in fact, she despised him, and Frederick only discovered this once he had reached his thirties. His perpetual age never came. He transformed into an old man, and his time still continued to march onwards. His once soft, luscious skin began to visibly deteriorate, his smile lines were accentuated, and his hair began to thin.

Frederick begged and prayed. He even visited the church to entreat the gods directly. *Please, don't let my body deteriorate any further. Let me reach my perpetual age.* The gods, however, were indifferent. No matter how long he waited, his body continued to

wizen.

Now, he was far below average. Most vampires stopped aging when they were still young; being old was the sign of inferiority, and youth the sign of superiority. No one knew why perpetual ages differed between vampires. Some said it was simply determined by the individual, while others believed it was hereditary. There was even a theory that posited it was determined by how much sex a vampire had. But the most credible theory was that it was based on talent.

Gifted vampires would reach a certain prowess while they were still young, which would alert their body that they had reached their heyday and tell it to stop their aging. Meanwhile, the bodies of those who failed to reach that prowess would never determine to have reached that zenith and continue to age. According to the theory, those who failed to reach a certain point would continue to grow, searching for a sign of adulthood they would never reach.

Of course, this was just a theory. There was no evidence to back it. But somehow, it was oddly convincing.

For example, there was Frederick's underclassman Bernhard Grunewald. He had been a late bloomer, and while he had outclassed his peers during his schooldays to stand at the top of his grade, he continued to age, making his already mature face appear even older. Because of that alone, he fell into the same category as Frederick, but unlike him, Bernhard's skills continued to develop. The more he grew, the stronger he became, and eventually, no one could hold a candle to him. His feats in the war earned him the title of hero, and his skills shot up drastically. And eventually, once he had reached the peak of his capabilities, he greeted his perpetual age at twenty-eight and continued to reign as the strongest vampire there was.

Frederick had never reached his heyday, but Bernhard's just happened to be later in his life. The height of the hurdle a vampire needed to cross differed by individual, and as long as they never cleared it, their flesh would continue to age. It was nothing more than conjecture, but it had Frederick hopelessly shaking in his boots.

Ultimately, Frederick only reached his perpetual age when he had

entered his nineties and aged into the eldest of men. He had lost all his hair, and harsh wrinkles were carved into his face. He had lost both his teeth and his fangs and had to wear dentures. His eyes and ears had deteriorated, his body had grown soft and flabby, and he began to totter on his feet. It was only once he had reached this point that his time finally stopped.

No, this wasn't his heyday—you couldn't even force such words out of him. His body must have simply realized that aging any further would kill him. He cursed his own flesh. *You idiot! You damned fool!* It was meaningless to stop aging now. He had lost his youth, his power, and his stamina. What could a long life possibly bring him?

His wife gave up on him, and he lost the title of baron—something promised to him by virtue of his birth—to his younger brother. His father had sent him a disownment letter, explaining that Frederick was simply not fit. Whenever he stepped into town, the others would point and laugh. The older kids would ridicule him and even kick over his wobbling legs. When he passed by his old girlfriends, they'd no longer even recognize him, and if any of his classmates did, they'd mock him ruthlessly.

Above all that, though, there was one event that made him more miserable than anything else. One day, as Frederick had been tottering through town, a group of hoodlums had surrounded him, and soldiers had rushed in to save him.

The only problem was the identity of the girl who led this band of soldiers.

"Take this, you brats!"

"Agh! D-Damn it! Let's scram!"

"Seriously! Are you okay, gramps?"

She appeared to be a young girl, but the uniform she wore and the soldiers she led made it clear she was much older than she seemed. And Frederick knew exactly who she was. They had studied at the same school, and he had even once looked down on her.

"Han...nah?"

"Huh? Have we met before?"

Hannah failed to recognize Frederick, but that was

understandable. All traces of his former self were now gone, reducing him to nothing but a simple, wizened old man.

It's better if she doesn't recognize me, he thought. He didn't want anyone to connect his current miserable form to his old, youthful self. But the unnecessary mutterings of one of her soldiers shattered that hope.

"Oh, it's Old Man Frederick. He's famous around here. Do you know him, captain?"

"Frederick? Fred... Huuuuh?!"

Hannah's eyes flung open. Frederick didn't remember exactly what she had said afterward, but he assumed it was probably something like "long time no see" or "you sure have changed." The majority of her words went out his ears immediately after entering them, as he was too deep in the pits of despair to listen.

How? How?! Why are we so different?!

He had once belittled Hannah. She was the eldest daughter of a baron, and not only was she ineligible to take her father's title, she had reached her perpetual age while she was still a child. He had always thought she was pitiful.

However, it was talent that determined the onset of one's perpetual age. Reaching immortality in your youth was a sign of excellence—the markings of a genius.

A prodigy at ten, a genius at fifteen, a common man past twenty.

Real prodigies stopped aging when they were still young enough to be *called* prodigies. It wasn't that they stopped developing; they no longer needed to. And it was the truly talented who were Lady Luck's chosen ones. If she held you in good favor, you'd be able to find your own place in life even if you couldn't inherit the title of baron.

That was how it must have been for Hannah. She had men at her feet who adored her and called her captain. Nobody was laughing now—instead, they looked at her with respect. Frederick himself had once belittled Hannah, but now he envied her youth. Her skin was both luscious and wrinkle free, and she was bursting with energy. Could the two of them really have spent the same amount of time on this planet? Could they really have once been classmates?!

Suddenly, Frederick realized there were tears streaming down his face. He was devastated by his own misery.

"F-Frederick?! Y-You okay?! Are you hurt?!"

"Well, everywhere hurts when you're in a body as decrepit as mine..."

"What to do, what to do...? For now, let's go somewhere to relax and..."

"Um, Captain? You have an audience with His Majesty shortly."

Hannah panicked, but Frederick could only glare. She *worried* for him, which meant she must have determined him to be weak. No one would be concerned about someone far stronger than themselves. That feeling meant one thing—that you were being looked down on as lesser.

Hannah likely lacked such intentions, but that was the only way Frederick could interpret her actions.

"Don't look down on me..."

"Huh?"

"Don't... Don't you dare look down on me!"

Frederick feebly stood up. His back hurt, and his legs were trembling. Even the simple act of standing drained his stamina. But he couldn't stay cowering on the ground—he couldn't stand the shame of it.

"Look at me! J-Just you wait! This won't be my end! One day, you'll all be looking back at me!" wailed the miserable old man, spitting everywhere as tears and snot ran down his face.

He knew he was being absurd. He knew this was no way to treat someone who had just offered him a helping hand. The natural reaction to his actions was ire. That was what he deserved! And yet...Hannah wasn't angry. The only emotion in her eyes was *pity.*

It wasn't only her either. All the soldiers and other vampires around them were looking at him with the very same pity.

When a ferocious dog barked, people just thought it was loud and annoying. Some might even grow frustrated or scared. But what if it was an old dog, missing its teeth and barking in a rasp? Would anyone be angry? No, the majority would just find it...*sad*. Why? Because it was weak. It posed no threat.

In other words, Frederick was too weak to be a target of her anger.

Thus, he set out on his own to explore unknown lands, and after much hard work and frustration, he returned with power. After many long years, he was employed as the principal of Edelrot Academy. Finally, he had gained a place where he belonged.

However, once again, a prodigy had gotten his way. That detestable Grunewald name once again stood as a wall that barred him from the destiny he deserved. Mercedes Grunewald... She had Hannah’s talent and Bernhard’s ruthlessness; she was a prodigy sent here straight from hell.

Frederick couldn’t shake the feeling that she was here to take away what was rightfully his.

Chapter 60: Instinctual Fear

Mercedes didn't immediately spring into action once she had learned that Hannah and Felix had been kidnapped. First, she explained the matter to Hartmann and sent him to Blut with a message for Gustav. Not taking that precaution would mean they'd send a search party once they realized Mercedes was taking too long to arrive.

Next, she returned to the academy and met with Sieglinde, though they refrained from immediately bursting into the principal's office to confront Frederick. Let's say, for example, that they *did* do that and captured the man. What would their next move be? To those around them, they'd look like assailants throwing around baseless accusations. Their only witness testimony had come from Bunbun, which meant Frederick would get off scot-free as long as he played dumb.

Therefore, they needed either evidence or a confession from the man himself. But even if he *did* confess, it would be pointless if Mercedes and Sieglinde were the only ones around to hear it. Confessions only held weight if many had heard, or if they had been made publicly. If the three were alone when he confessed, he could just backtrack later and be pronounced innocent.

For that reason, barging in was a bad plan. Sieglinde wanted to corner him as soon as possible, but they currently lacked enough cards up their sleeves. Yes, the words of a princess held more sway than those of the average student, but she was still just a girl. Frederick had become principal on his own merits. When you ranked their track records against each other, which side would the people take?

Of course, Sieglinde could use her authority to forcibly have him arrested, but that would brand her as a despot. She was only twelve and thus had little trust from her people. Such an action would only

erode that even further. Some might even riot.

So that plan wouldn't work either. They needed to prove their side was unequivocally just while proving Frederick was undeniably evil.

When it came to her intrinsic character, Mercedes was no moral paragon, and she never considered herself to be someone with a strong sense of justice. In fact, she loathed the very *idea* of being that type of person. But still, that didn't mean she could ignore the populace's sense of justice. People were social in nature, and the majority opinion easily spread and turned them into a hive mind.

Yes, there were those who would disagree, but ninety-nine percent of them were simply fools obsessed with the idea of being a freethinker. They didn't critically ponder the issue and instead simply decided to take the contrarian opinion under the mistaken belief that they were cool for not getting swept up by the opinion of the hive mind. They weren't worth considering, and once those minority opinions put them in danger, they readily realigned themselves with the hive mind. Those who *truly* thought through things critically and maintained their identity without getting swept up in the crowd numbered incredibly few.

Of course, Mercedes wasn't trying to disparage the conformists. Humans were a social species, and aligning with the majority was instinctual. Mercedes assumed vampires were the same. The majority believed the word of the masses and rejected the minority. So Mercedes and Sieglinde couldn't let themselves become this rejected minority by capturing Frederick, as it would create many more enemies besides just him.

"But what do we do, Mercedes? I doubt Principal Frederick will just confess in front of everyone."

"You're right. He won't."

Mercedes didn't need Sieglinde to tell her that he'd never get up in front of everybody and admit, "Little old me sold out his country." That meant they needed evidence, but unfortunately, there wasn't any. The torn-up ground was enough to prove *something* had taken place there, but not *what*, which was something Mercedes herself didn't even know. In the absence of evidence, they needed a

confession.

However, that raised the question of what was the best way to get one. They likely didn't have much time. Hannah would be able to escape on her own, but Mercedes had no such faith in Felix, and him dying...wouldn't be good for her. She would no longer have a sacrifice she could offer up to avoid inheriting House Grunewald. Bernhard likely wouldn't care about losing his son, but it would throw a huge wrench in Mercedes's plans.

"Give me some time to think," said Mercedes. While she was at it, she also decided to post Bunbun and Chirpy as guards to make sure Sieglinde didn't run off on her own. Then, she left Sieglinde in the empty classroom and stepped outside.

A few minutes later, Mercedes had entered her dungeon. She headed straight for the golden door—the treasure room. She thought she might find something useful inside.

She didn't have a full grasp of what was in this vault. In fact, it was way too big for that to be possible. Instead, she was just hoping to find something that might turn their situation around and had every intention of shifting course if she couldn't.

In general, Mercedes could think of two possible next steps. The first was to use Bernhard. He may not have cared much about Felix's safety, but he wasn't the type to let a traitor roam free. But using him meant relying on him, which in turn would make her indebted to him. She wanted to avoid that if possible.

The second was to fabricate evidence. If they didn't have any, they could just make some up, though that'd obviously be heretical. Normally, evidence was needed to prove a suspect's guilt, but Mercedes would flip this, instead first determining the culprit and then preparing the evidence needed to arrest them. Of course, it could become disastrous if anyone found out, and that was a bridge Mercedes didn't want to cross unless absolutely necessary. Thus, she had come here to find something she might be able to put to use, even if it couldn't deal the knockout blow.

Luckily, fate was Mercedes's friend and Frederick's foe.

"This is..."

Ultimately, Mercedes found what she sought—no, it even

exceeded her expectations. Put mildly, it was an OOPArt, a tool that clearly didn't match the technological development of her current world and therefore must have been left behind by the gods. It would be strange to call it a holy relic, though the people of this world certainly would.

Most wouldn't understand its use, instead dismissing it as a weird clump of metal that had snuck its way into the treasure room. But Mercedes knew exactly what it was and how to use it. The only problem was whether it still worked...

She gingerly examined the item, and then pressed the switch. It turned on. Dungeons really were amazing; enough time had passed that it should have been nonfunctional, but the dungeon had preserved it as if it had just been made yesterday. Although rather than glee, it was confusion that mostly filled Mercedes's chest.

Why is this here? Only people like me would understand how to use it, and it clearly utilizes technology too advanced for this world. Did they think someone who could analyze this item and deduce its purpose would one day find it? Or was it placed here knowing that someone like me might...

Mercedes could think of two possibilities. The first was that it was an inheritance left for the future, predicated on the hope that someone would one day be able to analyze its workings and figure out how to use it. Under normal logic, this was much more likely. Nobody was born with memories of their past life, after all.

However, there was something that just didn't make sense to Mercedes. This world was stuck in the Middle Ages, in a way that suggested it was deliberately done by someone. If that "someone" happened to be the gods of this world, would they really hope that a person would come along and figure out this technology? Wouldn't they instead take measures to ensure that technology *didn't* develop?

The other possibility was even more unlikely and one Mercedes hoped wasn't true—someone had put it here, predicting that a person like Mercedes might one day find it. In other words, being born with memories of your past life *wasn't* impossible. At the very least, the gods considered it a definite possibility.

However, Mercedes herself didn't have any idea why she had her past memories. In fact, it should be impossible, as her brain—the vessel that stores memories—had been left behind in her previous life. Even if people really were reborn, they shouldn't have their old memories.

Let's say, for example, that there was a broken computer, and you temporarily disassembled it into its individual parts. From those, you took the part that stores all its data and built a new computer with its remaining parts. Would this new, *reborn* computer still have its old data—its old memories? It wouldn't. You could make it remember if you had an external backup, but the computer itself wouldn't remember a thing, as the part that stored those memories had been left behind.

Rebirth was the same. Mercedes's brain—what stored her memories—had been left back in her old body. She shouldn't even have those memories now.

As long as there's no backup, huh? Could I be—?!

Her back suddenly grew cold. A fear unlike anything she'd ever experienced before took hold of her. If anything, Mercedes wasn't one to feel much emotion. She was never particularly happy, nor particularly sad. But this fear was different—it was as if someone or something had injected the emotion into her, or the electric signals in her brain that produced fear had gone haywire. She couldn't quite accept this feeling as natural.

However, she didn't want to think about it any further. She felt like continuing down that train of thought would drive her insane. Thus, she shook her head and dismissed the thought. And what would you know? The fear disappeared as if it had never been there at all, leaving Mercedes on her knees and panting.

*No. I can't think about that. I don't know why, but...*something *bad will happen.*

Mercedes herself didn't know what was so terrifying, but her instincts avidly steered her away from these thoughts. She mustn't think about that. She had to avert her eyes. At least, that was the warning coming from somewhere deep inside her.

Let's just consider what I found here a win. It will stop Frederick.

This unknown fear wasn’t something she could face. She redirected her mind to the problem at hand, almost as if she were running away.

Chapter 61: He Had No Other Choice

Shady dealings had been brought to Frederick's doorstep well before Sieglinde had been revealed to be a princess. The incompetent King Isaac had informed him that a body double of one of his children would be attending the academy and instructed him not to intervene when a foreign nation would eventually assassinate her. Frederick had agreed to cooperate.

Not that he had much choice in the matter. Isaac was Orcus's king, and turning his fangs against him would result in Frederick losing his position as principal—the title he had only achieved after many long years of hard work. He was willing to sacrifice a single girl to keep his prestige, and he did so without guilt. Was that not what body doubles were for? There was no point in protecting her if it meant earning the king's ire.

Frederick's decision had been heartless, but it could hardly be considered unwise. The body double's duty *was* to be sacrificed. Fulfilling it was a great honor! Of course, he did want to protect his students, but he felt no particular need to go out of his way to protect this one.

Back then, that was all he had considered. He may have been a conspirator, but he was not yet a true traitor to his country.

However, the situation abruptly escalated once Sieglinde's identity was revealed to the world. King Isaac was nothing but a puppet sitting on the throne, propped up by the Beatrix Empire. And once he was overthrown, the first person Empress Beatrix approached was none other than Frederick himself.

She sent a simple message: Help us kidnap the princess. It would mean selling out his country and betraying the crown, not to mention if his collusion were revealed, it would be the end of him.

His actions could no longer be dismissed as mere callousness in the name of aiding the king.

Therefore, he should have refused this order, as he had the choice to do. He could have summoned his courage and defied the empress; it was clearly the right thing to do.

However, doing the right thing sometimes comes with risks. Empress Beatrix had plenty of experience with warfare, while Orcus was led by a mere girl ignorant of her identity as a princess. Frederick knew his side would lose any resulting clash. They'd be trampled by Beatrix, and unfortunately, that future seemed to be drawing near. But if the flames of war consumed Orcus, he feared they would destroy his academy as well. His students would be conscripted, and once the Beatrix Empire had won, the academy would be disbanded as punishment for defying them.

Frederick had been forced to consider not the present, but the future. And so, he'd sold his country to the empress.

In exchange, she'd promised that after Orcus had been conquered, the academy would remain as it was, and the children would be left alone. But most importantly, she had assured Frederick that he would be able to keep his position as principal.

However...

"This is terrible, Principal Frederick! Hannah and I switched places, and she and Felix were kidnapped by the white cloaks!"

That had been when Frederick realized his plan was coming apart. The person who had come running into his office panting was none other than Princess Sieglinde herself—the girl who should have already been in Beatrix. She was the last person he had wanted to see.

I've been duped. Frederick immediately deduced that this must have been Hannah's doing. Something had been off, now that he thought about it. Sieglinde had been awfully calm and quiet when he handed her over to the white cloaks, almost as if she didn't want anyone to hear her voice.

That had been Hannah. Frederick wasn't sure if she had seen through his plot or if she had simply acted out of an abundance of caution, but regardless, things had absolutely taken a turn for the

worse. Would the Beatrix Empire believe him if he explained he hadn't been aware of their switch? He doubted it. They'd simply assume he was trying to protect the princess, and on the off chance that they *did* believe him, they'd continue to have their doubts. He'd lose their trust forever.

Damn you! Damn you, Hannah! Why do you always have to get in my way?! You've ruined me again and again!

However, the time for excuses had already long passed. The Beatrix Empire would inevitably discover that the girl they had kidnapped wasn't Sieglinde. Knowing Hannah, she'd probably reveal herself during her escape, backing Frederick into a corner. She might even claim that the two switching places had been *his* idea, which would spell his demise. There would be nothing he could say to regain Beatrix's trust.

Yet, he couldn't realign with Orcus either. He may have failed, but he had still conspired to abduct the princess. The die had already been cast. Having betrayed his country and been discarded by Beatrix, he was now backed to a cliff. He had nowhere to run, so his only options were to wait for his enemies to corner him, or to make the jump himself.

It was checkmate. If Felix had been captured alone, Frederick could still cling to the hope that he'd simply die before the truth came to light. But Hannah would certainly return home alive, and when she did, she'd reveal his crimes to the world and oust him from the academy—the only place he truly belonged.

However, he couldn't find refuge in Beatrix either. To them, he was the man who had switched Hannah and Sieglinde in order to save his princess. He had no plays left.

Wait. I have one right in front of me, don't I?

He couldn't reverse Hannah and Sieglinde's switch, which had undoubtedly caused Beatrix to lose trust in him. But what if he brought them the real Sieglinde himself? Any man who had saved the princess wouldn't feed her to the wolves, so there was a chance he'd be able to convince them that he truly had been ignorant of the situation. If he offered up Sieglinde himself, maybe he could regain their trust.

“Felix and Hannah, you say? My, that’s terrible. We need to act immediately.” Frederick stood on his weary legs, stuck his hand in his pocket, and began to finger the seed inside. He hadn’t been blessed with skill in magic or any sort of martial arts. He may have been a gifted child, but in the end, he was nothing more than an ordinary man.

However, the one thing he could take pride in was his proficiency in controlling the plant he’d discovered in those unexplored lands. Nourishing it with a little mana could cause it to grow and shrink, and after many years of research, he had developed a way to control it at will. It required the right amount of mana, the right elemental affinities, and proper technique, but when that all came together, it could serve as both a sword and a shield.

Frederick commanded it to grow, entrapping the unsuspecting Sieglinde.

“Huh?! What are you doing, Principal Frederick?!” she asked, clearly panicked.

“I’d keep still if I were you. I don’t want to injure you, after all,” he said, his voice low and devoid of emotion. He felt pity for Sieglinde and knew that he was committing the deepest of sins: treason. But what other choice did he have? This was what it took to protect his home. He was despised by fate, disowned by his family, and abandoned by his wife—loathed by everything and everyone! The academy was the only thing he had, the only thing he had ever earned!

Yes, Frederick was a pathetic man. A laughable, pitiable old fool who clung to his status. He knew that, but he didn’t care. Regardless of what others thought of him, his position as principal of Edelrot Academy was what gave his life meaning. It was the only thing he had.

Therefore, he had no other choice. At least, that was how he had justified it.

“Why?! What do you plan to do with me?!”

“I’m very sorry, but you’ll be accompanying me to the Beatrix Empire. While I doubt it will be any condolence to you, they hold women in high regard there. They will treat you well, my dear.”

“Why?! Wait! You’re the leader of Beatrix’s forces, aren’t you?!”

“I had no other choice. No other choice indeed. But please don’t hate this poor old man.” Frederick ignored Sieglinde’s ireful glare and continued on coldly. “I’m simply considering what will happen when Beatrix subsumes Orcus. We’d lose in a war, my dear, so I conspired with them to protect this academy. I do apologize that you’ll have to be that sacrifice, though.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Do you really plan on selling out your country?”

“I do indeed. I’ve never been a patriot. All that matters to me is this academy. No matter what happens to Orcus or who rules as our monarch, this academy is what I must keep safe. Everything else is inconsequential.” Frederick twisted his lips into a smile, revealing his dentures. “Edelrot is my whole world. The rest matters not to me...”

That statement came deep from the heart of a pitiful old soul. Not only did destiny despise Frederick, his own body did as well. But his sole accomplishment in his sad life had been becoming this academy’s principal, so Edelrot became his whole world. He didn’t need or care about anything else.

Having sensed this old man’s deep grudge from his expression, Sieglinde grew silent as her face paled. Frederick was no big shot—he was an average weakling. That was how the stars aligned on the day of his birth, and so his obsession with his small world wasn’t even worth comparing to that of the greats.

The talented had limitless opportunities and possibilities, but not Frederick. He could count his opportunities on one hand, and his possibilities were next to zero. He couldn’t abandon this life. Once it was over, he’d have nothing, so all he could do was cling to it with everything he had.

While the tenacity and resentment of this ordinary man inspired fear in Sieglinde, their eavesdropper was unperturbed. She kicked down the door, glared coldly at Frederick, and said, “Thanks for the confession. I can’t say I understand your motives, but it was enough for me to know you’re our enemy.”

He kept silent, staring back at Mercedes with a similarly icy gaze. She must have been waiting outside the door so she could burst in

when Sieglinde had gotten the information they needed out of him. He had to admit, it wasn't a bad plan.

Considering that Mercedes had thanked him for his confession, his assumption about their plot was likely correct. But they were so naive! *Just children*, he thought to himself, amused. Perhaps their plan would have worked had they posted a teacher outside the door, but Mercedes had been alone, meaning the two girls present were the only ones who had heard his admission. No matter what they claimed, it would be near impossible to bring him down. And even *had* a teacher been there to listen, the majority would have still taken Frederick's side, since he had used his authority to ensure the faculty consisted of nothing but loyal and tacit followers. The confession the two had just heard would prove meaningless.

"Oho ho ho! You girls sure are brave. But you've failed to cover all your bases. It will be impossible to corner me, I'm afraid," he said with a sneer.

Nevertheless, he regarded Mercedes with a level of caution. A twelve-year-old would not normally be worthy of such consideration, but she had already proven herself to be more skilled than her peers, and only fools judged people on age and looks. The only thing she lacked was experience, and in a few years' time, she'd undoubtedly become vicious to a degree that rivaled Bernhard.

This inspired a thought in Frederick—wouldn't it be best to have her on his side? He decided to give the two a final chance. "You may think you've cornered little old me, but it's the opposite, I'm afraid. I could shut you up if I so wished, but I'd prefer not to take such measures. It's not in my heart to hurt a student, after all. So how about this? Why don't you keep what happened here to yourself?"

As soon as those words left Frederick's lips, a giant plant blocked the door. His treason had been discovered, and he had failed to capture the princess. But he still had time to offer her up to Beatrix. In fact, it benefited him that Mercedes was motivated by justice. Luck was on his side!

At least, that was what Frederick had believed, but Mercedes's gaze remained as icy as ever. "You seem to be misunderstanding things. I wasn't trying to corner you, Principal Frederick."

“Oho ho! You really are a bright girl, aren’t you?” She had been playing the waiting game, apparently. Frederick’s smile widened. Now that Mercedes had realized she was at a disadvantage, she decided to avoid confrontation.

Clearly, Frederick didn’t understand her at all.

“Cornering you is too indirect. I came to put an *end* to you.”

“Huh?”

“A soundproofing spell’s been cast on this room, right? I’m sure you were trying to keep your conversations here secret considering how guilty you are. But that’s exactly why you failed to notice until it was already too late. Undo the spell.”

Frederick wasn’t quite sure what she was talking about, but the glint in her eyes was so convincing, he knew there was a chance she was serious. He had wanted to dismiss this as a mere child’s silly bluff, but the senses he had accrued with age had started ringing the alarm bells.

No, he didn’t believe her. He felt no fear. But just to make sure—to be absolutely certain she was bluffing—he decided to undo the spell for just a moment. With that excuse in his mind, he reached into his desk, took out a magic stone imbibed with wind, and undid the soundproofing.

At the same time, Mercedes brought something to her lips and whispered, “See?”

He heard her voice twice. First, the small voice of the girl before him, then an unnaturally loud voice booming from somewhere else. It echoed throughout the academy, but Frederick failed to understand what was happening or what magic she had cast.

However, there was one thing he was certain of—their conversation had been blasted to everyone outside.

“S-Since when...? When did you...?”

“Since the start. Everything you said was leaking from the moment Sieglinde stepped inside.”

No, it wasn’t winter, but Frederick’s entire frame was assaulted by a frigid chill. It spread from his feet to his back, then to his neck. A ringing in his ears began to consume him as he was distanced from reality. Eventually, he collapsed on the floor.

From the start? He was convinced no one would hear his confession. Had he accidentally given himself up?

"Wh-What is that thing...?"

"A microphone, though I'm sure you're not familiar with the word. It's a tool that picks up sounds, then broadcasts them to another tool called a 'speaker' to play at a louder volume."

Frederick had never heard of such things before, but that was natural considering they far surpassed the technology that existed on the Red Planet. Still, while the words "microphone" and "speaker" were new to him, he had always had an inkling that tools more advanced than those of his own civilization were out there.

"An Overdeveloped Relic... What is that doing here?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb! You're using it yourself, aren't you?! That's a relic that exceeds Falsch civilizations, a vestige left behind by the gods—a holy relic!"

***

The items Mercedes had recovered from her dungeon were a microphone and speaker set. They clearly didn't belong to any civilization on the Red Planet. Not only were they anachronistic, they should have been uncreatable given her world's current state of development. Yes, she questioned their existence. In fact, it constantly nagged at her. But she knew that considering this question ran counter to the instincts of her current body. Whenever she did so, all the fear synapses in her brain fired, regardless of logic. Thus, she had buried her doubts and decided to think of nothing but using these objects for her own gain.

However, there was one more thing she discovered—similar tools had appeared throughout this world's history. Frederick had called them "Overdeveloped Relics," and dungeon conquerors had recovered many. But oddly enough, no one had ever tried to analyze these objects—or perhaps they simply couldn't. Mercedes had long known that vampires like herself had mental limits and mechanisms that guided their views. If she hadn't retained the memories from

her previous life, she wouldn't have questioned things either. In fact, all the Falsch, including the Elfe, Chimäre, and Vogel, had similar limits placed on them.

Just what had the gods—no, *humanity*—been thinking? In any case, it wasn't the time or place to consider that question.

"Who cares what this is? All that matters is that your confession was broadcast outside. You understand what that means, right? Everyone here is a witness. You're done for."

Mercedes didn't take half measures. She hadn't backed him into a corner, but she didn't have to. The path to checkmate had already been forged, and all she had to do was capture the king with her rook. Frederick could stay here no longer. Many of Edelrot's students were the children of nobles and merchants, and they'd mention this news to their parents, who'd spread it to their underlings, thus ruining Frederick's name in high society for good.

"...stole it," Frederick said. He was trembling, and his voice was strained as if speaking took all the energy in his bones. Sieglinde sensed the danger in his words and stepped backward. Mercedes, on the other hand, stepped forward.

"You stole it... Th-The only place I have to call home... My everything..." he muttered as if chanting a curse. He thrust his hand in his pocket, but Mercedes mercilessly kicked him aside. The first to strike tended to be the one to win, so she had simply followed that axiom. Now that she had confirmed Frederick to be her enemy, there was no longer any reason to restrain herself.

They could talk once he was lying on the ground, motionless. And if he still wanted to keep his mouth shut after that, she could just crush him. In any case, neutralizing him came first.

This callousness was something Felix lacked—or perhaps, it would be more correct to call it a lack of compassion on Mercedes's part.

The wailings of an old man wouldn't touch hearts. No one paid it any mind. But it was filled with resentment and obsession, and once Mercedes had attacked the old man, he imprisoned the room in his plant.

Chapter 62: Frederick Resists

I guess I made the wrong choice. Mercedes examined the plant that consumed the room and inwardly admitted her mistakes. She didn't regret that she'd struck first, only that she hadn't hit harder. After confirming Frederick to be her enemy, she should have cut off his head, or at least an arm.

However, the moment she attacked, she let her misgivings get to her. Frederick may have been a traitor, but he was still her principal. Killing or seriously injuring him could get her expelled, or perhaps cause the academy to be shut down entirely. She still had plenty to learn at Edelrot, whether that be the common sense of this world's people, or history, or the sort of knowledge and skills one could only attain with a proper education. Having been in charge of her own edification for so long, she understood how invaluable all those things were to her.

A tower of blocks could only be built high with a proper base, so Mercedes had avoided dismissing her teachers, even the ones she knew were weaker than herself. But that was exactly what had caused her to show restraint—she was worried that killing Frederick would mean losing all that.

Cutting off his neck could come back to bite me later. I should probably just crush his limbs. Having reached her decision, she jumped on Frederick. Vines shot forth to intercept her, but she was faster. She grabbed him by the shoulder, crushed it in her grip, and followed that up with a bone-shattering kick to the hip. His elderly form flew into the air like a withered tree, crashed into the ceiling, then fell to the floor.

However, Frederick continued to mutter to himself as if he felt no pain at all. "This is my academy... My everything... You can't have it! You can't haaaaave iiiit!!!"

The vines stretched out to cover him. Mercedes immediately cut

through them with wind magic, but he had already disappeared.

Suddenly, the entire academy began to shake as if there had been an earthquake, and the plant continued to grow larger.

"Damn it!"

Realizing that staying here would mean entering the belly of her foe, she grabbed Sieglinde, took a fire magic stone out of her pocket, and chucked it at the window, using the explosion to secretly return the microphone and speaker to her dungeon. The blast blew a hole in the plant as Mercedes kicked through the window and escaped outside. She'd have to make the jump from the top floor to the ground, but that was easy for her. Her landing was loud, but she was fine.

After that, she turned around to face the academy.

"This academy...is miiiine!"

The building was now completely devoured by Frederick's plant.



No, that wasn't all. The plant had ripped the academy up from its base, absorbing it. The tree limbs growing out its sides formed arms, while the roots came together to form legs. The limbs on top tangled together to construct a head that awfully resembled Frederick's wizened face. Mercedes could hear the terrified screams of the students and teachers who had been left inside, though they didn't seem to be in immediate danger.

"What is that?! A monster?!" The students and teachers who had been lucky enough to be outside gazed at the now-transformed academy, trembling and cowering in fear.

They were right. This was undoubtedly a monster, a demon plant created by an obsessive old man. It was twenty meters tall and the very image of the word grotesque. It oozed with Frederick's own ugliness and misery.

"Deary me! There were still students outside! Come on, kids! Come back in!"

"Th-That voice. You've got to be kidding me!"

"Principal Frederick?"

The demon plant twisted its mouth into a grin and looked at the students. It was terrifying, of course, but Frederick was entirely unaware as he extended his vines toward the students and faculty.

"Mercedes! Everyone's going to be...!"

"Yeah, I know." Mercedes would have preferred to make her move while Frederick was distracted attacking the students, but it would be inhuman and immoral to sacrifice innocent bystanders. She was a person with a heart, not an emotionless machine. Saving them was the right thing to do—the *correct* thing to do. So, she used her wind blades to cut through the vines.

"A word of advice, master. Frederick does not wish to harm the students. Allowing him to consume them would allow you to use your dungeon's power to its greatest potential."

I know that.

Zwölf was perfectly right, and even Mercedes recognized that. Given their situation, the best course of action would be to overwhelm Frederick with the vast resources of her dungeon. In fact, this was perhaps the perfect opportunity to try using Stark

Dungeon's Guardian, the Schwarz Historie. But for that, she couldn't have people watching her. It would be wise to keep her status as a dungeon conqueror a secret.

Additionally, of course, Sieglinde was in her way. She'd likely keep quiet if asked, but Mercedes thought there was a good chance she'd accidentally leak it somewhere down the line considering how honest she was.

Therefore, letting Frederick capture the students, teachers, and even Sieglinde was in Mercedes's best interest, but that would be cruel—the sort of action taken by a machine that prioritized efficiency alone.

Those with hearts sometimes ignore efficiency and logic and instead let their emotions guide them. I would seem heartless if I abandoned my teachers and classmates, so I need to at least make it appear like I tried my best.

Wind magic wasn't Mercedes's forte, but she nevertheless used it to cut through the vines, then jumped out of the way of the arm that came crashing down on her. She was at a clear disadvantage in this fight. Of course, she could flip that around, but not while having to protect this dead weight.

The situation gradually grew worse. More and more students were abducted by the vines and imprisoned inside the academy.

Five left, now four...

Mercedes counted down the remaining students as she restrained herself. She couldn't make her move just yet. She mustn't wish for the students to hurry up and get captured. Yes, they were in her way, but fighting to protect innocent bystanders was just.

She wasn't going easy on Frederick. Yes, she hadn't utilized her most powerful cards, but she was still doing her best to fight with those that were available to her. Unfortunately, though, it just wasn't enough. She couldn't protect the students, and they started to drop one by one.

However, what else could she do? If the nuisances were removed from the scene in the process of her doing the right thing, then this outcome was simply inevitable. Her actions were perfectly humane.

Three, two...

Teachers and students continued to disappear. Sieglinde stepped in to save them, but the academy flung her out of the way, sending her tumbling across the ground. She was...still. She must have lost consciousness.

That made Mercedes's job easier.

One...zero.

Now, the people she'd been trying to protect had all fallen victim to Frederick, which meant there were no more bystanders. She didn't have to do what was right anymore. She could cast aside her humanity and instead prioritize efficiency.

"My, they disappeared! They all disappeared! How does it feel knowing you were powerless to protect them, deary? No one will come to save you since they're all sleeping peacefully inside me!"

Mercedes had strained her ears to confirm his words. She no longer heard the screams from earlier, which meant he must have been telling the truth. He had put them all to sleep. She almost wanted to thank him.

"You're right. I didn't protect them, and Sieglinde's unconscious. I'm all alone. But you know, that took longer than I thought it would. I was hoping we could get here a little quicker."

"What?"

"You got rid of all the bystanders. That's better for me."

"What...do you mean?"

"I can use the full extent of my power!"

Now that their audience was gone, she no longer had to act human. She took the broach—her master key in Idle Mode—out of her pocket, transformed it into her halberd, and leaped into the air.

She went after his feet first. She used gravitational magic to strengthen her swing, cutting through the roots and bringing an academy many times her size tumbling to the ground.

Then, she followed this up with a kick—*multiple* kicks. She struck Frederick's large frame a hundred times, using gravity magic to ram him into the ground.

"Whoa, there! Students and teachers are inside me!"

"You'll protect them, won't you?"

Frederick was oddly attached to the school, which meant he

would certainly do his best to protect the faculty and students inside of him. The academy was nothing without them, after all.

Therefore, Mercedes attacked with full force. Frederick was the one who had wanted to fight while carrying dead weight, after all.

"Come on out, Schwarz Historie!" she commanded, raising her Blut Eisen aloft. A white giant the size of the school appeared out of thin air. It had three pairs of wings on its back, the left one glowing like an angel's wing and the right one a dark, muddy demonic color. It lacked a face, but it was backed by a halo and surrounded by black flames.

This was the strongest foe Mercedes had ever known, and it brimmed with power as it looked down on Frederick with crossed arms.

Chapter 63: The Giant Who Gouges Hearts

Bernhard Grunewald is a dungeon master. That was the credible rumor whispered throughout high society. He had an abundance of wealth from unknown origins, and Practis Dungeon was just too perfect for the large city of Blut. Despite lacking connections, he was shockingly promoted to the position of duke in just a single generation, and no one knew why the king treated him so favorably either. It all lent credence to this rumor.

In fact, given his circumstances, it would have been stranger if Bernhard *didn't* own a dungeon. Someone rising from baron to duke was highly abnormal, and while he was undeniably a fiend on the battlefield, that alone wouldn't merit such a promotion. So then why had the previous king given him the title? The obvious answer was that Bernhard possessed a power that could rival the throne. He was no longer a noble, but a king who had a dungeon of his own, and knowing this, the king had granted him authority in an attempt to keep him on his side.

That was what the nobility thought, and Frederick had as well. "How...preposterous! Not just the father, but the daughter too?!"

Frederick couldn't believe the scene playing out before him—or perhaps, it'd be more apt to say he didn't *want* to believe it. Yes, the thing Mercedes had summoned from her halberd was a monster, but at the same time, it wasn't. This was a Guardian, a being only those who had truly conquered a dungeon could command, and a monster with equal power to an entire army. Even the king himself couldn't summon one.

Of course, Frederick lacked the conclusive evidence to draw that conclusion, and Mercedes had never announced that this creature was a Guardian either. But nevertheless, he knew. Given its

overbearing presence and intimidating aura, it was painfully obvious what it had to be.

"Just how unfair can you all possibly be?! You...you...freakish fiends!" roared Frederick as the hands of the plant-covered academy stretched out toward Mercedes.

However, she stayed still. The Schwarz Historie moved in her place. It grabbed the school as the bandages fell from its arms burning with black fire. "Chapter One: Arm Bandage (Arms Untamed)," it announced. The black fire quickly spread from the academy's arms to the main body, sundering them.

However, it wasn't over quite yet. The academy began regenerating its arms with shocking speed.

The Historie announced its next attack before the academy could finish. "Chapter Two: Rückseite Selbst (Dark Self Unreal)."

A bright light shot out from the Historie's nonexistent face. It enveloped Frederick, and suddenly...he was back in the classroom from his schooldays. His younger self was there with him, and he looked at Frederick and sneered. *"Hey, now. You're looking quite feeble there, old man. Talk about pathetic. Aren't you embarrassed living like that? Ugh, senile vampires are so damn ugly. I'd have killed myself already."*

"Th-This is..."

It was another version of Frederick—one that dwelled within himself. It laughed at him for being so old and decrepit, but it was undoubtedly *him*, the same man who desperately clung to his boyhood days. Frederick suddenly began to feel his knees go weak. He collapsed to the ground, as the ridicule from his younger self had nearly broken him.

However, the Historie wasn't done yet. It launched another attack on this pitiful old man. "Chapter Three: Mitleid Auge (Pitiful Surrounding Eye)."

The surrounding classmates' uniforms shifted, and many of them were now adults. Frederick stood in the center of them, bearing the full brunt of their pity. They had once been the same age physically, but Frederick alone had continued to age, and now he was the only old man among them.

"Poor Frederick..."

"Huh? You're Frederick, right?"

"Your life's over once you get that old."

"Stop it... Stop it...!" Tears formed in his eyes as he attempted to escape, but he tripped over his own feet. His legs were as thin as rotten branches. He could no longer run, so instead, he lay awkwardly on the ground.

However, someone extended their hand to him. It was the girl he'd once scorned for being stuck in the body of a child—Hannah. She looked down on him, genuine sympathy in her eyes. *"Are you all right, Frederick? Don't push yourself, okay? You're an old man now."*

"Stop it! I don't need your pity!" Frederick knocked her hand away and fled in a crawl. He was surrounded by innumerable eyes, all gazing at him with pity. But suddenly, they disappeared, and he was thrust into darkness.

"Chapter Four: Waldeinsamkeit (Lonely Isolation)."

He neither saw nor heard a thing. Now, the pitying eyes that surrounded him had given way to complete isolation, sending his emotions into disarray. His sense of time began to dull as seconds felt like hours. People—and vampires—were social creatures, but that made them incredibly susceptible to loneliness. There were no exceptions; even misanthropes would break when faced with hours, days, or perhaps weeks of solitude.

The gods had once conducted a certain experiment. They wanted to see how long a person could last in an environment of total sensory deprivation. In the end, even the sane and stable had begun to hallucinate after just fifteen minutes.

Another experiment had the subjects' eyes and ears blocked and their limbs bound together, forcing them to stay in a soft bed at all times they weren't eating or toileting. Only two or three days of this was enough to break them.

People just couldn't withstand an environment that lacked stimuli. Stuck in an empty space with nothing to stimulate their senses of sight, sound, or touch, they broke mentally at alarming rates, and the saner a person was at the start, the faster that decline would be. The Falsch that mankind—the gods—had created in their image

were no exception.

Frederick panicked and struggled within the empty space. He wasn't a weak-willed individual—in fact, his fortitude was stronger than most's. It was just that the sane couldn't withstand such an environment. If—just if—there was anyone out there who could counter this attack with a stable, calm mind, then that person had to have been born without a vital something. They had to have had a heart that waned.

"Chapter Five: Heftig Glück (Intense Regret)."

Frederick didn't know what was happening. Deprived of all light and sound, he had no way of perceiving the outside world, leaving him ignorant of the fact that the academy he so cherished was currently engulfed in crimson flames.

What a vicious attack this was! He was enveloped in flames that burned him to the bone, but he himself felt nothing at all. He wasn't even aware he was being subject to an attack. Trapped inside this lonesome darkness and deprived of his senses, he was absolutely powerless.

This was what made the Schwarz Historie so truly frightening.

"Chapter Six: Unverändlich Einst (Past Unchanging)."

***

"...drick! Frederick! Frederick Beckenbauer!"

Having heard his name, Frederick awoke with a jump. This voice was like a light in the darkness after being cut off from all senses during his battle with Mercedes. His sense of time was so warped, it felt like years since he had last heard a fellow man.

However, most strikingly, he opened his eyes to find light—not just the sensation, but *real* light. Vampires were a nocturnal species that loathed brightness, but the darkness created by the Schwarz Historie had worn down Frederick's vampiric heart, and now the light he had once so despised seemed like the greatest of blessings.

However, he was met with a shocking sight that immediately killed his jubilance.

"What's a top student like you doing sleeping in class? Am I that

boring?”

“Huh...?”

“Stay focused, you hear? You’re our class’s rising star, after all.”

It took Frederick a moment to realize who was speaking to him. He recognized the face and the voice—no, he *remembered* them. But the man Frederick knew wasn’t this friendly to him, nor did he ever smile at him like this. Yes, Frederick’s teacher from his school days had treated him that way when he was young and still convinced he was a genius, but once he fell to mediocrity and then below even that, the teacher had started to regard him with scorn.

“Huh? Wh-Where has this old man found himself...?”

“Ew! Why are you calling yourself an old man, Frederick? You sound like a geezer!” giggled a girl, finding this utterance amusing. She was one of his ex-girlfriends. At one point in time, she’d been kind to him, but they grew distant as Frederick aged. Recently, he only recalled her ridiculing him.

What in the world is...? As soon as he caught sight of his arms, that line of thinking stopped. They weren’t the thin twigs of an old man, but plump, healthy arms belonging to a boy in his youth. In a panic, he touched his body all over. It was plump and young, and he moved shockingly smoothly, without pain or sluggishness. He touched the top of his head to find a full head of hair, alerting him that the body he was currently in didn’t match his perceptions.

“S-Sorry. Could you lend me a mirror?”

“A mirror? Sure.”

Frederick took the handheld mirror from one of the girls and stared at his reflection. As expected...there was the face of his younger self. He was still handsome, adored by the ladies, and at his prime when everyone believed he was destined for greatness. Frederick had thought he’d never return to that period of his life, and yet, here he was.

Have I come to the past?!

He couldn’t believe what had happened to him. He had been fighting that freakishly powerful girl—the Grunewald child. They were locked in battle, and then the Guardian she summoned had deprived him of his senses.

So why was he here? Why had he returned to the past? Had he been killed by Mercedes, and that was what had thrust him back in time? No, that would be preposterous. He just couldn't understand. What was happening to him was completely beyond his comprehension. All he knew was the sight being presented to him proved he was in the past, which meant one thing: He had a chance to redo things.

Having arrived at this realization, Frederick immediately jumped into action to change his hapless fate. At one point, he was haughty, condescending, and self-complacent with his skills. Believing he was a genius, he failed to properly train or study, and once he had realized his mistake, it was too late for him to catch up even after he frantically dedicated himself to his schoolwork.

He couldn't repeat that mistake. It would mean going down the same road of failure as before. So this time, Frederick studied hard to forge a new path for himself. He didn't mind the label of antisocial if it meant changing his fate, so he stuck to himself, refrained from leisure activities, and focused solely on bettering himself in the hopes that this time—just maybe—his perpetual age would come earlier. That hope propelled him onward.

"What's been up with you lately, Frederick? You're so antisocial. Let's go hang out!"

"You guys can hang out on your own if that's all you want to do. Old men like—I mean, *I* need to train. I need to get stronger and prove to this stupid body that my prime has come! That's the only way I can avoid having to wait forever for a perpetual age that'll never come while turning into a decrepit old man..."

"You're overthinking things! There's no need to worry about your perpetual age! Just—"

"Shut up! Leave me alone, you plague bringers! I'm not like you fools! You helpless idiots who'll be young forever will never know real suffering!"

All of his old school friends he used to joke with distanced themselves from him, but they were just fools who prioritized temporary pleasure above all else. Frederick knew that despite their cordialness, they'd all abandon him once he was at his worst. He

knew they ridiculed him for his old age.

"Damn it! What's gotten into him?!"

"Let's just leave him alone."

Frederick's friends left him, and his girlfriend did the same after her love for him faded away. But that was okay! He *wanted* them gone! He would only be a schoolboy for a few years, just a blink of an eye in the lifespan of vampires who lived decades or even centuries! He needed to focus his attention toward the future, to polish his skills to avoid the same pitiful fate!

Frederick lived his second life with those words as his mantra, and in the end...

"I'm disappointed in you, Frederick. How did you fail this test? It was easy!"

His teacher lost all hope in him. He fell from Class A to Class B, then to Class C.

"Hey, look! It's Frederick. He was so scared of growing old, but look at him now!"

"What a *loser*."

"At least we're still young!"

His former friends and girlfriend now sneered at him. Ultimately...Frederick had failed to halt his aging. He ended up in the same future he had come from, as if all his efforts had been meaningless from the start.

Once again, the old, feeble Frederick tottered down the streets. His despair and vexation were too strong for him to be bothered by the hoodlums who picked on him...but a familiar, youthful voice snapped him back to reality.

"Take this, you brats!"

"Agh! D-Damn it! Let's scram!"

"Seriously! Are you okay, gramps?" The girl who offered those words and extended her hand...was Hannah. It was happening again! Everything was repeating in the exact same way! She had climbed the ranks, was adored by her soldiers, and now pitied Frederick.

"Aaah... Aaaaaaah!" he screamed, his pathetic voice filled with

fear. He didn't remember much of what happened after that. All he knew was that he had directed his ill-placed anger at Hannah and ran.

It hadn't changed! *Nothing* had changed!

His despair only fueled his obsession with the academy. He was convinced it was the only place he belonged, and once again, he sold out his country to Beatrix and fought Mercedes. What awaited him was the same conclusion as last time: Mercedes summoned her Guardian, and it deprived him of all his senses.

Except, one thing *was* different. Once the darkness had cleared, Frederick was in front of Mercedes, and she had her halberd pointed at him. He was still. His body wouldn't obey him, and he failed to either resist or flee. He couldn't even speak.

However, when she mercilessly swung her halberd down, he could have sworn he heard a voice. "Final Chapter: Einst Refrain (Past Repeated)."

***

"...drick! Frederick! Frederick Beckenbauer!"

Having heard his name, Frederick awoke with a jump. He scanned his environment and discovered he was inside his classroom. The homeroom teacher of Class A he had known in his youth was standing before him, and he was surrounded by his classmates.

"What's a top student like you doing sleeping in class? Am I that boring?"

"H...uh...?"

"Stay focused, you hear? You're our class's rising star, after all."

It's a repeat of last time, he thought. Just as he had before been suddenly thrust into the past, he now once again found himself in the days of his youth. Yes, he was glad to have the chance at a redo, to some degree. But what weighed even heavier in his chest was the fear that he'd again be forced to walk down the same path as before.

What if he met the same end? What if his efforts and actions

were all meaningless, and they all converged on the same future? What if that was just his destiny? If so, his heart would certainly break.

What propelled him forward in this third chance at life was fear. He struggled feverishly. Believing that hubris during his youth would lead to ridicule later, he decided to lie low this time, and, convinced that even he could change his fate, he worked to better himself. This time, he ventured to unexplored lands and discovered the seed that grew on command earlier than he had before.

Still, however, he advanced into his old age and became the target of ridicule for those around him. There was nothing he could do about his body, but with his despair came a certain acceptance: No matter what he did, he'd grow old, and his perpetual age wouldn't come until his later years. But if that was the case, he at least needed to protect the one place where he belonged, so he made the necessary preparations.

As long as Mercedes never enrolled in the academy, he wouldn't meet the same fate, so he abused his authority as the academy's principal to fail her, and once the entrance exams were over, he summoned all the participating teachers and ordered them to not admit her.

"There is a certain student... Her name is Mercedes Grunewald. I have decided to fail her. She is not fit for our academy."

"What do you mean, Principal Frederick?! She scored highest among all the applicants, and she's a daughter of House Grunewald! You have to be crazy to fail her without a good reason!"

"That's exactly right! Please reconsider this, sir. At least find a proper reason to..."

"The duke will not just sit back and accept this."

"My apologies, but I've made my decision, and I refuse to be overruled. I will do the work of explaining the situation to Lord Bernhard myself."

What were those reactions? Keeping that prodigal fiend out of the academy was a top priority! Yes, Bernhard would protest this decision, but that was far better than assured destruction! As long as Mercedes never set foot in the academy, he could figure things out.

And thankfully, she entered her carriage and left just as Frederick had hoped.

He was relieved from the bottom of his heart. He had finally succeeded at forging a new future for himself.

However, for some reason, Mercedes was attending school the very next day.

Frederick panicked. Why was she here? Why was she walking around like she was supposed to be here? Why hadn't anyone told him about this?! She had failed! He had used his authority as principal to kick her out and silence all opposition! He had even seen her leave!

So why was she still here at the academy?

Still panicked, Frederick decided to grab one of the female teachers roaming the halls and ask for an explanation. "Hey!"

"Oh, Principal Frederick! What is it?"

"Excuse me?! Why the hell is that student here?! We failed her!"

"Huh? We failed Mercedes Grunewald? What do you mean? You must be getting senile! She scored the highest in her class!"

"What do I mean? I used my authority as principal to fail her, no? You were wholly against it, but I successfully shut you up in the end, right?"

"You must be joking! That never happened. Maybe you should get some rest," she said, laughing a bit before she left.

What was happening? Frederick had failed Mercedes yesterday. Had that truth been erased from this world? No, had Bernhard pressured them to let her in?!

Frederick interrogated every single one of the teachers at the school, but they all reacted the same.

"What do you mean? Miss Grunewald scored at the top of her grade. She even addressed the new class at the entrance ceremony."

"Were you hallucinating or something?"

"We discussed failing her? I don't know what you're talking about. We adjourned immediately at that meeting."

"You must be tired."

What was happening? Frederick couldn't understand. His

memories clashed with their responses. It was as if Mercedes entering the academy with top grades was a fixed episode in history, and logical consistency of all events preceding it were ignored to reach that point. Things just felt*...off*, like he had pulled the number one from a bingo machine only for it to morph into a six.

Everything that happened after was in line with the future Frederick remembered. Mercedes and Sieglinde got to know each other and confronted him. In the end, he was blocked by that giant, and then...Mercedes raised her halberd before him.

He had lost once again. Now, he had reached the same endpoint three times.

Mercedes swung down her halberd, and in the next moment, a crackling sound rang out through him as the world was warped by a sandstorm and he was once again thrust into darkness.

***

"...drick! Principal Frederick!"

He awoke with a jump. This time, he was pulled out of the darkness by a voice belonging to one of the teachers at the academy.

Shocked, he looked around him. This was now his fourth attempt at life, though this time, his restart point had been during his old age, not his youth.

Regardless, Frederick didn't mind. He now knew that nothing could stop his aging. He had accepted his fate. But the one thing he *couldn't* accept was having the title he deserved be taken from him. This time, he needed to eliminate Mercedes Grunewald.

"Wh-What day is it?!"

"Huh?"

"What day is it?! When was the entrance ceremony?! Is there a student here named Mercedes Grunewald?!"

"Oh, right. Don't you remember? The entrance ceremony was yesterday, and Mercedes was obviously there too. She's amazing, isn't she? She scored at the top of her grade."

This was the worst news possible for Frederick. The entrance

ceremony had already taken place. He wanted to scream and cry. Why had he been taken to this wretched time?

Still, she hadn't come to confront him yet, which meant she still didn't know he was a traitor. He simply had to eliminate her once she found out, so Frederick did all he could to make sure that happened.

His fifth chance at life: He conspired with Beatrix to carry out an assassination. This failed, and he fell to Mercedes's blade.

His sixth chance at life: He tried to kill Mercedes by setting monsters free in the quasi dungeon used for classes. All were defeated, and his direct attempt to eliminate her failed. He fell to her blade.

His seventh chance at life: He tried spreading rumors that Mercedes was a dungeon master, but it only gave her more authority and her words more weight. She realized he was a spy for Beatrix, and he fell to her blade.

His eighth chance at life: He tried informing Beatrix that Mercedes was a dungeon master. Now viewing her as a threat, Beatrix decided to back off, but Mercedes determined Frederick to be a man willing to blabber to her enemies. Thus, he fell to her blade.

His ninth chance at life: He launched a surprise attack out of desperation, but he naturally lost and fell to her blade.

His tenth chance at life: He fell to her blade.

His twentieth chance at life: He fell to her blade.

His thirtieth chance at life: He fell to her blade.

He lost countless times; no matter how many times he tried, he could never win. As he experienced his life over and over, he gradually began to accept his fate, which led to resignation.

He gave up on banishing her from the academy. He gave up on assassinating her. He gave up on winning her over to his side, and he gave up on convincing her. He gave up once, then twice, then a third time, a fourth, a fifth, and eventually...

His hundredth chance at life: He did nothing, until eventually, he

fell to her blade.

Finally, he gave up.

***

Within that solitude, Frederick vicariously lived the latter half of his life over and over. It was the so-called second chance at life which all longed for—a chance to see through the lingering doubts and regrets—that was granted to him via illusion and fantasy. It was as if he had gone to the past and redone his life, but it was all just a realistic illusion that Frederick struggled desperately through.

He tried abandoning his womanizing ways, and he tried offering more respect to others. He tried not growing complacent with his talents and dedicating himself to his training and studies. But every single loop ended in the same conclusion, and all versions of himself became an old, depressed failure. And when it was all over, that prodigal fiend broke through his dream.

"It's over, Principal Frederick."

He wasn't sure when she had gotten there, but Mercedes now stood above him with her halberd raised high. It was nothing new, just the experience of defeat he had encountered countless times within his dreams.

He was beyond distinguishing dreams from reality. Instead, his broken soul only muttered, "so it happens again." He didn't even try to resist. Instead, his empty eyes were trained only on his repeating past, unaware that he had made it back to reality.

Final Chapter: Einst Refrain (Past Repeated).

The broken old man was struck with innumerable pasts that had become his reality. *Einst Refrain* was the Schwarz Historie's final and greatest power, and it manipulated the nanomachines in one's body to put that person completely to sleep. The preceding chapter existed to weaken the mind and blur the line between dream and reality. Then, the final chapter completely manipulated the five senses to present them with a perfectly realistic dream of their past, filled with defeat.

Yes, the person may resist—those with stronger wills quite thoroughly. But it was all meaningless. The illusion was created by the Historie, and it would never allow its victims victory. Instead, they would experience their past over and over until they eventually accepted their fate. Then, reality would come crushing back down on them.

Thus, the victim of the attack would merely interpret it as the end of just one countless life, instead simply accepting their fate with the thought "so it happens again."

When put into words, it sounded quite possible to resist this attack. It was true—if someone was able to regain their sanity once they were brought back to reality, then they would. As long as they didn't give up, they'd have another chance. If they resisted their innumerable pasts without resigning themselves to their fate, then they'd be able to overcome this attack.

But how many were capable of that? Those people could hardly be considered normal, if they even existed at all.

Thus, Einst Refrain was an attack that broke the mind, and one none of sound mind could counter.

Chapter 64: To the Empire

Mercedes's final strike didn't kill Frederick, but it did sever the nerves connecting his limbs. He was still a valuable source of information, and killing him could jeopardize her standing. Thus, she handed him over to the band of knights who had rushed to the academy's aid, putting an end to the pandemonium.

The knights were quite dilatory in their arrival, as apparently, they hadn't been quite sure whether or not the academy monster was part of some lesson. They quickly caught sight of the monster and initially sent a reconnaissance force to investigate whether it was an accident. But after seeing the school attack both students and teachers, the group was sure it was an incident that needed dealing with, so they returned to headquarters to deliver that message. Only then was a combat squad assembled and dispatched.

It was universally true that militaries couldn't act without absolute certainty, and since their failure to respond immediately had allowed Mercedes to test out her Guardian, all was well in the end.

However, that didn't mean all their problems had been solved. Felix and Hannah were still in enemy captivity, and defeating Frederick hadn't changed that. Sieglinde had immediately asked the knights to recover them, but it would take time before they could head into battle—and battle would mean one thing: war.

However, war required just cause; an army couldn't carelessly march into battle just because a foreign nation *might* have been meddling in domestic affairs, or because they *might* have kidnapped somebody important. Wars were to be avoided, and one sparked by false pretenses was a worst-case scenario, as it meant the first army to attack had done so without justification.

In fact, it was more likely the army wouldn't act even if they discovered undeniable evidence of wrongdoing, because Sieglinde was safe in the end. Cold as it may sound, sacrificing Hannah and

Felix to avoid a war would minimize casualties.

Thus, the army wouldn't attack. First, an investigation would be launched, and then a letter of protest would be sent. Then...well, it was unlikely that things would progress from there. Hannah and Felix were certainly important, but not so much that their lives were worth engulfing Orcus in the flames of war.

Perhaps the army would mobilize if Bernhard ordered them to save his precious heir, as now that Orcus lacked a king, his words carried more sway than any other in the kingdom. But he would never do that. He viewed Mercedes as his heir—not Felix—and he was confident Hannah would be able to escape on her own.

However, that meant that if nobody acted, the situation wouldn't improve.

"Sieglinde," Mercedes called out to the princess as she was confirming with her knights that they really had no other options. Nobody would act, nor could they. But that allowed Mercedes to step in and fill that void. "Appoint me as the messenger to deliver the letter of grievances. That will allow me to head to Beatrix with permission from the princess."

Bernhard wouldn't try to save Hannah and Felix, but Mercedes saw a reason to interfere herself. Yes, strictly speaking logically, there wasn't much benefit for her to do so. Felix's death would make things harder for her, yes, but it was questionable whether saving him was worth making an enemy out of an entire nation. Therefore, the right call was to abandon them. Hannah would eventually return, and her testimony could be used to denounce the empire.

However, the two prisoners were Mercedes's very own brother and aunt. She held no particular emotional attachment to them, but only coldhearted people would abandon their family, and that was something she didn't want to become.

I really...only act out of self-interest, huh?

Mercedes was well aware herself. She made all her judgments based on what would most benefit her. She was concerned for neither Hannah nor Felix, and she had instead decided to save them just to avoid garnering a reputation as being ruthless.

At her core, Mercedes was selfish and egotistical. While it may

seem like she was acting in the interest of others, she was only thinking about herself. All her decisions were calculated on personal pros and cons, and when they weren't, she wasn't motivated by emotions or sympathy, but instead the desire to convince herself she was the type to make the "right" decisions—to comfort herself by feigning emotion.

That part of herself—the person she thought she no longer was, the same woman from her past life who she so desperately wanted to consider someone else no matter how much she knew it wasn't true—was terribly ugly to her.

Sending the Historie after Frederick had forced her to once again reckon with the fact that she was broken. When she had fought the Historie herself, its psychological attacks had hardly affected her. She thought they were strong offensively, but that was it. Despite being forced to watch an illusion of her past self dying over and over, she simply kicked it all away, thinking it was stupid. She hadn't even realized that the attack was meant to break her sanity.

The Historie's attacks were the *destruction* of sanity, so naturally, they didn't work on those already insane. It was impossible to melt water or light flames on fire; this was the same principle. You couldn't break what was already broken. Mercedes had never been of sane mind, so it had been impossible to break hers. She hadn't even realized that the Historie had such an extreme effect on the mind until now.

Still...perhaps she could fake it until she made it. She had once heard that pretending to be a madman could truly turn you into one, and this was simply the opposite. If she played the part of an upstanding person for long enough, perhaps she could really become one. If others saw her moon as full, perhaps one day, it really would be.

Thus, Mercedes chose to head down the path of no personal benefit, as she knew it was the path she ought to walk.

"That'll be dangerous, though, Mercedes."

"I know. But if no one else will do anything, then I will. I'm a Seeker, after all. I'm used to battles."

"A-At least take some guards with you."

"I don't need them. It'll be easier to operate on my own."

"Then take me, if no one else."

"I can't. You need to stay here in Orcus."

Yes, Sieglinde was highlighting the dangers, but deep down, her true wish must have been to save Felix and Hannah, especially considering it had been her fault that they were captured. She would never choose to abandon them.

It was terribly foolish, and it made her terribly unfit to be ruler. But she could serve as a compass. Sieglinde was incredibly kindhearted, honest, and true to her heart, and Mercedes felt that with her as a guide, she'd one day find her full moon.

"B-But..."

Sieglinde must have known Mercedes was the best person for the job as well. She could move instantly, and she was plenty strong enough considering she had defeated Frederick. If Sieglinde wanted to save Hannah and Felix as soon as possible, then it should have been an easy decision. At the very least, Mercedes would have given those orders without hesitation.

However, perhaps such fears were what made people people.

"You don't need to worry. I'll bring Hannah and Felix back safe and sound. You just need to believe in me and send me there to save them." Mercedes offered words that would inspire confidence, urging Sieglinde toward a decision. By asking for her faith and promising to bring the two home, she allayed Sieglinde's fears.

However, deep down, she couldn't help but sneer at herself for asking Sieglinde to believe in her when she didn't even believe in herself.

"You're really okay with this, right? You'll be fine?"

"Yeah. Leave it to me."

Sieglinde stared straight into Mercedes's marble-like eyes. Eventually, she gave her orders. Mercedes had broken her down. "Fine. I'll appoint you as my messenger. But promise me you won't push yourself beyond your limits, okay?"

Now, Mercedes could act as an official representative of Orcus. She was somewhat sad that she'd be away from school for so long, but she could easily catch up once she returned. Gaining the

princess’s trust was clearly the best move for her future, and a chance to see a foreign country could hardly be considered meaningless.

At first, Mercedes had only planned on leaving Blut, but once she had learned that Bernhard’s influence spread through the entire nation, she realized she needed to consider leaving Orcus entirely. Getting a chance now to see what life abroad was like would certainly be useful to her.

Mercedes couldn’t help but snicker at herself. It had happened again. In the end, her thoughts always returned to self-interest.

She really was beyond salvation.

Chapter 65: A Twisted Nation

Who had been the first to coin the phrase "flying like the wind"? That was what preoccupied Mercedes's mind as she watched the ground below from Chirpy's back. He was currently traveling at around a hundred kilometers per hour, and while it didn't quite reach her own top speeds, he was plenty fast enough. Since she couldn't always travel her fastest and sometimes suffered exhaustion, it was better to leave skyward travel to him anyway.

Mercedes held down her fluttering hair and enjoyed the feeling of the wind on her cheeks. Whoever had come up with the idiom about flying like the wind was onto something; that was exactly what it felt like traveling at these speeds.

It's so obvious how underdeveloped this place is here from up in the air.

The majority of what filled Mercedes's vision were plains, mountain ranges, and forests—all areas that Falsch couldn't live in. Villages and towns would occasionally rush past, but they made up only a small minority—a far cry from modern Japan where buildings could be found everywhere outside the remote countryside. Mercedes used to play retro games where small towns and villages would occasionally pop up on a huge field, and the sight before her now was similar.

Mankind on Earth had ventured outward over countless centuries, eliminating wild animals and expanding their own habitats. As a result, the majority of nature had been destroyed, and humans even made concerted efforts to protect what little bits of nature were left. In fact, it was the only reason any nature was still left at all. Having come from a world like that, Mercedes never tired of seeing the natural abundance of this one.

However, among the greenery, the royal capital filled with vampires stuck out like a sore thumb. Actually, it was an *imperial*

capital, since she was now in Beatrix. On the whole, it was built like any other fortress city. Buildings were constructed around a castle that stood at their center, and all of that was enclosed in a protective wall. It was generally rectangular in shape, and at least to Mercedes's eyes, appeared to be about three kilometers in diameter. For a city supposedly as developed as those of the Middle Ages, it was almost *too* big.

Each of the four walls had a gate, so it was probably safe to assume they were the only official exits and entrances. Soldiers were stationed on high ground to prevent any breaching by sky, and Mercedes could currently feel their eyes on her. She was quite certain that decreasing her altitude any further would get her labeled as a trespasser and skewered with arrows.

It doesn't look like I can sneak in. Even forcing my way inside is going to create a few witnesses.

There were plenty of flying monsters in this world, which meant measures had been taken to protect from skyborne attacks, as the city walls were inadequate to defend from those. Mercedes debated using magic or another method to force her way inside, but ultimately decided against it.

Her best bet was probably to enter as a traveling Seeker, so she had Chirpy let her down on the ground a short distance away from the city. Then, she walked up to the gates, which were manned by two guards who crossed their spears together to block the entrance. Both were vampires.

"Show us your ID."

Mercedes did as instructed and took her Seeker card out of her pocket. She wasn't foolish enough to use the Grunewald name here.

"Mercedes Calvert... Rank C, I see."

"Hmph. We'll do a body search just in case. Head to that hut."

She was directed to a building near the gate that appeared to be a guardroom; this seemed a natural security step for a city like this one. Inside the hut were some female soldiers, who were obviously dressed in nicer garb than the two gatekeepers.

"Sorry, but these are the rules. We need to make sure you're not carrying anything dangerous. Take your clothes off. And don't worry,

the men will stay outside."

"What will happen to the weapon on me? I need it for my Seeker work."

"You can keep it. We're looking for other items, like bombs or illicit drugs. Those are the things we can't let inside the city."

Mercedes considered these safeguards to be logical, and thus she stripped down to her undergarments to undergo a simple body search. The magic stones imbibed with fire she had on her were the only problem, as they were categorized as bombs in Beatrix. But of course, the master key in her pocket only appeared to be a simple accessory, so it was completely overlooked.

"Sorry, but we'll be holding on to these for a bit. We'll return them to you as you leave. Write your name and the items that you'll be entrusting to us here."

Her fire magic stones had been confiscated, but what could she do? Luckily, these were stones she had bought, rather than the magic ones produced in dungeons with infinite uses, so she wouldn't miss them much. Not to mention, she was simply entrusting them to these soldiers, and they had every intention of returning them to her once her business here was done.

Thus, Mercedes wrote her name and the confiscated goods on the piece of parchment presented to her and gained permission to enter.

"Welcome to the imperial capital. We will gladly welcome you as long as you don't cause any trouble."

Somehow, Mercedes had made it past the first checkpoint and inside the gates, but that was when she noticed a naked man. He seemed to be going through the same security check as she had, though apparently, he wasn't afforded the same privacy. It was needlessly cruel, and he must have been freezing.

One of the female soldiers followed Mercedes outside the guardroom and addressed the gatekeepers. "Did you find anything suspicious?"

"Yes, ma'am! A longsword and some fire magic stones."

"Confiscate them. We can't let anyone who would carry dangerous articles into the city."

That was odd. Mercedes took a moment to ponder how differently this man was treated. Perhaps he had a criminal record?

"W-Wait a second! These are for self-protection! I'm a Seeker! I need my weapons!"

"Rules are rules. If you don't like them, then don't come here."

"You'll give 'em back later, right?!"

"Of course not. You might use them to attack us."

"Th-This is cruel! It's unfair! What did I do?!"

"Nothing. These are merely the rules, and you're free to dislike them. But you need to leave if you refuse to respect them."

Apparently, his harsh treatment *wasn't* because of any previous track record. Then what was it? His Seeker rank? That seemed plausible. A low rank inspired doubt, as a hoodlum could just register as a Seeker as a cover.

However, his next words shot down that possibility as well. "I'm a C-rank Seeker, and the guild can vouch for me! I won't cause any problems!"

"That's exactly what someone who *would* cause problems would say."

"N-No way... Wait! Look at her! She's got a weapon on her!" The man had noticed Mercedes and was pointing at the sword on her hip. Naturally, this was a decoy meant to hide her real weapon, the master key. She wouldn't have minded had her sword been confiscated, but she had been allowed to carry it without issue.

"She's a woman. She needs it to protect herself."

"Huh?! Are you all crazy?!"

"Quiet! Either leave or enter, the choice is yours. But unfortunately, my time is limited."

"Damn it!"

This was terrible. Sexism was the only explanation for this behavior. Considering the equipment of the female soldiers and the fact the men serving as gatekeepers had been forced to stand, it was all too obvious that women were higher on the social ladder than men here.

That meant Felix was in even greater danger, and with that thought on her mind, Mercedes finally stepped through the gate.

The buildings that lined the streets of the capital were quite tall and constructed with bricks piled into squares. The windows were lavishly affixed with glass, which was a privilege only afforded to the wealthy during the Middle Ages. The streets were even paved with stones, making travel easy and comfortable.

People walked the bustling streets under the moonlight, laughing and chatting among themselves. But oddly, Mercedes had yet to see any men, and she still didn't no matter how long she walked.

That was until she wandered into a part of town visibly different from the rest. Unlike the lavish quarters she had come from, the buildings here were quite crass. The houses were made of wood, and the windows were affixed with wooden planks instead of glass. Perhaps this was the slums? They existed in all cities, but...oddly, Mercedes had finally found men.

The clothes they wore were filthy drabs, in stark contrast to what the women wore, and their skin was equally dirty, as if they weren't allowed to stay properly clean. Numerous such men walked these streets, but they scurried away as soon as they locked eyes with Mercedes.

I noticed it at the gate too, but this society... It was a complete matriarchy.

She heaved an exasperated sigh as she shifted her thoughts to how she could sneak into the castle and rescue Felix and Hannah.

Chapter 66: Orcs Are a Female Knight’s Worst Nightmare

Mercedes had come to the Beatrix Empire as a messenger to deliver a formal letter of grievances, but quite honestly, she never had intended to march straight into the city to deliver this missive. It was clear from the Empire’s actions that they were trying to provoke Orcus—likely to war considering they had laid hands on the princess.

This was not a prelude to war, but an act of war itself. There just had yet to be any battles. An opponent this brash wouldn’t back down from just a letter; in fact, the world would be a much more peaceful place if a scrap of paper really had the power to prevent a war.

If Mercedes decided to brazenly approach the empress, she’d be captured on the spot or executed, and that would be the end of things. No matter what happened, it wouldn’t be good. This barred her from a frontal attack, as lawlessness could only be countered with the same.

However, Mercedes was up against a whole nation, and one mistake could spell her end. The best-case scenario would be if she managed to sneak into the castle undetected, rescue Hannah and Felix, and escape, but unfortunately, Mercedes wasn’t so stealthy. She highly doubted she could accomplish such a feat even if armed with the most legendary of covert tools—the cardboard box.

Since sneaking in wasn’t an option, Mercedes thus opted for the opposite—to rush in with a bang. Her plan was to prepare a flashy diversion she’d unleash on the area that would plummet the castle and town into turmoil, and then she’d use that as a smoke screen to sneak in and rescue Felix and Hannah.

Luckily, Mercedes also had just the right thing for this plan. Her first step was to focus her mind toward her dungeon and mass-

produce a certain monster. *Orcs,* to be exact—the familiar bipedal pigs equipped with certain "thin rods."

Quite frankly, Mercedes herself wasn't confident that these monsters could really be considered orcs. The name originally came from a sea monster, which served as the inspiration for the orcs created by Tolkien, the modern image everyone knows. But his orcs were the result of elves who were abused and tortured, and they lacked the pig faces that had become characteristic of orcs in Japan —the origin of which Mercedes herself wasn't even aware of. Thus, pig-faced orcs were a derivative Japanese version, but they were oddly the category the orcs in this world fell into, and they likely had nothing to do with the Elven.

Incidentally, the term "orc" is believed to be an Old English term borrowed from the Latin word "Orcus," which also happened to be the name of the nation Mercedes hailed from, though these two facts were likely unrelated.

Anyway, it was impossible to trace the origins of the orcs in this world, but the type Mercedes had opted to use deviated even further from the original and were known as kyoseizumi ("castrated") orcs. They had been castrated to make them obedient, and they were unfortunately slightly weaker than typical orcs. But that wasn't because of any physical differences. Rather, the loss of sex drive dampened their pigheadedness, thus weakening them.

Mercedes created a hundred of these orcs to start with and placed them on standby within her dungeon. If you haven't caught on by this point, this was her planned diversion. Orcs were the bane of female knights everywhere! Well, perhaps not *everywhere*, but still.

However, even Mercedes would be left with a bitter aftertaste in her mouth if the orcs actually raped any of these women. This was why she had opted for kyoseizumi orcs to ensure anything sexual was off the table.

All right. I'll send sixty orcs through the front gates and thirty through the back, which leaves ten to send roaming through town. That'll force some of the knights into the streets.

These knights were trained, so the orcs would be eradicated

immediately if she sent them all rushing in headfirst through the front gates. Then she wouldn't have a diversion at all. This meant the best option was to have them operate in squads and let some into town to force a portion of Beatrix's personnel there to defend the townsfolk.

Of course, the orcs in town would just be going for a stroll. Mercedes had given them strict orders to not attack civilians under any circumstances.

"Shall we get started, then?" With one swing of her Blut Eisen, a hundred orcs appeared out of thin air. Then, she ran forth, the orcs following behind her. To others, it looked like a pack of orcs were barreling after a young girl, and while Mercedes was no actor, she begged the female knights standing guard outside the castle for help.

"This is terrible! A horde of orcs suddenly appeared out of nowhere! H-Help me!"



Ultimately, Mercedes had decided to infiltrate the castle by pretending to be an innocent victim fleeing from a mob of monsters. The knights standing on watch would let her inside out of concern—and the confusion of the moment only made that likelier. On the off chance they'd decide to throw her to the wolves—er, orcs—she could think of another plan of attack.

"How awful! A lovely young girl is being chased by a horde of filthy pigs!"

"What are you doing?! Protect her!"

"What's with those damn guards?! This is why men are such scum!"

However, contrary to Mercedes's fears, the female knights rushed to her rescue. They kept the orcs at bay with their magnificent sword arms before grabbing Mercedes by the hand and pulling her inside the castle grounds.

"There's nothing to worry about, young miss. Hide here inside the castle!"

"We won't let them lay a finger on you!"

"Those orcs are no match for us!"

The female knights offered Mercedes some theatrical words of comfort; she could have almost sworn she saw lilies blooming behind them. They were incredibly friendly, and Mercedes was starting to feel a tad guilty for deceiving them.

Still, phase one of her plan had proven a success. In fact, it had gone even better than she expected—she had made it inside the castle with zero difficulty. The knights didn't question Mercedes at all and were instead all locked in battle with the orcs.

Is this country okay? Well, I suppose I should just be glad my plan worked. It won't take long for them to eradicate these orcs, so I need to get moving.

She had made it inside the castle, but this was where the real operation began. She had to find and rescue Felix and Hannah before the knights eliminated the orcs.

For now, Mercedes set her sights on the dungeon. If prisoners were going to be anywhere, it would be there. Thus began her

journey to find the stairs leading down there.

***

As it turned out, Felix and Hannah were not in the dungeon as Mercedes presumed. Rather than being held in captivity, they had been shown to lavish guestrooms on the second floor. Of course, the windows were sealed from the outside to prevent their escape and a knight was perpetually stationed outside the door, but they suffered no other impairments. Their room was affixed with a bath and toilet, and they were brought nutritious meals three times a day. Therefore, the treatment Empress Beatrix gave them was far from crude. If anything, they were being treated as esteemed guests.

Unfortunately, only male prisoners could be found in the dungeon where Mercedes was headed.

"There seems to be quite the commotion outside," noted Felix. The turmoil was beginning to make him nervous.

How many could actually recognize him as he was dressed now? Mercedes, at the very least, certainly couldn't. His visage was no longer that of a man, but a beautiful girl in a white dress with luscious blonde hair reaching down to her hips. Empress Beatrix had given him the dress, and it unfortunately looked amazing on him. No matter where he went, he could feel the passionate gazes of the female knights on his back. It was positively unpleasant.

Felix was a prudent gentleman, and he always refrained from sending such amorous glances any woman's way. He could have never imagined that he'd one day be the *recipient* of such glances. His manly pride was in shambles.

"Has she come for us?"

"Huh?"

Hannah ignored Felix and walked toward the door. It was locked from the outside, but she knew there'd be a guard on standby there as well. So, she knocked on the door, feigned Sieglinde's voice, and questioned her. "It's loud out there. What happened?"

"A horde of orcs has attacked, Your Highness."

"Orcs? Where'd they come from?"

"We're currently investigating the matter, but it's nothing you need to worry about. Lowly orcs could never make their way here, and even if they do, I shall protect you."

Hannah pondered this response. She had left Bunbun behind as a messenger, and the others had certainly learned of their kidnapping —as well as Frederick's culpability—by now.

However, fears of war kept the army at bay. The loss of both the eldest son of a duke and the head of the clandestine forces would be a major blow to Orcus, and if Bernhard demanded that they recover his heir, the army would be forced into action. But there was no way he would do such a thing, so the army hadn't been mobilized.

However, there were very few people who could launch such a large-scale attack without military aid, not to mention that the imperial capital was defended by walls and that orcs couldn't be found anywhere nearby. If a large horde of them had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, then...

"All righty, then. Let's run, Felix."

"Huh?!"

"This must be Mercy's doing. It'll probably be your only chance to escape."

Hannah was relatively careless and quick to panic, but she was nevertheless brilliant. Her mind had already connected the dots, which meant she knew that her atypical niece was the girl behind the pandemonium.

This was their chance to escape.

Knowing Mercy, she won't expect prisoners captured by an enemy force to have received the treatment we've gotten. She's got no sense for actions that put desires over efficiency, which means the first place she'll check is the dungeons...

Mercedes was certainly searching that very place as they spoke, and having realized this, Hannah decided to head there herself. Now that she knew her next steps, she simply needed to implement them. So, she picked the lock as if she were an expert at it, opened the door, and snuck behind the shocked guard.

Then, she knocked the guard out with a karate chop to the back of her head, shoved her into the room, and locked the door behind

her.

Chapter 67: The Empress and the Odd One

The palace had transformed into a battleground. Orcs were frequently exterminated on hunts just like goblins, but they were far from weak. They stood at over two meters tall and were covered in a thick layer of subcutaneous fat. Even the smallest among them weighed over 150 kilograms, and they had enough strength to lift boulders—not to mention that their bones were sturdy enough to support their large frames.

A skilled vampire could overcome their strength, but they were still hard to counter in packs. The knights guarding the castle were the cream of the crop, but this surprise attack had put them at a disadvantage by preventing them from responding with the best measures. Multiple orcs had already made it inside the castle grounds, parading around as if they owned the place.

However, it was thanks to this pandemonium that the knights didn't catch sight of Hannah and Felix.

"This way, Felix! The dungeon is over here!"

"H-How do you know that?"

"I've been out snooping a few times!"

Apparently, Hannah had been slipping out of her confinement to investigate the palace grounds, and she wasn't the head of Orcus's clandestine forces just for show. She had prepared well enough that she could escape alone whenever, so she had only stayed behind because of Felix—or perhaps, only to investigate Empress Beatrix.

"Y-You bastard! You filthy beast! Let go of me!"

On their way to the dungeon, they overheard a familiar female voice. It was Rose, the soldier captain they had encountered as soon as they had arrived at the castle.

As convoluted as it was, Rose wasn't a knight. Knights employed

at the palace were bestowed land, and they were elites contractually obligated to protect the castle. Soldiers, meanwhile, were not landowners. In the simplest terms, knights were career bureaucrats, while soldiers were policemen, and Rose's own position coincided with that of a police sergeant. Additionally male soldiers were treated as lesser, and more or less mere security guards.

However, Rose stood out due to her sword arm and beauty, her virtue and beauty—and mainly, her beauty. In other words, looks took precedence here. This country *really* had some problems.

In any case, Rose—a soldier captain for this dysfunctional nation—had been surrounded and captured by a horde of orcs.

"What do you plan to do with me?! You're going to violate me, aren't you?! You filthy pigs are slaves to lust! Fine... But do not forget! No matter how you may defile me, my heart will remain pure! I will not submit to mere orcs!" She must have known how cliché those lines were, right? At least, that was Hannah's impression.

The orcs stared at her, scowling. *What do you think we're going to do? I mean, we've been castrated,* was at least what their expressions said.

"What's the matter?! You're not going to lunge at me?! Are you afraid of me, cowards?! If you're going to do it, then get it over with already!!!"

That was the moment Hannah decided to abandon her, but her companion had other ideas. Felix had stopped in his tracks and was now glaring at the orcs. "This is terrible! One of the women has been captured! Wait just a moment, Aunt Hannah."

"Huh? You're going to save her?"

"Of course I am! There's no telling what will happen to her if we don't do something."

"I mean, I think we can just let her be. She seems to be enjoying herself."

"How can you say that?!"

Felix was a chivalrous gentleman, and abandoning Rose wasn't an option for him. Even if she looked like she was having fun (was that just their imagination?), panting laboriously with flushed cheeks, she

was nevertheless someone who ought to be saved.

"Prepare yourselves!" Felix yelled, picking up a sword off the floor. He quickly stabbed one of the orcs, the only thought on the creature's mind as it died being "Whoa! This knight's hot!"

He decapitated another orc with his next attack. This one died with a different thought on its mind: "What a fine girl! If only I wasn't castrated, I'd have had my way with her!"

The final orc he stabbed through the heart. It was satisfied with its death, and the last thought that passed through its mind was "Pure knights like her really are better than the freaks who enjoy being violated."

For some reason, the orcs all died smiling.

Meanwhile, Felix immediately picked up Rose in a bridal carry, jumped into the air, and escaped the horde of orcs. His movements were fluid and wonderfully elegant, so much so he could've been knighted right then and there.

Felix was far from weak. He was just unfortunately cursed with a freakish outlier as his basis for comparison.

"Are you all right?"

"Y-Yes... I'm fine." Rose was staring right into Felix's eyes, her cheeks flushed pink.

She's in love. Hannah was assured of that. The look on Rose's face was unmistakably that of a lovestruck maiden. The fact that her affections were limited to those of the same sex was karma biting her in the butt.

"Felix? Will saving her help us?"

"B-But..."

"We can't even use her as a dummy. Toss her."

This girl isn't some pet... thought Felix as he set Rose down.

"Wait a moment, Your Highness! It's dangerous in the castle now! You need to get somewhere safe and—"

"Sorry, but I can't do that," said Hannah as she tossed aside her wig. There was no use in pretending to be Sieglinde any longer—in fact, they'd only chase after her with more fervor if they still thought she was Sieglinde. Thus, it had become time to throw away her costume, as the moment Beatrix learned she was a fake was the

moment she lost value to them.

"H-Huh? Y-You're..."

"Yup! You lot never managed to catch Princess Sieglinde after all!"

"Damn it all...! But I can't just let you go free!" Rose reached for her sword, but she was too late. Hannah had nimbly slipped behind her and knocked her out with a karate chop. However, Rose's helmet had gotten in the way of that, so Hannah first had to remove the thing before giving her a big whack on the head and forcing her asleep.

After that, she stripped Rose's armor off and put it on herself, seeming all too used to doing it. "Hmm, it's a bit big for me, but it beats walking around as is. Let's go then, Felix!"

"R-Right!"

She really must have a lot of experience in these sorts of situations. Watching his usually ditzy aunt transform into a skilled spy inspired a sense of awe in Felix.

***

"Not here either."

Mercedes had come to the dungeon in search of Hannah and Felix, but they were nowhere to be found. However, considering they had never been here in the first place, that made sense.

The only prisoners in the dungeons were feeble-looking folks both fettered and starved. The annoying part for Mercedes was that their emaciation meant she couldn't immediately distinguish them from Felix. With meat on their bones, she'd have been able to tell immediately, but when they were all skin and bones, she couldn't help but consider the possibility that one might actually be her brother.

As a result, she had to check every single prisoner's face, forcing her to waste precious time.

"You won't find who you're looking for down here. This is where we quarantine the vulgar men."

Mercedes heard a voice from behind her, causing her to halt

where she stood. *I must have overstayed my welcome*, she thought as she turned around to find a woman adorned in a lavish dress.

It was clear she wasn't a knight. Her clothes weren't suited for combat, but the aura she emanated was oddly imposing.

"I'm not so uncouth that I'd lock beautiful women down here, even if they oppose me. You've searched the wrong place, daughter of my enemies."

"Who are you?"

Beautiful young women? Mercedes scrunched up her face as her thoughts returned to Hannah and Felix. Perhaps Hannah was deserving of being placed in that category—although she looked quite young, her appearance was certainly that of a pretty girl—but Felix was a guy! Mercedes couldn't shake the feeling that the woman before her was mistaken about something.

"I'm Beatrix XVII, the empress who rules this land. State your name, girl! You can't be a mere ordinary young woman."

"I'm Mercedes Calvert, a Seeker who's been sent to deliver a letter of grievances," she said, chucking Sieglinde's letter at Beatrix. As the empress watched it go, she took her eyes off Mercedes momentarily—and Mercedes used that window to leap into the air and swing her Blut Eisen.

I'll strike her with the handle and smash her in a single strike!

Mercedes had eased her power to ensure it didn't kill Beatrix, but the woman blocked the attack with her fan as if she had predicted it. The clanging sound of metal reverberated through the air, causing the prisoners to shiver.

"Bwah hah hah! That was quite the greeting! I'm quite obliged to be the victim of a surprise attack! Some messenger you are!"

"We've long surpassed what could be resolved with a simple letter, haven't we?"

"Indeed. I see you understand your situation. I've taken quite a liking to you, girl... I'll make you mine!"

Mercedes once again swung her Blut Eisen, and Beatrix once again blocked with her fan. Each strike damaged the dungeon walls and reverberated like thunder. Thus, the curtain opened on a battle in the dungeon with only prisoners as audience.

Chapter 68: A Battle Between Masters

Mercedes's halberd and Beatrix's fan clashed countless times as sparks flew through the air. Fans were a household commodity meant to create air currents via a flapping motion and couldn't be considered a weapon in any sense—what ought to happen when a halberd made contact with a fan was beyond consideration or debate. Yet Beatrix's fan somehow withstood the swings from Mercedes's halberd, acting as a genuine shield.

"Take this!" Beatrix unfurled her fan and swung it as if in the middle of a ritual dance. The walls and floor of the dungeon were sliced through like butter. This attack was shockingly strong, and not just sharp. Countless invisible blades—perhaps wind magic—now flew through the air, adding extra force to the attack.

Mercedes watched as nearby prisoners were severed in two, causing her brow to furrow. No, she wasn't sympathizing with them. Seeing that this blow was lethal enough to easily cut through a vampiric body had simply made her more on guard.

"I'd appreciate it if you stayed still. I'll treat your wounds, but I'd like to avoid scarring you if possible. Still, if that happens, it happens. I'll meticulously rub medicine on your pale skin myself and make you moan."

"You've got quite the degenerate fetish," spat Mercedes as she once again closed the gap between them and swung her halberd.



Fighting underground put Mercedes at a disadvantage. Her halberd was an excellent weapon that extended her lackluster range, but closed spaces neutralized those advantages. The blade was hitting the dungeon walls, and while she was swinging with enough force to blast through them, it still slowed her a beat.

Beatrix agilely dodged her attacks with backsteps. "Degenerate? I'm not degenerate at all! That would imply I'm abnormal, but my word is the law of the land. Thus, people whose desires don't match mine are the degenerate ones! I'm simply proposing an ordinary world!"

"Ordinary?"

"Indeed! I've always thought this world only needed women."

What the hell is she saying? Mercedes was half annoyed as she kicked the floor to accelerate. Then, she swung her halberd—rather, she feigned a swing before transitioning into a punch! In such close quarters, hand-to-hand combat was superior to armed combat. She missed, but Beatrix's expression began to change after she witnessed her strike break through the walls with ease.

"I see. Now I know you don't share my values."

Mercedes had no misgivings with homosexuality. Doctrines, preferences, and tastes were personal matters. As long as you weren't bothering others, anyone was free to live as they wanted.

However, those who forced their creeds on everyone else were more annoying than anything—especially when *you* were a target of their lust.

Mercedes caught the fan being swung at her with her arm and pushed the blade into her bone. Of course, she wasn't going to let Beatrix sever her arm. Once she had determined the fan was far enough inside her flesh, she focused power into her forearm and contracted her muscles to force the blade to stop.

Beatrix immediately tried to retract her weapon the moment she realized Mercedes's plan, but Mercedes's superhuman strength had thoroughly trapped the blade. The younger girl jumped at Beatrix's bosom and punched her straight in the gut, sending her flying.

Surprisingly, this damage wasn't enough for Beatrix to drop her fan. She used the momentum to extract her fan from Mercedes's

flesh before she slammed into the dungeon wall.

That didn't feel like skin. She's got something near her stomach. Mercedes's full attention was focused on Beatrix as her arm regenerated. This battle wasn't over—Mercedes had done some damage, but Beatrix's armor had blocked the brunt of it.

Just as Mercedes had predicted, Beatrix stood back up, sporting a composed smile. "That was quite the blow. Despite my special armor, I could feel it in my bones."

Apparently, Beatrix was wearing armor underneath her dress, though that wasn't exactly strange. Royals were always at risk of assassination, so it was natural for them to take a few precautions.

Slamming her fist into armor had given it a shock, so she shook it off as she checked her condition. It didn't seem to be broken.

"So? What will you do? That long weapon puts you at a disadvantage, but your fists won't work against me either. Have we reached an impasse? In that case...take this!"

Beatrix rushed at Mercedes before giving an elegant twirl. Mercedes jumped into the air as Beatrix swung her weapon a full 360 degrees around her. Metal bars were severed, and then the men inside were cut in two. Mercedes watched this scene unfold as she landed, but Beatrix immediately segued into her next attack.

Mercedes utilized her short stature, lurching her torso backward to escape the fan's slash. Wind blades, along with the fan, whizzed by right above her chest, and while this position made her unsteady, she flexed her leg muscles to fix her balance, bringing her torso back upright as she slashed with her halberd.

She was aiming for Beatrix's legs, but the empress jumped into the air and used Mercedes's blade as a springboard to launch herself behind the younger girl. She then spun around and slashed her fan at Mercedes's back.

"Agh!"

However, right before the blade could collide with flesh, Beatrix let out a gurgle. A metal bar had impaled her throat—one that had been cut free by her earlier attack—and Mercedes was holding the other end. While Beatrix had managed to slip behind her, Mercedes had picked up one of these bars and counterattacked, her back still

turned to Beatrix.

"Ugh..."

As Beatrix retreated, her hands clasped around her neck, Mercedes turned around and launched a punch at her. It was blocked by her armor, but Mercedes wasn't done yet. She swung her halberd, destroying the wall around her. It left Mercedes wide open, and Beatrix would have been able to avoid the attack by leaping backward. However, Mercedes was pointing at something behind her.

"Go."

Who was she giving orders to?

Beatrix learned the answer to that question immediately. Pieces of iron bars once scattered on the floor were now floating in the air, and the shackles binding the prisoners had been detached from the walls. Even the corpses were hovering.

Then, they all morphed into bullets and blasted toward Beatrix. This was the same ranged attack Mercedes had utilized in her battle against Shufu—placing an attraction field around her opponent. Mercedes's earlier punch wasn't meant to do any damage—it was meant to set this field, which would cause everything in the vicinity to home in on and attack her opponent.

"Agh...! Bars, shackles, and rubble are one thing...but how dare you launch men at me!" shouted Beatrix as she cut down projectile after projectile.

However, that was Mercedes's goal. Given her opponent's proclivities, she was quite certain this attack would do some emotional damage, and that moment of shock would be Mercedes's chance to strike. Beatrix was a misandrist, and she reflexively slashed the male prisoners that were launched at her first. Yes, she knew this would open her up to attacks, but she moved before she could think—that was what defined reflexes, after all.

To give an extreme example, if a horde of cockroaches suddenly came flying at you, almost anyone would reflexively swat them away. For Beatrix, this was practically the same.

Mercedes used the prisoners as a shield to close in on Beatrix, then punched her straight in the gut through her armor. Cracking sounds reverberated as Beatrix flew through the air and slammed

into the wall.

"Ugh... Aha ha! You sure are a wild one! Look at the shape my armor's in after just two punches!"

Obviously, Mercedes had no way to see for herself, but given that she had felt the armor crack beneath her fists, it was safe to assume the gear protecting Beatrix's stomach was now broken. And even though the blow was above the armor, Beatrix shouldn't be completely unharmed. Mercedes was at a disadvantage weapon-wise, but her physical stats still outclassed Beatrix's. This battle was far from unwinnable.

However, just as that thought passed through Mercedes's mind, Beatrix flashed her an indomitable smile. Mercedes didn't know what was going on in her head, but Beatrix immediately swung her fan, spun around, and carved a circle into the floor.

The two were now falling, but their fight continued midair. They switched to their weapons, which collided over and over.

"Oho! Your reflexes still work in this high-pressure environment! You're quite the girl!"

Initially, Mercedes had been surprised to learn that there was a cave beneath the dungeon, but it was no more than a mild shock. She felt as if she were flying as she tumbled downward alongside the rest of the rubble, all the while swinging at Beatrix.

However, in the midst of the fighting, Beatrix used her wind magic to float above Mercedes. While the younger girl could block against the fan, she had no footing in the air, so the force of the attacks sent her tumbling further.

This time, however, Mercedes used her gravity magic to float. She rose in elevation and launched herself at Beatrix, who easily dodged using the flow of the wind.

While both were floating, there was a big difference between them. Mercedes had simply negated gravity's pull, while Beatrix was actually moving with the wind, as described above.

However, Mercedes had her own way to fly. Just as she had once done when traveling between Blut and Stark Dungeon, she kicked hard into the air to accelerate.

"Huh?!"

Beatrix was caught off guard by her opponent's speed as a foot was smashed into her, sending her flying. However, being in the air dampened the force, and while Beatrix tumbled and turned, she suffered little damage.

Beatrix turned herself upright and laughed. "That's flying magic... Do you have a wind affinity? No, it's a tad different, a special type of magic even I'm unfamiliar with. You appear not to be flying, but floating. And you seem to have decreased maneuverability. All right, then... How's this?!"

Beatrix swung her fan. But just as Mercedes dismissed it as her usual cheap wind blade attack, she realized that this was instead a raging blast of air. Given Mercedes's agility, she could easily react instantaneously and leap out of the way, but as wide as this area was, she was still indoors. The blast of wind was directionless; it attacked everything at full force.

In other words, this wasn't a focused attack, but a wide-range one. With nowhere to run, Mercedes's floating form was left to bear the full brunt of the gust. It was like clothes being tossed in the laundry machine, she thought, as if it were happening to somebody else. But she quickly rebounded, casting gravity magic to pull herself downward as she tumbled in the wind.

At the same time, she made the rubble float and hurled it at Beatrix, who immediately cut her attack short to dodge the strike. She forced aside a projectile flying at her with her magic, using the short gap in the flurry to sidestep and avoid the rest.

However, then one of them crumbled, and Mercedes came flying at her from the other side. Their weapons collided, and the lack of footholds sent both of them flying backward. But they immediately closed the gap again, launching strikes at each other that once more sent them both flying, repeating this process over and over.

After countless blows, they finally landed on the ground. It was only now that Mercedes learned what actually lay below the dungeon.

"This is..."

Unlike where they'd been before, this was a wide, open space. Sand had been placed in a circle with a fifty-meter radius, which was

surrounded and blocked off by walls. Above that were audience seats; this was clearly a coliseum.

"Surprised, aren't you? This is my arena, as you can already see. Usually, we come here to amuse ourselves by watching male slaves and prisoners fight monsters, but today, it belongs to you and me alone. I do apologize for the lack of elegance, though. This isn't a place a girl like you ought to be in."

The prisoners who had gotten caught in the cross fire of the two's fight were crushed as they hit the floor, and Beatrix offered Mercedes an unprompted explanation as that all happened. It was quite the gruesome pastime, but perhaps quite understandable given that this world was stuck in the Middle Ages. Modern morality viewed killing as the ultimate taboo, and while it was still loathed, that wasn't entirely the case in the past. There had even been a time on Earth when people enjoyed spectating fights to the death and public executions at a Colosseum; this was a *vampiric* country—and one with a warped matriarchy to boot. Mercedes couldn't condone the practice, but she understood the purpose this place served.

Regardless, Mercedes was glad for the scenery change. She could swing her halberd as freely as she wanted here. This area was wide-open and even blocked by walls to prevent her opponent's escape. In closed spaces, daggers were most advantageous due to their mobility, while swords reigned supreme in spaces that provided slightly more room to move around. Meanwhile, bows and guns were incredibly deadly in wide, spacious areas. However, *this* was the perfect place for midrange weapons like lances and halberds, and it gave Mercedes a chance to barrage Beatrix with attacks while out of her fan's reach.

The only thing that weighed on Mercedes's mind was why Beatrix had chosen this location. "Isn't this a poor place for you to fight me? My weapon clearly gives me the advantage here."

Differences in range couldn't be overlooked, and they were even one of the biggest deciding factors in a battle. Swords could rarely beat lances, with the latter having gradually shifted from being tools of battle to decorations as gun technology developed. Strikes

launched from beyond your opponent's range were simple, but effective.

No matter how sharp and famous your sword, you'd be at risk if you fought a large bear on equal footing. But if you could fight that bear from somewhere it couldn't reach—perhaps atop a cliff—you could put a bear to shame just by lobbing rocks at it, all the while bearing zero danger.

Mercedes's halberd was longer than a whole adult person, measuring two meters in length. Beatrix's fan, on the other hand, was a measly twenty centimeters long. The difference in the range was stark.

However, the arrogant smile on Beatrix's face never faltered as she spread out her fan dramatically. "This fan is obviously iron-ribbed, but isn't it so very beautiful as well? It sustained all those strikes from your heavyweight weapon, and yet there's not a single scratch! Why do you think that is?"

"Dunno. Because it's made of a strong material?"

"Bwah hah hah! Indeed, you are correct! This fan is made from the strongest of metals—*godly*, unbreakable metal! Do you know what that means?" gloated Beatrix as Mercedes furrowed her brow.

Godly, unbreakable metal... Mercedes knew of such a thing, and she knew which weapons were made of it. Yet this didn't surprise her. She was fighting a monarch, so she had assumed from the start that her opponent was in possession of one—that Beatrix's fan was in fact a dungeon.

"Then allow me to shed light on your ignorance! Bloom, my garden! Decompress!" Beatrix unfurled her fan and spoke the magic words to open up a dungeon. Immediately, the arena morphed into a flower garden adorned by brilliant petals. She must have summoned a section of her dungeon.

The flowers around her weren't just plants either—it was safe to assume they were all monsters.

"Rejoice, girl! I've deemed you a formidable foe worthy of seeing my garden! This is the power afforded only to those who carry the blood of emperors in their veins—strength that can rival an entire army...and it's time you got a taste of it!"

The flowers began to move at her command. It was a beautiful, magical sight, but it was also more than that. Mercedes realized this was her first time fighting a dungeon master, and for the sake of her future, she needed to use this opportunity to gain as much experience as possible.

That was the only thought on her mind as she nonchalantly held her weapon at the ready.

Chapter 69: Monsters Summoned

Flowers bloomed like a whirlwind from Beatrix's dungeon. There were giant carnivorous plants, creeping rafflesias, trees carved into human-shaped dolls, and vines that reached the ceiling. Evidently, Beatrix's dungeon was plant-based.

Mercedes had already gone against some plants when she fought Frederick, but things clearly wouldn't be so easy this time.

"Hah!" she barked as she sliced through the advancing vines with her halberd before jumping to dodge a carnivorous plant that chomped at her. But her flight through the air left her defenseless, and a giant rose capitalized on the opportunity to block her sides and launch thorns at her.

She cut them aside with her halberd and used gravity magic to divert the ones she had missed. Then, she hurled a single-use magic stone imbued with fire at the location where the plants were most dense.

However, one of the carnivorous plants ate it, and it then exploded.

The plant was completely uninjured, meaning her attack was completely ineffective. Mercedes groaned.

"My, you even gave me a present! Thank you! Magic stones are my favorite!"

Mercedes had never heard of any monster that ate magic stones before, but this world was still filled with many mysteries she was ignorant of.

She was shocked, but then a tree doll immediately leaped at her back, overpowering her defenses and kicking her aside. A carnivorous plant was waiting with an open mouth right where she was headed, but she used her wind magic to redirect herself and land safely.

"Hey! There's no rest for the weary!"

Monsters immediately rushed her, forcing her into a defensive posture. It was almost impossible to overcome a numbers disadvantage in battle; the army with more men would win in almost every instance. Occasionally, a genius commander would come along who could overcome this disadvantage, beating a thousand-man army with only a hundred men, but they were insignificant outliers. Fundamentally, the side that was outnumbered suffered overwhelming defeat.

Mercedes herself had fought at a numbers disadvantage before. Back at the Grunewald residence, she had effortlessly defeated a horde of bandits—but that was only because the bandits failed to communicate and act together. There was a major difference between ten people attacking ten separate times and ten people attacking as one. You could take down an unorganized mob one person at a time—and if you were fast enough, it didn't matter how many people made up that mob.

However, foes that worked together to cover gaps in their defenses while fighting under a skilled commander could exceed all expectations. Not to mention, each and every monster here was incredibly strong, rivaling the strength of Kuro when she and he had first met. These were no weak soldiers.

Likely, Beatrix and her predecessors had purposefully mass-produced stronger monsters over countless years, as even the dungeon points naturally accrued could balloon when left alone for over a century. Not to mention, Mercedes assumed Beatrix had been throwing male prisoners and slaves into her dungeon, making mass production of even Asura ogre-class monsters a real possibility.

This violence was carried out by countless elite soldiers, all of whom lacked the individual thoughts and wills possessed by vampires. They operated with only their master's goals in mind, and they would never betray or make voluntary decisions, nor did they fear death. All were expendable pawns to be used freely. They made the perfect army.

"Ugh..." A tree doll moved in front of Mercedes with teleportation-like speed. It fired a flurry of punches at her from above where she could guard, but as soon as it sent her flying through the air, it

disappeared...only to reappear behind her. It kicked Mercedes once again, then moved back in front of her to swing at her with all its might, slamming her into the floor.

The moment Mercedes landed, she moved at the speed of sound, almost seeming to disappear into thin air. After sneaking behind the tree doll, she kicked it.

The tree doll once again disappeared before whacking at Mercedes's back. But this time, Mercedes dodged at top speed and counterattacked. While she managed to kick it away, the tree doll jumped back into the air as soon as it had touched the ground and swung at her again. While it looked like small fry, it was shockingly strong.

"What's the matter? This isn't all you've got, is it? Why don't you release your full power? That halberd is a dungeon, no?"

"So you noticed."

"How would I not? The sudden horde of pigs, the skills you displayed... There are no dungeons near the imperial capital that produce those pigs, and the city is surrounded by walls. How would they get in? I considered the possibility of a seal stone, but there were simply too many for that. Which only leaves one answer."

Apparently, Beatrix was no simple dungeon inheritor. She had advanced skills of her own, as well as sharp intellect and talent as a commander.

Beatrix continued, still wearing the same composed smile. "Perhaps Orcus was hiding more of its royal family, or perhaps you're the real Sieglinde—or possibly even her descendant. I'm not quite sure, but I'll interrogate you myself once I capture you! So show me your true power! You'll regret losing here without trying, I'm sure."

"I suppose I shall."

Beatrix was right. Mercedes's odds were only getting worse and worse. All the monsters were weak enough for her to defeat on her own, but she hadn't predicted they'd be so strong when operating as one army under a single commander. She had thoroughly been taught what separated ten individuals from a group of ten.

"Decompress!"

However, the solution was simple; she just needed to break their

organization. At her command, the monsters sealed in her halberd materialized.

There was the ogre dressed in full-body armor—a fellow she felt like she hadn't seen in a while—Benkei, a giant wolf covered in black fur, Kuro, and even Chirpy swirling around near the ceiling. Shufu appeared with a chef's knife in his right hand and a frying pan in his left, but the jokes this inspired could be ignored for the time being.

There was a rather swole no-good jelly slime alongside his stronger version, the really no-good jelly slime. There were goblins and orcs, and goblin hexers to support the squad from behind. She even summoned a horde of usuihon orcs to inflict visual harassment. Her army didn't really seem very...consistent. Mercedes even began to wonder why her dungeon was so discordant compared to others. Still, Chirpy and Shufu were breeds that originally belonged to Beatrix's dungeon, which meant hers wasn't all plants either.

Beatrix's face grew pale the moment she noticed them. "Aren't those the monsters I sent out...? No, that's preposterous! Impossible! It must be a coincidence!" She raised her fan to the sky, rallying her troops. But this time, it was a group battle. Mercedes's troops wouldn't be as organized as Beatrix's, but she just needed to disrupt *their* organization. A no-good jelly slime blocked a tree doll's path, and its barrage of punches proved no match for the jelly. Its fists simply slid into its gelatinous flesh until eventually, the entire tree doll had sunk inside.

"Female... Female..."

An usuihon orc with its pixelated body part ignored the other monsters and headed straight for Beatrix, but another monster rushed in to intercept it, castrating its censored member and reducing it to a kyoseizumi orc.

These stupid pigs aren't worth crap. Not wanting to waste her points, Mercedes resolved to never produce any again.

"Roooooooar!" Benkei seemed awfully dedicated to this fight, swinging his weapon with the force of a hundred-man army. The plants were no match for him and were reduced to shreds.

"Flambé!" Shufu was using a *unique* technique to shoot fire out of his frying pan and reduce the plants to ashes. Mercedes watched

him curiously, not remembering him having such a skill.

When she turned to face Beatrix, she was sporting a similar expression.

"Female... Female..."

All the normal orcs had ignored the other enemies and were rushing toward Beatrix. But once again, monsters intercepted them and fired at their weak spots: their crotches. Thus, they too were reduced to kyoseizumi orcs.

These guys really aren't worth crap! If she was going to produce orcs, it would be better to just have them pre-castrated.

"Hey! Head there!"

"Right!"

"Hold them back!"

Meanwhile, the kyoseizumi orcs were admirably working together to defeat monsters. These guys really were better than the others. Orcs usually only thought with their lower halves, but once those were gone, they could apparently think rationally.

"Kuro!"

"Woof!"

Kuro ran to Mercedes, just as she commanded. Among all these bizarre monsters, he alone was a saving grace. She jumped on his back and bolted toward Beatrix.



She cut aside the monsters that stepped across her path and swung her halberd. Beatrix was able to block with her fan, but Mercedes was stronger. She whammed into Beatrix with all her might and sent her flying toward the arena walls.

Chapter 70: The Difference Between Them

The scale gradually began to tip in Mercedes's favor after she summoned her own monsters. The monsters that had impeded her were now the impeded, allowing for a one-on-one fight between Mercedes and Beatrix.

While Beatrix was plenty strong herself, she was naturally outclassed by her opponent. Mercedes's power resulted from her unique knowledge of gravity and the fact she had used it to train her body, which meant it was impossible to truly gauge her power when operating under common sense alone.

What would happen if an astronaut suffering from muscular atrophy after a long stint in space had to fight bare-handed against a boxer from Earth? *That* described this battle perfectly.

Now that their fight had been taken elsewhere, the gap in level of mastery in their weapons was even more apparent. Beatrix had brought them to this arena in order to summon her monsters, but now that Mercedes had called upon her own, the matchup had returned to being a duel between the two army commanders. The longer range of Mercedes's weapon gave her a clear advantage, and while Beatrix's fan was certainly a weapon, it was built more for defense than offense. It wasn't meant to be brought to the battlefield like a sword or spear, but to be portable and substitute for a real weapon. While Beatrix may have the upper hand in skill, Mercedes's physical strength and weapon choice easily disabled this advantage. In fact, Beatrix probably deserved praise for lasting this long.

This is strange. As Beatrix deflected a strike from Mercedes's halberd, Mercedes began to sense that something didn't quite add up. *Beatrix* had been the one to demand that Mercedes summon her

monsters, but now that they were fighting on equal footing, anyone could see that Beatrix was at a disadvantage against Mercedes. However, that would have always been the obvious result of Mercedes summoning her monsters, which meant Beatrix should have adopted the opposite strategy and ensured Mercedes didn't use her dungeon at all costs. Yet Beatrix had *asked* her to use it, which was strange.

I guess it doesn't matter. I just need to keep on the offensive!

Maybe Beatrix was just an idiot, but even if she did have some trick up her sleeve, Mercedes just needed to subjugate her before she had the chance to use it.

However, Eisen's blade groaned as it fell onto Beatrix. Unlike Mercedes's earlier attacks, this was a rupturing blow accelerated by excess gravity. If the strike landed, it would smash Beatrix's bones, resulting in certain death. If Beatrix dodged, she'd use that opening to counterattack, and if it hit Mercedes, her defenses would crumble and she'd be vulnerable to the next attack. This was a do-or-die moment, yet Beatrix...just laughed.

"Show yourself!"

Beatrix neither blocked, dodged, nor countered the attack—though if one had to choose between the three, blocking was what most closely described her actions. However, she didn't block with her fan, but with a monster she had summoned between herself and Mercedes's blade. It was a flower made of metal, and while the strike created a crack in it, it managed to withstand both Mercedes's strength and the force of her blade.

Beatrix used this moment to slip beside Mercedes and swing her fan. Mercedes immediately tried to dodge, but she failed to do so completely. Blood spurted out of her right arm.

"You're a young woman with frightening power. Look at what you've done to my Eisen Blume with a single strike!"

Apparently, this metal flower was known as an Eisen Blume. Mercedes wasn't familiar with the monster, which meant it was Zwölf's time to shine. "The monster known as an Eisen Blume is a D-level threat with only the metal affinity. While they are typically harmless, their advanced defensive abilities make them impervious

to all but the strongest of attacks."

So basically, these guys are only good as shields, thought Mercedes. That made things simple. Beatrix had used it as a shield because, simply put, that was the only purpose it served.

Beatrix quickly stored the Eisen Blume back in her dungeon and summoned roses from her fan—or rather, a storm of thorns to attack Mercedes. She jumped to the side to dodge, swinging her halberd, but that was when the Eisen Blume reappeared, blocking her strike. And this was a new one, not the same one she had cracked earlier.

"Change positions! Implement pattern D!" As soon as Beatrix barked these orders, the monsters' actions began to change. They shifted targets and now fought in small units—likely meant to supplement monster weaknesses or stack strengths—which was a stark difference from Mercedes's monsters who simply fought in a frenzy. Over time, Beatrix had discovered which of her monsters worked well together and grouped them into squads to utilize their power to the fullest.

Mercedes's monsters weren't weaker than Beatrix's; if anything, they were stronger, just as Mercedes was stronger than Beatrix. However, Mercedes was now the one at a disadvantage. The only thing which Beatrix had that Mercedes lacked was refinement; the difference between Mercedes, who had simply summoned her monsters, and Beatrix, who was leading hers, was what had resulted in the current situation.

"How disappointing! You don't know how to use your dungeon at all! Monsters aren't simply summoned! What separates a true inheritor of a dungeon from a fraud is knowing how to best utilize and organize your forces. Monsters are not only swords, but shields, and your ignorance of this fact means you will never emerge victorious against me!" Beatrix performed an elegant dance as she spoke. Petals spurted from her fan, completely enveloping the arena. Mercedes knew this had to be part of some monster.

The petals turned into a raging wind of blades that rushed at Mercedes and her monsters.

"Whiiiine!"

Her monsters failed to completely dodge. Many were wounded,

including Kuro. Chirpy flapped his wings and dispersed the petals with the resulting wind, while Shufu burned the petals using the flames from his frying pan. Benkei was wearing full-bodied armor which kept him uninjured, but this attack had nevertheless managed to completely turn the tide against them.

"Return, Kuro."

Kuro's death seemed all but certain at this rate, so Mercedes returned him to her dungeon and summoned a new horde of goblins to take his place. However, all this did was increase her numbers; she had no strategy or formation for her troops, so this wouldn't be enough to overcome her disadvantage. If nothing changed, this fight between dungeon masters would end with Mercedes's loss. Even if she fought with her full power, she might fail to clinch victory. It might not be enough.

Something festered in Mercedes's chest. Was it shame? Cowardliness?

It was neither. This was a feeling Mercedes knew well. Her heart began to sing, and she felt enjoyment. She didn't know why, but...it wasn't a bad feeling.

"Why are you smiling?" Beatrix asked, eying her curiously. These words prompted Mercedes to lift a hand to her cheeks. It was only then that she realized the corners of her lips were upturned.

Was she smiling? At a time like this? What was there to smile about? She was at a complete disadvantage! Yet Mercedes had no answers to these questions. She herself didn't know why she was smiling. But...she felt like she had always been searching for the indescribable sensation that now filled her.

"Blood Manipulation..." she muttered, accelerating the blood flowing within her body. Her heart started to pound.

In addition to vampires' innate muscular power and instantaneous force, the flow of the blood in their veins could dramatically alter their physical abilities. By consciously accelerating the speed of the blood flowing from their heart to every corner of their body, they could gain explosive strength.

Mercedes had been using this technique daily, even before she had moved into the Grunewald manor. The gravity she cast on

herself for training naturally made her blood heavier as well, and the fact that it still reached her extremities like normal meant it traveled at abnormal speed and force. Thus, her daily gravity training had granted her a heart that was tougher than any other, which was what pumped blood throughout her body. She had succeeded in doing unconsciously what other vampires had to do consciously, and at an unprecedented level.

Now, however, she *consciously* accelerated her blood. Her body grew hot, and the steam it let off warped the air around her. Her golden eyes began to glow, and in the next moment...the monsters standing between her and Beatrix were flying through the air.

No, she hadn't simply cut through them. The force of her overwhelming strength completely destroyed them. Their remains flew through the air, and the sight sent a shiver down Beatrix's back. *That will be me if she lands a direct hit...!*

She immediately tried to guard with her fan...but in the next moment, she slammed against the audience seats in the arena.

"Agh!" But she didn't have time to groan in pain. Mercedes was already right in front of her, her halberd held high. Beatrix rolled out of the way as the seats were reduced to ruins.

Frankly, the sight was absurd. The audience seats were made of stone, not paper. Someone weak wouldn't have even been able to successfully stick their blade into the stone, while a strong person could only pierce in and pull out, at most. Yet Mercedes swung her blade with unimpeded speed—as if the air had been empty, not filled with stone seats.

"I suppose it's worth a shot... Go, Eisen Blume!" Beatrix summoned the metal flower that had blocked the earlier attack and sent it toward her opponent.

Mercedes simply swung her halberd...sundering it in two.

Beatrix shivered. She had tried to feign composure by sending out the same metal flower that she had earlier used as a shield, but this time, it was cut clean through.

"Pattern B!" shouted Beatrix. Her monsters instantly rushed Mercedes, from the front, behind, the sides, and even above. They all jumped on her, attacking her in as large a group as possible. Even

as Mercedes escaped, they immediately segued into another attack of the same shape and size. This formation was clearly meant to continuously encircle their foe.

Vampires had two eyes, two arms, two legs, and one head. This structure meant they had blind spots and places that were hard for them to attack. Thus, an assault from all sides and angles allowed one to locate those blind spots.

However, in the next moment, the monsters that had swarmed Mercedes were flying through the air like shredded paper in the wind. Beatrix immediately dodged to her right.

Immediately, the stone audience seats were reduced to ruins in the air, causing the blood to drain from Beatrix's face.

Oh, how terrifyingly heroic it was! This was the kind of raw violence that lacked any hint of refinement, yet Beatrix found beauty in it. Vampires worshipped strength, so they naturally found aesthetic beauty in all displays of it.

However, Mercedes wasn't the only threat. Hiding in her shadow were the monsters she had summoned, completely disorganized and left to their own devices. But now that Mercedes's individual strength had begun to overwhelm Beatrix's entire army, the scales once again tipped in Mercedes's favor.

Benkei slaughtered one monster after another with his six arms, while Shufu ran wild, cutting away with his kitchen knife. Chirpy sniped his foes from above, occasionally attacking Beatrix as well. But it was Mercedes whom Beatrix truly couldn't handle. Her numerical superiority served no purpose at all, as the moment her monsters were summoned, they were punched, crushed, and demolished. A single strike reduced a tree doll to splinters, and her Eisen Blume could no longer function as a shield. When she constrained Mercedes with her roses, she broke through them like it was nothing, and the force of the wind created by swinging her halberd was enough to blow away the petal blades from Beatrix's fan.

However, this took a toll on Mercedes. It wasn't easy for her to use Blood Manipulation, and pushing her body to its limits was beginning to wear down her stamina, as well as cause her pain. Yes,

Mercedes was dominating her competition, but this was a tough battle for her. Despite the anguish, though, she was filled with an odd sense of accomplishment.

She was brought back to the final days of her past life. She'd had no goals, nor could she find enjoyment in anything. She'd never found something that felt worth doing; her life could be likened to aimlessly wandering through midnight streets.

However, right now, she had found a glimmer of light in the darkness. She could see it! She could nearly understand what was needed to live a life without regret! A fulfilling life meant living to the fullest with everything you had. So what she had always sought must have been—

"A suggestion, master. She has *inherited* a dungeon, while you have conquered yours. If you use that fact to your advantage, you can easily force her into checkmate."

After hearing Zwölf's advice, she quickly cooled down, both physically and mentally. She regained her usual icy composure, as those simple words were enough for her to understand the best course of action—the shortest path to victory. But now that she knew what she had to do, she could no longer use the full extent of her power, for she had already won.

Ignoring the quickest route to victory to drag out this battle meant abandoning victory and completely underestimating her opponent, which would mean...regret.

"I see. I had forgotten I could do that."

"Was my advice unnecessary?"

"No. Thanks for pointing that out."

Zwölf was an excellent assistant, and she didn't disappoint. Nothing more, nothing less.

Mercedes heaved a defeated sigh. She had realized the shortest path to victory, as much as she wished she hadn't. Now, this battle was over—really, it had always been from the start.

"You were right, Empress Beatrix. I do lack refinement, but you taught me how to truly use your dungeon."

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"I just felt that needed to be said. I am about to reluctantly

violate the rules of this battle, which means I can't consider this a win. You will be the victor, and I the loser. Now that I've clarified that..."

There was a hint of disappointment in Mercedes's tone as she thrust her Blut Eisen into the floor, returned her monsters to the dungeon, brought her Blood Manipulation back to normal levels, and slowly closed her eyes.

"I will defeat you here and now."

What did she plan to do? Mercedes answered that question before Beatrix even had the chance to consider it.

"Zwölf."

"Yes, master. Activating your superior authority. The monsters here will be registered to Stark Dungeon."

"Decompress...and compress!"

Mercedes's declaration came with dramatic effects. All the monsters Beatrix had summoned were absorbed into Mercedes's halberd. Beatrix knew what she had done. First, she had opened her dungeon via decompression and then compressed her dungeon back to steal all of Beatrix's monsters. That was all.

"Preposterous! Impossible! A dungeon master cannot steal the monsters of another!" Beatrix was clearly shaken.

One function dungeons had was the ability to absorb items from outside it to convert into points. Monsters and vampires that died in a dungeon would be broken down into mana and turned into these points, so by using that function, one could win a fight by absorbing their foes into their dungeon and converting them into points.

However, that should have been impossible in this fight, at least as far as Beatrix knew. She was under the impression that a dungeon couldn't absorb monsters already operating under another master, and that this was a safety function built into the system. After all, if stealing a dungeon master's monsters were possible, it would result in an eternal struggle of stealing back and forth. Thus, monsters serving a master couldn't be absorbed into another dungeon...at least, that *should* have been the case.

However, that only held true for fights between dungeon *inheritors*. The situation changed if one of those masters was a

conqueror, as conquerors could register new monsters into their dungeon, which allowed them to become the master of their opponent's monsters.

Right now, Mercedes had registered all the monsters Beatrix had summoned into the area as her own. So, what would happen next?

Let's say, for example, that Beatrix summoned a new tree doll. She would clearly be the master of this monster, but as Mercedes had registered this monster as well, she would also have master authority over it, since monsters created by dungeons were clones rather than individuals.

However, what would happen if the monster was compressed by both of them simultaneously? The answer was simple. It would return to the dungeon master with greater authority—to the *conqueror.* In other words, this was a fixed match, a victory predetermined before the fight had even begun.

An inheritor simply couldn't win against a conqueror.

Chapter 71: I Don’t Need That Right

When Hannah and Felix arrived at the dungeon, they found a disaster. The walls were deeply damaged, the ceiling cracked, and the floor destroyed. Bodies of prisoners who must have gotten caught up in the chaos were strewn across the floor, while the survivors were trembling in fear. Clearly, fighting had taken place.

The arena should be below the dungeon, if I remember correctly. They took their fight to a more open space, which means... This is terrible!

Hannah had investigated the palace during her imprisonment. She had a good grasp of how the building was structured, so she had already deduced what had gone down here. She knew for certain that the orcs had been Mercedes’s doing, and Beatrix must have realized this, as the capital was surrounded by walls and there were no dungeons containing orcs in the vicinity. Of course, it was technically possible for orcs from a far-off dungeon to have overflowed and made a habitat for themselves nearby, but it was hard to imagine there would be so many in this case, and that they would have been able to break through the city walls unnoticed.

Thus, there was only one answer. One had to assume the horde of orcs had suddenly appeared right outside of the castle, which naturally meant a dungeon master had to be responsible. Not to mention, there were only two possible reasons why that master would involve themself—either they were trying to assassinate Beatrix or rescue the girls the empress had abducted. Beatrix had assumed it was the latter and predicted the culprit would first search for the girls in the dungeon. Then, she had discovered Mercedes, resulting in a skirmish. Hannah had pieced all of this together, but one thing bugged her...

That fan would beat Mercy's halberd in a tight space like this. If she moved the battle to the arena, then...she did so to fully utilize her dungeon.

This alarmed Hannah. Battles between dungeon masters weren't one against one, but group against group. They were full-fledged wars, not simple duels.

Mercedes had a dungeon, of which Hannah was certain. She had chosen not to report it to Orcus, but she was confident in her assessment. Not to mention...she wasn't an inheritor. She was a conqueror, someone who had beaten a dungeon using nothing but their own strength.

Hannah wondered how Mercedes had accomplished this. She had yet to gain a full grasp of the dungeons; to her, they were still full of mysteries. In fact, she had once made it to the deeper parts of a dungeon herself. She had led a group of elites, and while it had required sacrifices, they had successfully made it to the final floor on the last scraps of food they had left.

However, there had only been a *golden* door. They brought countless treasures back with them and donated them to the royal family to improve her standing with them. Even so, she had failed to conquer a dungeon.

Afterward, she had used this knowledge and experience to reach the final floors of many dungeons, but all she ever found was treasure. Unable to discover a single clue that would help her figure out how to conquer a dungeon—and after losing many of her elite men—she eventually gave up on the idea.

What she didn't know was that there was a black door down there as well, and that choosing the golden door erased your memories of the black door and prevented another one from ever appearing before you again.

She didn't know that the first time she had reached the deepest part and was faced with this choice, she had been so depleted and exhausted she had no choice but to choose the golden door, thus erasing her chances of obtaining a dungeon for herself forever.

However, what she *did* know was that a huge gap separated inheritors and conquerors. According to the records, a conqueror

could register new monsters and tools to their dungeon, where they could subsequently produce them.

Still, Mercedes was the one at a disadvantage, as she was ignorant of war. Yes, she was a genius—a true wunderkind. She was certainly strong enough to defeat Beatrix in a one-on-one battle. However, she had no experience as a commander leading her troops. Her rash, overwhelming talent and strength had allowed her to force her way to victory up until now, but there was a limit to what an individual could accomplish alone. Vampires were strong, but even they were imperfect. No amount of training could make you faster than light or give you the strength to punch through mountains. Even vampires were powerless when numerically disadvantaged, and unfortunately for Mercedes, Beatrix knew how to use power in numbers.

"Mercy!"

Mercedes was in danger. There wasn't any doubt in Hannah's mind. Simple defeat would be one thing, but this questionable empress wouldn't leave it at just that. While Mercedes was still a child, she was just the kind of young lady who was Beatrix's type—or maybe it was more accurate to say she was a young girl? No, at twelve, she had just barely made it into the young lady category.

In any case, Beatrix would likely sink her fangs into her.

With renewed panic, Hannah jumped into the hole in the floor and unsheathed her dagger. She was hoping to land a single lethal strike. She thought her odds of winning against a dungeon master were nigh impossible, so she needed to end things without a fight.

Killing an empress would undoubtedly cause ripples that would spread abroad and create future problems, but she couldn't abandon her niece when her chastity was at stake. Thus, she needed to kill Beatrix before she even had the chance to react!

Having resolved to dye her hands red in the empress's blood, Hannah looked for her opponent while in free fall, only to discover...

"I beg you! Take me as your wife! I would even deign to be your husband!"

...the empress confessing her love to Mercedes. She face-planted.

***

Mercedes was thoroughly confused. She had cleanly but reluctantly clenched victory by utilizing her superior authority as a dungeon conqueror to cheat and neutralize Beatrix's dungeon. In all honesty, she had wanted to win on her own merit, but once she had discovered a path to victory, failing to seize on it would just be careless. With that realization, dragging out the fight would only be insulting to her opponent.

However, relying on her superior authority had turned this battle into a slightly bitter experience. But really, things had been too easy for her until now. They say failure is the mother of success, which just meant Mercedes needed to learn from this experience.

Quite honestly, she still wished to know what would have happened had she continued the fight. The tide had turned in her favor once she had begun to use Blood Manipulation, but there was a chance Beatrix had another trick up her sleeve as well. The tables could have turned back against her, but Mercedes had used her superior authority to cheat and remove that possibility.

It would be a lie to say she had no lingering regrets, but Beatrix's reaction upon losing so thoroughly confused Mercedes that she forgot all about them.

Let us turn back the clock to Beatrix's defeat.

"How preposterous! Y-You're...a dungeon conqueror..."

"Yup. I am."

It was impossible to overcome the gap that separated conquerors and inheritors. The latter could only use limited functions, knew not of the dungeon's administrator, and had lower authority. Meanwhile, a conqueror's authority exceeded that of an inheritor, allowing them to steal an inheritor's resources for themselves, almost as if the dungeon itself was begging to be reclaimed from an inheritor who no longer served any purpose.

Inheritors, in the end, were temporary owners. Their dungeon was just a consolation prize with limited functions bestowed upon

them for being the descendant of the *true* owner. Inheritors were nothing but a temporary place for the dungeon to stay until it met a conqueror deserving of its power, in which case it would immediately be usurped by the one who deserved it. That was just how the system was designed.

Mercedes held her halberd to Beatrix's throat, leaving her defenseless. The look in her eyes made it clear to Beatrix that any unnecessary movement would send her head flying.

"It's over."

"Indeed it is."

There was no resistance in Beatrix's gaze. No matter how many monsters she summoned, they'd only be stolen by Mercedes. This fight had been reduced to one between a dungeon master and an average vampire, and Beatrix was thoroughly outnumbered. If there was any path left for her, it would be to cut through the wave of monsters and take a swing at Mercedes, but given that Beatrix was weaker, that wouldn't work either.

Therefore, Beatrix was out of options. This was checkmate, and the moment she realized this, she smiled.

Quite honestly, the battle had been decided well before Mercedes resorted to this method. Beatrix stood no chance against Mercedes's Blood Manipulation, and she had no tricks left up her sleeves. Her dungeon had already been her final trump card. Had the battle continued, she would have lost regardless.

Realizing this caused her to burst out laughing. "Oho! Oho ho ho! You're quite the opponent! I've been completely defeated!" Beatrix admitted her defeat and stared at Mercedes. "Despite your youth, you're strong, fierce, and beautiful... Thus, I have no qualms in accepting my defeat. I have always been waiting for someone like you to appear before me."

"What?"

"Have you ever wished to be a monarch, my dear?" Despite the blade pressed against her neck which gave Mercedes complete control over her survival, Beatrix never lost composure. Instead, her smile showed how long she had waited for this moment. "This world is in ruin. Wars are never-ending, technological innovation stagnant,

and vampires unchanging. At this rate, our species will perish. Eventually, the birds or the beasts or the long ears will destroy us. Whether it is mere coincidence or an inevitable outcome is something I do not know myself, but the other Falsch have united in recent years. The time has come for us vampires to do the same."

Vampires were not on good terms with the other Falsch. If anything, they were enemies who regarded each other with distrust. Mercedes had learned at school that the vampires had emerged victorious in the previous war, but there was no guarantee that would be the same outcome next time.

"What we need is a monarch with unparalleled strength, an emperor who can unite all vampiric nations."

"So is that why you interfered with Orcus's affairs?"

"It is. I hoped to unite the royal weapons under one crown and create a new monarch for a new generation."

"Which would be you?"

"No, I am just an inheritor. I can climb no further. I said I wanted to *create* one, did I not? I trained and educated my adopted child to produce the perfect dungeon conqueror, and I hoped that once they had succeeded in conquering a dungeon, Sieglinde and I would hand over our own dungeons to crown a new emperor," she said, sounding awfully disappointed. "But if only things had been so simple. My child is still a novice who can't hold a candle to me. While I love my screwup, love will not help me reach my goals. But today, I finally met the person who I have always been searching for."

Beatrix shot Mercedes a flirtatious glance. A man would have been putty in her hands, but it had no effect on Mercedes.

"You are a strong young woman with composure and judgment beyond your years. You are who I've been waiting for—the perfect candidate to serve as our monarch. Thus, I ask you once again. Would you unite the royal weapons with your power and rule all vampiric kind as their empress?"

Mercedes pondered her offer. The conversation had suddenly gotten serious, but from what she could tell, the unification of all vampires was a dire issue, not a mere joke. For this, they would clearly need an emperor, but they would also need to unite the

dungeons, which aligned with Mercedes's own goal of conquering all the dungeons to learn the truth of this world. Whether she accepted the offer or not, joining forces with Beatrix could only be a boon.

"And I grant you permission to take me as your wife once you've fully grown and have been crowned as emperor!"

Actually, *forget it*. Mercedes decided to pass on the offer.

"A permission I *absolutely* refuse!"

Chapter 72: The Body Double

Mercedes ignored Beatrix's advances and began to ponder what to do with the empress. She was the mastermind behind the entire plot involving Sieglinde since the previous year, and Mercedes would've loved to have been able to execute her.

However, Beatrix was an empress, and harming her would engender a lingering distrust that would turn her people against Mercedes. Even if Beatrix was gone, the empire would remain—albeit weaker and less unified. If their hatred was singularly directed at Mercedes...things could get bad. Even a dungeon wouldn't allow her to live the rest of her life in peace, not to mention that the other species might see the partial collapse of the empire as an opportunity to invade.

Basically, she couldn't kill Beatrix just yet. So, she opted for the next best option—to neutralize her while keeping her alive. Back at the Grunewald manor, she had learned of a lightning spell which made that possible—specifically, a *brainwashing* spell. A spy from the empire had even once tried to use it on Felix. Mercedes couldn't cast such magic herself, but Hannah would likely find someone able to if she asked. Thus, one option was to brainwash Beatrix and convert her into a pawn. Mercedes also considered capturing Beatrix and installing a body double in her place.

However, all of this was predicated on the assumption that Beatrix wouldn't be so amicable.

"I-I see. I wouldn't mind us starting as lovers."

Beatrix's flirtatious behavior didn't seem like an act considering it required her throwing away her pride, though in a way, it would be admirable if she was able to act so shamefully just to protect her country.

Still, Mercedes had too many worries to place her trust in Beatrix.

"I beg you! Take me as your wife! I would even deign to be your

husband!”

Yeah...I better tie up this empress and throw her into her dungeon. She could discuss options like brainwashing or installing a body double with Hannah later.

Having reached that decision, Mercedes activated her Blut Eisen. But that was when Hannah fell out of the sky headfirst.

“M-Mercy! Are you okay?!”

“Y-Yeah, but are *you* okay?”

“I’m fine. My head just hurts a bit. But anyway, what’s happening?” Hannah rubbed the back of her head as she stared at Beatrix curiously, which was only natural considering she was bearing witness to an empress professing her love to a child.

Mercedes looked up to where Hannah had fallen from and found Felix. Apparently, he had managed to escape.

...Huh? Felix? *That* was Felix?

Although he was cross-dressing for some reason, that probably had to be Felix. Had he always been into that sort of thing?

Everyone’s free to like what they like. No need to make fun of him. Deeming it not worth worrying about, Mercedes decided to ignore his cross-dressing. Figuring out what to do with Beatrix was more important anyway.

Luckily for Mercedes, Felix and Hannah had come *to* her, completing the goal that had originally brought her here. Now, she just had to figure out how to neutralize Beatrix without incurring the ire of her people and she could call it a day.

“Perfect timing, Hannah. This is Empress Beatrix. I’ve beaten her, but I don’t know what to do with her now. Can we use brainwashing magic, or a magic stone imbibed with the spell?”

“How can you suggest the craziest things so casually?! That spell’s taboo! You’ll be arrested!”

“Then can we prepare a body double to serve in her place? We can’t just let her be.”

“Hmm... Well, I suppose we *can*, but...”

Beatrix was the leader of the enemy that had interfered with Orcus, though “interfered” was really an understatement. Her actions had practically constituted war. She was dangerous.

But defeating Beatrix in battle thus presented them with a golden opportunity, and Hannah was perfectly aware of that fact. The only question was whether bringing her to Orcus was safe. It'd be disastrous if she managed to stir up trouble from the inside, so first, Hannah decided to seek confirmation.

"Mercy, can you lock her up?"

"I can."

Hannah wanted to make sure that Mercedes could lock Beatrix up *in her dungeon*. She had long known that Mercedes was a dungeon conqueror, which also meant there was no point in asking how Mercedes had won this battle.

At the same time, Mercedes knew that Hannah had once witnessed her summon monsters from thin air, and so she had responded only with a simple affirmation. Felix was the only one present who couldn't follow the conversation.

"In that case, take Felix back upstairs. I'll restrain her."

"Got it... But be careful, okay?"

Mercedes didn't want Felix to know she was in possession of a dungeon, so she ordered them to leave. Picking up on this, Hannah leaped back up to the floor above. Mercedes listened to their footsteps fade in the distance before decompressing one of the rooms in her dungeon to serve as Beatrix's prison.

First, she decompressed only part of her dungeon, and then she compressed the whole thing. This made it possible to trap others inside, but that was also when Beatrix suddenly interrupted.

"Wait a moment. If you take me away and send a body double to serve in my place, there will be a period of absence. If you can't prepare a body double immediately, then there will necessarily be some time when my whereabouts are unknown. My soldiers will suspect that a double has taken my place."

"Then you want me to leave you here? That's out of the question."

"No, that isn't what I'm asking of you. Listen. You do not need to prepare a body double, as you are capable of creating the perfect double here and now. Shall I teach you how?"

What was she thinking? Mercedes glared back at Beatrix, who

simply looked back at her with a suspicious grin.

***

"Haah... So we've finally eradicated the disgusting pigs," said Captain Rose, letting out a sigh as she wiped the sweat from her forehead. They'd eliminated the orc horde that had infiltrated the castle, ushering back peace. The horde had utilized guerrilla tactics and cooperation that seemed unthinkable for the species, making the fight surprisingly grueling. But in the end, the established knights and soldiers had proven victorious. The orcs that had appeared in town had also likely been eliminated by now.

That was when Empress Beatrix appeared. "I see you've taken care of the pigs, Captain Rose."

"Your Majesty! What brings you here...?"

"A rat managed to sneak into the dungeon, so I took care of it myself. It made for the perfect workout."

The blood rushed from Rose's face. She had failed to detect enemy infiltrators, and her dear leader even had to clean up the mess herself.

Beatrix must have noticed how she felt and addressed her with a soothing tone. "All is well. Don't worry about it."

"B-But...!"

"More importantly, it reeks in here. Get these pigs out of the castle at once."

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty! Right away!"

Her voice, actions, appearance—*everything* was a perfect imitation of Beatrix. None would suspect her as a fake, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say this woman *was* the real Beatrix. It wasn't just her appearance; her personality, memories, character, and even thought patterns matched Beatrix completely. Had this world possessed the technology to recognize fingerprints, voices, and retinas, it would certainly have recognized her as the real Beatrix as well.

Yet, this woman was not the same one whom Rose and the others had called "Your Majesty" just yesterday. The real Beatrix was

currently stored in Mercedes's Blut Eisen, flying through the air on Chirpy's back. Next to Mercedes was Hannah, and Felix was below them, being carried in Chirpy's claws like he was some sort of prey.

Ultimately, the Beatrix at the castle was not only a body double, but also the real Beatrix herself. And as Chirpy carried Mercedes farther and farther from the castle, she reflected on the plan Beatrix had offered her.

"You simply need to register me to your dungeon and produce a copy. It will create a clone in my exact image...that's also incapable of betraying you."

So that was what Mercedes had done: use the production capabilities of her dungeon to produce *another* Beatrix. As a clone created by a dungeon, she was an exact copy down to each individual cell; nothing about her differed from the real Beatrix. She was undeniably the empress herself.

However, there was just one thing that differentiated the two—the Beatrix produced by Mercedes's dungeon was completely servile and incapable of betraying her master. While nothing had ostensibly changed in the empire, it was now secretly under Mercedes's control, which meant as much as it displeased her, she had ultimately become Beatrix's ruler just as the empress had wanted.

So even vampires can be reproduced. But then what differentiates us from monsters? Are we...one and the same?

In a sense, vampires were defined as humans in this world, but even they could be produced by the dungeons. This fact inspired unease in Mercedes, and she couldn't help but consider the implications. Were vampires and the other Falsch *really* people?

Maybe we and every other living thing in this world are just monsters created by the dungeons.

Chapter 73: The Transference Ceremony

Capturing Empress Beatrix meant finally putting an end to the chain of events that stretched back a year prior, and Mercedes had now returned to her ordinary routine. Frederick's treason and his arrest by the knights meant school was out of session for a spell, but a new principal was soon appointed and the academy reopened.

Hannah was frequently absent from school, as dealing with the aftermath of the complications with Beatrix was keeping her busy. Mercedes hadn't told her that she was keeping Beatrix prisoner in her dungeon, nor that the Beatrix now leading the empire was a copy created by her dungeon. This was a bombshell that would clearly ignite chaos, and Mercedes obviously couldn't reveal she had become the true head of the Beatrix Empire. Thus, things ostensibly continued on as normal, even if they had drastically shifted behind the scenes.

First, the empire had now completely withdrawn from Orcus, carrying out peace talks in a complete reversal of their original policy. Mercedes stayed in correspondence with the fake Beatrix via letters delivered by her monsters. Her true identity remained a secret, and she continued to rule over the empire, though the love confessions she stuck at the end of every one of her missives annoyed Mercedes more than anything else. At the behest of the fake Beatrix, Mercedes was treated as her friend, which allowed her to freely enter the empire.

Oddly, none found this suspicious, which only spoke to the degree in which Beatrix typically acted according to her own desires and whims. Announcing she had taken a liking to Mercedes, Sieglinde, and (the cross-dressing) Felix had been enough to completely quell all questions about her sudden shift in policy. The Beatrix Empire

was truly...questionable.

Additionally, Mercedes had the fake Beatrix try to summon monsters with the royal weapon, but that experiment had failed. While the fake was closer blood-wise than any of Beatrix's relatives could possibly be, clones were apparently incapable of wielding a dungeon key. Mercedes wasn't sure how, but apparently the gods' technology was capable of distinguishing clones from originals. Therefore, while it was possible to create Beatrix clones, only the original who had inherited the right could use her dungeon.

Mercedes also learned that she couldn't create clones of herself, as according to Zwölf, conquerors couldn't be produced in dungeons. But, unfortunately, she didn't receive a reason as to why. It was restricted information, the same sort she had encountered when asking Zwölf about the nature of nanomachines.

Basically, there was a limit to how much someone who only possessed a single dungeon could know. Those with no dungeon could only know so much, there were truths even inheritors of dungeons weren't privy to, and even those who had conquered a dungeon couldn't know the whole truth.

Thus, Mercedes set her sights on lifting the information restrictions that had been applied to Zwölf.

"There is a limit as to what can be shared to a dungeon master who only possesses one dungeon." That was what Zwölf had once told her, which meant she needed to increase the dungeons in her possession.

That was why she was currently meeting with Beatrix in a field far away from the academy.

"Then we shall now begin the Transference Ceremony. Do I have your permission?" asked Zwölf.

"You do."

The rights to a dungeon could be transferred, and while this intel had come from Beatrix, Zwölf had affirmed it. According to her, those rights were transferred when a dungeon conqueror killed an inheritor or when an inheritor voluntarily transferred those rights to a conqueror.

But that came with conditions. Truly acquiring a dungeon

required conquering it. You had to prove your strength—in other words, defeat the dungeon's Guardian.

"You will not have access to your dungeon during the Transference Ceremony. You will be unable to use the Historie when fighting this Guardian, nor will you be able to summon any monsters. The only monsters available to you will be those you captured using your own merit."

"So Benkei, Kuro, Chirpy, and Shufu."

"Yes."

The force of a dungeon couldn't be used during a battle with a Guardian, as it was a trial meant to prove that you had the strength worthy of a dungeon's master. The only power you could use was your own, and the only exception was monsters you had captured yourself, not via your rights to a dungeon. However, the treasures of your dungeon could be utilized in the battle, which meant you weren't completely cut off from the boons it provided you.

Basically, all Mercedes could use in this battle was her Blut Eisen—though barred from its functions as a dungeon—alongside Benkei, Kuro, Shufu, and Chirpy as companions. Her armor and access to items like magic stones would also be a major deciding factor in this battle.

And finally, she had just one more secret monster at her disposal, but she didn't want to use it unless forced to.

"Then would you like to challenge the Transference Ceremony, master?" confirmed Zwölf.

"Yeah."

Mercedes wished to get this over with as quickly as possible. Yes, she wanted another dungeon to prove her supremacy, but more importantly, she didn't trust Beatrix. Her main goal was to deprive the empress of her power so she didn't have to worry about any scheming.

"Shall I help you, Mercedes?" offered Beatrix.

"I don't need your help. Just stay still and be quiet."

The empress giggled. "I see you still doubt me."

Mercedes didn't want to fall victim to a literal backstabbing, so she decided to keep Beatrix outside until her battle with the

Guardian was over. Really, she wanted to imprison the monarch in her dungeon, but that wouldn't work right now. Beatrix had *offered* the Transference Ceremony to Mercedes, which meant the ceremony couldn't be carried out with Beatrix still locked inside her dungeon. If this had been the fake Beatrix incapable of betrayal thanks to the mechanics of the dungeons, Mercedes would have allowed her to join the fight. But not the original.

Just to be safe, Mercedes had summoned a few dozen monsters to keep watch on her and confiscated her weapon. She shouldn't have been capable of pulling anything.

"Then I shall transfer you to the Guardian's chambers. I will be incapable of interference until the ceremony concludes. Master... Good luck."

"I see you are ready, Mercedes. All right, then: 'I relinquish all rights to my dungeon and transfer them onto Mercedes'!"

The scenery surrounding her suddenly shifted as she was thrust into a space that resembled a dense forest full of flowers and saplings. This was the room that lay in the deepest depths of Beatrix's dungeon—the room of trial. Mercedes wasn't given a choice between the black or golden door this time. Having come to face the trial, there was no need for it.

"Welcome, challenger of truth." Mercedes was greeted by a giant woman standing around twenty meters tall. In general, she resembled a beautiful lady, but she had some distinguishing features as well. Her skin was green, and what looked to be a giant rafflesia adorned her head like a crown. She wore no clothes, yet there oddly wasn't anything lewd about her nudity. But most strikingly of all, her body below her waist morphed into the floor, resembling the roots of a large tree.



However, what caught Mercedes's attention most was the smell. It was disgustingly saccharine and pulled her consciousness away from reality.

"If you have made it here, then there is no need for any extraneous explanations. If truth is what you seek, then prove your mettle. If you can, that is." While her voice was completely different, her utterances closely resembled the Historie's. Mercedes began to wonder if all Guardians had to announce themselves like this. "I am Paradies, the sanctuary for flights of fancy and human reveries, and I shall enshroud you in illusion as well, seeker of truth."

"Can I ask you something? Do you really need to announce yourself like that?"

"No, not really. But I do enjoy it."

"I see."

Mercedes asked just to see what would happen, and the Guardian promptly answered, completely breaking character. She was pretty sure that the glare she felt coming from Benkei begging her to read the room wasn't just her imagination.

Mercedes swung her weapon to refocus herself. "Here I come!"

She kicked the ground and launched herself toward the sky as Benkei and the others dispersed. Mercedes's party had improved greatly since the battle with the Historie, and they had Chirpy and Shufu to rely on now too. Not to mention they had gotten to skip the hard part of venturing through the dungeon and go straight to the boss fight. Their odds from the get-go were overwhelmingly more positive than the last time.

Wanting to take full advantage of this position and push forward immediately, Mercedes swung her halberd, but the Paradies easily blocked the attack with her arm.

Mercedes let out a gasp.

"How weak." With a single swing, the Paradies sent Mercedes flying. Then, its arms branched off to form tentacles that swooped in on her and her party members. Chirpy and Kuro nimbly dodged, while Benkei guarded. Meanwhile, Shufu drew in a big gulp of air before breathing out fire and burning the tentacles to crisps.

Huh. So he *could* attack like an actual demon if he wanted to.

“Chirp, chirp!” Chirpy turned his wings into steel and dived toward the Paradies, leaving a giant slash in its shoulder. Benkei followed this up with a shot from his crossbow to keep it still as Mercedes leaped into the air and raised her halberd toward the sky.

“Gravity times ten!”

Then, she upped the gravity and swung her blade downward! The strike left a deep gash that went from the Paradies’s shoulder to its torso. While its power exceeded the Historie’s, its defenses were weaker.

However, as soon as that revelation occurred to her, plants sprouted out from the wound, tangling together until they had completely fused together.

“Huh?!” Mercedes was shocked stiff, which could prove lethal in a battle. She was knocked into the air by a tentacle and skipped across the ground until Benkei finally caught her.

She’d thought its defenses were weaker than the Historie’s, but it was the exact *opposite.* This thing was so tough it could regenerate shallow wounds in an instant.

This won’t be easy, thought Mercedes as she regathered herself.

Chapter 74: A New Magic

The group attacked the Paradies relentlessly. Mercedes slashed at its arms while Benkei stabbed at its torso, Kuro bit at its neck, Chirpy pierced its head, and Shufu burned its back. But no matter how much damage they did, the Paradies simply regenerated and counterattacked.

Monsters with regeneration powers like this usually had a weak spot, but Mercedes had no clue where that could be. They had targeted its head, neck, heart, and anywhere else that seemed capable of hiding its vitals, but no matter how many times they stabbed through its head or cut through its neck, it simply regenerated, and it didn't even seem to have a heart.

Meanwhile, Mercedes and her companions were only growing more battered and more exhausted. At this rate, the outcome of the battle was obvious.

"Haaah!" Mercedes upped the gravity acting on her halberd and swung. She had put all of her power into the strike, and it cut the Paradies's head clean off. However, new saplings sprouted from its neck and tangled together to form a new one.

Then, the new head took in a deep breath and launched compressed air at them like bullets. Mercedes guarded immediately, but she was still sent flying. She slammed into the wall and fell to her knees.

"Damn it!" Mercedes used her halberd as a crutch to get back on her feet and then looked up at the Paradies. It was tough. She wasn't trying to let her pride get to her head, but some part of her was assured that she'd emerge victorious in this battle given she had beaten a Guardian before. She was stronger, better equipped, and more skilled than before—not to mention she had new party members. She expected some degree of struggle, but she was confident she'd come out on top in the end.

What hubris! If defeating a Guardian was that easy, then there'd be more conquerors in the world. The choice between the two doors was vicious, and most would surely choose the golden. Conquerors could threaten a monarch's authority, so they had purposefully concealed information about the dungeons; that was one reason there were so few conquerors.

However, it was still preposterous to think that nobody had chosen the black. Countless possessed unbridled adventuring spirit, countless had come ready to throw away their lives, countless were even like Mercedes—and they must have chosen the black door. Yet, there were still so few conquerors out there, but why?

Well, because defeating a Guardian was just *that* difficult. Mercedes and her party were practically *too* strong. Benkei had once decimated a group of twenty B-rank Seekers that had been employed as Trein's guards, and Shufu had not only completely eradicated the entire personal army of the Grunewalds but even trounced Felix with ease. Kuro and Chirpy were plenty strong as well, and all four of them had continued to power up further, not to mention that Mercedes had the strength to defeat them all and employ them as her underlings.

Yet, the Guardians were strong enough to overwhelm even them. Mercedes had underestimated her opponent; a Guardian was not to be taken lightly. She had only won against the Historie because his weaknesses happened to perfectly play to her strengths.

"Bark!" Kuro was flung into the air toward Mercedes by a tentacle, and Chirpy was immediately knocked to the ground right after. His eyes were spinning.

To prevent them from bearing the brunt of any more of the Paradies's attacks, Mercedes evacuated them with gravity magic. Then, she observed Benkei and Shufu's battle. There was a limit as to what could be accomplished via muscle-headed rather than levelheaded fighting. If they wanted to win, they would need to find a strategy which allowed that.

We've attacked everywhere we could, so there's no point whacking at it anymore—but the only place we haven't targeted yet...is its roots.

Now that the group had tried targeting everything that stuck out of the ground, continuing this struggle was pointless. They needed to segue into attacking what they *couldn't* see. They hadn't struck any of the roots, so maybe those were its weakness. But at the same time, that wouldn't be so easy. The aboveground portion of the Paradies would obstruct them, and since it could regenerate, there was no way of eliminating its presence.

"That just means I need to uproot it! Befreien!"

Befreien was the first spell Mercedes had created, and thus far, she had only used it to fly. At its core, though, it wasn't a flying spell, but one that eliminated gravity. In doing so, it made her weightless, which allowed flight. But at the same time, she had to be careful, as completely eliminating gravity was suicidal. It'd send her flying right past the atmosphere and straight into outer space.

However, this time, she cast the spell on the Paradies, and unlike when she used the spell on herself, she didn't leave any gravity behind. Now, she had completely unshackled the Paradies from gravity's clutches.

"Huh?! H-Huuuuh?!"

The Paradies floated upward, dragging its roots out of the ground. In a panic, the Guardian thrust its tentacles into the soil to prevent it from rising any further.

That was step one. Mercedes had laid the groundwork for a path toward victory.

"All right! You're up next! Go!"

However, she still hadn't completely uprooted the Paradies. She needed to completely deprive it of any means to resist, so she took a seed out of her pocket and threw it at the Paradies. It immediately began to germinate, morphing into a giant tree in an instant.

What Mercedes tossed at the Guardian was no ordinary seed, but a monster known as a Dämon Forst. Once it takes root, it sucks up nutrients from its surroundings to grow into a giant tree that will eventually reach the size of a forest. *This* was the true identity of Frederick's monster plant.

The Dämon Forst withered the surrounding plants, transforming into a giant tree as it absorbed nutrients from the Paradies. An eye

for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a plant for a plant. The Dämon Forst's ability to absorb nutrients made it the perfect herbicide, and the Paradies began to wilt as it lost its earlier strength.

That was step two. The next stone on the path to victory had been laid.

However, Mercedes hadn't done enough quite yet. The Paradies continued to regenerate, and its defenses around the roots were impregnable. Benkei and Shufu were doing their best, but they couldn't land any attacks.

So next, Mercedes needed to deprive it of any means to counter.

It's a bit of a shot in the dark, but I've seen it done once before.

Mercedes's mind returned to the battle that had cornered a foolish king a year prior. She envisioned the magic Bernhard had used and imagined the nanomachines around her hardening into metal. Immediately, blades of steel popped up around her, and she levitated them using her gravity magic.

"Go!"

She swiftly fired the steel blades, severing the Paradies's tentacles. But those amounted to her only attacks. While she had changed her weapon, the result was the same.

However, she still wasn't done. She had a reason for attacking with metal magic.

"Melt!"

The steel blades that had severed the Paradies's tentacles stayed right where they were, affixing themselves to the Paradies's wounds and forming a metal amoeba. By covering the wounds with metal, Mercedes prevented the Paradies from regenerating. The metal turned into an amoeba that filled even its smaller wounds, completely depriving the Paradies of any means to recover.

Thus, she laid the next stone. The Paradies could no longer fight back, and now that it was weak, Mercedes *could* fight back. All that was left was to walk the path she had paved.

Thanks to Befreien, the Paradies was completely uprooted. Mercedes rushed forth with her halberd in hand, and Benkei and Shufu followed, all attacking at once.

"Haaah!" Mercedes swung her blade with superhuman strength,

completely severing the Paradies's roots. Benkei and Shufu piled on, the former swinging his weapon and the latter breathing fire.



Suddenly, Shufu seemed to remember he had a chef's knife on him. He ceased the fire breathing and began to hack away with his blade. But honestly, this was entirely unnecessary. He didn't need to switch his weapon just to stay in character.

To deliver the finishing blow, Mercedes whammed into the Paradies from its side, flipping it upside down and directing its roots toward the sky. Then, she jumped into the air and brought up her halberd.

"Gravity times one hundred!"

She upped the gravity acting on her to its maximum and swung downward. The strike ripped through the Paradies's roots, even going through its head. Now that it was sundered in two, the Paradies simply whispered, "Excellent."

"...You are very much deserving of truth." Once it had spouted the same line as the Historie, it turned into beads of scattering light. As Mercedes watched it disappear, she plopped on the ground with a sigh.

Her opponent had been tough, but somehow or other, she had managed to claim victory once again.

Chapter 75: An Evolutionary Dead End

Upon defeating the Paradies, Mercedes stepped forth into the area beyond the Guardian's chambers. It resembled what she had seen before—a room where monsters and items were mass-produced. The majority of those copied monsters were plant-based, but after a careful look, she discovered some demon-type monsters as well, suggesting this dungeon likely contained both of those types.

After a brief stroll, Mercedes lifted her face to find the projection of a man who seemed to have been waiting for her. He wore glasses and the same lab coat as Zwölf. He appeared to be about thirty years old, and while he still maintained some of his youthfulness, his thinning hair inspired a sense of pity. This man was likely made in the image of someone just like Zwölf had been, and it was a shame for the original that this was the version that later generations would know him as.

"Are you this dungeon's administrator?"

"Yes, Master Mercedes. Please refer to me as Sieben."

"Got it. I have a question, though, Sieben. I already have a dungeon. What happens now?"

Once a dungeon was conquered, it was compressed into a key so it could be carried around by its master. But Mercedes already had a dungeon, so did that mean she'd receive a new dungeon key, or would her dungeons fuse together?

Sieben seemed to have anticipated this question. "You will be given a separate key, but if you wish, you may fuse your two dungeons together."

"Hmm..."

Mercedes hadn't expected this function to be so flexible. Should

she keep her former key separate, or should she fuse the two together? Each option had its pros and cons.

Fusing them together would make her dungeons easier to manage. She'd only have one key, and she'd be able to summon the monsters of two dungeons at will. The dungeon points would likely also be merged, which meant she could use the points from her new dungeon to produce monsters from Stark Dungeon. This royal weapon had been passed down in the Beatrix Empire for generations, which meant there should be plenty of points at her disposal.

The only downside was that she'd lose an opportunity to obtain another strong weapon for herself. Even if she never used it to summon any monsters, dungeon keys were unbreakable. Her halberd still worked just fine, but she could turn this new dungeon into armor or a shield to up her defenses. But that would be impossible if she fused the two dungeons.

"Let's keep them separate."

After weighing her options, Mercedes decided not to fuse her two dungeons together and to save this new one to use as a trump card. If she could convince her enemies she only had one dungeon and keep the other a secret, it'd give her a great advantage in battle. Not to mention, if she used this indestructible metal under her clothes, it could serve as insurance in an emergency. While cliché, there were many stories where a character was protected from a fatal blow by a lighter or pendant in their pocket. Having one more good-luck charm of sorts would make her safer.

However, considering how hard it would be to summon monsters from under her clothes, she thought it might be better to use it as a wrist guard.

"Understood. What shape would you like the key to take?"

"A bracelet is probably best. Can you do that?"

"As you wish."

As soon as Mercedes voiced her demand, the dungeon compressed, affixing itself to her arm in the exact shape she had requested. Now she could reflect attacks with her arm if necessary, or instantaneously summon monsters from it. Her battle with Beatrix

had taught her how monsters could be utilized for both defense and offense, and she was ready to study how her monsters might be used to her advantage.

However, that would come later. There was something Mercedes needed to learn first.

"Zwölf."

She could have called upon either of her dungeon administrators, but she decided to summon the one she had known longer. On command, a woman in a lab coat was projected in front of her, and she bowed. She was a lot more visually pleasing than the balding Sieben. Why had he even chosen that form in the first place?

"I'm now a master of two dungeons. That means I have higher authority, and you can share more with me now, right?"

"Yes, master. But we cannot talk here."

Mercedes had once learned from Zwölf what made up this world. Nanomachines filled the atmosphere, and they also constructed the bodies of both Falsch and monsters. However, Zwölf had cut their conversation short when she had asked exactly what these nanomachines were. Apparently, there was a limit to what could be shared with a dungeon master who only had one dungeon, but now that Mercedes had two, she should be privy to more info.

However, only the master themself could hear that information, which was a fact Mercedes had completely forgotten. Now that the dungeon was compressed, Beatrix was present, as she had been waiting outside.

"Decompress."

Thus, Mercedes decompressed her dungeon and returned inside to get rid of any prying ears.

Zwölf nodded silently, seemingly waiting for Mercedes to ask her first question. From her demeanor, it appeared anything was on the table.

"First, I want to hear the rest of what I asked before. The monsters and organisms of this world are made of nanomachines, but what exactly are they?"

"Nanomachines are man-made atoms created by the gods, and atoms are—"

"You don't need to explain atoms to me. Anyway, even though they have 'machine' in the name, nanomachines *aren't* machines, correct?"

"Correct. You are organic without a doubt, master."

Mercedes had feared that she was actually a robot. The word "nanomachine" came up all the time in science fiction, and it generally referred to machines too small to see with the naked eye. However, she had now at least confirmed that she and everyone else weren't secretly androids.

But at the same time, she'd also confirmed they were *man-made*.

"Why did the gods make...? No, why did the gods use nanomachines to create us?"

"So that you could surpass the confines of life."

"The confines?"

"The world of the gods was once the peak of prosperity. They gained longevity, developed the ability to regenerate missing limbs, and even conquered diseases that were once believed to be untreatable. But at the same time, they continued to devolve."

Mercedes could see a hint of grief in Zwölf's countenance as she spoke. It was the first time she'd seen *any* emotion from the dungeon administrator. She didn't know what became of the gods—no, of humans—but she could at least tell their ultimate fate had been one that reflected Zwölf's current expression.

"As technology developed, it deprived them of a need to walk, or even use their hands. Their endless pursuit for convenience led them to a point where all movement was meaningless and thought alone sufficed."

"But wouldn't they die from lack of exercise?"

"Their advanced technology solved that problem. The gods lived within life-support systems managed by a computer to keep them in perfect condition. At the time, the average lifespan was five hundred years."

"How horrific."

"Of course, there was no joy in such a life, so the gods wished for separate bodies they could manipulate remotely. They created clones linked to their brainwaves and lived lives akin to controlling a

character in a game. They could live and die freely—the death of a clone caused no pain for the gods. Instead, they simply lost that body. But as a result of living such lives...it was too late by the time they realized how far they had devolved."

This was the end result of technological advancement gone too far, and hearing this story engendered some misgivings in Mercedes. She had been a human in her past life, and while she rather disliked that world, she had no desire to hear of the grim fate it ultimately met.

Yet, she needed to. Having reached that decision, Mercedes urged Zwölf forward. "What happened to them?"

"As a result of mental overuse, the brain alone grew grotesquely developed, while their unused limbs continued to shrink. Their eyes, noses, mouths, and everything else they failed to use completely degenerated until those organs became useless. In the end...their appearance resembled giant heads. Should you have seen them, master, you would have surely considered them monsters."

"Were they...alive?"

"No. You cannot consider those *things* as alive." After a moment of silence, Zwölf denied that the gods were living. Just moments earlier, she had declared the opposite of Mercedes and the other Falsch, who were made up of man-made nanomachines.

That was the extent to how far humanity had strayed from life, and the thought induced a scowl from Mercedes.

"The gods—*humanity*—morphed into flawed beings unable to survive without the modern conveniences that they themselves had created. Perhaps this was the result of tinkering with their own DNA to elongate their lifespans, or perhaps that was simply what they were always meant to become. In any case, what had once been the most advanced species on Earth devolved into the weakest. That is the true identity of what you Falsch revere as gods—the true history of your creators."

Zwölf continued onwards, sharing the demise of this species that approached the status of gods without limits. "As the gods grew more and more prosperous, they continued to lose what truly made them alive. They created organs that could never become diseased

and replaced all the organs in their body with these as soon as they were born. As this continued across generations, they began to give birth to deformed children missing their vital organs. These children were saved due to their advanced technology and had children of their own, leaving behind many future generations. In the end, humans lost all their organs, morphing into deformed beings that needed to be operated on upon birth just to stay alive."

"I don't believe it. The principles of evolution dictate that unused organs will deteriorate, but they wouldn't deteriorate to such extremes, would they?"

"No, not naturally. However, the gods began to manipulate their DNA to suit their needs, morphing themselves into beings exempt from the normal laws of evolution."

Mercedes began to wonder what this suggested in regard to Zwölf. She had once stated that she had been modeled after the gods, but perhaps what had served as her model had just been a clone, while her true body was one of those clumps of meat she considered nonliving.

"Naturally, humans grew weaker and more prone to death. They suffered congenital diseases, which again necessitated replacing organs and hastened their demise. As this process repeated over and over...they lost everything. Once even their senses of sight and sound could only be supplied by the life-support machines, all became meaningless but their brains, and they became something less than alive."

"It's rare to hear you sound so bitter."

"I am merely explaining the truth. They could not survive a mere minute without their machines. Should they have tried to walk on their own two feet, they would have been crushed to death by the weight of their own heads. You cannot consider such *things* to be alive."

Mercedes sighed as she imagined these future humans. Was it...something like that? Did they look like those chibi anime characters who had heads the size of their bodies and were clearly unable to reach their hands above their ears no matter how hard they tried? Those looked quite cute in the drawings, but they'd be

quite grotesque in real life. At the very least, Mercedes would never want to come face-to-face with one herself.

"Eventually, the gods lost the ability to leave behind progeny and had to rely on their machines to harvest their own DNA and cultivate clones. No, perhaps you can't even truly consider such *things* progeny."

"You're right. It really is hard to consider beings like that as alive."

"Once they reached the peak of their prosperity, a certain thought began to infest the gods—nostalgia. They began to reminisce on the days when they were the species that best balanced the functions of brain and body, and they wished to return to that."

"What about beauty? Humans wouldn't consider primitive man to be attractive, so in the same vein, I'd think these overly altered humans would view the humans of old as a completely different species."

"That simply speaks to the extent of how long ago their clocks had stopped. As I mentioned earlier, the gods controlled clones to walk around outside—clones in the image of the humans of old. Even the gods would consider their own forms to be monstrous."

That would be hell, thought Mercedes. Transforming into a monster while maintaining the sensibilities of a normal human would drive any average person to insanity.

"Thus, the gods attempted to create a new type of human to serve as their progeny. If they simply cloned the humans of old, they'd likely befall the same fate as them, making the experiment meaningless, so the gods created a new type of humanity from scratch, starting with the atoms. They wanted a human that would never deteriorate, but still be healthy, beautiful, and long-living. Thus, they created nanomachines."

"Which are what the beings of this world are made of."

"Yes."

Mercedes looked up to the blue moon with a sigh. Quite frankly, she thought this whole saga of humanity was quite strange, but perhaps it was the natural conclusion of never-ending technological advancement. At the very least, she was now painfully aware that this was not the fantasy world or alternate dimension that she had

originally thought she'd found herself in.

"Then why are we here? Why do we live ignorant of this truth? Humans only created species separate from themselves. We don't function as humanity's successors. This isn't what they sought."

"That is... My apologies, but I can not divulge that information at this time."

"So this is the limit of what I can learn with two dungeons. Can you at least tell me whether this truth was purposefully hidden from us?"

"I cannot."

"Hmm... Then let me change the question." She looked into Zwölf's eyes. Something earlier had caught her attention, and now she was near certain of it. Ever since she had told Zwölf that she needed no explanation of the concept of atoms, Zwölf had been speaking with the assumption that Mercedes knew of the Earth of the past. "Zwölf, you must know that I'm familiar with Earth...and that I have the memories of someone who once lived there, right?"

"I only grew convinced of it recently when you declared you did not need an explanation of atoms, master."

"But you don't seem surprised. Which means it's not unprecedented for Falsch to have a human's memories."

"Yes, that is true. While very few will have such memories, a certain number of them will, and more will certainly be born in the future."

In other words, reincarnation was part of the system. From Zwölf's and the gods' perspectives, it was within the realm of possibility, so there were currently others like Mercedes out there.

Mercedes didn't have a good feeling about any of this, starting with the fact that the Falsch had been created as humanity's successors. She didn't have actual answers yet, which meant she couldn't conclude anything for sure, but none of the possibilities that flashed through her mind were pleasant ones.

"Then there must be some relation between us Falsch with human memories and the gods, right?"

"Yes, there is."

"Can you explain that relation?"

"Not at this moment."

"There are locks placed on our thought patterns, aren't there?"

"Yes. When Falsch stumble upon certain thoughts, they are induced with fear. However, those locks have been removed now that you have come into possession of a second dungeon, master."

"Why do we have these locks?"

"I cannot answer that."

"Am I just a doll manipulated by a god, and is that god my true self? Or has the brain of a god who lost her memories been transplanted into my body?"

When Mercedes had once pondered these questions, she had been blocked by a lock on her thought processes. Had she been reincarnated, it would have been impossible for her to retain these memories, as the brain—the medium that stored memories—had been left behind.

Yet, Mercedes had these memories. She had started to entertain the possibility of a backup, but when she began to consider this, a lock had induced fear in her, preventing her from contemplating it any further.

Now, however, she didn't have this fear, so she returned to this question. Was there a backup of her memories somewhere outside her body, and had that been transferred to her like data being copied into a new computer? No, perhaps the backup was her *real* body, and her current form was just a doll.

"No, master. That body is you. The brains of gods are too large to transplant into a Falsch."

The scariest possibility was that this present version of her wasn't her true self, that a god was manipulating her—a clone—from a remote terminal like she was some video game character. There was no way to disprove this, but Zwölf had denied the possibility.

"I still cannot explain this to you in detail. For that...you will need to conquer every dungeon. Only then can I divulge the full truth of this world."

"Then my goal remains the same."

"Indeed."

Mercedes felt that with every step she took, she was gradually

prying open Pandora's Box. The end of humanity, nanomachines, the man-made Falsch...and the reason those Falsch were created. At first, Mercedes had only thought of conquering the dungeons so she could die with no regrets, but the mystery behind this world only continued to deepen. Had she remained ignorant, she would have been able to pass on without a second thought when her life reached its natural conclusion, but now that she was beginning to uncover the truth, she'd certainly die with regret if she turned a blind eye. Now that she was in for the penny, she was in for the pound.

Therefore, Mercedes resolved to conquer the dungeons and piece together the truth of this world. Perhaps nothing good would come of it, but what did she care? She was beyond the point of no return, so the only way now was forward.

"Fine. I'll conquer the dungeons. Stick with me, Zwölf."

"Of course, master."

Having her answer, Mercedes stored away her dungeon and converted it back into a bracelet. Now, she had two, and to gain more, there were only two options: Head abroad...or defeat whoever was the master of Practis Dungeon.

The time had finally come.



Parent and Child

Two ladies in resplendent dresses walked the city streets lit up by the pale light of the moon. The well-maintained stone path was decorated by the light that escaped the brick houses, while the street lamps glowed orange, bringing life to this town even in the darkness of the night.

However, what captured the attention of these two ladies were the visitors that had come from abroad—travelers from an academy located in the neighboring nation of Orcus's capital city, Abendrot. Until just recently, Orcus and Beatrix had been enemies, but now that Beatrix had suddenly decided to strive for peace, the two nations had forged an amicable relationship. As proof of this, it was decided that a few dozen students from the academy would visit the Beatrix Empire each year, and these travelers would be commemorated as the first.

Among them were Mercedes, Monika, and Margaret.

"Look, Mercedes! The ladies here all look so wonderfully elegant!"

"Uh, I guess," Mercedes lazily responded. The other girl, Monika, was clinging to her arm.

How did we get here? Why am I *here?* wondered Mercedes. But she knew the reason. Beatrix had been the one to suggest these visits, and Mercedes had been the one to deliver her message to the academy.

"Um, what's that, big sister? Don't their feet hurt?"

"Hmm? Oh, those are high heels. They're shoes meant to keep your feet clean—I mean, to make you look taller."

Margaret clung to Mercedes's other arm, showing a rare amount of excitement. As Mercedes answered her question, her mind was elsewhere. She had a few goals for this visit. One was to make it evident that the Beatrix Empire had really shifted their policy to one of reconciliation. Once word spread that the two nations were on

good terms, it would no longer be odd for Mercedes to make frequent visits, and she'd be able to enter Beatrix without having to hide herself.

At the same time, a cordial relationship meant Mercedes could borrow the military might of the empire if she ever needed it. While she was currently the secret, de facto ruler of this nation, she had no intention of making this reality known. However, that in turn meant she couldn't mobilize Beatrix's army if the situation called for it. Ostensibly, Mercedes was just the empress's friend and nothing more. No matter the reason, a foreign nation couldn't take action for an individual's personal interests.

However, if they were on friendly terms with Orcus, Mercedes would be able to mobilize them under the pretense that it was for *Orcus*'s interests. For that reason, Mercedes needed to lay the groundwork and emphasize the fact that the Beatrix Empire and Orcus had reconciled, and Empress Beatrix had suggested this trip to do so.

Participants were chosen based first on whether the student wanted to join, and then on family prestige and grades. As a result, Mercedes and Monika had been chosen for their top-notch grades and status as daughters of a duke, while Margaret had been chosen thanks to her family title even though her grades didn't quite compare to Mercedes and Monika's.

"What an elegant city. Everyone looks so fashionable," remarked Monika with a spellbound sigh.

Mercedes, on the other hand, wasn't so relaxed. It hadn't caught her attention during her previous visit, but the ladies walking through town really were well-dressed. Perhaps due to the misandrist nature of this society, female fashion was more developed here than in Orcus. The women walked the streets in high heels and hoop skirts, each and every one of them carrying parasols. They exuded elegance.

However, during the Middle Ages on Earth, high heels had simply been functional shoes worn to avoid stepping in waste, and parasols a means of keeping the waste thrown from windows from landing on your head. Hoop skirts as well were worn merely to let women do

their business while standing. Even if each of these items were a fashion statement, it was hard to avoid *other* thoughts seeing them all together in one place.

Thus, Mercedes was gripped by a fear that exceeded what she had experienced during both her fights with the Guardians and her battle with Beatrix; she was worried that waste might land on her head at any moment. Luckily, there was no stench, and she hadn't spotted any waste on the roadside. Still, she needed to remain vigilant.

"Oh, is that a street vendor? I wonder what they're selling." Margaret caught sight of a stall sitting on the side of the road, and it had attracted the attention of the other students as well. A few dozen were in attendance—just as they had originally planned—and they were currently headed for their lodgings. Leading them was the soldier captain Mercedes had met before, Rose. She seemed a lot less busy than the title of "captain" would suggest.

In any case, a sweet scent wafted from the stand that Margaret was staring at. They seemed to be selling something that resembled a waffle.

"I guess I'll buy some. Give me three."

"Coming right up!"

Mercedes paid the owner of the waffle stand and bought some for herself, Monika, and Margaret, prompting other students to follow suit. The waffles were pricey, but nothing was too expensive for the children of nobles. The wealth gap in this nation was wide, but all the women walking the streets were kempt and seemingly well-off. These waffles were probably meant as a snack for the rich, which explained their price.

However, it was now time for the moment of truth—how they tasted.

"They're so sweet!" gleefully exclaimed Margaret. Mercedes was also surprised herself. Orcus had a similar delicacy, but theirs lacked any sweetness. Instead, they just tasted like fried clumps of dough. Maybe the Beatrix Empire's version was so sweet because they were made for the rich, or maybe Orcus was just stingy when it came to sugar. In any case, the difference was night and day. Mercedes

considered bringing some home as a souvenir for Sieglinde and Hannah, the former having been forced to stay behind and the latter having chosen to so she could guard the other.

Sieglinde had truly wanted to come on the trip, but naturally, no one would permit her visiting a foreign nation that had attempted to kidnap her quite recently.

In any case...about ten seemed enough according to Mercedes's judgments. But just as that thought occurred to her, she felt eyes on her back, prompting her to turn around.

No one was there, just the ladies curiously eying the foreign visitors.

"What's wrong, big sister?"

"...Nothing."

Given everything that had happened lately, she must have naturally been on guard. After that, Mercedes comforted her sister and headed to the inn with the rest of the group.

***

What most shocked Mercedes upon her arrival was the presence of a proper, large bath within their lodgings. Orcus had public bathing facilities, but not only were they mixed gender, people ate there, drank there, danced there, and even engaged in prostitution there. They were a place where nothing was off-limits, which meant Mercedes had absolutely no interest in using them.

Of course, the baths at the Grunewald manor were different, but she was nevertheless shocked to see the sort of bathing facilities typically only accessible to nobles available to the general public. While Orcus and Beatrix were both vampiric nations, there were clearly some cultural differences.

In any case, Mercedes decided to jump on the opportunity and cleanse her body in the spacious baths. The capital of Beatrix resembled Paris, so Mercedes had been afraid that waste might drop down on her from the skies at any moment. But apparently, this nation was much more hygienic than she had originally thought.

"What is it, Monika?"

"I-It's nothing... *Shlurp!"*

Monika's gaze was quite...*intense*...but Mercedes concluded it was probably best for her mental health not to think about it too much.

As Mercedes soaked in the bath, someone came and sat next to her. She turned to face the person and discovered an unfamiliar face. She wasn't a student from Edelrot.

Appearance-wise, she seemed about the same age as Mercedes, or perhaps a bit older. Still, vampires had perpetual ages, so it wouldn't have been strange for her to be much older than she looked, just like Hannah was. Her fiery red hair reached her shoulders, and while she had balanced features, it was her sharp, purple eyes that left the greatest impression. There was great potential for her body if she hadn't fully matured yet, as she already had curves in all the right places. She was beautiful, but unlike her hair, she seemed quite cold-natured.

Mercedes concluded she must be another guest at the inn and averted her gaze.

"You're Mercedes Grunewald, correct?"

Mercedes looked back at her. "And who are you?"

"The daughter of the woman you stole a dungeon from. That should tell you all you need to know, yes?"

There was only one woman Mercedes had stolen a dungeon from, and she had mentioned she had an adopted child. If she remembered correctly, Beatrix had raised her in order to consolidate the dungeons. Beatrix couldn't change the fact she was a dungeon inheritor and not a conqueror, so she had raised someone who *could* conquer a dungeon, and had planned to bequeath her own dungeon—as well as Sieglinde's, if all went according to plan—to the girl, uniting three dungeons under a single crown and creating a new generation of monarchs. The plot that stretched back a year—actually, even earlier—had been the groundwork for this lofty goal.

However, there was now a new shining light in that plan. Mercedes suddenly jumped into Beatrix's script to save Sieglinde, quell the chaos, and even snatch Beatrix's dungeon for herself.

This wasn't a bad turn of events for the empress. The dungeons had still been consolidated under a new vampiric monarch. As long

as they weren't crushed by another species of Falsch, Beatrix would still come out on top, and her plan would come to fruition. The new monarch had simply shifted from Beatrix's child to Mercedes, which was even *better* for Beatrix. She had discovered a diamond where she had least expected it.

However, this was unbearable for the girl who was robbed of the limelight. She had been raised by Beatrix to serve as a monarch for a new generation, and now that her path had suddenly been derailed, she was at a loss. In one sense, she was the center of things, but in the other, she was a victim. Mercedes doubted her heart was at peace, but it was impossible to tell given her lack of expression.

"Why are you here?"

"To voice my grievances." Well, she certainly didn't beat around the bush. Still, Mercedes expected her to be displeased, and she thought she had the right to at least vent. From this girl's perspective, Mercedes had abruptly tugged away her entire life's purpose, after all.

"We have company here. I'll be waiting for you in the plaza behind the inn." With that, the girl who claimed to be Beatrix's adoptive daughter left.

Mercedes considered ignoring her request, but she didn't want the truth being leaked to the general public. Still, just what was the copy of Beatrix thinking? The fact this girl knew that Mercedes was in possession of Beatrix's dungeon could only mean that the copy had divulged the information to her. As a copy made in Mercedes's dungeon, this Beatrix was unwaveringly loyal to her and couldn't do anything that might cause her harm. If she revealed this fact to the girl, it could only mean she determined she couldn't pose any threat to Mercedes.

Having made up her mind, Mercedes stepped out of the bath, dressed herself, and slipped outside when Monika wasn't looking. The sun had already risen high in the sky, bathing the world in light. For vampires, it was already bedtime.

Mercedes put on her sunlight-blocking glasses and headed for the plaza behind the inn, which was a round, open space. At its center

was a statue of a woman holding a bottle, which poured water into a fountain around her.

"I've been waiting for you." The girl from earlier was standing near the fountain, and she greeted Mercedes with a bow. She was quite respectful for a girl who had been raised by Beatrix. Her black dress was open around the bosom, which was probably Beatrix's doing.

"Let me introduce myself. I am Diana, though one day, I shall abandon that name and become Beatrix XVIII. Then, I shall obtain multiple dungeons, becoming the queen of a new generation of vampires united under a single ruler. At least...that was how it should have been."

"I'm sure you already know, but I'm Mercedes Grunewald." It was only polite to name yourself after someone else gave an introduction. Of course, the other party already knew of her, which meant it was rather meaningless. Still, she had decided to follow formality.

"So? What are your grievances?" Mercedes asked.

"I was adopted by my mother and raised to be the monarch for a new generation. That was the sole purpose of my existence, but recently, that was taken from me." Diana spoke coldly and without showing emotion. But strangely, she looked like a lost girl on the verge of tears to Mercedes. "I was meant to conquer a dungeon and inherit my mother's after claiming victory during the Transference Ceremony. That is what I wished for...and what I was meant to do. And it's also...what *you* did."

As she listened, Mercedes began to understand why she had obediently obliged Diana. The girl before her resembled the woman from her previous life. She was the protagonist in a directionless story—or rather, in a story that had *lost* its direction. She had stumbled down a path with no way forward, clueless as to what her next step should be.

She was a waning moon who had lost its chance to become full.

"I can't accept this. So..."

"That's enough." Mercedes interjected, grabbing hold of the broach in Idle Mode and transforming it into her halberd. It was

currently morning, and no one was in the vicinity. Thus, a small skirmish shouldn't be a problem.

"If you can't accept it, then shut up and show me what you've got."

Diana couldn't continue forward in her current state. As long as she still clung to her lost goals, she'd remain stagnant. Therefore, Mercedes considered it her duty to cut through that stagnation. She'd mercilessly destroy Diana's lingering hope that she herself could have accomplished what Mercedes had, forcing her to realize that her goals had never been attainable in the first place.

That was the only way to save her from eternal regret.

"Thank you." Diana clasped her hands before her chest. She had no weapon—how did she plan to fight?

Suddenly, Mercedes bore witness to something unusual. The ground around Diana cracked and floated into the air, forming stone dolls. She had an earth affinity, and she had used it to create an army.

Next, she used metal magic. She produced steel swords and spears to equip her soldiers, though that wasn't all. Next, she commanded the water from the fountain to spill over and form snakes that danced about. Then, she froze some of this water into ice that floated around her.

She used all four of her affinities, including sub-affinities...!

Mercedes was shocked. Individuals in this world could only have two magic affinities, and only master four in total, including the sub-affinities that were derived from the basic four. Mercedes had seen plenty of people cast magic that derived from their sub-affinities, and she herself had finally begun to get the hang of her metal magic sub-affinity during her battle with the Paradies. However, this was her first time witnessing a master who had full control over all four.

The stone soldiers rushed forth, ice bullets flying behind them as backup. But Mercedes slaughtered every soldier and cut down every ice bullet with a single swing of her Blut Eisen. Then, she launched herself toward Diana and attacked with her blade. However, the dancing water snakes around her easily intercepted her.

Mercedes cursed under her breath. She was flung away by the

snakes, but she did a flip midair before landing back on the ground. A new round of soldiers rushed her, though one swing of her Blut Eisen was again enough to knock them back.

Quite frankly, Mercedes thought Diana was a formidable opponent, and there was no doubt in Mercedes's mind that she was a prodigy. She could take on a platoon—or perhaps even a company—all on her own. She alone had perfectly mastered hand-to-hand combat, cover fire, the skills required of a commander, and the methods needed to protect that commander. She was a girl of innate genius, so much so that even Bernhard would have recognized her talent. Neither Sieglinde nor Felix could have stood a chance against her in a fight.

"I see. You really do have the makings of a girl Beatrix would try to make her successor. But that only makes your circumstances more unfortunate."

Diana was a genius, an all-rounder of absolute perfection. She certainly could fight anyone anywhere. Her skill with magic exceeded Mercedes's, and she had no weaknesses to speak of.

Still, it just wasn't enough.

"You lack resolve." With that, Mercedes cut down a whole row of soldiers. It was amazing that Diana had managed to create so many, but individually, they weren't very strong. They were as perfect as they needed to be, and they had the strength to take on the average Seeker. However, someone of Benkei's caliber could easily mow down the whole lot.

Mercedes dodged the onslaught of ice bullets that followed by leaping from side to side as she closed the distance between them. The projectiles weren't fast enough to hit a monster as agile as Kuro.

Now that she was right near Diana, the redhead's water snakes attacked. However, Mercedes lifted her palm and repelled them with gravity magic. This volume of water could easily be blasted away, and a monster that could manipulate flames as well as Shufu could easily evaporate it.

All of this just wasn't enough. Even if she managed to reach a Guardian, she'd fail to defeat it. She had no special tricks that could

accomplish the feat.

Finally, Mercedes thrust her blade toward Diana's throat as if to slice through her regrets. "You still want to continue this fight?"

"No... This was enough. I have lost."

Once Diana had admitted defeat, Mercedes morphed her Blut Eisen back into a broach.

***

Diana was born to the Hertlings, a viscount family of the Beatrix Empire. However, her mother, Viscount Hertling (the Beatrix Empire being a matriarchal society, it was typical that the woman hold the noble title) was a spendthrift who burned through the fortune she had inherited, accruing copious debt and ruining House Hertling in a single generation.

In the end, she sold her daughter for the money to flee and successfully escaped the Empire...though just a few years later, her corpse was discovered outside the entrance of Practis Dungeon near the great city of Blut, Orcus. Diana assumed that her mother had challenged the dungeon in an attempt to turn her fortunes around, only to fail. As she was dying, she had managed to escape the dungeon, but ran out of strength as soon as she had reached the exit.

Meanwhile, Diana's father had always despised the customs of the Beatrix Empire and had thus also abandoned his daughter to flee. She was unaware of his whereabouts, but she assumed that he too had died somewhere and that his corpse had been consumed by either monsters or wild beasts.

In the end, Diana had been rescued from slavery by a platoon led by Rose, only to then fall under Empress Beatrix's auspices. She underwent various tests, and once the empress was assured of Diana's talent for battle, she officially adopted the girl, bringing us to the present.

Diana had no faith in the bonds that united people. Her childhood had taught her that even parents connected to their children by blood would gladly toss them aside for their own personal gain. Of

course, she knew not all parents were like her own, and theoretically, she knew that there were parents who loved their children. However, she herself had been abandoned by her parents. She didn't know familial bonds; she had never experienced them.

The same was true with her adoptive mother, Beatrix. Diana never felt love for her mother, though she did have respect and gratitude for the woman. The empress raised Diana to be the next generation of monarch, and not out of love or pity. But Diana preferred this. It meant she wasn't raised for immaterial, unreliable reasons, but needed for a concrete goal.

The only things unconditional love inspired were anxiety and fear. Thus, she preferred it to be conditional. She wanted a clear role to serve, as it put her at ease. Serving that role was what allowed her to exist. At least, that was what she had always thought.

However, she had now lost that role.

"Thank you, Mercedes. Now I can finally give up," said the defeated Diana as she turned around and walked off.

"Where are you going? The castle's in the opposite direction."

"There's no longer a place for me there." Diana had been adopted and raised to be the first in a new lineage of monarchs. That was once her purpose in life, but no more. She knew there was a stark rift between her skill level and Mercedes's. Any lingering regrets had now vanished. And so...she was done. She had given up on everything.

"Did someone tell you that?"

"I'm sure my mother would. Now that I've lost my purpose, I have lost my value."

"I see... You hear that, Beatrix?"

The mention of that name caused Diana to turn around—and there, she found her mother, Beatrix. "Mother... Why are you here?"

"The Beatrix at the castle is a body double created by my dungeon. She was the one who came up with the idea... Seriously, she's crazy," said Mercedes, sighing. Then, she glared at Beatrix to tacitly pressure her to take over.

"Hmm... Ah, how should I say this? I apologize, Diana. Please forgive your mother," she said with a bow. It was rare to see her act

in such an admirable manner. “I didn’t know I had tormented you so. Since you always seemed so disinterested, I had assumed you viewed me as a nuisance.”

Oh, thought Mercedes, completely understanding the queen. From what she could tell, Diana was a girl of little emotion and one who was hard to understand. Given her cold, disinterested attitude, it was likely difficult to discern her true feelings. Of course, Mercedes put her *own* lack of emotion aside while mulling this over.

“Pay no mind to your role. You are my darling daughter, and you may stay in the castle as long and as prominently as you wish.”

“Is that really...okay? I can no longer inherit your dungeon, mother.”

“That does not bother me one bit. In fact, consider it a stroke of luck. You now have someone who can brave the dangers in your place.”

So that’s what she thinks I’m here for, thought Mercedes, somewhat irately. Still, she couldn’t remain a mere spectator. She was partly responsible for this ordeal, so she decided to offer some advice. “I’ve always been searching as well.”

“Do you...think I’ll find it?”

“That’s for you to decide.”

“I see.”

Diana responded to Mercedes’s curt utterances with equal brevity. Both girls seemed to follow the conversation, but Beatrix interrupted. “Wait just a moment. You’ve kept it too brief! I have no clue what you’re discussing at all.”

“Well, I’ve also been searching for my own role to serve...for a purpose in life. So Diana can do the same. And that’s not something someone else can decide for her; it’s something she should decide for herself.”

“I’m surprised you were both able to follow.”

Perhaps Mercedes had an odd sense of sympathy for her fellow emotionless comrade in arms. Beatrix was simply flabbergasted, but Diana had finally smiled. “I see. In that case...I’ll search for my own purpose, just like you.”

She had apparently overcome her problems. Thus, the case was

closed...except for one lingering question.

"But why did you spill everything to her, Beatrix? None of this would have happened had you kept your mouth shut."

"Well, it was my body double who divulged everything that had occurred. But we are one and the same, after all, so I do understand her reasons."

"Which are?"

"Had she concealed the truth, Diana would have continued to struggle in vain, which would be terribly pitiful."

"You're right," agreed Mercedes, nodding her head. As a mother, Beatrix must not have wanted to see her daughter work fruitlessly toward an impossible goal. Everything made sense assuming the copy of Beatrix—which was incapable of harming Mercedes—had divulged the truth to Diana because she was assured that her skill couldn't match Mercedes's.

"Not to mention, it would have likely been fine to leave the matter in your hands. And what would you know? It was."

"You were just off-loading the problem to me, then."

"I would never! This experience is sure to garner love and trust between—" Beatrix had veered into the territory of delusion, so Mercedes quietly returned her to her dungeon.

Diana let out a defeated sigh and bowed her head. "I apologize for my mother. She's... Well, you see how she is, but I do ask that you take good care of her."

"Don't worry about it. She's a much better person than my father."

"He's...even worse than her?"

"Way worse."

Beatrix cared for her daughter, at least in some sense. That alone put her leagues above Bernhard.

Mercedes bid farewell to Diana, returned to the inn, and went to bed. As she drifted off, she marveled at the many forms a relationship between parent and child could take.

"Achoo!" Bernhard had no way of catching Mercedes's slander, and his only hint was the sneeze that escaped him as he sat alone.

Benkei’s Struggles

Benkei’s typical day began at dusk. Unlike vampires, Asura ogres had no aversion to the sun and were a monster species that could function normally even in the daylight. But having a vampire master, Benkei had fully morphed into a nocturnal creature.

However, that was beyond his control. When his master needed his help, sleeping couldn’t serve as an excuse to slack off.

Benkei had lived on the Red Planet’s surface until Mercedes started attending the academy, but now, Stark Dungeon had once again become his home. Still, there was no helping that. The other students would be quaking in their boots if they found Benkei strolling through the hallways.

He was a creature of the dungeon, so he had no qualms about his home. In fact, this environment was a big improvement. Mercedes had used her authority as a dungeon master to completely renovate floors twenty-four and twenty-five. The latter floor now boasted a two-story house, a pool, and even a hot spring; meanwhile, the twenty-fourth floor had been transformed into a training ground where various monsters honed their skills—the most zealous among them the no-good jelly slime. His gelatinous form was now swole with muscles, making for quite a bizarre sight.

Benkei crawled out of his *futon* wearing nothing but a pair of underwear and walked to the bathroom as he scratched his back. The house had tap water from a spring, and he used it to wash his face and wake himself up. Then, he adorned his armor so that he could answer his master’s call whenever she might beckon him, though she was so strong herself she rarely did so. Most of her battles concluded before it got to the point where she summoned any of her monster companions, and while this somewhat disappointed Benkei, he was proud that the master who had bested and domesticated him was so strong. He had some conflicting

feelings about the matter.

When he stepped outside the house, Kuro immediately bounded toward him. While the two were both veterans, Mercedes called upon Kuro much more often than Benkei. He wasn't just useful for battle but could also serve as both a mount and a pet. Thus, she often summoned him outside the dungeon for no reason but to give him some pets.

Meanwhile, Shufu mostly stayed at the Grunewald manor to serve as a cook, and Chirpy—a newer member of their squad—could be used as a flying mount, as well as to deliver messages from the copy of Beatrix who was still in the Empire. Thus, Benkei, Kuro, Shufu, and Chirpy were the four monsters Mercedes used most, but Benkei alone was the only one who didn't serve a purpose outside of battle.

Quite honestly, this inspired some panic in Benkei—yet he was powerless to change anything. Given his appearance, he could hardly be considered a pet, nor could he fly through the sky or cook. Thus, his days were overwhelmingly free.

"Things cannot stay as they are. Unless... Unless I find value for myself outside of battle, I will be forgotten."

The other monsters aside from Benkei all had unique strengths. When Mercedes had first captured him, he had served as a packmonster. With his six arms and large frame, he could carry much more than Mercedes, making him an invaluable companion in the dungeons. However, she had later bought a proper packmonster, and now that she owned a dungeon, she no longer needed someone to carry her bags. Thus, Benkei's strength outside of battle had been taken from him.

Still, Benkei himself had been the one to suggest that Mercedes obtain a monster just to carry her bags. Still, in any case, he had to do something! And to that end, he had thought up a few plans that might fix his situation.

[Plan A: Master Magic]

Benkei's first idea had been to master magic. Currently, Benkei's main abilities were offensive attacks using a variety of weapons and utilizing all six of his arms. Thus, what Mercedes sought from Benkei

was versatility in battle. He attacked at close range with a sword, midrange with a spear, and long range with a bow and arrow. Additionally, he covered defense with a shield, though he hardly ever needed it. If he could add magic to his repertoire, his versatility would skyrocket.

Magic was not only useful in battle, but in daily life too. He had never tried his hand at magic before, but all organisms—including monsters—had magical affinities. Therefore, he assumed Asura ogres could master magic as well, and he had called upon the goblin hexer to serve as his instructor.

"You wish to learn magic, Lord Benkei? What a wonderful idea," the goblin hexer had said, immediately agreeing to aid him. He spoke the language of monsters, so Mercedes required a monster who could speak the language of vampires to act as interpreter when communicating with goblins. Benkei, however, didn't share that problem. "Utilizing magic in addition to the physical attacks from your six arms would intimidate your opponent as well."

There was no need for magic to be channeled from the hands or fingers, and skilled magicians like Bernhard could utilize magic without moving at all. Nevertheless, stronger spells were easiest to control when channeled from the extremities. Magic was the process of emitting mana from one's body to command the mana in the air, and it was simplest to imagine the hands as the point of emission for this mana. Therefore, if Benkei learned how to use magic, his opponents would be unaware of when he might cast a spell, serving as an apt intimidation tactic.

Basically, even if Benkei *didn't* use any magic, the fact that he *could* would frighten his opponents, forcing them to fight with caution and limiting their movements. Just having six arms was enough to accomplish this, so Benkei had immediately begun his magical training. However...

"I-I've never met such a dunce when it comes to magic in my life!" After just a few days, that was the goblin hexer's appraisal. Unfortunately, Benkei had zero talent for magic, and he showed no signs of being anywhere near accomplishing even the most basic of basic steps—emitting mana from his body. In fact, his skills were so

terrible, they were practically acting as a *detriment*.

"You should give it a rest, Lord Benkei." Ultimately, the goblin hexer determined him to be a lost cause and threw in the towel. Everyone had their strengths and weaknesses, and apparently, that applied to monsters as well. Magic just happened to be one of Benkei's weaknesses. That was all.

[Plan B: Flying]

The greatest reason Mercedes regarded Chirpy so highly was his ability to fly, so Benkei concluded he just needed to learn to do the same. Chirpy had just returned to the dungeon when he heard this, and he very exasperatedly told him, "That's impossible."

Benkei wasn't a flying monster. He didn't have wings, and he was too heavy to fly anyway. The only reason Mercedes could herself was because of her magic; her physical body had nothing to do with it. It had already been established that Benkei had absolutely zero talent with magic, which meant...he couldn't fly.

However, Benkei was no quitter! If wings were necessary to fly, he only needed to find some! If he could hold wings in his six arms and flap them hard enough, maybe that would work.

"That's crazy. Where are you going to find wings anyway?" asked Chirpy.

However, Benkei simply smirked as he pulled out a pair of giant wings! Wait...were those really wings? The end of the handles was shaped into large, flat circles, so they *kind of* looked like wings, but no one had any clue as to what the Chinese character for "festival" was doing on their center. In any case, Benkei had six of these mysterious devices. They were larger than vampires, and even a gentle flap created a strong gust of wind.

"What even *are* those...?"

"I found them in the treasure vault."

"And you're allowed to use them?"

"I received permission from our master via Zwölf. I am not too sure what they are myself, but apparently they are known as 'giant fans.'"

The items that lay beyond the golden door in the treasure vault

could only be used with the dungeon master's permission. Given that Mercedes had assented to Benkei's use of them, they couldn't have had much value to her. In fact, they were so useless she questioned why they were even in the vault at all. Had Zwölf not presented them to Benkei when he asked if she knew of anything he might use as wings, Mercedes would never have known they were in there at all. They were obviously giant fans to be used at festivals, but Mercedes had absolutely no idea how they could possibly be utilized, so she decided to just give them to Benkei. Of course, these had to be so-called Overdeveloped Relics, but a vampire could easily make one if they wanted to. They were *Under*developed Relics, more like it.

"These shall give me wings! To the heavens!"

Benkei took off the heavy armor weighing him down and held a giant fan in each of his six hands. Then, he flapped with all his might in hopes that the wind force would carry him into the sky.

Benkei was a monster, but a humanoid one, and humans were very unfit for flight. Birds could only fly because their bones were so light, and even the Vogelen didn't fly using their muscles alone; according to one theory, their wings acted on surrounding mana to create lift.

Still, if Benkei couldn't accomplish this, how could he possibly call himself Mercedes's first minion? Urged forth by nothing but his own stubbornness, he flapped his arms with all his might. After all, how could you know something was impossible if you didn't even try? You could always give up afterward!

"Aaaaaaaaaagh!!!" roared Benkei. His face was beet red and dripping with sweat as he created winds of incredible force in a desperate attempt to fly. The wind around him roared like a typhoon, and even Chirpy stepped back on reflex.

"Wh-Whoa! You're hovering, though only a little bit!"

"Aaaaaaaaagh!!!!!!"

Benkei flew! His feet had taken off, and he slowly ascended farther into the sky. He was only fifty centimeters from the ground—not even a meter—yet he was undoubtedly flying. He had never once whined that flight was impossible for an Asura ogre! Instead,

he had tested his limits and performed a miracle! He stood victorious! He had overcome the impossible, and no one could dare say otherwise!

"So? How is this gonna help?"

Those heartless words sent Benkei crashing to the ground. He had flown! He had overcome all odds! What else could possibly matter?!

However, the real issue at hand was how hovering fifty centimeters off the ground could possibly serve any purpose. He had to flap his arms so furiously it shook him around violently, meaning Mercedes couldn't ride on his back like she did Chirpy's. In fact, it was much easier to just fly using her *own* magic.

Yes, what Benkei accomplished was a miracle and a grand victory. But it was also worth less than crap. That was the cruel reality.

It was never too late to give up, so Benkei had given it a try. Then he *had* given up.

[Plan C: Become a Handyman]

Shufu was no pet, and while he could technically fly, he wasn't fit for long-distance flight like Chirpy. Yet Mercedes prized him regardless, and that was for his cooking skills. Creating something from nothing was a great strength, and it was one Shufu had learned.

Pet-like monsters only needed their natural cuteness, but Benkei was a humanoid giant. He could never serve the same purpose as Kuro, and while Chirpy's flight abilities were also innate, Benkei had already learned there was no changing that during his last attempt to find a purpose for himself. However, crafts were skills gained through nurture, not nature. Thus, Benkei found hope in learning a skill that was acquired by effort alone. Not to mention, he had six arms, which meant his output could be three times what a normal vampire was capable of!

Still, Benkei wasn't going to learn how to cook. He would just be following Shufu's footsteps, and he'd end up nothing but a worse imitation. Thus, he decided to do what Shufu couldn't, which he ultimately determined to be creating household and everyday goods.

Mercedes had come from an impoverished background and had struggled to get by. Of course, she now lived at the Grunewald manor, but she'd likely one day leave her father's side. When that time came, it would be a pity if she had to return to living with her mother in a dilapidated manor. Therefore, Benkei had set his final goal at gaining the skills needed to build a house.

Once he had decided on this idea, he spent his days honing his craft. With Mercedes's permission, he cut down nearby trees and brought them into the dungeon, crafting them into whatever his heart desired. His first attempt was a failed doghouse, but after a few more tries, he succeeded at building one specifically for large dogs that even Kuro could fit inside, and after a few months, he had constructed a small shed.

After all that, Benkei suddenly thought, *This is more fun than I was expecting.* Ever since, he had become hooked on the art of woodwork and built all sorts of things.

Benkei's entire life had been fight after fight. He had been born in the dungeons to face off against invaders, and he continued to do battle even after Mercedes became his master. He had never been dissatisfied with his life; Asura ogres were a species that lived to fight, after all. That was why they had unwavering respect for those who bested them in battle, pledging absolute loyalty to them.

However, that also explained why this was the first time he had found enjoyment outside of battle. He'd never had a hobby before, so this was his first.

Upon awakening to his love of craftsmanship, Benkei tried his hand at building all sorts of things, expanding his repertoire as he created bookshelves, dressers, accessory cases, desks, chairs, and even toys.

Unfortunately, however, it didn't take long before he was thrust back into reality. One day, Mercedes had mentioned that she wanted a new chair, and he offered to create one himself.

Her response had been cruel. "No, that's fine. I'll just buy one."

Yes, that had been her response! *That!*

No matter her past, Mercedes was now rich. She had enough money to comfortably survive on her own even if she was one day

disowned by House Grunewald. She was a dungeon master, so if she needed somewhere to rest, she had her dungeon. And if gold was what she required, she only had to sell the treasures found inside the vault. Not to mention that those treasures could be produced without limit by her dungeon, meaning she would never be in need again.

She had money...which meant she could simply buy what she needed. She could purchase craftworks from artisans who, unlike Benkei, had trained for years or even decades. She had no reason to rely on Benkei to craft her things, nor to use anything he made for her.

Unfortunately, Shufu had gotten his start on different footing. It was nearly impossible to find a cook so skilled in Orcus, but there were countless artisans more skilled than Benkei. Thus...his crafts weren't needed. He'd never have a chance to use his skills for Mercedes's benefit.

Given Benkei's talents, there was a chance he could attain craftsmanship skills on the level of top-rate artisans after some months and years, but that would take time—perhaps decades.

This realization left Benkei terribly depressed.

***

In a corner of the final floor of Stark Dungeon, Benkei sat hugging his knees and facing the wall. He was no magician. He couldn't fly, and his craftsmanship skills just weren't up to snuff. In the end, it all felt like one big demonstration that he could truly serve no purpose outside of battle.

Benkei was Mercedes's first monster companion, and therefore the leader of the rest. However, he served little purpose outside of limited scenarios.

How spineless! How incompetent!

Benkei was overcome with shame as he cowered in his giant frame. But that was when a certain jelly slime came to visit him—one that wasn't so much jiggly as it was brawny.

"Jiggle jiggle! What are you doing here, Benkei?!" He seemed

even more energetic than usual.

Benkei spared him a brief glance before turning back to face the wall. “Ah, it is you, slime. Do not mind me. I have simply become painfully aware of my own shortcomings.”

“How terrible! I’m here to talk, if you want!”

“Even should I share... No, I suppose sharing will lighten what weighs on my soul. Will you listen?”

“Of course!”

Thus, Benkei began to divulge his woes. He spoke of his lack of talent outside battle...his lack of use. He told the slime of how Kuro, Chirpy, and Shufu were often summoned to the outside world, while he was left on standby within the dungeon.

Once he had shared all his woes, the jelly slime offered an unexpected response. “You’re lucky to have worries like that!”

“What?”

“Master didn’t capture me herself, so she can’t use me to fight any Guardians! But she can summon you, so I’m jealous!”

Benkei was silent.

“Master has you wait on standby so she can summon you whenever she needs you! She relies on you more than anyone else in fights!”

When battling a Guardian, a dungeon master had access to very little of their dungeons’ blessings. Not only were they barred from summoning their own Guardians, they were even prevented from using any monsters from their dungeon. All they could use was their dungeon key in weapon form and the monster companions they’d recruited on their own merit. Thus, no matter how hard the no-good jelly slime might try, he could never be used in a fight against a Guardian, as Mercedes hadn’t captured him on her own, but acquired him by becoming the master of Stark Dungeon. He was just part of the spoils.

Benkei, however, was different. Mercedes had bested him with her own skills before she had become a dungeon master, thus gaining him as a minion. He was connected not to the dungeon, but to Mercedes herself. Therefore, she could summon him in any battle she wished, and even kept him on standby in her dungeon so she

could call upon him at a moment's notice.

Shufu, for example, was usually at the Grunewald manor, which meant she couldn't use him in battle when she was fighting away from home. The same could be said for Chirpy, who couldn't offer any help if she got into a fight while he was off serving as a carrier pigeon. Benkei and Kuro alone were always by her side so she could call upon them whenever she needed.

"Not to mention, you speak the language of vampires too, so you can serve as her interpreter!"

"I see that this is a matter of perspective."

Benkei had only considered his lack of time in the spotlight as a negative, but it could also be considered a positive. He could serve Mercedes wherever and whenever—this was a strength that the others lacked. In a sense, being always positioned by her side was an expression of her great trust in him.

"I suppose interpreting truly is an important role."

"It is!"

"You have my thanks, slime. You have relieved me of my woes."

To think he'd be cheered up by a *slime* of all things. Still, he was thankful for his kind words.

The two looked up to the sky in unison—their master was calling upon the powers of her dungeon. Anxiety spread through them all. Just who would she summon?

The goblin hexer was the first to react. "Looks like I'm up. She must want to train her magic."

He was the first to disappear, and when he was summoned, someone else always followed. Goblin hexers couldn't speak the language of vampires, which meant their master would need an interpreter.

"Looks like you're up, Benkei! Go get 'em!"

"Yes. Thank you, slime."

The jelly slime gave Benkei a pat on his back as he looked forward. It was time to leave his anxiety behind him. His master was calling, so he needed to play his part. *Just you wait, master! I, Benkei, shall come to your aid!*

The next second, the jelly slime disappeared.

Right. He can also speak the language of vampires.
With that realization, Benkei fell to his knees.

Not that it particularly mattered, but shortly afterward, Mercedes called upon Benkei in her fights with Beatrix and the Guardian.

A Humble Victory Celebration

Mercedes was in her dungeon that day, alongside Benkei, Kuro, and the other prominent members of her party. Even the recently defeated Beatrix was present. Today, they would feast to celebrate their triumph over the Paradies, as well as Mercedes successfully obtaining a second dungeon. Basically, this was a party.

This hadn't been Mercedes's idea, but Beatrix's. Mercedes had been satisfied with simply extending her thanks to her comrades, but Beatrix had interrupted her, saying, "You are now a monarch, Mercedes, and a monarch must reward her vassals for their dedication. It is your job to maintain their morale, and you mustn't assume that your appreciation will be communicated without stating as such outright. Reward them and inspire them to toil just as hard in your next fight. At the very least, *I* will not accept failure to celebrate your victory over *me*."

Oh, she's only serious about that last part, thought Mercedes, but Beatrix's words were nevertheless sound. After a trying battle, it was clear that holding a banquet to celebrate her vassals' efforts would be much more inspiring than simply telling them, "Good job, and keep it up for our next fight." Having realized this, Mercedes assented to the idea.

Thus, all who had participated in the recent battle had gathered inside Mercedes's dungeon and were enjoying some snacks and drinks while making small talk. Furthermore, it was Shufu who served as the backbone of this party. Given the number of attendees and the need to feed them all, the amount of ingredients needed was nothing to scoff at. They had to be cheap, while also adequate in quantity to feed everyone—not to mention delicious. If the food served at this victory celebration was inedible, it would only dampen morale.

Still, Shufu had risen to the occasion admirably, and he carried

the completed dishes out to the table as he cooked them. There were even some dishes containing ingredients Mercedes hadn't procured for him, and she couldn't help but wonder where they had come from.

In any case, everyone was happy, and that was all that mattered. Realizing she ought to greet all her comrades, she began to walk around her dungeon, heading first for the man who had prepared this banquet, Shufu.

***

"I'd like three days." That was the condition Shufu had laid down when Mercedes had brought up the party idea to him. She had obtained all the ingredients for the feast in town, but considering the number of monsters she needed to feed, she had gone on the cheaper side. Of course, Shufu could cook up tasty food regardless, but it would limit his repertoire. Not to mention, using the dungeon functions to replicate food would mean wasting dungeon points. Considering the trials and tribulations they were sure to face ahead, that would be best avoided.

Therefore, Shufu had asked Mercedes to wait three days so he'd have enough time to gather ingredients outside the dungeon, immediately setting off on his quest afterward. First, he visited a small farming village near Blut, which grew fresh fruits and vegetables and sustained themselves by shipping these ingredients to big cities like Blut and Abendrot; they were the unsung heroes of Blut's affluent culinary culture.

However, this village had suffered in recent years, and the culprits were beasts that came from the mountains. Bears wouldn't have been a problem—one could easily be taken out by a group of adults, and its blood could also be used as food. Even the NPC types in this village were vampires, after all, so they couldn't be underestimated.

Yet, there were beasts that even these mighty villagers who preyed on bears feared—deer. Yes, they were adorable, but they were also the natural enemies of farmers and indefatigable consumers of crops. They were not only adaptable, but they

multiplied like rabbits, and they even functioned during both day and night. Since they moved in packs, allowing them to trespass even once would destroy a field; deer would eat anything in sight. They ate fruits, vegetables, grains, and even tree bark, and of course, they'd eat flowers and seedlings too.

However, their most *terrifying* trait was that they had a perfect balance of timidness and courage. They'd bolt as soon as they saw a vampire—making them hard to catch—but as soon as they got a taste of success, they'd always return for more. Vampires were strong, which meant that while bears were a threat, they weren't anything to truly fear. However, some enemies could not be defeated with strength alone—those enemies being...deer.

When Shufu appeared in this village ravaged by beasts, though, he made a certain request. "I shall take care of the deer that trouble you so. But in exchange, I'd like you to sell me the fruits and vegetables that you can't ship to the cities for cheap."

The villagers were shocked upon suddenly encountering this mighty monster, but taking care of the deer was an offer they couldn't refuse. Thus, they enlisted Shufu's aid, and immediately, he ventured into the mountains with a giant net.

Two days later, he returned, the net shoved full of countless deer. Complete eradication could damage the ecosystem, so he had left the minimal amount needed to breed. Nevertheless, he had succeeded at drastically reducing their threat.

"Why, thank you! Take all you want! We don't need the money!"

The villagers had been saved from the savage beasts, and they were left jumping for joy. They readily handed over the fruits and vegetables they couldn't ship to the cities, and thus, Shufu had procured ample ingredients for the victory celebration.

Currently, Shufu was breaking down those deer and cooking all their edible parts.

"Shufu."

"Oh, master. What is it?"

"I just came to suggest that you join us soon."

"Hmm... I suppose I've prepared enough food. I'll go and enjoy myself shortly."

Shufu had started to prep the food in advance, and he had cooked enough that there was no need to make any more. So Shufu readily followed Mercedes's suggestion, and after picking up a plate of food he had set aside for himself, he exited the kitchen. There seemed to be some *fancier* foods on his plate that hadn't appeared at the party table, but...he was the man who had catered the event. Mercedes decided to turn a blind eye.

***

Benkei had removed his usual helmet and was currently scarfing down deer skewers. Shufu had admirably removed the gamey stench from the meat, so Benkei had found the dish quite delicious. Opposite of him sat Chirpy, who was similarly gulping down deer skewers by skillfully removing them from the stick with his beak. One might wonder if it was truly okay for an avian creature to dine on seasoned meat, but Chirpy was a monster, so the logic that applied to animals couldn't be applied to him. He typically enjoyed raw meat, but once he had eaten his share of that, he had decided that it might be nice to dine on cooked meat every once in a while as well.

There was one last skewer, and Benkei's hand and Chirpy's claw collided over it, inducing a staring contest.

"I believe you have eaten enough. This meat should be relinquished to me."

"Chirp!" cried Chirpy, vehemently opposed to Benkei's suggestion. If you were to translate his words, it would mean something like "Early bird gets the worm, stupid!"

An oppressive silence hung in the air. But suddenly, Benkei grabbed at the skewer with the hand that wasn't already occupied with keeping the bird at bay. In response, Chirpy grabbed at it with his free claw, but *another* hand swooped in and snatched the prize—Benkei didn't have six hands just for show.

"Hah! How disappointing for you," Benkei boasted with a victorious grin as he brought the skewer toward his mouth. But Chirpy swooped in and stole it before he could take a bite!

Chirpy landed atop the roof of the house that Mercedes had built in her dungeon and peered down at Benkei. “Caw, caw, caw!” Apparently, birds could gloat.

Chirpy moved his mouth toward the skewer, but then, some chains stole it right out from under him. It was now back in Benkei’s hands. His mastery of various weapons was his greatest strength, but it didn’t seem nearly as cool when used to fight over a skewer of meat.

Benkei moved in for a bite, but...

“Chirp...”

Chirpy’s despondent cries and downcast eyes caused Benkei to freeze. He couldn’t help but laugh at how childish he had been. “Come down here! I shall split it with you!”

“Chirp, chirp!”

As comrades who served the same master, there was no need to fight. They could bask in the pleasure together, and having hit upon this realization, Benkei called Chirpy back over.

However, as soon as Chirpy arrived, he stole the whole skewer. “Caw, caw, caw!” he chirped, gloating once again. He seemed to be saying, “You idiot! You’re too gullible!”

Benkei was furious, and as Chirpy tried to fly away, Benkei grabbed hold of his claws. “You despicable bird!”

“Chirp!”

The two monsters fought furiously for the skewer, but eventually, it went flying out of their hands and through the air, straight toward Kuro. The wolf reflexively jumped up and caught it in his mouth, removing the meat with his front paws before wolfing it down.

Of course, Kuro was also a monster, so he could handle some seasoning.

After scarfing down the deer meat, Kuro walked away, wagging his tail in satisfaction. Having lost their prize because of this foolish fight, the bird and ogre collapsed on the ground in defeat.

***

After devouring the mysterious flying skewer, Kuro began

aimlessly walking through the dungeon. All the monsters attending the celebration were enjoying their food and congratulating each other on their victory, but that was when Kuro spotted Beatrix, who was sitting a bit away from the others. She was a glamorous woman, but Mercedes's dungeon—the party venue—was full of goblins, orcs, animated skeletons, giant moles, human-shaped slimes, and wolfmen, all of which could hardly be considered glamorous. She just didn't fancy them.

When Kuro approached, Beatrix turned to face him. "Why, if it isn't Mercedes's dog."

"Woof!" *I'm not a dog! I'm a wolf!* His bark was a cry of protest, but unfortunately, that message didn't reach Beatrix, who took it as affirmation. She reached her hand out to pet him, but Kuro dodged it and instead retreated beyond her reach. His master was one thing, but others couldn't touch him so easily.

"My, you're not very friendly." Beatrix preferred women, but only for humanoids. She paid little attention to sex when it came to dogs or cats, and she'd only marginally prefer a female if she were to have one as a pet herself. Therefore, she didn't think much of Kuro. "Does this dungeon truly not have any...well, more...*attractive* monsters? There's nothing but goblins and orcs!"

Goblins and orcs cost few dungeon points to produce, so Mercedes prized them as expendable pawns. However, they apparently didn't satisfy Beatrix's aesthetic tastes.

Kuro wasn't too pleased about her negative appraisal of the place that had birthed him, so he left and gathered some other monsters in an effort to prove that there were more than just goblins and orcs. The first to appear before Beatrix was the swole no-good jelly slime.

"Jiggle, jiggle! I'm a no-good jelly slime!"

"Nothing about you is jiggly at all! Appearance-wise, you're the worst of them all!"

Unfortunately, the jelly slime did not live up to her expectations, but a second monster then immediately sprang up before her! This one was about the size of a vampire child and was shaped like an insect that glowed black. It had long antennae, wiggly feet, and

when standing, showed off an underbelly that induced visceral disgust. Yes, this was a giant cockro—

"I take that back! This one's the worst! Get it out of here!" Beatrix commanded that this visual abomination be removed as the blood rushed from her face. Even Mercedes had never utilized this beast before. Actually, did anyone even remember ever seeing this monster here? And why did it have to appear for the first time in the middle of a party?!

At least, that last one was the question on Beatrix's mind. She was thoroughly disgusted, but the next monster that appeared before her was a cat the size of a tiger. "Oh, this one's quite cute..."

"Meow!" The cat completely ignored Beatrix and ran off. Felines tended to be fickle like that.

Next, Kuro showed her an armed skeleton and a giant rat, but neither seemed to impress the empress. "I finally understand... The only solace I can find here is in Mercedes!"

Thus, Beatrix truly began to focus on nothing but this dungeon's master. As she followed the girl with her eyes, she absentmindedly reached out toward Kuro's pelt—but Kuro nimbly dodged.

"Your master is quite twisted, isn't she?"

She was only met with silence.

"She is the type who's willing to trample over anything to reach her goals. Yet while she knows this, she tries to avert her eyes from it. What a spectacle... I do wish to see what becomes of her when she accepts her twistedness. Don't you?" Beatrix turned toward Kuro.

However, he was gone! He had probably gotten fed up with the empress long ago and taken his leave, but she figured a wolf couldn't follow such a complicated discussion anyway. Having lost her conversational partner, Beatrix had no choice but to turn her attention to her food.

***

After making the rounds, Mercedes decided to dig in as well. Everyone else had already left a dent in the catering, and she had

been afraid there might not be any left for her. However, Shufu had been sure to set some aside for her, allowing Mercedes to partake as the others had.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Mercedes extended her gratitude to Shufu and reached out for her deer steak. It didn't look much different from a beef steak, but now that she was considering the matter, she realized she had hardly ever consumed deer before. Over the course of her previous life, she had never visited any restaurants that served wild game, meaning she was a complete stranger to the delicacy. And in this life, it was much more typical to consume only pork or monster meat.

Curious about the taste, she readied herself and took a bite. There was nothing odd about how it tasted—in fact, it was delicious. She had been expecting the meat to be tough or gamey smelling, but it was neither, and the taste was fine as well. Since there was little fat, the flavor was quite strong, but Mercedes actually preferred it to pork. Perhaps that was because it had a higher iron content.

After focusing on her food for a spell, Mercedes once again returned her attention to her comrades. There was Benkei, who had been her first acquisition and a reliable companion, and Kuro, a black wolf that had also been with her since the beginning. Then there was Shufu, a demon whom Mercedes employed after she had defeated him at Felix's birthday party when Boris had summoned him there, and Chirpy, who was stubborn but a talented flying companion. Mercedes had successfully rallied all sorts of other monsters under her as well, and even Beatrix. She had so many more comrades now than when she had first solo conquered that dungeon.

Still, it wasn't a bad feeling. She now had two dungeons, and if she was going to push forward, she knew there'd be even greater dangers and more ferocious battles lying ahead. But with her invaluable companions by her side, she truly felt like she could overcome any challenge.

She petted Kuro—who had made his way over after leaving

Beatrix—on the head and looked at her comrades. “Benkei, Kuro, Shufu, Chirpy...”

They all turned to face her.

While she spoke to her loyal monsters, her tone was softer than usual. “You’ve all worked so hard to get here. Without you, obtaining a second dungeon would have been a pipe dream. But this isn’t the end, just a checkpoint.”

She already had two dungeons at her disposal, and while she wasn’t sure how many were out there, she knew that if her goal was to conquer them all, then she still had a long, long journey ahead of her. Thus, she couldn’t afford to get complacent just yet. For the sake of her goals, she still had so much more ground to cover. She wasn’t content at this moment, and she still had yet to live to the fullest. As she was now, she’d only die with regrets.

“Even I am not certain where our goal lies, but I have no intention of letting that stop me. I will not be accepting ‘no’ as an answer. Stick with me until the end!”

Mercedes’s monsters knelt obediently to her command. They’d all continue to walk forward together until the day she found a purpose for her pointless story, and until the day her heart was satisfied.

Until the day her moon became full.

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. This is Fire head, the author, and thank you so much for purchasing volume 3 of *Mercedes and the Waning Moon*.

Anyway, I wanted to talk a bit about the orcs and the *peculiar* presence they had during the battle in the Beatrix Empire. What do you all think of when you hear the word "orc"? I'm sure plenty of you imagine walking pigs, just like I do. But when I was doing my research, I was surprised to learn that orcs were originally sea monsters.

When it comes to non-sea-related orcs, there's Grendel from the epic *Beowulf*, who is a monster known as an orcneas, and Tolkien took that name to create *his* orcs. Orcneas are zombielike monsters, and even the orcs Tolkien created weren't pigs, making the fact that orcs somehow became pig monsters in Japan a fascinating mystery.

These orcs in Japanese fiction usually appear with goblins and only exist to be punching bags essentially, but in this story, they serve as prominent allies for Mercedes. They bravely rush into enemy lines to prove the enemies' strength by their defeat. Wait, they're still just there to get beaten up!

However, having such pawns as allies is quite important in stories. If the hero and their forces claim victory over their enemies without suffering any casualties, it just makes their enemies look weak, so you need a foil. At the same time, I didn't want to kill any named characters.

So that's where goblins and Japanese orcs come in! By having them rush into battle and suffer defeat at enemy hands, you can prove that these enemies have some mettle. I'm sure Mercedes will continue to abuse these unsung heroes, and more and more will fall victim to violence.

Thank you, Japanese orcs! Do your best out there!

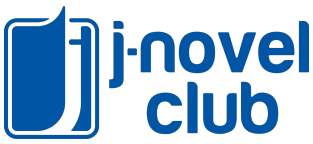
I'm sure many fantasy stories will continue to call upon them only to have them suffer terrible mistreatment, but that's just a testament to how important of a role they play in Japanese fantasy tales.

Anyway, I'd like to extend my gratitude to orcs' continuous dedication despite their continuous mistreatment and wrap up this afterword! Thank you to TO Books and my editor for their hard work in creating volume three, to KeG for their amazing illustrations, to Pochi Edoya for their work on the manga adaptation, and to all my readers.

Fire head







Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Mercedes and the Waning Moon: The Dungeoneering Feats of a Discarded Vampire Aristocrat Volume 3
by Fire head

Translated by Maddy Willette Edited by Travis Welsh

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Fire head Illustrations by KeG
Cover illustration by KeG

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by TO Books, Inc., Tokyo.
This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Inc., Tokyo English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: September 2025