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Chapter 1: Omens of Change Both Inside and Out

Two days had passed since Majima Takahiro's arrival in the imperial capital to hold peace talks with Margrave Maclaurin. Due to a sudden teleportation event, his group found themselves in a mysterious labyrinth.

The only one who'd been left behind was Kei, who just happened to be away from the room at the time. She was currently running around with Kath—one of the dragons of Draconia—looking for those who'd vanished.

Using her spirit's ability to detect living beings, she ran around the grand cathedral. She was unaware, however, that the people she was searching for had been scattered and teleported to another world, struggling heroically just to reunite.

There was no way to even guess that any of this had occurred. The one behind the teleportation, the Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma, had been discovered dead. Travis had been turned into a horrific monster, but had been defeated with the help of Kudou Riku and his servant Dora. After that, Kaneki Mikihiko had launched a surprise attack on Majima Takahiro, wounding him severely and abducting Katou Mana in the process.

However, the success of the surprise attack was unexpected for Kaneki Mikihiko. With his beloved taken hostage, he had to endure all humiliation and act obedient. All the while, he'd been sneaking around in the shadows to save Majima Takahiro from certain death. His scheming had gotten the Skanda Iino Yuna and the Fairy Ring Shimazu Yui caught up in the teleportation. If not for this act of subterfuge, there would've been no way out of that world. One or two of the girls might even have died.

However, so long as they had a hostage, he couldn't refuse any direct orders. The mastermind behind this dreadful plot, the Holy Order's Marshal Harrison Addington, had ordered Majima Takahiro's death. At this point, the cruel battle between best friends was unavoidable.

Meanwhile, after being abducted, Katou Mana was being brought by Angel Puppeteer Ottmar Valhalder to the enemy's ringleader. Now that Kaneki Mikihiko wasn't around to guarantee her safety, there was nobody to protect the powerless girl.

Naturally, Kei had no way of knowing any of this. She couldn't do anything. No matter how much she devoted herself to the task, her aimless search would never pinpoint the people she was looking for. That was supposed to be the case, but a sudden change was taking place.

"It can't be...!"

It coincidentally happened right after coming across Mitarai Aoi. Kei's spirit told her something and the little elf ran off at full speed. Kath chased her in a fluster, but Kei kept running without paying that any mind. She'd already accumulated a fair bit of fatigue from searching for so long, so even with all her training as a squire, she ran out of breath right away. Nevertheless, she forced her legs to keep moving.

She ran, and ran, and ran... And then, she reached her destination.

"Thought so...!"

Her eyes shot open. Something was happening outside the fabricated world. At the same time, things were on the move to break the deadlock within as well. Having lost consciousness from his deep wound, the boy woke up from his short rest.

Chapter 2: The Girl's Lost Property

I stared into the sky, looking up so long my neck was starting to hurt. There was nothing up there. In the truest sense, there was nothing at all. As such, I was only looking up at the air. I was looking away from the truth. I thought I'd resolved myself, but I needed more mental fortitude to see what was before me. Regardless, I couldn't stay this way forever.

"Master."

I looked back down as someone called out to me. I was on the slope leading up to my school. To be more precise, it was the scenery constructed by my memories. Salvia stood in front of me. She was making a grief-stricken expression. It was like she was going to start crying at any moment.

"Please don't look so sad," I said.

"But my dear..." Salvia said, biting her lip.

Down the path she was standing on was black nothingness. The road I'd used to school had long dissipated from existence. That wasn't all either. There was nothing else beyond the school. It was all gone.

Even the school looked so fleeting. It was like it was going to shatter at any moment. This was the scenery I had to steel myself to look at. This was the inner world of the human known as Majima Takahiro.

"Sorry," I said. "Even though you spent so much time slowly fixing it for me."

"Who cares about that? This is far too..."

"It's fine. This is what I wanted."

Salvia looked like she was going to cry because she knew better than anyone what this implied. I really was at my limit. If a person's memories were the foundation that made up their personality, then the foundation of the human known as Majima Takahiro was already on the brink of collapsing. It was like a diorama made of sand. It wouldn't be strange for it to crumble at any moment.

Nevertheless, if this was necessary for everyone's sake, I wasn't one to

hesitate. I felt guilty that Salvia had to witness this, though. Figuring I should at least talk to her, I took a look around.

“Anyway... I wonder who he is?” I said.

A young man with brown hair stood in the school courtyard. He wasn’t from my memories. He was the enigma I’d encountered in this world the evening I arrived in the imperial capital.

By all rights, he was an impossible intruder; someone I had to be wary of. He was looking my way, no hostility or malice in his eyes. All I could sense from him was a hint of curiosity. He had nothing more to do here. Without saying a word, he suddenly disappeared.

“It’s not like he came to do anything... I don’t get it,” I said, questioning who he was once more.

“My dear, that’s...”

“Salvia?”

She stared at where the young man had been with a dubious expression. She had her hand pressed hard against her heart.

“No... I wonder who he is too,” she said.

“Who knows?” It was natural to find it strange, so I nodded along. “It’s the second time he showed up, but I didn’t sense any hostility. He’s not meddling or anything either. Or maybe...”

Maybe he was trying to meddle, but couldn’t. It somehow or other seemed that way too. It didn’t follow any logic. I simply felt like it was the case. Perhaps that was because this world was created by my ability. His appearance had nothing to do with the attack on us. It was fine to ignore him. At the very least, it was for now.

“Let’s focus on what’s in front of us first,” I said.

Thus, I awakened from my short rest.

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I woke up to the ticklish sensation of someone licking my chin.

“Kuu.”

Waving her poofy tail about, Ayame sat atop my chest.

“Ayame? Why are you here?”

I held her in my arms and sat up. Kudou smiled next to me.

“You’re awake,” he said. He appeared to be reading something. He rolled up the papers he’d had in his hands. “I didn’t think the injury was fatal, but you passed out, so I was a little worried.”

“How long have I been out?” I asked.

“Not that long. About twenty minutes. Fortunately, no enemies showed up.”

It turned out not that much time had passed. Regardless, it seemed the situation had changed significantly.

“Berta...and even Shimazu?”

The only ones with me when I passed out had been Kudou and Dora. However, the two-headed wolf Berta was next to Kudou now. What’s more, a little farther away, the Fairy Ring Shimazu Yui was cradling her knees.

“Though it’s hard to claim we did so without issue...” Berta said as I met her eyes. “I’m glad we meet again, Majima Takahiro.”

“It was quite the disaster, huh? For both of us...” Shimazu added.

“What’s going on?” I asked Kudou. “Can you give me a sitrep?”

“Of course,” he answered, then told me about everything that’d passed while I was asleep.

“I see. Berta followed Mikihiko’s scent here... And Shimazu was called to our room by *someone*, getting her involved in this incident,” I said, voicing the portions that’d caught my attention.

“More importantly, the main problem is that the walls were manipulated to seal us in here,” Kudou said. “It might be possible to escape by breaking down a wall at the right place, but that’ll take time and it’ll catch their attention. We moved from where we were attacked earlier, so they shouldn’t know our exact location. Once they find out, they might attack us right away. What should we

do?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I have no intention of running away to begin with.”

“What’re you saying?!” Dora yelled before Kudou could say anything. “Do you understand the situation you’re in?!”



She quickly closed in on me and grabbed me by the collar.

“No matter how much you can strengthen your body with mana, that’s a serious wound!”

She was being rough, but her words were spoken out of concern for my well being.

“Sh-She’s right,” Shimazu joined in. “You were stabbed, right? I heard it was pretty bad.”

“Exactly. Get some rest,” Dora said.

I expected this from Shimazu, but Dora’s concern was surprising. I was grateful, but their consideration was unnecessary.

“My wound is fine,” I said.

“There’s no way...” Dora started objecting, but stopped upon noticing something. She probably saw that I wasn’t bothered by my injury at all. Her brow furrowed quizzically.

“It mostly healed after a little sleep,” I said.

“There’s no way!” she protested.

“It’s true. I still feel a little stiff, but not enough to stop me from fighting.”

I wasn’t lying. After all, this was what I’d gained by shaving away what remained of myself. My resilience had already far exceeded human boundaries when I had overcome the Travis variant of Holy Water during the battle with the Maclaurin Provincial Army. The phenomenon was similar to reproducing Gerbera’s superhuman strength.

In this world, physical laws were accompanied by mana-based phenomena. This obviously applied to magic, but even a monster’s flaming breath or half-liquid body, and even the creation of magic tools, all worked on the fundamental law that a specific mana flow created a corresponding phenomenon. Lily and Gerbera’s regenerative abilities, ones that far surpassed the limits of any living being, were half because of mana.

My servants’ mana coursed within me. Lily and Gerbera’s made up the majority of it too. That was why I was capable of using that same mana to demonstrate regeneration beyond any human, even if it still couldn’t match the

originals.

Unfortunately, the human body couldn't go as far as reattaching or regrowing a severed limb, but given enough time to stabilize, I could recover from relatively serious wounds. Though I hadn't recovered completely from the stab wound Mikihiko had inflicted, it was already sealed. It would hurt if I moved too intensely, but it was within my pain tolerance.

That said, if I was only getting my servants' mana coursing in me, it wouldn't be applicable to my body this quickly. Maybe it would've taken years to accomplish the same feat. The secret to my rapid regeneration was Lily.

As a mimic slime, Lily collected the remnants of the souls of all monsters she ate. By imitating their mana flow, she was able to mimic their inherent abilities. What I was doing now, although different in application, was very similar to her mimicry. Her mana flowed through me. Going by that logic, I was mimicking her mimicry.

To put it simply, I had a model to learn from. Once more, the nature of my soul was approaching that of my servants. As a result, it was possible for me to imitate their regenerative abilities.

Setting aside those with special inherent abilities, even the other cheaters couldn't exhibit such unnatural regeneration. It wouldn't be much help in the middle of battle, but it was useful at times like these.

Coming to grips with the fact that I was capable of fighting, Dora backed down, even if doubt still lingered in her gaze. On the other hand, knowing my situation to a certain extent, Berta looked at me with pity in her eyes. I shook my head to tell her that such sympathy was unwarranted.

"I understand your situation and intentions, Senpai," Kudou said. "I don't mind lending you a hand. I doubt the enemy will let us go without a fight, anyway."

After offering his aid, Kudou handed me a small bag that'd been by his side.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It seems Katou Mana dropped this when she was abducted. You should hang on to it."

Now that he mentioned it, it looked familiar. This was the magic bag Rose had made for Katou.

"And this too," Kudou added, handing over the bundle of paper he'd been reading. "It fell out of the bag. Looks like a sort of journal. There are some pretty interesting things written in it."

With that, he unfurled it and handed it to me. On the papers were walls of clean handwriting.

"There's still a lot we don't understand about this power to begin with.

"In this world, strong wishes come true.

"If that's how it works, there's no point arguing about it.

"However, even if the law itself has no room for doubt, there's something about the reality I find myself in that feels out of place.

"To put it briefly, it feels like reality doesn't match this law.

"In all likelihood, there is significance behind this.

"Something feels weird about this world."

It looked like she'd been writing down her thoughts as they came to her. Kudou's curiosity was piqued by what she'd written about our powers.

"'If that's how it works, there's no point arguing about it.'" he recited. "I hadn't gone out of my way to perceive things that way, but that is in fact how laws work. Taking that into account and harboring doubts toward reality itself is a rather interesting process."

"Does this bring anything to mind for you?" I asked.

"It does." Kudou paused for a beat before continuing. "It's nothing major...but if such laws exist, then why do they only apply to visitors?"

"Why only visitors?"

For a brief moment, I didn't understand what he meant. However, now that he mentioned it, he did have a point. I'd been told that was how the world worked, so I never really gave it much thought. Still, even if that was the law here, the conditions felt far too specific. Not that I knew what that implied,

though. We didn't have the time to think about it either.

"After we get Katou back, please discuss that with her," I said.

Even as I spoke, my eyes were drawn to the words on the page—to Katou's thoughts.

"I'm weak.

"If I was a resident of this world, I could sum that up as an inevitability.

"But I'm a visitor.

"By all rights, I should be able to obtain great power.

"Regardless, I remain powerless."

Katou had apparently been troubled by her inability to fight. She'd shown signs of this after coming to this mysterious labyrinth, but by the looks of things, this had been bothering her for a long time.

I kept reading.

"I've questioned this for a while now.

"The powers we visitors possess manifest from a wish deep within our hearts.

"That's exactly why this is so weird.

"In truth, I've known about my wish for a long time.

"And yet, my power remains dormant.

"Why exactly is that?

"Why me?"

Many of her written thoughts came to an end like this without finding an answer. There were also cases where she'd found an answer and had contributed to the group. There were dozens of pages covered in writing here. Behind the major contributions she'd made were many times more pages reflecting her thought exercises of trial and error. This journal was the record of that powerless girl's paltry yet great efforts.

"Katou..."

My fingers clenched the papers. I had to get her back. Conviction gave steel to

my will. With determination renewed in my heart, I started moving. I expected I’d soon have to cross blades with my best friend, but I showed no hesitation.

Chapter 3: Those Lying in Wait

The fabricated world formed by the Dimensional Cornerstone could be manipulated by the magic tool's wielder. That said, they didn't have complete control of this space. Were that possible, Harrison Addington would've isolated Majima Takahiro from his allies immediately after the teleportation.

Currently, the marshal of the Holy Order was operating the Dimensional Cornerstone, but couldn't give it more than broad directions which took time to be reflected in reality. It was practically impossible to use in response to his enemies' movements. However, knowing where his enemies were coming from, he could transform the corridors ahead of time so that they were more convenient for his own forces.

At present, the spot Majima Takahiro found himself in only had paths leading to the space Harrison and his men were occupying. Kaneki Mikihiko had been dispatched with Edgar to a large room along the path that'd been prepared beforehand.

The room gave off the impression of an arena. It was about as vast as a school sports ground. Corridors sat high above the room, encircling the circumference. There were only two exits. Unless the two men were defeated, there was no getting through. It was technically possible to run past them, but that would leave Majima Takahiro pincered between the two giving chase from behind and the knights lying in wait farther down the corridor.

There were no other knights around. It was strange. For the last few months, Kaneki Mikihiko had basically always had several knights nearby monitoring him. At the very least, one had always remained attached to him. Due to his obedience, the surveillance had slackened recently, but he hadn't been permitted to do as he liked.

Edgar was at most being used as a remnant of the Fourth Company, so wasn't here to keep an eye on him. By all rights, it would've been normal to have other knights here to keep watch. Nevertheless, it'd been decided that the two would be fine alone. This was definitely a conclusion that had taken into consideration

the nature of the man known as Edgar Guivarch.

Edgar only had an interest in battle and had deep resentment toward Majima Takahiro. Even if Kaneki Mikihiko tried anything imprudent, Edgar would cut him down on the spot. That was their belief. Although, in reality, sound judgment wasn't always correct. Perhaps this was more so the case with the Battle Ogre, who was an avatar of recklessness.

This had happened just moments ago. Saying he had nothing to lose, Kaneki Mikihiko had told Edgar that he wanted to check on Katou Mana's condition. Edgar hadn't refused. Even if it was just for a short time, Kaneki Mikhiko had slipped past all watchful eyes. As a result, it'd been possible for him to come in contact with Katou Mana without Harrison's orders.

"I'm going. I don't have a choice."

"Katou, you just sit tight right here and believe in him."

The reason he'd been able to leave her those words was because of Edgar's whimsy. As for the knight responsible for letting this unanticipated event occur, he didn't really seem to pay it any mind as he sat on the ground with his sword in his arms.

"I'm sick of waiting. What's that asshole doing?" he said.

"Not all that much time has passed yet," Mikihiko said. "Besides, we don't even know if he'll come."

"Hah! What a load of bull. He's obviously coming." Edgar snorted in ridicule. "We've got his woman. There's no way he'll sit back."

"Katou isn't Takahiro's lover... Well, I wonder about that? It's a complicated line."

"It don't matter. He's still gonna come here."

There wasn't a shadow of doubt in his voice.

"Hey, Edgar?" Mikihiko said, throwing him a sidelong glance.

"Ah?"

"What're you thinking?"

There was nobody watching him now. The Holy Order probably hadn't anticipated that he'd talk to Edgar like this either. Kaneki Mikihiko withdrew his subservient attitude and spoke frankly.

"You realized, yeah?" Mikihiko asked.

"Realized what?"

"I'm talking about you prodding me about Katou like that to gauge my intent."

He was referring to when Edgar had tried to go see the unconscious Katou Mana. Kaneki Mikihiko had stopped him, resolved to fight if necessary. However, Edgar had backed down easily.

"You've got a point there. Makes sense for you to be pissed. After all...it's your hard-won 'achievement.'"

"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 had emphasized "achievement" like that to ridicule Kaneki Mikihiko acting like a toady...so the knights accompanying him at the time probably believed. However, Kaneki Mikihiko had a different impression. He couldn't see the unnatural speech as anything other than Edgar verifying what he wanted to verify, then matching stories to calm things down.

"Who knows? You're free to think what you want," Edgar said.

"In that case, let me ask you just to see if I'm right. What's your objective?"

Edgar continued to play dumb without meeting Mikihiko's eyes, but that wasn't enough to stop him.

"I thought you were Takahiro's enemy," Mikihiko said. "But I don't think you are."

If he was an enemy, Edgar wouldn't have left Kaneki Mikihiko at large after having gleaned a sliver of his intentions. It didn't match Edgar's reputation as a battle maniac. After sinking into thought for a while, Edgar shrugged.

"Well, I figured someone who got along with *that* Majima Takahiro had more to him than that," he said.

“So...like I thought?”

“But don’t misunderstand me. I’m not like you. I’m not his ally.”

“I don’t think that, so relax.”

Edgar had once taken it upon himself to risk his life in a surprise attack on Majima Takahiro during his stay in an elven reclamation village. As a result, Majima Takahiro had been forced into a harsh battle against the Maclaurin Provincial Army. Edgar couldn’t possibly be an ally.

So what was he thinking? Kaneki Mikihiko turned a quizzical glance his way, and Edgar turned only his eyes back at him. There was a strangely serious light behind the ogre’s gaze, despite his supposed singular interest in battle.

“You got any idea why the Holy Church has such a grudge against Majima Takahiro?” Edgar asked, giving off a different impression from usual. “This is just me guessing, so take it with a grain of salt. There are signs that bastard Harrison manipulated Travis pretty good.”

“Huh?”

Travis Mortimer was the commander of the Holy Order’s Fourth Company. He was Edgar’s former officer and the first person to make an attempt on Majima Takahiro’s life. He didn’t care an ounce about others and was a problematic person in general, attacking Majima Takahiro for personal glory. That was supposed to be the case, but things were different if Harrison had been the one to manipulate him into action.

“Hang on a sec. You serious?” Mikihiko asked.

“Up to you whether you believe me.” Edgar didn’t really seem to care either way and continued without paying heed to Mikihiko. “There’s that guy called Ottmar, yeah? The asshole they say is a deserter that Travis hired for his private army. That guy ain’t just a deserter. He’s one of Harrison’s special forces.”

“Special forces? Even though he quit the order?”

“It’s probably set up that way so that he don’t ’cause the order trouble no matter what happens. Meaning he’s the one who does the shady jobs. Harrison’s got Archbishop Gerd above him. He’s quite literally the most

powerful man in the world. Just goes to show you don't get that high keeping your hands clean. Over the course of history, rot is sure to form. As such..."

"You fight fire with fire?"

"Seems so. He used that asshole Travis to solve problems that can't be solved the proper way. When necessary, he cut him loose. Well, I'm the one who actually fucked him up, but it's all the same. If I didn't do it, Ottmar or the like probably would've done it... So hey. When you think of it like that, don't you start seeing the bigger picture?"

"You're saying Harrison instigated everything?" Mikihiko said with a stern expression.

Travis had put the Fourth Company into action to take down Majima Takahiro for personal glory. Ottmar had guided him and had also lent a hand to the Maclaurin Provincial Army on their expedition to bring down the fake savior. And this time, Harrison had plotted this whole incident targeting Majima Takahiro, using Ottmar as a subordinate.

"Majima Takahiro was a target from the very beginning. That's what I think," Edgar said.

Mikihiko gulped. This was of course predicated on whether Ottmar truly was part of Harrison's special forces, but Edgar seemed convinced.

"You've been investigating his reasons...? What for?" Mikihiko asked.

"Hah. Ain't it obvious? To pay back everything that's owed for my humiliation." In that instant, Edgar's expression returned to that of the Battle Ogre. "There was this guy called Zoltan... He was a boring ass I was stuck with for a long time. Right at the very end, he did something real fucking stupid. He covered for me and let me get away, kicking the bucket in my goddamn stead. I don't know what the hell he saw in Majima Takahiro. All he said was he was dazzled by a brilliant light, then died in satisfaction all on his own. How can I take such humiliation?"

His words came from the heart. Even Kaneki Mikihiko, who'd resolved himself for death, was overawed by this for a moment.

"I just don't get it. It's so fucking stupid. Fighting hasn't been fun since then.

Fighting was my everything, and Zoltan screwed it all up with that stupid shit he did. It's absolutely unforgivable."

"But Zoltan is dead, right? What's there to forgive?"

"Nope. You've got it wrong," Edgar denied, his tone strong. "One of the reasons Zoltan died is because of Travis's actions. Ottmar was the one who strung Travis along, and he was acting on Harrison's orders. Hypothetically, say Harrison was targeting Majima Takahiro for some bullshit reason... Heh heh. Hey, ain't it a riot? It makes Zoltan look like a jackass for dying contentedly. I'll settle things with Harrison too while laughing my ass off about it."



“Is that why you cooperated with the Maclaurin Provincial Army and launched

a surprise attack on Takahiro back then?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I needed some clout to go through Ottmar and work for the guy giving him orders. Besides, Zoltan saw some value in Majima Takahiro. If that was enough to crush the guy, I figured I could laugh at Zoltan’s lousy perception too.”

“Doesn’t that mean...?”

Kaneki Mikihiko was at a sudden loss for words. There was a certain deception in Edgar’s story. That said, it didn’t come from malice. It was something subconscious, like Edgar wasn’t even aware that he was lying. Maybe this was Kaneki Mikihiko’s instincts at work, having spent the last few months deceiving everyone around him.

An abrupt thought came to mind. Speaking in hindsight, Majima Takahiro had pulled through Edgar’s surprise attack and the Maclaurin Provincial Army’s pursuit. Edgar had said, “If that was enough to crush the guy, I figured I could laugh at Zoltan’s lousy perception too.” However, this logically implied, “So long as Majima Takahiro overcomes the situation, Zoltan’s read was right.” In the end, Edgar was simply stating the inverse.

It didn’t seem like he was aware of this himself, though. From the conversations they’d had, Kaneki Mikihiko didn’t think Edgar was foolish enough not to notice. Was it that he hadn’t, or couldn’t? Or maybe...he didn’t want to. This could also be related to Zoltan’s death, in a way. Did Edgar want to verify if it had been meaningless, or meaningful?

In any case, it didn’t change what had to be done either way. Why did he consider fighting so boring now to begin with? Why was he so angry at being saved from the verge of death? Perhaps Edgar was so fixated on his way of life as the Battle Ogre that he was no longer able to consider other possibilities.

At any rate, this was just Kaneki Mikihiko’s intuition. He had nothing to base it on. As such, he couldn’t go deeper into this topic. Instead, he spoke of something else.

“I get what you’re saying, but is that all right? You drew the short end of the stick just for that. You’ve realized by now, yeah? We’re sacrificial pawns.”

It was exactly as they'd just discussed. Fight fire with fire, and if necessary, cut them loose. Kaneki Mikihiko was no longer under suspicion, but that didn't mean he'd built any trust. The Holy Order wouldn't care if he died. That was why, now that things had reached the stage for a head on confrontation, it wasn't strange for him to be used as the first sacrificial pawn.

"Hah. You're one to talk," Edgar said, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "Ain't you in the same boat? Or do you wanna die?"

"Like hell I do..." Mikihiko grimaced. He was resolved for death, but he wasn't delighted by the prospect. "There's just no other way. This is my only choice. But..."

"But?"

His last word caught Edgar's interest. Despite saying things like he'd given up already, the boy's eyes were still full of spirit. However, just then, a knight's voice played from the long-range communication device Kaneki Mikihiko was carrying.

"Respond."

He could tell it was the man who'd been assigned to keep an eye on the woman who was dearest to him. This meant they were reminding him about the collar around his neck right before the battle with his best friend, just in case of betrayal. It was an effective measure to take, but ultimately pointless against someone who'd long steeled his resolve.

"Yes, yes, what is it?" Mikihiko responded as Edgar clicked his tongue at having their conversation interrupted.

"I've gotten word that Majima Takahiro is headed your way," the knight said. "Coordinate with Edgar to eliminate him."

Chapter 4: Their Respective Time

“I’ll take Takahiro.”

“Hah. Do what you want.”

Kaneki Mikihiko took the initiative and Edgar yielded the role with unexpected ease. By the looks of it, he’d intended it to go this way from the start. Or perhaps he considered this another opportunity to weigh the caliber of the man known as Majima Takahiro. In either case, so long as Edgar couldn’t be completely trusted, his acceptance was convenient.

“He’s here.”

Edgar stood up and pointed at the entrance with his chin. Passing through the corridor, Majima Takahiro stepped into the large room. He held a drawn sword in one hand and Asarina had her fangs at the ready. Next to him, Kudou Riku sat atop Berta, Friedrich’s inorganic wings spreading out behind him and Caesar’s defensive membrane lingering around him. He smiled, concealing all emotions, and upon meeting his eyes, Kaneki Mikihiko’s lips curved bitterly for a short instant.

Why wasn’t he the one standing there? He knew there was no point dwelling on such impossibilities, but he found it hard to erase such thoughts from his mind. Regardless, this was reality. The one who stood next to Kaneki Mikihiko was Edgar, and he’d been ordered to murder his best friend.

“Oh come on. That wolf is really with him too,” Edgar said.

By all rights, Berta meeting up with Majima Takahiro before he was isolated should’ve been unexpected, but Edgar didn’t look surprised. Harrison had already informed them of that particular development. As for how he knew, it was thanks to the power of the Dimensional Cornerstone. Its wielder was capable of perceiving those within the fabricated world. In this sense, it was similar to Majima Takahiro’s Misty Lodge when deployed over a wide area.

That magic came from forming a contract with Salvia. Her Misty Lodge was able to create another world, much like the Dimensional Cornerstone. The two

were so similar that upon being teleported here, it'd interfered with his magic and rendered it unusable for a while. As such, it wasn't strange for it to possess the same perception capabilities.

That said, the accuracy was no match for the Misty Lodge. Majima Takahiro had a near-perfect grasp of everything happening within. Salvia was the magic itself, and her miraculous harmony and affinity with Takahiro only sharpened their keen senses.

In contrast, when Harrison used the Dimensional Cornerstone, he was only capable of gathering information in blocks of several hundred meters, getting only vague glimpses of the subject's location. As such, the enemy's condition could only be known by seeing them in person.

"Hang on... Majima don't look injured," Edgar said dubiously.

Kaneki Mikihiko gulped in surprise. It was true, Majima Takahiro showed no signs of bearing a severe wound. How could that be? It turned out Majima Takahiro hadn't shown the full extent of his power during their mock battle the other day. Not an unforeseen outcome, but…

Naturally, there was no asking how this was accomplished. Kaneki Mikihiko wasn't even permitted to exchange words with him, for starters.

"Kill him."

A ruthless command came over the magic communication device he carried. Thus, Kaneki Mikihiko's end began.

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"Let's go."

Edgar was the first to make a move. At the same time, Majima Takahiro and Berta split left and right, breaking into a run. Just as they'd discussed, Edgar targeted Kudou Riku.

"I'll leave Majima for later. First, I'll butcher you for getting in the way."

"Like I'll let you."

Berta picked up her speed, but by that time, Edgar already manifested his true power.

“Grrr.”

His hair turned red and his skin took on a black and metallic sheen. His muscles swelled, giving birth to an explosive stride, closing the distance in an instant.

“What the?!”

“Graaaah!”

Berta dodged to the side, but the Battle Ogre kept up with her and swung his sword with a roar. He aimed for Kudou Riku’s neck. Berta placed her tentacles in the way to defend. The blade cut right through them and dug into Caesar’s sludge where it came to a stop. However, the ogre’s brute strength couldn’t be held back so easily.

“Take this!”

“Guh?!”

Edgar pushed on his sword with all his might, sending Berta and her master flying away. Berta righted herself in midair and landed.

“Hah! C’mon!” Edgar howled. “What’s wrong?! This ain’t even a decent warm-up for slaughtering Majima!”

“Keep running, Berta. We’ll shoot him down from a distance,” Kudou ordered, ignoring the taunt.

This enraged Edgar even further. Keeping a corner of his eye on that battle, Kaneki Mikihiko also made his move. He smoothly pulled a two-handed sword from one of the two magic bags dangling at his hips.

“Aerial Knight.”

Once his ability activated, the sword ran through the air as if it’d been given a life of its own. The knack behind handling this ability was much like playing a video game. By moving the character behind the screen and assuming there was an invisible avatar of himself, he was capable of controlling it with his mind. By doing so, he could wield the sword with the exact same precision as if he was holding it himself. It was almost as if he’d created another Kaneki Mikihiko.

“Here I go!”

The imaginary Kaneki Mikihiko gripped the sword in both hands and slashed at his best friend. This was a preliminary strike to test things out. During the mock battle the other day, he'd been in a somewhat disadvantageous position, but...

"You're kidding me?!"

With the grating sound of metal clashing, the two-handed sword was repelled with ease. What's more, he'd been gripping the sword tight with *two hands*, whereas Majima Takahiro had swung his using only one. Kaneki Mikihiko had tried warding off the blow, but he hadn't managed. That was because Majima Takahiro's speed and strength were a step above what he'd displayed during the mock battle. Did that mean he'd been holding back at the time?

No, he hadn't given that impression. That meant he was the type to manifest more strength than he possessed when faced with a life-or-death situation. It was unexpected. Kaneki Mikihiko had known him for a long time. Never had he gotten the impression that his best friend possessed this hidden reservoir of strength. This was a facet of him that he didn't know. Or perhaps it was something that'd developed due to the harsh environment of this world. This was a quality he'd obtained by overcoming death.

"Mikihiko!"

After repelling the attack, Majima Takahiro charged in. This was a bit of a relief. Kaneki Mikihiko was a little concerned about whether his friend would be able to fight him seriously as an opponent. It looked like that was an unnecessary concern. There was no hesitation in his stride.

That was how it should be. With that in mind, Kaneki Mikihiko stepped back and prepared his next hand. He started by pulling a combat knife from each of his magic bags and activated them using Aerial Knight. Next, he pulled out a spear, and without holding it at the ready either, he let go of it. He followed up with a hatchet and a mace. His brain managed five controllers. That was his current fighting style.

"No way?!" Realizing the situation, Majima Takahiro's eyes shot open. "Multiple weapons at once?!"

Twinned knives, a spear, a hatchet, a mace, and a two-handed sword. All

these weapons hummed in the air and came rushing in.



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During the mock battle, there was something Majima Takahiro misunderstood. After crossing blades with Kaneki Mikihiko's two-handed sword, he'd been delighted to see that his best friend had surpassed him in terms of technique.

However, reality far surpassed his impressions. He should've put more weight on the fact that the Great White Spider of the Depths had recognized this boy's talent for fighting. In truth, Kaneki Mikihiko hadn't only learned swordsmanship. Knights in this world were expected to master all forms of combat. As such, he'd also learned to use every kind of weapon he could get his hands on. After all, his inherent ability didn't show its full potential when used only for a single weapon.

The more weapon types he was capable of wielding, the more he could manipulate at the same time. That was the true power of Kaneki Mikihiko's Aerial Knight. It wasn't all positives, however. Naturally, by splitting his focus, he wielded each weapon a little slower. Still, in terms of technique, he'd surpassed Majima Takahiro's swordsmanship.

Kaneki Mikhiko had learned to use a sword in the early stages of training, so he couldn't wield his other weapons with the same level of skill. Nevertheless, he wielded each with more skill than Majima Takahiro's single sword, making each of them a serious threat.

Naturally, this wasn't purely talent. If he was seen as useless, there was no telling what would happen to the woman dearest to his heart. It was possible she would be released without a question, and also possible she would be eliminated without hesitation.

Without knowing which way it would go, he'd had no choice but to continuously prove his worth while under such fierce pressure—the last few months of his life had been almost entirely dedicated to suppressing monsters and training. He hadn't had any time to catch his breath. This had been a necessity and was also what he'd wished for.

He tormented himself as if it was a form of atonement. Ironically, to the boy who was incapable of protecting the woman he loved, the talent he'd seen as worthless and meaningless was forged in the depths of hopelessness and

despair, shining here with a clear radiance.

“Go!”

Feeling a dull pain in his brain, Kaneki Mikihiko wielded all the weapons at once. Obviously, manipulating ten arms aside from his own was a significant burden compared to what he was doing before. However, he also had much to gain from doing so. His skill with each weapon differed, but this was still like being attacked by five people at once. In all practicality, this amplified his combat strength far more than five times over.

“So this is your true strength now?” Having an accurate grasp of the situation, genuine surprise highlighted Majima Takahiro’s face. He didn’t falter, though. “I can’t go falling behind.”

Making great strides over the period of several months also applied to Majima Takahiro. He swung his left arm.

“Asarina!”

During the mock battle the other day, he hadn’t had Asarina’s assistance. As such, Kaneki Mikihiko was unaware of the mobility she granted him.

“Sttter!”

Her viny body slammed against the ground hard, sending her master soaring forward.

“Wha?!”

There was no predicting such inhuman movement. The five weapons struck at empty air. The overbearing action seemed like it would throw him off balance, but Majima Takahiro had complete control of his body. He then activated the mana building up within him.

Kaneki Mikihiko felt a chill run up his spine. He had overcome hellish battles multiple times when going out to suppress monsters at the church’s command. His experience was shouting at him now that he was facing a formidable enemy. His premonition was correct.

“Misty Lodge.”

Majima Takahiro activated the one and only magic he was capable of. White

mist poured from the boy's body, filling the air. This entire space became his field. Kaneki Mikihko was shocked by the results this brought forth.

An attack by the mace from behind was avoided by crouching. The sword and dual knives that followed were immediately repelled. Asarina slammed against the ground again, getting him above the spear's thrust and the two-handed sword's horizontal slash. Before the hatchet could come into play, Majima Takahiro thrust his hand forward.

"Asarina!"

With perfect timing, a vine shot out like a spear.

"O-Oooh?!"

Kaneki Mikihiko moved immediately. He jammed a hand into his magic bag. There was no time to be picky. He pulled out the first thing he could grab, promptly readying a halberd with the same deftness as a competent knight.

"Oooh!"

He stepped forward and slashed. However, right after being decapitated, Asarina grew another head from her severed stump, snapping at the halberd.

"Wha?!"

It was as if she'd known she would be cut down. No. This terrifying reaction speed was precisely because she'd known, thanks to the Misty Lodge. Kaneki Mikihiko let go of his weapon a second late.

"Ssster!"

"Whoa?!"

He couldn't win in a contest of strength. Kanek Mikihiko was thrown like a pebble, tumbling across the stone floor.

"Guh!"

Maintaining a firm grip on his ability despite being caught off guard was worthy of praise. He kept Majima Takahiro in check using the hatchet that'd been chasing him, Kaneki Mikihiko controlled the halberd in Asarina's jaws with Aerial Knight to prevent any further attacks.

He got to his feet, breaking out into a cold sweat. An invisible collar had been placed around his neck. If he was defeated too easily, it was possible they would see it as him holding back. If so, the woman who was dearest to him could be in danger. He had a reason to give everything he had in this fight. Nevertheless, he was handily being beaten. His opponent was far stronger than expected.

“So this is Takahiro’s current strength...?”

In terms of pure talent for combat, Majima Takahiro was in fact weaker than Kaneki Mikihiko. What’s more, his inherent ability was even more unsuitable for battle than Aerial Knight, which wasn’t particularly strong itself.

But that wasn’t all he’d gained. This was, of course, not something as simple as learning magic that Kaneki Mikihiko was incapable of. Majima Takahiro didn’t have a talent for magic to begin with. He’d been so desperate to train in close combat for the sake of survival that he hadn’t had the time to learn normal magic.

The only magic he could use was the one he’d gained through his contract with the Misty Lodge Salvia. In other words, it was proof of the bonds he’d made in this world. This didn’t only apply to magic, of course. The mana from his servants flowing through him was a prime example.

“Man, you really got me...”

Kaneki Mikihiko quietly muttered to himself. He hadn’t meant to underestimate his best friend. However, here he found he hadn’t gauged Majima Takahiro’s abilities with any precision whatsoever.

Just maybe, the time they’d spent together in their old world had blinded him to the reality in this one. The Majima Takahiro he knew was the one who’d lived a peaceful, quiet, and common everyday life. But now things were different. And that wasn’t all.

Kaneki Mikihiko finally had a real sense for it. The boy in front of his eyes was now, without a doubt, the visitor who’d been thrown into the jaws of certain death more than any other and overcome it every time. Setting aside exceptions like cheaters, he had already reached the peak of strength as an individual fighter in this world. If Kaneki Mikihiko didn’t put his entire soul into

this, he would be defeated in an instant.

“Now’s not the time to be worrying about him, huh?”

Muttering quietly, Kaneki Mikihiko broke into a smile.

Chapter 5: Exhausting Every Last Ounce of Strength

In this fierce battle against his best friend, Kaneki Mikihiko realized something. To be precise, it was something that'd bothered him for a while. After coming here, Majima Takahiro hadn't once asked why. He didn't press for an answer as to why Kaneki Mikihiko was an enemy now.

On the other hand, he didn't look like he was so enraged and out for blood that there was no room to question it. He simply looked right at his best friend, ready to attack at any moment. This definitely wasn't the attitude one took toward a traitor.

There was no mistaking it at this point. Majima Takahiro grasped the situation. He figured out that his best friend was being forced to do as they said by taking a hostage. How he had noticed was a pointless question. If their positions were reversed, Kaneki Mikihiko would've figured it out too.

They both knew each other so well. Giving some thought to their circumstances was enough to know what spurred the other on. That was of course only if they believed that the other hadn't changed, though.

"That's one thing I never have to question..."

Majima Takahiro still remained Kaneki Mikihiko's best friend. On top of that, he showed no hesitation in battle. There was no anger or bloodlust in his eyes, but his fighting spirit was honed to a keen edge. Kaneki Mikihiko sensed he was honestly putting his full power on display.

Seeing that, he understood. Majima Takahiro was playing along with his plan. It was as if his eyes were saying, "This works for you, yeah?" Despite being stabbed, he showed no signs of having the slightest apprehension at Mihiko's sudden betrayal. Sensing the wholehearted trust behind this, Kaneki Mikihiko laughed inwardly. His heart was settled now.

"What are you doing, Kaneki Mikihiko! Fight with all your might!"

“I know...”

He replied noncommittally to the voice coming from the magic communication device. He didn’t need to be told. He would fight at full strength. That wasn’t because he was being forced to, however. He was going to exhaust every last ounce of his strength to answer Majima Takahiro’s friendship.

“Here I come, Takahiro.”

This was the beginning of the true battle. Kaneki Mikihiko kicked off the ground and broke into a charge. At the same time, he pulled weapons out of his magic bags and threw them in the air. They were mostly swords. A longsword, a shortsword, a broadsword, an estoc, a saber, a double-edged sword, rapier, an arming sword, a scimitar... He seized all of them with Aerial Knight.

“Guh...”

The burden from using his ability ramped up exponentially. Normally, Aerial Knight couldn’t be used to wield two of the same weapon. There was a trick to it, though. By taking the same weapons with slightly different shapes, they counted as different weapons. Using that little cheat, it was possible for him to wield multiple swords at once, the weapon he was most familiar with.

Still, it felt like his brain was going to split apart. He held back the pain, creating avatars of himself to wield each and every sword.

“With...this!”

A total of twenty Kaneki Mikihikos rushed Majima Takahiro. His combat strength had been amplified more than twenty times over. Such a wave of violence was likely impossible for even the Battle Ogre to handle, but...

“I can’t hit...?!”

Using the Misty Lodge’s perception and matching it to the mobility granted to him by Asarina, Majima Takahiro’s movements were no longer that of a human. His agility and speed were a wonder to behold. Thanks to Asarina’s complete freedom of movement, it was even possible for him to maneuver in midair.

“It’s this much worse with her...?!”

“Ssster!”

From Kaneki Mikihiko’s perspective, he had to deal with an opponent who was already faster than him now moving in three dimensions. It was beyond his means. What’s more, Asarina was acting like an autonomous whip that sealed any attacks.

What was even more troublesome was the magic mist covering the area. An advantage of attacking with many weapons came from simply increasing the number of attacks, but a far larger one was being able to strike from multiple directions at once.

To be able to handle an attack, one had to be cognizant of what was going on, but humans only had two eyes facing forward. There was a limit to how much could be handled at once from the perspective of human cognition.

However, Majima Takahiro had a full grasp of his surroundings because of the magic mist. By sacrificing enough that it had an effect on his internal world, the accuracy of his perception was higher than ever before. Further enhanced by Salvia’s feelings as she watched over him, the connection between them was even deeper, reflected in the precision of the magic. As it was now, the Misty Lodge knew every little detail of all twenty weapons’ movements.

Regardless, if Kaneki Mikihiko was capable of attacking with every single weapon at once, it would likely be impossible to handle. That was exactly why Majima Takahiro moved in a way to prevent that. By remaining constantly on the move, he ensured he was never completely surrounded. His devotion to his training and his experience with deadly battles made it possible for him to fight this way.

Inferior in terms of speed and mobility, Kaneki Mikihiko couldn’t keep up. Even when he managed to somehow go around and cut him off by relying on numbers, it took everything he had to attack with just a few weapons. To Majima Takahiro, that was well within the realm of what could be handled.

“Oooh!”

He repelled the two swords coming from the front with a sweep of the blade in his right hand. At the same time, he used the shield in his left to block an attack from the side, relying on Asarina to help him get away from the attack

from behind by flinging him into the air. He shot a fireball from the runestone in his bracer at another sword that came thrusting at him, sending it flying away. Without even looking, he repelled the spear that was waiting for him at his landing point. Kaneki Mikihiko couldn't even scratch him. On the contrary, Majima Takahiro had the leisure to turn his attention elsewhere.

"Look out, Kudou!"

He fired a wind bullet from his bracer, attacking Edgar's flank.

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"Gah! Fuck! You really did it now!"

The surprise attack slammed into Edgar's ribs. It was supposed to be fairly powerful, but the ogre's metallic black skin and tenacious muscles didn't seem to suffer much damage. Still, it was enough to interrupt him, allowing Kudou Riku to barely evade the attack that had nearly struck him directly.

"Ugh..."

"C'mon, what's the matter?!" Edgar roared, hot on Berta's heels as she sprinted away. "All you've been doing is scurrying around! I don't see the other one that's supposed to be with you. You aiming for an opening or something? You'll get crushed before that happens!"

Dora was nowhere to be seen. It did seem that she wasn't going to be able to strike Edgar from a blind spot anytime soon. Forget making an opening, Kudou Riku was gradually being driven into a corner.

Having been struck multiple times, his breathing was ragged. Caesar had defended against every strike, but his body wasn't even mana-enhanced. The simple shock of being tossed about was enough to drain Kudou Riku's stamina.

"Seriously, how pathetic..."

Kudou Riku flashed a cynical and bitter smile. This was inevitable. His inherent ability was extremely powerful, but the same power shaved away at his health. Beyond the apparent strength granted by his menagerie, Kudou Riku himself was weak. He was actually getting weaker by the day. It was like some kind of curse.

“My king, are you hurt?”

Despite being in the middle of combat, Berta raised a concerned voice. In truth, she’d been against him participating in this battle. She’d voiced her opinion, fully prepared to be punished for it. However, while Kudou Riku had refused her suggestion, he hadn’t punished her. This was unexpected for Berta. Perhaps it was even unexpected for Kudou Riku himself.

“Berta...”

If there was a reason for this, then it was the conversation he’d had with Majima Takahiro here in this fabricated world.

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

“That’s wrong. Even if that’s all there is to you, there are those who don’t think so.”

That was how Majima Takahiro had refuted him.

“Aah... Seriously, this is so stupid.”

Things he didn’t know. Things he now knew. Majima Takahiro had told him of Berta’s desire. What did that bring about? Did Kudou Riku’s mumbling reach Berta’s ears? At any rate, they were in the middle of battle, so now wasn’t the time to talk about it. Even if they were at peace, Kudou Riku wouldn’t have expressed his innermost thoughts. Instead, he told her something else.

“Fight at full strength, Berta.”

“My king...?” Berta said, shaken by his words. “What did you just say?”

“I’m ordering you to fight at full strength. From here on out, shed that false form and bring out everything you have.”

Berta had a true form, but Kudou Riku had prohibited her from revealing it. By breaking that ban once, she’d been horribly punished. So what had changed his mind about it?

“Do it quickly. We can’t take up any more of Majima-senpai’s time.”

As expected, Kudou Riku didn’t explain himself. Still, Berta sensed this was an

omen of a definitive change within him.

“As you will, my king. I’ll put on display my full power,” the wolf replied reassuringly.

“The hell’re you two mumbling about?!”

Edgar lunged forward and swung his sword. However, this time, he hadn’t stepped in deep enough. This wasn’t due to poor swordsmanship or anything. Berta’s movements were clearly faster than before.

“Wha?!”

A wall of tentacles and sludge dulled the attack, but unlike before, the sword truly didn’t reach its target. Fiery breath licked the tip of his nose in a counterattack, getting Edgar to step back for the first time. He then realized that the wolf before him had transformed.

“You bastard...”

“It’s my king’s command. I’ll be fighting at full strength from this point onward,” the woman sprouting from the wolf’s back declared proudly.

Berta the scylla. This was her true form as the most powerful of the Demon King’s subordinates. Released from her self-imposed fetters, the wolf began dashing at full speed.

Chapter 6: Collision

Swords manipulated by a paranormal power flew about the battlefield.

Using the bonds with his servants as his weapons, a boy handled every strike.

With the Demon King on her back, a wolf ran about, a roaring ogre hot on her heels.

As a result of everyone bringing their full strength to bear, both sides were struggling for supremacy. They were for now, at least. As a participant of the battle, however, Kaneki Mikihiko understood that, at this rate, he was going to be the first to fall.

“Part of it is poor affinity, but...”

He muttered to himself, holding back the throbbing pain in his head. The advantage of Aerial Knight was multiplying his own forces. However, Majima Takahiro also wielded a sword, Asarina, and many magic tools. Each and every weapon was strong, and the man himself was a step or two faster.

Kaneki Mikihiko won in terms of pure numbers, but because of the Misty Lodge, he couldn’t make full use of that advantage. Even now, the twenty weapons—composed largely of swords—rushed in on their target, but Majima Takahiro dealt with all of them with ease.

He repelled swords, parried blows, used magic tools to intercept strikes, and if none of those were going to work, he dodged or blocked. It looked like Majima Takahiro was being sealed, but it was actually the opposite. All of Kaneki Mikihiko’s strengths were being suppressed. He had poor affinity with this opponent.

“No... That’s not much of an excuse.”

Majima Takahiro’s defensive fighting style showed very few openings to begin with. To defeat him, the only choice was to meet him head on with overwhelming attack power and speed. There was no point complaining about affinity against an opponent like that.

What unfolded before his eyes told him everything. Kaneki Mikihiko was no match for Majima Takahiro.

“What are you doing, Kaneki Mikihiko?!” Losing patience, a voice suffused with irritation played over the magic communication device. “You better not be holding back.”

“I’m being serious,” Mikihiko answered, keeping his focus on the battle. It was pretty hard to pull off. “I don’t mind if you check for yourself. You’ve been monitoring me since the battle started, haven’t you? I’m sure personnel have been dispatched here already.”

Now that the fighting had started, everyone had to focus on the enemies before them, pulling their focus away from their surroundings. Using the opening this created, an assault force had been dispatched to the arena. Kaneki Mikihiko had predicted this far ahead of time. In all likelihood, they were hiding in the corridor.

There were only a few people Harrison could secretly call to arms for this operation. Even if he was the leader of the Holy Order, there weren’t that many people he could make use of for what was essentially an assassination. The few personnel he’d called from the capital were to return to their posts were they not needed, but due to the failure of the planned all-out attack right after the teleportation and the loss of multiple trump cards, they had to be put to use now. Those who had secretly infiltrated this arena had to be sending information to the man who was commanding the whole operation.

“Ugh. It does seem you aren’t holding back...”

“Yeah, this is my limit.”

It was the truth. He felt a tingling sensation deep in his nose. A slimy liquid leaked out. He wiped it away, seeing a red stain on his hand. This was blood from a torn capillary vessel. About ten minutes had passed since he’d started wielding twenty weapons. He could feel his brain burning out from concentrating too much. He’d long passed the point where his headache was unbearable.

In that state, he was keeping Majima Takahiro at bay, who was fiercely searching for an opening to exploit. Nobody could accuse him of holding back.

He was giving it everything he had.

“Any more than this is useless for me. How’s Sir Edgar doing?”

“He’s also in a stalemate...”

It seemed Kudou Riku was doing well. Standing on even ground against the Battle Ogre, who fought with the same strength as a visitor, meant Kudou Riku’s power when combined with his elite servants was significant.

“How can this be? To think it’d go this poorly...” The voice on the other end sounded at his wits’ end. It served him right. “I thought Majima would falter with you as an opponent, but it isn’t going to be that easy, I see.”

“Looks like he doesn’t really care about some traitor,” Mikihiko said, saying whatever seemed suitable.

The truth was the opposite. It was because they believed in each other that they were able to fight at full strength.

“A stalemate...” the voice said.

Even if they had a collar around his neck, they weren’t going to try and force him to do something he was incapable of. Kaneki Mikihiko felt relieved that the hostage they’d taken was safe due to his efforts.

He hadn’t been defeated in an instant, but wasn’t going to win either. He’d been aiming to push himself to the very limit in a prolonged deadlock to begin with. That was the ideal outcome.

Although, that would only hold for a few minutes. It wouldn’t be strange for the stalemate to break at any moment. As such, he’d predicted his next orders.

“There’s no choice then, Make the gamble.”

After going down a long, long road, the end was finally in sight.

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“Roger that...”

He’d persevered to his very limit. He’d hung in there for so, so long. He’d done absolutely everything he could. All that was left was to believe.

“Here I come, Takahiro.”

Without even the leisure to wipe the blood dribbling from his nose, a crimson grin painted Kaneki Mikihiko's features, a sign of grim determination. He pulled back all the weapons he'd been manipulating. Sensing the shift, Majima Takahiro came to a stop. Even after such a long battle, he didn't have a single scratch on him. That fact brought Kaneki Mikihiko genuine relief.

However, at the same time, it was just a little frustrating. Even though they were best friends—no, *because* they were best friends—a part of him didn't want to lose. Naturally, he wasn't going to fuss over winning at this point. He wanted to be someone he could take pride in before his friend. As such...

"This is the ace up my sleeve."

He'd made his preparations ahead of time. Shifting his focus, the weapons lying in the corridor floated up and swarmed together. At the same time, he grabbed the magic bags dangling at his hips and destroyed their runestones. By doing so, the weapons within scattered all over.

The manipulation of multiple weapons at once—the main difference now was the sheer number of them.

There were bladed weapons from swords of all sizes to crude knives.

There were poled weapons from spears, to halberds, to battleaxes.

There were even weapons like whips and flails—weapons that had been nothing but failed ambitions.

A visitor's ability was a reflection of their wish. As such, it was greatly affected by the visitor's subconscious. He wanted to be a knight who could protect the woman who was dearest to him. It was because he'd truly fallen in love that he'd wished for that. However, this was a dream that could never come true.

Kaneki Mikihiko couldn't become a knight.

He wasn't suitable. He didn't have the caliber. A man incapable of protecting his beloved couldn't possibly become a knight, no matter how much he wished for it.

If he could, he would at most just be able to imitate one. That was exactly why his ability had manifested as Aerial Knight—a sham of a knight with no

substance.

Regardless, even if he couldn't become his ideal, there was something he wanted to protect. He didn't care if he was some cheap imitation. So long as he protected her, it didn't matter. With that resolution close at heart, he gave his power form.

"Ooooh!"

The weapons he manipulated numbered roughly 250 in total. It was no coincidence that this was pretty much the same number of knights who'd once made up the Third Company of the Alliance Knights.

This was the true form of Kaneki Mikihiko's inherent ability. In short, it was the empty, hollow, sham of a knightly order commanded by the boy who couldn't become a knight. Nevertheless, with the desire to protect someone deep in his heart, he brought it to its final stage, still so far from perfection.

"Aerial Knights!"

Leading a tremendous company of weapons, the boy made his final charge.

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The human brain had a processing limit. The manifestation of his inherent ability had come with the senses to manipulate many weapons in parallel, but that had a ceiling too. Twenty was really pushing it in terms of continuous use. Using ten times that number was insanity. It wasn't like he could freely wield this many weapons. Well, perhaps that would've been possible one day, but at the very least, it wasn't now.

"Gah...?!"

Even just getting them to float in the air dyed his vision red. Assaulted by a pain that felt like it would tear his head apart, his consciousness flickered in and out. He endured all the agony and simply ran forward.

"Aaaaah!"

He could only keep this active for a very short time. He couldn't make minute adjustments or manipulate them at range. As such, he had to lead the charge himself. The scene was like a knightly order holding their weapons high, lunging

forward to destroy their enemy.

The rushing swarm of weapons would surely even be able to kill a warrior with their overwhelming numbers. If visitors with inherent abilities were categorized as premature and late bloomers, Kaneki Mikihiko definitely belonged to the latter. Compared to warriors, who'd manifested violent combat abilities right off the bat, his road to strength was so very long. As such, the fact that he'd taken his ability to such heights in so short a time was worthy of admiration.

It was true he had an outstanding talent for fighting, but that wasn't enough to take him this far on its own. The ferocity of his passion and the wish in his heart had driven him to this stage.

Just maybe, given another year, his ability would've reached completion. Given five years, it was possible he'd be able to wield this many at once like it was perfectly normal. However, he hadn't been given that much time. Perhaps that was the greatest factor that brought the boy in front of him victory.

"Asarina," the boy called quietly.

Inside his red-dyed vision, Kaneki Mikhiko witnessed his best friend's arm wrapped by vines, transforming into something grotesque. This was an imitation of Lily's Devil Arm. This was the strongest attack Majima Takahiro was capable of on his own.

"Salvia."

Another quiet word. In that instant, Kaneki Mikihiko sensed an abnormality in his Aerial Knights. He didn't know what was done, but he knew something happened. The majority of the weapons under his command slowed down as if caught on something.

Normally, this slight delay wouldn't be a problem. However, right now, he was in the middle of an all-or-nothing suicide charge.

"Guh! Oooh?!"

The all-out attack, all aiming for the same point, broke down. Kaneki Mikihiko reacted instantly, trying to break through what was holding him back; something he was only capable of because of his great sense for combat.

The Aerial Knights that followed him numbered around fifty. There were less of them now, but this was still more than double his usual limit.

However, the Devil Arm was held aloft waiting for him. The strength it was capable of exhibiting was eighty percent of the tyranny wielded by the Great White Spider of the Depths. It was weaker than the original, but because the grotesque arm was shaped by Asarina, it possessed a certain level of flexibility. The arm grew prodigiously, covering a terrifyingly vast and long range.

It came crashing down.

“Aah...”

Kaneki Mikihiko let out a relieved and bloody sigh.

“It’s my loss.”

The Devil Arm mowed down the boy and all his weapons.

Chapter 7: The Thin Thread to Victory

His entire body had been blown to bits. The strike had been intense enough for that delusion to take root. When he came to, Kaneki Mikihiko found himself lying face up on the hard stone floor. He'd apparently lost consciousness. When he opened his eyes, he saw his best friend looking down at him.

"I'm...alive?"

"Not much point asking me. You should know better than anyone."

"That's true..."

He laughed a little. It turned out he hadn't met an explosive end. That said, it felt like "not dead" was a better descriptor than "alive." In terms of condition, worn-out rag seemed an appropriate analogy. His utter defeat was almost refreshing.

"Aah...dammit."

Correction. It felt great.

"How pathetic. I couldn't do a thing."

"That's not true."

Majima Takahiro shook his head. There was no deception in his tone. As proof of his claim, his left arm was dangling in its socket. This was the arm he'd used in the collision against Aerial Knights. Even now, blood dribbled down his fingers.

"Did you think you were no match at all?" Takahiro asked.

"Uhhh..."

"Just so you know, I didn't hold anything back. I'd be dead if I did."

There was a large laceration on the cheek of his dead-serious face. There were wounds all over his body too. Above all else, his voice clearly indicated that he wasn't just trying to comfort his friend.

"You're strong, Mikihiko. That's why I gave it everything I had."

He believed. Just maybe, he believed more than Kaneki Mikihiko himself. He knew there was no way his best friend would die from an attack of this level.

During the battle, Kaneki Mikihiko had also sensed that Majima Takahiro believed in him to such an extent. That was why, in that last instant, the thought, “I can’t die here,” came to mind. By colliding with Aerial Knights, the Devil Arm had slowed down the tiniest bit, which had allowed him to twist to the side with a reserve strength he didn’t even know he had.

Perhaps the belief his best friend had in him was what had allowed him to narrowly avoid death. Surely, this had been the one and only path to prevent the doom he’d already steeled himself for.

“I see...”

Kaneki Mikihiko sighed deeply. It was as if he was catching his first breath after walking down a long, long road. However, that was when a boorish presence approached.

“Defeated, huh?”

Someone had jumped down from the corridor surrounding the upper level of this room. It was one of the knights who’d been keeping an eye on Kaneki Mikihiko. He was a particularly skilled one too. As to be expected, he’d infiltrated the area during the battle. He wasn’t likely to be the only one either. The others simply didn’t show themselves yet. They were the assault force meant to deliver the final blow after their sacrificial pawn finished his job.

“Kaneki Mikihiko, if you can still move, seal Majima Takahiro’s movements.”

He was probably the leader of the assault force. His orders were dispassionate.

“That’s unreasonable...”

Kaneki Mikihiko flashed a wry smile. His body was so wounded he didn’t even know what state it was in anymore. At the very least, all his limbs were broken. Also, while the weapons he’d used for Aerial Knights were scattered all over, his ability had naturally been cut off, and none were so much as budging. Either way, the knight probably expected this answer.

“I see. How unfortunate,” he said in a business-like manner.

He raised his hand. He was about to give the signal for his men to attack. Seeing how they were waiting for the perfect opportunity to show themselves, they’d likely brought some kind of rare magic tools or the like with them. They’d confirmed that their target, Majima Takahiro, had suffered considerable wounds. They likely didn’t care about their sacrificial pawn getting caught in the crossfire either.

Kaneki Mikihiko had predicted this development. However, now that it had come to this, he couldn’t do anything about it. That was why he’d done everything he could to prepare. He’d played every hand he could think of. On top of all that, he believed. There was a limit to what people could accomplish alone. That was exactly why people trusted others. It was precisely because he’d devoted himself to human relations that this trust bore fruit.

“Wh-Who the hell are you?!”

A voice suddenly reached his ears. This was the thin thread leading to victory. This was the hope the boy who’d endured for so long was finally able to grasp.

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The voice was coming from the magic communication device that’d been lent to Kaneki Mikihiko.

“How?! Why the hell are you here?!”

He could tell how much of a panic the man who’d been giving him orders was in. However, that only lasted for a moment.

“Gah?!”

The man shrieked in agony. It was clearly an abnormal situation.

“Wh-What’s happening...?”

The knight who was about to give the order to attack looked startled. Sounds of destruction resonated over the communication device followed by a flurry of activity. Around ten seconds later, an unexpected voice played over it.

“Mister Kaneki! Can you hear me?!”

“Huh...?” Majima Takahiro was the one to react to the woman’s call. “Shiran?”

He wouldn’t mistake that voice for anyone else. It was the voice of the knight who’d offered him her sword. However, she was supposed to be in this fabricated world too. Why was she on the other end of the communication device with the man who was monitoring the commander in the capital? That was only the beginning of the shocking news too.

“Shiran! The west side is secured! Miss Mitarai is asking what to do next!”

“Even Kei...?”



Next, they could hear Kei, who’d been left behind in the capital. For some

reason, even the Stalwart Snow White Mitarai Aoi's name came up. The situation was becoming more and more incomprehensible.

"Understood. Kei, please wait a moment. I'm trying to get in touch with Mister Kaneki... Huh, Marcus?!"

"Mikihiko! Can you hear me?! We did it!" an emotional man yelled over the device.

"H-Hey! Give that back!" Shiran shouted in a fluster. "At any rate, just as we planned, we've secured the commander's safety!"

"What?!"

The leader of the assault force raised his voice in shock. Unable to keep up with the situation, his mouth flapped open and shut. However, Kaneki Mikihiko's focus didn't catch the man's reactions. The only thing he wanted was to hear a single voice.

"Mikihiko. You fool."

In that instant, the boy was rewarded for all the suffering he'd gone through. Truly, and thoroughly, it was all worth it now. It was like a miracle.

"Commander, are you all right?"

Mustering what little mana he had, Kaneki Mikihiko's voice reached her across the magic tool.

"Yes. Of course. How could I not be? Who do you think has been protecting me?"

She sounded angry. That made him happy.

"I have something to tell you," she said. "It'll take a while, so... Mikihiko, make sure to come back alive. You hear me? That's a promise."

"Understood."

After they exchanged that nail-biting promise, Shiran spoke again.

"All the captured members of the Alliance Knights have also been freed. I'll be taking them now to break out of here."

They were in the middle of an operation. That was when the communication

cut off.

“Wh-Wh-Wha...”

Attacking was long out of the assault force leader’s mind. He was clearly in dismay, glaring down at Kaneki Mikihiko.

“Wh-What the hell have you done?!”

“Well, you know, rescue the commander. Weren’t you listening?”

“You can’t possibly have...!”

“I can. I mean, now’s the only time to do it,” the boy said, grinning. “The majority of the knights Harrison can move behind closed doors have been mobilized for this assassination. When else can it be done?”

“Wha...?!”

Yes. This exact instant was what he’d been aiming for all along.

“With an operation this big, you need a whole lotta hands on deck. However, even though Harrison’s at the top of the Holy Order, there aren’t that many people who can be put into action for an assassination. And if he bumps into trouble, he’s gotta make use of the personnel he had on standby in the capital. It was clear to see.”

The Holy Order was made up entirely of knights. They were respectable people who safeguarded the world, protecting the people from the constant threat of monsters. Much like Gordon, the majority of the knights hadn’t been informed, restricting what Harrison was capable of. This was an opening Kaneki Mikihiko had taken advantage of.

“That’s why I constantly got in the way of the plan. To protect Takahiro and to rescue the commander.”

“B-But y-you’re...”

“You figured my willpower was already broken, yeah? I did go as far as having a serious fight to the death against Takahiro. In such circumstances, there was no point in keeping a strict watch on the commander, especially when you’re already short on hands... I made sure you came to that conclusion.”

There were those who always kept an eye on Kaneki Mikihiko, but it would've been tremendously difficult for them to see through the layers of subterfuge. After all, the fight to the death with his best friend had been the real thing.

Kaneki Mikihiko had faced this battle ready to die. His grim determination had made it impossible for his observers to anticipate his intentions.

"Several of the Alliance Knights didn't get caught in Serrata. I've been secretly in contact with them, putting together a rescue operation. Still, we were lacking in terms of combat strength. That's why I asked for some help."

"I see. That's where Shiran comes in..."

Majima Takahiro nodded in understanding. He knew his best friend's disposition well. He'd inferred that Kaneki Mikihiko had steeled himself for death, and had also figured there was more to this whole thing than that. That was why he'd played along with this plan. Still, he obviously didn't know all the details, so he paid careful attention to what his friend was saying.

"I explained everything to Shiran and had her go back to the capital using a teleportation runestone. The Alliance Knights who'd evaded capture were fully prepared on-site, and once she linked up with them, she took part in the rescue operation."

Shiran was also one of the Alliance Knights who'd evaded capture in Serrata. There was no way she'd object to rescuing the commander who was so respected and revered among the company. This was especially the case that if, by doing so, Kaneki Mikihiko would be freed from having to join the enemy, reducing the threat to the savior she'd sworn her sword to.

"Y-You bastard!" With everything revealed to him, the leader of the assault force roared. "Th-There's no way you could've done such a thing! You've been under surveillance!"

"Yeah. You lot were watching me, but I pulled it off anyway. That's the truth."

"G-Guh...!" It meant he'd been tricked this whole time. The knight's rage flowed outward. "Die!"

He raised his hand once more in anger, signaling his comrades to launch the attack. Majima Takahiro had been dealt major damage. They could just crush

him here. However, in that instant, a shadowy blade jutted out of the knight's stomach.

"Wh...at?"

"Unfortunately, your friends have already been exterminated," Dora said.

She hadn't shown herself this entire time. She'd been pretending to wait for Edgar to show an opening while instead dealing with the enemies who'd infiltrated the room.

"N-No...way..."

The last member of the assault force collapsed. At that moment, Kaneki Mikihiko's lonely battle finally came to an end.

Chapter 8: The Enemy

The battle between best friends had come to a complete stop and the follow-up attack had been prevented. The tumult of battle had vanished from the vast room.

“I’m glad to see you’re safe, Senpai,” Kudou said, seated on Berta’s back as she walked toward Majima Takahiro.

“Kudou? Where’s Edgar?”

“Sorry. He got away. Once he saw your fight was over, he ran away immediately. I never imagined he’d retreat, so it caught me off guard.”

“I see... Whatever, I don’t mind. For now, let’s just be happy we drove him off.”

“Ah, about that, Takahiro,” Mikihiko joined in. “There’s something I gotta tell you. Edgar might not be an enemy. Well, I suppose that doesn’t make him an ally either, so you should still be wary of him...”

“What do you mean?”

“I had a chance to chat with him. Looks like he’s got another objective in mind. He told me he wants to know why Harrison is so hostile toward you.”

“The reason Harrison is hostile...?”

Majima Takahiro grimaced. He had in fact harbored suspicions about the Holy Order’s overbearing behavior. By killing the guests they’d invited to the capital themselves, the Holy Church would take a tremendous hit to their dignity and the trust the people had in them. They only had things to lose by committing to this betrayal, so their motivation was a complete mystery.

Of course, humans weren’t driven entirely by logic. Even if that wasn’t the case, it was possible this conflict was born of a difference of values, much like with Margrave Maclaurin. There was more than enough of a reason for them to be hostile, considering Majima Takahiro’s monstrous menagerie, so there was no reason to overthink it.

“Got it. That helps, Mikihiko. If that’s the reason he backed down so easily, then there’s no need to be overly concerned about him.”

And as they exchanged what information they had to share, a new figure appeared in the corridor.

“Kuu.”

“Ah, hey, wait up.”

It was Shimazu Yui and Ayame, who’d kept their distance during the fighting. At a glance, it looked like Shimazu Yui had been looking after Ayame, but the little fox was actually the guard here. Even if she couldn’t use her power right now, the Fairy Ring’s presence was a trump card, so this was an important duty.

“It’s a relief to see you safe, Majima. Looks like you repelled the enemy,” Shimazu said.

“Yes. Just as you can see, Mikihiko isn’t in any danger of dying either.”

“So that’s Kaneki Mikihiko...”

“Nice to meet you,” Mikihiko said. “I’m glad you managed to link up with Takahiro... Um, Shimazu? Why are you glaring at me like that?”

“I’m just having trouble coming to terms with this,” she said. “You’re the one who tricked me, right?”

“I’m really sorry about that. I’ll apologize all you want.”

“It’s fine. I’m not going to complain if it helps Majima out. Besides, you’re a total mess.”

So, after a minor quarrel, everyone was back together.

“Okay then, about what to do next.” Everyone paid attention to what Majima Takahiro had to say. Kaneki Mikihiko’s case was resolved now, but that was still just one stage in the complex web of crises. “Next is Katou. We have to save her. Mikihiko, can you tell me where she is?”

“Of course.”

The boys were moving on to what had to be done next, but just then...

“What the?!”

A tremendous tremor shook the entire room. It was the biggest one yet. At the same time, the corridor Ayame and Shimazu Yui had just used sealed itself. Tension was clear on everyone's faces. And as that went on, someone laughed inappropriately.

"H-Ha ha..."

It was the assault force's leader, still prostrate on the ground. Dora had cut him down, but he was still alive. Blood dyed his lips as he spoke.

"Ha ha ha. It's over."

"What do you know about this?!" Mikihiko roared.

"We...failed," the man said, smiling as the shadow of death hung over him. "So this is the failsafe."

"The failsafe...?"

"Prepare yourselves... This room...is collapsing."

Leaving behind that curse, the man passed away. As if reinforcing his words, cracks ran along the ceiling.

"No way?!"

Kaneki Mikihiko understood the situation. His face twisted. He'd seen himself as a sacrificial pawn, no more than an expendable tool meant to slam against their enemy and exhaust him, but what if that wasn't all? For example, what if he'd only been sent here to keep Majima Takahiro in place?

There was no meaning to victory or defeat in the first place. If he won, that would be fine. If he couldn't finish Majima Takahiro off or was defeated, they'd kill every last one of them like this. This was their plan from the very beginning.

"Harrisooooon!"

The boy's bellow was drowned out by the tremors.

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A short while earlier, Ottmar led Katou Mana and the female knight keeping an eye on her, Elena, to another location. The mastermind behind this incident, Harrison Addington, had called for her. They arrived in a large room furnished

with an altar. The moment she stepped foot inside, her expression convulsed.

This was due to the amassed attention of the two groups awaiting her arrival. One group was made up of armored men who gave off a similar impression to Ottmar. The other was made up of knights of the Holy Order like Elena. There were several women, but the majority were men.

“Eep...”

Her throat went dry in an instant and blood drained from her face. Her androphobia was back and wouldn’t relent. It was already bad enough with just Ottmar around, but now there were so many men around. Gastric acid surged up her throat and she was assaulted by a horrible dizzy spell. The impulse to scream in despair and run back the way she came pounded in her chest. How easy things would be if she could just lose her mind like that.

“Miss Katou?” Elena said.

“It’s nothing...”

Katou Mana forcefully repressed her panic attack. She couldn’t lose her mind here. She’d clenched her teeth and made it all the way here hoping there was something she could do for the boy she loved.

She bit her lip to retain her sanity, glaring at a particularly splendid knight who stood out from both groups. He had short trimmed black hair and hazel eyes. He had chiseled features, but still looked somewhat Asian, giving a sense of his mixed heritage. His thoroughly tempered body gave off a heavy presence.

This was the marshal of the Holy Order, Harrison Addington. He was the ringleader behind this entire incident. If not for this opportunity, he was someone she could never approach. Katou Mana clenched her dainty fists, pressing hard against her chest.

“Give me strength, Senpai...”

Having once had his heart gouged out by human cruelty in the Colony and forced to wander the Woodlands with the fear of death carved into his soul, he’d still chosen to march forward. Her yearning for that boy was the only thing supporting her now.

“Let’s go,” Ottmar said, turning around.

“Yes...”

She suppressed the fear roiling inside her and limped forward. Step by step, she kept her body from trembling and walked, finally arriving right in the center of both groups.

She came to a sudden realization. Something was strange here. Her thoughts had been muddled, so she was late in noticing. Once she saw it, however, the source of her unease was clear.

Despite calling for her, the people in this room were apathetic to her presence. Standing atop the altar, Harrison hadn’t even given her a single glance. The two groups had also only turned to look when she first entered the room. Their zealous eyes were instead focused on something else entirely. What were they watching? Upon turning to take a look for herself, Katou Mana’s eyes shot open.

“Majima-senpai?!”

In front of the altar, where both groups were focusing their attention, there was a circular cutout in the ground reflecting a far-away scene. It was an image being shown through some magical means; a bird’s-eye view of two boys talking to each other in a vast space.

Kaneki Mikihiko was on the ground covered in wounds, while Majima Takahiro was standing over him. He was safe. Relieved by this fact, Katou Mana also found it strange. To the people gathered here, this scene wasn’t supposed to be what they’d hoped for. And yet, they showed no signs of being vexed or bewildered.

“He really got us,” one of the knights said. He didn’t sound particularly shaken. He was just straight and to the point.

“A meaningless victory. With this, it’s over,” another knight with level eyes said.

Hearing that, Katou Mana felt a chill run up her spine. The words had an ominous ring to them, like he was certain that the people he was looking at were going to die. She couldn’t let this go on. With that thought in mind, she

stirred into action.

“Harrison Addington!” she screamed, hiding her fear by raising her voice. “You’re the one who called me here, right?! Didn’t you need something from me?!”

With that, Harrison’s hazel eyes turned to her for the first time. He had a far more placid gaze than expected. Unlike when he greeted them the other day, there was absolutely no need for him to keep up appearances. She figured she’d see him displaying negative emotions like anger or revulsion toward the boy who led monsters, but he was the same as before.

The knight among knights.

“You misunderstand,” Harrison said, his bearing unchanged.

“Huh?”

“I have no business with you. I simply have no intention of making unnecessary sacrifices. In the worst case, it’s possible the room you were being held in gets caught in this.”

She hadn’t expected this. She’d come here prepared to be thoroughly interrogated about Majima Takahiro, or perhaps to be tortured to be made an example of. But that apparently wasn’t the case.

Furthermore, she didn’t know what he meant by “getting caught in this.” Surprisingly, Elena, who was supporting Katou Mana from the side, also looked bewildered. Ottmar, who’d brought her here, had his back turned to her so she couldn’t see his reaction. At the very least, Elena hadn’t been informed of this situation. And with no way of guessing, Katou Mana could only ask.

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t mind telling you. You have the right to hear it,” Harrison said, agreeing with unexpected ease. “But there’s something that needs to be done first.”

He then quietly gave an order.

“Do it.”

In an instant, Ottmar turned around toward her.

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By the time he was facing her, Ottmar's hand was already on the hilt of his sword, drawing it in a quick slash. With her focus on Harrison, Katou Mana couldn't react. Even if she was keenly focused on Ottmar, there wasn't anything a girl lacking any skill in combat could do about an attack from a trained knight.

The sword flashed through the air, scattering blood in its wake. Dyed red by the splash, Katou Mana fell on her backside. Her mind couldn't keep up with the situation. She could only interpret the reality she saw before her.

"Lady...Elena...?"

The knight who'd been watching her had been cut down. Elena vomited a large quantity of blood and fell to her knees.

"The commander of the Alliance Knights was broken out of confinement just now," Harrison said from the altar. "It seems the remnants of the Alliance Knights have done so at Kaneki Mikihiko's directions. That isn't all. It turns out a great many of the troubles we've had with this operation were all instigated by Kaneki Mikihiko."

"Huh? Kaneki-senpai did?"

This was the first Katou Mana had heard of this, but since she harbored doubts regarding Kaneki Mikihiko's speech and conduct to begin with, this made sense to her.

He'd likely been prepared to be treated like a traitor for the sake of protecting what was dear to him. The sight of him resisting no matter what for the sake of something precious reminded her of the boy she yearned for.

Despite being smeared in mud, they shined so brightly. It wasn't strange for others to be attracted by such brilliance. Katou Mana was one case, and the woman before her was surely another.

"You've been watching Kaneki Mikihiko at all times," Harrison said to the blood-soaked Elena. "There were no openings for him to act. Although, if there's even one traitor, things change considerably. You're a traitor. Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

“No, none at all,” Elena answered, her face pale from blood loss. “It’s only natural for me to be punished, but I have no regrets.”

“So you were deceived. To think you’ve lost sight of your duty.”

“Those who risk their lives for others shine so brightly, even if their feelings don’t penetrate the darkness. I simply cannot see the justice in harming that man.”

“Justice must be carried out regardless. That is precisely our duty as descendants of foreign entities, as people who don’t belong to this world.” Harrison shook his head. “To maintain this easily shaken world is both our mission and true justice. How unfortunate, Elena. To think you’d give your life away so meaninglessly.”

“What are you saying...?”

“Your betrayal has no purpose. They will die here,” Harrison declared, holding up the large jewel in his hand. “Controlling this Dimensional Cornerstone is difficult, but given enough time and limiting the effective range, it isn’t impossible to make large-scale modifications. Just like this.”



Harrison poured his mana into the large jewel—the Dimensional Cornerstone.

The ground gradually started shaking. The tremors got stronger and stronger, but things were far worse in the image being reflected by magic.

“S-Senpai...!”

Katou Mana turned pale as the boys realized the abnormality. She could see what looked like pieces of ceiling tumbling down.

“Don’t tell me, you plan on destroying the whole room to kill them?!”

That was why none of the people here were perturbed by Kaneki Mikihiko’s defeat. Harrison had played his hand so that it didn’t matter how things unfolded. Realizing this, a shudder of horror ran up Katou Mana’s back. But it was too late.

“With this, it’s over.”

A cruel declaration. Those boys’ efforts, feelings, devotion, all of it was being crushed under the weight of this so-called justice. There was no way to resist the power that manipulated the very fabric of this world. That was supposed to be the case.

“What...?”

A bewildered sound quivered in Harrison’s throat. The shaking on the other side of the image didn’t subside, but the room’s collapse wasn’t progressing.

It was an unexpected development. What was happening? The first to realize was the girl who possessed no strength in a fight.

“Senpai...?”

In the magical image on the floor, the boy glared straight at the ceiling. It was as if he was aware of those peeping down on him. His eyes were telling them that he wasn’t going to let it end yet.

Chapter 9: Those Who Refuse to Give Up

“Why won’t it collapse...?”

Harrison groaned at the unexpected development. Still, as expected of a man of his station, he wasn’t terribly agitated. He already seemed to be searching for the cause behind it.

“Is the Dimensional Cornerstone not taking commands? No, that’s not it. This is more like...”

“Sir Harrison? Is something the matter?” one of the knights asked. “Don’t tell me there’s a problem with the Dimensional Cornerstone...”

“No. It’s working normally.”

“So why...?”

“But it’s not moving. It’s as if there’s interference...”

Hearing Harrison’s words, the room was astir. They all exchanged looks and started talking among themselves.

“Interference? Is such a thing possible?”

“Hang on. The Dimensional Cornerstone is a special magic tool that created this whole world.”

“That’s right. So long as it’s manipulating the world itself, it should be impossible to interfere with it unless you use similar magic...”

What Harrison was trying to do was essentially use the world itself to crush his enemies. There was no way of resisting that. It was a surefire trap. As such, everyone in the room was incapable of understanding—with one exception.

“Similar magic? Don’t tell me...” Katou Mana muttered, her heart full of hope. She knew of another magic capable of creating worlds, after all. “Majima-senpai!”

Once aware of this, she could see a white mist dying the magic image on the floor.

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“What...is this?”

Kaneki Mikihiko’s eyes shot open as he looked up at the ceiling. It wasn’t collapsing. Before he knew it, a white mist had gradually covered the ceiling. There was obviously no way such a thing could support the falling rocks. By all rights, it shouldn’t have. However, the mist was preventing the ceiling from collapsing. It was even repairing the cracks. He couldn’t help but stare in wonder.

“T-Takahiro? A-Are you doing that?”

“Yeah.”

Salvia was wrapped in mist behind Majima Takahiro. The fog created by the two of them was growing denser, filling up the vast room.

“I intended to do this from the very beginning,” Takahiro said. “That’s why I had Salvia get things ready while I was fighting you.”

“Ready? For what?” Mikihiko asked.

“Ready to interfere with the Dimensional Cornerstone’s control over this world it created. It was theoretically possible, after all.”

Immediately after being forcefully teleported to this place, the Misty Lodge was rendered unusable. The magical effect of the Dimensional Cornerstone’s creation of this fabricated world had interfered with the Misty Lodge’s original nature. That was why they’d adjusted it so that it didn’t interfere, allowing them to activate the magic mist.

What they were doing now was the opposite. By pushing the interference to the max, they prevented the other side from using their magic. If one side could create interference for the other, then the inverse was naturally possible too.

Still, if the interference was inadequate, their resistance would be easily crushed. However, Majima Takahiro now possessed something to make this possible.

“I wasn’t sure how much I could do, though,” he said.

“No, as you are now, you can do it, my dear,” Salvia said, stroking his cheek.

Her touch was both affectionate and sorrowful. In exchange for the loss within his inside world, something only she had seen, the boy had taken his magic to the next stage. This was the power of creation.

He didn't have enough mana to make a whole world from scratch, but all he had to do here was manipulate an already existing world. He just needed a certain level of strength and a greater level of skill at controlling the world than his opponent. And in terms of control, Majima Takahiro's Misty Lodge far surpassed Harrison's Dimensional Cornerstone.

"I get it now. That's what that was..." Mikihiko muttered.

He recalled what happened during his Aerial Knights' charge. At the time, his approximately 250 weapons had nearly come to a simultaneous stop. In all likelihood, Majima Takahiro had already taken partial control of this world. By manipulating space, he'd indirectly stopped the swarm of weapons.

"Ha ha... That's nuts."

During the battle, Kaneki Mikihiko had felt how little affinity he had for fighting his best friend, but this was on a whole other plane. From Harrison's perspective, who was trying to manipulate this world, it was like an unknown, lethal virus had made its way in.

"I would've liked a bit more time, but there's no helping it at this point." Accompanied by the woman of mist, Majima Takahiro weaved his mana, then declared with determination, "I'm taking control of this world."

His influence spread out into the space around him. He started by controlling the nearby area. The shaking settled down and the ceiling was back in perfect condition. With that, their lives were no longer in danger. Next, he expanded his zone of influence. There was pretty no resistance. That stood to reason. How could anyone prepare against a threat they'd never imagined?

At the same time, by using the Misty Lodge's perception, he expanded his senses into the hijacked world. His consciousness spread through the labyrinth like a breeze through an empty field.

"Found you," Takahiro said, locating his objective. "Harrison Addington."

His senses positively identified the knight wrapped in a solemn atmosphere,

the threads of corruption he had woven had reached all the way to the core of this world—the Dimensional Cornerstone. After coming so far, it was only a little more until he had full control. And as he carefully stretched out his threads to finish the task...

“Not yet.”

He heard a man’s voice filled with unshakable conviction. In the next instant, the scales that should’ve tipped back toward victory were overturned.

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What exactly did it mean to be the marshal of the Holy Order? This was the organization that prided itself on having the greatest military force in the world and an unrivaled history. As such, the one who served as its head needed to be someone with the strength to carry everything the organization had built up over the ages on their back. From a certain perspective, Harrison Addington could be said to be standing at the summit of all people in this world. That was why this wasn’t over yet.

“What...?”

What happened next could only be described as unreasonable. The threads Majima Takahiro was stretching out to take control of the world were being torn apart by brute strength. It was impossible.

Magic’s intensity came from the skill in manipulating mana and the magnitude of mana being used. On that point, Majima Takahiro’s manipulation of the Misty Lodge was an exception among exceptions. Rather than say this was a technique related to the use of magic, it was more accurate to attribute it to his affinity with Salvia, who was the magic itself. That was to say nothing of how difficult it was to use the Dimensional Cornerstone. There was a gulf in their abilities to manipulate mana. So what was it that the boy felt just now?

“This can’t be...”

He knew what it was. It was an oppressive and massive amount of mana. This was the most unreasonable of powers. It was surely enough to even save the world. No, maybe it had even surpassed that.

“Harrison...!”

The boy felt chills as he yelled, and the tremors that had once calmed down started again.

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“No way...”

Katou Mana couldn’t believe what she was seeing. A dreadful amount of mana was surging out of Harrison’s body. She was capable of using mana, even if only for healing magic, so she understood how abnormal this was.

The scale was on an entirely different level. This was well within the realm of a visitor, or even beyond that. It was grand in simple terms of volume, not strength, but would still take several exploration team members to be able to oppose this.

“What on earth...?”

“Perfect sync...” Elena answered. “Through devoted study, training body and mind, and conforming one’s soul to be like that of a past savior, it’s possible to manifest the power of said savior. That is perfect sync.”

“And you’re saying that applies to Harrison?”

“No,” Elena said, shaking her head.

“Huh?”

“That’s wrong. It’s different. He’s on an entirely different level.” Her denial wasn’t meant to avoid an overestimation of the marshal. Quite the opposite, in fact. “To avoid disrespect, it is formally acknowledged as perfect sync, but in truth, it’s different. Sir Harrison Addington is the one and only man to have ever surpassed a great savior of the past.”

“Wha...?”

Katou Mana was speechless. How could that be? It was impossible. It couldn’t be allowed. She felt that on instinct.

No.

Nevertheless, her insight overrode her instinct. It was possible. In contrast to visitors, who spent the early half of their lives in their own worlds, the people

who lived here enlisted themselves to serve in battle from the very beginning. The blessed of beloved blood were descendants of visitors, so when they approached the quality of the originals, it was more than possible for some to even surpass said originals.

However, even so, it had to be impossible. Even if it could theoretically happen, the state of the world refuted it. After all, they revered visitors as their saviors here. Even to this day, they were treated with the utmost importance. If there truly was someone so influential who had surpassed a visitor, then there would be no need to place such an importance on visitors.

It was weird. It was impossible. In that instant, Katou Mana felt a fathomless chill. It was like she'd just swallowed something indigestible.

This was something she'd felt for a long time. Something about this world had always seemed strange.

What was in front of her now was the source of that dissonance. That was what her intuition was telling her.

Were saviors really that necessary to this world to begin with? She did of course understand their validity as tremendous fighters to add to the frontlines. Their existence had been a necessity to keep humanity from falling to ruin since antiquity.

But the world had grown and developed. As it was now, they had enough of an established civilization and military force. The Maclaurin Provincial Army which had fought a close battle against Majima Takahiro's party was a prime example of that.

Inevitably, this would lower the relative value of saviors. This wasn't good or bad. It was simply a fact. In accordance with the world's development, what was once essential loses relevance. This could be said to be a certainty with the passage of time.

Harrison Addington's was a symbol, a crystallization of history's essence. He'd been created by gathering a great many of the blessed blood and providing them with an environment to allow their talents to flourish.

On the other hand, however, this world still continued to place great

importance on saviors. Why was that?

The man known as Harrison Addington was far too incomprehensible and illogical. It was enough for Katou Mana to think it was inevitable for the situation to be changed drastically by his hands. On the other side of the magic image, the collapsing ceiling that had once calmed down was threatening the boys again.

“That’s Sir Harrison for you!”

The knights of the Holy Order grew excited, whereas Katou Mana turned pale. There was no way to win against a man like this. Harrison Addington possessed a quality that made her believe so. It was as if his victory was a certainty now.

“Sir Harrison...?”

However, everyone realized that the situation wasn’t so simple. That was because Harrison maintained his stern expression.

“So you can still withstand this, Majima Takahiro?”

There was an air of surprise in his voice. The tremors were intense, yet the room inside the image wasn’t collapsing. Harrison definitely had a major advantage, but the boy was still resisting. It was clear from the continuous stream of mana coming from Harrison that a fierce battle over control was still ongoing.

“Majima Takahiro. How utterly persistent.”

The boy hadn’t given up. Despite being torn apart by such unreasonable power, the threads of corrosion still held fast. A second of laxity meant getting crushed, but despite that overwhelming pressure, he still maintained his focus and continued doing what had to be done. He was even keeping an eye open for an opportunity to counterattack. His figure made Katou Mana feel like he was a hero out of a fairytale, challenging a dragon with nothing but a sword.

“Perhaps people like you are what we should call true saviors,” Harrison said, his thoughts still obscure to her. “How unfortunate.”

She sensed true emotion behind his words, but that didn’t change anything.

“I must kill you.”

He spoke with determination. Seeing this, Katou Mana realized her misunderstanding. Harrison hadn't become an enemy out of simple hatred or physiological revulsion. There was a will of steel inside him. Much like Majima Takahiro, he possessed firm conviction.

In that case, there would never be an opening to launch a counterattack. Harrison Addington wouldn't allow his focus to relax like that. At this rate, things were hopeless.

Katou Mana felt like she was thrown into utter darkness. She had no allies here. The only one who might've been one was Elena, but she was on the verge of death. Katou Mana had to do something on her own.

But she had no power. All her weapons and tools had been taken from her. Even if she had them, she wouldn't be able to do anything. It was impossible to talk Harrison down. Getting him to bend his unshakable will would be like trying to persuade Majima Takahiro to kill his own servants. It was unthinkable.

She was stuck here and couldn't do anything. After pouring all her focus into thinking about it, she came to that cruel conclusion. She felt despair creep its way all the way to her extremities. She wasn't capable of overturning the situation.

So will you just sit here and do nothing?

In that instant, heat suddenly filled her body. The depths of her soul refused to accept this. On the other side of the image, the boy she loved was still struggling. In that case, she couldn't surrender either. This fiery emotion inside her burned away all fear and despair. She still hadn't given up.

Chapter 10: The Girl's Wish

She couldn't allow the boy she yearned for to be lost. Katou Mana clenched her fists tight. She'd always been the one being protected by him. That was exactly why she was capable of standing on her own and running her thoughts at full speed for everyone's sake.

But that wasn't enough now. She had to save him on her own. With his death lingering mere seconds away, her thoughts sharpened to a dangerous extent.

She groped for the possibility. The situation was a deadlock. There was no choice whatsoever before her. Having finished putting things in order, that was her first conclusion. As such, if she wanted to find some means of survival—she had to create a new choice that didn't exist. In other words, she had to tap into her aptitude as a visitor.

"Why...?"

Why was she still powerless? She didn't know how many tens or hundreds of thousands of times she'd already asked herself that. She had to find the answer right now. Fortunately, she'd gained a clue upon coming to this place. She recalled what Kudou Riku said to her.

"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 will happen.

"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."

He was partially correct. A visitor's ability was born of their wish. Depending on the contents of said wish, it was entirely possible for it to grant an ability that leads to ruin. What's more, Katou Mana had always known what her wish was. There was no need to think about it. It was so easy to understand; something anyone who knew her would be able to imagine.

As a consequence, she was even capable of predicting what kind of ability

would manifest. It would be horrible. In that sense, Kudou Riku was on point. However, the presumption that her ability wasn't manifesting due to fear of her own destruction was wrong. After all, she was far more scared of losing the boy she loved. It terrified her so much it would be stupid to even try comparing the two options. So, if there was a reason behind this, she could clearly deduce that it had to be something else. But what? Was her wish actually insufficient?

"No... That's not it."

That would leave her at an impasse, but if that was the case, Kudou Riku wouldn't have given her that warning. There was a part of her that resembled that boy. He'd said so himself. The fact that he gave off an aura of ruin wasn't something she should be ignoring thoughtlessly.

She couldn't doubt the strength of her own wish. She had to believe more in this feeling inside her heart. Coming to that conclusion, her thoughts moved on. In other words, what she should be thinking about wasn't why her ability refused to manifest, but what was obstructing it from doing so when it so obviously should. Realizing that, her understanding deepened as she ascended to the next stage of thought.

"Ah..."

The one who gave her a hint was the boy on the other side of the magic image. The sight of him desperately resisting allowed her to figure it out.

The fight for supremacy between the Dimensional Cornerstone and the Misty Lodge.

Abilities of similar nature.

One that breaks, and one that resists.

A collision of emotions running on opposite vectors, negating each other.

"Is it maybe...?"

Was the same thing happening to her? It wasn't that her wish was insufficient, preventing it from manifesting. It could manifest, but was being negated. And if there was something obstructing her wish from coming true, then it had to be...

“Another wish?”

What would happen if a visitor harbored two wishes from the bottom of their heart? And what if those two wishes denied each other? Naturally, it was extremely improbable to possess two wishes that were powerful enough to manifest an ability. But extremely improbable wasn’t enough to discount the possibility.

Maybe it was strange to have wishes that contradicted each other, but it was human to harbor such contradictions.

“So that’s what’s going on...”

It wasn’t difficult for the insightful girl to put the rest of it together.

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“Heh... Heh heh...”

A quiet laugh slipped from the girl’s lips. The reason Harrison noticed, despite having to concentrate on crushing Majima Takahiro, was maybe because, as one who dedicated his life to battle, he felt impending danger from her.

“What are you laughing at?” he asked.

Naturally, at this point in time, he didn’t really understand the situation. To him, she was but a momentary distraction, a fleeting concern.

“Nothing,” the girl answered, holding back her laughter. “I was just thinking about how pathetic I am.” Her tone was calm—unnaturally so for a captive who was witnessing someone dear to her about to be crushed to death. “I’m truly pathetic.”

That was when everyone in the room sensed something ominous. Still, even Harrison had no idea what that was yet. The girl in front of him was powerless, after all. How could he know? Until that special something on the inside came to the surface, there was no way of knowing.

“Majima-senpai has always protected me,” she continued. “The reason I’m able to keep living after being broken once already is without a doubt thanks to him. He shouldn’t have had the time to worry about others, but he’s always been considerate to me. Back then, I definitely felt like I touched his heart.”

Her words flowed smoothly. It was no mistake that this came across as a sort of testament.

“I was spurred into action by my love for him,” she said. “I got him to treat me like a companion. It was like a dream. That’s why it turned into my wish.”

“What are you talking about?” Harrison interjected.

“About the wish I wasn’t aware of. I prayed for it. I prayed for this dream to go on forever. The first place he gave me to belong in this world was as ‘someone who needs protecting.’ So, I unconsciously believed that I had to keep being that way.”

Enjoyable days. Time spent having fun. Moments of happiness. The desire that things remain that way forever applied to anyone. The same went for her.

Because she’d given up on everything, she was especially happy about what he’d granted her. It was a treasure she wouldn’t exchange for anything. She was happy just to be by his side. Losing it was so frightening that she never gave it any thought. That was why she’d unconsciously wished for things to remain the same. She’d wished for it strong enough that it could manifest as an ability.

“But that’s over now.”

She was a coward, but also single-minded. She knew that she had to manifest the power that’d remained suppressed all this time. That was the only way to save the boy she loved. Once she knew what was suppressing it, she didn’t hesitate to shake off her fetters.

Naturally, her desire for things to remain unchanged was still there.

Happy days. Time spent in warmth. A distance that still wasn’t close enough to be lovers, but definitely closer than friends.

She wanted to spend unchanging days by his side. She was scared of change. It was terrifying.

However, she was far more scared of remaining powerless and losing him in the process. Thus, it was time to say goodbye to the wish that had been tying her down. It was time to awaken her first wish. It was time to unleash the feelings she’d held from the moment she met and fell in love with that boy who

kept monsters by his side. Even if that meant her own destruction...

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“Ottmar!” Harrison shouted.

He sensed the omens. It was like a dreadfully vast amount of mana was squirming around inside the dainty girl’s body. Sensing danger like never before in his life, he yelled a quick command.

“Kill her!”

Ottmar was closest to Katou Mana. He executed the order as quickly as possible. He swung the sword he’d used to cut down Elena, driving it deep into the petite girl’s shoulder.

It was too late, however.

“What’s this sensation...?”

Ottmar’s eyes shot open. The feedback he felt through his hands was so bizarre it couldn’t have come from cutting a human.

“That won’t do,” the girl said, smiling calmly.

To her, this was nothing to be surprised about. There was no way such a measly attack could impede her. After all, the strength of a visitor’s manifested ability, though displayed in many ways, was proportional to the strength of the wish behind it.

This wish had always been inside her. From the moment she fell in love, she’d continued wishing for it. The feeling had only grown stronger, never fading for an instant, until it reached this point.

It had simply grown and grown to a maddening extent.

Now, it was time to give voice to the wish she’d been keeping to herself all this time. After all, she could easily declare that the strength of these feelings was indomitable.

“I want to be a monster.”

In that instant, the girl transformed.

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The first target was Harrison. Something crashed with a sound akin to an explosion. It was questionable whether anyone even realized that a strike had come from above ignoring any concept of range.

“Wha...?!”

Before anyone in the room knew it, the altar Harrison was standing on had caved in. They had no idea what happened. They weren’t given the time to come to grips with the situation either. Before the debris could even fall to the ground, a black storm trampled over the entire room.

“Gaah?”!

Something struck Ottmar, sending him flying high up toward the ceiling. He’d been the closest to the enemy. However, because Harrison had been prioritized, he’d had just enough time to try and evade upon noticing the abnormality.

Sharpening his senses, he’d taken a leap backward, creating angel puppets to protect him. He’d also been trained well enough to use his own shield to defend himself. That was why he got off lightly, only flying all the way to the other end of the massive room—all three of the defending puppets broken and a shudder of pain running up his shield arm.

However, that didn’t go for everyone else in the room. Together, members of the special forces and First Company made up around fifty people. All of them were the highest class of knights.

Of them, sixty percent died instantly.

Thirty percent avoided dying on the spot, but wouldn’t live for more than a few minutes.

The remaining ten percent were broken shambles, far from being safe and sound.

“What the hell is that...?” Ottmar mumbled in a daze.

He looked up at something dreadful. At a glance, it was like a pitch-black tree with branches stretching in every direction. However, upon closer inspection, he realized it was something else entirely.

“A monster...?”

It was a monster whose body was made up of a black half-liquid substance. What looked like branches were in fact feelers reaching out in all directions. This was what had crashed down on Harrison before pulverizing everyone in the room.

“A slime variant...?”

Ottmar immediately referred to what knowledge he had. One could say he was trying to apply a layer of common sense to this so that he could understand. It did in fact look similar, but that was a false similarity.

The black feelers swayed about in the air. Ottmar couldn’t help but feel sheer dread at this. Just looking at it made it feel like something important inside him was being shaved away. He gritted his teeth hard to maintain his sanity.

“Is that...the girl?” he mumbled. Uncharacteristically, the puppet-like man’s voice quivered. “What kind of repulsive wish did she have to turn into such an abomination?”

He simply couldn’t understand. He just felt chills at how terrifying the thought was.



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As such, he would never be able to imagine it. Why had this delicate girl turned into such a repulsive monster? Anyone who knew her would find it so easy to understand. She'd even spoken of it before.

This was back when her journey had just begun. Deep inside the Woodlands, she'd spoken to the white spider who still hadn't been given a name.

"There's a lot I want to say to you servants. Thinking back on it, Lily was the same. Why be jealous of someone like me? Even if the lawn is greener on the other side, don't you think it's far too cruel? I'm *the one who's jealous.*

"Aren't you the same? You have something I could never obtain within your reach, and yet you don't even realize it. Isn't it obvious that I'd like to at least complain about it?"

Lily once had a complex about being a repulsive monster, feeling jealous of Katou Mana, who was a human just like her master. However, from the other side of the pond, such jealousy was far too cruel. After all, a repulsive monster was exactly what the girl wanted to become.

She'd always been so helplessly envious of them. Enough for her to turn into this abomination now. In truth, it was astounding that she'd maintained a human form for so long. That was a situation only made possible because of Majima Takahiro and Katou Mana.

He was a sincere boy, and she was a clever girl. In that situation, she properly understood the worth of being accepted as one of his companions while still human. Despite being tormented by his trauma, he'd accepted Katou Mana as a human. How could she possibly do anything to disregard that?

As a result, she'd maintained her humanity. She was jealous of his servants, but never begrudged them. She was satisfied to simply be by his side. In truth, even inside the Misty Lodge, where all dreams became reality, she'd been one of the few who hadn't changed at all. Her maddening wish to become a monster hadn't vanished, but she'd been satisfied with her situation.

In all likelihood, if not for a crisis like the one she found herself in today, she would never have awakened to her power. Harrison had forced her hand. Once it was released, her wish turned into power, and there was no keeping its strength in check.

Much like how Majima Takahiro was losing his memories of their old world, Katou Mana lost all reason bestowed by her humanity. She was the world's ultimate monster. The only thing she remembered was the one objective of wanting to protect the boy she was in love with.

In accordance with that objective, she acted like a monster. With all certainty, this abomination was sure to eliminate all obstructions in his path.

However, what he lost in exchange was tremendous.

It was far too much.

That said, if there was anything that could be done about this, it would be just one thing...

Chapter 11: What Mustn’t Be Lost

Harrison’s assault using the world itself was a terrifying thing. Resisting was all I could do at this point. Still, giving up wasn’t an option. I continued looking for an opening to counterattack. I obstinately stretched out my torn threads of mana, clenching my teeth at the ever-increasing burden as I did everything I could to prevent us from being crushed. I was acting out of sheer desperation. That was why the change in the situation seemed so abrupt.

“Huh...?”

The presence of the enemy I’d been so fiercely clashing with was suddenly gone. The command to crush the room we were occupying had been severed.

“What happened?” Salvia said, bewildered as she sensed the same thing.

Even as we talked, the crumbling ceiling repaired itself. This was the result of our threads taking complete control. It didn’t look like it was collapsing at all anymore. The excessive convenience of the situation left me dumbfounded for a moment.

“H-Hey, what’s wrong, Majima?” Shimazu asked, holding Ayame in her arms.

“The enemy interference is gone,” I said, not quite knowing how to explain it.

“Gone? Why?”

“I don’t know. Please wait a moment.”

I didn’t have a grasp of the situation, but the resistance had definitely dissipated. I stretched out my threads of corruption and spread my perception through the world toward the room where the enemy was supposed to be gathered.

“What the...?”

What I found was a disaster. Ominous red smears dyed the stone floor of the vast room. Remnants of what had once been people were scattered here and there. The sight was enough for me to hallucinate the putrid smell of death within. The altar Harrison was supposed to be standing on had collapsed

completely without leaving a shadow of its former presence. In its stead, a monster towered in the center of the room.

“A black monster...?” Salvia muttered, seeing the same thing.

Her voice trembled with evident fear. The monster’s dreadful aura was simply that overwhelming. However, at the same time, the sight of it standing there all on its own seemed somehow melancholic.

“Did that monster do them all in...?” I muttered in a daze, then noticed something important. “Katou! What about Katou?!”

Back when I stretched my senses to Harrison’s area earlier, I’d felt Katou’s presence there too. What happened to her in this calamity? Blood drained from my face.

“Where is she?!”

I immediately scanned the whole area, then felt slight relief.

“She’s not here...”

“Looks like,” Salvia agreed.

Even after picking through the carnage, Katou was nowhere to be seen. I couldn’t be at ease until I confirmed where she was, but at the very least, she definitely hadn’t died here.

“Hey Takahiro, what happened?” Mikihiko asked. “I can guess you’re using the Misty Lodge to perceive the space Harrison is in, but I’ve got no other clue what’s going on. Talk in a way that makes sense to us too.”

“R-Right. Not that there’s a whole lot we know either...” I had no objections to talking. On the contrary, Mikihiko’s opinion as the one who knew the enemy’s situation best was valuable. “It looks like Harrison’s group was attacked by a monster. I’ve never seen it before. Also, it looks terrifyingly strong. It did kill pretty much everyone who was there in a short time. Mikihiko, you have any ideas?”

“A monster that can kill that group that quickly...? No. None.”

“I see. Honestly, I figured it’s their hidden ace.”

“If they were hiding it from me too, then I’ve got no way of knowing. So? You mentioned something about Katou?”

“Up until earlier, she was in the same room as Harrison, but now she’s not. That said, it doesn’t look like she was killed in there either. Where did she go...?”

A fairly wide region of this world was already under my control, but there was a limit to how much of it I could perceive at once.

“If she was taken away somewhere, I’ve gotta search for her... With no clues, however, it’ll take some time,” I said, gritting my teeth.

“About that, Takahiro,” Mikihiko said, sitting upright on the ground. “I might be able to help.”

“How?”

He hadn’t received any treatment yet, so he had to be hurting. Still, he pulled something out of his pocket and showed it to me.

“I figure I should give you this,” he said.

“This is...a teleportation runestone?”

He handed me a familiar violet jewel. I stared back at him, still unable to understand.

“Katou has the other one,” he said. “To be precise, I put it on her when she was unconscious.”

“Mikihiko...”

“With this, you should be able to go to her side.”

He’d taken every precaution. He’d been ready to die, so this had to have been his way of making amends. There was nothing more reassuring to have at this point, but Mikihiko’s expression remained grim.

“This was something I originally set up to get Katou *out*. I had a conspirator, you see, and told her to find the right time to use it. The plan was to send her here right away after I lost...”

“Meaning something happened.”

“Probably,” Mikihiko agreed, pointing at the teleportation runestone. “I’m pretty sure you know, but that thing only works once. We don’t know where Katou went. No matter what happens on the other side, you won’t be able to come back by using it again.”

“I know,” I said, nodding. “Even so, I have to go save her.”

“Okay, guess I didn’t need to say anything.”

I didn’t hesitate. If something happened, I couldn’t possibly leave Katou alone. Steeling myself, I gripped the runestone tightly. However, just then, a voice cut in to put a damper on the situation.

“About that, I’m pretty sure it’ll be fine,” Kudou said, looking at me with a gloomy expression.

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“Kudou? What’re you talking about?” I asked.

Unlike usual, Kudou wasn’t hiding behind a smile. His dark expression simply gave off a reluctant air.

“Even if you use that runestone, I think you’ll be safe,” he answered. “Without a doubt, it’ll teleport you to the room Harrison was in.”

I still didn’t understand what he was implying.

“Hey, Kudou, what’re you saying?” Mikihiko said, furrowing his brow. “According to Takahiro, Katou isn’t there. Besides, even if he does get teleported there, that monster who beat Harrison is. Don’t that make it even more dangerous?”

“No. It shouldn’t be dangerous at all. At the very least, it won’t be to Majima-senpai.” Kudou’s tone remained dispassionate. It was like he was pushing aside all emotions and simply conveying the truth. “Try and give it some thought. Isn’t it strange for Harrison’s group to so conveniently be annihilated in this situation? The timing was far too fortiuitous, and a monster strong enough to kill them all in an instant is beyond abnormal. At the very least, it would have to be on the level of the Mad Beast or the Dragon...or maybe even beyond them. Beings like that don’t just pop out of nowhere.”

“You’re not making any—”

“Hang on, Mikihiko,” I said, cutting into their conversation.

My voice had turned stiff without me knowing it. That was because I realized why Kudou had specifically compared the monster to the Mad Beast and the Dragon. Maybe I’d recognized the possibility somewhere in my head already. The reason I hadn’t consciously focused on it was because it was far too hard to accept. Still, I had to confirm the possibility.

“Kudou,” I said heavily. “Are you saying that monster is Katou?”

Considering the timing, that would in fact be a natural conclusion. A girl turning into a monster was an impossible phenomenon, but different rules applied to visitors. My days in this world had seared that lesson into my heart, more than I’d ever wanted.

“Wha...?! Katou turned into a monster?!” Mikihiko yelled in shock.

Saying it aloud only made me more confident in Kudou’s suspicions. If she did in fact possess such power, Katou would do it. If there was something she could do, and there was a need to do it, she would never hesitate.

I suddenly recalled what Kudou had once told Katou.

“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.”

If that monster was Katou, it meant her ability had manifested.

I shifted my focus to the black monster and immediately came to a realization.

“Even though the enemy was exterminated, she’s showing no signs of transforming back...?”

Forget that, she wasn’t even showing any signs of intellect. Even after defeating the enemy, the monster simply loitered inside the room. The worst possibility came to mind.

“Don’t tell me... She lost all sense of reason and can’t turn back?” I muttered in shock.

“The same as the Mad Beast, then,” Kudou said. The Mad Beast currently served Kudou. That was probably why he was able to grasp what was going on so quickly. “So long as she doesn’t recover her sense of reason and heart, she probably won’t turn back. The Mad Beast has never once returned to its original form... That’s the kind of ability it is.”

“No way...” I said, turning pale.

“Unfortunately, the girl known as Katou Mana is already lost,” Kudou said, giving me the decisive truth.

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The world shook violently. I felt enough of a shock to make me think that. Katou wasn’t coming back. We would never be able to talk again. That one thought made me lose control of all my senses.

“Senpai...? Are you all right, Senpai?”

Kudou’s voice sounded so far away.

Everything felt far away.

Did the tremendous shock make me lose all sense of the world?

No.

In truth, an essential fragment that made up my world had fallen away.

Unlike Lily and the others, Katou wasn’t my servant. However, she was still as irreplaceable to me as any of them.

Because she’d been with me, I was able to trust humans. If I hadn’t met her, I would’ve avoided coming in contact with anyone and would probably still be living inside the Woodlands. The reason I was who I was now was definitely thanks to Katou.

My world couldn’t exist without her.

As such, I couldn’t possibly accept that she was gone.

“Not yet.”

If I called out to her, it was entirely possible my voice could still reach her. At the very least, there was no telling until I tried.

The logical side of me denied this hope as a delusion, but my heart couldn't discard it. I simply couldn't accept losing her like this. I couldn't give up. With those thoughts in mind, I poured my mana into the teleportation runestone.

"Senpai?!"

Kudou's surprised face vanished from my sight. The world around me changed and I found myself somewhere else.

It was a vast room.

Just as Kudou said, the teleportation runestone brought me to where Harrison was. The smell of blood, entrails, and dust reached my nose. However, all of that vanished from my mind immediately. Witnessing the black monster's majesty with my own eyes stole away all other thoughts.

"Katou..."

I faced the monster and reached out a hand.

"I'm here to get you."

Chapter 12: Those Who Surpass Miracles

The black monster responded to my call.

It slithered my way.

An honest response. One could even call it obedient.

It looked different from her, but the way it crept across the ground reminded me a little of Lily. Lily's true form was large, but this one was even bigger. Its hue was also ominous, giving it an intimidating air. Above all else, the mana it exuded was terrifyingly dense. Honestly, I'd never felt anything like it, even including visitors.

It was a true monster. It wasn't strange for it to have easily defeated Harrison's group. However, even as such a dangerous presence drew nearer to me, I didn't feel any fear.

I didn't feel like I was in danger, after all. There wasn't the slightest hint that it was going to attack me. Even though it was responsible for this terrible spectacle, it was so peaceful now.

"Aah..."

I should've felt relief, but all that was in my heart was a sense of loss.

"It really is you, Katou."

The monster got closer to me, but showed no other reaction whatsoever. It simply approached. And yet, the feelers swaying about it seemed to remain vigilant. If anyone appeared to try and cause me harm, it would surely exercise its authority without mercy. It had in fact already annihilated Harrison's group. Considering its apparent docility, if I moved, it would surely follow and protect me. If I gave it simple orders, it might even follow them. This monster's simple presence guaranteed my safety.

That was sure to apply even if I left this place. It would definitely protect me from any and all danger. The fathomless strength I felt from this monster surpassed all other visitors. Just maybe, it could even contend with the

exploration team. If looked at as a guard, it had no peers. It existed only to protect me. A certain type of person might find this wonderful.

However, it was completely different for me. I simply couldn't accept it. I didn't want to think about losing her. My quivering lips called out to her.

"Come back to me, Katou."

So long as her sense of reason was gone, she wasn't going to come back. In that case, I just needed to get it back. The only way to do that was to keep talking to her.

"Please open your eyes."

I called out to her again. The monster simply stood there.

"Katou."

I reached out and touched it. The monster simply stood there.

"Katou."

I called out to her. Over and over. I kept calling out to her. However, the monster simply stood there.

"Katou..."

Naturally, my voice never reached her.

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I already knew.

As she was now, she wasn't in a state to answer my call. Nevertheless, I'd bet on a ray of hope and had flung myself into this room. I hadn't been able to help myself. And here was the result. No matter how much I wanted it, a miracle wasn't going to happen.

I already knew.

If such miracles existed, Katou would never have gone through that hell the day the Colony fell. There were no miracles in this world. We only had reality. Regardless...giving up was one thing I couldn't do.

"Master."

Salvia's call reached me. She lived inside my body because of our contract, so she'd been able to come with me when I used the teleportation runestone.

"Ssster..."

Obviously, the same went for Asarina, who purred anxiously as she timidly came out of the back of my hand.

"How does Katou look to you?" I asked.

"There's no mistake, she lost her heart..." Salvia answered, looking at both me and the monster with a heartbroken expression.

I withstood the urge to fall to my knees powerlessly. I felt like if I fell, it would truly be over. If she lost all sense of reason and her heart died completely, this tremendously powerful monster would be her gravestone. If I fell to my knees and grieved for her, that would be like admitting it was over. That was why I endured the pain. I didn't give up. I couldn't give up. However, there was nothing left I could do.

"Your voice isn't reaching her?" Salvia asked.

"It's no good. It's hard to tell because of how quiet she's being, but I think her state is pretty similar to when Shiran turned into an undead monster at Fort Tilia."

"The same as Shiran..." Salvia muttered. "In that case, can you do the same thing you did for her?" There was the faintest hope in her voice. "According to what I've been told, you connected to Shiran with the mental path and pulled her heart back to the surface, right? Can't you do the same thing now?"

This happened during the attack on Fort Tilia. I'd used the mental path to retrieve Shiran's heart after she turned into an undead monster and lost all sense of reason. If I could do the same thing here, I could bring Katou back too. Salvia was correct...but that was only *if* I could do the same thing.

"It's useless," I groaned. "Shiran turned into an undead monster, but Katou is different."

"Different how?"

"She's a monster, but not a monster. Her form has changed, but she's still

human, just like the Mad Beast and the Dragon.”

I hadn’t been able to connect the mental path to the Mad Beast. I never met him, but the same probably went for the Dragon. Katou’s ability was the same type as theirs.

“My ability is only capable of connecting to the hearts of monsters. It doesn’t work on humans... It doesn’t work on Katou.”

That was why I couldn’t save her. I didn’t say that part aloud. I didn’t intend on giving up yet, after all. However, I didn’t feel like I was going to come up with something that would work. If it was simply a matter of being unable to reach her or being lacking in some way, I would probably work something out. I was ready to put in as much effort as I had to. I was ready to pay any price I had to. But if there was no objective for me to reach out to, then what was I supposed to do?

“Master.”

I was at a complete loss. I didn’t even have the energy to reply to Salvia’s call. After being sent to this fabricated world, I’d continued struggling without giving up. But right at the very, very end, this was what awaited me. Harsh reality stood right in front of my eyes to block my way. I couldn’t do anything about it. It was always like this. There was nothing I could do on my own against reality.

“Master!”

That was why I needed companions to help me hand in hand.

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Salvia called out once more and reached out. Putting a hand on each of my cheeks, she pulled me closer to her, her sincere eyes peering right into mine.



“S-Salvia?”

“Even so...” Salvia said, her eyes unwavering. “Even so, I think you can do it.”

“Salvia...”

“This is you and Mana we’re talking about, my dear. I’m sure your hearts can be connected.”

Her declaration was firm and clear. She had nothing to base it on. Still, it wasn’t complete nonsense. There was something in her voice that made me believe in the possibility. Perhaps it was instinct. My mind didn’t understand, but my senses did. Even if I couldn’t verbalize why this was, I had conviction. This definitely wasn’t nonsense.

After all, Salvia had once taken me into her misty world. It was a miraculous place that granted dreams for just a short while. Naturally, to create such a world, she possessed the power to read dreams. In other words, she knew exactly what mine was.

Dreams were also directly linked to a visitor’s power. Since, due to our contract, Salvia was always watching over me, she was capable of speaking with such confidence.

“You can do it, my dear.”

She let go of my cheeks. As if guided by her, I turned my focus to the monster once more. I reached out and concentrated on the sense only I possessed. That was when I realized.

“This is...”

Obviously, it was impossible for this to be a miracle.

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“It might be a misunderstanding. I’m just discussing the possibility,” a boy said, his voice resounding through an enormous room.

This was where Kudou Riku, his servants, and Kaneki Mikihiko had been left behind.

“Just as you know, the abilities we visitors possess come from our wishes. For that reason, no matter what you do, there is always an unconscious influence on them. Be it a complex, preconceived notion, or a misunderstanding.”

Kaneki Mikihiko was receiving emergency aid from Dora. During that time, Kudou Riku spoke on a whim.

“Yes, a misunderstanding. That’s why it’s important to really know what your own wish is. If you have it wrong, your ability will never manifest to its true potential.”

“Why are you bringing this up?” Mikihiko asked.

“It simply brings a question to mind. What exactly was Majima-senpai’s wish?”

“Takahiro’s wish?” Mikihiko furrowed his brow. The answer to that just seemed so obvious to him. “Isn’t it to continue living in this world with Lily and the others? That’s what he’s been giving his all for this whole time.”

“No, you’re wrong,” Kudou said, shaking his head. “That in itself is true, but that’s not what I’m referring to. I’m asking what wish manifested his ability.”

“Hm? Hmm? How is that different...? Wait. Hang on. I get it.” After a short moment of confusion, Mikihiko figured it out. “That doesn’t fit chronologically, huh?”

Majima Takahiro had only gained something dear to protect in Lily and the others *after* his ability manifested. Naturally, the desire to live in this world with them could only come afterward too. His desire for something was different from his desire to protect something. Kudou Riku was asking about the former —the more fundamental part of his wish.

“You’re asking what he wished for when his ability manifested,” Mikihiko said.

“Yes. Depending on what it was, a possibility might exist.”

“Why didn’t you tell him that?” Mikihiko asked, scowling at the younger boy.

“Because it’s only a possibility,” Kudou answered, shrugging. “Besides, just knowing about it won’t make it so simple. A preconceived notion can’t be overturned that easily. I know that better than anyone.”

He flashed a self-deprecating smile. The Demon King’s wounds were deep and weren’t going to heal for all eternity. Berta cast her eyes down at the thought.

“Knowing of the possibility and failing hurts far worse than never having a

chance at all," he continued. "Just maybe, it'll be enough to break him."

"That's why you didn't say anything?"

In truth, Kudou's hesitation was born of concern.

"At any rate, he's already gone," Kudou said. "We won't make it in time even if we try to chase him. Before any of that, we should be doing what we ought to."

"And what's that?"

Kudou Riku nodded, then turned his eyes away for a moment.

"Now that it's come to this, I won't be able to stop you. I pray that you manage to take back what you wish for, Senpai."

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It really was the faintest of connections. If not for what Salvia said, I surely wouldn't have noticed. However, a definite connection had taken shape—one between Katou and me.

"How...?"

I thought it was impossible, but it actually happened. In other words, my perception was what had actually been wrong.

"I misunderstood my own ability...?"

Now that I thought of it, I'd never really considered the possibility. What exactly was my ability? It seemed so obvious that thinking about it was a useless exercise. However, at this point, there was a need to do exactly that.

I tried getting things in order first. I was a monster tamer. Using the mental path, I had the power to form a connection with a monster's heart. To a select few special monsters, ones who had a budding heart, a connection to the mental path urged it to sprout, essentially "granting them a heart." As a result, the monsters who became my servants—which was entirely of their own will—ended up creating a situation where I "led monsters."

In other words, "granting monsters hearts" and "leading monsters" were phenomena brought about as a result of my ability, not my ability itself. At its

core, my ability was the power to form a connection with a monster's heart.

So I believed, at least. If I was misunderstanding something, it'd be this fundamental part—the true nature of my ability, the manifestation of my wish. If there was something to misinterpret there...

"What did I wish for...?"

I remembered, of course. That marked my beginning in this world, after all. Inside that cave I ran away to when the Colony fell—betrayed, trampled over, suffering, and dying—when I despaired at humanity being composed of nothing but trash...

"Someone save me."

I still prayed. I believed in no one, but I wanted someone by my side. I wanted to trust someone.

"Ah..."

Back then, Lily had responded to my feelings. It just so happened that a monster had been the one to form a connection with my heart. And since I no longer believed in humanity, I'd never thought of opening my heart to humans. So what if I'd misunderstood all this time?

Forming a connection with a monster's heart was nothing more than one facet of my ability. If the true nature of the power Majima Takahiro had gained was the ability to connect to anyone's heart who would stay by my side with no conditions...

"I can connect to a human's heart too...?"

There was distinct bewilderment in my voice. It was so late for me to realize this, after all. Even if I had been using my ability in a very limited manner, so long as I was under that preconception, my ability had been nothing more than "the power to form a connection with a monster's heart." A visitor's power was greatly influenced by that manner of unconscious thought.

It'd be one thing if I'd been using it arbitrarily, but this power was my bond with Lily and the others. I'd been treating it so dearly, which had only strengthened my mistaken understanding of it. To overturn that notion, at least

at this stage, was extremely difficult. If handled poorly, I was actually liable to lose a grip on my ability.

To the very end, I was nothing more than someone who possessed the ability to form a connection with a monster's heart. That didn't change.

"However..."

I shifted my attention to the black mass before me.

"This is the one and only exception."

Yes, it was just as Salvia said.

"Even so, I think you can do it.

"This is you and Mana we're talking about, my dear. I'm sure your hearts can be connected."

Just as she implied, there was already a connection. This was no miracle of course. There was no such thing in this world.

Even if she wasn't my servant, she was special to me. It had nothing to do with being a monster or human. This connection existed because of the deep bond between us. The time we'd spent together, the feelings we had, the relationship we'd nurtured, all of it surpassed the realm of miracles.

Because I felt this way, I even overcame my unconscious preconception, and the presence of what was connecting us grew more substantial. This connection became the thread that would guide me to her lost heart.

Chapter 13: Because the Two Kept Misunderstanding

My consciousness left my body behind and sank into the depths. Just as always, I arrived inside my own world. It was deep within the place where hearts connected to hearts, the world molded by my memories. Or so it seemed...

It was the same high school as usual, but something was definitively different. That only stood to reason. Even when two people looked at the same thing, they perceived it in different ways. So depending on the viewpoint, the world constructed by memories would change too.

There was no mistaking it. This was Katou's world. My power had been the one to construct it, but her memories had been used as reference. It looked like I'd reached my destination. Perhaps because of that difference, I was wearing the school uniform I hadn't put on for quite some time. I didn't have the leisure to feel nostalgic about it, though.

"I have to find Katou..."

After thinking it over for a bit, I entered the school building. It was fortunate that I still had my memories of school. I walked without hesitation. The building was rectangular and consisted of four parallel blocks that ran between two vertical ones. The B and C blocks in the middle were for the regular classrooms. The A block at the end housed the staffroom, and the D block on the other side had all the special rooms for specific classes.

The first place to look was naturally Katou's classroom. With that in mind, I headed for the first-year classrooms on the first floor. Unfortunately, I'd never asked what class she was in, so I didn't even know if it was in the B or C block. I searched the slow and steady way. I peeked into a classroom from the hallway, and after seeing that she wasn't there, I went to the next one.

From one room, to a second, to a third...

Katou was supposed to be a part of the wind instrument club like Mizushima,

so she had a connection to the arts rooms in the separated E block as well. I considered the possibility that she was there, but it turned out I didn't have to go that far.

I found Katou sitting all alone in a classroom. Upon discovering her, I felt relief and joy, but immediately reeled those emotions back. Something about her was off.

She stared out the window in a daze. It was like her soul was gone, leaving her hollow. I opened the door and stepped inside, but she didn't react. After crossing the room, I stood by her side. Even so, she still didn't react.

"Katou."

I called out to her and her eyelashes finally twitched a little. She blinked slowly, her movements sluggish like a statue coming to life.

"Senpai...?"

It seemed my voice barely reached her. There was the slightest hint of joy in her expression, but it quickly vanished.

"No... There's no way."

Her vacant expression returned. It seemed she wasn't properly cognizant of me. This hadn't happened when I bumped into Salvia and Asarina in my world... Maybe dealing with a human was different from normal. I still hadn't reached her heart.

"How stupid. There's no way Senpai would come here."

It was like she'd given up on everything. Her lonely smile made me feel a tightness in my chest.

"I'm not a monster. Our hearts can't be connected. These feelings won't reach him."

Her words tore at my heart.

"Senpai won't turn to look my way... I'm human, after all."

Because she was human. I now knew how significant that was to her.

"But that's fine."

She slowly shook her head. Clenching a hand lightly atop her desk, she placed her other on her chest.

“Majima-senpai faced me while tormented by his trauma. Thanks to that, I was able to stay by his side. So, I’m satisfied. Just being with him brought me happiness, after all.”

“Katou...”

This was her world. These were definitely her true feelings. For the first time, I learned of what she’d been keeping to herself.

Envious of the monsters who nestled together, her desire to become a monster had grown and grown. And yet, because she was no more than human, she’d given up on ever conveying her feelings.

Nevertheless, so long as she was by my side, she was satisfied with her happiness. Thinking back on how that’d manifested as her ability in reality, I realized this was all reflected by her power. All of her feelings were so strong and supported each other as an unshakable foundation. That was exactly what granted that monster its strength...to the point where it couldn’t be undone.

There was no point in doing things superficially. I had to uproot everything from the very foundation. Coming to that understanding, I was now convinced.

I was the only person capable of bringing her back. After all, Katou’s wish to become a monster was preceded by her recognition that her feelings couldn’t reach due to her humanity. That impression was the root of the problem. So, only by proving this was wrong would her wish falter. As a concerned party, I was the only one who could do that.

When I thought of it like that, it was fortunate that the mental path hadn’t formed a connection with Katou as a monster. If it had, it would’ve put her under the impression that we could only get through to each other because she was a monster. That wouldn’t allow me to overturn her preconceptions. To get her back, I had to completely upset these firm and mistaken assumptions she had. To that end, I had to...

“I’ll have to throw away my preconceptions too.”

I shifted my eyes to the hand Katou had on her desk. It was so dainty and

delicate, like a piece of glasswork. Thinking of how it might break if I touched it carelessly had me endlessly nervous.

The regretful memories I had of being absolutely unable to trust her when we first met had made me this way. Precisely because she was dear to me, I never wanted to hurt her again.

I drew a clear line as a “companion” that I would never cross because of her androphobia. I’d made sure never to touch her as a man would, even by mistake.

However, that stance was also one part of what had driven her misunderstanding. As a matter of fact, my ignorance played a big role in why Katou was so content with remaining as nothing more than my companion.

Back when we first met, when I distrusted all humans, I’d desperately faced her properly. It was precisely because she treated that so dearly that she was satisfied with being by my side. Precisely because we cared for each other, we slowly misunderstood each other’s feelings and couldn’t convey them.

Our harsh past had rendered our relationship like that. However, right here and now, that was no good. I knew this, so I grasped her hand.

I consciously stepped over the boundary line of being companions.

I stepped forward so that we could reach the next stage.

At the same time, this was also an act to draw in her heart which had gotten so distant and was gradually being lost.

“Katou.”

I called out to her once more.

I formed a far stronger connection to her heart from far closer.

This time, my voice reached her.

“Sen...pai...?”

With that, her unfocused eyes finally reflected my image.

“Thank goodness. My voice reached you.”

That simple fact brought me relief, reconfirming my feelings for her. As such, I

wasn’t going to hesitate anymore.

“Umm, Senpai? What’s...?”

“I’m here to get you, Katou.”

Still unable to process the situation, Katou continued blinking in confusion.

“No,” I said with a smile. “I guess it’s more accurate to say that I’m here to tell you something.”

I opened the lid on the emotion I’d been suppressing all this time. This was what I had always considered taboo. I looked at the girl in front of me as a man would.

“Ah...”

Through our hands, and through my eyes, my passion was conveyed to her.

“Huh? What? Senpai?” Katou’s face gradually turned redder. “Wh-What are...?”

Realizing I was holding her hand, she was shaken by my gaze. The rare sight of her in a fluster was so adorable. Able to recognize that now, I couldn’t stop. I had no intention to.

It was all very simple. To overturn Katou’s recognition that her feelings wouldn’t reach me because she was human, I just had to convey my feelings to her.

“Katou. I love you.”

My confession came out more naturally than expected. Staring at me, Katou’s eyes shot open considerably.

She froze in place. Her thoughts had likely come to a complete halt. She really wasn’t budging at all. I didn’t mind. I was fine with waiting for as long as she needed.

“Is that...true?” she muttered after a short while.

“It is.”

“Even though I’m human?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Then you really...”

“Yeah.”

She surely wanted to confirm it again and again. Each time, my answer would be the same.

“Just as I said, I’m in love with you, Katou.”

I conveyed my feelings to her once more. Because we’d kept misunderstanding each other, I wasn’t going to let this be misinterpreted. And finally, my feelings got through completely.

“Ah... Aaah...”

In a flash, Katou’s eyes were filled with tears. They came spilling out. From the day I first met her, I’d never seen her make this expression. These were tears of happiness from finally obtaining what she’d always wanted for a long, long time.

“Senpai...!”

She called out to me and jumped into my arms. I caught her firmly. As I embraced her dainty body, she wrapped her arms around my back and squeezed tight.

“Me too... I also love you, Senpai. I love you so much! I’ve loved you ever since we met!” she said, her voice filled with joy as she confessed right into my ear. “I love you. I love you so much. Aah, finally... I finally said it.”

She savored the words. She was going through a flood of emotions. Conveying her feelings was like a miracle to her.

“I love you, Senpai...”

“Yeah, I love you too.”

Inside a world that existed only for us, we shared a hug. Her feelings realized, and her devotion rewarded, the forlorn assumption she’d carried so long was vanishing. There was no longer any need for her to be a monster.

Chapter 14: The Knight Among Knights

The first thing I felt upon returning to the real world was a relieving softness and warmth. Much like when I was in the world of hearts moments ago, I had a petite girl wrapped in my arms. The monster was nowhere in sight. In its stead was Katou, her head buried in my chest. She stirred slightly and looked up, smiling like a gently blooming flower.

“Senpai,” she said, her voice tickling my ear and giving me a real sense that she was back. “That dream...wasn’t a dream, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Besides, can’t you feel it?”

Grasping my meaning, Katou gave me a truly happy smile.

“So this is your mental path.”



Her heartfelt delight was conveyed to me—not in the metaphorical sense, but

for real. I also felt how much she'd wanted this until now. The time we'd spent together, the bonds we'd fostered, all of it connected us. And as we smiled, other voices called out to us.

"I see Katou has come back to us, my dear."

"Sttter!"

It was Salvia and Asarina. It seemed they'd been treating a woman who'd collapsed on the ground, but upon noticing that the monster was gone, they came our way. The two of them were overjoyed that Katou was back.

"Sorry for worrying you," Katou said.

"It's fine. I'm glad you're back safely," Salvia said. "Besides, it looks like you finally got your feelings across."

Salvia giggled. The last remark was for both of us. I nodded and Katou blushed happily.

"Oh, guess we can't stay like this too long," I said, remembering I'd left Mikihiko and the others behind. "We've gotta head back."

"Now that you mention it, did you come here alone, Senpai?" Katou asked.

"I used a teleportation runestone Mikihiko prepared for us. Only one person can use it. He apparently planted it among your effects."

"When did he...?"

I'd used the teleportation runestone to jump to Katou's location, skipping the path I'd been using before. As such, I didn't know the way back. By all rights, it would've been very difficult to find our way. Fortunately, Ayame was also with Mikihiko, so I knew the general direction they were in. And so long as I knew that, I could work things out one way or another. As I was now, I had control of this world through the Misty Lodge. It wasn't very difficult to find a path back so long as I knew what direction to go. It would also be possible for me to rendezvous with Lily and the others, who were isolated from us.

I'd had to concentrate on the mental path's connection to Katou, so my threads were currently severed, but I could use them again right away once a connection was re-established. I was pretty exhausted, so the reconnection

would take some effort, but we only had one last spurt to go. I focused on my mana to manipulate the magic mist once more, when suddenly...

“What...?”

I felt a chill. I tensed up immediately, switching gears from the relaxed atmosphere we were in to prepare for battle. The perception magic of the Misty Lodge detected danger. I turned around right as I heard the sound of collapsing rubble.

“Senpai?!”

I grabbed Katou and jumped backward.

“He’s...”

Someone came out from beneath the destroyed altar. His gaze told me that it still wasn’t over.

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“Harrison... So you’re still alive.”

The marshal of the Holy Order had pushed himself out from under the rubble. His imposing figure was a tattered mess. His trimmed black hair was dirty with sticky red blood. His left arm seemed to be broken, dangling unmoving from its socket.

He used his remaining arm to push aside the rubble crushing down on him. He’d apparently survived Katou’s attack. I was dumbfounded by the fighting spirit blazing behind his eyes. However, I quickly regained my composure.

“Give it up,” I said. “You’re not in any state to fight.”

He’d taken a hit from a monster so far beyond the norm it could’ve fought the exploration team head-on. The fact that he was still breathing was astounding. However, his wounds were far too deep.

A large pool of blood stained the ground. One of his arms was broken. His crushed armor made it easy to imagine the state of his torso beneath. His injuries were harsh enough that simply standing up likely put his life at risk. There was no moving around in that state.

Even if he forced himself to move, he wouldn't be able to exhibit much strength, and he'd only be able to do so for a short time. We could win just by waiting for him to come to a stop. This man was undoubtedly aware of this too.

"And what of it?"

However, he remained unwavering. He clenched his good fist, not even armed with a sword. He kicked off the bloody ground with transparent determination. His body was severely injured, but the threat I sensed from him was no joke.

"Haaah!"

He swung his fist with the force of a gale. I jumped back on instinct, then immediately opened my eyes wide. The spot I'd been occupying was smashed to bits. The force behind his punch was enough for me to doubt his injuries. A single hit would be enough to knock me out of this fight.

Still, the motion of the attack itself had been stiff and easy to read. This was likely because he was recklessly using mana to reinforce his broken body and force it to move. There was no way he could be dextrous like that.

The backlash seemed to have opened his wounds further, sending blood dribbling to the ground. Regardless, Harrison remained on his feet. His fighting spirit was unfaltering, his clear hazel eyes glaring at me.

"Why are you...?" I mumbled.

His unshakable conviction kept his broken body up. In all likelihood, this willpower was what had allowed him to climb to the very top of the Holy Order. It was precisely because I sensed this in him that something felt out of place.

"Majima Takahiro. I must kill you."

His quiet tone had something behind it that I'd also sensed when I first met the man in the imperial capital. This was the pride and dignity of a knight; the noble will to offer everything he was to protect the stability of this world. Not a single thing about that impression had changed, even now. I naturally remembered what he said when we were first introduced.

"Mister Majima, I harbor no ill will toward you like the margrave does.

“I also will not selfishly pursue personal glory like Travis did. All I wish for is to fulfill the duty I’ve been charged with.

“Every moment I’ve lived as a knight I’ve devoted to protecting the peace of our brittle and frail world. I am sure I will continue doing so from this day onward too.”

So long as we didn’t threaten the world, he would never become our enemy. At the time, that was what I believed. In the sense of upholding justice, he was the same as Louis Bard—the man who’d acted as Margrave Maclaurin’s proxy—but his way of life was different.

The one time I met Louis, he’d seen himself as righteous and me as evil. However, that didn’t apply to Harrison. In truth, even now, there was no revulsion in his eyes. I felt neither hatred nor fury from him. The only thing I saw was a sense of duty. It didn’t look like an act. That was exactly why a question came to mind.

“Why are you trying to kill us?” I asked.

If I died after being explicitly invited to the capital, the Holy Church would lose trust and authority. The world would be destabilized and the church’s relationship with the exploration team could also deteriorate. Regardless, he’d resorted to assassination. This wasn’t motivated by revulsion, hatred, or anger. What drove him to do so was far too much of a mystery.

“Why would you...?” I repeated.

Harrison stared back at me. I really couldn’t see a hint of disgust or hatred in his eyes.

“Majima Takahiro. Why do you fight?” he asked.

“What?”

“I’m asking why you fight. Never mind. There’s no need for you to answer. I know. You simply fight for your companions.”

Was this an answer to my question?

“As the one leading your companions, you devote yourself to fulfill your responsibilities,” Harrison continued indifferently. “You try to protect

everything important to you within your reach. Isn't that right?"

Everything he said was correct.

"Even after being called Aker's hero, you don't fight for the sake of righteousness," he said. "Even if you save people as a result, you don't misinterpret your objective as carrying out justice. To you, the presence of your companions carries far more weight than anything else. Surely, they even have more weight to you than the world."

There wasn't anything to deny. He really was different from Louis. At most, Louis had only ever seen me as the Wicked Monster Tamer. Unlike him, Harrison didn't discard all attempts at understanding me. This was a difference large enough that it couldn't be ignored. However, looking only at the answer it'd guided him to, the difference could also be said to be minuscule.

"That's why I must kill you," Harrison said.

He understood me properly. This wasn't anything born of a misunderstanding. Just maybe, he even assessed me highly. Nevertheless, Harrison was after my life while retaining his facet as a knight who protected the world.

As such, a sudden hypothesis came to mind. Really, just hypothetically speaking, say he truly was a knight who protected the world. Say he was fair and impartial, and had come to the conclusion that I had to die...

"What do you know that we don't?" Katou asked. She must have come to the same conclusion as me already. She keenly got to the point, her eyes staring at Harrison with an intensity that saw straight through to the truth. "Something about this world is strange. I always felt something out of place, but it's clear to me now. The Holy Church no longer requires saviors. Not only do they possess beloveds of blessed blood who can rival a visitor's power, they even have a man who has already surpassed many visitors."

It turned out Katou had noticed something because of this incident. When she verbalized it like that, I started to sense something out of place too.

"I get it," I said. "Even in the exploration team, the only ones capable of comparing to Harrison's power are some of the nicknamed cheaters."

"Yes. That's right," Katou said. "And the important thing here is the fact that

over a hundred visitors arrived in the human world from the Colony. By all rights, only one or two visitors should ever show up once a century. As such...”

“If not for an irregularity like that, it’d be pretty much impossible for a visitor to appear who’s stronger than Harrison?” I asked.

“Exactly.” Katou nodded, then turned to Harrison. “Having the power of a visitor must make things easier, but the need to revere them as absolute as you do now should have waned. It’s far more reassuring to rely on your own strength than something as uncertain as visitors, right?”

What Katou was saying made sense to me.

“And then there’s your current behavior,” she continued. “You don’t believe Majima-senpai is evil, do you? You would have been stirred to action much sooner, otherwise. You’re nothing more than a knight. You exist to protect the people of the world and maintain society. However, you still tried to assassinate Majima-senpai, risking the trust and authority of the church. None of it makes sense. That’s how it looks to us, at least.”

Even though saviors weren’t required to protect the world, they still relied on saviors. Even though he was supposed to be working to protect the world, he was trying to kill a savior meant to accomplish that same task, risking the trust of the people in the process. None of it made sense.

I couldn’t see it any other way. However, meeting him face to face like this, Harrison didn’t seem like the kind of person to do something so reckless. There had to be something else driving his actions, some unseen circumstance.

“What is it that we don’t know?” Katou asked, her voice frighteningly earnest.

She understood too. Even if we did win here, so long as we didn’t comprehend the man before us, the situation wouldn’t be resolved.

The church would be at the end of its rope if it learned that this attack failed. Taken to an extreme, it was entirely possible for them to try and stop it from going public, ignoring all appearances and crushing Aker.

Naturally, if they resorted to that, there would be a major backlash. However, that would mean throwing the world into chaos. As a concerned party, we wouldn’t be able to live in peace. So, we had to prevent that from happening

now.

“Answer us, Harrison,” I said, glaring at the knight.

Our eyes clashed and a dreadfully heavy silence filled the room. Harrison stood there imposingly, his sense of presence unaffected by his wounds. His gaze had a sharpness and strength akin to a drawn blade. I refused to surrender to timidity, though. I glared right back at him, Katou leaning against my side.

“So you want to know,” Harrison eventually said with blood-soaked lips, something calm yet ominous behind his voice. “Very well. If that is what you want, then I will tell you about the truth of this world.”

Chapter 15: The Diary Left Behind by a Savior

Before diving into the truth of the world, let's go over an old story. This was a distant memory for a certain man. These were the events of the day that decided all future paths.

"What's this...?"

A boy with hazel eyes raised an innocent voice. He had an old book in his hands. It was something he found tucked away in a corner of his house's study. The boy, not even ten years old yet, was of imperial nobility. What's more, his lineage had inherited the blessed blood of a savior who'd saved the world. His family was well known for contributing a great many knights to the Holy Order for generations.

"We are not members of this world by nature. Thus, we have a duty to leverage our abilities to protect this world. Do not forget. Have pride as a knight."

Taught this by his father, the boy lived up to all expectations. He understood the value of what he was to be burdened with. He had no complaints about going down this path. He would become a splendid knight just like his father, supporting the saviors to protect the world. That was what he believed. Until this day, he truly did.

"This is...a diary?"

The old book the boy found was a diary written by his ancestor—a girl from another world. He didn't know why it was tucked away in the corner of the study. Any item related to the saviors, even if a simple diary, would naturally be treated with the greatest care. The fact that it wasn't meant it'd made its way into this study without anyone knowing.

After all, the girl had appeared in this world several centuries ago. It was more than possible for something like this to have coincidentally gotten mixed in

among other books over the long years.

The diary wrote of events from some time after the girl found herself in this world—around the time she learned the local language—to when she started her activities as a savior.

Such details were more than enough to tickle the boy's curiosity. Given the opportunity to learn of the everyday life of his esteemed ancestor, he had no choice but to read it.

Naturally, the boy knew of his ancestor's legend. Her ability hadn't been special in any way, but through steady effort and devotion, she'd become known as a savior who'd accomplished a great many deeds.

The studious boy knew about her very well. He thought he did, at least. As such, the moment he started reading, he was struck by a sudden shock. The journal wrote of the girl's true feelings without hiding anything, after all.

Anxiety at being sent to an unknown place.

Gratitude toward the people who accepted her.

Despair at being unable to return to her world.

Excitement at obtaining power.

Fear at having to fight monsters.

Courage from fighting for the sake of those she was indebted to.

Malediction toward the circumstances she could do nothing about.

Happiness at meeting people.

Not everything was pretty. Nor was everything dirty. The person who wrote this journal was truly human.

The young boy was overwhelmed by the girl's exposed thoughts. He was captivated by how she'd desperately tried to survive while tormented by difficulties. Before he knew it, he'd read the entire diary.

By the time he closed the book, his understanding of his ancestor had changed entirely. The boy now knew that the deified saviors were humans who suffered from anxiety like anyone else. Such knowledge made him a complete

exception in this world.

And so, aiming to become a knight, the boy was furnished with more consideration for others than the average person, as well as a tremendous sense of responsibility. That was why it was inevitable for him to come to the following conclusion.

His childlike mind came across a certain thought. Weren't they mistaken to rely on visitors as their saviors?

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Visitors were pitiful castaways.

Let loose from their original worlds, they lived their lives harboring solitude and sorrow.

Was it really all right to make such people bear the harsh reality of this world?

That was far too strange. Didn't others feel sorry for them?

A knight had the duty to save everyone, sword in hand. So how long were they going to continue forcing people like that girl to bear such agony?

As someone born to become a knight, could he allow such a thing?

No. He could not.

This world's problems should be resolved by those born in this world.

If nobody was capable of that, then he would accomplish it himself.

He would become the saviors' substitute. In their stead, he would protect this world. That was surely what he was born for.

Even as a child, his determination was unshakeable. His youth provided him a bulwark against cynicism and despair.

On that day, the boy swore to the girl on the other side of the diary.

Just maybe, what he felt at the time was something like a first love.

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That oath was sacred to the boy.

He earnestly pursued power more than ever before.

He desired strength that surpassed even a savior, dedicating himself nonstop to his improvement.

Fortunately, he had the qualifications for it. Or perhaps the determination in his heart had turned into such qualifications. As a beloved of blessed blood, his power manifested.

That said, his ability wasn't particularly special or outstanding compared to those of others like him.

Unfortunately, his ancestor hadn't possessed a special ability. As such, the boy also hadn't manifested one. Compared to the likes of the Radiant Wings, the Holy Gaze, the All-Seeing Eye, or the Battle Ogre, his power didn't seem particularly impressive.

However, the boy didn't give that any thought. He knew his ancestor. He couldn't possibly admit that the power he inherited from the girl who'd been so desperate to survive in another world could be inferior to any other.

That emotion was precisely what made him stronger. The boy became a teenager and gathered strength as a knight. Even when his faint love faded into a treasure from the distant past, the oath he swore that day remained as prominent in his heart as ever.

And then the day finally came. Now an adult, he achieved far more than any other and stood at the top of his knightly order. Naturally, that wasn't his goal. It was the starting line.

By this point, he'd gained enough power to surpass the average savior. With this, he believed he could fulfill the oath he'd made that day.

From this day onward, everything would change.

That was his plan.

"Excuse me."

With hope and ideals in his heart, the young man entered the room of the archbishop who'd summoned him—with no way of knowing what awaited him.

Chapter 16: The Truth of the World

“Have you never found it strange?” Harrison asked, his mouth stained in blood. “How you visitors are able to acquire special powers, I mean.”

With Katou still in my arms, I exchanged glances with her. I had of course questioned this before. It’d be far stranger not to question it after obtaining such mysterious powers. It’d been a common topic when we first arrived in this world without knowing left from right. That said, we already had the answer to that question.

“Isn’t it a law of this world?” I answered.

“They’re the words left behind by the first savior. ‘This is the world where wishes come true,’” Katou added.

Those words spoke of the law of this world. Visitors who came here had their wishes manifested into abilities.

“So long as it’s a law, there’s not much room to debate why that is,” Katou said. I was in agreement with her.

“You’re wrong,” Harrison said.

“Are you saying the first savior was wrong?” I said, unintentionally scowling.

“No, not that. The esteemed first savior discovered the truth of this world,” Harrison answered. “Their words aren’t in error. However, you’re misinterpreting them.”

“How so...?” I asked.

“Why are visitors the only exception?” Harrison asked in turn.

“What...?”

“So long as it’s a law, there’s no room to debate why it is,” he continued. “You certainly have a point. However, if that truly is a law of this world, shouldn’t it apply to all people? Why would a law only apply to visitors? Is such a thing possible?”

“That’s...”

Now that he mentioned it, it did seem unnatural. The first savior had only said, “This is the world where wishes come true,” not, “This is the world where a visitors’ wishes come true.” Still, it was a fact that visitors possessed powers that manifested from their wishes. In contrast, the people of this world had no such power. The only exceptions were those who’d inherited the blood of visitors. Regardless of how unnatural it seemed, fact was fact.

However, after hearing this, Katou seemed to have gone down a different branch of thought.

“You can’t mean...” she said, gulping.

This wasn’t only a matter of her being caught off guard by this information. It was like she was shocked after figuring out what she’d been searching for all this time.

Seeing her reaction, I remembered one other thing. Now that I thought of it, she’d also questioned the abilities we visitors possessed. I’d seen this in the notes Kudou had picked up.

“There’s still a lot we don’t understand about this power to begin with.

“In this world, strong wishes come true.

“If that’s how it works, there’s no point arguing about it.

“However, even if the law itself has no room for doubt, there’s something about the reality I find myself in that feels out of place.

“To put it briefly, it feels like reality doesn’t match this law.

“In all likelihood, there is significance behind this.

“Something feels weird about this world.”

After reading that, Kudou had said, “If such laws exist, then why do they only apply to visitors?”

We hadn’t had any time when he mentioned it, so I hadn’t given it much thought. However, Harrison referenced that point again here. Katou hadn’t been with us when Kudou mentioned it, but maybe this was the piece of the

puzzle she was missing all this time.

“Why are visitors an exception...? But in truth, visitors have their wishes turned into abilities... It’s not only visitors? In that case... No, that can’t be... But that’s...?” Reaching some manner of conclusion, she covered her mouth with both hands. “Then *what* exactly...?”

“Katou?” I said.

She turned to look at me, her eyes clearly shaken. It was as if all common sense had been flipped upside down on her.

“Majima-senpai, just maybe, the law that wishes come true in this world might apply equally to all people.”

For a moment, I didn’t understand what she was saying. Her statement was simply too wild.

“All people... You mean even the residents of this world?” I asked.

In truth, visitors didn’t possess any kind of mysterious powers. There was no such thing as a cheat here. Everyone was equal. We all followed the same laws. In that case, Harrison would be making sense. Still...

“Katou, isn’t that impossible?” I said. “Only visitors have ever manifested abilities based on a wish.”

Reality defied the possibility. She didn’t refute that.

“You’re right,” Katou said. “That’s how it looks to me too... How it *looked*. However, wishes that can manifest an ability contend with each other. If two abilities are to manifest at the same time, neither of the contending abilities will manifest at all. That’s how it was for me. That’s how I passed my days until now without realizing it.”

“So you’re saying...the same thing applies to the residents of this world?” I asked. After she spelled it out so thoroughly, I understood what she was getting at. “It’s not that their wishes can’t manifest, it’s that they’ve already manifested...? Without them realizing it?”

“I believe it’s possible.” Katou nodded. “Naturally, it’s not like everyone has such strong wishes. However, we know of exceptions who have manifested

power without having any definitive wish.”

That immediately struck home.

“You mean the warriors,” I said.

“That’s right,” Katou affirmed. “Based on their unconscious cognition that, as visitors, they had to possess some kind of amazing powers, their abilities manifested. In that case...”

“The people of this world have also manifested some kind of power due to an unconscious cognition?”

This wasn’t a matter of impossible or possible. At the very least, Harrison implied it could happen. Even as we continued our conjecture, he didn’t deny anything we said.

Thinking of it like that, it would be more unnatural to believe that this was a world where only visitors had their wishes granted. Even the first savior hadn’t said anything of the like. And so, by recognizing the possibility, I reached the same conclusion as Katou.

“But if that’s true... *What* exactly did they unconsciously manifest?” I said, repeating her earlier mumblings.

If this hypothesis was correct, then the people of this world had manifested some kind of ability—turning an unconscious thought into reality. But nothing of the like came to mind. At the very least, I didn’t remember ever seeing anything to suggest it. Had I really never witnessed it? Or had it been so obvious that I hadn’t seen it as a result of some power?

“Say, my dear...” Salvia, who’d been keeping quiet behind me all this time, spoke up.

She often took a step back in cases like this, so it was a little unexpected. However, looking back at this later, it was inevitable that she joined the conversation. There was something she’d realized from the very beginning, after all.

“My Misty Lodge is a world that grants wishes. Also, in this world created by the Dimensional Cornerstone, the monsters are reflections of the unconscious

cognition of the capital's residents."

Salvia and I had taken control of this world. We knew of its nature to a certain extent. That was why we were able to realize something.

"Both worlds share a commonality in that they are based on people's emotions, be it wishes or cognition," she continued. "And this is the world where wishes come true. Do you think these commonalities are really a coincidence?"

"That's..."

"I also think it's pretty out there. But you know, I have a sudden question to ask." Salvia's voice was hoarse with tension. "My dear, what exactly is this fabricated world?"

It was a strange question. Salvia herself was magic that created other worlds, after all. Still, there was no helping the fact that she had suspicions about such a fundamental matter. Her next words were the definitive blow.

"Just maybe, this fabricated world and the real world differ only in scale, but are essentially the same thing."

"The same thing...?" I repeated.

"At the very least, they have commonalities. What's more... Yes, now that I think of it, the Holy Church has gathered all the Dimensional Cornerstones that possess powers much like mine. Why? Why did the church gather them? Do they really only 'create worlds?' Perhaps they actually..."

"Correct," a grave voice confirmed. Harrison had once more opened his mouth. "You've already been given these clues. Even if I did not say anything, I'm sure you would've eventually reached the truth. That's why I spoke."

In truth, Kudou was of a mind with Harrison where these suspicions were concerned. It would've happened sooner or later.

"So it really is..." I said, my throat dry.

The knight among knights then revealed the true nature of the world he was meant to protect.

"That's right. This world is composed of the cognition of practically all the

humans who live in it. The unconscious cognition that ‘this world must exist,’ is what makes it a reality. What maintains and controls reality are the Dimensional Cornerstones—the magic tools created by the first saviors, ones that gave birth to the world itself.”

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This world didn’t exist and hence recognized as such. It was recognized as existing and hence it was. That was what made up this world. Harrison’s almost indifferent tone simply conveyed the truth. Despite the tenor, I felt sheer dread at his words.

“Senpai...”

Still in my arms, Katou strengthened her grip on my chest. She was likely feeling the same thing. It was like everything we saw or felt was so chilling and faint that it could vanish at any moment. If things only existed because they were perceived as such, then that meant nothing existed to begin with. Had the world always appeared like that to the man before us? Seeing that we understood the severity of what he’d told us, Harrison spoke once more.

“This world is unstable. After all, it is a materialization of the people’s unconscious. It is naturally influenced by it as well. An insecurity in human nature is enough for monsters to become more active and for the Woodlands’ encroachment to accelerate.”

“Monsters and the Woodlands...? How are they related?” I asked.

“I told you this world exists based on the people’s cognition,” Harrison said. “What we know as the Woodlands and monsters are embodiments of the people’s fears and anxieties.”

“Embodiments of the people’s fears and anxieties...?” I repeated in shock.

“That’s right. Lately, monsters have become far more active. My ignorant subordinates lament the fact that monsters have gotten active right when society is getting unstable, but the root cause of both is the same.”

This revelation sparked a memory, the sight I’d witnessed when Fort Tilia fell. In this world, abandoned settlements and fortresses were immediately swallowed by the trees of the Woodlands. When we left Fort Tilia, I remembered seeing the trees encroaching on the fortress with terrifying vigor, as if the Woodlands was a living creature.

In a world of magic, I’d figured that manner of phenomenon was normal, so I hadn’t really paid it any attention. However, in all likelihood, that was a reflection of the garrisoned knights no longer recognizing the fortress as human

territory.

There was one other thing too. If human cognition gave birth to monsters, then that explained something I'd found strange for a while now. Why did monsters like Lily possess the potential for a human-like heart?

Rose wasn't a biological being, and Salvia didn't even physically exist, so it was hard to imagine monsters like them evolving the same way we did. However, if human cognition gave birth to monsters, then it was actually a natural development for them to have budding human hearts within.

"The reason visitors manifest abilities is that, as people from the outside, they do not take part in forming this world," Harrison said. "As their descendants, the same applies to we of blessed blood."

"So that's why you're able to manifest abilities too?" I asked.

"Exactly. In the end, we of blessed blood are not members of this world."

Not members of this world. These words weren't meant to remind him that his ancestor was a foreigner from another world. They were meant to be taken literally. I remembered hearing the same phrase from Gordon before. This was likely because a select few who knew the truth had concealed these words within the consciousness of the Holy Order. Those same words were one facet of what had hardened Harrison's determination to such an extent.

"In a certain sense, while being born to this world, we possess a duty we must fulfill," Harrison continued. "As such, we must at least protect this world. It is far too fragile and easy to destabilize. That is why we've safeguarded it for all this time."

"If that's the case, the reason you're trying to kill us is that the discord between me and Maclaurin is destabilizing human society?"

Now that we knew the truth, we could finally return to our original question. Why was Harrison going to such an unnatural extent to kill me? In truth, current world affairs were unstable like never before. I didn't deny that my existence played a factor in that.

"You're wrong," Harrison said, denying my train of thought. "If that was the problem, we could simply put all our efforts into mediating between you. We

have no qualms with going through the trouble to do so, and we can manage somehow even if we have to be heavy-handed."

I didn't sense any falsehoods in his words. His objective was to keep the world stable. In that sense, doing it that way would've been less risky.

"So why?" I asked again. This was making less and less sense.

"Because you and your servants cannot be allowed to exist," he answered, his expression stiff.

If I didn't know better, this could come across as no more than, "We can't allow the Wicked Monster Tamer to live." However, I already knew that he wasn't driven by such motives. What's more, there was the slightest bitterness in Harrison's tone. I sensed something like regret in it.

Just maybe, he felt guilty about this. Perhaps his indifferent tone was a deliberate method of keeping it from showing. If my impression of him was correct...this was actually terrifying. He knew what he was doing was unreasonable. He even had a proper sense of morals. The fact that he was doing it regardless meant that he had to have a reason to do this no matter the cost. Still, after coming this far, I couldn't possibly be seized by fear.

"We can't be allowed to exist?" I asked.

Even now, Harrison didn't hold his tongue.

"The Great Cataclysm," he said, an ominous ring to his words. "It isn't spoken of in the savior legends, so you may not know about it. To those who do, it is an event referred to only with the deepest dread. It is spoken of as the worst event to ever happen since the formation of the Holy Church. At the time, humanity lost seventy percent of its populace, the Alliance Knights were annihilated, two saviors died, and many of blessed blood were lost. It is a calamity that is forbidden from remaining in any records. If things had taken a turn for the worst, human society would've been destroyed."

The Great Cataclysm. As he said, I'd never heard of it. To continue living here, I'd spent time learning about this world. I'd studied historical events too, but at the very least, the name had never come up.

So I thought, but something about it bothered me. Wondering what it was, I

searched my memories and came to a sudden understanding. During our stay in the Akerian palace, Lily had taken daily trips to the archives. I recalled a conversation I'd had with her regarding this.

"Elves show up every now and then in Aker's history books, but no matter the book, there is no mention of them further than eight hundred years back. Actually, there aren't that many books touching on anything before that in the first place. It's like information from that age is just cut out.

"Seems like there was a global calamity—an explosive outbreak of monsters accompanied by a natural disaster or something.

"It's not touched upon in the savior legends. They might've deemed it as damaging to the saviors' absolute reputation or something. Still, it definitely had an impact. The legends from before that time are really vague."

"The gap in all information eight hundred years ago..." I said. "A huge outbreak of monsters coinciding with a natural disaster... You don't mean..."

"You know about it?" Harrison said, looking slightly surprised. "Yes, exactly that. Setting aside the gap in information, I didn't think you'd know any concrete details... No, I see now. You settled down in Aker, didn't you? That nation is out of the central government's reach, so it wouldn't be strange for fragments of records to escape erasure."

"One of my companions investigated it enthusiastically. Seems she was looking into the history of elves at the time, though."

"Elves, you say?" Harrison said, a bitter expression on his face.

"What about them?" I asked. I didn't expect such an expression from him. I didn't think he was the type of man to discriminate against elves. "Do you have a problem with elves?"

"Not at all. Not regarding the currently living elves."

In truth, he didn't discriminate. In that case, what was with his reaction? Wait... Not regarding the currently living elves?

"Elves were the cause of the Great Cataclysm," he said, his serious expression unwavering.

“What...?”

“The Great Cataclysm was caused by the race known as elves. That said, they didn’t proactively do anything.”

“What are you saying? What does that mean?”

“Elves are monsters.”

This time, I was at a loss for words. For an instant, I had no idea what he was saying.

“To be precise,” he continued, “about a hundred years before the Great Cataclysm, a certain visitor absconded from humanity. The monsters under their command at the time became the elves and spirits of today.”

Harrison kept the conversation going without any concern for my reaction. Still somewhat confused, I somehow managed to open my mouth.

“You mean...someone like me existed in the past?”

And elves and spirits were the servants who followed them? It was really out there, but I had no evidence to deny it. Elves stood out in this world. They were the only subrace of humanity. They had features like long ears that differentiated them from others and had longer natural lifespans.

Also, there were no documents whatsoever describing them beyond eight hundred years ago. Harrison was telling me that this wasn’t because of the Great Cataclysm, but because elves didn’t even exist before that. This didn’t contradict anything I knew.

“The Holy Church at the time had no knowledge of a being capable of turning monsters into servants,” Harrison said. “As such, the savior and the first elf held their tongues about their origins. The fact that the savior was involved in such a way was only discovered in records far after the fact. At the time, with nobody knowing who they were, they were simply deemed as another race they hadn’t yet met. Troubles came up every now and then, but they set up a foundation in the borderlands and multiplied over a hundred years.”

Harrison’s story gave me an enormous shock. It wasn’t entirely in a bad sense, though. After all, someone before us had made a place for themselves in this

world alongside their servants. Naturally, there was a big difference between this story and our current situation. Elves didn't look all that different from humans, which made them easier to accept, but this still showed that they'd accomplished our dream. The existence of a pioneer granted us hope. However, Harrison's story took a turn.

"Elves merged into human society. As a result, they guided the world to calamity."

"That doesn't make sense... Why did it end up like that?" I asked. "Even if I accept that elves are monsters, that doesn't lead to the Great Cataclysm. I mean, how can a single race cause such a huge disaster?"

"Normally, it would be impossible. As I said, they didn't proactively do anything to cause the cataclysm," Harrison agreed, but immediately shook his head. "They didn't try to destroy the world or anything. Their very existence ran counter to the way of the world."

This made the least sense out of everything, but a single look at Harrison's face told me that he wasn't spouting random nonsense. His severely tense expression even looked chilled by the thought.

"This world has a predetermined way it ought to be," Harrison said. "In other words, a World View that is set in stone. This was the method the esteemed first savior took to stabilize this fragile world and to allow its continued existence."

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"Just as I've been telling you, this world is formed by cognition. By all rights, it is extremely fragile. That is when the first saviors used the Dimensional Cornerstone to define the World View as, 'Saviors from other worlds appear and save the people.'"

Harrison maintained his chilled expression as he continued talking.

"You can think of the World View as shared cognition. So long as reality is made up of the cognition of countless humans, having that cognition all over the place would be inconvenient. By sharing the same World View, reality can function as a single entity."

In other words...the first savior prepared a template for how the world should be interpreted? And that was by setting the World View that saviors appeared from other worlds to save the people.

This world was at such a disadvantage against monsters—at least in the past—that it couldn't have continued existing without saviors. This cognition conformed with reality. And with everyone viewing the world the same way, their shared cognition became stronger, stabilizing the world in the process.

What's more, by believing saviors will save them, the populace gained hope. In turn, this suppressed monster activity, which was a manifestation of the people's anxieties. Everything clicked together. It was pretty well thought out.

"Thanks to the first savior's countermeasures, the world stabilized," Harrison continued. "So long as the people conform to the World View, even with a fair amount of discord, the world itself won't waver beyond the point of recovery."

Now that he mentioned it, despite the entirety of human society being shaken due to my conflict with Margrave Maclaurin, the resulting phenomenon had gone no further than monsters becoming more active. Naturally, if things remained as they were or got worse, it could lead to a more horrible outcome. Still, even with the world thrown into chaos, it wasn't going to end in an instant.

That meant that even if the world was trembling, it was relatively stable. This was thanks to the system left behind by the first savior—the Dimensional Cornerstones.

"The Holy Church works so that the entire world conforms to the World View," Harrison said. "Naturally, the Holy Order plays a role in this as well. However, since we have to conform, our duties are fixed. We can't do anything to contradict it."

"Is that why saviors are still so highly regarded?" I asked.

"That's right. Only a visitor can carry the burden of being a savior. That is how it's made to be," Harrison answered, nodding.

His power surpassed the average visitor. Nevertheless, the Holy Church continued to rely on saviors. They had no other choice but to do so. Even if the people of this world acquired power that no average visitor could contend with,

they couldn't become the saviors that carried the hopes of the people. On the contrary, according to what he was telling me, if they tried, it would destabilize the world.

"No matter how good your intentions, no matter how much effort you put into it, there are things that cannot be accomplished without the right qualifications," Harrison went on. "The people of this world cannot substitute for visitors. That is how this world is set up."

As he spoke of this, the man's stern expression, one that could be likened to a steel sword, showed a hint of pain. This one fact hurt him far more than his severe wounds. However, he immediately shook off that emotion and continued speaking.

"The elves' existence wasn't recorded in the World View defined in the Dimensional Cornerstone at the time. There was no proper way of interpreting their existence. In regions where people were able to come in contact with elves, some accepted them, and some rejected them. In regions where elves hadn't propagated yet, some doubted their existence, and some didn't even know about them. A portion of the common cognition of how the world was supposed to be was falling apart."

In other words, a disparity had taken shape in the common sense the Holy Church had been maintaining for ages. The church hadn't taught the people about their existence, so the people had lacked a framework for interpreting the elves. With everyone making their own interpretation, common cognition had fallen apart. And as elves became more widely known, they'd given birth to a serious issue.

"When few people knew about elves, it only resulted in small cracks in the seams. However, once the majority knew about elves, the situation reached a breaking point. Elves didn't exist in the World View where saviors from other worlds save the people. Regardless of whether people accepted or rejected them, the moment the majority of the populace saw the existence of elves as a matter of fact, the inconsistency with the World View became fatal. As a result, the world was greatly destabilized."

"And that was the Great Cataclysm?" I asked.

“That’s right. And once more, the world faces danger.” Harrison paused and stared at me. “Answer me, Majima Takahiro. Between what is dear to you and this world, which will you choose?”

Chapter 17: Their Respective Choices

Those dear to me, or the world. I had to choose one. When asked such a question, I doubted many people would be able to give an immediate answer. Given that there were only two choices, it was the same as asking which I would prefer to cast away. If someone was capable of answering this with ease, they would be a genuine monster.

At the very least, it was impossible for me. I opened my mouth and shut it multiple times. I practically gasped for breath. But that was it. I clenched my fists and hardened my resolve.

“I want to live in this world with my companions,” I said clearly. “I can’t abandon them.”

My answer had been decided long ago. I’d simply needed the courage to say it aloud.

“I see...” Harrison said. Maybe he’d anticipated my answer. He understood me properly. Maybe that was why he’d gone so far to try and kill me. “Then you are an evil who will bring harm to this world.”

His voice was charged with hostility. I couldn’t deny him. Up until now, I’d fought to protect what was dear to me. I hadn’t ever considered fighting for some grandiose righteous cause like protecting the world. My motivations were independent of justice or evil.

As such, even if I was slandered as evil, I wouldn’t abandon what was dear to me. Even when weighed against the entire world, I couldn’t possibly cast them aside. To me, my companions carried far more weight. It was just as Harrison pointed out.

“You’ll destroy the world for your own ego?”

So, it was inevitable for him to say this to me. I already knew it. It was a different matter whether I agreed, though.

“Don’t go assuming things,” I said. “I have no intention of destroying the world.”

“What...?”

Harrison looked puzzled as I stared at him. I hadn’t the slightest intention of just standing here and letting him say whatever he wanted.

“I’m not abandoning anything that’s important to me. However, that doesn’t mean I think of everything else as inconsequential either.”

It was perfectly natural. There were people I was close to in Aker. There was a place that’d accepted me. Not only that, I would never consider sacrificing those who had nothing to do with me just for myself. As someone who had once been part of that majority of “others,” nearly dying in vain due to the cruelties of reality, I couldn’t possibly do such a thing.

“I’m not arrogant enough to try and sacrifice others,” I said.

“Then what are you going to do?” Harrison asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I answered without hesitation. “I won’t let anyone kill my companions, and I’ll avoid destroying the world. I’ll find a way where I won’t have to lose either of them.”

If I had to compromise and pick only one, I wouldn’t have needed to go out of my way to muster my courage. Choosing the most difficult path where I refused to lose anything was why I’d needed the courage to speak.

That said, such an answer could be interpreted as disrespectful. It could even be seen as a declaration of war.

“A ridiculous answer,” Harrison said, the pressure exuding from him becoming even stronger. “I told you to choose one.”

His sharp gaze crushed down on me like a physical mass. His eyes were enough to render the faint of heart unconscious. Still, I refused to falter.

“Like I give a damn.”

I refused the decision he tried to force on me. I had a reason to. The question wasn’t really one of two choices. After all, if this world vanished, we wouldn’t have a place to live. Harrison’s question was actually for me to choose between letting Lily and the others die or dying with them.

Either case would lead me to lose what was dear to me. I wasn’t going to let

that happen. To live with Lily and the others, I couldn't make either of those choices. I had to do something about both my companions and the world, no matter how difficult it would be.

"Hah..." Harrison chuckled dryly. "What's this about not being arrogant? What a jest. Do you even understand what it is you're saying? That's the path of a hero."

"And what of it?" I said, refusing to take a step back. "If it's necessary for all of us to survive, I'll do anything. That's how it's been until now, and that's how it will be."

I was well aware that I was talking big. Nevertheless, I had to make it clear right here and now. Besides, I wasn't alone.

"In truth, it's entirely possible," Katou said. She was always supporting me wherever I was lacking. The same went for everyone else. Because they were there for me, I was able to summon my courage and refuse to give up on either choice. "If your logic is correct, it should be strange that the elves who defied the World View weren't eliminated. Elves live to this day, though. They have spread their roots in this world and have been accepted as perfectly natural to be around. Why is that? Maybe you omitted something from your story?"

Harrison didn't reply. Perhaps he felt like she would see straight through anything he said. Either way, remaining silent didn't mean he could escape her questions.

"I don't mind if you refuse to answer. In truth, I already have an idea. In all likelihood, the elves have already been imprinted in this World View, right?"

"How..."

"If not, your logic doesn't hold water. In other words, this World View the first savior created can be modified. Naturally, if it was simple to modify, it would conform more closely to the present, so it must be tremendously difficult. However, that doesn't make it impossible."

Katou smiled with an implied "Or maybe." Her cold and beautiful smile was akin to a brandished sword.

"If that's not the case, then that means everything you told us was a lie," she

continued. “If so, the marshal of the Holy Order is truly lacking in creativity. Oh, I thought of a great idea. It’s a waste for us to be the only ones to enjoy the fable made up by the great marshal of the Holy Order. Why don’t we spread it across the entire world?”

“Stop.” Harrison raised his voice bitterly. If we did that, the people’s cognition would become a mess. This was one thing he could never shut his eyes to. “It’s just as you say. The elves have already been included in the World View. It happened in the middle of the Great Cataclysm. Elves made contact with a Dimensional Cornerstone. It is believed they rewrote the World View using it at the time. However, it is unknown what exactly was done.”

“It’s unknown?” Katou asked.

“At the time, very little was known about the Dimensional Cornerstones. The church was simply informed that they were necessary for maintaining the world. The elves who made contact with a Dimensional Cornerstone were annihilated, so there was no asking them either. However, a while after that, the Great Cataclysm came to an end.”

“Because the elves rewrote the World View?” Katou asked.

“Exactly. The elves’ existence was inserted into the World View. However, the Holy Church didn’t know that. That’s why they made a mistake. While investigating the unprecedented disaster, they discovered that the World View was a mechanism to stabilize the world. They also found out the elves’ existence had shaken the World View, causing the Great Cataclysm. So that it would never happen again, the Holy Church made moves in secret to exterminate them. What happened next was the war between the Empire and the Alliance Kingdoms. The Empire fought against the Alliance, who harbored elves in their territory... As a result, they invited instability into the world once more.”

“Because elves were already part of the World View by then,” Katou said.

“Indeed. After finally seeing the bigger picture, the church put a stop to the war.”

“And as a result, elves have continued living to this day...”

Katou exchanged looks with me, and I nodded back to her. This was a great harvest. Those dear to me, and this world—there was now a path where both could be preserved. The key was the Dimensional Cornerstones, magic tools kept by the Holy Church. Naturally, Harrison immediately understood what we were thinking.

“So you plan on rewriting the World View?” he asked.

“There’s a way of handling this without abandoning anything,” I said. “I can’t possibly give up now.”

“I see...”

Unlike before, Harrison didn’t criticize me. Exposing the situation of the world, thrusting how difficult things were before me, and measuring the extent of my resolve—through and through, this conversation was an “attack” to get me to give up.

Conversely, once he knew my will was unshakable, there was no point in continuing the attack. However, Harrison looked at me as if he was being blinded by something.

“To fight so that you don’t lose anything. Not possessing the caliber of a hero, with no intention of becoming a hero, but reduced to becoming one for the sake of what is precious to you. You really are...”

I didn’t know what sentiments were behind his words. However, I felt like this man with a mask of steel was giving a glimpse of who he was. I could see tremendous emotions moving unseen behind his grim expression. Naturally, no matter what they were, it wouldn’t shake my conviction.

“Then you are my enemy,” Harrison said, pulling a large jewel out of his pocket. There was an indomitable will behind his words. “Even if it worked out somehow before, that doesn’t necessarily mean it will work again. So long as you’re touching the very foundations of this world, it’s possible you will introduce a fatal flaw. Even if there is the slightest chance that everything can be lost, I must remove all threats to the world.”

Refusing to give up because everything could be lost. Intent on stopping this because it was possible everything could be lost. A difference in position

changed the priorities of the choices made.

Harrison Addington was a man who protected the stability of the world. He'd sworn to protect it no matter what happened, much like I'd decided to do anything to protect my servants. So long as the safest and most guaranteed way of solving this problem was, "Killing Majima Takahiro and his servants," what he had to do had long been decided. He couldn't allow emotions to sway him. He was calm and rational.

"But right now...any more of this will be useless," Harrison said, his hostility toward me as prominent as ever. "I'll back down."

He'd finished his preparations while we were talking. Harrison activated the Dimensional Cornerstone in his hand.

"Right here and now, unravel."

"This is..."

I'd stood at the ready so that it would be all right no matter what happened, but this wasn't an attack. I remembered this sensation. It was the same as when the world of mist I'd wandered into had been dispelled. The contour of everything in sight melted away.

Even the feeling of the ground beneath my feet became vague, so I couldn't move. I focused on my weapon for just a moment, but in the end, I did nothing more than hold Katou tight so that we wouldn't be separated.

As the world faded away, only the people retained a clear contour. The wounded knight facing me looked at me as an enemy to the very end.

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Before I knew it, I found myself in a prairie. Katou was still in my arms making a dumbfounded expression. I turned around and met Salvia's gaze. She merely shrugged. It seemed we'd been expelled from the fabricated world. One could say we'd also been freed from captivity.

"So we all escaped...?"

Using the senses of the mental path, I could tell everyone was outside the fabricated world, even if they were a little far away. They likely had no idea

what was happening. I could sense their bewilderment, but upon noticing my presence, they immediately began moving.

With no corridors to get in their way, it would be easy to reach me. They were probably going to be here shortly. I felt a tugging on my sleeve and lowered my eyes, where Katou smiled up at me.

“Looks like we won, Senpai.”

“Yeah...”

For now, it was fine to call this a victory. We’d warded off the sudden teleportation and obstinate attacks. Mikihiko had been freed from his shackles, and I’d gotten Katou back after she’d been abducted. I hadn’t lost anything.

What’s more, we’d even gotten much-needed information... Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say we’d been imparted with it. Even if not for the conversation with Harrison, we would’ve likely figured out the truth of this world on our own. However, it was possible our understanding would be half-baked like that.

In the worst case, we would touch the foundation of this world with superficial knowledge. There was no telling what would happen in that case. That was exactly why Harrison had told us all that. While he’d attacked us so that we would give up, he’d also spent the time to impart us with proper knowledge. Through and through, that man moved only to lower the risk posed to this world.

“Senpai...”

Leaning against me, Katou called out anxiously, and I lightly embraced her.

“It’s all right,” I said. Regardless of our opinion on the matter, it didn’t change what had to be done. Either way, we’d gained knowledge about the truth of this world. All that was left was to decide how to make our move. “First, we need to meet up with everyone.”

We had to rendezvous with Lily and the others, then secure everyone’s safety. We also had to link up with Shiran, who’d broken the commander out of the capital. Once everyone was together, we could discuss the future. No matter how heavy the truth of the world was, so long as we had each other, anything

was possible.

“Shall we?”

“Yes, Senpai.”

So, I took Katou’s hand and started walking.

Extra Story: What He'd Staked His Life on Regaining *Kaneki Mikihiko's POV*

Overcoming all adversity, the incident was now over. For me, it was the end of a long battle. I'd been one step away from the clutches of death, but here I was, still breathing and the commander taken back from captivity. This was pretty much the best outcome I could possibly imagine.

After escaping that world, Takahiro successfully reunited with his servants. He also linked back up with me, Iino, and Shimazu. The one exception was Kudou, who'd made himself scarce along with his servants right before the rendezvous. Well, it probably would've gotten complicated if he bumped into Iino or the like, so that was probably the right decision.

Once we were all back together, I got some genuine medical care. In the middle of that, I reached my limit and passed out.

By the time I opened my eyes again, I found myself lying down in an unfamiliar place. Quite a while had passed, judging by how dark it was. Before passing out, I'd been under the blue sky in the prairies a couple dozen kilometers away from the capital. Now, having apparently been moved, I was looking up at a cloth ceiling.

"Where...?"

"You're inside a tent Mister Majima offered us."

I froze upon hearing the voice that answered me. It had been so long since I'd heard it in person. On the spur of the moment, I had no idea how to respond. This was an instant I'd longed for so much that my mind blanked out once it actually happened. And as I remained frozen, an illumination runestone lit up, revealing the person sitting to my side.

"Commander...?"

"Morning, Mikihiko. I'm so glad we meet again."

With that, her face still haggard, the commander showed me a smile that was

no different from how it'd been before.

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It was a touching reunion, but the commander immediately excused herself and left the tent. It was somewhat anticlimactic.

Still, giving it some thought, I was so shocked by our sudden reunion that I had no idea what to say. That was no good. No good at all. Even if I'd spent months living like a dog looked down upon by the Holy Order, I still had enough pride in me left to want to look cool before the woman I loved.

I waited all on my own, and next, Takahiro came by. The commander had apparently informed him I was awake. Lily was the only one accompanying him.

"What a relief. You're awake," he said.

"Just as you can see," I replied. "It's all thanks to Lily, right? I can't really move about, though."

Healing magic wasn't omnipotent. I'd been beaten to a pulp. It would take a fair amount of time and rest for me to be up and about. That said, there was no need for me to fight anymore, so it didn't really bother me.

"What happened after that?" I asked.

"Right, that's what I came to inform you of."

Takahiro nodded, then told me about what happened since I lost consciousness. He'd used the long-distance communication device I'd been carrying to contact Shiran. By then, she'd finished rescuing the commander and the other Alliance Knights, had linked up with Philip, the Akerian delegation, and the dragons of Draconia, and had escaped the capital. The dragons were capable of flying, so it hadn't been much trouble to get out of the city. Using the air lanes, Shiran's entire group had linked up with ours within the day.

The few knights of the Holy Order who'd gotten caught in the teleportation, namely Gordon and his subordinates, were also safe. After Shiran had gone to save the commander in the capital, they'd survived inside the fabricated world while repelling monsters the whole time. Once they were thrown out into the prairies, Takahiro had used the Misty Lodge to locate and retrieve them.

He'd also pinpointed several former exploration team members—the ones working with the Holy Order—wandering the prairies, but had declined to contact them. This was the right decision. It was best to let sleeping dogs lie. There was no need to shelter them, and there was no point in going out of our way to attack them either.

"After that, we asked the dragons to move everyone to the nearby forest," Takahiro said. "We didn't want to be found by the church."

"So once you were hidden, you set up camp," I said. "Anyway, I'm surprised you had a tent like this with you. You've even got one just for me."

"We don't actually have one for everyone," he said. "You and that other one are getting special treatment. You know, that knight who was cooperating with you, Lady Elena. You two were heavily injured. Well, with people using them in groups, we do in fact have enough to house everyone. Rose made them, after all."

"She can really pull anything out of those magic bags of hers, huh?"

"You talk like it has nothing to do with you. A pretty large majority of the stuff in there is stuff you planted in her head."

"Oops, didn't mean to stir that nest," I said, laughing frivolously.

"That's how it goes," Takahio replied, shrugging before his smile vanished. "We're all resting until tomorrow. You rest up too, Mikihiko. You might not like having Sir Gordon so nearby, though."

"To be brutally honest, the Holy Order is the one group I find particularly disgusting."

"Makes sense."

"Still, I know I'm being unreasonable. I'm sure Gordon didn't even know anything."

"He didn't. He and his men are genuinely sincere and virtuous knights. I'm betting that's exactly why Harrison didn't tell them the truth..."

"Takahiro?"

I cocked my head, sensing something steely behind my best friend's

expression. This was the face of a man ready to see his hopes accomplished.

“Mikihiko. Don’t tell anyone what I’m about to tell you. After being used like that, I believe you should know about it.”

After that preamble, Takahiro went on to explain the truth of this world to me. His story was full of nothing but surprises, but somehow, it all made sense.

“Edgar mentioned something to me,” I said. “He wants to know why Harrison is so insistent on killing you.”

“He said that?”

“Mm-hm. If this is the answer, it kinda makes sense. ‘To protect the world.’ I get it now.”

“Mikihiko?”

“I just find it really tough. Knowing about the truth of this world and trying to protect its fragile existence. Being virtuous alone isn’t enough. To still be a knight, a personification of justice, holding the people’s livelihood so close at heart...but when necessary, having the ability to make critical decisions. It must require a will of steel. In other words, to be just like Harrison Addington.”

Only after saying that did I notice Takahiro looking at me wide-eyed.

“How unexpected,” he said. “You assess Harrison pretty highly.”

“Ha ha, I’ve got a different opinion of him on an emotional level. He did manipulate me like crazy. I know him better than you do, Takahiro. He’s actually really impressive. How do I put it? He’s the kinda guy you see in textbooks? That’s exactly why it was weird that he was trying to kill you so obstinately, disregarding anything there was to gain or lose from doing so.”

“I see.”

“Well, setting that aside, I wouldn’t mind giving him a good stabbing if I ever see him again.”

Even if my emotional impressions were a separate matter, there was also a facet of them that coincided with my logical impressions. The commander had survived safely to this day because the Holy Church had been desperately maintaining the world’s stability. I accepted that fact and didn’t deny the

monumental effort it implied. I understood they were a necessity to this world, and I appraised them highly for that. Even taking that into consideration, I couldn't forgive them for what they'd done. That was why it warranted a little stabbing.

"Anyway, let me know if you need a hand," I said. "You can't really tell a lot of people about how the world works and all... Well, so I say, but look at the state I'm in."

"Just get some rest for now," Takahiro said, chuckling. "When the time comes, I'll be relying on you."

He spoke words of consideration in a relaxed manner. However, he was the one who needed worrying about. My battle was over, but my best friend was still in the maelstrom. He stood in an endlessly difficult position, one that seemed like nobody had ever experienced before. Despite that, he seemed so relaxed. He must've steeled himself for what was to come already.

When he found himself in another dreadful situation, I was definitely going to be there for him. I confirmed that in my heart once more.

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"That's everything I had to tell you. I'll go let the commander know," Takahiro said as he started leaving. "I'm sure she'll come over right away. You have a ton to talk about, right?"

My heart leaped. I missed my chance to reply.

"What's with that face?" Takahiro said, finding my reaction unexpected. "You finally get to see her again."

"Well, that's true, but ya know... Getting to see her kinda makes me really nervous. My feelings only grew stronger, so it's like it's scary to see her again...? Ugh, you wouldn't understand! You and your mutual love!"

"I won't deny that."

"You saying that straight to my goddamn face?!"

"Then don't mention it in the first place..." Takahiro said with an exasperated smile. "I hope it goes well."

“Mm. Thanks.”

A friendly conversation where we fooled around. Even after such a desperate fight to the death, our relationship remained the same. This truly was a tremendous gift. And just as Takahiro left, perhaps having held back so that the two friends could talk, Lily spoke up for the first time since coming here.

“Oh right. I have a message from Gerbera,” she said.

“From Gerbera? What is it?” I asked.

“‘I left you a gift as a thank you,’ so she said. I don’t know what she meant, but there you have it.”

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Now then, what could this gift be about? I looked up at the tent’s ceiling and puzzled over it. I couldn’t think of anything. There wasn’t much I could do about that. I’d been so desperate these last few months. I couldn’t really remember the peaceful days before that. I felt totally burned out too, and despite having gotten some sleep, my brain still wasn’t really functioning. What’s more, my head was full of the commander.

Well, I could just shelve that for later. I could also ask her about it when I got the chance. Right as I came to that conclusion, the commander returned. She had a somewhat large leather bag in one hand, and a sandwich in the other.

“You must be hungry,” she said. “I brought you a meal. You still can’t move, so I’ll feed you.”

“Huh? You’ll feed me personally?”

“Who else is here?”

“H-Hang on a sec! I’m not ready!”

“Ready for what? You can’t move, can you? Quit being foolish or I’ll jam it in there.”

I wasn’t really being foolish. I needed to mentally prepare myself for how heart-pounding this was. It was the same as always. I had no idea what to say.

Incidentally, despite saying all that, the commander fed me courteously—my

heart beating like a hammer the whole time. Once she was done, she had me drink some water. I could die with no regrets now. Not that I would actually be okay with dying at this point, obviously. I still had things I had to do, after all.

“Now then,” the commander said, straightening her posture by my bedside and looking down at me. “Do you remember what I said?”

“Yes.”

“I have something to tell you. It’ll take a while, so... Mikihiko, make sure to come back alive. You hear me? That’s a promise.”

I was well aware that I’d acted without being asked to. It sounded nice saying I’d risked my life to protect the commander, but it was a different matter whether she’d wished for such a thing. It made sense for her to be angry. If I wasn’t okay with that, I wouldn’t have thrown myself into battle to begin with. I quietly awaited my sermon.

“Um, you know,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Umm, you see...”

“Yes?”

Oh? What was with her? She wasn’t scolding me. She wasn’t acting as decisive as she usually did. Her eyes wandered, and after hesitating for a good while, she asked me a question instead.

“Right. Do you have something you want to say?”

“Me?”

“You got me back. There must be something.”

I hadn’t expected this. Still, if she was going that far, I had no choice but to comply. After thinking it over a little, I answered honestly.

“I don’t,” I said.

“Y-You don’t?” The commander acted a little flustered, her eyes looking somewhat shaken. “But despite saying that, you’re, um, in...”

“Love with you. I’m head over heels. Enough that I don’t mind throwing away

my life for you.”

“O-Oh. Right.”

“But it’s not like I want some kinda compensation for saving you or anything.”

“In other words...” the commander said, knitting her brow. “You have no desire to enter a relationship?”

“No! I totally want that! I want it like nothing else! But that, like, goes into a different stomach? It’s like a difference in interpretation? Like I don’t mind being a houseplant in a corner of a happy household?”

“You’re not making sense. Explain it in a way that I’ll understand too.”

“I’m saying... So long as you’re happy, that’s fine with me.”

It was a pretty immature thing to say. It was embarrassing, but these were my true feelings.

“I’m no more than a brat to you,” I said. “I’m not a man. I’m not of any romantic interest. I’ve known this for a long time.”

It was frustrating, but I still had a long way to go. In truth, I hadn’t even been able to protect her. I hadn’t been able to become her knight in shining armor.

“I have no interest in entering that kinda relationship by taking advantage of a debt of gratitude,” I said. “There’s no point to it unless you’re happy.”

“Is that so? Very well,” the command said, sighing and scratching her head. “What a fool. I am still royalty, remember? It’s normal to get married without feeling any love. And here I owe you enough that I wouldn’t be able to refuse if you pressed me for marriage. Good grief.”

“Ha ha ha. Sorry for being stupid.”

Would I come to regret this? No. Now wasn’t the time to be thinking of idiotic ideas like that.

“But you know, Mikihiko, you misunderstand,” the commander said. “People grow. Sometimes, they do so when you’re not looking. As such, you might not even realize that you’ve changed yourself.”

“Huh?”

I didn’t really get it. I cocked my head as she faced me with gentle eyes.

“You’re a man. That’s what I believe.”

I was speechless.

“Now then, that’s all for today. Sorry this dragged on,” she said.

“H-Hang on?!”

Wait! Wait! Wait! Wait a tick!

“One more time! Say that one more time.”

“I said that’s all for today.”

She shut me down coldly. However, illuminated by the runestone, the commander’s face looked red.



Huh? Seriously? Can I actually be hopeful? I felt restless. The commander was

acting bashful too, making the air awfully awkward.

Aaaah! I wanna bring it up again! I really, really wanna quip and bring it up again! But she was sure to get angry if I did. What's more, it would definitely trouble her. I couldn't do it. I absolutely couldn't do it. But I felt so awkward not to say anything. I tried to think of a topic we could shift to, when something suddenly caught my eye.

"Oh yeah, Commander?"

"What is it?"

"It's been bugging me for a while now. What's that?"

I turned her attention to the leather bag she'd brought in here. I was curious about it this whole time.

"Aah, this?"

The commander also looked relieved. It seemed this was the right answer. Freed from the awkward tension, I let out a sigh of relief.

This turned out to be a tremendous failure, though...

"Gerbera handed it to me," the commander said, holding up the bag. "What was it she said...? 'As thanks for the advice Mikihiko gave me, I made this based on what we discussed. Please open it together and enjoy it. Mikihiko will be pleased.'"

"What...?"

Thanks? For advice I'd given her? I wondered what it was. Now that I thought of it, Lily had mentioned something similar. *"I left you a gift as a thank you."* That was her message from Gerbera. So this was what she'd been referring to? What was she thanking me for, though? Advice I'd given her? Now then, what advice had I given Gerbera?

"Ah..."

I remembered. I'd definitely given her advice. It happened during our journey from Fort TIlia to Serrata. She'd come to me to discuss what kind of clothes she should make for Rose. I remembered giving it my all to draw up a plan on a piece of loose-leaf paper. I was actually pretty good at drawing. That said, I was

still at the level of a sprouting amateur.

Anyway, she didn't really need to thank me for that. When she was so innocently grateful about it, it actually made me feel guilty. After all, what I'd drawn was a slightly sexy maid outfit brimming with frills and lace. I'd insisted that all men loved it and that Takahiro would be pleased. It'd been a bit of a prank. Well, I was pretty sure it would've pleased him either way. Takahiro was a man too. Still, he was pretty straight-laced, so it was questionable on that front.

So, um... What did she say again?

"As thanks for the advice Mikihiko gave me, I made this based on what we discussed. Please open it together and enjoy it. Mikihiko will be pleased."

I turned pale. Judging by the way she worded it, Gerbera had no ill intent. She genuinely believed that "all men loved it" meant "I loved it." And to thank me for teaching her, she'd created one and had given it to the woman I had my heart set on. There was nothing but gratitude behind this act. If she'd designed it exactly as I'd drawn it, I was simply reaping what I sowed.

"Miki...hiko... This is..."

With a slightly sexy maid outfit brimming with frills and lace in hand, the commander trembled. I trembled too.

"Mikihikooooooo!"

"I'm sorryyyyyy!"

A roar and scream resonated over the campsite. And just like that, the everyday life I'd staked my life on recovering had come back to me.

Extra Story: A Dreamlike Moment *Katou Mana's POV*

After surviving the life-or-death struggle inside a fabricated world, we safely managed to reunite everyone.

The truth of the world had been revealed to us. Majima-senpai's status threatened the world, and the Holy Church considered it their greatest duty to protect the world. When I thought of what we had to do next, my head hurt.

That said, it wasn't something that could be done in the brief span of a day. There was no way I was going to come up with any great ideas with both my body and mind exhausted from the day's trials. So for now, recovering was more important.

Thus, after taking a short rest, I became Rose's puppet.

"Ummm...?"

I was seated atop her lap, being carried like a little doll. The arms she had around my waist were firm and refused to let go.

"Rose?"

"What is it, Mana?"

"I can't move."

She'd detained me the moment Majima-senpai went to talk to Kaneki-senpai. I was petite even for a girl, and Rose was about as tall as the average man. There wasn't much that could be done about how I was seated from a height perspective, but it was still embarrassing. Shiran and Gerbera, who were in the same tent as us, gave me painful looks. They didn't look at me like they were observing an odd scene. Their eyes were filled with kindness. I was glad both Lobivia and Kei were already asleep.

"I heard you were rather reckless this time around, Mana," Rose said, her voice a little stiff.

Uncharacteristically, there was a hint of obstinacy in her tone. That was enough for me to understand.

“Did I make you worry?” I asked.

Rose silently strengthened her hold on me.

“Sorry,” I said, placing my hand atop hers.

Now that I thought of it, back when Rose had done something really reckless, I’d lost all composure. Rose was very in control of herself seeing that she wasn’t crying and bawling, so I didn’t really have the right to say anything here.

It seemed I had no choice but to let her do as she pleased. Resigned to my fate, I let the tension out of my body. I was usually the one hugging her, so this was somewhat refreshing.

Judging that things had reached a good stopping point, Shiran and Gerbera joined the conversation.

“In any case, I’m glad everyone is safe,” Shiran said.

“Indeed,” Gerbera agreed.

“Are you all right, Gerbera?” Shiran asked. “Your complexion is a little poor.”

“Hm? Is that so? I wasn’t aware. I might in fact be rather tired.”

“You should get some proper rest today. My undead body doesn’t need sleep, so please leave watch duty to me.”

“I’ll also keep watch over the night,” Rose added. “Mana, make sure you get some good and proper rest too.” Pausing there, Rose suddenly cocked her head. “Aah, let’s have you share my master’s tent tonight.”

I felt my cheeks heating up. We’d already informed everyone of the situation, but having it said to my face like this made me very conscious of it.

“Things are going to get busy,” Rose continued. “Your feelings have finally been answered. We should at least make time for the two of you to be alone today.”

“R-Right...”

I’d lost all composure at this point and was still unable to move within Rose’s

arms.

“Truly, congratulations,” Rose added with a smile. “I’m looking forward to the baby you two have.”

“Hwah?!”



My face felt like burning iron. She was jumping the gun. She was skipping far

too many steps. Much like his other servants, Rose's sensibilities were different from those of a human. These things had to be taken step by step. But even as I tried to protest, my words spun in circles with nowhere to go inside my head, and my usually fluent tongue refused to move.

"You're capable of bearing my master's child, after all," Rose added happily.

"Rose...?"

"As a puppet, it's something I cannot do."

My mind cooled down in an instant. This felt like a prick to my heart. I didn't know that my best friend thought that way. Although, it would actually be unnatural not to think of such things when she had someone she loved who also loved her back. I'd been at a standstill at the very first step for so long, so Rose had reached this stage first.

I never thought I'd be the trigger for us to talk about this. I had no idea what to say.

"No, that's not necessarily true, Rose," Shiran said.

"Shiran?" I called, exchanging looks with her.

"Magical puppets reproduce by creating a new puppet, correct?" Shiran continued. "Monsters segment a part of their mana off and grant it to their child. In that sense, magical puppets are no different from any other race."

"Yes, that is true," Rose confirmed. "However, unlike other races, the child will be exactly the same as the parent who made it."

"Yes. If the mana were the same, that would be the case. But what if the mana is mixed? Wouldn't it be a different story?"

"Forgive me, I don't really understand," Rose said.

"I'm saying you should ask for mana from Takahiro. If you pour mana from the two of you into a child, what else would you call it but a baby the two of you made together?"

Rose started and stiffened behind me. She hadn't thought about that, so this was quite a shock. I hadn't realized it either. I found it unexpected that Shiran had come up with this idea so quickly.

“In my case...” Shiran continued shyly. “I receive mana from, um...Takahiro’s fluids, but magical puppets can get mana from the atmosphere, right? In other words, you can absorb mana from the air you touch. The mana in the air is very sparse, so you should be able to gain much more by touching a living body.”

The idea had apparently come from her own experiences. Now that I thought of it, what about Shiran herself? Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible for her to have a child, but she was already completely different from a regular undead monster. So just maybe, there was a possibility for her too.

“Naturally, when it comes to making a child, you’ll need to absorb mana for a significant amount of time, and you’ll probably need to be deeply in contact with him,” Shiran said. “As lovers, you’ll have plenty of opportunities to do so.”

“I see... I see, you’re right,” Rose said. “In that case, it will be possible for me to receive my master’s mana.” Rose nodded repeatedly, deep in admiration. “Actually, I’ve received a significant amount up until now without even noticing it. This function is more like breathing to me than eating, after all. I do it unconsciously, so if I focus on it...”

Rose looked over my shoulder at her hand, gripping and opening it repeatedly.

“I can...have my master’s child?”

Rose trembled and squeezed me tight in her arms. I knew this was an expression of her irrepressible happiness, so I was delighted too.

“Isn’t that great, Rose?” I said.

“Yes.” Rose nodded, then turned a serious look at me. “But now that I think of it, a little of your mana is mixed in too. It’s not as much as I received from my master, though. We don’t share the deep contact of lovers, but we do touch pretty often.”

“Huh?”

“In that case, wouldn’t that make it a child between the three of us? Aah, that sounds even better.”

“Waaah?!”

Rose was so innocently happy. I had no idea how to react to this normally impossible situation. And as this happened, Majima-senpai came back, my eyes shooting open as he entered the tent.

“Ah, but first, we should start with Mana’s ba—”

“Wait, Rose! Majima-senpai is back already!”

◆ ◆ ◆

Immediately after that, it was time to rest for the day. I moved to another tent to get some sleep. Just as Rose suggested, I was in the same tent as Majima-senpai.

I was extremely nervous. Majima-senpai took a seat, and I sat down next to him. I was sitting on my heels with my hands on my knees, my body naturally curling up a little.

The tent wasn’t all that large. Still, there was more than enough space for both of us to sleep in it. Yes. Just the two of us.

My face turned red with enough vigor that I thought I could hear a kettle steaming. Rose’s words twirled around in my head nonstop. A baby. There was a necessary act to creating one.

No. No. No. That was impossible. But if he asked me... No, no, no.

“Katou.”

“Yesh?!”

He called out to me, and I made a weird noise. I wanted to bury my head into the ground.

“Is your body all right?” he asked, smiling wryly and getting a little of my composure back.

“Oh, that. Yes. Thanks to you.”

My power as a visitor, the Abomination, was under control. Rather than say I’d returned to human form, it was more accurate to say I’d turned into human form. By being connected to Majima-senpai’s heart, I had settled into human

shape. If he wasn't here, there was still a risk I'd lose control.

"If only I healed you better," he said bitterly.

"That isn't something for you to fret over, Senpai," I said, suddenly grabbing his sleeve. "This is my problem."

"Katou..."

"Besides, this is another connection between us," I said with a teasing smile. "It might sound imprudent, but I'm just a little happy about that."

"You got me there," he said, smiling.

He probably thought it was a joke. I was half serious, though. He continued staring at me, a trace of a smile still remaining on his gentle face.

"Got it. I'll stop worrying about this for nothing," he said. "But can I say one more thing?"

"What is it?"

"Katou, you said it's your own problem, but that's where you're wrong. It's *our* problem."

"Yes..."

Unable to stand it any longer, I placed my head on his shoulder. A gentle warmth—something I'd once given up on but had wanted so much.

I recalled the days ever since I was in that mountain hut. After so much help and kindness, I'd finally grasped his hand. I was so happy now.

If this was a dream, I didn't want to wake up. If this was reality, I wanted someone to make me feel like it was real.

I looked up at him with those thoughts in mind, and he reached out to touch my cheek. He lifted my jaw just a little, and without resisting it, I closed my eyes in a dreamy state.

The sweet sensation against my lips told me that this wasn't a dream.

Chapter 18: Once More to the Capital

After linking back up and sharing all the important information we had—leaving out the truth of this world to the Akerians with us, of course—we rested for the day. My companions and I healed ourselves of the exhaustion of having overcome death.

The same went for everyone else who'd escaped from that fabricated world. Mikihiko and the commander were talking about something among themselves. I was sure they had plenty to say to each other, so I let them be. Partway through, I heard something like a screaming apology, which had me a little curious. Well, they had their own relationship going, so maybe this was proof that they got along. Drawing undue attention to it would be insensitive.

In contrast, I was worried that Iino was talking a lot less. Her expression was constantly stiff, and her eyes looked like she was tormenting herself over something. Because of the battle in the fabricated world, she'd taken a severe wound to her greatest weapon—her leg. But that probably wasn't the reason behind her turmoil. I'd already heard of what she'd gone through inside the fabricated world.

The Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya, a former member of the exploration team, believed he could go back to our world and had sided with our enemy to achieve that goal. Someone she believed to be Kouzu Asahi, the failed visitor who was being sheltered in the capital, had also been present. Both had been her comrades in the exploration team. This was definitely a shock to her. She was so depressed that I felt a little worried about her.

At any rate, after a night's rest, Shimazu would be able to recover somewhat and use Fairy Ring again. So, we got some well-needed sleep.

The next day...

"I'm thinking of returning to the capital," Gordon said.

He and his subordinates had fought by Shiran's side during this incident. However, as Harrison's subordinates, they could be enemies. Because of that,

we'd had them disarm themselves and they were now being treated somewhat like prisoners of war. To be more precise, Gordon had requested he be treated this way. He was as honest as ever.

Considering the importance of the information and the confidentiality required, Gordon was the only one among the knights that I'd informed of what we'd learned from Harrison. This wasn't a situation he could come to grips with without knowing about it, and he'd strongly wished for me to tell him. I wasn't sure whether it had been the right thing to do, though.

"For Sir Harrison to do such a thing..."

When I told him about it, Gordon had seemed considerably distraught.

"But that makes sense to me. That's the sort of thing he cannot tell me about. Or I suppose there was no purpose in telling me. I don't believe I'll ever be able to cut down the innocent..."

I was sure that, when it came to simply protecting humanity from the threat of monsters, Gordon would fight with more courage and sense of responsibility than any other. However, that wasn't enough for this situation.

"If protecting the world is the true duty of a knight of the Holy Order, then that is a duty I cannot fulfill..."

He wasn't capable of killing a person. He wasn't going to become my enemy. I knew this, which was why I'd told him about the truth of this world. The more people I could trust to be tight-lipped about it, the better. However, I had fears about how Harrison would treat him now that he knew about the truth he wasn't supposed to know.

"Do you have to go back?" I asked.

"I must," Gordon answered.

I was planning on asking Gordon if he would come back with us to Aker, but his will was strong.

"Understood. I'll try asking Shimazu," I said.

"Thank you very much."

As a result, choosing to respect his will, I sent him and his subordinates to the

capital using Fairy Ring. Iino accompanied Shimazu as an escort alongside me, Lily, and a few others.

Naturally, we saw them to the capital, but not to the Holy Church's headquarters. We kept a respectful distance from the grand cathedral, just in case. With so much power gathered together, we weren't in any danger this way. Besides, we were planning on using Shimazu's ability to return right away.

Our one other objective was, if possible, to contact the exploration team's leader, Nakajima. If we could talk to him, we could make sure the church didn't plant any strange ideas into his head. This part of the plan depended on how things went, though.

Incidentally, we still hadn't fully discussed this nor had we made a proper decision, but in the event that we couldn't contact the exploration team, we were planning to return to Aker right away.

This wasn't simply to put some distance between us and the Holy Church's headquarters. This was a move toward a new stage. One of my objectives now that I knew the truth of the world was to come in contact with a Dimensional Cornerstone.

To modify the World View, to make this a place that would accept us, it was absolutely necessary for us to acquire a Dimensional Cornerstone, one of the magic tools that maintained and controlled the world itself.

However, the Holy Church managed the Dimensional Cornerstones, so it wouldn't be that easy to get one. So long as Harrison, the man who prioritized the world's protection above all else, declared us as enemies, it would be impossible for us to simply borrow one.

If we wanted to get one by force, the only option was to attack the church. If we did that, the entire Holy Order would be against us. If handled poorly, it was possible the exploration would be our enemy too. That option was obviously off the table.

That would leave us in a stalemate, but that wasn't really the case. We did have one other idea. The Holy Church had assembled all the Dimensional Cornerstones, but there was one exception. In fact, that was the one we'd learned of first.

For a long time, Draconia had been protected by the Mist Barrier. This had been maintained by the Dimensional Cornerstone that the Misty Lodge Salvia had given them. Unfortunately, Draconia had been destroyed by visitors. After returning to investigate, Ella had reported to me that they hadn't been able to locate the settlement's Dimensional Cornerstone. However, we still had one other lead.

The settlement had been given two Dimensional Cornerstones. I'd even seen the other one before. It was in the possession of the settlement's explorer, Thaddeus. The young man who'd led us to the settlement had the duty of locating another spot where their world of mist could be deployed. He was supposed to be traveling in the vicinity of Aker right now. If we could get in touch with him, we'd have access to a Dimensional Cornerstone. We'd also be able to research how to overwrite the World View.

With the Fairy Ring and the Skanda on our side, we could return to Aker right away, but the church couldn't. Normally, it would take four months to cover that distance. Now that Harrison's special forces were annihilated, he would need time to reform them, giving us plenty of time to conduct our research.

Also, regarding how we would get in touch with Thaddeus, he'd given us a means to do so when we parted ways. It would take time for any messages to reach him, though. In truth, we'd yet to receive any contact from him in the month or so after informing him about Draconia's destruction.

That said, a fair amount of time had passed, so it was about time for the message to reach him. More than half of Draconia's residents had stayed behind in Aker's palace, so he was sure to be getting in touch with them soon.

If things went well, by the time we returned to Aker, we would already be able to acquire a Dimensional Cornerstone.

That was our plan.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Everyone ready? Then let's get going."

The teleportation succeeded without a problem. We were in the room Shimazu had been using in the capital, located inside the palace. A fair amount

of time had passed since she started staying here, so she had a lot of personal effects. It was all very neat and tidy, giving off the impression of a girl's room.

In any case, we were in the imperial capital now. Someone sensitive might've noticed the mana used for the Fairy Ring's teleportation. We predicted that some of the exploration team members would notice and come by to check.

We had two of their upper brass with us, Shimazu and Iino. By talking with them, the members who dropped by could go get Nakajima for us. If that was out of the question, we would withdraw immediately. And as our plans ran through my head, Lily raised her voice.

"Huh? I-Isn't that...?"

She sounded shocked. She stared out the window, so naturally, everyone followed her eyes. As a member of the exploration team, Shimazu had been assigned a nice room. The large window looked down over the beautiful townscape of the capital.

Looking out it now, we could see a building even more splendid than the imperial palace towering over its surroundings. It was a solemn white structure —the Holy Church's grand cathedral. Its main temple was an enormous dome in the center, and it was connected to six gigantic steeples that shot off into the heavens. That was supposed to be the case, but the scenery I saw before my eyes was different.

"It's missing steeples...?"

I noticed the abnormality right away. What was supposed to be six steeples was now four. One of the missing steeples was broken right down the middle, exposing its cross-section. The other one we couldn't see any hint of from our position. It might have collapsed entirely.

And that wasn't all. Taking a closer look, the other four towers showed signs of damage. The delicate sculptures were broken, and pieces of the pure white wall had crumbled every here and there.

We'd only spent one day away from the imperial capital. However, in that short time, the greatest authority in this world—the ones equipped with the strongest military force, the Holy Church that governed over the peace of the

world—now had their very symbol, the grand cathedral, exposed in such a miserable state.

“What on earth...?”

Someone’s muttering rang ominously in my ear.

This incident wasn’t over yet.

The world was approaching its destruction.