14

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Monster Tamer


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Monster Tamer: Volume 14 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10


14
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Chapter 1: An Empty Room

A surprise attack. That was the only way of describing the current situation. An incident had occurred in the imperial capital's grand cathedral—the headquarters of the Holy Church, those who worshiped the saviors and protected world order.

There was a section in the grand cathedral that was, for the moment, under particularly strict security. Having fought the Maclaurin Provincial Army and the Holy Order's Fourth Company in Aker, this was where the young man who stood in the eye of the storm—Majima Takahiro—was lodged. He had one room for him and his servants, rooms for the delegation led by Aker's second prince, Philip Kendall, and for the dragons of Draconia who were here as his guards. This entire section of the cathedral was sealed from all outsiders. Knights of the Holy Order were posted on the boundaries of the area, guaranteeing its safety. It was supposed to be impossible to intrude by any common means. However...

"No way, you're kidding me..."

Having just returned to the room, Kei's knees buckled. She was dumbfounded. She'd only been away for a short while. She'd gone to visit the dragons because she'd had some business there. At the time, Philip had been there too, sitting across a table from the dragons' eldest sister, Ella.

During the meeting a few hours ago between Majima Takahiro and the exploration team, the dragons had encountered one of the culprits who'd obliterated their home, the Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma. Philip had paid Ella a visit out of consideration for her emotional instability. Thanks to that, Ella had calmed down somewhat.

Aker was Kei's precious homeland, and the dragons of Draconia were her friend Lobivia's family. She was delighted to see both sides getting along. However, that idyllic moment had suddenly been shattered. The clamorous noise of something breaking had rumbled through the room. The dragons had

immediately charged out. Despite being somewhat behind due to the difference in their physiques, Kei followed them right away.

Immediately after that, she'd sensed something bizarre. Anyone capable of using magic would've been able to sense the tremendous amount of mana being manipulated. Her legs had tangled for a moment, but Kei had remained strong and kept running. Rushing out into the hallway, the room she had been using came into sight right away. The knight who was supposed to be standing there had gone missing. Perhaps he'd gone into the room after hearing the noise. Kei had barged into the room with the dragons.

However, by that time, they were far too late. Not a single person was inside. The situation was far too strange. It hadn't even taken them ten seconds from noticing the abnormality to their arrival. There were several among Majima Takahiro's party who possessed tremendous strength in a fight. Even if faced with visitors who were extolled as saviors, they had the strength to repel one or two of them. Against more, they wouldn't go down so easily. It was impossible to defeat them in a mere ten seconds.

Kei only remained in a daze for a few seconds. She took action faster than anyone else. She told the spirit—the one with whom she'd formed a contract the other day—to search the area. However, the people she was looking for were nowhere to be found. The dragons and Aker's delegation began panicking around her.

Hearing the uproar, knights of the Holy Order quickly arrived. They were all pale. They immediately began investigating and asked everyone else to leave the room. Philip and Ella requested to stay as representatives of Majima Takahiro's group to assist in the investigation. Their offer was accepted.

While moving over to another room, Kei remained deep in thought. Something felt off. There hadn't been any signs of a struggle inside the room. Did that mean all those strong people had been abducted without even being able to put up a fight? Furthermore, had they all been taken so far away in so short a time that a spirit couldn't detect them? There was also the massive amount of mana she'd sensed before it all happened...

She had no evidence to support her suspicions, but she couldn't help but one

errant memory continued to pull at her.

“It can’t be... Fairy Ring?”

This was the name of the ability of one of the exploration team’s upper brass, the nicknamed cheater Shimazu Yui. It was the power of long-distance teleportation that had brought Majima Takahiro’s party of twenty or so people from Aker all the way to the imperial capital.

What had happened to Majima Takahiro and those who’d been with him? Were they safe? Where had they gone? To explain all that, we must go back a little in time.

Chapter 2: A Conversation Before Being Teleported

From the perspective of those who knew of the circumstances, it might've seemed like a strange sight. In one of the rooms being used by Majima Takahiro's group, an enormous two-headed wolf lay on the ground. On top of one of its heads, a small fox opened its mouth wide and yawned. Next to the wolf, a girl sat on the floor cradling her knees.

The two-headed wolf was Berta. The girl was Iino Yuna.

Berta was a subordinate of the notorious Lord of Darkness, Kudou Riku. The Skanda Iino Yuna possessed the greatest sense of justice among the exploration team, who had been making their names as saviors in this world. By all rights, the moment they came face to face, it would be natural for them to fight to the death. That was how Berta saw it. However, strangely enough, the two shared a space here. Iino Yuna had been the one to come to her.

The meeting between Majima Takahiro and the exploration team had somehow ended safely, despite its somewhat chaotic nature. After that, Iino Yuna had gone back with Majima Takahiro's group to their room. She hated the idea of irresponsibly ignoring her duty as their guard. However, because someone from the exploration team had attacked Draconia, she felt, as a fellow member, it was hard to speak with them. As such, she moved to the room that had been allocated to the one and only outsider in the group—Berta.

If not for Majima Takahiro, this situation would be impossible. Or maybe, to those who knew a certain fact, this would seem like the strange hand of fate. That was because Berta's true form as a scylla, one she kept hidden, was that of a girl sprouting from the body of a wolf. That girl just happened to look exactly like the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya, Iino Yuna's best friend.

Berta had never spoken as to the reason behind this. She had no intention of showing Iino Yuna that form to begin with. Her master had forbidden her from showing it to anyone. She'd only done so before Majima Takahiro as an

exception due to the emergency they'd found themselves in.

That said, she'd only been forbidden from showing her true form. There'd been no restrictions placed on her in regards to coming into contact with or speaking to this girl who was tied to her by fate.

"It's nothing for you to be so depressed about, is it?" Berta said. Iino Yuna was still cradling her knees absentmindedly.

"Are you comforting me?" Iino asked, looking like she found this unexpected. She then smiled meekly. When she did, her usually strong-willed features looked surprisingly soft. "Thanks."

"Not really..." Berta said, turning her snout to the side. "I owe you for teaching me things that one time. I'm simply paying you back."

"Owe me? For what?"

"That thing about pets or whatnot."

"Aah, that."

During the battle against the Mad Beast Takaya Jun, Iino Yuna had described Berta as "a pet who wags its tail even when its owner is abusing it." At the time, Berta had gotten curious about what a pet was and had asked for clarification. Having so few social connections, it was rare for anyone to teach Berta anything, so she remembered it well. To Iino Yuna, having a conversation with a talking wolf must've left quite the impression too.

"How upstanding of you," Iino said, letting out a friendly chuckle. "When I gave it some thought after that, I figured I was being a little rude, though."

"How so?" Berta asked, cocking her head.

Iino nodded. "I mean, you're a wolf, right? You're not a collared dog."

"That's..."

"Oh, I didn't mean that as an insult or anything. I love dogs," Iino said, waving her hands about in a fluster before giving Berta a curious look. "But I guess dogs and wolves really are different, so I wondered if it offended you."

"Not at all. I don't mind," Berta replied curtly, then paused to wonder if her

response was lacking somewhat. She didn't want to come off like she was trying to push the girl aside. "You like dogs?"

Iino nodded again. "Yes. A friend of mine always kept a lot of them at her home, so I naturally ended up liking them. Hee hee. How nostalgic. My favorites were called Mattie and Nordy. I've known them since they were puppies. There was a Doberman named Ludwig too, but he didn't really let me get close. Right before coming to this world, she bought another dog called Otto, who was still only this small. I wonder how he's doing."

Iino Yuna spoke as if she missed those days. Listening to her, Berta's mind was caught on something else entirely, though.

"Ludwig and Otto... So the other two are Martha and Nordpol?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"The dogs' full names. Is that right?"

Iino Yuna looked a little perplexed. This wasn't because Berta's remark came off as random.

"Uhh, you mean Mattie and Nordy...? Martha. Nordpol. Now that you mention it, those are their names. How did you know?"

She'd correctly guessed the names of two pets she'd never met. It was mysterious, but it wasn't all that impressive if one knew the naming convention being used.

"I think it's called a phonetic code?" Berta said. "It's some kind of jargon that comes from your world."

The phonetic code Berta spoke of was a system that used words starting with each letter of the alphabet to make verbal transmission of said letters reliable and unmistakable. In movies that featured fighter jets, it was often possible to see scenes where they referred to each other as Alpha, Bravo, and the like. Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta corresponded to A, B, C, and D respectively. These were of course English names, so even using the same alphabet, different languages, countries, and organizations used different codes.

The pets raised in the Todoroki household—likely named by their owner,

Todoroki Miya's father—were named Ludwig, Martha, Nordpol, and Otto. These corresponded to L, M, N, and O in the German phonetic code. That was why Berta had recognized it immediately.

After all, A, B, C, and D in the same code were Anton, Berta, Caesar, and Dora. Kudou Riku's servants took their names from this system in order. That was how Berta knew. Not that she explained things to such an extent. As such, Iino Yuna didn't notice the strange correspondence between the names given to Kudou Riku's servants and Todoroki Miya's pets.

"Hmm. So that's what those names meant," Iino said, simply accepting the fact with a nostalgic smile. "Thanks for teaching me."

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Following that, the two of them talked a little. By all rights, they were supposed to be enemies, but they got along well enough. After a while, Iino Yuna stood up.

"I have a meeting with Yui-senpai. I'll be back later."

It would mean stepping down from guard duty, but it was just for a short time, and it was close enough that she could run back within a minute. She'd already spoken about it with Majima Takahiro too. Berta went to see her off when Iino suddenly turned around.

"Hey, you're here as Majima's servant, right?" she asked.

"Well...something like that," Berta answered.

As a subordinate of the notorious Lord of Darkness, Kudou Riku, Berta was publicly treated as Majima Takahiro's servant during their stay in the capital. Perhaps that wasn't entirely a formality, though. With that in mind, Berta recalled what had happened when she last met her king.

"Oh right. Senpai, when you go to the Empire, please take Berta with you. The other visitors might complain, but you can tell them you pitied my abandoned servant and picked it up as your own. It's not entirely a lie."

The memory alone threatened to tear her heart in two. She already knew Kudou hated her. However, he'd finally abandoned her. She still believed she

was her king's pawn. Perhaps even that dim hope was now just a nuisance for him.

It was hard to read a wolf's innermost thoughts. Berta was depressed, but Iino Yuna didn't know of her circumstances. That was why she continued without really paying it any mind.

"I mean, Kudou Riku isn't suitable to be your master," she said.

"Huh...?"

Berta was taken aback by her offhand statement. Iino Yuna didn't notice her surprise either and kept going.

"Majima's a hateful guy, but he treats his companions dearly. I think this is a suitable place for you. I'm sure you'll be able to find happiness with them."

Iino Yuna hadn't been informed. That was why she was able to speak her mind without reservation. Her words prodded at a facet of the truth.

"Okay, see you later."

She left with a casual wave. However, Berta remained frozen in shock for a while longer. She'd never thought of it that way before. She'd always been at a loss. She wasn't what her king desired. She wasn't suitable for him. That was why she considered herself a failure. Iino had said her king wasn't suitable for her, though. Her view was practically the exact opposite.

That was how she came to a realization. Who was unsuitable for who? It was all a matter of perspective. If that was the case, her perception that she was a failure wasn't entirely correct. But didn't she know that from the very beginning? That was who she was. Failure was a word that described something that couldn't become what it was meant to be. However, the fact that she was like this was an inevitability, so—

[What's wrong, Berta?]

Just then, someone called out to the frozen wolf.

"Ayame."

The little fox who'd been sleeping on her head was now awake.

[You looked totally dazed there for a while.]

She spoke out of concern for Berta as if it was perfectly natural. This was something Berta had never been granted while serving her king; it was enough to warm her heart. Iino Yuna had told her that she could be happy here. Berta felt that she was right.

“No... It’s nothing.”

However, Berta didn’t say anything more. She didn’t have the time even if she wanted to.

“What...?”

She detected an omen. Berta’s delicate senses picked up on the faint mana building up in the room. She stood at the ready the moment she noticed, and immediately following that, the world distorted. Space twisted, and someone appeared before her.

“You’re...”

It was a girl. Her face was pale, giving off the impression of a criminal walking to the gallows. It was someone Berta knew.

“The Fairy Ring...?”

An instant later, the piercing sound of unseen destruction resounded in the air.

Chapter 3: An Encounter Right Before Teleporting

After finishing her conversation with Berta, Iino Yuna left Majima Takahiro's room. That was where she came across a large bald knight.

"Hello, Sir Gordon. I'm heading out, so I'll leave things here in your hands."

"Understood."

Gordon Cavill returned a reliable smile on his grim face. He was the vice marshal of the Holy Order and the commander of its Second Company. When Iino Yuna had spoken of needing to step away for a moment, he'd gone out of his way to make some time and accept her guard duty in her stead.

"I'll be off then," Iino said.

She'd been informed through the Holy Church that Shimazu Yui wanted to speak with her. She'd designated a spot that would take the Skanda less than a minute to return from. Surely a choice meant to ensure she could respond quickly to any abnormal events.

As she walked down the hallway, Iino Yuna racked her brain over what she could say to comfort the girl she was going to see. Iino knew very well how hard she'd worked to get Majima Takahiro to join the exploration team. For all that effort to go to waste must've been a great shock.

In truth, after talks of him joining had tragically ended, Mitarai Aoi had turned pale and speechless, and Okazaki Takuma had gone on and on trying to make excuses. Shimazu Yui, meanwhile, had immediately withdrawn to her room. Seeing her like that, Iino Yuna had tried to say something, but she'd had no clue what to say. In the end, she hadn't been able to do anything but watch her walk away.

Remembering that, she couldn't help but feel depressed. She hadn't been able to do anything for her. Well, when put like that, it had always been the way.

By the time she returned to Fort Tilia, it had already collapsed.

During the fake savior incident, tragedy had already occurred by the time she discovered the truth.

When she'd gone to stop the margrave, she hadn't been able to persuade him.

She hadn't meant to cut any corners. She'd meant to do her best at all times. Despite everything, no matter how hard she tried, she hadn't been able to do anything. The more she took action, the more powerless she felt. This stabbing sensation in her chest wouldn't vanish.

The powerlessness rooted in her heart reached like black tentacles crawling throughout her body. It went through her muscles and weakened her limbs. In the event the horrid sensation reached her extremities, she felt like she wouldn't be able to move a single step. That premonition haunted her.

"I can't be like this..."

She swallowed the sigh she was about to let out. She couldn't immerse herself in such pessimistic thoughts. Berta had just cheered her up. Fretting about everything like this would put her efforts to waste. With that in mind, she banished all these absurd notions from her mind. And just then...

"Huh?"

A figure peeked out of one of the rooms down the hallway. Iino Yuna was still in the section of the cathedral that had been restricted for the sake of Majima Takahiro's stay. As such, there was pretty much nobody here. At most, only the knights who were part of the security detail should've been around. However, the figure was wearing a suspicious-looking hood. Clearly, they couldn't be a knight. Furthermore, she recalled seeing this person before.

"You're..."

During her investigation of the rumors of a fake savior, Iino Yuna had encountered an unidentifiable man in a certain village. He'd informed her that Margrave Maclaurin had dispatched an army to subjugate Majima Takahiro. That man had been dressed exactly like the figure standing before her.

“Long time no see.”

Just as expected, this man’s voice was just as unnaturally deep as the one back then.

“Why are you here...?” Iino asked.

“Follow me.”

The man ignored her question and immediately withdrew into the room.

“Meaning he has no intention of listening to me...”

She felt her cheek twitch a little. The man had been like this last time too. Iino Yuna looked at the room the man had vanished into. She hesitated a little. He had a habit of acting suspicious. By all rights, she should’ve been yelling for the knights to come. On the other hand, she owed him for the information he’d given her. If not for him, she wouldn’t have known about the crisis that had been closing in on Majima Takahiro, preventing the situation they were in now from developing.

“It might be related to him again...”

After thinking about it a little, she entered the room. This entire section had been cleared of people, so nobody was using these rooms. Iino Yuna stood face to face with the man waiting inside on his own. She knit her brow. Something felt off, but she couldn’t tell what.

“So? What is it?” she asked, setting that unease aside.

The man hesitated to answer for a moment because of her hostile attitude.

“I want to know the current state of Majima Takahiro and his surroundings. So, I decided to call upon you.”

“You laid in wait just for that?”

There was an air of exasperation in her voice. It was a coincidence that she’d gone out for a walk on her own like this. If Shimazu Yui hadn’t called for her, she’d probably still be talking to Berta. It seemed rather presumptuous to wait without knowing if she would coincidentally walk by.

“Well, whatever. I do owe you one,” she said.

“My thanks.”

She did of course consider the risks of talking about this, but the members of the exploration team and a portion of the knights all knew about Majima Takahiro’s current situation. There wasn’t anything to hide. This mysterious man had acted to save Majima Takahiro before too. Deciding that there wasn’t a problem here, Iino briefly went over the details. The man threw in a question here and there, and their conversation ended in about five minutes.

“That’s about everything. That enough for you?” Iino said.

“Yeah,” the man said, nodding. “Thanks for sparing me the time.”

“What is it exactly that you want?” Iino asked, not hiding her puzzlement. This man’s behavior just seemed so strange. “I owe you for the information you gave me last time, so I don’t care if you keep your identity hidden. However, can you at least tell me what you’re trying to accomplish?”

She had once considered him a bona fide third party who didn’t want to be known, but things were a little different if he came all the way here.

“What are you to Majima?” she asked.

The man paused before replying, a little too long to be thinking about it. Just around the time Iino Yuna started getting irritated, the man finally opened his mouth.

“Nothing really. Not me.”

Despite the long consideration, his words came across as cold. Regardless, there was a certain nuance about it that bothered Iino.

“I’m...”

He was about to say something else, but a shrill noise cut him off.

“Wh-What?!”

Iino stiffened at the sudden disturbance. The sound had come through the open window. It was from a nearby room.

“It’s starting...” the man said. In contrast to her shock, he remained calm. “That’s enough stalling.”

“It can’t be, you’re...” Iino was confused, but her well-honed instincts forced her to prioritize the current situation. “Out of the way!”

She thrust the man aside and leaned out the open window. She checked on the windows of the nearby rooms. Only one among them was broken. Judging by its position, it was definitely the room Majima Takahiro’s group was staying in. This was an attack.

“Why?!”

Iino Yuna screamed. The mysterious man obviously knew that this was going to happen. He had to be connected to the attack in some way. After having saved Majima Takahiro once before, why would he do such a thing? The thought came to mind, but Iino had no time to question him about it.

“Ugh.”

She left the man behind, kicked the door open, and flew out of the room. She went at full speed back down the path she’d used. However, in that instant, she sensed an accumulation of mana. It was intense enough that she felt threatened by it.

“You’re kidding me...!”

The outrageous development was far too sudden. There was no way to try and react on the spot. That even applied to cheaters who possessed multiple times the physical capabilities of a normal person. However, there was one exception to that.

“Aaaah!”

Her nickname was the Skanda. In terms of speed, she could beat anyone in the world. Fortunately, she wasn’t all that far away. It was about a three-minute walk at two hundred meters. It wouldn’t even take her five seconds at her maximum speed. The door to the room she arrived at was already open. The knight on guard duty had definitely noticed the abnormality and gone inside. Iino Yuna charged into the room without slowing down. In that instant, the power of teleportation engulfed her.

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She couldn’t have possibly imagined being suddenly teleported upon arriving at her destination. Not even the Skanda could deal with the sudden shift of everything around her.

“Wah?!”

Because of her momentum, she tumbled in grand fashion. She rolled across the floor with tremendous force. It was made of hard stone. A normal person would’ve been horribly injured by this, but she was the Skanda. She immediately got to her feet, drew the sword at her waist, and took a look around her.

First, she had to guard herself against any potential attacks. At the same time, she tried to get a grip on the situation. She hadn’t expected this kind of development, but considering how it had all played out, her ability to immediately deal with it in a precise manner was worthy of praise. However, even well-accustomed to hectic battles, this was far too much for her to digest.

“Where am I...?”

Her dumbfounded voice echoed through the vast space. She stood all alone in a dimly lit stone passageway.

Chapter 4: Teleported as a Pair

“What is this place?” Lily muttered, at a loss.

She’d been passing the time in their room when the sound of something breaking sent her into motion. She’d immediately gone to check what it was when the teleportation suddenly gripped her. After that, she found herself in a stone corridor. It was a strange place. The walls and floors were faintly luminescent. There were no windows and similar corridors branched off as far as the eye could see.

The glow of the walls ensured she had a perfect field of view. Being able to see her surroundings wasn’t enough to identify where she was, though. She’d gone from the tight security of the cathedral to somewhere she’d never been before. The situation was almost as bad as could be. The one saving grace was that there was someone else with her.

“It seems we’ve been teleported,” Gerbera said, keeping an eye on her surroundings.

She’d been speaking with Lily in their room at the time and had been transferred to the same spot as her. Put another way, all their other companions weren’t with them.

“To think such a thing would happen,” Gerbera continued. “The feeling of teleportation was the same as using Fairy Ring.”

“You think so too?” Lily said.

“Mm-hm. I resisted the interference of mana, but I ended up being taken away.” Gerbera sighed heavily as if to spit out the anger building up within her. “It activated far too quickly. To think that little girl would do such a thing...”

Her spider legs skittered about in a display of her rage. Nevertheless, she exerted herself to maintain the ability to make calm judgments.

“At any rate, this is very bad,” Gerbera said.

“I know,” Lily agreed, pulling out her favorite black spear from the magic bag

at her waist. “It’d be fine if it’s only us, but judging by the mental path, everyone was teleported. They really got us.”

All of Majima Takahiro’s servants were connected by the mental path. To a certain extent, it was possible to know where they were relative to each other. Currently, from what they could sense, they weren’t close enough to link back up together right away. That said, they weren’t far enough away for the mental path to be out of range. It was safe to assume that everyone had been teleported to this mysterious place. What’s more, it was hard to believe that the one who’d done this devious act was someone who’d been so friendly with them.

“Is it the remnants of Travis’s group borrowing the Fairy Ring’s help? Or maybe it’s the margrave...?” Gerbera ruminated. “In any case, everything up until now is going to our enemy’s plan. As such, they should be playing their next hand.”

Lily silently looked around the area. She was ready for some kind of attack to be launched against them. Time passed tensely. After a short while, Lily scowled.

“Looks like nobody’s coming...”

Was the enemy trying to lure them into a false sense of security? But from what they could see, there were no threats nearby. The corridor just went on and on with nowhere to hide. Lily lowered the tip of her spear.

“How strange,” Gerbera said, making a sour look. “Why don’t they attack?”

“I don’t know.” Lily shook her head. “But if I had to guess...” She paused and turned to Gerbera. “You said you resisted the teleportation. It might be that.”

“Hm?”

“That was done through mana, so it could be resisted through mana. I resisted too, and I felt the feedback.”

Lily lowered her gaze to her hand. Within lay the strength she’d tempered to protect what was dear to her. She definitely wasn’t powerless.

“Right. I felt like my resistance wasn’t futile either,” Gerbera agreed. “Hm? In

that case, did the enemy miscalculate?”

Lily nodded. “Yes. It’s highly likely we threw off our destination.”

The teleportation had been far too fast and powerful. Still, it wasn’t to the level that they couldn’t resist at all. They’d definitely dealt damage to the fingers that’d rudely grasped them and had tried to toss them to another location. By the time the teleportation had started, half the fingers had broken, and in the middle they’d been torn off. They hadn’t been able to prevent the teleportation itself, but things hadn’t gone exactly to their enemy’s plan.

“I think the fact that we’re not being attacked is proof of that,” Lily added.

With the capability of picking the teleport destination freely, the enemy could’ve thrown them into a lethal trap or somewhere where they’d gathered their forces. It made sense that they hadn’t because of a miscalculation. As such, how much they could move before the enemy dealt with that fact would affect the outcome of this battle.

“Let’s talk on the move,” Lily said. “If nobody’s attacking, we should reunite while we can.”

“Mm. You’re right,” Gerbera agreed immediately. “Although, we can’t go running around recklessly. Which way should we go? Should we head toward our lord?”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea. I believe everyone will head his way first.”

“Meaning we’ll all reunite that way.”

“Mm-hm. If anyone is nearby, we can also link up with them first, but...”

“According to the mental path, nobody is close. Our only choice is to start with our lord. He’s rather far too... We must hurry.”

The two immediately began moving. Still, this was enemy territory. They had to remain vigilant even while on the move. They went as fast as they could while still being able to deal with any trouble. The corridors forked every now and then, and they proceeded onward. Because of the faint glow, the place seemed somewhat mystical. Not that they had any leisure to appreciate the scenery. The main nuisance was the fact that it wasn’t an open space.

“It’s practically a dungeon,” Lily grumbled.

Even if they knew where their destination was, they didn’t know which corridor would lead them there. Their only choice was to go in a general direction. There was a fair distance to cover, so it was going to take them a while to reunite with the others.

“How about it, Lily? Can you tell how the others are doing?” Gerbera asked while still on the move. “All I can tell is a vague direction.”

“I might be able to figure out a bit more. Hang on, let me try.”

There was a difference in how much information each servant was capable of gleaning from the mental path. Their capacity was largely influenced by their affinity with the ability, so the two who lived inside Majima Takahiro’s body, Asarina and Salvia, boasted the best aptitude. The ability stemmed from him, after all. As his first servant, Lily had a relatively high affinity with the mental path too. Conversely, Gerbera wasn’t particularly good at handling delicate things. Normally, they didn’t pay much attention to this, but when separated as they were now, the difference came to the fore.

Lily focused on the sensation of the mental path. She reeled in the information she could garner from it. She was perceiving everyone’s emotions. That was because the mental path connected the hearts of the servants and their master. It was possible to judge the situation based on easy-to-read emotions.

After focusing on it, even though they were distant and vague, she somehow managed to grasp what was going on. Everyone’s tension and wariness were being conveyed to her along with their concern for each other. On the other hand, she didn’t sense any sort of pain yet.

“Mm. For the time being, I think everyone’s fine. Doesn’t look like anyone’s hurt,” Lily reported.

“That’s good,” Gerbera said, sighing in relief. “Just before teleporting, I heard what sounded like an attack. It had me anxious. Can you perceive anything else?”

“Hang on. If possible, I’ll try to find out who’s with who.”

This was rather difficult. Still, hoping to find out everything she could about her companions, Lily focused hard. By doing so, she somehow managed to get the information she needed. In an instant, her expression stiffened. She couldn't help but make such a reaction.

"Lily?" Gerbera asked, finding this strange.

A beat later, Lily said, "I figured it out. Rose and Lobivia are probably together."

"Ooh, that's good news. It's better than either being alone."

"It looks like Ayame and Shiran are scattered. I can't tell through the mental path, but it's highly likely Berta is with Ayame."

"They should've been together right before teleporting. That's a bit of a relief."

Those two had been spending time together in Berta's room, whereas Rose had been minding Lobivia. It was safe to assume that those who'd been close to each other had gotten teleported together.

"I'm a little worried that Shiran is alone, but when it comes to a short battle, her power surpasses mine," Gerbera said. "She won't be defeated so easily. Huh, the situation is better than we thought, isn't it...?"

After saying it aloud, Gerbera's expression stiffened. She probably noticed too. It would've been strange for her not to.

"Hey, Lily. If you're right, then our lord...?"

Lily and Gerbera were together. Rose was with Lobivia. Ayame and Shiran were scattered, and Berta was with Ayame. In that case, there was only one answer.

"It looks like nobody is with him except for Asarina and Salvia," Lily said.

"How can that be...?"

"Strictly speaking, I think Katou is with him too, but..."

Recalling what had been going on right before teleporting, it was highly likely. Although, in this one case, it wasn't a cause for relief.

“Katou is incapable of fighting, after all,” Gerbera said.

Katou Mana was in fact a reliable companion. However, when it came to battle, she possessed no power whatsoever. Gerbera’s anxiety was understandable. Worrying about it wouldn’t break them out of this situation, though. Lily forced her fretfulness away.

“In any case, this doesn’t change what we have to do,” she said. “We need to get to our master quickly, before any enemies attack.”

The enemy had been stalled because of Lily and Gerbera’s resistance. If they’d set lethal traps at the teleport destination, it would take a significant amount of time to launch an attack on them if they were instead in random locations. With that thought in mind, Lily’s judgment was correct.

However, there was one thing she didn’t know. She didn’t understand what kind of place this was. Depending on where they were, there could be another opposing force besides the enemy. An enormous figure appeared further down the corridor.

“It can’t be...”

There was no way Lily would mistake its large half-liquid body for anything else. A slime had come out to block the path.

“There are monsters here?!”

As Lily and Gerbera closed in, the slime demonstrated its animosity and stretched feelers toward them.

Chapter 5: Past and Present

After getting forcefully teleported, we encountered monsters right as we finally grasped the situation we found ourselves in.

“Senpai! Something’s coming this way!” Katou said, stifling her voice.

Her eyes were directed at a shadowy figure. It was at the end of the dimly lit corridor, so at first, I thought it was human. However, its limbs moved far too unnaturally for it to be one.

“A puppet-type monster?” I mumbled.

Unlike the magical puppets of the Depths, this puppet’s body was made of similar materials as the corridor itself. I knit my brow. Our short-lived relief at our enemy’s apparent miscalculation of our destination, and the subsequent loss of initiative, faded quickly. We hadn’t considered the possible presence of monsters. The foe who’d teleported us had chosen a really dangerous place to bring us to.

Three puppets appeared, and upon noticing us in this empty corridor with nowhere to hide, came running right at us.

“S-Senpai!” Katou called, seemingly at her wits’ end. “Forget me and just run away!”

She probably judged that she would be nothing but a hindrance. She immediately came to her decision. It was true. In our current situation, I had nobody to rely on. We were at a disadvantage in terms of numbers too. I had no choice but to accept that. That said, abandoning Katou and running away was impossible for a multitude of reasons.

“Hang on a sec, Katou,” I said, grabbing her shoulder and stopping her as she stepped forward to try and act as a decoy.

“S-Senpai?”



“There’s no need for that.”

It was a pretty bad situation, but not so bad that such tragic determination was necessary. After all, I possessed the strength to fight monsters now. Taking out three at once while protecting Katou would be a little too much for me, but there was a way of handling this.

“Sorry, just put up with this for a bit,” I said.

I obviously didn’t have the time to give her a full explanation while monsters closed in on us. After apologizing to her beforehand, I hefted Katou up in one arm. I wanted to keep one hand free, so I had her cradled to one side. It was somewhat like holding up a child. Fortunately, Katou was fairly petite, even for a girl. As long as I remained careful, she wasn’t going to throw me off balance. With my magically reinforced strength, it was easy enough to hold her up. Unless I carried her in both arms, I would need her whole body glued to mine for this, so I had no choice but to have her put up with that.

“W-W-Wah! S-S-Senpai?!” Katou raised her voice right next to my ear. It was a little embarrassing, but now wasn’t really the time to be worrying about that.

“Wrap your arms around my neck and hang on tight!”

The moment after I instructed Katou to do this, the puppets charged. First, I had to get some range on them. I kicked off the ground hard and jumped backward. Katou obediently did as she was told and wrapped her arms around my neck. She squeezed tightly, and as we fell back as one, the puppets gave chase with their cudgels in hand. I wasn’t going to let them get close so easily, though.

I continued moving backward and held out my free left hand toward the incoming enemies. I always carried Rose’s gifts on me—the Asarina Bracers and the Rosette Dagger—in my magic bag. I’d equipped them the moment we found ourselves here. This bracer was a magic tool that Rose had fashioned to protect me. If I poured mana into it, I was capable of creating bullets of any element.

“Eat this!”

I shaped a wind bullet and fired it at one of the charging puppets. The

projectile hit it square in the head, toppling it over backward. This wasn't enough to defeat it, but I'd succeeded in stalling it. Meanwhile, the remaining two puppets were getting closer. A vine flew out of the back of my outstretched hand and assaulted them like a whip.

"Ssster!"

Asarina entangled one of the remaining puppets. She hadn't sealed its movements completely, but the act obstructed its mobility somewhat. As a result, the last puppet was ahead of the others. Things were going exactly as planned. That was when I finally took a step forward.

We wouldn't get anywhere by constantly running away. If we bumped into more monsters before losing these ones, we would only burden ourselves with having to handle more foes at once. Our only recourse was to finish them off one by one. Asarina was already coiled around my left arm, working as an exoskeleton.

Ever since Asarina started parasitizing on me, she'd continuously grown stronger over the course of time, her roots running deeper and deeper into my left arm. As a price for that, I'd lost some dexterity in my fingers. Lately, my left hand could no longer do much more than vaguely grasp objects. However, what I'd gained in exchange was great. My loss of delicacy was made up for with sturdiness. It was enough to withstand an equally powerful force.

I let my mana flow, reproducing forty percent of the genuine Great White Spider's tyranny. At this level, it wasn't a noticeable burden anymore. I warded off the incoming cudgel with my bracer and took a swing as we crossed.

"Shatter."

My fist pulverized the puppet's torso.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

"No..."

I defeated the remaining puppets with the same decisive one-on-one precision, then let Katou down on the ground.

“I’m surprised,” she muttered, staring at me wide-eyed. “Senpai, you’ve gotten so strong. You can even take on multiple monsters at once, while still protecting me the whole time.”

“Now that I think of it, you’ve never seen me fight any monsters, huh?”

During our journey, Lily and Gerbera had handled the majority of monster encounters. In Aker, I’d gone out to suppress monsters near the reclamation villages several times, but Katou hadn’t come with us on those occasions. Perhaps her reaction was only a matter of course.

“I can more or less handle this much,” I said. “Besides, they weren’t all that strong.”

At most, they were at the level of monsters from the Fringes. If they had come from the Depths, it might have been a far harder fight.

“But...” I added, letting the word fall limply.

“But?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

A certain fear came to mind, but I kept it to myself. Nothing would come of mentioning it. We had no way of doing anything about it from here, so there was no point in making Katou anxious. Instead, I strengthened my tone a little.

“Anyway, I can hold my own against monsters as I am now. It’s not much of a problem to have you with me. So don’t ever mention me abandoning you and running away again.”

“I... Okay, I understand.”

Katou nodded obediently. Although, it was a little questionable whether I’d really gotten through to her. She saw herself in far too poor a light, after all.

“Sorry, Senpai,” she continued. “There was no need to run away at all, was there? You’re strong now.”

“No... Even if I wasn’t strong or anything, it’s impossible for me to abandon you and run away.”

Katou blinked in confusion, then smiled amicably.

“You really do treasure your friends,” she said. “Thank you.”

That wasn’t what I meant, though. I suddenly recalled what’d happened before this incident. If I’d gone with my impulse and succeeded in conveying my feelings, things would probably be different. Given the circumstances, it was out of the question to continue that conversation now.

“Okay then, shall we get moving?” I suggested.

Setting aside conveying what I’d wanted to say before being teleported here, I decided it was good enough to have convinced her not to commit to self-sacrifice.

“We didn’t expect to find monsters here, but it doesn’t change what we have to do,” I continued. “We need to rendezvous with the others while the enemy is a step behind.”

“Right.”

“That being the case, sorry. Katou, I’m gonna have to carry you again.”

“Okay... What?”

Katou’s eyes turned to saucers, and I once more scooped her up.

“Hwah?”

This time I held her across both my arms, so she wasn’t totally glued against me. Instead, her face was much closer to mine and we could look each other in the eyes.

“S-Senpai? Wh-What’re you...?”

Katou was so red that it was clear to see even in this dimly lit corridor. I couldn’t deny how adorable it was. I had no intention of ignoring my own feelings any longer.

“You won’t be able to react if something happens, right?” I said. “I’m not as strong as the others, so if that happens, I’m not sure I’ll be able to protect you.”

“So...it’s a countermeasure against ambushes?” Katou said, demonstrating wisdom in spite of her shyness. She sank into thought, still red to the cheeks. “But don’t you have the Misty Lodge?”

“Yeah, I do.” I nodded, knitting my brow a little. The Misty Lodge was in fact capable of seeing everything within its reach. If I deployed it far and wide, it would be improbable for anything to ambush us. That would normally be the case. “As a matter of fact, I’ve had it deployed for a while. Its spatial perception isn’t working well. I can manage when things are really close, but it’s no good at a distance.”

“Huh? What’s causing that?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, but maybe it’s a special property of this place.”

I took a look around. In more familiar terms, our surroundings looked a lot like an underground concrete tunnel. The wide rectangular corridors diverged every now and then and went on and on. The stone walls were smooth and glowed faintly. It was tranquil, immaculate, and had a certain mystique to it. It was clear there was some kind of magic at work here. It wouldn’t be weird for some force to be blocking the Misty Lodge’s perception.

“I wonder what this place is? It’s really mysterious,” I said.

“It is,” Katou agreed, then narrowed her eyes in contemplation. “It looks strange enough as is, but it’s weird for such a vast space not to be covered in dust.”

“Now that you mention it...”

The air wasn’t dusty and the walls weren’t moldy. There was no way someone was cleaning a place that was infested with monsters. Was this some kind of magic too? I thought it over for a bit, then shook my head.

“Well, at any rate, our number one priority is linking up with the others and getting out of here,” I said.

We could think about it afterward. I shelved our questions for now and started walking when I suddenly realized something.

“This is my first time walking around like this with someone in my arms.”

Conversely, I’d been carried by others or ridden on others quite a lot. I wasn’t used to it, so it was hard to keep my balance.

“Sorry Katou, but can you wrap your arms around my neck?”

“Y-Yes.”

Katou acted meekly. Her arms were slightly folded in front of her chest, and she timidly wrapped them around me. With this, she maintained her own balance much better too, making it a fair bit easier to walk.

“Thanks. This’ll work,” I said.

“Y-You’re welcome...”

Like this, it would be easier to shift her over to one arm as I’d done before. This place was built like a dungeon, so it was sure to take us some time to find the others. To prevent Katou from exhausting herself, carrying her around was the best choice.

Still, it was a little embarrassing. Quite literally nose to nose, Katou’s lips squirmed about.

“Senpai... Am I heavy?”

“Not at all. You’re real light.”

I trained regularly, so it was simple for me to carry her and walk in such a way, even just using my raw muscles. Now that I’d gotten more adept at using mana to reinforce my body, the task wasn’t a burden whatsoever. In my arms, her body was so slender, small, soft, and warm. While holding her, I really understood why Rose always said that she was scared of breaking Katou whenever she touched her.

Back when I first met Katou, we both had to be protected by Lily and the others. Now, those girls weren’t with us. Instead, I had the strength to fight. I had to protect Katou. No matter what happened, I had to.

Renewing my resolve, I focused on the mental path. Which way was best to link up with the others? The mental path was my inherent ability, so I was capable of gleaning the most information from it. I had a general grasp of where everyone was relative to each other. The closest were—

“Rose and Lobivia are relatively close,” I said.

“Ah, so Rose is here as well. And Lobivia too,” Katou said, a happy look on her

face. It must've been reassuring to know her best friend was nearby.

"It looks like the two of them are trying to make their way here."

"Is that so? That's good... What's wrong?" Katou asked, noticing my complex expression.

"No, it's just, this is right after that matter with Okazaki. I'm a little worried about Lobivia."

I'd kept her close, intending to pay attention to her until she was emotionally stable. I'd never imagined this would happen, so I couldn't help but worry.

"You have a point," Katou agreed, knitting her brow. "Lobivia is very level-headed, but there are times she really acts her age."

"We need to link up with them quickly so that she can relax."

Coming to an agreement and nodding, we moved out to reunite with the others.

Chapter 6: Quarrel

While Rose had been spending time with Lobivia, the two had been teleported to a strange place. Naturally, like his other servants, the two girls were moving to rendezvous with their master. However, the place they'd found themselves in was inhabited by monsters. Fighting was unavoidable if they hoped to return to his side.

Such was the case, and though Rose had her ax in hand, she hadn't once taken part in any battles. The same went for Lobivia. There was no need for either of them to do so.

"Hyaaah!"

A typhoon in the shape of a human blew through the vast corridor. A sword slashed at the puppets blocking their path. The strike was so intense that even Rose, who was a monster from the Depths trained in human martial arts, would barely be able to block a single attack. These puppets had no way of dealing with such a force and were quickly bisected along with their weapons. The wielder of the sword was a girl with long black hair. She was the fastest of the exploration team—the Skanda Iino Yuna. Rose and Lobivia had bumped into her by coincidence.

"That's all of them."

Iino Yuna returned to the two girls after cutting down all their enemies. Naturally, she didn't have a scratch on her. It'd taken nearly no time to exterminate them. It was a little late, but Rose couldn't help but be awestruck by Iino's dreadful power. This was a stroke of good fortune, in Rose's opinion.

Rose and Lobivia were plenty strong enough, but they were a step below Lily, Gerbera, and Shiran. It was lucky that the two had gotten teleported together, but the situation had still been dire. It was extremely reassuring to have the exploration team's Skanda with them. Of course, it wasn't like they had nothing to be worried about.

"Are you hurt?" Iino asked.

“Not at all,” Rose answered, then turned her eyes to the side. “Lobivia is fine too.”

Next to her, the little dragon pouted in silence. She’d been like this ever since the two had bumped into Iino Yuna. She pretty much refused to speak and generally wouldn’t leave Rose’s side. She just kept a careful eye on her surroundings while observing Iino Yuna’s behavior. This was common for a shy child, but her behavior didn’t offer a very friendly impression.

“I see. So long as you’re both fine,” Iino said, fortunately not really taking any particular offense.

At any rate, Rose was getting closer to her master at a steady pace. While on the move, Iino Yuna volunteered to take the lead, which had her coming into contact with the most enemies. Not connected by the mental path, she turned around every now and then to verify which way to go, and Rose provided her with directions.

Iino Yuna had taken responsibility for all the fighting. Running across monsters on the way would normally stall them considerably, but because of her ability to instantly bring things to an end, it hardly amounted to any time lost. Furthermore, her presence here had great significance. After all, bringing the exploration team’s great Skanda to their master would guarantee his safety. Just that would be enough to flip the situation on its head. It was extremely lucky that she’d bumped into Rose and Lobivia, who were the closest to their master’s location.

“It’s okay, Lobivia. If I get to him, I can guarantee Majima’s safety,” Iino said.

She understood the situation and had interpreted Lobivia’s silence as anxiety. That wasn’t entirely wrong. Lobivia’s state right after being teleported had been pretty horrible, after all.

“Takahiro? Huh? No way.”

At first, she’d been dumbfounded and had then turned pale as a sheet.

“Takahiro. Takahiro. Takahiro... What do we do, Rose? If Takahiro dies, I... I don’t want that. Where’d you go? Takahirooo...?”

She’d practically been panicking. This had shocked Rose a good deal. Lobivia

was extremely—in a sense, abnormally—terrified of losing the boy she idolized. Although considering what had happened to her lately, it wasn't all that strange.

It'd seemed like Lobivia had recovered from the cruel death of her mother Malvina relatively quickly. Lately, she'd often made claims that she was "gonna be the one to protect Takahiro," keeping an optimistic outlook. However, in truth, she hadn't recovered. She'd been driven by her fear of losing the one last precious thing left to her, thrusting her depression aside with obsessive insistence.

Rose had somehow managed to calm her down. The two had bumped into Iino Yuna after that. That was why Iino Yuna wasn't wrong to assume that Lobivia was worried about Majima Takahiro's safety. However...

"Guarantee Takahiro's safety...? *You*?" Lobivia said.

"Yes," Iino answered, smiling. "Didn't you see that fight just now? I'm actually pretty strong."

"I know you're strong," Lobivia said curtly, her face expressionless. "But can you be trusted?"

"Huh?"

It was an extremely impolite question to ask someone who had been so helpful.

"Lobivia," Rose said, raising her voice to warn Lobivia, but the little girl kept her lips tight and didn't answer.

"Yes..." Iino said, a bewildered expression on her face. "Of course you can trust me."

She probably hadn't imagined being asked such a thing. Perhaps she found it a little vexing. Nevertheless, she didn't get angry. She was likely taking into consideration that she was speaking with a child—one who was emotionally unstable and had been forcefully dragged into such an inexplicable situation.

"It's okay. I've always fought for the sake of justice. You can trust me," Iino said, nothing but kindness in her voice.

Maybe she'd consoled the frightened populace before using such a tactic. There was pride and confidence behind her words. There was a strength to her that could convince others, and not just because she was a visitor who was treated like a savior in this world. If only she hadn't been speaking to Lobivia, she might've been very impressive. However, things were different here.

"Justice...?" Lobivia said, her voice penetratingly cold. "Are you saying you'll protect Takahiro for the sake of your justice?"

The emotions behind her words were far beyond simple irritation or anger, they were verging on bloodlust. This definitely wasn't the attitude to take toward someone who was helping. In other words, Lobivia hadn't once considered Iino Yuna as an ally.

"Your people destroyed my home claiming it was for the sake of justice," she spat in a terrifyingly chilling voice.



Ever since finding out the settlement had been destroyed by visitors, Lobivia had only seen visitors aside from Majima Takahiro and Katou Mana as subjects of suspicion. What's more, it'd been discovered that one of those who'd attacked the settlement was one of the exploration team's upper brass. The only reason she suppressed her animosity toward the exploration team was that she took into consideration the position of the boy she idolized.

Not only that, Lobivia had met Iino Yuna at a bad time. In contrast, Rose had known her for a relatively long time. They'd cooperated in getting Lily back from Takaya Jun too. Rose didn't believe she would betray them and found her overwhelming power here indispensable.

But Lobivia was different. She'd met Iino Yuna after visitors had taken her home away. That in itself gave Lobivia a horrible impression of visitors, and after that, the two hadn't had an opportunity to socialize. To make matters worse, there was the incident with Okazaki Takuma. It was impossible for her to trust Iino Yuna. And so long as Lobivia couldn't trust her, the power she possessed could only be seen as a major threat.

That was why Lobivia was scared. Not only that, she'd made up her mind that she had to protect her companions. In truth, the reason Lobivia hadn't left Rose's side wasn't that she was a shy child, but so that she could stand in Iino Yuna's way and protect Rose in case the Skanda turned to attack them.

"I really can't trust any of you," Lobivia said, her eyes transforming into those of a dragon.

Lobivia had apprehensions that bringing Iino Yuna with them would mean something horrible happening to the boy so dear to her. In contrast, faced with such unexpected hostility from someone she'd had nothing but genuine consideration and goodwill for, Iino Yuna looked really thrown off. She was pale, unable to say anything in her defense. At worst, it was possible this would end in battle between them. If anyone could diffuse the tension, it was Rose, who understood Lobivia's heart well.

"Stop that, Lobivia," Rose said. "Iino isn't that type of person."

"I can't trust her. I mean, that Shimazu girl who was working with her ended up betraying us too, dragging us into this place. How *can* I trust her?"

She was being stubborn, but did have a point. Lobivia wasn't being thoughtless. In her own way, she was trying to protect what was dear to her. That was why she wasn't going to yield so easily. However, Rose had an ace up her sleeve for times like these. She'd learned how to do it by watching her best friend prod at just the right spots, after all.

"Lobivia. I'll say it once more. Stop that."

"But!"

"Have you forgotten? Our master knows Iino far better than you, and he's decided that she can be trusted."

Hearing that, Lobivia swallowed her rebuttal. Her stubborn expression shook, and her eyes wavered.

"Takahiro said..."

"That's right."

The effect was instantaneous. Hostility vanished from Lobivia's tiny frame as if physically expelled from within her.

"Takahiro..."

In the end, he was definitely the most important thing to her. Rose knew that well. She only needed one more push.

"Don't you believe in our master?"

"Of course I do..."

"Then you understand, right?"

After a moment's indecision, Lobivia nodded.

"Good girl," Rose said, sighing in relief.

It wasn't like Lobivia's hostility toward the exploration team and suspicion toward visitors had vanished. Nevertheless, she kept it to herself now. Rose patted Lobivia's head, then turned to Iino Yuna. She required a few words too.

"Please forgive her," Rose said. "Even though you're helping us, she said such rude things to you."

“It’s fine... I was careless too,” Iino said, her face still pale. “Right, there was that matter with Okazaki... And Yui-senpai too...”

“Neither one is your fault,” Rose said, shaking her head.

If forced to choose, Rose would actually find Lobivia in the wrong. Justice wasn’t a bad thing in itself. Her master was in fact someone who devoted everything he had to protecting those close to him, but he didn’t refute those who acted for the sake of people they didn’t know. He saw this as something he was incapable of, and even harbored admiration toward those that did so. That was one part of the complicated feelings he had toward Iino Yuna.

On the other, it would be far too cruel to ask the young Lobivia to act rationally right after losing her family. The situation had moved beyond sheer reason. Moreover, she’d gotten one thing wrong.

“Also, I don’t believe we can be sure about Shimazu yet,” Rose said.

“Huh?” Iino Yuna widened her eyes, not quite expecting that.

“What do you mean?” Lobivia asked, likewise taken by surprise.

Rose was fine with answering them, but she didn’t forget the situation they were in.

“Let’s continue this conversation on the move,” she said, pointing in the right direction with her ax. “Fortunately, we’ve resolved Lobivia’s apprehensions for now. There is no more reason for you to obstruct us from reaching our master, right?”

“Yeah. I ain’t gonna complain,” Lobivia said, exchanging looks with Iino Yuna.

“Then let’s get going,” Rose said.

Having somehow resolved the issue, the three of them were about to get moving once more, but just then, Iino Yuna’s brow pricked up.

“Something’s approaching...”

“Another monster?” Rose asked.

“I bet it is.”

Iino Yuna corrected the grip on her sword. She was still a little pale, but it

looked like she was trying to get her feelings in order. Not that the Skanda would be remotely bothered by some monster just because she wasn't in tip-top shape. Just as before, it would be less than a hindrance. They were sure to rendezvous with Majima Takahiro shortly.

"First, we have to get this nuisance out of the way," Iino said, as though she were simply cleaning the place up, then ran off.

Chapter 7: Witness Testimony

“Dammit, a dead end,” Berta groaned.

She’d just scattered the monsters who’d blocked her path, only to find herself with nowhere to go.

“We’re backtracking.”

She turned around smoothly, returning all the way to the last junction. This place was like a labyrinth. Without a guide, it would be impossible to find anyone.

“Is this way fine?”

[Mm. That way!] An adorable fox yelped in response.

Berta did as Ayame said and ran down the dimly lit corridor. They were headed toward Ayame’s master, Majima Takahiro. Berta wasn’t his servant, but she’d been ordered by her king to protect him. As her king’s subject, she didn’t hesitate to stake her life on fulfilling her duty. Also, as an individual, she felt like she couldn’t afford to lose the boy that her king saw as special...and to add to that, at this point, she was rather fond of him too.

The one guiding her toward the boy was Ayame, seated atop one of her heads. Berta had a tentacle holding her in place by the belly, making sure that she didn’t get shaken off by Berta’s running.

[My master is that way, but Rose and Lobivia are on the opposite side. Looks like he’s headed toward them.]

“Meaning he’s going the same direction as us. We need to hurry or we’ll never catch up.”

[Mm! Hurry! Hurry!]

“I know.”

That said, the layout here was complex. She couldn’t just run in a straight line. It was sure to take a significant amount of time to catch up. What’s more, there were monsters here, so she couldn’t act carelessly.

Berta kept running, keeping an eye on her surroundings. That was when someone stirred atop her back.

“U-Ugh...” It was a girl, her voice hoarse from extreme exhaustion. “Where is this...?”

“You’re awake?” Berta asked, but no answer came. Was she surprised? Or did she have her mind on something? Berta continued without really paying that any mind. “How are you feeling, Shimazu Yui?”



The one Berta had placed on her back and was carrying around was a member of the exploration team, the Fairy Ring Shimazu Yui. Right before Majima Takahiro's group had gotten swallowed in this teleportation, she'd suddenly appeared before Berta. Her inherent ability had been the cause of this incident. Berta had secured her person.

"Where are we going?" Shimazu asked quietly.

"To Majima Takahiro," Berta answered. "You lost consciousness. If left alone, you were likely to be killed by the monsters wandering around here, so I brought you along. Even if you're a visitor, you have no way of resisting while unconscious."

Shimazu Yui fell silent for a while. She appeared to be deep in thought.

"Meaning you've been protecting me," she finally said.

"Well, yes. What about it?"

"Don't you...suspect me of being behind all this?"

Shimazu Yui looked so defenseless on Berta's back, an air of resignation in her voice. Interpreting this correctly, Berta snorted. It was ludicrous. There'd been no need for her to do anything of the like.

"Not at all," Berta denied bluntly. "The moment before we were teleported, I witnessed what you did."

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It happened right before the teleportation. Shimazu Yui appeared, her expression deathly pale. She looked shaken upon seeing Berta. She probably tried to say something, but, as if purposefully preempting her, a loud noise rumbled through the room. It was the sound of something breaking spectacularly in a nearby room.

Shimazu Yui started at the sudden event before a look of fear dominated her features. Immediately after that, her expression changed completely.

“Oh no!”

She screamed and accumulated mana in her body. Visitors possessed tremendous mana, yet on the spur of the moment, there was only so much she could gather. Before she could do anything, a terrifying amount of mana distorted the world. It was unleashed by someone else entirely.

“That was definitely teleportation by Fairy Ring,” Berta said, reminiscing over the event. “However, you weren’t the culprit responsible for it this time. On the contrary, I saw you resist it on the spot. Did I see wrong?”

“No... It’s exactly as you say,” Shimazu answered hesitantly. Perhaps she’d been prepared to be accused of being the culprit. That idea didn’t sit well with Berta.

“Don’t make light of us,” Berta said, huffing. “Things were done a little too shoddily this time to even consider you as a suspect. During the teleportation, it was possible to resist using mana. Fairy Ring’s effect can be resisted, correct?”

“Y-Yes. My Fairy Ring isn’t meant for battle,” Shimazu admitted, somewhat bewildered. A shadow fell over her expression, and she hung her head feebly. “In truth, Fairy Ring is meant only for running away; to go somewhere familiar that’s far and safe. That was what I wished for, so it can’t do anything else.”

Just maybe, she had a complex about this. A visitor’s ability was born of their wish, meaning it was a display of everything that was in their heart. As such, this was possible too.

“Fairy Ring can’t be used for violence,” Shimazu continued. “If attempted, not only will it fail, it’ll inflict serious damage on the user.”

“You understand your own ability well,” Berta said, nodding.

“Well, it *is* mine.”

“That’s the point.”

“Huh?”

“According to my king, a visitor understands their own inherent ability without having to be taught by anyone. As such, it should never have ended up like this.”

“Meaning?”

“As a result of us resisting the teleportation, the enemy has lost the initiative and sent us flying to random, unknown locations. If you were the perpetrator, there would be no need to pick a time that made it explicitly possible to resist. You could’ve prepared a surefire trap and sent us there at any point during our journey to the capital.”

Naturally, Berta had only realized that something was out of place because she knew for a fact that Shimazu Yui wasn’t their true foe. Any other concerned party in this crisis was likewise sure to notice sooner or later.

“Nevertheless, we were teleported,” Berta said. “What’s more, it was done by Fairy Ring. As such, there is another culprit. As for who is capable of this—”

“The Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma. He’s the only one who can,” Shimazu said.

His power to use other people’s abilities made it possible for him to use Fairy Ring. Shimazu Yui made a horribly bitter face at the thought. How could she not? Not only had her ability been used to do this, but she’d fallen prey to it as well.

“That makes sense to me,” Shimazu continued. “You know, I was called by Majima, so I went to his room. I was sure he was going to criticize me harshly.”

“I heard nothing of the sort from Majima Takahiro,” Berta said.

“Thought so... I was probably tricked,” Shimazu admitted bitterly.

“Now that you mention it, Iino Yuna said she was called to go see you,” Berta

said, coming to a sudden realization.

“What’s with that? I don’t know anything about it.”

“Hmm. Meaning she was fooled too.”

By gathering another perspective, the rough picture was taking shape. Okazaki Takuma had fabricated a lethal trap and had made an attempt on Majima Takahiro’s entire party by throwing them into it. However, there were no absolutes in such complex schemes. He’d made a way to lay the blame on the ability’s original use, the Fairy Ring Shimazu Yui. Or perhaps she’d also been a target to kill. In either case, his plan had dragged her into it.

“Although,” Berta added, “even if the Almighty Vessel succeeded in teleporting you into a trap, your Fairy Ring would be able to teleport you right back out of it. It’s curious that he didn’t realize that.”

“No. That’s impossible,” Shimazu said. “My Fairy Ring takes time to prepare depending on how far I need to go. I can only go somewhere I’ve been before too. If I’m sent somewhere ‘unfamiliar’ and ‘far away,’ I would need time to gather the mana to make the long journey to somewhere I know. I wouldn’t be able to run away on the spot.”

“Meaning you wouldn’t be able to break out of a lethal trap.”

The plan itself had apparently been valid. However, Okazaki Takuma hadn’t grasped Fairy Ring’s fragility. The teleportation had been executed poorly, and the enemy had lost the initiative because of it. That about summed it up. Now convinced of this, Berta was suddenly caught on a certain detail.

“But if Fairy Ring requires time to gather mana for long-distance teleportation, how was it executed so quickly?”

It’d taken nearly no time at all from detecting the mana to its activation. If time was needed to prepare, Berta would’ve noticed and could’ve escaped in the meantime.

“Is it possible to do such a thing with Okazaki Takuma’s Almighty Vessel?”

That was the only thing that came to Berta’s mind, but Shimazu Yui shook her head.

“No. Not at all. His Almighty Vessel is definitely an extremely powerful ability, but it has its flaws. For most inherent abilities, he can’t draw out as much power as the real thing. There are even abilities he can’t copy at all.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm-hm. Our leader’s Sword of Light is one of them. If that wasn’t the case, that boy would’ve made a move to take our leader’s seat. He craves the limelight. I’m guessing Majima’s ability is also impossible for him. That ability has captured the entire world’s attention, after all. I can’t imagine him not trying to copy it, and if he managed, he definitely would’ve bragged about it.”

“He sounds like an awfully petty human.”

“Mm. Just maybe, that’s exactly why his Almighty Vessel isn’t really almighty. He once said, ‘If someone else can do something, there’s no way I can’t do it too.’ He actually is pretty talented. However, even if a vessel is almighty, its scope can limit its function.”

Shimazu Yui sighed.

“So I say, but I don’t know if that’s actually the reason,” she added. “Anyway, his pettiness may be connected to this reckless action.”

“However, even if he’s petty, he is a definite threat,” Berta said, getting things back on track. “Your Fairy Ring can’t be immediately activated. The same goes for Okazaki. Can you think of anything that makes it possible, then?”

As the original user of Fairy Ring, maybe there was something she was capable of figuring out. Still being shaken about on Berta’s back, Shimazu Yui sank into thought for a while. In the end, she shook her head.

“Sorry, I can’t think of anything. The only way would be for Okazaki to have his mana fully ready and have me use my own Fairy Ring to bring him to your room...”

“You didn’t bring him. I saw that with my own eyes.”

“So if it’s possible, it was done some other way. There are magic tools in this world, so maybe it was made viable by some other means.”

“Doesn’t that mean anything goes?” Berta said with a grunt.

“It sure does,” Shimazu admitted. “But that’s exactly why we can figure some things out.”

“What?”

“I mean, the magic tools of this world are very limited, right? At most, they can reproduce grade 3 magic. It isn’t quite anything goes. Normally, at least.”

“Hmm...”

The first thing that came to Berta’s mind was the fight against Takaya Jun. Before he manifested the power of the Mad Beast, he’d used a treasured sword to unleash earth magic. That sword was the greatest class of magic tool that’d been created in this world. It wasn’t all that bad as a weapon, but it was very restricted in its use. A visitor’s inherent ability was simply outlandish, making the weapon look simple. After thinking it through, Berta figured it out.

“Aah, I get it,” she said. “Is this what you’re trying to say? No matter what it is, it’s impossible for the magic tool that the Almighty Vessel used here to be something normal.”

“Exactly. It would only be possible for a relic of salvation, and there are only a few ways of getting those. The only ones who have any are the Holy Church and Holy Order... But that’s impossible. The Holy Church needs Majima to survive. Otherwise, it’ll be a major problem for them.”

If these discussions between Majima Takahiro and the margrave ended poorly, it would destabilize the entire world. If Majima Takahiro were killed after being explicitly invited by the church, they would suffer a terrible blow to their authority. It would create a fissure between them and the exploration team too. There was nothing to gain from it at all.

“In that case, the possibilities are limited,” Shimazu said.

“The Angel Puppeteer’s group and the unknown faction they serve...”

Berta reached the answer right away. As former knights of the Holy Order, they possessed and wielded relics of salvation. It was highly probable for them to be involved. They’d been quiet since the last battle, but had finally made a move.

“How troublesome,” Berta groaned.

“Seriously,” Shimazu agreed. “Still, there is a small stroke of good luck here. Okazaki used Fairy Ring carelessly.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s not some errand runner like I am. He’s a true nicknamed cheater of the exploration team. He’s unbelievably strong. Right now, though, he can’t move. Due to his careless use of Fairy Ring, the damage he suffered from it being resisted should be significant.”

“I see. Meaning one of our troublesome enemies isn’t capable of fighting.”

“Exactly. What’s more, I interfered as someone capable of using the same ability, so the effect on him must’ve been even greater. Conversely, having used that ability to resist, the same could be said about me.”

An apologetic expression crossed her emaciated and pale face.

“I’m doing better than Okazaki, but I suffered damage too,” she added. “My mana is totally drained, and I don’t quite know how to put it, but I feel like I’m a total wreck on a more fundamental level. At worst, I think I’ll need an entire day to recover before I can transport all of you out of here using Fairy Ring.”

In other words, it was impossible to escape this place right away. Not that Berta had any intention of criticizing her for it. She’d witnessed Shimazu Yui writhing in agony resisting the teleportation, looking like she was going to die, and passing out from the pain.

Besides, so long as she recovered, they could use Fairy Ring. If everyone managed to meet up and evade danger for another day, they would be able to get out of here without having to defeat the enemy.

Majima Takahiro’s group could win by linking everyone back up and crushing the enemy before leaving the place on foot. Now, they could also wait for time to pass and escape using Fairy Ring. Having more choices in this situation held great significance. Involving Shimazu Yui in their poorly executed schemes had come to bite the enemy in the back.

“At any rate, we must hurry and find the others first,” Berta said.

According to Ayame, Rose and Lobivia looked like they were going to be the first to link up with Majima Takahiro. After them, it would probably be Lily and Gerbera. Berta's group would be next, and then finally Shiran.

Thinking of it like that meant Shiran, having been sent to this place all on her own, wouldn't be able to get to the others until the very end. Berta knew of her strength, but it was still cause for concern. That was when she came to a realization. She really had been influenced by these people so much. She recalled the conversation she'd had with Iino Yuna right before being teleported.

"Majima's a hateful guy, but he treats his companions dearly. I think this is a suitable place for you. I'm sure you'll be able to live a happy life by his side."

Berta already considered them dear travel companions and worried for their safety as if it was a matter of course. This was surely what it meant to belong somewhere. Convincing herself of this, all that was left to do was to run.

Chapter 8: Perfect Sync

A painful scream echoed down the corridor. Shiran whipped around to the sound.

“Ah...”

She saw a knight entwined in spider threads falling to the ground. A spider larger than any normal human stood atop him, having sealed his movements. The torso of a woman sat atop the spider’s body. It was an arachne. Obviously, this wasn’t Gerbera. It was another monster entirely.

“Aaaah...!”

Unlike Gerbera, who was a high monster, the common arachne’s upper half also had a monstrous appearance. Its mouth split its face from ear to ear and was wide open. In the next instant, two fangs tore into the desperate knight’s upper arm.

“G-Gaaah?!”

Blood splattered into the air, and the knight dropped the sword he’d barely been holding on to. That wasn’t the end of the horrific spectacle. The arachne bared its fangs once more. So weakened, the knight had no way of doing anything about them. Even if she wanted to assist, Shiran was far away. At this rate, he was sure to meet a gruesome fate. However, before his end could come to pass, a sword sent the monster’s head flying.

“Hey, are you all right?”

The sword’s wielder was a large bald man with dark skin, the marshal of the Holy Order, Gordon Cavill. Having saved his subordinate’s life, he checked on the knight’s safety.

“Yes... It’s not a problem.”

The knight staggered back to his feet. After watching from beginning to end, Shiran let out a sigh of relief. The man was injured, but it wouldn’t pose a threat to his life. His fighting spirit still looked strong too. Such were the elites of the

Holy Order's Second Company she'd heard so much about.

"Good. That's the last one."

Gordon nodded to his subordinate, then took a look around. Shiran also turned her attention to her surroundings. There were enormous spider webs in the corridor. This was an arachne nest. The threads weren't particularly dense, but the webs went on and on down this never-ending corridor.

"Sir Gordon, I have a suggestion. May I?" Shiran said.

"What is it?"

"I believe it would be best if I fight as well."

Perhaps she was being too forward, but Shiran felt compelled to make such a proposal. Up until now, Gordon and the knights of the Holy Order had been protecting her while on the move. However, she wasn't some civilian who needed to be protected all the time. At the very least, she was capable of contributing greatly to the survival of this entire group.

"I can't allow that, Lady Shiran," Gordon said. This wasn't a simple refusal. It was a decision made through calm judgment, solid conviction, and steadfast resolve. "According to you, we are the furthest from Mister Majima's position. No matter how much we struggle, we'll be the last to link up with them. As such, seeing as you cannot fight continuous battles, we must be the ones to protect you."

"Sir Gordon..."

In a short battle, Shiran was capable of exhibiting power that surpassed the legendary Great White Spider of the Depths. However, to counterbalance this, she relied heavily on Majima Takahiro for mana, so she was weak in continuous battles on her own. In this situation, where it was unclear when she would be able to reunite with him, it was best for her to avoid fighting whenever possible. Gordon was right...if one ignored the safety of him and his knights as a factor.

"Our duty is to protect Mister Majima," Gordon continued. "Even so, things have devolved into this crisis. As such, we must show that we can at least deliver you to his side. Otherwise, we have no excuses to make."

Gordon's voice was firm, and his subordinates nodded with determination. Their behavior didn't show any care for the fact that she was an elf—and undead on top of that. They staked their lives on protecting what they were meant to protect. That was all she sensed from them. Beyond any doubt, they were knights. They devoted their swords to justice, even at the cost of their lives. Moreover, they didn't do so out of desperation.

"Besides, we aren't going to die that easily," Gordon added.

In truth, they'd defeated around ten monsters over the course of several sporadic battles. During that time, not a single knight had suffered a fatal wound. They possessed more than enough strength.

"If you insist..."

In the end, Shiran accepted Gordon's argument. She now saw that it was possible for them to hang in there without losing a single knight until they found the others.

"Let's move after taking a short rest," Gordon said.

"Very well." Shiran nodded, then narrowed her eyes. "You're all so strong."

"That's abrupt of you."

"Sorry. The thought simply came to mind. It wouldn't be strange for a normal knight to waver in such a situation."

One of the saviors had taken hostile action against someone the Holy Church had decided to protect, forcefully throwing them into this strange place. Normally, it would be chaos. However, these knights stood firm. The way they kept their eyes on their duty was worthy of respect.

"That's the celebrated Holy Order for you. I stand in awe," Shiran said.

"Perish the thought. Hearing that from the famed strongest knight of the northern Woodlands makes me feel self-conscious," Gordon said grimly, then knit his thick brow. "Besides, now isn't the time to descend into chaos."

"The Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma, you mean?"

"And probably Angel Puppeteer Ottmar. I don't know what magic tools they've brought out, but they've made a real mess of things."

Seeing Gordon's righteous indignation on full display, Shiran recalled the events of the teleportation.

"Magic tools, you say?"

"Is something on your mind?" Gordon asked.

"I was just considering the possibility. Sir Gordon, I believe you remember as well, but the sound we heard right before being teleported..."

Shiran swallowed her next words. She turned on reflex, gazing beyond the spiderwebs that stretched across the corridor.

"Be careful! Arachnes!"

She wasn't currently using her spirit. She noticed them relying only on her honed senses as a knight. The arachnes skittered closer on eight legs. Seeing how the knights were proceeding through an arachne nest, this was hardly a surprise. Everyone stood at the ready, but they'd made a miscalculation.

"Totalling...seven? No, even more...?"

Recognizing the signs of enemies down the corridor, Gordon groaned. Shiran and the knights had assumed there'd only be four or five arachnes in this nest. According to their experience, that would be normal. However, the number of enemies far exceeded their estimates.

"Sir Gordon! This is bad, there are more than ten enemies!"

All of the knights tensed upon hearing Shiran's warning. Knights of the Holy Order were skilled, capable of fighting on equal ground against monsters one-on-one. What's more, humanity's greatest weapon was their ability to fight as a group. When these trained knights coordinated against small groups of monsters over and over, it was entirely possible for them to defeat dozens at the end of the day. However, the number of enemies here surpassed their estimates over twofold. This was an advantageous field for the arachnes, and the monsters outnumbered the knights. It would be difficult to handle. They'd miscalculated. But this kind of situation happened too. Shiran immediately switched gears.

"Sir Gordon! I shall join the fray!"

Shiran gripped her sword. She'd intended to forcefully join the battle if it seemed like the knights were going to suffer casualties. Shiran was also a knight. She was one who wielded her sword for the sake of protecting others. She couldn't stand back and watch in silence.

The current situation was bad enough that it wasn't clear whether lending only a little assistance would help prevent casualties. Bearing that in mind, Shiran resolved to draw out all her strength. She was Majima Takahiro's strongest servant. If she wielded the strength of her undead body and her powers as a spiritualist, she was capable of matching or even surpassing the average savior. That would exhaust her all the more, but there was no other choice. However, just as she made that decision...

"No, not yet."

"Sir Gordon?! What are—"

Gordon shook his head. He'd also made his silent resolve.

"We still have some tricks up our sleeves. If we're to play our trump card, I believe it's more appropriate to start with us."

"Wha...?"

Shiran gulped. She sensed a terrifying amount of mana from Gordon. The pressure she felt was in no way inferior to what she'd felt from Juumonji Tatsuya, the visitor she'd once crossed swords with. Gordon faced the arachnes who were still charging toward the knights, and made a declaration.

"I am the descendant of the heroic Radiant Wings, Gordon Cavill. The wings I've inherited from my ancestor protect all in their embrace."

Wings sprouted from his massive armored frame.



They were pure white, so small, dainty, and beautiful that they didn't suit his large body at all. Considering this was the manifestation of a past savior's ability, perhaps that was only to be expected. After all, it was said that the savior extolled as the Radiant Wings in the legends was a delicate little girl. Although, how little it suited him had nothing to do with how much of the savior's power he could reproduce.

"Ooh! The light from Sir Gordon's Radiant Wings!"

"My body is brimming with power!"

Bathed in its brilliance, the knights raised their voices in joy. Saviors were known as those who took up the sword and stood at the vanguard, but that didn't apply to such a small number of them. There were exceptions who possessed support abilities and weren't much help in a fight themselves. The savior known as the Radiant Wings was one of them—the savior celebrated as the wielder of the greatest support blessing in all of history. And that power was now made manifest.

"Let's go!"

The battle against the arachnes commenced.

"Ooooh!"

Given strength by Gordon's Radiant Wings, the knights' movements were beyond recognition. Each of their individual prowess in battle now clearly surpassed an arachne. They blocked blows, launched counterattacks, and even as they suffered the occasional wound, they definitively brought their enemies down. It was an astonishing sight.

"This is the Radiant Wings."

It boosted physical abilities, strengthened the body, amplified magic, restored wounds, and raised morale. The scene before Shiran was right out of the legends of the Radiant Wings. Naturally, it wouldn't be like this if not for the knights' fundamental strength. This was the Holy Order's Second Company led by Gordon Cavill. Shiran remembered hearing of their fame during her stay in distant Fort Tilia. The tales had been no exaggeration. Before long, the battle came to an end.

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“That was splendid.”

After the fighting ended, Shiran called out to the knights as they caught their breath. The wings of light had already vanished from Gordon’s massive back, but their beautiful brilliance remained seared in her memory. Having fought with his sword even after manifesting his power, Gordon looked somewhat tired. Still, he had plenty of fight in him; proof in itself that Gordon was an outstanding knight.

“It was nothing. My power is simply inherited,” Gordon said, the man in question remaining humble. “Those who are truly splendid are my ancestor the Radiant Wing and my men, who deserve to be rewarded for their efforts, not me.”

“What are you saying?” one of the knights cut in. “Your power is amazing, Sir Gordon. Even among the beloved of blessed blood, there are only a few who can manifest their power to a level that can be used in combat. Among all of them, you are the one and only exception who has achieved perfect sync through your devoted studies.”

“Perfect sync...?” Shiran asked, cocking her head.

The young knight nodded. “We have inherited the blood of saviors and can sometimes reproduce their powers. However, the degree to which this can be done varies. To reproduce one perfectly requires endless devotion to one’s studies, tempering both mind and body, and for the state of one’s soul to approach that of the past savior. This cannot be accomplished easily.”

“And that’s perfect sync?” Shiran said, coming to an understanding.

“An overstatement,” Gordon said, shaking his head.

Despite this, Shiran sensed pride in him. A savior’s blessing—the inherent ability of a visitor—came from their wish. Having achieved perfect sync with a savior from the past gave a glimpse into Gordon’s way of life. Naturally, he wasn’t haughty about being such a considerable character.

“Besides, I don’t hold a candle to our marshal, Sir Harrison. He is what all knights aspire to be. I’m still far too inexperienced.”

“Sir Harrison Addington, you say?” Shiran said. She had of course heard of the current marshal of the Holy Order. “Many call him a knight among knights. I’ve only seen him once since coming here, but if you evaluate him so highly, I’m sure his reputation is no lie.”

“If we have the opportunity, please allow me to tell you about him. He is a magnificent knight.”

“By all means.”

There was something to gain, even in this dire situation. Shiran was lucky to have been teleported with Gordon’s group during this incident. She had a synergetic affinity with them as a knight, and they’d managed to build mutual trust quickly. After overcoming this incident, said trust was sure to have a positive effect between the Holy Church and Majima Takahiro.

“So that we may greet that day, let us overcome this,” Shiran said with a smile.

Gordon and his knight nodded back to her. Together, they could prevail—and just then, they all froze.

“It can’t be...”

They heard more skittering spider legs. New enemies appeared beyond the nest. It still wasn’t over. There were another ten arachnes, their intent clear as they rushed the knights.

“Second Company, to arms!” Gordon yelled immediately, deploying the Radiant Wings from his back once more.

There were just as many enemies as last time. They could manage. They could...

“How can there be so many?!”

The ten earlier arachnes could be summed up as a miscalculation. However, twenty in so short a time was abnormal. Shiran had never come across this, not even in the Depths. This was far beyond a miscalculation.

“What *is* this place...?!”

The situation seemed all the more dangerous now in Shiran’s mind. Her

scattered companions were trying to link back up, but there was a gap in how strong each group was. If they were forced into fights like this, there were groups who could handle it much like the knights. However, there were those for whom this would be considerably difficult.

“Takahiro...”

So far away from him, the only thing Shiran could do for the boy who was so dear to her was pray for his safety.

Chapter 9: United Front

I heard the crude panting of beasts. Heat touched my skin coming from the sparks scattered by their stimulated fur. They bared their fangs and growled. I was faced with a pack of spirit foxes. A while after I'd been teleported here with Katou, I found myself in a horrible situation.

"What a pain...!"

It would be ludicrous to even try and count all the beasts as they ran parallel to me. They had the annoying and relentless eyes of hunters spotting prey. Of all the countless gazes fixed on me, only the one from a certain girl was concerned for my safety.

"Senpai!"

"I got it!"

It was an unpleasant predicament, but so long as this presence cradled against my chest existed, I wasn't going to falter. I pumped mana through my limbs. I kicked off the stone floor hard, leaping into the air as flames rushed in.

"Graoooh!"

Flames burst from the spirit foxes' fur, turning the beasts into fireballs as they rushed at me. They weren't all that powerful, but they were fast. Above all else, the foxes were cunning. They only ever launched attacks in groups from multiple angles, making it that much more difficult to deal with. Just as I dodged three ramming attacks, four others came at me just a moment later.

"You little!"

I kept Katou in my right arm and jumped to change course again. I dodged one, but two more were on a direct collision course.

"Ugh! Asarina, it's up to you!"

"Sttter!"

Asarina's viny body deployed around me and struck at the foxes. They were repelled, but immediately sprung back to their feet. Unfortunately, they hadn't

been dealt much damage. It seemed they were sturdier than blowfoxes, who specialized in long-range attacks. I started running again and gritted my teeth, the severity of the situation setting in.

Even if things kept going in such a way, I probably wasn't going to go down that easily. Each individual fox wasn't all that strong. However, I lacked the means of dealing a decisive blow. Asarina's attack earlier hadn't defeated any. Given my comparatively limited arsenal, I had no other valid means of going on the offense. Things were balanced for now, but it couldn't go on forever...

"Ah!"

Perhaps too preoccupied with trying to figure out a way of dealing with this, I ate a ramming attack to my waist. The clothes Gerbera made for me didn't burn upon contact with the spirit fox's flames. Strengthened by mana, my body was sturdy, so even though I felt a little pain, I suffered very little damage. Still, their power was a threat. I staggered, creating an opening they weren't going to miss, and two more foxes came flying at me.

"Dammit!"

I bashed the fox flying at me from the front with my shield, but I couldn't dodge the other. Quite repulsively, it was aiming for my right arm, where I was holding on to Katou. I shuddered. Unable to strengthen herself, her body was fragile. Even a single hit would burn her muscles and break her bones.

"Like hell I'll let you!"

I twisted on the spot and covered her, then felt a sharp pain run through my shoulder.

"Ugh!"

It bit my right shoulder. I clenched my teeth at the pain of fangs piercing my flesh.

"Get off me!"

I immediately grabbed the fox biting me by the neck. This was a good opportunity. I strengthened my grip with everything I had for a single instant, crushing its sturdy spine. As its jaws went slack, I yanked it off me.

“Guh!”

Forcefully pulling it away gouged at my wound, sending blood flying out. Droplets splashed against Katou’s cheek.

“S-Senpai! You’re hurt?!” she yelled, her voice trembling upon realizing the situation.

“I’m fine!”

I tossed the limp fox at another charging monster. To finish things off, I fired a wind bullet from my Asarina Bracer at the fox aiming for my legs. That got me through this chain of attacks, and I started running once more.

“Finally got one...”

I was hoping they would fall back because of that, but that was wishful thinking. The pack of spirit foxes continued hounding us. They weren’t going to give up. The throbbing pain in my shoulder was yelling at me about how bad this was getting.

“Senpai, enough already, just—”

“Quit saying such useless things,” I said, cutting Katou off.

I obviously knew. I understood completely. The reason things were so dire was that I couldn’t use my sword. My right arm was preoccupied with holding Katou up. I also had to be careful to defend her as I had earlier. This was a huge handicap. I couldn’t deny it.

But what about it? I knew that already. I was determined to protect her to the end despite that. It was impossible for me to abandon her. No matter what happened, I was never going to do it. Renewing my resolve, I opened my mouth once more.

“Now that it’s come to this, I have no choice but to steel myself.”

“Senpai?”

Despite the situation, I wasn’t completely devoid of options.

“I’ve got to resort to that.”

I focused on my left arm. Asaring wriggled in response and covered my entire

limb, creating giant monstrous claws.

“No way... Senpai...”

Katou gulped upon realizing what was going on. During the battle against the Maclaurin Provincial Army, I’d gained this power to save Rose from the middle of the enemy formation—an imitation of Lily’s Devil Claw combined with a reproduction of Gerbera’s tyranny. If used, I would be able to get us through this. That was one thing I would be able to accomplish.

“B-But Senpai, if you do that...!”

“Yeah. I know.”

I nodded. There was of course a reason I hadn’t resorted to a method that was capable of breaking this deadlock.

“Using this is extremely exhausting.”

The Misty Lodge still wasn’t working properly, so I didn’t have a full grasp of their numbers, but judging by the ongoing chase, there were at least twenty enemies. I needed twenty shots. I didn’t know if I had the mana to repeat so many attacks, and even if I pulled it off, the recoil to my left arm was probably going to cripple it forever.

However, if that was the only choice, I was ready to do it. Honestly speaking, even if I could manage without resorting to this on my own, it was highly likely that I wouldn’t be able to continue protecting Katou to the end. I absolutely couldn’t allow that. I had to do this.

“There’s no need to tear apart the pack to the last. If I cull their numbers, it’ll be easier to deal with them, and they might get scared and run off.”

Regardless, it was going to exhaust me, so I had to rendezvous with Rose and Lobivia quickly. This was a tightrope act, but I didn’t have any other plans. I had to remain calm, decisive, and do whatever I was capable of. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to protect what was dear to me.

“Here I go!”

I was more than prepared for the pain and stopped running, when suddenly...

“Good grief. You’re the same as always.”

An amused boy’s voice echoed down the corridor. In the next instant, arrows of ice came rushing toward us.

◆ ◆ ◆

“Wha?!”

The arrows of ice were a magic attack. A surprise attack at that. However, there was no need for me to deal with them. It wasn’t aimed at me. The arrows only pierced the spirit foxes swooping down on me, their screams filling the corridor.

“When you act so gallantly, how can I possibly stay out of it?”

The source of the attack came around a corner down the corridor. His footsteps resounded as he approached, four shining inorganic wings of different colors spreading out behind him.

“You’re...”

It was a slender boy. His gentle smile was filled with goodwill, but it made anyone who saw it feel uneasy. It was hard to imagine many people like him.

“Kudou? What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I don’t mind answering your question,” the Lord of Darkness, Kudou Riku, said, his smile deepening, “but for now, shouldn’t we do something about this first?”

The magic he’d used was powerful, but that one volley had only defeated a few of them. Regardless, the situation had changed greatly.

“Now’s our chance. This way, Senpai,” Kudou said.

“Right! I owe you!”

I ran toward Kudou. The spirit foxes had faltered for a moment, but came back to their senses and gave chase.

“Friedrich, fire,” Kudou said, raising a hand toward them.

That was probably the name of the inorganic monster spreading its wings on Kudou’s back. Magic once more flew out of the wings, and the spirit foxes screamed again.

“Still not enough to stop them all, huh?” Kudou muttered.

Just as he said, a portion of the spirit foxes waited for a pause in the rain of magic and started their charge. Regardless, Kudou didn’t panic.

“Do it, Dora.”

“As you will.”

Obeying his command, a monochrome girl appeared out of Kudou’s shadow. This was the nightmare stalker Dora. Her arms turned into blades, and she cut down one of the charging spirit foxes.

“Trash. How absurd of you to defy our king.”

As expected of one of the Demon King’s particularly powerful subordinates, the spirit foxes sensed a clear threat in her. They came to a stop and began growling. Seeing this, Kudou cocked his head.

“It’s a little troublesome handling this many,” he said. “Defeating them all with magic is too exhausting, but if I throw Dora at them, I’m neglecting my own defenses. I hate the idea of falling into a stalemate against enemies of this level too. Now then, what to do?”

After ruminating aloud, he threw a glance my way. His lips curved into what could be called an innocent smile.

“How about it, Majima-senpai? Shall we fight on a united front?”

“A united front?”

“Yes. Just as I mentioned, I’m lacking a little power right now,” he said, looking endlessly cheerful. It was a little suspect if he was telling the truth. “With Dora at the front and me to the rear, I’m lacking a bit of defense. As such, you can leave Katou by my side, then protect both of us behind you. You’ll be free to fight that way, right?”

I had several doubts, but the plan itself wasn’t bad.

“Fine, you’re on,” I said.

Getting through our current problem was the number one priority here. I didn’t think I’d end up fighting with Kudou by my side. With neither of us possessing a winning hand, however, this was unavoidable. Above all else, there was Katou. Considering her safety, refusing wasn’t even a choice.

“But you better tell me what’s going on after this, got it?”

“Of course,” Kudou said.

“Okay then. Let’s fight together, Kudou. Katou, stay here,” I said, placing her on the ground.

“Senpai...” She looked up at me anxiously, yet made no move to stop me. She gripped my hand, and for just an instant, she brushed it against her cheek. “Please be careful.”

Leaving behind that soft and smooth sensation, she let go. I used my now free hand to draw my sword and turned around.

“Let’s do it.”

“Hmph. So my king commands.”

I stood by Dora’s side. This was my first time talking to her as something like an ally, but unlike Berta, she faced me with marked wariness. She would fight alongside me here only at Kudou’s command.

“I’ll charge in and defeat them. Trash like this are nothing to me. However, I doubt all of them will come my way. My king will intercept any who get this far with Friedrich’s magic. You—”

“Take care of all those who get past that. I’ll guard the rear,” I finished for her.

“Exactly,” Dora admitted indifferently.

“Very well, let’s exterminate them,” Kudou added, a manic glee animating his voice.

“As you will, my king.”

Just as she said she would, Dora charged the spirit foxes. The foxes were shaken by the powerful monster’s attack. Some of them leaped past her and headed our way. Kudou fired magic from his wings and struck them down. Facing those who got through, I brandished my sword.

Chapter 10: Sharing Information

The spirit foxes had given me a lot of trouble, but that was because I'd had to fight on my own. In a joint struggle, it ended all too quickly.

"That's the end of them."

After cutting down the last one, Dora came back toward us. I sheathed my sword, then got my ragged breathing in order before calling out to her.

"Thanks for the hard work. You really saved us."

"Hmph. You're the only one who had a hard time," Dora replied, her expression thorny and composed. "Trash of this level is nothing to one of my king's pawns."

This was my first time having a real conversation with her. It turned out she had a pretty twisted attitude. Her curtness reminded me of my first encounter with Berta, but it felt subtly different too. Dora acted a little younger than she appeared, giving a glimpse of her innocent pride in being Kudou's subordinate.

"Be sure to give your undying gratitude for our king's generosity in deciding to lend you a—"

"Senpai!"

Katou's slightly trembling voice cut Dora off. I turned around to see Katou running at me.

"Senpai...!"

Her gait looked unsteady. Up until Kudou had lent us a hand, I'd been carrying her on the run while jumping all over the place, so it wouldn't have been strange for her sense of balance to be a mess. Her legs tangled up, and I gently caught her light body in my arms.

"Are you all right?" I asked, but she didn't answer. Instead, her slender arms wrapped around my back.

"Thank goodness."

“Katou?”

Letting out a sigh of relief, she entrusted her entire weight against me. Her concern for me was evident.

“Yeah... I’m glad we managed safely,” I said, giving her a light tap on the back.

After rejoicing over each other’s safety, I raised my head. Kudou was watching us, and I met Dora’s eyes as she returned to his side. Kudou seemed to be in a good mood, while Dora was glaring at me reproachfully. Feeling a little awkward, I raised my voice.

“You really saved us, Kudou. You have my thanks.”

“There’s no need for that. This really helps me too,” he said, putting away his four wings with a smile. “Thanks to you protecting the rear guard, we were able to move freely as well.”

I wondered about that. He acted so composed that it was hard to believe him.

“I’m not lying,” Kudou said, shrugging as he read what I was thinking. “I wasn’t as badly cornered as you were, but there was plenty for me to gain by joining forces with you. Just as I said before, I’m short on power right now.”

“Oh yeah, what happened to your monsters?”

I finally started questioning why the many monsters who usually served Kudou weren’t around. Things had been so desperate that I hadn’t had the composure to find that odd. Once I realized this, I saw that there were several strange things at play here.

“Actually, forget your monsters, couldn’t you have used your ability to subordinate those foxes? Why are you here to begin with? Do you know anything about this place?”

“Slow down. I can’t answer all your questions at once,” Kudou said, holding up a relaxed palm. “I won’t run away, so let’s go through them one by one. I have questions of my own too.”

Considering what was going on, sharing information did sound like a good idea.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” I said.

“You can’t.”

However, a firm voice cut into our conversation. I looked down, where Katou was staring up at me with slightly teary eyes. It was unusual for her to look at me like that. As I faltered over this, she spoke in a somewhat strong tone.

“Senpai, your shoulder is injured. You need to treat it first.

“But...”

“You can’t.”

“But...”

“You can’t.”

She had no intention of backing down. Kudou’s shoulders shook in amusement as he watched.

“She has you at a loss, Senpai,” he said. “Let’s do as she says. I don’t want to leave your wound untended either.”

“Fine...”

I didn’t want to worry Katou or anything either. We went ahead with her proposal, moved over to the side of the corridor, and talked while she treated my wound. Katou quickly got to work on my shoulder. She sidled up against me as I sat down, checking the state of my injury. I’d torn the fox away violently while it’d been biting me, so a broken fang remained in the gash. Stopping me from wrenching it out, Katou pulled some tweezers from her magic bag and carefully pulled out the fang before casting healing magic.

Despite her shy manner while I’d been carrying her, she was scarily serious when it came to treating me. She showed no signs of concern that Kudou was watching her press up against me, touching my skin directly. I swallowed my embarrassment and focused on my conversation with Kudou.

“I’d rather you not suspect me, so let’s get this out of the way first,” he said. “I’m not the mastermind behind this incident. In this particular instance, I’m a fellow victim.”

“In this one instance?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

He had quite the smile. It bothered me a little, but we wouldn’t get anywhere if I pressed him for answers.

“So what’s going on? Why are you here?” I asked.

“Right. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to see you, then got caught up in that teleportation. So, I have no idea where we might be.”

“You were coming to see me?” Meaning he’d gotten dragged into this too. However, that sparked another question. “I thought you were in Aker?”

The imperial capital was very far from Aker. It’d be one thing if he had used Fairy Ring as we had, but this was hardly somewhere he could’ve just dropped by for a visit.

“I don’t think you could’ve followed us all the way here,” I added.

“No, that’s a little wrong. I didn’t follow you. I left for the capital before you did.”

“You left ahead of us?”

“Yes. After seeing you in Aker, I immediately departed for the imperial capital. That’s why I had more time to get here than you think.”

“Right after we met... That makes it just over a month ago?”

I’d met Kudou while we’d been waiting for Shimazu and Iino to return from the capital after presenting the church with our conditions for participating in the peace talks. The church had needed one month to get everything ready. Shimazu had spent one week returning with us using Fairy Ring. It had in fact been a significant amount of time.

“In any case, the imperial capital is, without a doubt, the center of the world right now,” Kudou said. “Many other visitors are converging here. I made up my mind the day of.”

“Well, I know you had the time, but it was still fast,” I said. “Setting aside your fast servants, what did you do about the slower ones?”

“I didn’t leave them behind or anything. I have a little trick up my sleeve.”

He was clearly keeping a secret behind his smile. There were things he was and wasn't going to tell us. I had no intention of prying either. If pushed to say it, I was more astonished at his boldness.

"I'm surprised you managed to sneak into the grand cathedral," I said.

"The cathedral itself is open to the public, and using Anton's spawns, it's possible to get a fair distance one way or another. Still, the security around you was far too tight, so I had no choice but to wait and see how things went."

"And as you did, you noticed the teleportation?"

"Aah, no. To be precise, I noticed the attack that happened beforehand."

"An attack?"

"Yes. So you really didn't see it?" Kudou said. "An ax. An ax was thrown through a window. Noticing that irregularity, I ordered Dora to charge in."

"An ax...?"

Katou, still casting healing magic on me, tugged on my sleeve.

"Senpai, isn't that what that was?" she said. "Remember? Before being sent here, we heard a loud noise."

"Aah, now that you mention it."

I remembered too, of course. Right before teleporting, it'd sounded like something had broken. I'd wondered what'd happened. Kudou was apparently referring to that.

"Meaning we were attacked before being teleported?" Katou said. "I hope nobody was hurt."

"I didn't hear any screaming, and I didn't sense any pain over the mental path. I think they're fine," I reassured her.

The thrown ax had probably flown into an empty room. That said, even if someone had been in there, anyone other than Katou wouldn't have suffered a serious injury from a randomly thrown ax.

"But why an ax?" I said.

"Why indeed...?"

The first thing that came to mind when it came to axes was Rose, but she fundamentally used them as melee weapons. She only threw one when it was necessary. An ax wasn't very convenient to use as an opening for a long-range attack. The two of us cocked our heads when Dora clicked her tongue.

"What? Do you doubt us? It was definitely an ax," she said.

"My kinetic vision was too poor to spot it, but Dora insists, so I believe it was an ax for sure," Kudou added. "This is a servant I named, after all."

"It is just as my king says," Dora said, looking as though her spirits had been lifted. "Well, I didn't manage to see the offender, though."

It was strange, but apparently the truth.

"Dora," Katou said as I tried to process the facts, "were you able to notice anything else?"

"What else, specifically?" Dora asked.

"Anything will do. Even the smallest details."

"That's not much to go on..." Dora grimaced a little. A spark of memory glimmered in her eye. "Now that I think of it, it looked like there was something wrapped around the haft."

"What was it?"

"Something like a small bag. I don't know if there was anything inside... What?"

Dora made a quizzical look. Katou had narrowed her eyes a little.

"Is that what it was...?" Katou said.

"Did you think of something?" I asked.

"This is just a conjecture," she started, turning my way, "but I wonder if there was a magic tool inside. I mean, we were questioning how Okazaki had used Fairy Ring to teleport us, right? If the bag tied to the ax contained one of two teleportation runestones, wouldn't that work?"

Teleportation runestones worked in pairs. By pouring mana into one, it was possible to teleport to the other, just like Zoltan and Edgar had done before.

Her theory was sound in my estimation.

“Okazaki finished preparing to use Fairy Ring, then used a teleportation runestone to leap into someone’s room! If that’s how he did it, then it’s possible to use Fairy Ring instantly!”

Maybe he’d used another magic tool, but either way, it meant it’d been possible for Okazaki to use Fairy Ring in an instant.

“If someone is helping him, I suppose it’d have to be Ottmar’s group,” Katou said.

“You think so too?” I agreed. “They do have teleportation runestones in their possession after all.”

Something that had only been conjecture was now closer to a certainty. That was what I felt now. At the same time, this conflict remained highly unpredictable.

“I hope nobody bumps into enemies before we all meet up,” I said.

“Right. Hopefully, at least a few groups can link up first,” Katou agreed.

“By Ottmar, you mean the former knight of the Holy Order you fought a few times?” Kudou joined in.

“Yeah. I don’t know if he’s cooperating with Okazaki or if he instigated him, but Ottmar is definitely involved. I don’t think Okazaki is capable of doing something so bold on his own, and he wouldn’t have the magic tools to begin with. Besides, the same goes for this place. I doubt he found it on his own.”

“This place, huh?” Kudou took a look around, then turned back to me. “Speaking of, there’s something strange about it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You wondered why I couldn’t dominate those foxes. In truth, my ability doesn’t work on the monsters here.”

“What...?”

“It’s true. At that level, there’s no way it shouldn’t...” Kudou said, a hint of displeasure in his voice. “I’ve gone all over the world, but this is a first for me.

Something is strange about these halls. Have you noticed anything about it, Senpai?”

“Now that you mention it... I’m not sure if it’s for the same reason, but I can’t deploy the Misty Lodge here either.”

“Even the Misty Lodge...?”

“I wonder what exactly this site is?”

By the looks of it, it was created by human hands, but the intention behind its design was a mystery. What had such an enormous structure been created for? It was far beyond the scale of something potentially built in secret. Maybe it would be best for us to go around the vicinity of the capital asking for anyone who knew about it. To investigate this mystery, we’d have to get out of here first.

“Well, I doubt we’ll figure anything out about this place by thinking about it,” I said. “Now it’s my turn. I’ll tell you what I know.”

Judging that we weren’t going to find an answer, I started telling Kudou everything I knew. As we talked, Katou remained sidled against me, giving her healing magic her undivided attention. Even if it couldn’t compare to Lily’s grade 3 abilities, continuous application had a decent effect. By the time we finished talking, the wound had largely sealed.

“That’s everything,” I finished.

“I understand the situation,” Kudou said. “So you and your companions are currently trying to reconvene.”

“That’s the idea. What’ll you do, Kudou?”

“If I’m not an impediment, I was thinking of accompanying you.”

I was relieved to get the exact answer I was hoping for.

“Is that so? It’ll really help,” I said, grateful from the bottom of my heart.

Unconsciously, I lowered my gaze. Having finished casting healing magic on me, Katou was still sitting on the ground, leaning against my side. I met her eyes. My greatest fear was being unable to protect her because of my lack of strength. The reason for my relief was that I felt it would be possible to protect

her now.

“What is it, Senpai?” Katou asked curiously.

“It’s nothing,” I answered, shaking my head.

I hugged her. She let out a quiet yelp. I was all healed up and we’d finished sharing information. It was time to get moving.

Chapter 11: Hypothetical

Now that we had Kudou and Dora with us, the monsters in our path were no longer a problem. Upon encountering any, Dora launched a violent assault, Kudou used magic to intercept any who slipped through to attack the rear guard, and I took on any who managed to get past that. Depending on the circumstances, I took into consideration having to use my “left arm,” but it hadn’t come up yet.

“Heh heh. We really do seem to have good affinity,” Kudou said after the din of battle faded.

“Setting aside matters of affinity, we have a good division of labor going,” I said.

“Indeed. It feels good to be able to cooperate so well.”

“I don’t know if it feels good, per se, but it is less stressful.”

While it seemed that we had gone off on a few tangents, Kudou was enjoying himself. It’d been about half an hour since we joined up; after walking the entire time and the occasional battle, he was looking a little tired. Unlike me, he couldn’t enhance his body with mana, so there was no helping that.

He didn’t look that fit to begin with. It seemed like he had even less muscle on him than when we first met. Kudou had been on the move up until he found me, so what little stamina he had had already been exhausted. I couldn’t push him too hard.

“Should we take a break?” I suggested.

“I can still keep going,” he said. “We should be linking up with your servants soon, right? In that case, we can rest after that.”

Rose and Lobivia were nearby, but we still hadn’t found them. This place was like a maze, so it wasn’t that strange for this to happen. Still, now that we were this close, it was only a matter of time.

“Got it,” I said, “but tell me if it gets too rough.”

“Yes, of course.”

“You too, Katou. If something’s up, don’t hold back and let me know,” I added, looking at the girl being carried in my arms. I then cocked my head. “Katou?”

She looked a little depressed. Or perhaps apologetic would be more accurate? It was an extreme contrast to Kudou’s cheerful attitude. I had no idea what could have inspired her dour mood.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, um...” Katou threw a quick glance at Kudou and Dora, then shrank her slender frame in my arms. “Sorry, Senpai. I’m the only useless one here.”

That was enough for me to understand. After hearing my conversation with Kudou, she felt inadequate when comparing his ability to her current state. It was true. Unlike Kudou, Katou couldn’t participate directly in battle. However, that wasn’t the same as having no part at all.

“What are you saying?” I protested. “Didn’t you just heal my wound with magic earlier?”

“That’s not—”

“It’s important,” I said, cutting her off. “I can’t use healing magic. It makes a big difference to have the means to heal our wounds at a critical moment.”

Much like how I’d acquired as much strength as I could so that I could fight in close-quarters combat, she’d done her best to learn healing magic. Both had equal worth. The only difference was the role we each played.

“Do what you’re capable of. Isn’t that how we’ve always complimented each other?” I said. I believed this was important, so I didn’t hesitate to voice my opinion. “The same applies here.”

“Yes... Thank you very much, Senpai,” Katou said, giving me a delighted smile.

She still looked a little down, but I’d managed to cheer her up. That was a relief. At this rate, once we found the others, she’d be back to her usual self. Currently, we just happened to need a more direct form of strength in battle. That was a matter of us lacking capable fighters. Put another way, it could be

said that Katou would have no need to feel depressed if I was stronger. Thinking I had to get my act together, I noticed someone's gaze on me. Kudou had been watching our entire exchange.

"What?" I asked, aware I came across as a little stiff.

This wasn't out of some trivial concern like being watched by an outsider. I knew I had empathy for Kudou, but I hadn't forgotten who exactly he was. The high spirits he was in from the moment I first met him was, at most, because of an obsession he had with my existence. The true nature of that was both terrifying and sad.

"My hatred won't go away. I can't get rid of my resentment. I just can't forgive them... How could I?"

"Yeah, that's right. How could I possibly stop now? I can't allow such a thing."

That was what Kudou had once said. Those words had come from the bottom of his heart. The hatred fueling him still raged on, and the only ones with him here were me and Katou. This wouldn't develop into a problem if my servants were here, but Katou was human. I couldn't predict how he would act.

He could face her with animosity or hostility, show clear displeasure, or at worst, even do something forceful. So long as I had such apprehensions, it was only natural for me to stand at the ready... That was exactly why it was a bit of an anti-climax.

"No, it's nothing," Kudou answered casually. "I was just watching because you seem to get along so well."

He didn't appear to harbor any grudge against her. The Demon King smiled in a good mood like any normal boy. I didn't sense any falsehood in that. The Demon King who was trying to destroy the world had no intention of killing Katou. There wasn't the slightest hint that he did.

"Hey... Kudou?" I said, urged to speak because of that contradiction. "You said you came to the imperial capital because it's currently the center of the world."

"Yes. What about it?"

"What do you want to do?"

I'd questioned this before. I had many doubts regarding Kudou's behavior. He'd said he would destroy the world as the Demon King, and he'd been accumulating power suitable to fulfill that goal. I'd also heard from Iino that he'd been moving behind the scenes during the fake savior incident.

On the other hand, Kudou had shown no signs of indiscriminately attacking the populace. From what I'd heard, he hadn't directed any hatred toward the villagers who'd been thrust into danger because of the former exploration team members. Even now, it didn't look like he felt any ill will toward Katou. Kudou's murderous intent wasn't indiscriminate.

Back when we met in Aker, I'd interpreted this as hesitation. That'd been wrong. However, if that was the case, what did Kudou actually want to do? I still couldn't see it at all.

"Senpai..." Kudou said, pulling back his smile.

He stared right at me. I didn't look away. After ten seconds of nothing but our footsteps echoing in the corridor, Kudou suddenly sighed.

"What do I want to do...?"

Kudou smiled once more. That said, it looked a little different from his usual unreadable archaic smile.

"Let's talk hypothetically," he said.

"Kudou? What are you getting at...?"

"It's a very common question. Please relax and hear me out," Kudou started, then spoke smoothly. "Say there existed a horrible tyrant. You go back to the past and meet him when he is but an infant. If you kill him, you'll save the many people he'll kill in the future, ridding the world of unhappiness. Now then, is killing this still innocent infant, one who will one day become a tyrant, the right thing to do?"

I'd heard the question somewhere before. However, there was a lifelike quality to it now.

"I believe there are many opinions on this. I don't mean to argue one way or the other. However..." Kudou paused, smiling without any hint of amusement.

“In my opinion, ‘evil shouldn’t be forgiven.’”

The reason I felt a little overawed was that it felt like everything defining Kudou lay behind these words. Still, I couldn’t read enough into it to see his intentions.

“Meaning killing him is righteous?” I asked, somewhat perplexed.

“No. Not at all.” Kudou shook his head. “You’ve got it wrong, Senpai. ‘What’s right’ and ‘righteous’ are different. Also, ‘what you should do’ and ‘what’s right’ aren’t necessarily the same. Senpai, you don’t protect your companions because it’s ‘what’s right,’ do you?”

“That’s...certainly true.”

“The act of killing the future tyrant is without a doubt evil. No matter what your reasons may be, it still is. That’s what I believe.”

Interpreting his words was like grasping at clouds. I simply couldn’t touch upon the core of the boy known as Kudou Riku. Or maybe that simply applied to everyone. I shared similar circumstances with him, but we hadn’t gone through identical experiences. We were capable of sympathizing with each other, but understanding each other perfectly was impossible.

If anyone was capable of touching upon Kudou’s core, it would be someone who happened to be there when he started on the path of the Demon King. However, as far as I knew, nobody of the like existed. Perhaps nobody would be able to understand the Demon King’s intentions to the very end.

“Ha ha, please don’t put too much thought into it,” Kudou said, his unreadable expression returning to normal. “This is no more than idle chatter.”

He did have a point there. From the very beginning, talking about something like this wasn’t going to change anything. That was why Kudou had chosen this topic. I knew that, but...

“What does it matter what I think about anything?” Kudou added. “I’m the Demon King. I resent the world. That’s all there is to it.”

“That’s wrong,” I said. I felt like I had to say this. Even if I couldn’t understand his intentions, there were other things I did know. “Even if that’s all there is to

you, there are those who think otherwise.”

Today, having spoken with Dora too, there was one thing I was able to reconfirm. It was regarding that gallant wolf, Berta. She was different from Kudou’s other subordinates. She knew Kudou was going to keep running toward his own destruction, meeting an end filled with despair. She prayed that he would at least find salvation. This manner of devotion would be impossible if Kudou only saw himself as the Demon King.

“There’s someone out there who wants you to find salvation, after all,” I said.

“Berta, you mean...” Kudou realized who I meant right away. It was a little unexpected. “So it’s been thinking of such things...?” Kudou let a bitter smile show. “Good grief. That one really is a failure.”

That was a rather horrible thing to say. Just as always, the Demon King was cruel to his noble servant. However, seeing his face, I was caught off guard. Uncharacteristically for him, Kudou truly looked troubled.

In all likelihood, he hadn’t realized it himself. If he had, he wouldn’t be exposing such a vulnerable expression. If I had just a little more time, it might’ve been possible for me to figure out what this was. Before I could, the situation changed.

“My king. Please be careful,” Dora said, raising a warning tone. Her eyes sharply glared in the direction we were going. “Something has collapsed up ahead.”

Chapter 12: The True Battle

“Say, Lily. May I ask something?” Gerbera said, running alongside Lily, a vaguely restless look in her red eyes. “What is everyone’s situation? It should be about time for us to check where they all are using the mental path.”

Gerbera was incapable of checking where all her distant companions were by searching the mental path. Lily could, but the act required intense concentration. It was far more difficult to do than sensing a vague direction. Not even the source of the ability, Majima Takahiro, was capable of constantly monitoring such a steady stream of information. It would be foolish to overdo it and exhaust herself just because they were worried. It could affect their concentration at a potentially critical moment. They had to be patient, so a fair amount of time had passed since Lily last checked.

The group had spent so much time together that being unsure of where the others were in enemy territory was an extremely stressful situation. Gerbera was considerably fretful, and Lily couldn’t claim to be calm about it either.

“Right, I guess now’s about time,” Lily said.

“Really?!”

“Hang on a sec, I need to concentrate.”

Leaving it any longer would just push their stress levels even higher. That in mind, Lily focused on the mental path. Meanwhile, Gerbera devoted herself to watching their surroundings as they kept running.

“Mm... I’ve got a grasp of it,” Lily said, accomplishing her objective after some time. “It looks like everyone is converging steadily.”

“Really?!”

“Yup. If I had to say anything, I guess Shiran is going a little slower than expected. Conversely, Rose and Lobovia should be reaching our master soon.”

“Ooh, that’s wonderful news.”

Gerbera’s expression brightened up. Relaxing her focus, Lily smiled too.

“At this rate, Rose will get to him in about the same amount of time as we initially predicted,” Lily said.

“Hm. I suppose that’s good progress. I panicked a little when we found there are tons of monsters here.”

“Right. Rose and Lobivia are strong, but against a whole swarm, they’ll get stalled a significant amount... Going at the pace we initially predicted means they haven’t been bumping into any. Looks like they’ve been fortunate.”

“Karma for their usual upstanding behavior!”

“Hee hee. You’re right. We should hurry too.”

Speaking of luck, the two of them hadn’t encountered any problems either. They’d bumped into two packs of monsters, but had broken through without spending much time on them. Among their group, the pair boasted the greatest strength in combat.

Their master, Majima Takahiro, would soon rendezvous with Rose and Lobivia. Overcoming the obstacles in their paths, their companions were gradually converging. Things were proceeding smoothly. At least, they were up until now.

However, Lily was aware that it wouldn’t end like this. They’d thrown their enemy’s plans off by resisting the teleportation. That meant the foe had only been stalled. Given enough time, they would make a move. She knew this, so she’d been in a hurry to rendezvous before that could happen.

That was why she’d been prepared for this development.

“It would’ve been best if all of us could get together first, but I guess things aren’t gonna go that well.”

“Lily?”

“Stop, Gerbera. Looks like the *real* enemy has appeared.”

The monsters they’d fought until now were no more than residents of this strange place. In a way, they were more obstacles than worthy combatants. There was still another, more dangerous adversary that had to be defeated.

“I see... How convenient,” Gerbera said, ferocious hostility clear in her eyes.

“Let’s crush them.”

“Mm.”

Hearts filled with determination, the two stopped running. They narrowed their eyes sharply, and the true villain appeared before them.

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What came around the corner of the dimly lit corridor was a group clad in the armor of the Holy Order. Despite appearances, Lily already knew that they were not formal knights.

“So you’re Ottmar?” she said.

Much like the other groups, Lily had figured out who was responsible for this incident and who had supported him. A man giving off a robotic impression stood at the head of the knights. At his sides were two smoothly textured puppets.

“Correct, Lily. This is the Angel Puppeteer,” Gerbera said, having met the man before. Her body seethed with fighting spirit. “Good grief, to refuse to learn your lesson so many times. I don’t know how you did it, but it must’ve been quite the journey chasing us all the way from Aker.”

“That is how closely tied we are by fate,” Ottmar replied, his tone emotionless.

“Fate?” Lily repeated, narrowing her eyes. “So is your motive revenge for having the tables turned on you? That was quite the feat. Doing something so crazy and even going as far as inciting Okazaki Takuma.”

“Mister Okazaki is an ally. We didn’t provoke him. He lent us his strength.”

“Hmm. Well, you can say whatever you want.” Lily shrugged. This conversation was meaningless when there was no telling how much of what he said was true. “Let me just ask you first: Care to surrender? If you tell us everything you know, maybe I’ll take that into consideration afterward?”

“Impossible. All of you will die here.”

“That’s quite the grudge...”

Although, as a deserter, losing Travis Mortimer and Louis Bard, his employers, one after the other had to be a serious blow. Much like the puppets he manipulated, it simply didn't show on his face. It wouldn't be strange for him to resent Majima Takahiro. That was no more than unjust resentment, though. Lily had no obligation to put up with it.

"I see. Then we'll defeat you right here."

Lily pointed her spear at Ottmar. Despite everything, this was a great opportunity. According to what she'd heard of Rose's battle against them, Ottmar served as the core of these former knights. If they defeated him here, their situation would improve greatly.

There were around thirty hostiles. A significant force, to be certain, but Lily and Gerbera were capable of fighting them. Lily had a particular, practiced advantage against knights of the Holy Order. During their last battle, she'd managed to turn their debilitation magic against them. Also, specializing in maneuvering freely in three dimensions, Gerbera had a significant advantage in such a restricted space.

"Let's do it!"

"Mm!"

They were going to end things here and now. Lily and Gerbera charged into battle. This was the strongest tag team among Majima Takahiro's servants. However, Ottmar showed no signs of faltering before them.

"I told you, you're the ones who will die here," he said, his tone as inhuman as ever. He casually raised his hand. That was the signal. A figure jumped out from behind the knights. "It's in your hands. Bring down the hammer of justice upon these evil monsters."

"Leave it to me," a deep muffled voice responded.

"That's...?" Lily quietly muttered to herself.

The man gave off a bizarre impression. It was hard to see his build because of his robe, and his face was hidden by a mask. The mask was decorated with many feathers that went all the way to the back of his head. He was a complete mystery. Who could it be?

At first, Lily thought it was Battle Ogre Edgar Guivarch, a member of the Holy Order's Fourth Company with whom their group had fought multiple times. However, his build couldn't be hidden with robes like that. The mana she felt on her skin wasn't as great as the Battle Ogre either. When he activated his ability, Edgar had enough strength to go toe-to-toe with a cheater, meaning this foe wasn't at that level.

Still, she sensed the enemy was close to her and Gerbera's level, so she couldn't be careless. What's more, the weapon he was wielding was bizarre too. It was an enormous sword with a pitch-black blade. Its sinister look clearly indicated that it was some kind of magic weapon.

This was the reason Ottmar was so composed. It was definitely the ace up his sleeve. Recognizing this, Lily didn't falter or halt her charge. This was a surprising turn of events, but nothing to panic over. In truth, she'd predicted that Ottmar had had some kind of trap ready.

Ottmar had no chance of winning in a head-on collision against them. What's more, he hadn't run away or hidden and had instead come out to attack them. It was only natural to assume he'd been up to something. That was why Lily had planned to devote her first move entirely to blocking and dodging. She used her trump card, the ability to mimic multiple monsters at once, and deployed a specialized defense.

Her right hand turned into an enormous shell with a metal-like texture. Hard scales covered the right sight of her body. Even a warrior's all-out attack wouldn't easily break through such an aegis. With her defenses hardened, Lily stepped in front of Gerbera. Her role was to be the shield. By catching the first attack, she would push back and create an opening if possible. Gerbera would then use that opportunity to counterattack.

If this was enough to defeat him, then that was that. If not, they would gain information on their enemy and even potentially consider retreating. This was an approach they'd developed informed by their constant flirtation with death. Even with such might at their fingertips, Lily wasn't careless.

That was how genuinely unreasonable this enemy was.

Everything up until this point had gone smoothly. However, now that they'd

encountered this enemy, the true battle had begun.

“Lily?!”

Gerbera’s scream echoed down the corridor. Cutting through every layer of defense, the bizarre sword split Lily’s torso in two.

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The hardy shell, the lithe yet firm scales, and even Rose’s specially-made armor served no purpose whatsoever. The sword split Lily from her right shoulder all the way to the opposite waist. The word dreadful seemed inadequate. It was like the slash had met no resistance at all. Half the tortoise shell and part of Lily’s right arm twirled up toward the high ceiling. Lily’s body lost all its strength and collapsed to the floor—then popped right back up.

“H-Holy crap?!”

Even as she staggered from her unbalanced body, Lily stepped back in a fluster. Her severed arm returned to a slimy state and splashed against the ground. Not that she had the leisure to retrieve it.

“Lily, are you all right?!” Gerbera yelled.

“I’m not! Anyone else would’ve died!” Lily shouted back.

She grabbed her severed right half and stuck it back on. This was a crude approach, but there was a need to hurry. The masked enemy had his sword brandished and was charging at her.

“Whoa?!”

Lily rolled backward to dodge the blow. Faced with yet another attack, she mimicked a firefang’s breath to blow flames at him. This was apparently unexpected, and the masked enemy came to a stop.

“Gerbera, we’re running!”

Lily’s decision was quick. Gerbera immediately obeyed and ran. They heard Ottmar yell, “After them!” right away. The knights gave chase with the masked enemy at their fore.

“Lily, should we really be running?!” Gerbera screamed, scattering spider

webs to slow their pursuers. She'd done as she was told, but didn't really understand.

"We have no choice!" Lily answered while busily rejuvenating her missing right arm. The damage she'd suffered was great. She'd lost a huge chunk of mana. However, that wasn't the only reason she'd chosen to run away. "That thing just now! It's probably magic! It's really bad! I can tell after getting hit by it! It doesn't cut as if it met no resistance, it *really* cuts with no resistance!"

"What...?"

Gerbera was speechless. Her red eyes focused on the spider webs she'd left behind that the masked enemy's sinister sword was cutting through like they were nothing. It was the same as before. Lily's defenses hadn't broken. The abnormal thing here was the feedback. There was no feeling of physical objects hitting each other. The blade simply slipped through. That was what it meant to cut with no resistance.

"I-I can't believe it. Is such power even possible?" Gerbera said.

"It sure is... It actually happened to me and all."

Lily added to Gerbera's attempts to stall the enemy as they talked. She fired grade 3 wind magic. Countless blades of wind filled the corridor. This seemed somewhat effective. The masked enemy swung their sword, even managing to cut the blades, but there were simply too many to handle for one person. Such a display served only to stall them temporarily. Using that brief respite, Lily shared what information she had.

"There was a cheater in the Colony with a similar power. His nickname was the Absolute Blade. So long as he held a bladed weapon, his inherent ability let him cut through anything. But it didn't matter what kind of weapon he had, so he wouldn't need that kinda weird sword. I guess it's a cheap imitation? It looks like that sword has a similar power."

Lily was talking about the exploration team's nicknamed cheater, the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji. He'd gone missing alongside the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya far to the south during the Colony's fall. Despite its ultimate fate, the exploration team's leader, Nakajima Kojirou, had entrusted those two with the Colony's safety, meaning they not only had his trust, but possessed

powerful abilities to handle the task. Even a cheap imitation was a threat.

“That magic weapon can’t possibly be normal. Maybe it’s a relic of salvation?”

“Another troublesome nuisance...” Gerbera groaned.

A blade that passed through anything couldn’t even be blocked. It could only be dodged. Being forced to evade every attack narrowed their choices significantly. This made defending meaningless while also making any offensive tactics problematic. Simply blocking a weapon with that sword would be enough to bisect said weapon, ensuring that they couldn’t even keep the enemy in check.

Judging by what she could see of the masked enemy’s movements, his strength even without the weapon was very close to Gerbera and Lily. Given the enormous advantage of that weapon, facing him head-on would be extremely dangerous. What’s more, there was Ottmar and the other knights to consider. Being able to handle them from a range with Lily’s magic at least improved the situation a little.

“Ugh. I suppose we have no choice but to withdraw,” Gerbera said. “But we have to reach our lord!”

With no other way to turn, they had to escape in the opposite direction they’d been going. That meant getting further from being able to reunite with the others. Gerbera gritted her teeth in vexation.

“No... Depending on how you look at it, it means we’re keeping that dangerous bunch from reaching our lord too,” Gerbera added.

“Right.”

Gerbera’s senses were sharp when it came to battle. Agreeing with her, Lily turned to look over her shoulder.

“Actually, let’s keep pulling them away. While we do, they won’t be able to attack our master.”

First, they had to get that masked enemy and Ottmar far away from this place. After that, they could somehow shake them off and work on reuniting with their friends. That was the only choice. It was irritating that they couldn’t

secure their precious master’s safety with their own hands for a while longer. Given their predicament, they were going to have to entrust that to Rose and Lobivia, who were going to get to him soon.

And so, Lily and Gerbera kept an eye out for opportunities to counterattack, beginning their long and arduous battle.

Chapter 13: Masked Mystery

Ottmar had finally shown himself, signaling the beginning of the genuine battle. Lily and Gerbera were leading Ottmar and the unidentified masked enemy away, having no choice but to leave their master to his other servants. Their hopes were pinned on the ones who were closest to finding him, Rose and Lobivia.

Lily didn't know this, but the two of them were accompanied by the Skanda Iino Yuna. If they managed to find Majima Takahiro, his safety would improve drastically. That was true.

That was only if they managed to find him, though.

Lily had overlooked one fact. Only knowing one facet of the whole, there was something she simply couldn't have accounted for. Earlier, she'd checked where everyone was relative to each other using the mental path. She'd found that her master and Rose were far closer than the last time she'd checked. However, the question was how long that'd been the case.

Had they been on the move the entire time to reach that point? Or had they reached it a while ago and come to a stop? Lily had no way of knowing. Had she constantly been monitoring their location, she would've realized. Or perhaps if she knew that Iino Yuna was accompanying them, she would've found this strange.

"At this rate, Rose will get to him in about the same amount of time we initially predicted."

That was what Lily had told Gerbera, but that was strange. After all, their initial predictions had only factored in Rose and Lobivia being together. Lily's calculations were based on them having to fight each time they encountered monsters blocking their path. However, the Skanda was accompanying them. Monsters weren't obstacles. They could move at a normally impossible speed.

As such, going at the same speed as Lily's prediction was clearly slow. It meant something had happened. But what? A moot point. After all, they

already had the answer to that question. Lily and Gerbera weren't the only ones who'd started fighting the real enemy.

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"Something is getting closer."

"Another monster?"

"Probably."

It happened immediately after Rose settled the quarrel between Iino Yuna and Lobivia.

"First, we need to get these obstacles out of our way," Iino said, running off and then immediately changing her tune. "Wh-What the?!"

She was so thrown off that she couldn't hide her discomposure. Nevertheless, she thrust out her slender sword. Thanks to her vast experience from fighting all over the world, she wouldn't be deterred.

"Haah!"

Her strike was faster than any other. Even her strength was comparable to the average combat-focused cheater. In truth, this boundlessly powerful strike had easily defeated many monsters to this day. This time, however, the blow was caught with an ear-grating clash of metal. Her attack, one that couldn't be perceived by the human eye, had been blocked by a sword. The sword's wielder wore the same mask as Lily's opponent.

"Impossible..." Iino mumbled in astonishment.

The masked enemy's reaction was naturally a little delayed, but it still kept up with her speed. As one of the strongest cheaters, only another cheater, a beloved of blessed blood at the level of the Battle Ogre, or just barely some of the strongest monsters like Lily and Gerbera, could keep up with her. Her enemy had outrageous skill. Despite her shock, her body kept pace.

"Yaah!"

Making full use of her speed, she dodged to the side, then struck at a different angle. So long as her enemy was reacting a little late, unleashing a chain of attacks would ensure that she would come out on top. As such, she

focused on getting more and more strikes in. Her plan wasn't unsound. The masked enemy was sure to fall in no time. If they had been alone, that is.

"Again?!"

Another masked enemy cut in between them and blocked her attack. Surprisingly, this one also possessed the strength to go toe to toe with the Skanda. And that wasn't all. There were five masked enemies in total. Unbelievably, despite somewhat of a difference between them, they all possessed comparable skill.

"You're kidding... Are you saying multiple people joined forces with Okazaki?!"

It was natural for her to be shaken. Possessing the power to somehow manage against the Skanda meant every enemy here was in no way inferior to a warrior of the exploration team. Still, they were different from warriors in that they had a clear command structure and mental fortitude.

For better or worse, warriors were egotistic and tended to have mental breakdowns when in an inferior position. They'd gained strength based on an unconscious certainty that they had to have some kind of power, making such weakness an inevitability.

However, the enemies before her fought with proper coordination. Not a single one showed any sign of trying to showboat. Also, even though they were facing the Skanda, an opponent who was beyond them individually, they didn't falter and properly fulfilled their roles. That gave Iino no opening to exploit. Even the Skanda couldn't easily defeat multiple opponents who were close to her level at the same time.

If she was here on her own, maybe it would be possible for her to manage. At worst, she could depend on her explosive leg strength to escape. No matter who these people were, they wouldn't be able to keep up with the Skanda's speed. That wasn't an option, though. Rose and Lobivia were with her.

"Gah?!"

Unable to hold back the attack of the masked enemy who'd gotten around Iino, Rose used her ax as a shield and was knocked over.

“Get away from her!”

“Rose!”

Iino Yuna immediately went to help, and Lobivia screamed.

“Lobivia... I’m fine. Protect yourself,” Rose said calmly, getting up and swinging her left arm that’d been rendered unusable.

“Combat Matryoshka. Exchange.”

Her arm split in two, activating the magic tool within. A new arm appeared and attached itself, and Rose readied herself once more.

“That’s not enough to defeat me.”

Resetting all damage done to her, Rose didn’t shy away from the battlefield. The speed at which she was able to get back on her feet was her greatest weapon. The reason she’d gotten hit in the first place was because she’d covered Lobivia. She’d made full use of her ability to recover instantaneously from damage.

Rose and Lobivia had often fought against enemies who were stronger than them. Neither had the strength to face these masked enemies head-on. Having to use what openings they could get while fighting Iino Yuna, the masked enemies couldn’t launch many attacks against the two, and the two girls had enough strength to defend against those attempts.

Lobivia was particularly strong. If she took on her original form as a dragon, she would be a much bigger target, giving Iino Yuna too much to cover. As such, she maintained her form as a little girl, transforming only her arms into their draconic aspect. She combined the martial arts she’d recently learned from Kei with her instincts as a beast. Whenever the masked enemies showed an opening, she charged into them. Once in a while, she also supported Iino Yuna with her flaming breath.

Things got dangerous here and there, but thanks to Rose taking the initiative to shield the others and instantly retake the field, they were managing. The masked enemies’ coordination was impressive, but Rose and Lobivia weren’t going to be outdone. So long as Iino Yuna was here to support them too, they weren’t going to be defeated so easily.

Conversely, it was also difficult for the girls to defeat their enemies. With neither side capable of dealing a decisive blow, the battle remained a stalemate. In other words, this prevented them from linking up with Majima Takahiro.

“What’s with these guys?! We were so close!”

Lobivia screamed in irritation. They’d spent a fair amount of time stuck here. They needed something significant to break this deadlock. In truth, they needed Majima Takahiro to reach them instead. Much like how Rose and Lobivia had the Skanda Iino Yuna as the ace up their sleeve, he had a joker: the Lord of Darkness Kudou Riku. Even without the majority of his army, he had the nightmare stalker Dora, dirty sludge Caesar, and elemental dragonfly Friedrich.

If they came here, it was more than enough to overturn the situation. The turning point to this battle might depend on how fast Majima Takahiro managed to make it here.

There was of course no need to say this, but—

“Why are you here?!”

This wasn’t the only place where the true battle had started.

Chapter 14: The Stray Corpse

“My king. Please be careful. Something has collapsed up ahead.”

Following Dora’s warning, we came to a stop. I squinted and looked down the corridor, spotting something on the ground lit by the walls’ dim light. It was still pretty far away, so I couldn’t make out anything more than a black lump.

“Is that...a person?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Dora answered, her eyesight apparently unhindered at this distance. “It’s probably a man. It’s face down, so I can’t say for sure.” She then turned to Kudou. “What shall we do, my king?”

“It’s suspicious...” Kudou said, narrowing his eyes. “It might be a trap. Dora, go take a look for us.”

“Ah. No. Kudou, I’ll do it,” I said.

“Senpai?” Kudou looked dubious. “I don’t mind, but do you have some kind of plan?”

“Yeah. We should proceed carefully,” I answered, letting Katou down and holding up my left arm. “Please check it out, Asarina.”

“Masss—ter!”

Asarina stretched out of the back of my left hand.

“I see, meaning she won’t suffer any damage even if she’s attacked?” Kudou remarked in admiration. “How convenient.”

“She always saves my skin.”

“But even if she goes, won’t she be unable to tell us any details?”

“It’ll be fine. In Asarina’s case, we share a certain amount of sensation. Her intentions are largely conveyed to me too.”

“How truly serendipitous.”

As we talked, Asarina flipped the figure over. After taking a little look around it, she came back.

“Ssster.”

“Mm... Doesn’t seem to be dangerous. Still, just in case, we should be careful,” I reported.

“Hmph. I don’t need you to tell me that,” Dora said, transforming her arms into blades. Maybe she was under the impression her role had been taken from her. She glared at me with her peculiar black eyes. “So? Is it alive?”

“No. Looks like it’s dead,” I answered.

“A corpse. Then I suppose there’s obviously no risk of it attacking.”

Dora didn’t seem to really care that someone had died here. She started walking in front of us. I put Asarina away and got Katou back up in my arms, then followed her.

“Just let me ask now. That corpse isn’t one of your servants, right?” Kudou said, walking by my side.

“It isn’t. I would’ve been able to feel it beforehand over the mental path.”

“Is that so? Who could it be, then?” Kudou said, sinking into contemplation. “I suppose someone else could’ve gotten dragged into this as I did. It could also be your knight escorts, an enemy your servants have already defeated, or maybe something else entirely. I suppose it could be someone completely unrelated to this incident who wandered in here in the past.”

“It could be any of those. Anyway, we’ll find out once we check.”

We talked as we proceeded down the corridor. That was when I heard a small, “Ah,” from Katou. She was quiet enough that I was the only one who heard her. It sounded like she realized something. I was a little curious, but by then, Dora had already reached the corpse.

“Well then...” Kudou mumbled.

There was a slight hint of surprise in his voice. One moment later, my focus returned to what was before us. I then froze at what I saw. I also felt Katou stiffen in my arms. After all, on the ground was...

“Hmm. Now this is unexpected,” Kudou said, full of interest as he squatted down next to the body.

A large amount of blood and entrails had splattered out of the corpse. This had happened some time ago. Despite the stench of blood, the majority of the stains had coagulated into a dark hue. Now turned face-up, we could see a twisted expression of fear and anger. This was enough to give me the chills, but Kudou's faint smile didn't flinch. Maybe this wasn't enough to send the smallest ripple through the Demon King's heart.

"How surprising," Kudou said, touching the blood to check how much it had coagulated. "I didn't think it'd be a fellow visitor."

Yes. The corpse on the ground was that of a visitor. However, that wasn't what gave me pause.

"Someone you know?" Kudou asked, turning my way.

"Yeah..." I replied a beat later.

This wasn't just because I was confused. I had no idea what I should've been feeling. Still, I couldn't remain frozen forever. I let out a sigh and spat out the complex feelings in my heart.

"That's...Okazaki Takuma."

"Okazaki?" Kudou repeated, surprise evident on his face now. "Then this is the Almighty Vessel?"

"Yeah."

It was unbelievable, but I couldn't deny the reality before my eyes. He was the mastermind behind this incident. After teleporting us to this place with him, Okazaki had ended up as this miserable corpse in a corridor.

"But what's going on?" I said.

He was the primary threat to our survival. That only made his apparent death all the more confusing. Having fewer enemies was cause for relief, but this inspired dread, not relief.

"Why is this guy dead here...?" I muttered.

"Does this mean Rose and Lobivia fought here?" Katou asked.

I shook my head. "I can't deny it for sure, but I don't think they've been here

yet.”

“In that case, maybe they had some trouble among collaborators?” she suggested next.

“I guess we can’t count that out,” I said, knitting my brow.

Okazaki tended to make enemies by nature, so I couldn’t say it was impossible. Still, it felt unnatural to kill a collaborator moments after making one. Perhaps something serious enough had happened to warrant that.

“It might be far simpler,” Kudou joined in. “Because he used Fairy Ring carelessly, it’s likely the Almighty Vessel was weakened. What if, much like us, Okazaki was thrown in here somewhere other than his intended destination?” Kudou shrugged. “He had no allies nearby and he wasn’t in a state to fight. Wouldn’t this be a lousy place to be left like that?”

“You don’t mean...” I knew what he was getting at right away. My cheek twitched.

Kudou nodded. “Okazaki Takuma was so weakened he couldn’t fight. He then encountered a monster and was defeated.”

“That’s...”

I was speechless. He’d dug his own grave. He’d got what he deserved. It was entirely possible.

“No, but still, to be so weak he couldn’t fight a monster...” I said.

“Even a cheater will die when taking on a horde of monsters alone and unprepared. I’ve witnessed it several times.”

There was a certain persuasiveness behind his words. Kudou then crudely touched Okazaki’s corpse.

“At any rate,” he said, “let’s investigate a little more. We might figure something out.”

He started casually stripping Okazaki’s clothes. He didn’t show a hint of consideration for the dead, but there was no point mentioning that to him. Besides, we did have to do an autopsy. With that in mind, I decided to watch attentively. However, the unexpected voice of his servant brought the Demon

King’s progress to a halt.

“My king, please wait a moment,” Dora said.

At first, I thought maybe she was criticizing his actions. That proved not to be the case. Her eyes were fixed down the corridor, her arms already in the shape of blades.

“Something is coming.”

I’d heard that same warning multiple times since coming to this place. Thinking back on it, seeing that Okazaki’s corpse was here, whatever or whoever had done it—be it a person or a monster—was likely still nearby. As such, it wasn’t strange for Dora to sense an enemy approaching. However, this time, things were a little different.

There was more caution behind Dora’s voice than anything I’d heard from her before. Her expression was extremely grim and tense. Something out there made her act like this. I got my answer right away.

“What is that...?”

A figure was headed our way down the corridor. It was huge. Its curled back rubbed against the high ceiling. Its body was far too large for its build, looking inflated like a pig. Its massive meaty mass was supported by several needle-like legs. I felt physiological revulsion. Goosebumps ran down my skin. All I could see for now was a silhouette, but it was still so grotesque I felt nauseous.

That thing was different. Something about it was off. Everyone here should’ve felt the same thing. On that point, Dora was decisive.

“I’m setting forth.”

Fear didn’t bind her movements. She charged just as she always had. Possessing great strength in close-quarters combat, she slashed with her blades without hesitation. Meanwhile, Kudou prepared his magic, and I positioned myself to protect the back line.

Our opponent was a monster. In many cases, they were defeated by Dora’s first attack. That didn’t fly this time, though.

“Wha?!”

Dora had dashed across the corridor, slashing at a body so large it was questionable whether it could even react—and in that instant, a long arm mowed her down.

“Ugh...!”

An unbelievably fast attack for a body that size sent Dora flying. It might’ve been slow enough to react to, but there hadn’t been any signs of it getting ready to launch that attack at all. The movement had been so revolting, like it didn’t belong to a living being. Dora slammed against a wall, scattering shattered debris all around her. With the hindrance out of the way, the enemy continued its dreadful advance.

“A-Aaa...”

Was that a roar? A chill ran up my spine. It almost sounded like a human voice. But that was impossible. How could such a thing be?

“Ma...iro...”

There was a resentful ring to it. The enormous body got close enough for me to see it in detail for myself.

“Ji...ma...”

Its disheveled blond hair was extremely dirty. Its originally graceful features were twisted with rage, long departing the realm of humanity. Deep crossing lacerations ran across its crushed eyes, making it all the more atrocious.

“Maji...ma...”

The voice it weakly wielded—no longer leaving any doubt that it was a human’s voice—came from its cranium. An unbearable urge to vomit crawled up my throat.

“No way, you’re...”

It was impossible. It couldn’t be. But his face was none other than—

“Travis Mortimer?!”

“Majimaaaaa... Aaaaaaah!”

The man who once commanded the Holy Order’s Fourth Company howled,

his figure twisted beyond belief.

Chapter 15: Hatred of One's Own Kind

"Travis Mortimer...?! Why are you here?!"

An assault carrying murderous intent answered my question..

"Maaaaajimaaaaa!"

By all rights, it shouldn't have reached me. However, the countless limbs holding its swollen body up possessed a strange elasticity.

"Katou!"

I immediately scooped Katou up and kicked off the ground to escape the attack. Unlike Dora, I was already quite far away when it set its sights on me. Such a straightforward strike was easy to read, so I succeeded in avoiding it. I didn't feel relieved, though. Instead, my blood ran cold.

The stone floor shattered under the blow, scattering small fragments of debris into the air. The ferocity of the attack gave me chills. Even if I blocked that with my shield, I'd get crushed. Slamming against it with the power of the Great White Spider would be one thing, but if I did that too often, I'd get exhausted in no time. My only choice was to dodge. I protected Katou from the small flying fragments and fell back away.

"Majimaaaaaa! Aaaaaah!"

Travis—no, the horror's eyes saw nothing but me. Having lost all sense of reason it once possessed as a human, its back scraped against the high ceiling as it charged forward at a terrifying speed.

"How unpleasant," Kudou spat, his expression filled with revulsion as he spread four colored wings against the oncoming charge. "Friedrich, deploy."

He activated grade 3 magic. This was the peak of what was achievable by the people of this world. Magic nearly beyond even the monsters of the Depths shot forth. His timing was impeccable, choosing the moment the horror had closed distance.

Although, maybe there wasn't much point going out of the way to time the

attack so that it couldn't be avoided. The horror didn't even try.

The violent storm of blades shredded one of its long legs. Fluids splattered across the stone floor. Even chunks of meat flew about. The price for carelessly stepping in was far too great. As it writhed in pain, it was time to attack once more—that would normally be the case. However, the sheer abnormality of the horror casually threw such common sense out the window.

"Out ooooooof! My waaaaaay!"

"Wha?!"

The horror didn't falter for a moment and launched a counterattack. The Lord of Darkness didn't possess any strength in battle himself. He couldn't even dodge.

"Kudou...!"

A human mass flew in the air like a ping-pong ball, passing right by me even though I'd gotten pretty far away from the horror. It wouldn't have been strange for Kudou to be reduced to a lump of meat after that. However, I didn't have the luxury to worry about him.

"Majiiiiimaaaaaaa!"

"Ugh?!"

Using the one instant I had my focus taken away by Kudou, the horror launched an attack on me. I stooped over to dodge the horizontal sweep.

"Senpai! Above you!" Katou screamed from within my arms.

I reflexively jumped to the side, dodging a downward stomp. The floor shattered spectacularly. I shuddered. I'd been inches away from being reduced to a stain.

"Dammit!"

Just barely having gotten away, I slipped in among the flying debris to get some distance from the horror. However, sitting atop the horror's body, Travis's cranium didn't lose sight of me for a second.

"Crap!"

By the time I realized, it already had its arm raised. I couldn't dodge this one.

"Hah hyaaaah!" it raised its voice in joy. "Maaaaajimaaaaa!"

And just before the grotesque arm came swinging down...

"Shut up."

A suppressed voice of violent rage cut off the manic roar. A shadowy blade cut through the air, lopping off the raised arm.

"Dora?!"

It turned out that, even after eating that earlier attack, she could still move. The shadowy girl stood in the horror's way, spitting blood from her mouth.

"Go to my king's side," she said.

"Thanks!"

I ran off, and the horror roared behind me.

"Doooon't! Get in my waaaaay!"

"How dare you bring shame upon me before my king!"

Insanity and wrath, shadowy blade and grotesque limb clashed. And as Dora stalled the horror, I ran over to Kudou.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yes... I'm not dead."

Before I got to him, Kudou rose to his feet. Judging by how casually he wiped off the dirt, he wasn't in any pain, despite being on the receiving end of such a powerful blow. All around him, what looked like green mud lay on the ground. This was Kudou's armor and shield, the dirty sludge Caesar. A normal person would likely have exploded under that horror's strike, but Caesar's defense had apparently gotten him through it.

"I see. Glad to see you aren't hurt," I said, sighing in relief.

"Senpai! Dora!" Katou yelled, tugging my collar from inside my arms.

I came to my senses and turned around. Dora was in the middle of flying through the air after being struck. Both she and one of the horror's arms were

spinning in midair. She executed a beautiful landing, then ran over to us.

“Forgive me, my king! I can’t hold it back any longer!”

Both of Dora’s blades were broken. She had one eye closed, and her gait was a little awkward as she ran. This was a result of her short yet intense battle. She hadn’t only been content to stay on the defensive, though. The horror in a frenzy behind her had lost several limbs.

Dora had suffered too much damage to really call it a draw. If things had gone on like that, it was highly probable she would’ve lost, so she’d backed off before it’d reached the critical juncture.

“Let’s run away, Senpai,” Katou said, tugging my collar once more. “There’s no need to go out of your way to fight that thing. Thanks to Dora, it has slowed down. We should be able to get away now.”

“You’re right.” I had no obligation to put up with this monstrosity’s unjust resentment. I nodded back to her and started running. “Kudou, let’s get out of here!”

“Understood.”

Kudou nodded. Friedrich’s inorganic wings on his back quivered, lifting his slender frame into the air. These wings weren’t just for show. They also allowed him to fly. Much like how Caesar specialized in defense, Friedrich specialized in magic. Kudou had told me that he generally didn’t fly because it consumed mana to maintain. He came to the conclusion that there was no other choice at this point. Dora also started running, and we all went back down the path we came.

“By the way, Senpai,” Kudou said, looking down at me from above. “That thing’s been calling your name rather passionately. Are you acquainted?”

“Just a little, in a horrible way,” I answered. “That’s the commander of the Holy Order’s Fourth Company.”

“Aah. The one who attacked you in Aker... That’s quite the personality.”

“He didn’t look like that before, though. His Holy Gaze was troublesome, but he didn’t have this kind of strength. Before all that, after we repulsed his attack,

for some reason his soul was turned into a weapon using a relic of salvation called Holy Water...”

After explaining that, something suddenly bothered me.

“Wait. In that case, what happened to his body after having his soul torn out?”

As we spoke, we came running around a corner in the corridor.

“Senpai?” That was when Katou raised her voice. That said, she was being shaken about by my running, so her speech came out in spurts. “Much like...how his soul was...used for Holy Water...couldn’t his body...also be used...for another magic tool?”

“That’s what I’m guessing. Also, you’ll bite your tongue if you talk too much.”

Regardless, Katou kept going.

“Does such a... magic tool...”

“I bet it exists. Travis has transformed into that horror and all.”

“No... I’m not asking...whether it exists... Why does...such a thing...? And this place too... It’s weird... Maybe it’s...”

“Hey! Behind us!” Dora screamed, cutting off our conversation.

I turned around without slowing down and saw the horror behind us.

“It’s chasing us?!”

It was important to analyze our situation, but we had to deal with the threat before our eyes first. I changed gears to focus on that instead.

“Tch! What the hell is that thing?! We should’ve given it the slip!” Dora yelled in annoyance.

“It doesn’t have eyes to begin with. Maybe we can’t lose it just by getting out of sight,” I said.

Perhaps it was accomplished by scent or some magical means. Either way, it had the ability to track us. There was also another reason it managed to catch up with us despite us peeling away earlier.

“Its legs are back. It can regenerate,” I said.

Cutting a few of its limbs off like Dora had would only buy us a little time. It meant we were capable of slowing it down, but...

“Each time we buy time, you’ll get hurt...” I said to Dora.

“Mrgh. So what?” Dora raised a brow. She restored her two broken blades, then rubbed them together menacingly. “Don’t belittle me! I don’t fear getting hurt for my king’s sake!”



“That’s not what I’m saying. If you get hurt for no good reason, you’ll eventually be incapable of fighting. That’ll be bad. The situation will just get worse and worse. I’m saying this precisely because we’re relying on your strength.”

“Mrgh...”

The abomination using Travis’s flesh wasn’t as strong as a cheater, but was pretty close. The only one who could face it head-on was Dora.

“I understand what you’re saying, but what should we do, then?” Kudou said as his subordinate fell silent. “Having a poor plan will only make the situation worse. Against such powerful regeneration and that massive body, there are very few ways of dealing a fatal wound. Cutting off its head seems like the only way...”

“My king, forgive my insolence, but I’ve already tried that. The horror’s defenses are unexpectedly tough. My blade never reached.”

Having fought the thing directly, she knew it would be difficult for her to take the horror’s head on her own. It was mysterious that it had no sense of reason while still maintaining a sense of self-preservation even in such a state. Travis’s vast experience was still powering that monstrous engine of destruction. I doubted his personality remained intact, but even after being reduced to such dregs, he was a huge pain. This meant we needed some kind of plan. What strategy could hope to best such a creature?

“In that case, shall we have Dora stall it?” Kudou concluded with ease. “We can’t resort to half measures. We can have Dora persevere to the end to buy us a significant amount of time. That’ll allow us to run far enough away that it won’t be able to catch up so easily.”

“You mean to sacrifice her?” I asked.

“My subordinates exist for that reason.”

Kudou’s answer was just as expected. I took a glance to confirm to see Dora listening to her master without questioning his words. I almost forgot due to her emotional transparency, but she was no more than another of the Demon King’s pawns. This was perfectly normal to them. However, for an instant, the

image of a two-headed wolf came to mind.

“No, let’s think of another plan,” I said.

Dora looked displeased. Her attitude really did remind me of when I first met Berta. On the other hand, Kudou looked like he’d figured I’d say that.

“Is that so?” he said, backing down unexpectedly fast. “What other choice do we have? We don’t have much time.”

“Let’s see...”

Kudou was right. We were still some distance away, so it was going to take around five minutes before it caught up to us. We had to decide on how to fight it before that happened. We didn’t have many options. I thought it over a bit before answering.

“We just have to make an opening large enough for Dora to take its head.”

“An opening, huh? Well, that’s true,” Kudou agreed, throwing a glance at Dora.

“Of course, my king,” she said, nodding. “I’ll prove I can lop off that repulsive head.”

“There’s your answer,” Kudou said.

“P-Please hold on...a minute,” Katou interjected.

It was hard for her to talk because of all the shaking, but she felt compelled to regardless. She looked up at me from within my arms.

“Who...w-will create...that opening?”

Dora had been bearing the brunt of things until now. However, this plan relied on her dealing the finishing blow. As such, Kudou or I would have to stand against the horror. Perhaps because she’d seen him get sent flying by the horror’s attack while looking perfectly fine, her eyes drifted to Kudou.

“Kudou...”

“I know what you’re trying to say,” he said.

Katou’s pleading gaze met Kudou’s narrowing eyes. That was when I realized that this was the first time these two had spoken to each other. I’d been so

focused on whether Kudou had any animosity toward Katou that this had never come to mind.

Meaning...they'd been avoiding each other? That was probably the case.

Kudou was expressionless. No. Maybe his brow was slightly knit. When he acted as the Demon King, he always had a smile on that hid his true emotions deep within him. Erasing all expression from his face was a sign that things weren't so calm within his heart.

If not for our current situation, maybe Katou would've never started a conversation with Kudou, nor would Kudou have started one with her. However, as things were, Katou had no other choice.

"Please... I have...no power...so I can't... do it."

Her voice, broken up intermittently by the shaking, sounded so helpless. It turned out that being unable to fight in this situation still weighed on her mind. Or perhaps...this had always bothered her. Katou's extremely gloomy expression gave me that impression.

"If only...I had the power...of a visitor," she said, the shadow over her voice getting darker. "I've long...had a wish...so why...am I still powerless?"

I felt something slightly out of place. If I wasn't mistaken, I felt something closer to guilt than helplessness in her voice. But I didn't get it. So long as her power didn't manifest, she had cause to be disappointed, but not apologetic. The Katou Mana I knew was clever enough not to mistake one for the other.

So why? It was strange. However, no matter how much I questioned it, it didn't change the fact that she harbored dark feelings about it. That was why she pleaded with Kudou, who she'd been avoiding. However, faced with her desperate pleas, Kudou grimaced a little.

"That's not how it goes, though," he said.

"Huh...?"

"You're misunderstanding. Unfortunate as that is," he continued with an air of resignation. "In truth, I can't do it either. Taking on that horror, I mean."

"Huh...? But earlier..."

“That’s what you’re misunderstanding. I wanted to keep this from Majima-senpai, though.”

With that, Kudou held out his left arm. His movements were stiff. Caesar was wrapped around his arm. No, that wasn’t quite right. It was more accurate to say the green sludge was moving his arm. But why would that be? As if to answer that, Kudou rolled up his sleeve.

“Hey, your arm?!” I shouted, my eyes wide open.

Under his sleeve, Kudou’s arm was a crushed mess. It only appeared to be fine under his clothing because Caesar had been supporting him.

“You didn’t defend against that attack?!” I yelled.

“Caesar isn’t that powerful a monster,” Kudou said, contrasting my panic with a calm demeanor despite his broken arm. “The one facet it specializes in is powerful, but it has its limits.”

“Now’s not the time to—!”

“I don’t really care,” Kudou said, pulling his sleeve back down. “I’m not a fighter, so I won’t be using my arm in battle. Besides, I was lucky. I’ve been on the verge of death for quite some time.”

“The verge of death...?”

His dispassionate voice gave me the chills for some reason. That was when I came to a late realization. This situation was far too strange.

“Hang on... Aren’t you in pain?”

For a while now, Kudou hadn’t shown the slightest hint of his hidden agony. I was late in realizing that his wound wasn’t at a level that could be ignored through willpower. Judging by the state of his body, showing no signs of feeling it was abnormal.

“Kudou, what’s up with your arm?”

“Wouldn’t you be able to understand, Senpai?”

There was a slight wryness to Kudou’s question. His face was far slimmer than when I first met him. It had been like this for a long time now. There was more

than enough information for me to figure it out.

“A side effect of your power...” I said.

“I’m just a weak human, after all,” Kudou quietly admitted. “By reaching for strength beyond my means, I had to compensate with something else.”

His face was so devoid of regret. I felt sorrow at this. A wish beyond one’s means destroyed one’s body. Or perhaps in this case, it was more directly a reflection of his wish. Kudou was resolute; he would follow his path as Demon King to its end, despite the despair and hopelessness it ensured.

“You don’t really need to be concerned about it,” Kudou continued. “This is a fitting fate for the likes of me. That’s exactly why I’ll give you a warning.”

Kudou then turned to Katou. Behind his eyes was a clearly thorny emotion. If what he faced me with was the sympathy for someone who shared his circumstances but walked a different path, then what he faced Katou with was closer to a hatred for his own kind. Maybe that was exactly why he could see through her. Kudou held out his sleeved left arm.

“You’re similar to me. This includes your weakness and your self-destructive disposition. I’ll declare it here and now. When your ability manifests, a horrible thing is sure to happen.”

Maybe this resonated with her. I could feel Katou jolting and shuddering because she was pressed against me.

“At the very least, as you are now, all that awaits you is ruin. If your ability isn’t manifesting because you fear that future, then you’re better off not thinking about any stupid ideas.”

“I-I’m...!”

Maybe she was trying to refute him. However, Katou didn’t say anything else. In truth, her ability still hadn’t manifested. Not that I believed this was a bad thing.

“Both of you, leave it at that,” I said.

We didn’t have the time to argue among ourselves, and there wasn’t much point in this conversation to begin with.

“I planned on taking this role from the beginning,” I added.

“S-Senpai...!” Katou called out in protest, but I didn’t back down.

“No matter how you look at it, that thing only sees me. There’s no need to discuss who’s most suitable to be a decoy.”

“But...!”

“My prospects of winning aren’t non-existent, of course.”

Katou fell silent. Instead, Kudou raised his voice in interest.

“You have a way of winning?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Salvia.”

That was the name of my servant who’d remained silent this entire time. Mist spread out, and a young woman appeared in the air. Her full lips formed a reassuring smile.

“Thank you for waiting, my dear. I’ve figured it out to a certain extent.”

“How about the magic?”

“Can also be deployed to a certain extent. Illusions are impossible and it can’t cover a very wide range, though.”

“It’s enough if I can sense my surroundings.”

Salvia hadn’t shown herself up until now, but hadn’t been sitting idle. This entire time, she’d been investigating why the Misty Lodge couldn’t be deployed and finding a way of dealing with that.

“Also, my dear, there’s something I’d like to talk about,” Salvia said.

“Got it, but leave it for after.”

She’d apparently discovered something new. I was curious as to what it might be. For now, I preempted further discussion.

“First, we need to deal with that thing.”

A corrupted roar echoed behind us. The horror was finally catching up.

“Senpai...” Katou said, her voice so forlorn.

She looked up at me, her face overcome with emotion. The horror approaching from behind was mighty. Maybe she thought it was useless to challenge it, but that wasn't true. What I'd built up upon coming to this world wasn't that weak.

"It's okay," I said, refocusing myself. "There's no need for you to feel guilty. You don't need to force yourself to do anything either. I...*we* will handle things here."

"Masss—ter!"

"That's right. Our master is strong now."

Asarina coiled around my left arm, forming five bizarre claws. Mist oozed out of my body, gathering information from all around me.

"And Kudou," I said before taking my leave, "I have something to talk about with you after this too."

I glanced at his crushed arm, then glared at him a little. When I remembered Berta, I couldn't ignore any matters related to Kudou's well-being.

"Very well..." Despite the force of my gaze, Kudou smiled happily, then turned to the side in midair, deploying a glyph. "I'll take charge of the first shot. I'll use one of my trump cards."

"It's in your hands," I said. Kudou's smile grew deeper. It felt like an exchange between comrades, which didn't feel bad for me either. "Dora, I'm counting on you too."

"R-Right. Leave it to me," Dora replied, somewhat unaccustomed to this.

I laughed a little, then stopped running. I put Katou down on the floor. That horror only had me in its sights. At the very least, until I was defeated, and if nobody took the initiative to get in its way, it wasn't a danger to anyone else. It was actually safer for Katou to be away from me.

Also, now that I could use the Misty Lodge, I could finally fight at full strength. This was where the fight truly started.

"Let's go, Travis!"

I readied my transformed left arm and ran toward the battle.

Chapter 16: The Counterattack *Katou Mana's POV*

Majima-senpai charged toward the horror. The tremendous hatred with which it faced him was obvious at a glance. It possessed enough power to break Caesar's defenses. Its regenerative abilities had nullified all the cuts Dora had inflicted. Even without such abilities, its enormous body must've been extremely durable.

Just watching Majima-senpai's back as he charged it drained the blood from my face and made me feel like I would collapse. I put my hand to my mouth and swallowed my scream—when a glyph took shape overhead.

"Friedrich, deploy."

Listening to the boy's voice, I opened my eyes wide as I looked up. Kudou, who was still floating in the air, spread the four colored wings behind him as they glowed. The magic he'd been building up during our flight from the horror was grade 3 magic—cast twofold. This was supposed to be a power only usable by the boy known as the Sturm und Drang of the exploration team.

"Burn to ash."

A raging fire was amplified by wind and swooped down on the horror. He'd mentioned using his trump card. This was it. Compared to the Sturm und Drang, who was said to be able to cast grade 5 magic in triplex, it wasn't much, but even so, it possessed dreadful power. The heat wave instantly raised the temperature in the corridor. And just as I thought maybe this could work, the swelling mass of meat broke through the flames.

"Thiiiis...iiiiis...nothiiiiing!"

"I didn't think that'd be enough to defeat it," Kudou said, clicking his tongue quietly.

The horror's skin had been carbonized, but it wasn't enough to deal a fatal wound. It'd raised an arm to protect its face too. So long as the wound wasn't

fatal, its regenerative abilities would repair the damage.

“Aah...”

It was no good. Even though Kudou used one of his trump cards, it hadn’t even been enough to stop its charge. The horror’s tattered skin crumbled to the ground, revealing swelling pink meat that had already started regenerating. Its movements had also only dulled for a short moment. I stood in shock as I watched that terrifying spectacle—when I saw a vine coil around one of the horror’s limbs.

“Sssster!”

“Okay, let’s go!”

Majima-senpai accelerated. He kicked off the ground to speed himself up as Asarina reeled him in. Using the moment the horror’s attention was caught by the magic attack, he reached its feet in the blink of an eye.

“Haah!”

As he passed the horror, he slashed, his sword sinking deep into one of its arms.

“Oh? Oooh?”

The horror didn’t know what’d happened. Majima-senpai continued running to its other side and gave it another slash. Its body was definitely strong. It’d even withstood Kudou’s magic attack. Nevertheless, Majima-senpai’s sword dug deep into its meat, splattering fluids all over the place. His weapon’s make naturally played a role in this, but the rigorous training he’d imposed on himself also allowed his sword skills to exceed the tenacity of the horror’s flesh. However, the horror wasn’t going to remain on the receiving end forever.

“Oooooh!”

It roared, its voice filled with dreadful delight. It now realized what had charged at it was Majima-senpai.

“Maaaaaaajimaaaaaa!”

It swiveled around and attacked.

“Eek!”

I unintentionally screamed. How much destructive force was behind that attack? I could feel the shaking from the blow, despite the immense distance. And there was more than one. As if putting the horror’s rage on full display, a storm of non-stop tremors shook the corridor. In the blink of an eye, I lost Majima-senpai’s figure in a cloud of debris and dust. The only thing I saw now was the enormous horror stomping on the ground. It looked like a repulsive and monstrous baby throwing a tantrum, sending chills down my spine. With this, he was... And just as I lost hope, a voice spoke to me from above.

“It’s all right.” It was Kudou, the edge of his lips curved into an amused smile. “Ha ha. Isn’t he amazing? Is that Majima-senpai’s true strength now?”

There was unmistakable admiration in his tone. Influenced by that, I once more focused on the fierce battle.

“Ah...”

It was just as Kudou said. Inside the cloud of dust, I saw Majima-senpai safe and sound. The repeated attacks couldn’t keep up with his nimble movements. He was fast. I was captivated by the sight of him running around and evading the horror’s strikes.

Ever since we were teleported here, he’d been carrying me around. The speed at which he’d evaded enemies during that time had been unbelievable. However, now he was even faster. Part of this was likely because he hadn’t been free to move while covering me. This was the true speed he could achieve in battle. He wasn’t just fast, either.

“Ooooh?! Maaajimaaaaa?! Aaaah?!”

Cursed by its enormous frame, the horror couldn’t make tight turns. Its ghastly body rotated awkwardly. In contrast, Majima-senpai was always moving into its blind spots. He did this while continuously dodging attacks, all of which would spell his end if they were to find their mark. It was as if he had a full grasp of everything his enemy was doing.

No, not as if... I couldn’t see it with my eyesight at this distance, but there must’ve been a mist surrounding the horror. This was the Misty Lodge, the

magic Majima-senpai had gained by forming a contract with Salvia. Its perception surely allowed him to fully grasp every move the horror was making. As such, he was capable of skipping the step of having to read the situation based on sight or hearing.

Naturally, it wasn't so simple to be able to make full use of that information. He needed athleticism to match, obviously, along with the willpower and concentration to continuously make decisions in the heat of the moment. Above all else, even in a situation where a single mistake would lead to death, it was essential for him to have the courage not to falter for even an instant.

This very spectacle, one that looked like a miracle in my eyes, was the crystallization of Majima-senpai's efforts, of everything he'd done so that he could survive in this world by his companions' side without being a hindrance to them.

"Maaaaajiiimaaaaa! Aaaah! Aaaaaah!"

As a result, the horror was unable to accurately locate him, forced to stomp on the ground randomly. It was like the Japanese fairy tale of the inch-high samurai and the ogre. The sight of the horror destroying the corridor was overwhelming, but in truth, Majima-senpai remained untouched.

"Amazing..."

My blood had frozen from fear and anxiety, but now it felt as if it had melted and was pumping through my whole body. My heart pounded in my chest, the excitement filling me with a numbing heat. I thought I'd already known this, but I hadn't known anything. *This* was what Majima-senpai had gained through his continuous hard work.

"Didn't I tell you?" Kudou said.

That was when I first realized I'd been engrossed in Majima-senpai's fight. Kudou looked at me with emotionless eyes. These were the same eyes he made when he'd told me I was similar to him and when he'd predicted something horrible would happen. At the time, I'd felt unconcealable fear, but mysteriously enough, I didn't any longer.

"Majima-senpai is strong," Kudou said. "There's no need for you to do

something you can never come back from. You don't need to think of anything unnecessary. You can just sit there quietly."

Kudou's attitude hadn't changed. Much like when he last spoke to me, his tone clearly conveyed his displeasure. As such, the main difference was my mental state. Up until this point, I'd been so focused on the possibility of Majima-senpai dying that I hadn't paid any attention. I'd been driven to the wall. But now it was different. Watching his fight and having my heart pumping in excitement, I'd regained my composure. That was why I caught onto a detail I hadn't noticed before.

"Kudou, you can't mean..."

I was a little surprised, staring at the classmate I just couldn't get along with. Why had I misinterpreted what he'd said?

"At the very least, as you are now, all that awaits you is ruin. If your ability isn't manifesting because you fear that future, then you're better off not thinking about any stupid ideas."

I'd been under the impression that he was just being mean.

"Was that really just a warning for me?" I asked.

Kudou held his tongue. Uncharacteristically, a sour expression highlighted his slender face.

"It wasn't for you," he said. "I simply had Majima-senpai in mind."

"Is that so...?"

I smiled a little, not sensing any lies behind his words. That was because I realized, in all likelihood, when it came to Majima-senpai, we simply shared the same opinion. Perhaps he sensed this too. Kudou knitted his brow slightly. After that, he turned his focus once more to Majima-senpai's fight. His preparations were complete.

"Let's settle this," Kudou said, readying another glyph. That was the signal for the counterattack. "Friedrich, deploy. Burn it to ash."

Facing Majima-senpai with all its bloodlust, the horror still noticed the danger and protected its cranium. That was exactly where the wind-boosted flames

rushed in. It was like a rehash of last time. After the horror's inherent endurance overcame the flames, it turned its face to Kudou.

"Doooon't...get iiiin...iiin?"

In the middle of spitting curses, the cranium stopped talking. It realized its focus was turned elsewhere. It looked directly underneath its cursing head—where Majima-senpai was about to launch an attack. If it noticed just a few seconds later, he would've been able to take its head. The horror had keen perception, however. Just maybe, Travis Mortimer's tenacity was still at work inside it.

"Hee hyah!"

The horror let out a mad laugh. Having tried to launch an attack on it, Majima-senpai had carelessly jumped out right in front of it. With its grudge finally in reach, the horror wasn't going to let this opportunity pass.

"Majimaaaaaa!"

It immediately slammed every arm it had in reach. The space in front of it was a death field. There was nowhere to escape. The horror was sure that it had achieved its revenge. Its face twisted in an expression of ecstasy. It probably hadn't realized that, this whole time, its hated enemy hadn't once used the grotesque claw on his left arm.

"Ooooh!"

Majima-senpai roared with fighting spirit. His left arm, which had been prepared and ready from the very start, was his trump card. The large claws replicating Lily's Devil Hand collided with one of the horror's arms. The brief equilibrium crumbled, and Majima-senpai was the one pushing the horror back.

The power of the Great White Spider's tyranny gave him the explosive strength to overcome the horror's strength for but an instant. His sharp claws tore through flesh, broke its bones, and twisted its strike trajectory. By breaking its attack head-on, he'd gained the perfect opportunity to attack.

"Right there!"

He leaped up high, closing in on the one remaining human portion of its

monstrous figure.

“Hyah hah!”

But this horror was sly. A wall of meat blocked his path. It’d kept one arm in reserve to defend itself. Flesh split open, fluids splattered, bones cracked, and the arm was torn off. However, Majima-senpai had lost the momentum of his jump. His attack would no longer reach. The cranium, the one and only place Travis’s features remained, made a triumphant smile. And then, it immediately froze. That was because a shadowy girl had leaped right in front of its eyes.

“The rest is up to you!”

“Leave it to me!”

Having served his role, Majima-senpai yelled out to Dora, who returned a brief yet reassuring reply. She swung her shadowy blades.

“Aaaaaah...!”

The horror screamed. Was it out of resentment toward its enemy? Was it a plea for mercy toward the one about to finish it off? In either case, Dora didn’t forgive it. She had a reason not to.

“Pay with your life for the sin of wounding my king.”

Fueled by her rage, her blades came down, sending the horror’s head flying high up into the air.

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The mass of meat collapsed with a tremendous thud. Once I was sure of this, I immediately started running. It was best to be as close as possible to everyone...so a logical part of me said. However, before all else, I simply wanted to be by his side.

“Senpai!”

“Hang on a sec, Katou. The ground here is broken and dangerous. I’ll head your way.”

As he noticed me approaching, Majima-senpai called me to a stop. Due to all the debris and broken ground, it wasn’t possible to walk properly down this

path. He jumped over it with Salvia trailing behind him and came my way. I immediately ran and closed the remaining distance.

“Senpai! Are you all right?!”

I checked him from head to toe. He didn’t have any serious injuries, though he was covered in lacerations and bruises. He’d been inside such a ferocious storm of attacks. The flying debris had likely crashed into him. An unbearable impulse throbbed in my chest, and I didn’t even try to defy it.

“I’ll heal you right away.”

I put a hand to his cheek and deployed a healing glyph. I could feel the lingering heat of battle on his skin. Perhaps because he’d been carrying me for the last few hours, being able to touch him brought relief to the bottom of my heart. It was as if my body had gotten completely accustomed to his warmth.

As I treated him, Dora ran over to Kudou. It was a little late, but she was apparently intending to treat his left arm. She’d taken out a bandage. Kudou’s arm had been seriously damaged, yet he wasn’t even bleeding. He’d called it a side effect of his ability. It must’ve been in pretty horrible shape to begin with. It wasn’t clear how much meaning there was in treating it. Majima-senpai also watched him anxiously as Dora treated him.

“I never thought Travis would show up. Especially like that,” Majima-senpai said.

“Yes, it surprised me too,” I agreed. “But we finally managed to sever our fate with him.”

“That we did...”

We’d suffered injuries. Still, we’d managed to overcome a major predicament. I was glad they’d managed to coordinate splendidly to defeat a powerful enemy. However, Majima-senpai’s reaction was dull. It was like his attention was caught on something else entirely.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Aah. Just something Salvia said...”

“Salvia? Oh, now that you mention it, she had something to talk about?”

We'd been in the middle of running away from the empty shell that had once been Travis at the time. I turned to look at her.

"Yes. I figured something out regarding this place," she said, nodding back to me.

"You did...?" Listening to her, I suddenly remembered something too. I'd realized it immediately before the horror attacked us. "Salvia, is it maybe related to how we haven't seen any corpses of the monsters who inhabit this place?"

I had come to this realization when we saw the collapsed figure in the hallway. Kudou had theorized that it could've been someone who'd wandered in here in the past. In truth, it was Okazaki Takuma's corpse, but after hearing his statement, I realized something strange.

We hadn't seen any old monster corpses in here, let alone residents of this world. If this place was like the Woodlands, it would be hard to see corpses hiding in all the greenery, and there were times they would rot and return to the earth without being seen at all. This place was different, though.

"It's a little unnatural for there to be no traces whatsoever," I said. "I feel like this place is *too* clean."

That said, I didn't know what that implied. Salvia had been analyzing the place so that she could figure out why the Misty Lodge wasn't working. When I heard that she'd realized something, I figured it might be related to the strangeness I'd taken notice of. I wasn't able to hear about this in more detail, as Majima-senpai suddenly tensed up.

"Katou!"

He suddenly pushed me away.

"Huh?"

As I tumbled backward, I saw his arm stretched my way from pushing me. I saw a freshly severed head making a ghastly expression and approaching his now exposed flank.

"Travis?!"

It twisted its long neck like a snake, burning the last of its life to lunge at Majima-senpai. Travis was like an incarnation of deep-seated hatred. The whole of his being was committed to killing the abominable man who'd brought him to ruin. He never considered this unjust resentment, and if told that, he wouldn't listen. Majima-senpai, Kudou, and Dora couldn't react in time.

As I fell backward, all I could do was watch things unfold. The head's drooling mouth opened wide, rows of teeth closing in on Majima-senpai's defenseless throat.

"Let's cut the stubborn behavior out there, yeah?"

And then, a flying spear slammed into the soaring head.

"Huh?"

The well-worn spearpoint stabbed deep into Travis's skull and came out the other side, altering the head's trajectory and crashing into the ground. I fell on my butt and closed my eyes. By the time I opened them again, it was all over. This time, Travis's severed head fell completely silent. Even the incarnation of hatred could do nothing with its brain destroyed. Having barely been saved, Majima-senpai whipped around as someone walked our way.

"Oh man, that was close. I couldn't sit back and watch."

"You're..."

He was somewhat short for a man and gave off a stout impression. His ruffled hair sat atop impish eyes, and he had a combat knife gripped in each hand.

"Yo, Takahiro. Glad to see you're okay."

"Mikihiko!"

Surprised by the arrival of his best friend, Majima-senpai's voice was filled with joy.



Chapter 17: Beneath the Mask

The battle between the masked group and Iino Yuna, Rose, and Lobivia continued.

“Ugh...”

Iino Yuna gritted her teeth, frustrated with what was almost an entirely defensive battle. The Skanda could make use of any opening she was given, but the enemy coordinated very well and showed no signs of falling apart. It was more appropriate to call them careful than good. Having witnessed the knights of the Holy Order in battle, Iino Yuna didn’t see the masked group’s coordination as rock solid. It didn’t have the smoothness born of having trained together for years. At most, they were just making sure not to get in each other’s way.

However, their individual strength far surpassed that of the average knight. As such, they had more than enough to make up for any shortcomings. What’s more, none of them pushed too far. If they were to attack just a little more aggressively, maybe it would be possible for them to defeat Rose or Lobivia, outpacing what Iino Yuna would be able to handle. Or maybe in the process of trying to help but not making it in time, she would make a definitive mistake. The masked group managed to avoid being struck down, never risking exposing an opening by taking such a proactive approach. They fought carefully and repulsively. The reason Iino Yuna felt such disgust for their tactics was that they were entirely targeted toward sealing the Skanda.

“Haaah!”

She had no idea how many times they’d clashed now. She pushed back on the enemy just a little, and they backed off right away. In their stead, another enemy threatened Rose and Lobivia. Lobivia fended off the attack with her sturdy dragon arms, and Rose drove in her ax. They were barely maintaining an equilibrium. It wouldn’t hold for long, though. Iino Yuna turned on her heels to help them. This was the umpteenth such occurrence.

Iino Yuna was already out of options. That was why this had repeated over

and over. This was one act of dozens in a never-ending play of offense and defense that was sure to continue endlessly. The masked enemies must've seen it this way too. It was only after Rose made a move that Iino Yuna realized this had lulled everyone into a cyclical rhythm.

"Hyaah!"

She only had one opportunity to pull it off. Believing she would act just like all the previous times, the enemy was caught off guard when seven knives came flying out of Rose's hand. Majima Takahiro's servants may have been the weaker party here, but they were skilled competitors at overcoming death. The thrown knives, a skill fostered through real combat experience, exploded due to the imitation runestones in their hilts.

The explosions weren't all that big. She couldn't really have expected to deal much damage to the enemy like this. Just by sensing the build-up of mana, some had jumped away and some had taken a defensive stance. However, it was still a lethal attack.

"Haaah!"

Weaving through the gaps in the explosions, the Skanda ran at lightning speed. She kicked one foe, then repelled another by clashing swords.

"Right there!"

"Hgh?!"

And she took advantage of the opening to target a masked man. Iino Yuna had already determined that he was at the core of their whole group. If even one of these masked enemies was defeated, it would become far more difficult to keep the Skanda in check. If their leader was defeated, it would be even harder.

"Haaah!"

"Hrgh!"

Faced with a surging wave of blows, the masked man let out a bitter groan. Her sword was like a tempest. He couldn't keep up. The tip of her blade cut his shoulder and chipped his mask. Tossed about left and right by her attacks, the

man showed a clear opening. Thanks to the explosions caused by Rose's knives, nobody could intervene. Gaining certainty in the outcome, Iino Yuna stepped forth. This would decide things. This would end it here and now.

"Haaah!"

And with a roar of fighting spirit, she lunged forward—

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At this point, Majima Takahiro's party was mainly fighting in three places.

Majima Takahiro had defeated Travis after linking up with Kudou Riku, managing to protect Katou Mana the entire time. Despite being thrown into an unexpected predicament at the very end, he'd succeeded in overcoming the knight-turned-horror.

Iino Yuna was working with Rose and Lobivia, and the trio were finally about to bring one of their enemies down. All that was left was to deal a wound that would knock him out of the fight.

Ottmar and his fellow former knights were accompanied by a masked man wielding a strange sword, putting Lily and Gerbera at a disadvantage. The two girls were forced to retreat, but they were managing to put up some resistance. So long as they didn't make any major mistakes, they weren't going to be caught so easily.

Even with the unexpected reinforcements of the mysterious masked group and Travis, Ottmar was unable to kill them. What Majima Takahiro and his servants had built up over their long journey wasn't so fragile. That was true. It certainly was. But...

"Is something the matter?"

Far away from the main battles, a girl raised her voice curiously. It was Shiran. There was a dubious light in her uncovered blue eye. She was looking at the bald knight, Gordon Cavill.

He was humble, sincere, and had fortitude and vigor. He and his knights had protected Shiran the whole time they were on the move. These knights had received training from their marshal, Harrison Addington. They had a strong

sense of responsibility and were devoted to their duty. All of them had suffered some amount of injury, having shed blood in one way or another. Gordon inspired his subordinates, taking up the sword himself and commanding them every step of the way.

Before she knew it, as they proceeded down the corridors, he'd fallen completely silent. At first, Shiran thought this was because of fatigue. Gordon had used the power of the Radiant Wings multiple times now. She'd suggested taking a break, but Gordon had refused and they'd kept going. In truth, his performance in combat hadn't deteriorated. His tempered body was still capable of more even after over-exerting himself. However, the gloomy look on his stern face was becoming more and more pronounced. It was enough that Shiran couldn't remain silent anymore.

"No. Not at all..." Gordon said, trying to brush her off.

"You've been in low spirits for quite a while now," Shiran said, indicating the knights around her. "Everyone has noticed."

Naturally, all of his subordinates had already noticed that their commander was acting strangely. This spread unrest and had a negative effect on morale.

"If something is bothering you, then please tell us," Shiran said.

At this rate, it was possible casualties would arise. Because of that, and because she was truly worried, Shiran had spoken up. During her short time with them, she was certain that the man before her and the many knights affiliated with the Holy Order were worthy of respect.

Ever since her childhood in Aker and up until her days as an active knight in the Woodlands, she'd always admired the knights of the Holy Order who directly supported the saviors. She'd started to harbor doubts during the incident with Travis, but now it was clear that those knights had been exceptions. Much like the legends, these knights were noble and sacrificed their lives for their duty. If she could help them in any way, she wanted to. Her feelings must've gotten across. However, Gordon didn't react the way she hoped he would.

"Lady Shiran..."

His expression was extremely grim. Bewilderment and confusion were clear in his honest eyes. What's more, Shiran even saw an unexpected hint of fear in them. She didn't doubt for a second that Gordon Cavill was a man possessing the highest class of strength in the world accompanied by an iron will. What could have him so afraid? Shiran felt an unpleasant irritation in her chest. She had a horrible premonition.

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"Haaah!"

Iino Yuna brandished her sword and stepped in. This was the deciding blow. This was the end. With that thought clear in her mind, just as she was about to slash...

"Man, you really are strong."

The masked man raised his voice. There was no fighting spirit behind it. It was almost affectionate.

"Huh?!"

His words were like magic. Iino Yuna stood there, her sword held high, her foot planted forward, completely frozen mid-swing. In that instant, the Skanda was defenseless as if time had stopped.

"Sorry, Iino."

"Hgh?!"

The man sounded truly remorseful, and in the next instant, Iino Yuna's face contorted in pain. An eerie knife, one that looked to be carved from bone was, stuck in her right thigh. He'd stabbed her as if slipping through a gap in her consciousness. The point of the blade went right through and came out the other side of her leg.

"Aaaaagh?!"

Unable to withstand the pain, Iino Yuna toppled over and collapsed. A small pool of blood spread across the floor. The blade seemed to have been coated in something. There was a black liquid mixed in among her blood.

"Aaah..."

Groaning on the ground in the middle of battle, she exposed far too large an opening to exploit, but no finishing blow came. Instead, the man spoke with genuine contrition.

“I’m really sorry. I didn’t wanna resort to this either, but you’re way too strong. It was the only way.”

“Iino...”

Seeing the Skanda laid low so tragically, Rose stood there dumbfounded. Things had taken such a sudden turn. Losing their strongest fighter all too fast, they were now in an overwhelmingly disadvantageous situation.

“It’s over.”

Hearing the man’s declaration, Rose and Lobivia readied themselves with grim expressions. They stood side by side so that they could protect each other. Neither had any intention of giving up to the very end. However, just then...

“H-Hhhhgh!”

“What?!”

Writhing in agony on the ground, Iino Yuna sprung up with a groan of effort. Her slender sword flickered in the air and attacked the masked group’s leader. He evaded by jumping backward, but as he did, she managed to jump one-legged to Rose’s side.

“Iino!”

“Hey, you’re...”

Standing before the two as they raised their voices, Iino Yuna clenched her back teeth hard, withstanding the pain running up her leg. She was gasping for breath. The knife was still in her leg. Nevertheless, her fighting spirit hadn’t broken.

“You really gonna stand and fight with that wound?” the masked man mumbled in astonishment.

“You should’ve broken both my legs while you were at it,” Iino retorted.

This wasn’t the first time her leg was injured. Last time both had been

mercilessly taken out, but this time she still had her left leg. She was just barely able to remain on her feet.

“Take off that mask,” Iino said grimly, looking at their leader. “There’s no point hiding it anymore, right?”

She wasn’t clenching her teeth only to endure the pain. The enemy had no obligation to do as she said. They didn’t, but as the masked group was about to attack without paying her any attention, their leader raised his hand to stop them. He then reached for his mask with resignation and took it off.

“A-Aah...”

A grief-stricken sound slipped through Iino Yuna’s lips. What was revealed beneath the mask was a virile and likable face. Now, that face was making a bittersweet expression. She never expected to see him in a place like this.



“Jinguuji...”

“Yo, Iino. I didn’t wanna see you here.”

Jinguuji Tomoya—nicknamed the Dragon in the exploration team. He was one of those who’d quit the team, a comrade in arms she’d explored the Woodlands with. After leaving the exploration team, she’d met him during the fake savior incidents. The reason she hadn’t noticed during the battle was likely due to some kind of concealment magic on his mask. However, that effect hadn’t extended to his voice. After taking several seconds to accept the reality before her, Iino Yuna began speaking with trembling lips.

“Why are you in a place like this...? Why are you doing this?”

She’d known it was him the moment she’d heard his voice, but she hadn’t wanted to believe it. Even now, she didn’t believe it. The members of the exploration team were comrades unlike any other. Among them, Jinguuji Tomoya and the other members of the upper brass were especially reliable comrades-in-arms. She’d never imagined meeting him like this. She felt like she heard the sound of something important cracking apart. It was an auditory hallucination of her world crumbling to pieces.

Up until now, she’d always fought for what she believed was right. Such had been the case when defending the Colony, exploring the Woodlands, setting out with the first expeditionary force, rescuing the survivors of the Colony, chasing the fake savior in the eastern Empire, and protecting that village from those rampaging monsters. She’d endured all the pain to fight and fight to the bitter end. The reason she’d managed was because she believed her actions were meaningful.

She’d given it her best. Even when things were hard, even when it hurt, she’d kept running without ever coming to a stop. So how had it all come crashing down like this? If it was going to end up this way, what had she been doing all that for?

“Answer me, Jinguuji...” A terrifying thought came to mind, and unable to stand it any longer, Iino screamed. “Why?! Why are you helping the likes of Ottmar?! Why are you trying to kill Majima?!”

The two who had once fought shoulder to shoulder exploring the Woodlands now locked eyes. The girl showed extreme agitation, while the boy's gaze remained steadfast. In other words, he'd long resolved himself for this.

"To get everyone back to our world," he answered.

"Huh...?"

"If I help them, they promised to send us back. That's why I'm here."

He spoke calmly, contrasting Iino Yuna's confusion greatly.

"Wh-What're you saying?" Iino asked. "Get everyone back to our world?"

That was in fact what he'd told her when they last met.

"To tell the truth, I haven't just been lazing around. I... I plan to somehow get back to our world."

He was being consistent, but that wasn't the main problem here.

"Do you really believe Ottmar can do that?"

It was common sense in this world that saviors couldn't go back to their own world. Iino Yuna didn't believe some lowly former knight of the Holy Order could do something like that.

"That's not all. Jinguuji, you said you want to get everyone back, right? You'll kill Majima to do that?"

She remembered the last conversation they had.

"I'm different from Juumonji. He was an idiot. Kill our friends to go back home? That's goddamn crazy. How many of us are left? A hundred? Two? How many of the original thousand are already dead? I'm different from that asshole. I'm getting back home with everyone."

His voice had been filled with righteous indignation. Those words had come from the heart. However, his actions now contradicted them. They couldn't be interpreted any other way. And yet, his next words were ones of denial.

"You've got it wrong," he said. "I'm not gonna kill Majima."

Iino Yuna couldn't understand what he was saying. The frustration of being unable to get through to each other was tearing away at her heart.

“Th-Then why are you attacking us?!” she screamed.

“That’s part of the promise I made,” Jinguuji answered calmly. “‘Annihilate Majima Takahiro’s servants,’ and ‘make Majima Takahiro vanish from the public stage.’ Those were the two conditions presented to me. I’ll have his servants slain. However, I’ll secure Majima and keep him silent. That’s all. I’m not gonna kill him.”

“Wha...?!”

Iino Yuna’s eyes shot open in shock. This was in fact consistent with his claim of going back home with everyone. Regardless, she couldn’t possibly accept that.

“Why’re you so surprised?” he asked. “They’re monsters. You’ve killed tons of them already, right?”

“Y-You’re wrong! You’ve got it wrong! I told you before. Majima’s servants are different from the monsters who just go around attacking people. They have hearts, just like us.”

“Even so.”

Iino had pleaded desperately, hoping this was some kind of misunderstanding, but her old comrade shook his head.

“My objective remains the same,” he said stubbornly. “This is so we can all go home. To that end, this is necessary.”

“Why...?”

She couldn’t persuade him. It was as if his heart was shut away behind lock and key. The joyous reunion they’d had in Bann Viscounty felt so far away now. No matter what she said at this point, it would be useless. Coming to that conclusion, Iino Yuna hung her head.

“Why do you act like we’re the only ones who matter...?” she said. She felt a rift between them, one that hadn’t been there before. “We were about more than just protecting everyone, weren’t we? That went for joining the exploration team and the first expeditionary force. We never thought of having to sacrifice anything, right?”

During the days of the Colony, the two of them had explored the Woodlands under their leader, Nakajima Kojirou. At the time, they still had no idea what danger awaited them. They'd fought for the sake of protecting the ones who needed protection. They'd felt the same. Back then, they were fellow comrades who'd definitely understood each other. But now they seemed so distant.

"So why...?"

Tears poured from her eyes, ran down her cheeks, and fell to the floor. Nothing would change because of this. However, maybe a little of her feelings had reached her former comrade's heart.

"It's just as you say, Iino," Jinguuji muttered. "That was definitely the case back then. But it didn't work."

With that, he let out a long sigh. She felt a deep sense of regret behind it. It also seemed like a gesture to hold back his own tears.

"Hey, Iino. I had a girlfriend."

"Huh...?"

"She was part of the home team. I figured I had to protect her."

Iino Yuna hadn't been aware of this. A Jinguuji Tomoya she didn't know wrenched open his old wounds.

"'Go protect everyone,' she said. 'You have the power to protect them, Tomoya,' she said. Yeah, it went the same as what you just said. I joined the expeditionary force. And then, she died in the Colony."

Iino was speechless.

"That's why, Iino. I'm not gonna mess up my priorities anymore."

Loss and regret he could never recover from were Jinguuji Tomoya's driving motives. Perhaps it was even an obsession. Iino Yuna had no idea what to say to him. After all, she couldn't do anything for him at this point. No matter how much she ran around, no matter how hard she tried, there was nothing she could accomplish. That was the truth.

"And one more thing."

Overwhelmed by all this, she listened to what he had to say.

“Earlier you asked if I really think we can go back. Yeah, I do. We can all go back. That’s why it’s my one and only goal.”

Iino Yuna didn’t understand. Was this a logically made conclusion? Or was this the reckless behavior of a boy who’d lost his lover? She didn’t get it. It didn’t make sense. All she knew for certain was that he was her enemy now. That was the one and only thing she understood after being knocked down so far—

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As such, Iino Yuna failed to notice one more thing.

The most terrifying fact at this point wasn’t that the powerful Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya was now her enemy. Her attention should’ve been drawn to the details that’d brought him here.

Whether by cordial invitation, trickery, or by driving him mad, they’d enlisted the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya to their cause. They’d done something Iino Yuna had considered impossible. That was the crucial fact that passed her by, as well as the true threat. It meant the enemy possessed something capable of accomplishing such a feat. As such, no betrayal could be considered impossible now.

That was why it turned out like this...

No matter how hard it was to believe...

“Miki...hiko...?”

“Aw come on, Takahiro. You can’t go dropping your guard like that.”

The boy who was supposed to be his best friend gripped a blood-soaked knife and smiled.

Chapter 18: Harsh Betrayal

“Huh...?”

Who was it who voiced their quiet surprise? Such a severe shock had shaken my heart that, in the moment, I hadn’t even been able to discern the culprit. My thoughts were blank, just a nothingness born of my consciousness rejecting my reality. Before I knew it, there was an unbearable burning sensation in my flank. Only when my face contorted in reaction did I realize this was pain.

“Ugh...”

A sharp blade had pierced my side. I choked on my breath in agony, feeling a cold sweat all over my body. However, in contrast, my consciousness interpreted the reality happening to me as a faraway event. It had simply been so unimaginable. It was enough for me to doubt this was really happening.

“Miki...hiko...?”

My trembling lips muttered the name of my best friend, because Mikihiko was leaning over me. The unnaturally close distance had caught me off guard. I saw his fingers wrapped tightly around the hilt of a knife.

Only after recognizing all that did I finally digest the reality I found myself in. Mikihiko had gone from a friendly greeting to an act of violence, stabbing me in the side with his combat knife. His forward-leaning posture was to push the blade in deep. He looked down at me from above with a frivolous smile.

“Aw come on, Takahiro. You can’t be dropping your guard like that.”

His half-joking, chiding, and cheerful tone was definitely that of my best friend. However, only his actions differed from what I knew to a cruel degree.

“Mikihiko, why...?”

My voice was hoarse with pain. I’d somehow managed to grab Mikihiko’s knife-wielding hand the moment before he’d stabbed me. This was thanks to the unconscious defensive reactions drilled into my body. Regardless, there was a limit to what I could handle. With each beat of my heart, hot and slippery

blood soaked my hand.

“N-Noooo?!”

Seeing my blood right before her eyes, Katou screamed. At the same time, the situation started moving again.

“Dora! Help him!”

“What are you doing, you bastard?!”

Kudou screamed in uncharacteristic dismay, and Dora moved before he finished talking, running toward me with her shadow swords brandished. However, this was apparently all within expectations. Mikihiko dealt with it calmly.

“Whoa there.”

Right before Dora could attack, he moved behind me to use me as a shield. His movements were the same as the skills he’d fostered through training, the ones I’d witnessed not too long ago when we’d acknowledged each other’s efforts.

“Here ya go.”

“Ugh.”

Mikihiko kicked my stomach and Dora caught me. He pulled the knife out at the same time, sending blood gushing into the air. My body rapidly lost strength from the blood loss. I pinned down the wound to stop the bleeding, but my vision was already darkening.

“Dora, get him to safety!”

“Understood!”

Kudou and Dora’s decision to secure my safety was probably correct. However, Mikihiko’s target was someone else from the very beginning.

“Eek?!”

Hearing a girl scream, my hair stood on end.

“Crap!”

By the time I noticed, it was too late. Not that I could do anything with my body in such a state, anyway. Nevertheless, I raised my head, forcing myself to look through the pain, and saw the worst possible outcome.

“Katou...”

Mikhiko was carrying her unconscious body over his shoulder.

“I’m all alone, and look at these odds. I’m not gonna fight fair and square.”

“Mikihiko...”

He pressed a knife against Katou’s neck. The savagery of our circumstances was thrust before my eyes. It made the stab wound feel like a trifling thing.

“Sorry, but you’re gonna hafta let me get away.”

“Do you think we will?” Kudou retorted quietly, the threat clear in his tone.

“Yeah, I do,” Mikihiko replied, not paying that any mind. “I’m sure you don’t give a lick about her, but Takahiro does. If Takahiro doesn’t want you to, you won’t make a move, right?”

“How insolent...”

Kudou clicked his tongue, yet didn’t do anything. I was relieved that he wasn’t going to attack and put Katou in danger, but the fact remained that we had no way of changing the situation.

“Mikihiko....” I forced myself to stay conscious so that I could speak. “Let Katou go.”

“No way. No can do. The scary one over there will kill me if I do,” he said, pointing at Dora with his eyes and trembling in an exaggerated manner. “That’s the same as asking me to die, yeah? Well, I guess it makes sense to ask me to at this point.”

“That’s not what I’m saying... Why are you against us, anyway? What happened?”

“Nothing really. I’m just your enemy now. That’s why I won’t hand Katou over.”

He ignored my question without really answering it.

“Ugh...”

I had a ton of questions, but there wasn’t enough blood for my brain to function. As such, my thoughts refused to work properly as my consciousness faded, leaving me with nothing to do except listen to Mikihiko’s words.

“It’s not all that weird, right? Takahiro, you have no way outta this place. It’s useless. It’s over for you. Choosing your side at this point would be stupid, don’tcha think?”

“Mikihiko...”

“Aah, what I’m getting at is this is a matter of priorities. This is something a recent ally...or an ally of an ally? Well, that’s what he said. I can’t stand the guy, but I think he’s right in this regard.”

“Priorities...?”

“Mm-hm. Priorities. So, I have no other choice.”

He was telling me to give up. I didn’t know what’d happened, but when he said, “I have no other choice,” I figured it out—that would normally be the case. However, before the thought came to mind...

“Mikihiko. Are you...?”

There was something I wanted to ask, but I wasn’t permitted to. Before I could, an abnormality occurred.

“What’s going on...?!”

The ground started oscillating up and down. What looked like a sturdy hallway was shaking violently.

“An earthquake at a time like this...? No, this is...”

“My king! Get closer! I sense mana!”

The unnatural timing spurred Kudou and Dora to readiness. Their reaction was normal, whereas Mikihiko and I were the odd ones out. Mikihiko immediately turned on his heels as I squeezed my words out.

“N-No! This isn’t an attack...!”

“What?”

Just as Dora raised her voice at my comment, Mikihiko reached the wall. There was nothing there—or so I thought. Suddenly, the wall started splitting in two with an ear-grating noise.

“What the?!”

Dora’s astonishment was a matter of course. The structure of this sturdy-looking corridor was changing. In the blink of an eye, a new path now existed. Mikihiko went through it without hesitation, the unconscious Katou still over his shoulder.

“Mikihiko, wait...!”

“H-Hey!”

Stirred by my unbearable uneasiness, I got away from Dora and tried to chase Mikihiko. However, as I took a step forward, my leg was unable to support my weight and I collapsed to my knees. Pain ran up my spine, cutting off all signals my nerves were trying to send to my limbs to keep moving.

“Hey! Do you understand the state of your injury?!” Dora yelled, grabbing me by the shoulder.

“I have to go after him...!” I knew, of course. I was well aware that I was being unreasonable, but I couldn’t just sit here. “He’s still... He’s still in reach...!”

“Y-You’re...” Dora’s eyes wavered. Immediately following that, a drawn blade flickered toward her. “Ugh?!”

It was a sharp spear thrust. However, what’d caught the experienced Dora off guard was the fact that the attack had come from empty space.

“Back off!”

Dora barely managed to react, changing one hand into a sword and repelling the sword as she stared in confusion.

“Wh-What is this...?”

There was a spear in front of her bewildered eyes. It was the same one that’d penetrated Travis’s cranium earlier to deliver the finishing blow. Strangely enough, it was floating in the air as if an invisible person was holding it at the ready. I’d seen a similar sight before.

“Aerial Knight! It’s Mikihiko’s inherent ability!”

He was capable of wielding weapons without touching them, similar to a form of telekinesis. The floating spear moved on its own, delivering a series of thrusts.

“What a pain...!”

Dora repelled every strike with precision. She was in no danger at all. However, she hadn’t overcome Mikihiko’s expectations.

“He’s keeping us at bay...” Kudou muttered, the wings on his back glowing. “Step aside, Dora. I’ll crush it.”

Speaking in a cold voice, he unleashed the magic he’d been holding back because Katou was a hostage. Immediately as Dora jumped aside, a hammer of wind broke the floating spear. Once broken, it looked like his ability didn’t work anymore. The shattered spear fell to the ground. However, by that time, we’d long lost our chance to do anything.

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“Fuck...”

I stared at the corridor Mikihiko had vanished down and clenched my blood-soaked fist. If we were going to chase him, we had to do it now. If we left it for later, it would take time to catch up to him. With a deep wound like this, even if Dora were to carry me, I wouldn’t be able to endure a prolonged chase. My outstretched hand couldn’t reach her. The moment I came to that realization, my willpower cut out.

“Ugh...”

Unable to even stay up on my knees, I collapsed. The ground was shaking beneath my palm.

“H-Hey, are you all right?”

Even as Dora called out to me, the tremors continued. I heard a deep rumble from afar. Much like before, the corridors were probably transforming. Was it making an escape route for Mikihiko? Or was it for some other reason? Either way, the enemy was definitely plotting something.

“Dora. Give Majima-senpai emergency treatment. I can’t use one of my hands...”

Kudou walked up to me as he gave instructions. His sharp eyes were highlighted by a strong air of wariness as the tremors continued.

“What exactly is going on...?”

“A magic tool...” I answered immediately.

“A magic tool?” Kudou repeated in bewilderment, perhaps having not expected an actual answer. “Considering the mana we detected when it started happening, that would certainly make sense... In that case, is this some kind of facility that’s packed with a ton of magic tools? Was that what that hidden passage was?”

“No,” I said, “this place isn’t packed with magic tools.”

“Senpai...?”

Kudou’s voice conveyed clear confusion. Maybe he was under the impression I wasn’t right in the mind. He looked at me anxiously. It wasn’t strange for him to think so in this situation, but that wasn’t the case.

“I’m fine. I haven’t lost my senses. That’s not it... I know this place’s true identity; the one Salvia discovered for me.”

“This place’s true identity...?”

It was what Salvia had been in the middle of telling us. She’d figured it out by coincidence. Ever since being teleported here, she’d been investigating why her contractor hadn’t been able to deploy the Misty Lodge. She’d succeeded too. It’d taken some time, but she’d found the source of the problem.

As a result, she’d been left utterly confused. After all, the reason our magic hadn’t been able to activate was because of mutual interference. When two similar magic were used in the same space, the magics interfered with each other.

Once she figured this out, she’d modified the magic being channeled through me to alter the part subject to interference, letting the magic work once more. It’d been a demonstration of the skills of the Misty Lodge who’d wandered this

world for an eternity. At the same time, it'd also exposed a certain truth.

The main clue was the facet of the Misty Lodge that'd been interfering with this place. In other words, she'd found out what kind of magic was in continuous use here. At first, Salvia had thought it was some kind of mistake. It couldn't possibly be true. After all, the interference came from what could be called her very essence.

However, no matter how much she double-checked, the answer remained the same. A certain magic was constantly deployed in this place. One that was the same kind as the Misty Lodge Salvia, whose very existence was magic. Knowing this, I denied Kudou's statement. In other words, magic tools weren't planted all over this place...

"This place itself was created using a magic tool. This is some kind of artificial world."

Chapter 19: Mastermind

Letting out a shriek in its death throes, a monster made of mist started dispersing into nothing. The monster had been defeated by a single combat knife, but the knife itself was floating in the air. This was Kaneki Mikihiko's inherent ability, Aerial Knight, which allowed him to wield weapons without even touching them. The mist monster was poisonous, but unable to display its true value against an opponent who fought at long range, it vanished in vain.

Having disposed of the obstruction, Kaneki Mikihiko started moving once more. He still had the unconscious Katou Mana over his shoulder. Around him were Ottmar's subordinates who'd linked up with him immediately after the surprise attack. They continued moving without any idle chatter. They didn't hesitate whatsoever, moving steadily toward a clear destination. They then encountered another monster.

"A dragon this time?"

"Grrr..."

A small dragon spread its wings and growled menacingly. Kaneki Mikihiko readied himself carefully, but before the battle could start, a shrill scream echoed down the corridor.

"You're in the way. Die."

A knight's sword pierced through its eyeball from behind. With its brain destroyed, the dragon collapsed. Looking down at Mikihiko's group from behind it was a violent-looking man wearing the armor of a knight of the Holy Order.

"Yo. Looks like you're back."

"Aah, well, well... If it isn't Sir Edgar."

The Battle Ogre Edgar Guivarch of the Holy Order's Fourth Company jumped over the dragon's corpse. He'd suffered horrible wounds launching a surprise attack on Majima Takahiro back in a reclamation village in Aker, but he had already recovered to the point where none of his movements were strained. Kaneki Mikihiko immediately relaxed his posture and flashed a joking smile.

“Thank you. You saved us.”

He abased himself with an easy-to-understand expression of servility. Edgar looked at the boy with boredom as the knights behind him stepped forth. At their head was a man with level eyes, Ottmar.

“Oh? Even you, Sir Ottmar? Weren’t you chasing Lily and Gerbera?” Mikihiko asked.

“I left the rest to them,” Ottmar answered.

“Aah. That’s why.”

Just as he implied, the masked man wielding the ominous sword and about half the knights who’d been chasing Lily and Gerbera weren’t here with him.

“The servants of our target, Majima Takahiro, are still on the run, but our ally is more than enough to handle them,” Ottmar said. “Judging it would be meaningless to take part in the chase, I returned.”

His reasoning was clear and logical. There was no room to question his efficient actions. That was precisely why Majima Takahiro’s group would’ve sensed something out of place had they witnessed this scene.

They were under the impression that Ottmar was the mastermind behind this incident because of his grudge. However, his actions showed nearly no fixation on Majima Takahiro whatsoever. It was possible it simply didn’t show in his attitude or expression, but his actions didn’t bear the hallmarks of one seeking vengeance.

What did it mean, then? Had they been able to question that, they might’ve noticed something else out of place here. It had to do with Kaneki Mikihiko’s presence.

The enemy making an attempt on Majima Takahiro’s life had won over the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya as an ally. If that was all, it was possible he’d simply been deceived, his judgment clouded due to the loss of his lover. However, the enemy had also won over Kaneki Mikihiko. He was extremely close to Majima Takahiro. It was completely different from turning Jinguuji Tomoya against him, who barely knew the guy.

The deciding factor here was the word “priorities” Kaneki Mikihiko had mentioned earlier. It didn’t need to be said who was at the very top of his priority list. Neither did her current whereabouts or situation need to be mentioned.

As such, one premise here completely fell apart.

“Report. I’ll relay everything to him.”

Ottmar spoke the definitive words; words that the mastermind behind the incident would never speak.

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“This place is a world created using magic...?” Shiran asked, unable to hide her bewilderment. The truth behind this maze had also been revealed to her. “What do you mean by that?”

The one to tell her was Gordon. For an instant, he averted his eyes as if unable to withstand the anguish. However, his sincerity didn’t allow him to keep quiet about it.

“There’s a magic tool capable of it,” he said. “Not that I’ve seen it for myself... At the very least, I know nothing about any structure of this kind with such a mysterious purpose. The same goes for my subordinates. Even as we moved through it, nothing about this abnormally vast space has been made clear to us. That’s when I came to a realization.”

“That this space is another world?”

“Yes. These enormous corridors do not exist in reality. That’s why this is another world.”

“A magic tool...”

Shiran groaned at the unbelievable information, but was also reminded of something. One of her companions, the Misty Lodge Salvia, was in fact capable of creating another world, though only for a few days. If this was the same thing —turning a blind eye to the scale and abnormality of it—it was possible for her to accept such a fantastical explanation. Still, questions remained.

“In that case, what about the monsters in here?” she asked. “Were they

brought in from the outside?” In truth, such a suggestion didn’t make much sense either. “There are a significant number of them. Bringing them in would be far too much work and be far too dangerous...”

“Yes. That would be wrong,” Gordon agreed. He then added something that was hard to believe even for someone who knew about the Misty Lodge. “Those were also created using the same magic tool.”

“Creating...monsters?”

Shiran’s eye shot open in astonishment. Much like how this world had been made using a magic tool, so too were the monsters who lived here.

“The monsters were likely created right before we were teleported here.”

It was hard to accept, but Gordon’s expression was deadly serious. Also, upon hearing this story, a sudden thought came to mind.

“Don’t tell me... Is that why we haven’t found any monster corpses aside from the ones we’ve defeated?”

The point of uncertainty Katou Mana had also questioned elsewhere was something Shiran had realized very quickly, having spent most of her life devoted to suppressing monsters. If the monsters had only just been born, then it made sense that there were no signs of them living here. Much like how Salvia’s world of mist realized its targets’ wishes by casting a glamor on their cognition, this place had the power to create monsters.

“Such a thing is far too...”

The reality she’d been informed of was hard to swallow, but Shiran forced her thoughts to remain in motion. She had a reason she needed to, after all.

“Sir Gordon, please allow me a question. Why have you been keeping quiet about this?”

Gordon hadn’t spoken of what he’d known until Shiran had asked him about it. That meant he’d had a reason not to.

“Why are you making such a pained expression, even now?” Shiran added.

Gordon clearly felt burdened by his realization. There had to be a reason for his distress.

“There’s something you still haven’t told us, isn’t there?” Shiran kept going. “Yes, for example... Why are all the monsters in here the same species as Takahiro’s servants?”

Slimes, puppets, arachnes, man-eating plants, spirit foxes, zombies, poison fog, and dragons. All of the monsters she’d encountered here reminded her of someone else. She’d only come across a few of these, but even so, she had a vague hunch about it. Now that it’d come to this, she couldn’t help but think there had to be some meaning behind it.

“Sir Gordon.”

After calling his name once more, Gordon closed his eyes in resignation. Or perhaps it was a gesture to accept the difficult truth for himself. His lips, which had been pulled tight into a perfectly straight line this whole time, finally parted.

“The magic tool capable of building this world can also create monsters, but they are largely reflections of what the people of the imperial capital fear.”

“The capital...?”

Shiran scowled at the odd condition. Gordon didn’t have a reason to lie, though. He wasn’t the type to either. What’s more, this condition somehow felt similar to the nature of the Misty Lodge. That world of mist realized the wishes of those who wandered within. In contrast, this place reflected the populace’s fears. Just maybe, all fabricated worlds shared such a nature. Also, if this was true, Shiran understood why the monsters here were all species she was familiar with.

“Under different circumstances, maybe monsters similar to the Lord of Darkness’s servants would’ve been created instead,” Gordon said. “However, Mister Majima is currently visiting the capital. Even though they know he’s here for peace talks, the majority of the populace is uneasy.”

“And that’s being reflected here?” Shiran asked.

“Yes. That said, none have actually seen his servants, so that’s likely why the monsters’ appearances and abilities only bear a passing resemblance.”

Gordon’s explanation summed up the situation pretty well. Though it made

sense to Shiran, she nevertheless felt a chill run up her spine. Gordon really did know what this place was. He even knew of its strange properties. Having gotten this far, she was pretty much convinced she knew why he'd hesitated to open up about it.

She now knew. She felt dizzy and staggered backward. In truth, when Gordon first mentioned this being another world, she'd harbored a vague suspicion. Up until that point, she'd considered Ottmar, his fellow former knights, and Travis and his subordinates as the enemies. She'd also considered their ally, the Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma, the biggest threat.

However, in that case, this place was far too special. The construction of another world that even surpassed the Misty Lodge in scale—a magic tool capable of creating such a nonsensical miracle couldn't possibly be in the hands of a measly former knight. Shiran had an idea as to what magic tool had been used, as well as its current whereabouts. As if to confirm her conjecture, Gordon spoke in a heavy tone.

"The magic tool to create another world has been passed down since antiquity under strict concealment. Only a select few even know about it. Its name is—"

His next words came out as if he'd swallowed lead.

"The Dimensional Cornerstone. A magic tool managed by the Holy Church."

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The Dimensional Cornerstone. This was the name of the magic tool that'd been used to maintain the Mist Barrier to keep Draconia hidden. Normally, the world of the Misty Lodge could only be maintained for a limited time. This magic tool could stabilize it and keep it going indefinitely. Salvia had once spoken of the history behind it.

"The Dimensional Cornerstone, you mean. I got it from an old friend long, long ago. The Holy Church was in charge of it before. There are apparently several of them in the imperial capital. You want to know why I lent it to her, right?"

Two Dimensional Cornerstones had come into Salvia's possession. One of them had been used to maintain the Mist Barrier. The other was being carried

by the acting explorer, Thaddeus. Naturally, the ones she hadn't been given were still stored by the Holy Church. One of those had been used in this incident.

After coming in contact with Kaneki Mikihiko, Ottmar dropped by the center of this fabricated world. It was a large room with an altar. Inside, two groups stood at the ready.

One was made up of around thirty people. They were all wearing knight's armor, and none showed any vulnerabilities, a testament to their skill. However, at the same time, none gave off the air of confidence or conceit that was natural to many of the famous elites of this world. All of the men had level eyes and looked completely devoid of ambition. Strangely enough, they shared this in common with Ottmar.

The other group was made up of around twenty people. These donned the armor of the Holy Order. They weren't former knights like Ottmar. They were the elect of the elite First Company. Though they were but a fraction of the six hundred knights that made up the company, they were genuine knights of the Holy Order. As such, there could only be one man leading them.

"You're back."

The marshal of the Holy Order, Harrison Addington, the man extolled as a knight among knights, welcomed Ottmar. It should've been impossible. It'd been discussed over and over how disadvantageous it'd be for the Holy Church to antagonize Majima Takahiro. He wasn't the type to be ignorant of that. What's more, he was devoted to his duties. He also wasn't the sort to act out of selfish desires.

It was impossible for him to become Majima Takahiro's enemy. That was supposed to be the case, yet the truth was undeniable. No matter how hard it was to accept, it simply was.

He was the one who'd instigated the exploration team's Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma. He'd created a lethal trap and had plotted this forced teleportation. Once that failed, he'd ordered Ottmar to give chase. He'd unleashed the knight-turned-horror, Travis, and had secured the Dragon's cooperation. He'd also ordered Kaneki Mikihiko to launch that surprise attack.

Absolutely everything had been orchestrated by the people in this room. However, despite having had a hand in all of these acts, the impression Harrison gave off hadn't changed in the least. He was the very image of a knight. With no conceit, no haughtiness, he kept his eyes on his duty and remained calm at all times. Perhaps this unshakeable aspect was the most dreadful thing about him.

"Report."

"Yes sir."

Ottmar saluted, then started conveying Kaneki Mikihiko's report to his master.

Chapter 20: And So the Cage Closes

Faced with the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya as an enemy, Iino Yuna couldn't be more shaken. The tip of her readied sword trembled pathetically, and the knife in her leg made her nerves screaming in unbearable agony. Fortunately, Jinguuji Tomoya hadn't attacked her yet. He looked at her apologetically, his eyes as friendly as ever. Despite this situation, he didn't consider her an enemy.

"Hey, Iino. Can you throw down your sword? Any more of this will just cause you suffering." His plea for her surrender even sounded like he held consideration for a friend. "I'm not gonna tell you to help us. You can just shut your eyes to what's happening here."

"You think I can?!"

Iino Yuna shook her head vigorously over and over. With each shake, tears spilled from her eyes. She also still considered him a friend. If he was working to get everyone back to their old world, she wanted to help him. Nevertheless, she was incapable of ignoring the plights of everyone else to accomplish that. That was why this conversation could go no further.

"Hey, isn't that enough?"

One of the four masked enemies with Jinguuji Tomoya spoke up. She was the only woman of the group.

"There's no point talking it out anymore, right?"

Despite being allies, her tone toward him was somewhat thorny. Her eyes glared at him through her mask. The other three didn't say anything, but they were all giving the same impression.

"So you say..."

As for Jinguuji Tomoya, he looked somewhat stumped. The exchange between them gave Iino Yuna a sense of unease. They were supposed to be allies, but they all faced her with different attitudes. Was this simply discord between them? Or maybe...

“Jinguuji, it seems you don’t understand the situation,” the masked woman continued in irritation. “We must fulfill the duty charged to us as quickly as we can. *He* told us to kill M ajima’s servants, after all.”

She spoke as if this duty was absolute. Just the use of this word offered a glimpse at how she viewed this incident. Rose and Lobivia stiffened up. The eyes the masked woman pointed toward them had a fanatical passion that wasn’t there when she was looking at Jinguuji Tomoya. The two of them didn’t know who the woman was referring to when she said “he,” but it was crystal clear that she would wield her sword against them with glee.

“Come, it’s time to fulfill our duty!”

Rose and Lobivia couldn’t face the masked group alone. The woman’s words were a declaration of death.

“Lobivia...!”

“Fuck!”

The bloodlust facing the two girls suddenly swelled up. The masked woman lunged forward, casually pointing her sword at them. Rose swung her ax in response, unable to accomplish anything and shattering to pieces. Witnessing her companion’s death in dismay, the little dragon’s transformed head fell to the floor. This future was basically set in stone—

“Like hell I’ll let youuuu!”

And what tore apart that hopeless future was a scream from the girl who was supposed to be severely injured.

“Wha?!”

Iino Yuna stepped in, her slender sword slamming against the woman’s blade. Having not expected the Skanda to move in such a state, the woman’s sword flew out of her hand.

“Guh!”

At the same time, Iino Yuna’s face convulsed spectacularly. This was due to the pain running up the leg she’d used to step in.

“Iino?!”

Rose called out to her in concern from behind, but she didn't have the leisure to respond. Pain had her head throbbing and her breathing was a ragged mess. Nevertheless, she raised her head and glared at her panicking, fleeing opponent.

It would be so easy if she just gave up after suffering such a wound and being in such an inferior position. However, if she did, something that'd been so important to her up until now would snap in two and never recover. She'd unconsciously come to that conclusion. Besides, she'd made a promise. She'd promised to protect Majima Takahiro's companions.

No matter what happened, that was one promise she could never break. Knowing Jinguuji Tomoya's intentions, as Iino Yuna's entire world shook at its foundation, this was her one guiding principle that stood firm. As such, she wasn't going to step aside.

"Eep."

The masked woman gulped. Iino Yuna possessed something sufficient enough to make her recoil, despite her supposedly advantageous position.

"Aah... So it's come to this."

Seeing this, Jinguuji Tomoya groaned. He sounded like he knew this would happen. He was the only person here who knew. This was the true power of the Skanda, the one who boasted of being the strongest in hand-to-hand combat among the entire exploration team.

Back when they first found themselves in the Woodlands, when a horde of monsters had attacked them, what'd unified the disorganized cheaters and saved them from the crisis had been the overwhelming strength of the Sword of Light and his charisma. However, what'd barely maintained the battle line before that had been the Skanda's unbreakable heart and obstinacy, fighting at the front the entire time.

If one stopped to imagine it for a moment, it was plain to see how great a feat that was—and depending on one's outlook, how unreasonably abnormal it was too. It'd been their first battle after being dropped into another world from peaceful Japan. Caught in a hopeless battle against an army of rampaging monsters, she hadn't been paralyzed with fear. She had instead held her

ground, gritted her teeth, and continued to fight. Of the visitors who'd gone out into the Woodlands, the only ones who'd done so were the Skanda and the Beast of Darkness.

Her nature didn't change just because she couldn't move one leg. If anything could make Iino Yuna capitulate, it would be by smashing apart the righteousness within her. Jinguuji Tomoya sighed, then grabbed the overawed masked woman by the shoulder.

"Hey, we're pulling out."

The other four masked enemies turned to him.

"Wh-What're you saying?!" the woman yelled.

"I'm telling you to give it up," Jinguuji said, shaking his head. "I know how you feel, of course. You guys are different from me. You're not helping them out just 'cause your interests align. However, now that it's come to this, Iino will resist us to the death. We can't stop the Skanda when she's serious and we're holding back."

There'd been a level of moderation to this battle. Iino Yuna had at most been protecting those with her, standing firm to suppress all attacks from her opponents. Jinguuji Tomoy had considered this a fight against a friend. However, now that things had reached this point, if she began a struggle to the death, they couldn't hold back any longer. One wrong step would have them killing each other. Jinguuji Tomoya couldn't allow that.

"I can't kill her. Rather, if you guys try and kill her, I'm gonna have to stop you."

His objective was getting all surviving visitors back home safe and sound. That included the girl he was crossing swords with now. In contrast, he didn't care what happened to anyone else. This was the other side of the coin. No matter how unfavorable things looked, his conviction wasn't going to falter. That was what his behavior now indicated.

There was one thing that was made clear by their exchange. The four other masked enemies had different motives from Jinguuji Tomoya. Back when they last met, he'd opened up to Iino Yuna that he was gathering comrades who'd

left the exploration team for the sake of finding a way back to their own world. However, the four masked enemies here clearly weren't the comrades he'd been referring to at the time. Unlike him, they were cooperating with the enemy without any personal interests at stake.

Who could they be? It was only natural to ask that. However, before she could press for answers, Jinguuji Tomoya got the conversation moving again.

"Ever since the failed teleportation, there have been so many irregularities to this plan. Iino's inclusion is the most extreme case. We were supposed to be the ace in the hole here, but we've been totally shut down. She was the one person who wasn't supposed to be here. That's the kinda opponent she is."

"That's..."

"We should step aside for now. It's no big deal. Everything is in place. We can just all join forces and clean up those Iino is protecting after everything's over, yeah?"

"Understood..."

The masked woman reluctantly nodded, convinced by his words. That said, listening to them from the side, Iino Yuna couldn't possibly ignore the concerning contents of their conversation.

"W-Wait. What do you mean by..."

And just as she started questioning them, an abnormality occurred.

"Wh-What?"

The corridor began shaking violently. Underground tremors had started somewhere nearby.

"What's happening...?"

"Like I said, it's over," Jinguuji Tomoya answered. "The sector Majima's in is sealed. Unfortunately for you, he's not getting any reinforcements now."

"Wha...?!"

That was the true nature of these tremors. Jinguuji Tomoya had mentioned that everything was in place. When Kaneki Mikihko's escape route had been

created, in that same instant, all routes to get to Majima Takahiro had been shut off.

“Hey, Jinguuji,” another one of the masked men cut in. “Don’t go blabbing about stuff you don’t need to mention.”

Unlike Jinguuji Tomoya and the masked woman, his voice was unnaturally deep. Still, even with an altered voice, it was clear that he was criticizing how loose-tongued they were being toward an enemy.

“My bad,” Jinguuji said, honestly apologizing. “I just don’t want Iino to suffer. It’s better for her to give up sooner or later.”

There was real consideration in his voice.

“The cage is closed now. All that’s left is for the loyalest of us all to bring it to an end.”

Chapter 21: Prideless Betrayer

It was a cramped room, fully furnished so that anyone living there wouldn't be inconvenienced. On the other hand, the thick door was locked and the only windows were sealed by iron bars. Perhaps calling it a dressed-up prison would be closer to the truth. A single woman was a prisoner within. Through the small window on the door, she spoke to a boy standing in the hallway.

"Sorry... I'm so sorry..."

The woman didn't go up to the window for him to see her, but the anguish was evident in her voice. The boy knew very well how impossible that was. She was strong. He looked up to her. Despite her resolve, she and the knights she led had become nothing more than helpless hostages. They were even being used as the collar binding his actions.

It wasn't all that strange a story. This organization was trying to kill Majima Takahiro, whose death would cause many problems. As such, she and her knights couldn't be exceptions.

"Forget about me. Live freely."

The sword she'd wielded to protect the people had been taken from her. The armor that was the symbol of her pride had been stripped from her. She had nothing now. As such, she could only hold back her tears and implore him to march on. The boy clenched his fist hard enough to draw blood. He cursed his own powerlessness. He lamented how useless he was. However, on the surface, he smiled like always. He didn't know any other way of protecting what was dear to him.

"Ha ha. I can't possibly do that, can I now?" That was when the boy's conviction crystalized. "Sorry. I'm gonna protect you."

One could say he'd determined his priorities. He'd decided to act only to protect what was important to him.

He did understand, of course. He'd decided to cast away everything else. He couldn't make any excuses. The boy had given up on something he would never

have normally given up on.

This happened months before what was going on now.

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After Ottmar left to give his report, Kaneki Mikihiko took his hostage, Katou Mana, elsewhere. Knights of the Holy Order's First Company, including Elena, were waiting for him at his destination. These were the knights he'd introduced to Majima Takahiro as "his comrades who'd fought by his side to suppress monsters."

"Aah, here's far enough. Thanks for your hard work."

Parting ways with Ottmar's subordinates, Kaneki Mikihiko linked up with Elena's group.

"Yo. It went off without a hitch."

The boy's frivolous smile and greeting were met with looks of contempt. They knew of Kaneki Mikihiko's circumstances. If he was reluctantly obeying because they had a hostage, they probably wouldn't have given it any thought. However, Kaneki Mikihiko was happily siding with the church. He was wagging his tail without a hint of pride, flattering them at every opportunity and obeying any command given to him.

In the end, he had even sold out his best friend. Their bond of trust had been severed with Mihiko's surprise attack. What's more, he'd abducted the girl his friend had been treating so dearly. The men and women here were respectable knights affiliated with the Holy Order. It was only natural for them to scowl at such cowardly acts. That said, Kaneki Mikihiko's frivolous behavior wasn't going to bend under the weight of their scorn.

"Man, I'm beat. Elena, sorry, but tie her up for me."

"Understood."

Only Elena responded to him expressionlessly. She took Katou Mana with business-like mannerisms and began restraining her just as she was told.

"Also, I'd like to ask you to keep an eye on her here. Can you?" Mikihiko asked.

“I don’t mind. She has androphobia, if I recall?”

“Yup. That’s it. It’ll be pretty bad if she suddenly panics and bites off her tongue or something. Even if it doesn’t go that far, she could get really hurt.” Mikihiko shrugged. “I mean, she’s a precious hostage. Do make sure she stays that way, okay?”

“As you say...”

His selfish attitude drew glares full of intensifying ire. He maintained his frivolous smile defiantly, and Elena’s audacity remained unchanging. After seeing that the unconscious Katou Mana had been laid down on a rug, Kaneki Mikihiko turned on his heels.

“Okay then, I’m gonna go get my next orders. I’ll leave the rest here to you.”

All the knights aside from Elena followed him out. However, after only a few minutes of walking, they came to a stop.

“Yo.”

A man called out to them from ahead. All the knights started. All he’d given them was a greeting, but all who heard him instinctively felt fear.

“Hm? It hasn’t been all that long,” Mikihiko said, wide-eyed. The one who appeared down the hallway was Edgar. “Is something the matter?”

As the knights tensed up, Kaneki Mikihiko acted like it was nothing. Perhaps this was an expression of his impudence. Beneath his glasses, he gave a flattering smile. He was acting so servile it would look unpleasant depending on who he was talking to. That said, Edgar was giving off a dangerous aura, so maybe acting servile was only normal. In truth, all the knights accompanying him were still stiff to the face.

“Oh come on. Don’t be so cold,” Edgar said. “Aren’t we allies? It’s normal to at least come get a look at your mug, yeah?”

“Aah, I guess so. Forgive me.”

In contrast to his words, there wasn’t a hint of friendliness in Edgar’s voice. Still, the boy maintained his frivolous attitude.

“What a boring asshole...” Edgar said, grimacing. “That Jinguuji brat at least

has a backbone.”

“Ha ha. I’m just a little kid. We may both be visitors, but I’d rather you not lump me together with a nicknamed exploration team member.”

“Aah, I guess you’ve got a point there. You’re just a little brat. And a huge scum at that. You stabbed Majima in a surprise attack? Well ain’t that a huge accomplishment.”

“Thank you very much. But in the end, I didn’t manage to kill him. Ha ha, I’m so ashamed.”

“Quit spouting crap. You actually get it, don’t you?” Edgar spat out, clicking his tongue. “The original plan’s a total failure. We had a surefire trap, but that almighty asshole fucked up the teleport destination. The Skanda and the Radiant Wings were supposed to be pulled away so they didn’t get involved, but that failed too. What’s more, nobody even considered the Lord of Darkness, and he’s here too. It’s a total mess. Even our trump card, the Dragon and his group, couldn’t cut it against the Skanda. And because of the Lord of Darkness, Travis’s monster got crushed.”

The Battle Ogre’s perception of the ongoing battle was precise. In the original plan, Iino Yuna, Gordon, and Kudou Riku weren’t supposed to be here. Majima Takahiro and his servants were supposed to be thrown in the middle of the monsters that’d been created in this world. After exhausting them, all forces including the Dragon and the dregs of Travis were to crush them. If things had gone to plan, Majima Takahiro would’ve been helpless. However, everything that could go wrong had gone wrong.

“Also, the Almighty Vessel’s apparently dead. I dunno if he got done in by Travis or the monsters in there...but if he managed to get some rest, he could’ve contributed to the fight pretty good too. Everything’s gone to shit. That’s Aker’s hero for you. He does have a reputation for overcoming every obstacle in his path.”

“Well, he *is* tenacious.”

“Yeah. He sure is. And you’re the only guy here who dealt him a serious blow. A spectacular victory. You might not have killed him, but not much you can do about that when you were acting solo to catch him off guard. Or maybe...you’re

just being snide?”

Edgar glared at Mikihiko.

“When I tried the same thing before, I couldn’t kill him either.”

“No, no, no! Perish the thought! Your solo surprise attack ended the same as mine, but that was because his servants got in the way. It’s different from attacking him when he was defenseless and still failing to kill him. That’s the great Battle Ogre for you.”

“Hah. The mouth on you.”

Edgar sneered. It was a thorny conversation. The knights were unable to intervene. Their ongoing exchange was proving that they definitely weren’t comrades.

“I don’t give a shit about your flattery. It’s disgusting,” Edgar said in a complete turnabout, then glared at the boy. “At any rate, you put in some pretty impressive work this time around. That goes for inflicting a severe wound on Majima Takahiro, of course, but you’re also the one who got the Almighty Vessel in, right?”

“Well, yes.”

At the beginning of the attack, the Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma had started by using a magic tool to teleport into Majima Takahiro’s room. According to Dora, she’d witnessed an ax being thrown into the room with something attached to it. The one who’d thrown that ax had been none other than Kaneki Mikihiko, using Aerial Knight. There were others like Jinguuji Tomoya who were capable of such a physical feat, but Kaneki Mikihiko had insisted that it would be more reliable for him to do it and had succeeded without issue.

“You’re the one who set the table, and you’re the first to deal a real blow. What’s more, you even got us a hostage. Take pride. With this, the higher-ups will remember you more and more.”

Edgar spoke like he found this utterly boring, then looked around as if noticing something.

“Oh yeah, what’d you do with the woman you caught?” he asked.

“I restrained her. She still hasn’t regained consciousness.”

“Hah. Unconscious, huh? What a drag,” Edgar spat, then made a ferocious smile. “The woman who’s been with Majima Takahiro from the very start, huh? Suits me just fine. Guess I’ll go get a look at her face.”

If any of Katou Mana’s companions were to witness this, they would definitely go pale. The Battle Ogre had gained an interest in her when she was in a far too defenseless state. If he was just taking a look, that would still be fine. But would that really be the end of it? Edgar was the implacable man who’d disregarded whatever could happen to him just to launch a surprise attack on Majima Takahiro. It wouldn’t be strange for him to enact any kind of cruelty against the boy’s companions. Even if that wasn’t the case, there was a dangerous air to him that made it hard to tell what he was going to do.

“I’m gonna hafta drop by.”

The violent ogre started making his way toward the defenseless girl. However, he came to a stop right away.

“Please gimme a break.”

Kaneki Mikihiko blocked his path, a troubled grin marking his features. The two were naturally face to face now. That said, they weren’t in equal positions.

“She’s my achievement. You know the situation I’m in, right? I’m begging you, don’t go spoiling things for me.”

Kaneki Mikihiko continued abasing himself. That was a display of his current status.

“You have a grudge against Takahiro. You might do something bad to my precious hostage. I’m scared of that.” His tone was subservient as he asked for understanding. “So I can’t let you get anywhere near her. Please understand.”

He objected in every way he could, practically on his hands and knees. Any normal person would feel awkward about this, but not Edgar.

“Hah. So what?”

He started walking again after quickly refusing. The Battle Ogre wasn’t the

type to be mindful of others no matter who pleaded with him.

“Outta the way.”

He casually pushed Kaneki Mikihiko aside. Once Edgar was past this point, nobody would be able to stop him. The powerless girl was sure to fall into the hands of this dangerous ogre. However, just then...

“Ah?”

Edgar once more came to a stop.

“The hell are you up to?”

He raised his voice in anger. That only stood to reason. A combat knife was thrust right before his nose, after all. The floating blade was being manipulated by Aerial Knight.



“Please. Seriously. Can you back off?”

The boy’s attitude remained servile, but the air wreathed around him had clearly changed. His smile was gone and his face was as expressionless as a noh mask. The combat knife was in a position to slash at any moment using Aerial Knight. He held a compact hatchet in his left hand. This he’d had in the magic bag at his waist, but it wasn’t clear when he’d pulled it out. His deftness of hand resembled a magic trick. This was how skilled he was in its use. At this close range, he could definitely swing it faster than a knight’s sword.

“Hmm...” For the first time, Edgar smiled in amusement. “Well, ain’t that nice? Not bad at all.” It was the smile of an ogre drunk on battle. “I heard the Great White Spider of the Depths acknowledged your talent for fighting. Yeah, I’ll acknowledge it too. Pretty impressive.”

“Please step back.”

In contrast, Kaneki Mikihiko remained sober. His frank voice was polite, but bereft of emotion. With the impossibly sudden change in atmosphere, the surrounding knights didn’t even know how to react. Maybe they were under the impression a fight to the death was about to begin. Surprisingly, though, that didn’t happen.

“Yeah. All right. I’ll back off,” Edgar said. “You’ve got a point there. Makes sense for you to be pissed. After all...it’s your hard-won ‘achievement.’”

“Do you...?”

Perhaps this was also unexpected for Kaneki Mikihiko. His expressionless face changed to one of suspicion. He narrowed his eyes behind his glasses as if searching for the man’s intentions. Facing him, Edgar remained indifferent.

“Yeah. I know of your ‘circumstances.’ Getting your achievements snatched away and wasted would be a big pain for you. That’s what you mean, yeah?”

Edgar did exactly as he said and stepped aside. He’d long dispersed his fighting spirit. His whim was like a passing storm. That said, this wasn’t the first time Edgar acted like this.

“You’re right... That’s exactly it. Thank you very much for understanding.”

Kaneki Mikihiko also went back to his earlier behavior. He returned a frivolous smile. Seeing that the two had come to an agreement, the knights around them sighed in relief.

“So? What did you really come here for, Sir Edgar?” Mikihiko asked. “You didn’t really come just to see me, right?”

“Well, yeah. I’ve got a message,” Edgar answered with a ferocious and violent grin befitting of an ogre. “You and me have been ordered to go and attack Majima Takahiro. If necessary, we can head out from here.”

“Hmm...”

“This time, we’ve been ordered to kill him for sure. Give it your all. You get what you want that way, yeah?”

“Yes. I know.”

Mikihiko’s lips also curved into a smile. It was a servile smile befitting of a traitor who submitted to the strong and who’d do any cowardly act.

“I’ll kill Majima Takahiro.”

Chapter 22: Those Who Reunited

It was like all warmth had vanished from the world. Ever since waking up, Katou Mana did nothing but tremble in fear, curled up into a ball. She shivered as though suffering from a horrible illness, her wrists bound together by rope. Her hands were so deprived of blood they looked to be as cold as ice.

“Senpai... Rose... Senpai... Rose…”

She hyperventilated, her consciousness drifting in and out over and over. Her violet-tinged lips endlessly called for help.

“Senpai... Rose... S-Senpai.. Ro...se...”

Her tangled tongue continued calling their names like a broken record.

“Save me... Save me...”

She’d thought she’d be able to handle this better. In truth, even if she’d never been completely alone during their journey, she’d been in situations where neither Majima Takahiro nor Rose were present. However, right now, she was beyond recovery.

The only knight she could see in her vicinity was the woman called Elena, but that didn’t comfort her at all. Thinking back on it, even during the period he’d been tormented by despair and disappointment in humanity, the boy she yearned for had never forgotten to be considerate of her. It could be said that she’d become best friends with Rose thanks to such consideration.

After recognizing her as a companion, he’d always treated her dearly. He’d always been gentle as if handling a precious piece of glasswork. The unconscious sense that he was protecting her at all times was what had given her the strength to finally stand on her own feet.

And now that he’d been forcibly torn away from her, in an instant, her heart had reverted to that time in that dreadful mountain hut. She was scared. It was so frightening to be alone. She couldn’t stop shivering, fainting and waking up in fear for the umpteenth time. How many times was her world going to flicker in and out like this?

“Mister Kaneki?”

Hearing Elena’s voice, Katou Mana snapped awake.

“You’ve returned?”

“Yeah. I just got a l’il something to do.”

Kaneki Mikihiko had vanished for a while, but was now standing in the corridor. His eyes turned to her through his glasses, and...

“How’s Katou do—”

“Eep?!”

Katou Mana reflexively sat upright and retreated to the wall.

“N-No...”

The reason she didn’t run away in fear was because she couldn’t even stand up properly. Her throat dried up in an instant. She turned deathly pale and quickly lost control of her breathing. She’d spoken with Kaneki Mikihiko many times before. For a time, he’d helped her try and conquer her androphobia. However, he was the one who’d stabbed the boy she loved and had abducted her. Seeing her like this, Kaneki Mikihiko stiffened up.

“That’s...worse than expected, huh?” he said.

“Yes. But I do believe it’s unreasonable to ask her to calm down.”

“I suppose so... Just be careful so that she doesn’t get hurt.”

“Understood. As a hostage, correct?”

“Yeah. She’s a precious hostage.”

The two continued talking, but Katou Mana didn’t have the capacity to listen to them. Everything went in one ear and out the other. Her endlessly swelling fear was like a snowball tumbling down into the darkness.

Tumbling, tumbling, tumbling, and tumbling.

Falling, falling, falling, and falling.

The further it went, the bigger it got, crashing down on her consciousness. She felt her mind fading away again. However, just before it did...

“Okay, I’m off then. It’s time.”

“You’re truly going through with this...with fighting Majima Takahiro.”

She heard the name of the boy she yearned for and the context in which it was mentioned. That was all it took to reach her fading consciousness. It was impossible for her to let that slide. Her dazed mind snapped awake in an instant.

All her senses suddenly came back. Her consciousness remained cloudy from dizziness and an urge to vomit. The back of her throat tasted bitter and sour. There was even a hint of blood in there from calling for help until her throat was dry. Nevertheless, as a black and white mosaic wormed its way from the edges of her vision, she somehow succeeded in capturing a man and woman facing each other in her sight.

“...ease...ait...”

She opened her mouth with astounding force of will. Kaneki Mikihiko and Elena turned to her in shock. That was how badly her body was shaking. It was as if she’d caught a horrible cold. However, this impulse was far stronger than that, forcing her to open her mouth.

“Please...wait...”

She pleaded desperately. She was reminded of the scene of the boy she loved being stabbed. The sight of him keeling over in shock was burned into her mind. She knew very well how much he trusted his best friend Kaneki Mikihiko. And that same friend had stabbed him. Just thinking of how painful that was for him was heart-wrenching, even in such a dire situation. Crossing swords with him meant he would have to go through that experience again. She couldn’t stand the thought.

“Stop... Please... Stop...”

She forcibly repressed her fear and pleaded with him. That was the only thing she could do. The calm analytical mind and resolve she’d used to help her companions many times before was long gone. All that was left were her emotions.

“I don’t care...what happens to me... I’ll do...anything... So please... Please...”

All she could do was implore him. She was desperate, but his response was ruthless.

“No can do.”

He casually kicked aside all her wishes. She sat there in a daze as the boy who’d been collared by the church spoke to her.

“I’m going. I have no other choice.”

There was no hesitation in his voice.

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“We must hurry.”

Jinguuji Tomoya and the masked group had left. Moments away from having their lives stolen, Rose and Lobivia had somehow managed to endure the crisis. However, this had been accomplished because Iino Yuna had shielded them. The enemy had simply let them off temporarily. When they had enough strength gathered to suppress her, Jinguuji Tomoya was sure to return. The girls had to quickly rendezvous with their companions, so they were back on the move.

“Hey... You okay?” Lobivia asked.

“Yes. Of course,” Iino answered, smiling back at her.

She was currently being carried on Rose’s back. A bandage was wrapped around her injured leg. Because of the ominous black fluid smeared on the knife that’d stabbed her, Rose had cleaned the wound thoroughly and treated it. That said, she couldn’t use magic, so this was no more than a stop-gap treatment. Even if she could use healing magic, the wound looked like it would take days to recover from. Iino Yuna had lost the speed of the Skanda. However, she had yet to lose her fighting spirit.

“Relax. It’s troublesome not being able to run around, but I can still fight.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” Lobivia asked.

“Not at all. I’m fine.”

Iino Yuna smiled, but there was no way she was telling the truth. Even the

untrained eye could see the area around her wound was swelling in an unpleasant color. It was clearly painful, enough that her resistance to the pain and her ability to fight earlier could only be seen as abnormal. Rose sensed that Iino Yuna was maintaining a stout smile so as to not worry them. What's more, the damage to her body wasn't the only wound she'd suffered.

When Jinguuji Tomoya revealed himself, even from behind, Rose could tell how much of a shock it'd been for her. An enormous fissure definitely ran through her heart. When she thought of that, Rose couldn't help but worry. On the other hand, she also had no choice but to rely on Iino Yuna's stouthearted nature. The situation was simply that grim.

"We don't have the time to rest right now," Iino said, her tone firm. "We have to get to Majima... Jinguuji said the sector he's in is sealed, but I don't think we should give up until we see it with our own eyes. Jinguuji wanted me to surrender. We can't be sure he's telling the truth about the area being sealed... And even if it is, there might be a hidden path or something."

She seemed to be trying to persuade herself too. Of course, turning that around, it was proof she didn't actually believe what she was saying. Jinguuji Tomoya was sincere. At the very least, he was to Iino Yuna. Even Rose, despite knowing nothing of the man, hadn't sensed any falsehood in his words. On the contrary, it'd sounded to her like words spoken out of consideration for a comrade-in-arms.

If it was in fact true that it was impossible for Rose to reunite with her beloved master... If "the most loyal among them" that Jinguuji Tomoya had mentioned was truly closing in on him... When those thoughts came to mind, the air felt so oppressive.

"Oh yeah," Lobivia said, perhaps unable to endure the heavy atmosphere. "Those guys just now, they didn't look like the Dragon's friends, right?"

"Indeed," Rose agreed. "The masked group is a part of our enemy, yet Jinguuji Tomoya seems to only be lending a hand. I didn't think they'd be such powerful foes. I suppose they must be visitors?"

"I understand where you're coming from, but I didn't know them," Iino cut in. "I mean, there were a lot of girls in the exploration team, but boys were still in

the majority. Especially in the expeditionary force where we had no idea what could happen."

The current surviving exploration team members, with rare exceptions like Aketora Fukatsu who they'd met in Aker, had taken part in the first expeditionary force. The male-to-female ratio was very one-sided.

"During the expedition, the girls stuck together quite a lot, so I'm pretty sure I'd recognize any of them by voice."

"Is that really true?"

"I get a little uneasy when you ask...but probably."

If they were to believe her, then those weren't exploration team members. However, Rose was caught up on a certain detail.

"In that case, what about the men?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"One of the men other than Jinguuji Tomoya spoke, remember? He said, "Don't go blabbing about stuff you don't need to mention.'"

Right before the masked group left, one had rebuked Jinguuji Tomoya for being too talkative toward Iino Yuna.

"That one had a modified voice," Rose continued. "If you weren't acquainted with him, there'd be no need to do that, correct?"

"Well.."

Iino Yuna made a face that said, "Now that you mention it..." There was of course also the possibility that Rose or Lobivia was acquainted with him, but the two of them mostly only knew people in Aker. They had very few acquaintances who were powerful fighters, so it made more sense to consider him one of Iino Yuna's acquaintances.

The reason she hadn't considered that possibility was that she hadn't recognized the masked woman's voice. She'd deemed that the woman's comrade was also someone she didn't know. Or perhaps her emotions had unconsciously eliminated the possibility from her mind.

However, just because the woman wasn’t someone she knew didn’t mean the same went for all of them. Rose’s suspicion made sense—it opened the door to the truth...or perhaps a cruel reality. After sinking into thought, Iino Yuna’s eyes suddenly shot open.

“It can’t be...”

She spoke in a daze. There was a sense of despair in her voice that was very similar to when Jinguuji Tomoya had revealed himself.

“Iino...?”

Rose came to a stop. Iino Yuna had turned abnormally pale and didn’t say another word. Rose and Lobivia couldn’t figure out what to say in this strange atmosphere. An ominous silence filled the corridor for a few seconds.

What broke the silence was the sudden sound of footsteps. Jolting back to their senses, the girls detected two presences approaching them. Expecting this to be enemies, they readied themselves. However, in this one instance, that wasn’t what was happening. On the contrary, this could be said to be a reward these girls had finally grasped after surviving this long.

One of the footsteps was that of a person. The other had the complex peculiarity of a spider’s footsteps.

“Rose! Lobivia!”

The voice that called out to them was filled with irrepressible joy. The unexpected voice was that of the reunion they’d so desired.

“Lily! And Gerbera too!” Rose yelled.

The two running toward them were fellow servants. The reason Rose and Lobivia hadn’t sensed them over the mental path was that they’d lost all composure due to the recent battle.

“Lily! Gerbera!” Lobivia shouted, running toward them.

Lily caught the little dragon in a hug. Rose followed her, still carrying Iino Yuna on her back.

“We’ve finally reunited,” Gerbera said.

“Yes. I’m a little surprised,” Rose replied.

“We’re also surprised. We never thought Iino would be with you too.”

There was an air of delight to their casual exchange. Majima Takahiro’s servants, even if only a few of them, had finally found each other. Discounting the aura of fatigue around her, Gerbera was pretty much the same as when they last saw her. Even Lily only looked slightly exhausted, her equipment and clothes somewhat damaged. As for Rose’s group, aside from Rose who could simply exchange parts, Lobivia was a tattered mess covered in wounds, and Iino Yuna was suffering from a major injury. Compared to them, Lily and Gerbera were doing pretty well.

“As I’d expect of you two,” Rose said. “I’m glad to see you’re both doing well.”

“Not at all,” Gerbera replied, waving her hand. “We actually had a hard time. We bumped into Ottmar, you see. The masked man with him was a formidable enemy.”

“A masked man?”

“That’s right. He used a terrifying weapon. Lily even got split in two like it was nothing. After that, they chased us for a long while. Before we knew it, we managed to lose them, though.”

“You also encountered a masked man?”

“Hrm? Also?”

Rose and Gerbera stared at each other when Lily, who was still hugging Lobivia, narrowed her eyes.

“Looks like we need to share what we know,” she said, then suddenly blinked curiously. “What’s wrong, Iino?”

She was looking at Iino Yuna, who was still deathly pale on Rose’s back.

“Lily!” Iino suddenly screamed.

She shook Rose’s hands away and got off her back, stumbling forward on her horribly injured leg and practically collapsing as she clung to Lily.

“Kouzu was here!”

“Kouzu...?”

Iino screamed in desperation, but it was far too sudden to get across to Lily right away. Lily knit her brow for a while, then seemed to remember something.

“By that, do you mean the exploration team’s Kouzu Asahi? The one who messed up big time and the source behind the fake savior rumors?”

After saying that much, the others at last gleaned some understanding. Kouzu Asahi was a former exploration team member who, at the request of some villagers in a small eastern province of the Empire, had taken up his sword with good intentions to conquer a nearby Dark Woods. As a result, not only had he been beaten back, but the monsters had come swarming out of the forest, exposing the villagers to great danger. Rose had heard about this great failure before.

“Was the masked man we saw just now Kouzu Asahi?” Rose asked.

If so, it made sense that he’d falsified his voice. Iino Yuna nodded, still ghostly pale. This time, she looked like she was moments away from breaking down. From her perspective, another person she’d been close to had become an enemy. It was only natural for her to be so dismayed. Compounding the shock of the revelation, she couldn’t help but realize another truth.

“After that incident, Kouzu was moved to the capital... He’s supposed to be living in the care of the Holy Church.”

The air froze. Everyone here realized what she was trying to say.

“If one of the masked men who attacked us was Kouzu...then the others are also...”

All strength left Iino Yuna. She slid down Lily’s body. Rose supported her in a fluster.

“I-Iino, are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes... I’m fine. I’m fine... More importantly—”

She didn’t look fine at all, but she kept telling herself she was.

“—Remember how I left Fort Tilia with the Imperial Knights to rescue the survivors in the Colony? The ones we found were taken by the knights to the

capital too. They're currently being taken care of by the Holy Church, and some of them are sympathizers now... Yes. That's it. Allies who aren't in it out of personal interest. There shouldn't be many people out there aside from visitors with that much strength. If that masked woman whose voice I don't recognize is someone who awakened to her ability after coming to the capital..."

Her trembling lips then uttered the dreadful truth.

"Then the Holy Church itself is our enemy...?"

After coming this far, they'd all had an inkling that the Holy Church was involved. Of course, from their perspective, this was still no more than conjecture. However, they couldn't shut their eyes to the possibility.

"Iino," Lily said, grabbing Iino Yuna's shoulders. "Calm down. We still don't have a grasp of the situation. There's a lot we don't know. I want you to tell me what happened, and keep it brief."

"R-Right. Of course."

Iino Yuna was so meek after being brought this low. She did as she was told and spoke of everything she'd seen.

About being called by the Fairy Ring Shimazu Yui, and on the way to her room, how she'd been obstructed by a hooded man.

About how she'd barely made it back in time to get caught in the teleportation, and how she'd protected Rose and Lobivia while they tried to reach the others.

About the five masked enemies who'd attacked them, and how one among them, the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya, was trying to get everyone back to their own world.

And finally, about how Majima Takahiro was currently isolated.

It had only taken a few minutes. Lily listened in silence to the end. In her stead, Gerbera was the one to speak up first.

"I see. I'm convinced now."

"Gerbera?" Iino said in confusion.

“About the masked man we’ve been running away from,” Gerbera continued, lowering her voice. “We were trying to make our way to our lord, but we couldn’t. We simply couldn’t find a path there.”

“Ah...”

This statement contradicted Iino Yuna’s earlier optimistic opinion. As expected, Jinguuji Tomoya hadn’t been lying.

“No matter how much we searched and searched, we couldn’t find any way to reach our lord,” Gerbera added. “And while we were on the move, we noticed we were closer to Rose and decided to link up with you first.”

“S-So what Jinguuji said is...?”

“I’m sure it’s true.”

“N-No way... So Majima is really isolated from everyone? Even though the enemy might be the entire Holy Church?”

Iino Yuna trembled unsteadily. That stood to reason. In other words, this was a battle they’d had no chance of winning from the very beginning. All they had to do was give it some thought. The Holy Church was, without a doubt, the organization that possessed the most authority and power in this world. Its martial forces were without equal. The knights of the Holy Order had inherited the blood of saviors and were both great in number and individual strength. Several of their greatest knights even possessed power that approached the original saviors.

The Holy Church possessed the weight and advantage of history. They had a great accumulation of resources over a long period of time that no savior possessed. They’d continued stocking weapons, tools, and personnel over its long existence. It wasn’t clear what the situation was, but just by the fact that the Holy Church was an enemy, Majima Takahiro had no chance of winning. He would be crushed all too quickly and everything would end. No matter how much he resisted, the end was predetermined. That was the reality they found themselves in.

In the end, the truth these girls had reached after finally reuniting was the futility of their resistance from the very start. It was only natural for them to

collapse to their knees in despair. This was why Iino Yuna was in shock. As for Majima Takahiro's servants, it didn't even need to be said—

"The Holy Church, huh? What a pain."

They weren't dispirited in the least. Gerbera sounded awfully annoyed as she spat those words, but there was no despair in her voice. None had fallen to their knees, let alone thrown away their will to resist.

"Y-You're all..." Seeing them, Iino Yuna was shaken. Her voice trembled as she questioned them. "Do you really understand? The enemy is *that* Holy Church, you know?"

"Of course we understand," Gerbera answered, nodding.

"No, you don't," Iino said, grimacing. "How can we possibly resist...?"

That was undoubtedly the truth. Gerbera didn't deny it either. However, perhaps it was better to say that it *had* been the truth. Gerbera shook her head and made a brief observation.

"But we actually put up some resistance already, didn't we? Am I wrong?"

"Ah..."

That was also the unmistakable truth.

"For some reason, we managed to resist," Gerbera said. "One of the biggest reasons for that...mm…would be your presence. It looks like Rose and Lobivia owe you greatly."

Jinguuji Tomoya had actually mentioned this too.

"Ever since the failed teleportation, there's been too many irregularities to this plan. Iino's inclusion is the most extreme case. We were supposed to be the ace in the hole here, but we've been totally shut down. She was the one person who wasn't supposed to be here. That's the kinda opponent she is."

Even if Majima Takahiro and his servants weren't able to resist, it was entirely possible to put up a fight if they joined forces with others. This was also the reality they found themselves in.

"No. Maybe it isn't just you either," Gerbera went on. "Just maybe, there are

others lending us their aid.”

Gerbera didn’t know about it, but she was entirely right.

Majima Takahiro had Kudou Riku and Dora.

Shiran had Gordon Cavill and his subordinates.

Ayame had Berta and Shimazu Yui.

Each had their own allies who were doing what they could to help.

“Mm. You’re right,” Lily said.

“Lily...?” Iino said.

After hearing Iino Yuna’s story, she’d fallen silent to sink into thought. Now, she looked lively. It was as if she’d found the answer.

“It’s just as Gerbera says. Because we have people helping us, not a single one of us has fallen yet.”

She looked straight into Iino Yuna’s eyes. Her expression was reassuring. It was as if she’d realized something important.

“Hey, Iino? About what you just told us... Isn’t there something a little weird about it?” she said with conviction.

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Her words shook up their understanding of the situation greatly. By reuniting with Rose’s group, Lily had been given the opportunity to point this out. And she wasn’t the only one who was in such a situation.

“What’s going on...?”

At the same time, in a different place, someone else raised the same question.

Chapter 23: Fragments of the Truth

“Wh-Why are you here...?!”

Berta’s tail straightened to a point in shock. An impossible chance meeting awaited her at the destination she’d finally reached after running for so long.

“My king...”

“Berta?” Kudou responded. He also looked surprised by this. “You managed to link up, I see.”

“Y-Yes. Because Ayame is with me, it was possible to use the mental path to make our way toward Majima Takahiro.”

Berta didn’t know that her master had come to this place. She hadn’t even been informed that he was in the capital. That was why she’d never expected this encounter to happen. This was also unexpected for Kudou Riku. After all, he was supposed to be isolated from the world with Majima Takahiro. So how had Berta gotten here? Recovering from her shock, Berta unveiled the details behind this.

“Aah, no. Now’s not the time to be discussing that. There are other things I must tell you.”

“Things to tell me? What do you mean?”

“Yes. My king, please listen to me carefully. This is urgent. Currently, this space is sealed off from all outside contact. It’s hard to believe, but the path I came down shut behind me. I saw it with my own eyes. It was incomprehensible, however there’s no mistaking it. If I was only a little slower, I would’ve been shut out too. I barely made it.”

“I see. So that’s what those tremors were...” Kudou said, narrowing his eyes. “Just like when Kaneki Mikihiko ran away, the layout was modified. Our forces have been divided.”

He grasped the situation right away, having put some thought into what the continuous tremors were after what’d happened.

“No, in that sense, maybe you meeting up with us is beyond the enemy’s expectations...” he added.

“My king. Kaneki Mikihiko is here too?” Berta asked.

She wasn’t supposed to know that Kaneki Mikihiko was in this place as an enemy, but she didn’t sound confused. On the contrary, there was an air of understanding in her voice.

“In truth, I got this far by following Kaneki Mikihiko’s scent. I questioned why he’d be here, but...it was in the same direction, so I figured there was a chance. Thanks to that, I managed to get all the way here using an optimal path without any dead ends.”

“Aah. That’s how...” Kudou said. “By following Kaneki Mikihiko’s scent, you managed to find the shortest path here. Because of that, you arrived faster than expected and the enemy couldn’t seal the route in time. How ironic. They inflicted a severe wound on Majima-senpai by using Kaneki Mikihiko, but had also allowed an intruder in because of that.”

“Huh...? Please wait a moment. Majima Takahiro is severely wounded?”

“Kuu?!”

Hearing Kudou Riku talk to himself, Berta raised her voice in astonishment, while the fox on her head let out a troubled yelp. Ayame had just been informed that her precious master had been stabbed, so her concern was to be expected. She jumped down Berta’s back in a panic and ran off toward her master.

“Now that you mention it, I don’t see Majima Takahiro anywhere. You don’t mean...” Berta said, watching the little fox’s back.

“No. His life isn’t in danger. He’s resting nearby. I discovered monsters in the distance, so I came out to intercept them. Dora is currently by his side guarding him.”

“Is that so? That’s reassuring to hear, given the situation...”

Just then, a groan came from behind Berta. Berta froze, and Kudou Riku raised his voice in suspicion. Shortly after, a girl sat up on Berta’s back.

“Berta...? Is someone there?”

It was Shimazu Yui, waking up with a hand pressed against her head. She was so exhausted she’d practically fainted and had fallen asleep, but was woken up when Ayame jumped on her head to get to the ground. Upon spotting Kudou Riku, she started.

“Wh-Who are you?”

“That’s my line.”

Faced with both their gazes, Berta awkwardly lowered her snout to the ground.

“Forgive me, my king. I should have informed you of this first.”

She couldn’t really be blamed for this. Because of the totally unexpected chance meeting with her master, she’d completely forgotten about the girl on her back.

“This is Shimazu Yui,” Berta said, “the exploration team’s Fairy Ring. I picked her up on the way.”

“The Fairy Ring...?”

“My king...? Meaning that’s Kudou Riku?! You’re kidding!”

Both of them sounded surprised. Shimazu Yui’s tired face was tense with shock, while Kudou Riku scowled. Seeing her master’s displeasure, Berta quickly followed up in a panic.

“Please forgive me for stating my opinion. She is not involved with the teleportation that brought us here. She’s here because she was lured into it.”

“Give me the details...” Kudou ordered stiffly.

Naturally, Berta obeyed without question.

“She was called to our room by someone impersonating Majima Takahiro and was then caught in the teleportation. She isn’t our enemy, though. On the contrary, she ensured the trap couldn’t be sprung properly. Because of that, she even suffered enough damage that she still can’t move around.”

Her master’s brow remained furrowed as she carefully conveyed the truth to

him. The reason she came off as trying to cover for the girl was because she sensed danger.

“I am of course keeping a watchful eye on her so that she cannot cause you any harm. So please show mercy.”

Hearing that, Shimazu Yui turned pale. Kudou Riku was the Demon King who threatened the populace. He’d already killed several visitors. And as she was now, she had no strength to oppose him. Berta had also never imagined that she would bump into her master here, so she was extremely tense as well. However, Kudou Riku had his mind on a different point entirely.

“She was lured here by the enemy?” he asked in bafflement. “She’s not here because she’s the true culprit behind the teleportation?”

“Wha...?! Wh-Why would I ever do something like that?!” Shimazu yelled, forgetting her fear at the sudden unjustified accusation. “I ran over because of a fake invitation and got caught in the teleportation the moment I arrived. Your servant Berta witnessed that herself.”

“Is that true?” Kudou asked.

“Yes,” Berta answered. “Everything she’s saying is true. Just as I mentioned earlier, she even resisted the teleportation.”

With that, he judged they weren’t lying, but he wasn’t entirely convinced.

“What’s going on...?”

Putting a hand to his mouth, Kudou Riku narrowed his eyes. Strangely enough, his words shook up their understanding of the current situation much like Lily’s had.

“My king. Is there something strange about what we said?” Berta asked in confusion.

“It’s impossible,” he replied with conviction. “There’s no way the Fairy Ring can be here after being tricked by the enemy.”

“Wh-What are you saying? I’m right here, aren’t I?” Shimazu protested in bewilderment. “Okazaki is probably trying to lay the blame on me. I don’t think it’s all that strange.”

“Yes, if that was all, it wouldn’t be,” Kudou said, nodding before shaking his head. “But I’ve already encountered the enemy. At the time, this is what Kaneki Mikihiko told us—we have no way of escaping this place.”

This was his answer when asked why he’d turned on his best friend.

“It’s not all that weird, right? Takahiro, you have no way outta this place. It’s useless. It’s over for you. Choosing your side at this point would be stupid, don’t you think?”

“And what does that mean?” Shimazu asked in irritation.

“You can’t tell?” Kudou said. “So long as you’re here, he would never have said that. After all, there’s a way out of here. Am I wrong, Fairy Ring?”

“Oh...”

Her inherent ability was that of long-distance teleportation. What had brought Majima Takahiro’s group here, to begin with, was an inferior copy of her ability used by the Almighty Vessel. The original could obviously replicate that feat in reverse.

“If he knew about the Fairy Ring, he wouldn’t have said that. Before all that, if the enemy was aware of you, it’d make far more sense to go after you as their first priority. But here you are, saying you were caught in the teleportation because of the enemy’s fake invitation. In that case, the enemy would’ve known about your presence.”

“H-Hang on...”

Shimazu Yui was in dismay. She finally understood what Kudou Riku was getting at.

“It’s impossible. There’s no way the Fairy Ring can be here after being tricked by the enemy.”

It was in fact impossible that the enemy had tricked her. If so, they would have known that she was here. In that case, it made more sense for the Fairy Ring to be part of the enemy’s forces. However, Shimazu Yui knew that she had no part in this. As such, her next words were only natural.

“Then who called me to come over...?”

Her question echoed down the hallway—

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“Something weird...? About what I said earlier?” Iino asked, bewilderment clear in her eyes.

LIly nodded. “Yup. Regarding the details of how you got here. It’s a little weird, right?”

“How I got here...?” Iino repeated, knitting her well-shaped brow. Nothing came to mind. “Umm, what about it? I was called out by Yui-senpai, entrusted things to Sir Gordon, and left the room... Judging by the timing, Yui-senpai wasn’t actually the one who called me out, though... I then met a hooded man on the way.”

She recalled what she’d told them, repeating it aloud bit by bit, retracing her steps until the teleportation.

“He said he had something to tell me... It was careless of me now that I think about it. However, he told me about Majima before, so I thought maybe it was related to Majima again... In the end, I was the one to tell him stuff, but he was acting strange... And then I heard a loud noise... The window to Majima’s room was broken and I realized he was under attack... Even though he gave me information to save Majima before, this time he’s an enemy...”

“Mm. That’s it,” Lily said, interrupting her recollection.

“How so?” Iino said, looking even more confused. “He clearly knew about the attack. He even said, ‘That’s enough stalling.’”

“That’s my point,” Lily said. “Think about what would’ve happened had he not stalled you.”

“What would’ve happened...?”

“You don’t get it? Iino, you were on your way elsewhere, right? If nothing happened, you would’ve reached your destination. In that case, you might not have even noticed the attack, let alone make it in time for the teleportation.”

“Oh...”

She was dumbfounded. What had he been stalling for? The meaning behind

that took a 180-degree turn.

“I made it in time...*because* he stalled me?” Iino said.

“That’s the gist of it.”

“No way... I didn’t notice at all.”

“It was an emergency, so it wasn’t really time to give it a lot of thought. The guy was hiding his face and acting suspicious, and then there’s the timing to consider. What’s more, he knew about the teleportation, so you were convinced he was an enemy. If I saw it for myself, I would probably misunderstand too. But that’s impossible.”

Lily demonstrated understanding of Iino Yuna’s misinterpretation of events, but she clearly denied the possibility.

“Iino, the enemy should’ve been extremely wary of you,” she continued. “I mean, they went out of their way to call you out with a fake invitation to get you away from us. It’d be contradictory to get in the way of that.”

“That’s true...”

Iino Yuna admitted that Lily’s opinion had merit. Despite being shaken by her perception of the situation being flipped upside now, she now harbored an obvious doubt.

“So who’s the guy who stopped me from getting too far away...?”

And once more, a girl’s question echoed down the corridor.

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“I don’t know who called you,” Kudou Riku said to the bewildered Shimazu Yui. “The one thing we know for certain is, that by being called, an escape route that should never have existed was created in the form of the Fairy Ring.”

“You’re saying someone knew of the attack and made that possible?”

“I don’t know how much of this was calculated. It wasn’t guaranteed you’d come to begin with. Thinking of it like that, it’s possible others who were liable to help were also caught in this—”

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“I don’t know who stopped you from getting too far,” Lily said to the shaken Iino Yuna. “But there’s no mistaking that he knew about the attack and sent you here. He made sure the Skanda, a threat so big they plotted to tear you away from us, made it here.”

“Now that you mention it, Jinguuji also said this incident is full of irregularities...and that I was the most extreme case.”

“Meaning there are other cases too. It sounds awfully roundabout. Oh, but maybe this was the only way he could do things, so he did everything he was capable of? If so—”

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At the same time, in different places, everyone was reaching the truth. Around then, Katou Mana sat with her back against the wall in a daze. The only one nearby was Elena, who was here to watch her.

“Kaneki-senpai...”

In the end, she hadn’t been able to prevent the battle. The cowardly traitor had left without listening to her pleas.

“I’m going. I have no other choice.”

There hadn’t been the slightest hint of hesitation in his voice. His answer had been enough for her to know that he was determined to face everything that was going to happen.

However, those weren’t his last words. He’d said more. That was what had her in a daze now. Wondering why he’d said such a thing, the words repeated in her mind once more.

“Katou, you just sit tight right here and believe in him.”

It was as if the cowardly traitor believed in Majima Takahiro more than anyone else. This was the last fragment of the truth.

Chapter 24: Kaneki Mikihiko’s Battle

“Okay, Commander. That’s it for today.”

Alone inside a faintly lit and vast corridor, Kaneki Mikihiko talked to the pendant in his palm.

“It’s unfortunate, but it’s already time.”

“Very well...Mikihiko,” a woman’s voice replied from the pendant. “Until next time.”



This was a long-range communication magic tool he was borrowing from the Holy Church. Naturally, he needed permission to use it and everything he said through it could be overheard. That meant he was only allowed to have innocuous conversations while using it. Regardless, just being able to hear her voice was priceless to Kaneki Mikihiko. This was a thread that connected him to her...and at the same time, it was a well-made tool to ensure he was aware of the chain and collar around his neck.

“Take good care of yourself,” she said.

“Ha ha ha. Of course.”

“Seriously... Cherish yourself.”

Her repeated words of consideration had an air of anxiety to them. Getting a sense of how timid she’d gotten, Kaneki Mikihiko’s heart ached. It reminded him of the day when everything had been decided. The day he’d tasted how powerless he was when he saw her cry. Until that day, he’d wanted to become a knight who could protect her. Even though he believed he wasn’t suited for it, he’d put his whole heart into pursuing it.

However, his wish had been thoroughly and utterly destroyed. All that remained in the wreckage was despair at his own weakness. Kaneki Mikihiko was scum who couldn’t even protect the woman he’d fallen for. From the beginning, the path of the knight was beyond him. He’d been forced to reckon with this.

Even so... after this humbling revelation, there were still things he couldn’t give up on. That was the reason Kaneki Mikihiko was here now. After finishing his short conversation over the magic tool, he clenched the pendant.

“Commander... I’ll protect you. I’ll protect what’s important to me to the very end. Because this is all for your sake, none of it hurts.”

It was no exaggeration to say that every day of these last few months had been for that purpose. Ever since arriving in the imperial capital and having his beloved taken hostage, Kaneki Mikihiko had done nothing but serve the Holy Church. This naturally included going out to suppress dangerous monsters and occasionally being rounded up for incidents like the fake savior turmoil.

He'd proactively contributed in every case. Anybody watching would've interpreted this as him desperately trying to curry favor with the people in power. The truth was, he'd been acting to cultivate such an innocuous illusion.

The only reason he did all of this was so that he could protect what was important to him. Just as he'd told his best friend, Majima Takahiro, he had no intention of mistaking his priorities. That was exactly how Kaneki Mikihiko had passed these last few months.

To put it another way, to protect what was important to him, he'd continuously cast away things that were low on his priority list. He'd been forced to consciously make cruel decisions, telling himself it was fine to abandon such things. The biggest among these was Majima Takahiro. After the woman who was both his benefactor and sweetheart was taken hostage, he was ordered to kill his best friend. He had no other path before him. It'd been decided for him. This was a determined future.

It wasn't funny. How could they mess with him like that? How could he accept such a thing? Kaneki Mikihiko was in fact a pathetic man who couldn't even protect the woman who was dear to him. He was scum without worth. However, he wasn't the type of scum to betray his best friend.

Kaneki Mikihiko would never betray Majima Takahiro—never in a million years. As such, this was a matter of priorities. To stop himself from casting away something he could never abandon, he decided to throw away something else.

By all rights, it was something he should never discard. To him, it was nothing more than a worthless cause for despair. It was the broken remnants of his wish that had concluded there was no worth in living. In other words, he was throwing away absolutely everything that defined the man known as Kaneki Mikihiko.

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With the woman dear to him taken hostage, Kaneki Mikihiko was unable to refuse the plan targeting his best friend's life. However, from another perspective, it could be said that he was in a perfect position to obstruct the plan from the inside. He was a treacherous fiend who, while participating in the plan without holding anything back, put even more effort into getting in its way.

This was of course much easier said than done. Pulling it off was a herculean task, and if he was discovered, it wouldn't end well. Regardless, he didn't hesitate. He'd discarded his own life from the very beginning. Thus, Kaneki Mikihiko's battle began.

To be able to obstruct the plan, he had to be in a position where they didn't suspect him. It didn't matter how that was accomplished. He'd thrown away his pride, playing the part of the cowardly traitor who flattered those in power. If it was asked of him, he risked his life suppressing monsters. He'd nearly died many times, but he'd secured the position he needed. He'd even degraded himself to a pathetic man who made the woman he loved cry. This was the most painful part. Tearing all his dignity to shreds, he wagged his tail as they collared him.

"Mister Kaneki, how can you smile all the time?"

Elena, who'd been assigned to keep an eye on him, had once asked him this. Honestly, it'd been a while since he lost his sense of time.

He hid all the humiliation, regret, and fury beneath a frivolous smile. He endured everything. It was like spending every day buried in filth. Today, that would all come to an end.

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"I did everything I could..."

He muttered to himself quietly. He'd taken many measures just for this day, and several had gone well. Majima Takahiro and his companions were frantically resisting the enemies swooping down on them and were being assisted by several others like Iino Yuna, Gordon Cavill, and, unmistakably, Kaneki Mikihiko himself.

"I messed up too, though..."

He was referring to the surprise attack on Majima Takahiro. So long as he was complicit in this plan, Kaneki Mikihiko absolutely had to perform the surprise attack as instructed. In truth, he hadn't expected to inflict a wound. Instead, he'd meant to use an opening to abduct Katou Mana—ensuring her safety, of course—to finish the surprise attack without being suspected by the Holy

Church. To that end, he'd properly measured his best friend's combat strength just the other day. He'd launched the surprise attack at a distance Majima Takahiro should've been able to react to.

However, contrary to expectations, the attack had succeeded. It was a tremendous failure. It had simply been that unexpected.

"Man... Why didn't you suspect me? It's way too suspicious for me to show up so conveniently, right?"

He was someone who hadn't been teleported with the group. It was clearly strange for him to appear there. If only Majima Takahiro had put himself the slightest bit on guard. If he'd been the least bit wary, he would've been able to deal with that attack easily. And yet, the surprise attack had succeeded. There was no misunderstanding why. Majima Takahiro hadn't doubted Kaneki Mikihiko for a second. He truly hadn't suspected him the slightest bit.

"What an idiot..."

This had been Kaneki Mikihiko's one big miscalculation.

"You're such an idiot, Takahiro..."

Majima Takahiro believed in Kaneki Mikihiko even more than he'd expected. He'd learned this in a way he couldn't have dreamed of. It made him believe that all these days spent smearing himself in mud wasn't a mistake. That in itself was more than enough recompense. As such, he didn't hesitate for a second.

"Okay, it's about time."

He started moving. He'd already gotten his orders. Kaneki Mikihiko had to attack Majima Takahiro. So long as they had a hostage, even if he could sneakily obstruct them behind the scenes, he couldn't refuse any orders. It was pretty much guaranteed that Majima Takahiro would come to get Katou Mana back. A fight to the death was inevitable. One of them had to die. But that was fine. That was the way it should be. After all...

"I believe in you too."

Yes. He believed in him. He believed Majima Takahiro would never lose to the

likes of Kaneki Mikihiko. That was why this was the end.

“Okay, let’s get going.”

Muttering casually, as if he were merely performing some mundane errand, the boy started walking toward his own demise.

Chapter 25: The Girl's Weapon

Left behind, Katou Mana curled up against the wall. After deteriorating to the worst possible state, it wasn't easy for her to recover. Her body and mind had been like a small boat tossed about in a storm. Nevertheless, she was gradually beginning to calm down.

First, her hyperventilating lungs remembered how to breathe properly. A short time later, perhaps with oxygen now reaching her brain, her dizziness and nausea slowly faded. The thoughts that had shattered from her swelling fear and unease were now falling back into place. She still wasn't able to stop her entire body from shivering, but she was slowly regaining the feeling in her limbs. She was still afraid, but with time, she stopped panicking.

"How surprising..." someone said, watching her recovery.

"Y-You're..."

"Is the cause of this Mister Kaneki's earlier words?"

It was Elena, the knight who'd stayed behind to keep an eye on her. Perhaps she was curious about the change that'd occurred to the girl who'd been panicking just moments ago. Katou Mana was a clever girl, but it was still too much to ask her to read what was behind Elena's stern and cold expression.

"So you believe it too?"

"Huh...?"

"That Majima Takahiro will come to save you."

Elena's words concisely conveyed the truth. There were several reasons Katou Mana was recovering. Knowing of the cruel situation confronting the boy who was dearest to her heart made her own situation vanish from mind. Unable to overlook Kaneki Mikihiko's strange behavior, her consciousness shifted to her thoughts rather than her fear. However, the biggest reason was that she had heard the last words he'd said before leaving.

"Katou, you just sit tight here and believe in him."

Those words had immediately sent a change throughout her shattered mind. She felt relief from the bottom of her heart.

Aah, I just have to wait. That was what she thought. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that had been what she thought. The girl named Katou Mana wasn't one to let things end there. She'd already regained her mental faculties. She was capable of viewing what'd happened to her like a third party. So, looking back on herself like that, what welled up in her chest was exasperation.

I just have to believe and wait? True, so long as she sat here in captivity, maybe she wouldn't be in any danger. However, even as she sat, the boy she loved was in a dire situation. So how was it fine to wait here? Of course it wasn't.

"I-I'm so..."

Why had she lost all heart? Even if the boy she loved was going to come to save her, she couldn't possibly feel at peace. She resented herself, trembling for an entirely different reason now.

It was unforgivable—deeply, intensely unforgivable. It was almost strange. Although, if she was going to view this like a third party, there weren't many people out there who could immediately get their thoughts in motion when pushed into such a corner. Still, even if that was the case, she couldn't forgive herself.

"There must be something I can do..."

Turning her resentment into fuel for the fire in her heart, Katou Mana's mind rebooted. It was all for the sake of being of some use to the boy she loved. But what could she do? And just as that thought came to mind...

"What's the meaning of this?"

Elena raised a stern voice. This was proof that something unexpected had happened. Her eyes were pointed down the corridor—where Ottmar was walking toward them.

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“Please stop right there.” Elena’s attitude wasn’t friendly in the least. “This place has been entrusted to me. I can’t let you carelessly come through here.”

Just as her uptight appearance suggested, she was faithful to her job. She didn’t put a hand on her sword, but her eyes had a sharpness like a naked blade. Regardless, Ottmar paid that no mind.

“Orders from above,” he said.

“From above?”

“Yes... You should grasp that, since I’ve come here personally.”

It was a casual conversation, but there was something strange about it. Elena was a knight of the Holy Order’s glorious First Company. In contrast, Ottmar was no more than a deserter. That was supposed to be the case, but the way the two talked didn’t seem to fit that assumption. That said, it seemed perfectly natural to them as the conversation kept going.

“But she might end up panicking. If we force her to move there, she could hurt herself.”

“Put her to sleep if you have to. I’m simply carrying out Sir Harrison’s orders.”

Katou Mana started. Considering Kaneki Mikihiko’s betrayal and Elena’s presence, she’d already concluded that the Holy Order’s marshal, Harrison Addington, was a part of this. On that point, she wasn’t particularly surprised. What had her flustered were the words, “Put her to sleep.” it wouldn’t be funny if everything ended while she was unconscious.

Besides, depending on her perspective, this wasn’t a bad development. She didn’t know what he was thinking, but Harrison was apparently intent on sending for her. Even if he had power over her life or death, this was an unexpected opportunity to come into contact with the enemy ringleader.

After coming this far, it was unlikely to get him to put down his sword through talking, but it wasn’t impossible. For example, much like when the Skanda Iino Yuna attacked them, they might be able to come to a compromise. Even if that couldn’t be done, it might be possible to grasp a clue that could break the deadlock in this situation. Just maybe, this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. However, if she was unconscious, she’d have no way of taking advantage of it.

As such, she couldn’t allow them to knock her out... In theory, she understood this.

“Looks like she’s awake.”

“Eep...”

The moment Ottmar turned his eyes toward her, she broke into a cold sweat. Just seeing him get closer was enough for her throat to convulse.

“Ah... Uh...”

She was starting to panic. At this rate, she was going to start hyperventilating. Ottmar wouldn’t even have to do anything for her to pass out. Up until just recently, that would’ve happened.

“...nic.”

“Hm?”

She opened her trembling lips. Ottmar came to a stop. Katou Mana glared back at him with tears in her eyes.

“I-I’m not...going to panic!”

This time, she suppressed her fear with dreadful self-control.

“Hmm. So you can speak,” Ottmar said, slightly surprised.

“I-I can... A-And I can stand...!” Katou yelled back sharply as she got to her feet.



She was still afraid, of course. She was deathly pale and felt like her knees were going to buckle at any second. Despite feeling chills all over her body, an unpleasant sweat covered her skin. The fear etched into her wasn't going to vanish so easily. However, she endured it all. This strength of heart was what made her who she was.

Feeling no fear was simply indifference, not courage. When assaulted by fear, was she able to withstand it? If exposed to waves of terror that were liable to break her mind, was she able to avoid being swept away? Her ability to do just that was her only and greatest weapon. She was driven by her single-minded love and need to help the boy who'd saved her. This one emotion had gotten her through many difficulties to date.

"I don't think there's any point for you to go out of your way to suffer," Ottmar said. "I can make it easier for you."

"No thank you," Katou declined.

"I see. Take her and follow me," Ottmar said to Elena.

Elena went behind Katou Mana and forced her to walk. She was now the very picture of a pitiful prisoner. Regardless, she didn't lose heart. The fire in her chest wasn't extinguished.

There was something she could do. The girl who was weaker than anyone else in this labyrinth harbored a determination that was stronger than any other. She walked toward the enemy leader with no way of knowing what danger awaited her.

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Kaneki Mikihiko marched with unwavering trust in his best friend, heading toward the battlefield where he would have to cross swords with that same friend. Even though he knew only death awaited him, he could not avoid his fate.

Katou Mana marched with deep affection for her beloved in her chest, suppressing her fear as she made her way to the enemy ringleader. No matter what danger awaited her, the powerless girl had no means of resisting.

Extra Story: Events on the Outside

This happened after Majima Takahiro's party went missing. The dragons of Draconia and Aker's delegation were spending the hours in the room that'd been prepared for them. A melancholic mood enveloped them all. Quite a lot of time had passed since the incident. The sun was setting outside the window. Everyone was pale, especially the eldest sister of the dragons, Ella, who almost looked like a corpse.

"What should we do...?"

"It'll be all right, Ella. Let's believe in Takahiro."

Ella had taken part in the investigation as the representative of Draconia, but after it'd concluded for the time being, she'd returned to the room with nothing to show for it. As the one responsible for her family, she was at a complete loss, anxious about the dark future that awaited them if Majima Takahiro didn't return and about the safety of her youngest sister, Lobivia. There was a pained air to Philip's voice as he tried to comfort her. That was when Kei quietly left the room.

"Wait."

"Kath?"

One of the dragons came after her.

"You're going to look for Lord Takahiro and the others, right? I'll come with you," Kath said.

The section Majima Takahiro's group had been using was still being inspected by the Holy Order. Several of the exploration team members had also made an appearance. This was because Gordon Cavill—the vice marshal of the Holy Order—a few of his knights, and the exploration team's Iino Yuna had gone missing too. Still, the investigation wasn't looking good. No matter how long they waited, no useful information was being passed along. As such, Kei had reached her limit and was leaving the room.

Fortunately, she'd made a contract with a spirit the other day, so it was

possible for her to search a wide area. Maybe she could find clues using a different approach from the Holy Order. She did know the probability of that was almost zero, though.

“Are you sure?” Kei asked. “It’s not like I have any real leads.”

“I know we might not find anything, but the same goes for holing up in this room,” Kath replied.

Moving about was likely to be futile, but nothing could be gained by staying still. Kei couldn’t stand staying put any longer than this, anyway, and it seemed Kath felt the same way.

“Understood. Let’s go.”

Kei summoned her spirit and started walking. She prayed from the bottom of her heart that she could find those dear to her that’d gone missing. She couldn’t possibly have imagined that they’d been whisked away to another world.

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By the time the exploration team’s Stalwart Snow White Mitarai Aoi woke up, the sun had already set. She was staying at an inn in the imperial capital. The exploration team members had rooms arranged for them in the castle, but she wanted to be alone right now, so had snuck into town and had booked an inn room.

Her eyes were puffy and her body felt heavy. She knew exactly why this was. She’d had a quarrel with her friend Katou Mana. Just remembering filled her with utter despondency. She’d never seen her act like that before. It was a facet of her friend that she’d never touched. The shock had blanked out her mind. She didn’t even remember what had happened afterward. That was how strongly she’d been rejected. That was how angry she’d made Katou Mana.

“Why...?”

Her quiet voice resounded in her empty room. Even now, she didn’t understand what’d angered her friend so badly. Regardless, there was room for sympathy here. After all, she still had no idea that Katou Mana had changed completely due to her experiences in this world.

She'd never been given the opportunity to learn that. It was far too cruel to criticize Mitari Aoi for her ignorance. So, without knowing who Katou Mana was now, there was no way of understanding her behavior. Mitarai Aoi had simply tried to correct her friend's mistake. She'd had no ill will. She'd acted with good intentions. Nevertheless, her friend had been indignant. That was all Mitarai Aoi recognized about the situation. That didn't justify what she'd done, though.

"It was my fault, right...?"

To her, Katou Mana was a smart, caring, kind, and reliable friend. Mitarai Aoi trusted her enough that if they ever came to odds, she would believe she was in the wrong. That was why, even if she didn't understand why she was wrong, she knew she'd done something. She didn't know what to feel remorse over, but blamed herself for it anyway. She knew she had to apologize. She wanted to. However, she was scared to do so, even helplessly frightened.

Mitarai Aoi was one of the exploration team's upper brass, the Stalwart Snow White. She was the strongest when it came to knocking everything in her path down with her fists. She'd made significant contributions during the early days when weapons were in short supply, but even after weapons were easily obtainable, she'd maintained her position in the highest class of combatants. However, her power served no purpose whatsoever when the situation couldn't be solved with a punch.

When she thought of being faced with such a chilly reception from Katou once more, she found herself frozen in fear. In that sense, she was still no more than a little girl in her tender years. Being a nicknamed cheater didn't help at all. To add to this, Katou Mana had overdone it at the time. Perhaps that was to be expected. She wasn't consciously feared by Gerbera and Iino Yuna for nothing.

So, at a total loss, Mitarai Aoi didn't return to the castle and had instead gone into town. She cradled her knees, the windows shut and the room engulfed in darkness. That was when she suddenly remembered the past.

Some time after coming to this world, she'd cradled her knees like this on her bed. At the time, many had cried at the thought of being unable to see their families or go home. Even if they'd acquired tremendous power, it hadn't

elevated their strength of heart. Overwhelmed by the sudden anxiety, Mitarai Aoi had cried, and the one who'd appeared before her had been her childhood friend, Ishida Tetsuo.

He'd comforted her then, but he wasn't going to show up now. She'd left without telling the exploration where she was. She hadn't been paying attention to the small details at the time, but even if she had, she probably wouldn't have told him. She thought it was cowardly to rely on her childhood friend when she was at fault here. That said, the same thought process was also why she was stuck here unable to move.

"I can't stand this..."

Sick of how pathetic she was, she tumbled back onto the bed.

"What should I do...?"

As she mumbled pitifully to herself, a memory bubbled up in her mind.

"I think people really do need to talk to each other."

This happened right after arriving at their destination, one month after departing as the first expeditionary force.

"What're you saying, Watanabe-senpai? Being a narcissist again?"

"Who're you calling a narcissist?"

This was before Iino Yuna left for Fort Tilia. Mitarai Aoi had had the opportunity to speak with Watanabe Yoshiki, who'd also been selected to go to Fort Tilia. Mitarai Aoi was very attached to Iino Yuna, so she'd also come across Watanabe Yoshiki, who'd had a crush on Iino Yuna, quite a few times. The two had formed a casual friendship. During one of their chats, Watanabe Yoshiki had brought this topic up out of nowhere.

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking about Juumonji. I feel like he's acting weird."

"That so? Doesn't seem like it to me. Maybe it's your imagination? You being you and all."

"You have no faith in me... Well, whatever. I'm telling you he's acting weird. He's trying to keep it hidden, but I can tell."

At the time, Mitarai Aoi had considered him overly self-conscious. However, thinking back on it now, maybe Watanabe Yoshiki had been the only person to notice the darkness that'd taken shape in Juumonji Tatsuya's heart, having worked with him as a team many times.

"Oh. Speak of the devil. Hey, Juumonji. You got a sec...? Huh? What's up? You got a headache? You look pale. Aah, going back to your room? Okay. Got it."

In the end, right after trying to strike up a conversation with him, Juumonji Tatsuya had left with a hand pressed against his head. His timing had been horrible. Juumonji Tatsuya had made an annoyed look as if someone out of sight had suddenly started talking to him.

"Off he goes, huh?"

"Oh well. I'll talk to him after we get back from Fort Tilia."

Watanabe Yoshiki had departed for Fort Tilia the next day. Would something have changed had he managed to talk to Juumonji Tatusya back then? Or would things have gone the same? Mitarai Aoi didn't know. Perhaps it was precisely because she didn't know that she sat up. She left the room and dragged her feet out of the inn.

She made her way to the Holy Church's headquarters, the grand cathedral. There was someone there she had to talk to. Even if she wasn't going to be forgiven, she had to at least apologize. She had no way of knowing that such feelings would go unfulfilled.

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Kei summoned her spirit and started searching the area. Much like she'd told Kath, she didn't have any leads. She did nothing more than walk around the vast grounds of the world's largest structure, the Holy Church's grand cathedral. There were of course areas that were off limits to outsiders, but using the unique senses of a spirit, it was possible to scan those areas from a distance. If she only needed to tell if the person she was looking for was there, it was entirely possible.

Kei was a squire and Kath was a dragon. They were both confident in their stamina, so they quickly made their way across the grounds. Regardless, they

didn’t find anything. How could they? Majima Takahiro’s group was in another world.

The sun had long set. Despite her fatigue, Kei pressed on optimistically.

“Maybe they aren’t in the cathedral?” she mused.

“What shall we do?” Kath asked.

“At this rate, we can go out into town and... Hm?”

Kei suddenly spotted something. Further down the corridor , she saw a familiar face. It was Mitarai Aoi. Despite traveling from Aker to the imperial capital together, Kei had never spoken with her. The same went for Kath. What’s more, not all that much time had passed since the quarrel during the meeting with the exploration team.

Kei figured she should at least give a greeting in passing, but before she could, someone else spoke to Mitarai Aoi. It was a young man she didn’t recognize who looked like he was part of the exploration team. After a quick conversation, a look of surprise crossed his features. Then he walked away, giving Kei and Kath a greeting. Kei was about to do the same, but came to a stop. Mitarai Aoi was acting strange.

“Um, are you okay?” Kei asked.

Mitarai Aoi was at the edge of the corridor, a dark expression on her face as she stood stock still in a daze. Kei figured this was why the man had looked shocked. One beat later, Mitarai Aoi sluggishly turned toward Kei.

“Aah... Majima-senpai’s... You two are fine, I see.”

She’d apparently just noticed that they were part of Majima Takahiro’s group. By the sound of things, she already knew about the incident.

“We just happened to be away from the room at the time,” Kei said.

“I see. I heard Mana went missing. Have you found her?”

“No.”

“I see. So she’s still missing...” Mitarai Aoi clenched her fist. “If I was with her too... Why did I get ahead of myself like that?”

There was a deep air of regret behind her voice. It was clear she was talking about the quarrel she'd started during the meeting between Majima Takahiro and the exploration team. Kei hadn't been able to do anything except watch at the time, but Mitarai Aoi had apparently done that for her friend's sake. It'd ended with Katou Mana breaking relations with her in response, yet Kei couldn't help but see this as Mitarai Aoi getting what she deserved. As such, Kei had been under the impression that Mitarai Aoi was egotistic. Now she had a slightly different impression.

"I made her so angry and couldn't even apologize... Now things are beyond the point of taking things back... What should I do...?"

Kei knew of the Stalwart Snow White. If this was a problem she could've punched away, Mitarai Aoi surely would've done so without hesitation. However, the problem she was agonizing over now couldn't be solved with sheer power. She had no way of finding a missing person and her physical strength served no purpose in reconciling with a friend.

"If Mana doesn't come back..."

Their sense of values was so different that Kei couldn't think of anything to say to her. Even during the meeting with the exploration team, Kei had no idea what problem had driven Mitarai Aoi to do such a thing. As such, she couldn't say anything regarding that matter. However, this matter was different.

"They'll come back," she said with conviction. "They'll definitely come back. I'm sure they're doing their best to do so right now."

That was how it'd always gone. She'd witnessed it for herself. That was why she was able to declare this with such conviction.

"So when they come back, please apologize properly. Mana was really hurt, after all."

Mitarai Aoi remained dumbfounded as Kei excused herself.

"Kei, how do I put this?" Kath muttered, following her.

"What is it?"

"You're pretty amazing."

Kei had no idea what she was talking about and cocked her head.

“More importantly, we’ve gone around pretty much this entire area,” Kei said. “ I think we should widen our search range a bit more.”

They hadn’t found the smallest hint yet, but Kei wasn’t discouraged. Much like she’d told Mitarai Aoi, she believed they were going to come back. As such, she was going to look around to see if there was any way to help them, even if her efforts ended in vain. She’d made up her mind already.

In truth, there was no meaning behind her actions. She wasn’t omniscient, so she had no way of knowing the people she was looking for had been sent to another world. No matter how far she widened her search, her spirit wouldn’t be able to find something that didn’t exist. No matter how much she combed the capital with an indomitable will, she would never be able to reach them.

“Huh...?”

Kei suddenly raised her voice and came to a stop. Kath stared at her curiously, but Kei didn’t even notice. Kei opened her eyes wide and stared up at empty space. Her spirit was floating in the air there, visible only to her, and dancing about cutely using the short limbs growing from its round body. It was telling its contractor that it’d found something.

“It can’t be...!”

“H-Hey, Kei?!”

Kei suddenly started running and Kath followed in a fluster. The spirit continued dancing in the air. It was as if it was giving her hope its blessing.

And as the two of them ran off, a girl stared at their backs. Her vacant expression of regret was a little better now. She clenched her fist and put a hand to her heart. It was as if she was verifying the emotion within. A short time later, nobody was left in the corridor.

Around the time the boy woke up after collapsing from his wound, something was happening outside the fabricated world too.