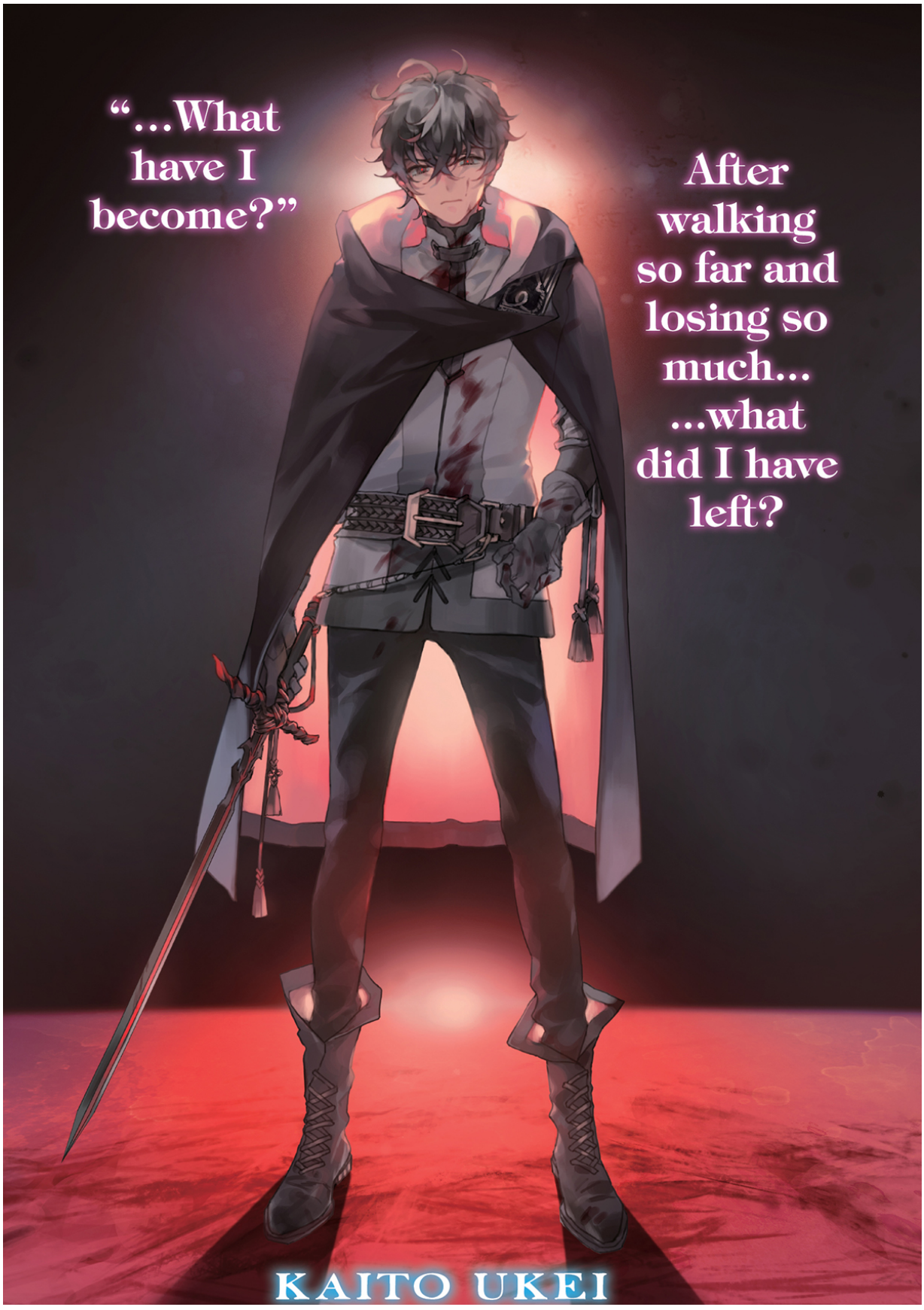
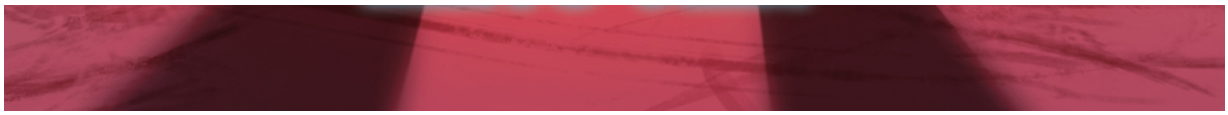

The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of VENGEANCE a Second Time
FINAL
8 The Eternal Avenger
NERO KIZUKA


And then that poisonous flower again, in full maddening bloom.
PRINCESS ALICIA OROLLEA
"Very soon now, this world shall be cleansed."
GODDESS LUNARIS




METELIA
LAURELIA
NONORICK
MAI UKEI
SHURIA
MINNALIS
LETICIA LU HARLESTON


"...What have I become?"
After walking so far and losing so much...
...what did I have left?
KAITO UKEI



The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of VENGEANCE a Second Time

8 The Eternal Avenger

NERO KIZUKA
Illustration by SINSORA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of Vengeance a Second Time, Vol. 8

NERO KIZUKA

TRANSLATION BY JAKE HUMPHREY • COVER ART BY SINSORA

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NIDOME NO YUSHA WA FUKUSYU NO MICHI O WARAI AYUMU Vol. 8 EIEI MUKYU NO FUKUSYUSHA
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First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
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First Yen On Edition: June 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Maya Deutsch
Designed by Yen Press Design: Eddy Mingki, Wendy Chan

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Kizuka, Nero, author. | Sinsora, illustrator. | Humphrey, Jake, translator.
Title: The hero laughs while walking the path of vengeance a second time / Nero Kizuka ; illustration by Sinsora ; translation by Jake Humphrey.
Other titles: Nidome no yusha wa fukushuu no michi wo warai ayumu. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021038196 | ISBN 9781975323707 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975323721 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975323745 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975323769 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975323783 (v. 5 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PL872.5.I97 N5313 2021 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021038196

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9196-6 (paperback)
978-1-9753-9197-3 (ebook)

E3-20250429-JV-NF-ORI

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The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of VENGEANCE a Second Time

NERO KIZUKA

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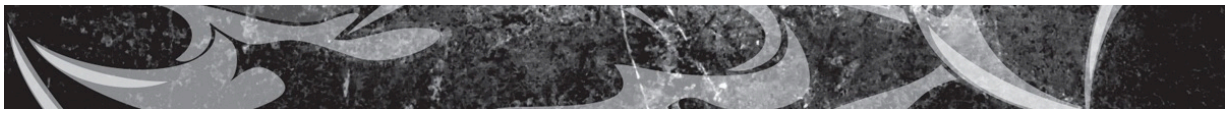
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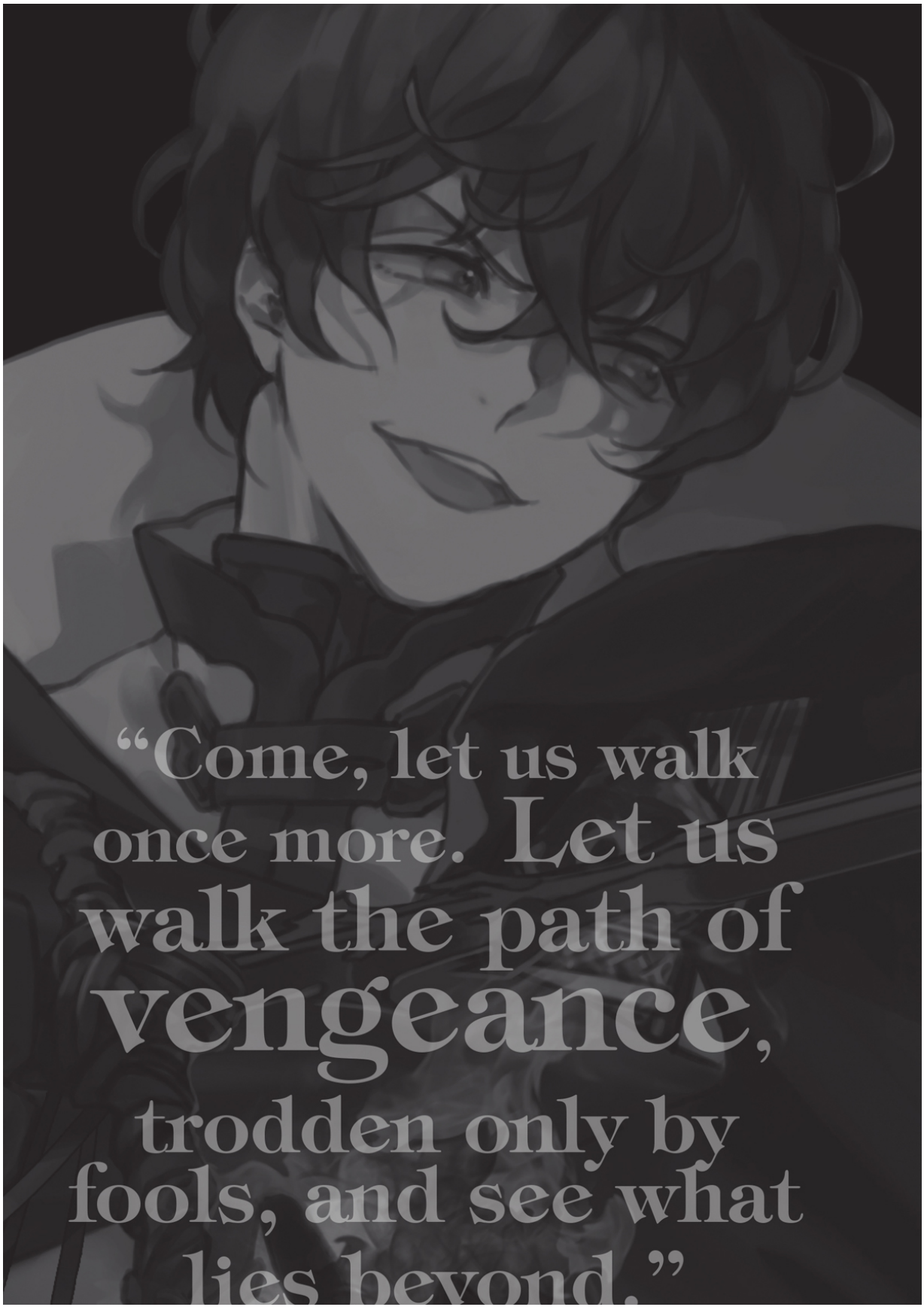
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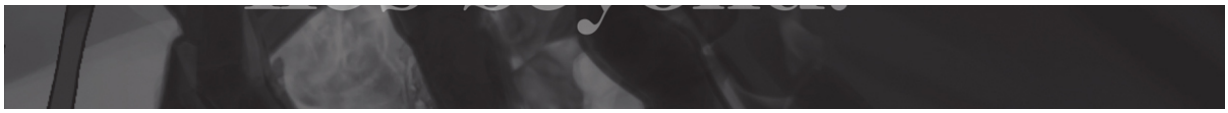
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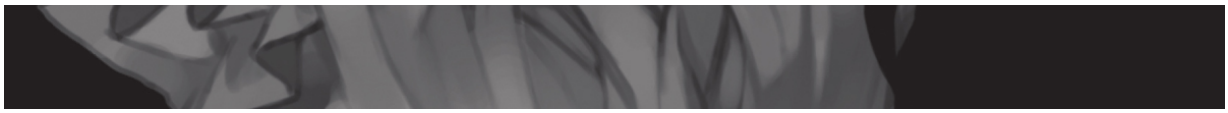
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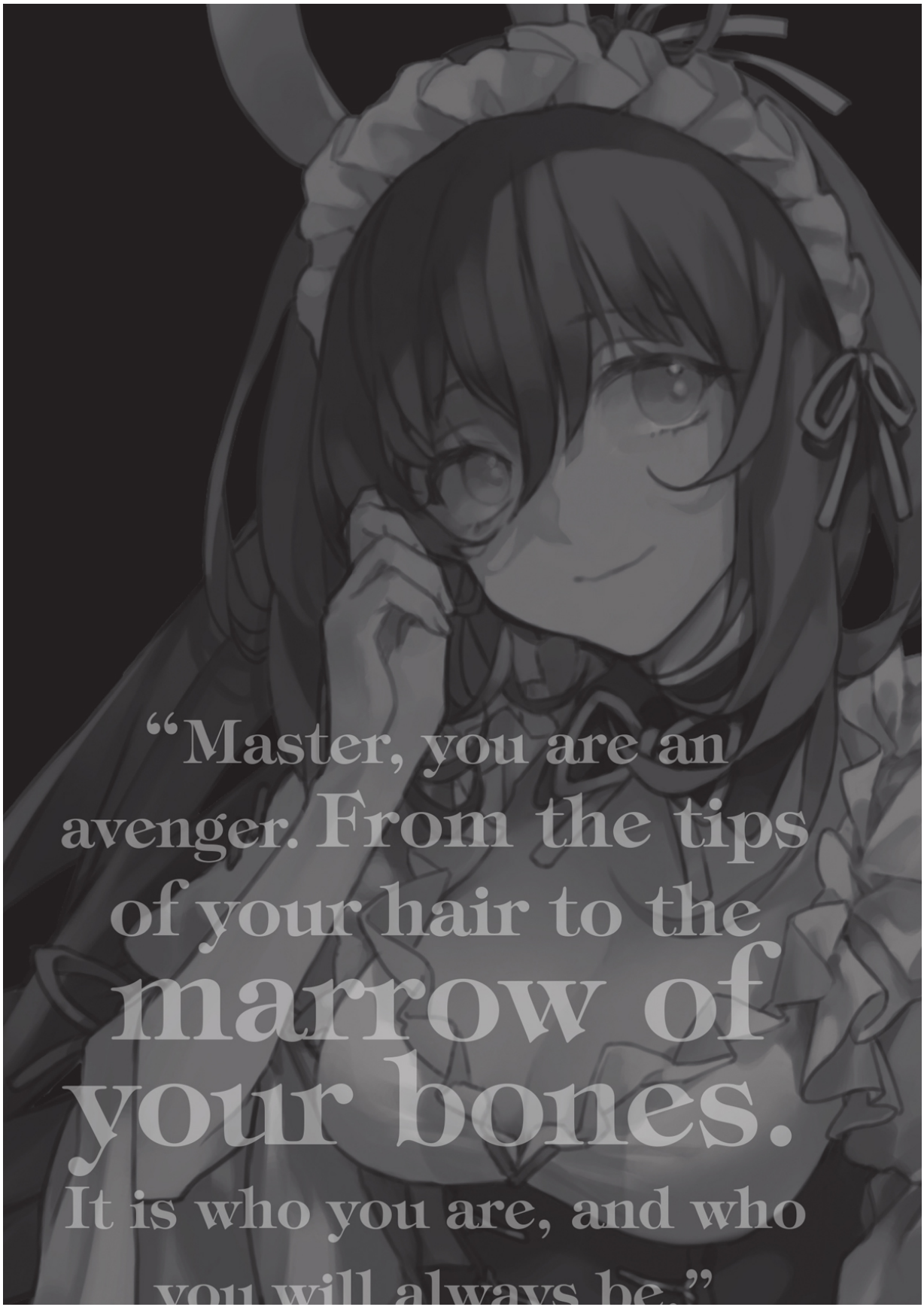



“Come, let us walk once more. Let us walk the path of vengeance, trodden only by fools, and see what lies beyond.”

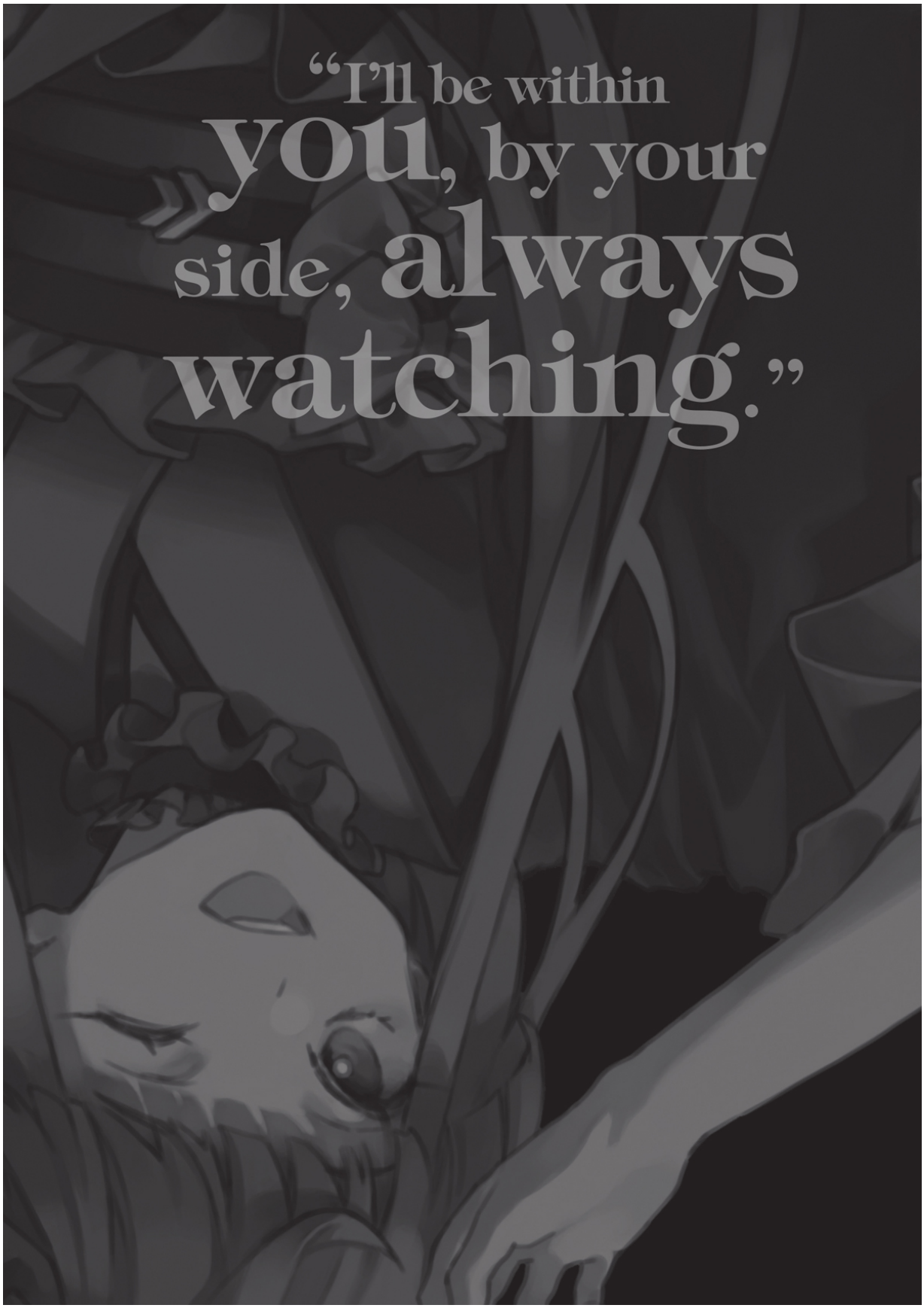



“I did it! I did it! I finally exterminated that rotten, oversize pest!”

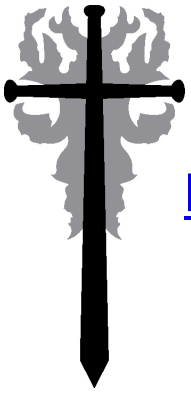



“Master, you are an avenger. From the tips of your hair to the marrow of your bones.
It is who you are, and who you will always be.”




“I’ll be within
you, by your
side, always
watching.”





PROLOGUE

I've not stopped walking.

I've followed the black flame that coils around me, even as I feel it leading me down and down, deeper and deeper into a dark swamp.

What lies at the end of this path, I don't know. There may not be anything at all.

…But I don't think that bothers me.

I keep walking as sharp barbs and thorns draw blood from my feet.
As each breath sucks black muck into my lungs.
As fire steadily devours everything I see.
As a biting frost eats me away.

I accepted all of that when I chose this path. I swore that whatever came my way, I'd take it all.

The alternative was to hold my breath, to pretend that none of it

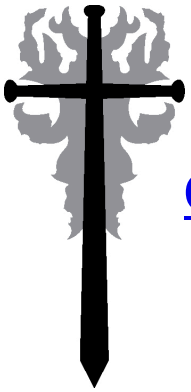
ever happened.

I couldn’t do that. Because the pathetic slob at the end of that road was no longer me.

Through it all, I have never stopped.

The moment I stop is the moment it all ends.

Whatever happens, I will keep on walking.



CHAPTER 1

Dividing Lines

The world blurred and swirled, and my insides churned.

"G-grh…"

It was common for teleportation spells of this magnitude to induce symptoms not unlike those of mana withdrawal. My mind was rendered momentarily blank.

"…Where am I?"

Clutching my head, I looked around to find myself in a sterile white space. The floor, walls, and ceiling were spotless, and I couldn't even see where one ended and the others began.

Around me were my fellow partners in crime, all groaning, suffering from much the same effects as I was.

Minnalis, Shuria, Leticia, Mai, Nonorick, and…?

"Y-Yuuto…?"

As soon as his name left my lips, memories of the last few minutes hit me like a camera flash.

Traveling to the Lunarian See, witnessing the murdered bodies of Metelia and Ardelius, and the sudden appearance of Alicia and the girl claiming to be the goddess Lunaris. The Offshoot army, the high elf, his invitation to Yuuto, and Yuuto's acceptance…

And then the scorching light that took them both away.

"…I have to go back."

I got up and conjured one of my soul blades, the Transcendent Blade of Translocation. As I channeled all my mana into it, the blade flickered and flashed, agitated by my emotions.

A moment later, however, I heard a cry of, "Settle down, you nincompoop!" and the next thing I knew, I was enveloped in a purple mist that neutralized the flow of my magical energy.

I looked to see Leticia rise to her feet, her face twisted in fury.

"Don't try to stop me!" I yelled at her. "I need to… I need to…!"

"D-don't do it, Master!!"

"Calm down, Kaito!!"

Minnalis and Shuria ran to my sides, grabbing hold of me.

"Grh! Let go of me! I have to go! I have to… Or else… Rgh!!"

Or else I'd lose him.

I didn't want to. I couldn't lose anything else!!

"Let me go! If you don't, I'll have to use force… Grh!!"

"Oh dear. Could you please try not to look so pathetic?"

That voice took me completely by surprise. At first, I thought its bearer had come out of nowhere, but my spine stiffened when I realized they had been there all along.

I spun around to see a strange green-haired girl.

"Now, where are you going, leaving your injured sister behind?"

"Oh…"

"Whatever. Healing first, then we can talk. *Full Recure.*"

She thrust out her palm, emitting a mist of pale green motes that sank into Mai's wounds, healing her completely. The girl's statement had made me freeze out of guilt, and in that moment, a deep-blue cord of mana materialized around my neck. Immediately, my strength left me, and my arms fell limp to my sides. The cord must have been infused with some kind of curse magic.

"Don't you remember the story of Humpty Dumpty?"

"Wh-who are you…?!"

She looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place her. But that

wasn’t important right now!

“You can’t put a broken egg back together. You should know that better than anyone.”

“Sh-shut up!”

I filled my body with mana to resist the strength-binding cord. That allowed me to move slightly, but not enough to break free.

“I’m grateful you healed Mai, but stay out of my way!!”

I flared up like a bonfire once more, desperate to escape.

“First off, what are you even going to do once you get back there?” the girl asked.

I don’t know. Why should I care?

I just have to get back, and then…

“Are you going to go mad and try to avenge him? Yuuto, was it? Or are you going to search the floor for his bits?”

“Shut up!! Dammit, get this thing off me…!!”

I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want to hear it.

“Rrrrrrggghhhhhh!!”

My anger boiling, I poured in every ounce of mana I had, and eventually, the restraint flew apart.

“Hey! That thing was based on magical curse theory, thank you very much! Seriously, we had a perfectly coherent unified magical theory going on here, and then you all had to come along and ruin it.”

The skin on my neck was bleeding where the restraint had been, but I didn’t feel the pain. I had more important things on my mind.

“…*Sigh*. It looks like you have some cooling off to do. Why don’t you take a little nap?”

“G-guhh!!”

Something flew past Minnalis, Shuria, and Mai, and the next instant, I felt a small but powerful jolt through my whole body. It accompanied a feeling of powerlessness even greater than the one from just before. The casting was so swift, yet precise, I couldn’t even register what had happened. All I could do was sink into unconsciousness, my bonfire smothered once more by a shovelful of dirt.

As always, her magic was so fast that by the time I noticed it, the tiny green spark had already made it past me and into Master, rendering him limp.

"Uh-oh."

I don't know if it was me or one of the other girls who said that, but we all began to fall, dragged forward by Master's weight, when…

"What are you playing at?"

Before we hit the ground, some kind of telekinetic force lifted up all four of us. The demon lord Leticia lowered Master gently onto his back, and placed the three of us—me, Shuria, and the black-haired girl—on the ground.

"Oh, how remarkable. I had heard of the current demon lord's proficiency for magic, but that's really not bad. I'd like to be friends with you, if you don't mind."

"…Sorry, I'm afraid I have a score to settle with someone who looks an awful lot like you," Leticia replied. "In fact, I thought you were them at first, but it seems not. Regardless, that will likely put a damper on any efforts at friendship."

"O-oh, I see. I understand. Well, in principle, anyway. I suppose I should be grateful you didn't sucker punch me as soon as we met."

The girl shrugged. Leticia eyed her suspiciously.

"From the way you talk," she said, "It sure sounds like the two of you are related."

"Well, I won't say we're unrelated," the girl answered. "It all depends on how you look at it."

"…I wonder if Guren got left behind?"

"Don't worry about that. I picked him up before you."

"…Well, thank you for that, anyway."

Leticia cut her questions short and went over to look at Master.

"He was so tough, I had to step up the magic a little to compensate," said the green-haired girl. "It was originally developed to work on gods, so it was especially effective against him. But don't you worry; it shouldn't cause any serious injury."

The girl then turned her back on us, as though whatever happened to Kaito now was none of her concern.

"W-wait a minute! Who are you? What did you to my dear

brother?!”

“Don’t worry, he’ll wake up—in a few days. Before that, though, I have to help my friend. Excuse me for one moment.”

With that, the green-haired girl took a glass beaker from her pocket, uncorked it, and spilled the silvery liquid within onto the floor. The silver puddle immediately adopted the form of a small humanoid that went over to pick up Metelia’s body, which had been teleported along with the rest of us.

“If you want to know how you’ll be spending those few days, just ask Minnalis and Shuria. Perhaps you haven’t noticed this yet, but you’re even more damaged than you look. That’s because you were in the presence of a god without the necessary precautions, you see. You’re not a follower, and you only indirectly benefited from the hero’s blessing. I’m surprised you’re even awake, if I’m being perfectly honest.”

“Wh-what are you—Huh…?”

The black-haired girl tried to stand but fell back on her rear, as if her feet had disappeared.

“Now if you’ll excuse me for a moment,” the green-haired girl said, “I need to go and help one of my only friends in this world.”

She strode over to the wall, and as she did, a wooden door appeared. The girl exited through it, and after she left, the door transformed into an empty wall once more.

“…Just who was that?” asked Leticia after she was gone. “She might be even better at magic than me! And her soul doesn’t seem human…or demon, or beastfolk, or elf, or anything!”

Leticia’s eyes narrowed as she muttered her misgivings. It was Shuria who answered her questions.

“That was Towako Kuroi!” she said.

“Kuroi? A strange name indeed…”

Leticia frowned, but it was the black-haired girl who had the most extreme reaction to that name.

“Did you say…Towako Kuroi? B-but that’s…”

This time I answered, following on from Shuria’s words.

“Yes,” I said. “Towako is from Master’s world. And what’s more…”

"…she was the hero before him."

☆

The world is divided by lines.

Lines that separate white from black. Lines that separate light from dark.

"Good girl, Alicia."

She was a wonderful person, my dear big sister Lamnecia.

My goal was to be a great princess like her.

I always thought the world was one big, connected place.

I always thought those happy days would go on forever.

But that all changed the day Lamnecia was killed.

"Mother? Wh-what did you just say?"

"…Your sister is dead."

One day, my beloved big sister was taken away from me.

I was still young at the time, and the news sent me into shock. It was only after overhearing the maids' gossip that I learned the truth.

"Hey, did you hear about the princess? The older one, I mean!"

"Oh, it's so sad. How she died protecting a beastfolk child from monsters on her way back from the empire?"

"It's tragic, that's what it is. And what were the royal knights doing? They were with her, right? Why didn't they protect her?"

"Apparently, they'd all been left with the empire for joint training. It was just bad luck."

Lamnecia fought monsters to save a child? And she died?

Why? Why? Why?

Why was she killed for trying to help someone? Why was she killed for doing something noble?

Lamnecia always treated everyone with respect; even beastfolk in a nation that despised them.

She wanted to end discrimination, even though some people didn't like her for that.

Is that why they did it?

Is that why they let her die?

…If only there were no monsters.

…If only there were no beastfolk children.

…If only there were no other countries.

The dark ideas that took root that day grew alongside me.

But I never let those feelings out. I ignored them; closed my eyes, blocked my ears, held my breath. I knew something would break if I did otherwise.

Not thinking about it was simple. I had duties of the utmost importance to attend to. Duties that had once been my sister's, that had now fallen to me.

People said my sister was the reincarnation of the prophetess who founded this country. Her sensitivity to the divine had been so great she could hear the Great Spirit's voice clearly. By contrast, it took such monumental effort for me to even partially replicate Lamnecia's feats that I had no time for anything else.

Day after day, I endured harsh training to hone my magic while also taking lessons in court manners and education, learning everything I would need to know to assume the duties formerly expected of my dearly departed sister.

And then, once I surpassed her age at death, and I was no longer a child, I heard the voice of the Great Spirit for the first time. My joy, however, was cut short by what little I could make of the fragmentary message.

For it told that someone close to the royal family had dealings with the demons.

This person was well-respected in the royal court, and my word alone was not enough to indict him. As I searched for more evidence to back up my claim, however, I inadvertently drew his notice, and

he fled the land, covering his tracks.

Then, a few days later, he appeared before me. Perhaps he wanted to distract the kingdom from his misconduct, or maybe he was simply tying up loose ends. Either way, he wanted to kill me.

But I still couldn't bring myself to believe that someone out there was allying with the demons. And so I foolishly asked my would-be assassin this question.

"Why did you do it? Answer me! Why have you sided with demons?!"

"Why? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

He returned only scornful laughter. And then…

"Haven't you figured it out yet? It's because I'm *a demon!!"*

"What…?"

At that moment, it was like a huge hammer had split my head in two.

This man had not simply been allying with demons—he *was* a demon.

All I felt was a sense of revulsion. That one simple fact—that a man standing right in front of me, who looked just like a human and talked like a human, was not one—disgusted me beyond everything else.

"You humans truly are a gullible lot. But thanks to that foolish trust, I was able to kill both of you!"

"Wh-wha—?!"

As I stood there, at a loss for words, I heard the utterance that caused my world to come crashing down.

Both of you.

If I was one, then who else was he talking about? Who had he killed before me?

"Aah… Aaahhh… Aaaaaaaaaghhh!!"

In the end, the royal knights rushed into my chamber and cut down the fiend before he was able to harm me, but the damage had already been done. The fetters that had once bound my mind to

reason had been broken.

A few days later, an inquiry revealed that Lamnecia's death had been no accident, but the result of a nefarious plot concocted by demonkind. The infernal beings had infiltrated our society some time ago, all in preparation for that day, as part of a scheme to drive a wedge between the Empire and the Kingdom.

But I didn't care about any of that.

"Disgusting… Every last one of these contemptible fiends that get in our way. The world is full of them."

Ever since then, I saw the world divided by lines.

There were humans…

…and there were *things* that wore human skin.



The smell of flowers reached my nostrils. A warm, sweet, all-enveloping scent.

"Oh, Alicia. You're awake."

When I opened my eyes, I was greeted by the lovely smile of my dear elder sister, Lamnecia. I slowly roused myself from slumber to find that my head rested in her lap.

"What…is this…?"

A field of pink flowers spread out in every direction, occasionally caressed by the soft touch of the breeze. My memories slowly returned.

I remember now. I brought her back.

My dear Lamnecia! I brought her back to life again!!

The excitement made me feel giddy. I had succeeded in preparing a vessel daubed with divinity and had placed Lamnecia's soul into it. Now, my dear sister walked the world of the living once more.

Evidently, I had used too much mana in the process, causing me to pass out.

"You were sleeping quite soundly," Lamnecia said. "You're still such a child, Alicia."

"Oh!"

I was surprised as Lamnecia began stroking my hair with her long, pretty fingers. Her touch was soft and gentle, filled with love. This was the feeling I'd longed for. The warmth I'd lost on that day, so long ago.

"Oh dear, what's wrong, Alicia? You're crying."

With a gentle finger, Lamnecia wiped a single tear from my eye.

"It is nothing, Sister. Please don't worry."

"If you…say so…Alicia."

Suddenly, Lamnecia began to speak and move with awkward jerks, like a wooden puppet in need of oil. Her soul must not have grown accustomed to its new body yet.

"Oh…dear…I…feel…most…peculiar…"

"Worry not," I said, slowly raising my hand to Lamnecia's cheek. "Very soon now, this world shall be cleansed."

Yes, every last thing would be painted over in white, so that just like this garden, the only things in it would be Lamnecia and I.

No demons, no beastfolk, no elves, no monsters, not even gods. No heroes, no demon lords, no priestesses. Nobody to get in our way.

"So just you wait," I said, "a little while longer."

"…Really? If you…say so, Alicia, then it…must be true."

"Yes, very soon now, my flowers will cover the world. I will create a realm for just you and me. As long as we have each other, then nothing else matters, does it?"

"No…it…doesn't…"

Lamnecia ran her fingers unsteadily through my hair.

This time, I would protect her. I wouldn't let those fiends take her away from me. I would stay by her side, and she by mine, forever. That is why I had collected all these pawns.

There is no need for impurities in this world.

I closed my eyes. In the warmth of Lamnecia's lap, I reached my mind out to the pieces of myself scattered throughout the land.

☆

In a dark and gloomy space, a gray snow fell. It came down as if trying to smother the world, to draw time itself to a crawl.

"Hellooo? Anyone there? Kaito Ukei! Can you hear meee?"

"…"

Before my eyes, a pitch-dark figure stepped out of the ashen landscape. It had no eyes and no nose, only a mouth, like a rift in a featureless plain. Like a living shade.

"Hey, come on. Let's chat. The weather's been dismal lately, hasn't it? I hate rain; it's wet and irritating and it spoils my mood. Not to mention it gets your food moldy… Oh yeah, come to think of it, that fried gujabiya, or whatever the stall owner called it, was awful, so bitter and sour. I think it had gone off, you know. I can't believe you ate the whole thing—are you nuts? If it were me, I'd just have taken one bite and thrown the rest in the trash. Oh, and another thing, remember that inn we stayed at a while back? I don't remember the name, but whatever. The point is, remember those beds? It was like sleeping on a cloud…"

"…"

It just kept coming, like a faucet that wouldn't turn off. The weather, food, inns, the scenery, dreams, songs heard on the road, bits of this and that picked up along the way. Just an unstoppable flood of random crap that didn't matter.

"Hey, you alive over there? Even I'm starting to get bored, you know."

"…"

How much time had passed?

I felt like I was floating atop a lake.

Not wanting to do anything, not wanting to think of anything, not wanting to remember anything.

And so I said nothing.

I said nothing to the dark figure that addressed me. I simply closed my lips.

Closed my lips and shut my eyes.



"The hero…before Kaito?"

"Yes," said Minnalis. "She was summoned to this world just like him and fought against a demon lord in this world's past. At least, that's what she claims."

I thought back to what my dear brother had told me. According to him, heroes past had fought against armies of demons, had defeated demon lords, and had been returned to their own world. These tales were recorded in oral tradition, myth and legend, and even the teachings of the Church.

"Although, at this point, I'm starting to wonder if any of them really were sent home. I mean, I did get back in the end, so I guess it's possible…"

"…"

When Kaito told me that, I wasn't able to say anything in response. His eyes became unfocused, and he fixed them on the sky above.

"…Whatever happened, I hope they figured it out better than I did."

I couldn't tell what Kaito meant by that, but I couldn't bring myself to ask.

In any case, I concluded that the part about heroes being returned was to be taken with a grain of salt.

"So…"

"Don't think you can hide from me, foolish boy."

"Ouchie!!"

As I was about to rejoin the conversation, I heard bones cracking. I looked in the direction of the noise to see Nonorick being stepped

on and a man I didn't know doing the stepping.

"Hey, what's the big idea, treading on a cute little girl like me?! You're going to get Nono's clothes all dirty!! Move your feet!"

"Girl? Hah! You're a boy, boy, and you know it. Besides, it's your fault for trying to hide from me."

His silver hair was slicked back, and he was tall, muscular yet not overly so, with an expensive fur-lined robe dyed black and red. He wore pants, but above that there was nothing beneath his open robe, and I could see his bare chest.

"Ouchies! Are you still mad about what happened?!"

"No. I am a lord, and I can ill afford to hold a grudge over each and every trespass. It matters not to me that you stole from my castle, or that, like the wretch you are, you pilfered my rare wines and fruits for yourself, or that you took my treasured swords and fled my kingdom."

"It sounds like you *are* mad!!"

"Well, I'm not."

"Anyway, it's your fault for locking me up in such a boring place!"

"If I recall correctly, you were the one who came to me seeking solace from a horde of dragons *you* angered. Did you not think there were limits to a lord's generosity? Hmm? Do you need me to crush some sense into you?"

"Owowowowow!!"

From what I could overhear, it seemed as if Nonorick and that gentleman had had some business together in the past.

"…Anyway, there's no sense waiting around here," said Minnalis. "Master needs to rest in a real bed. Everyone, come with me."

"If you can't move by yourself, I'll carry you!" chirped Shuria. "Get to work!"

She activated her magic, conjuring a team of shadows about ten centimeters in height. These dark figures, like toy soldiers, lifted Kaito onto a stretcher-like board and carried him away. Then I felt myself being lifted into the air and looked down to see I was receiving the same treatment.

As for Nonorick, the gray-haired gentleman picked him up by the scruff, like a cat, and carried him along.

"You," he said. "Rabbit. By whose authority do you give orders to royalty?"

"I wasn't asking you," Minnalis replied. "If you want to stay here, then by all means, please do."

"…You're all the same: Kaito, the rabbit, and the pointy-eared one. Not a shred of respect for lords."

As I was listening to the conversation another door appeared in the wall. It was much like the one the previous hero had disappeared through, made of wood but with a slightly different design. But while the first door was plain green with only a knob, this one had a motif carved into it that looked like a rabbit.

The door creaked open, taking us to a room that, while no less sanitary, was clearly more rustic than the previous one. It looked like the inside of a log cabin. There was a rusty lantern hanging from the ceiling, a small fireplace, a window with trees and sky outside, and a bed of simple make; there were also tables and chairs that had clearly seen some use, along with a small, neatly kept kitchen.

"I'm sorry it's not the largest room, but please, make yourself at home," said Minnalis with a pretty smile.

Shuria laid Kaito on the bed, while the other six of us took seats around the table.

"It's time for introductions, I think," she said, smiling sweetly. "I'll go first: I'm Minnalis, and as you can see, I'm a Lagonid—a rabbit beastfolk. I'm also one of Master's partners in crime."

The rabbit ears atop her head flopped adorably as she spoke. Her long, pretty, brown hair was tied up in a ponytail, and she wore a maid outfit that exposed the very un-Japanese shape of her breasts and hips. *Why a maid outfit, though?* I wondered.

Then the girl sitting beside her spoke.

"Me next! I'm Shuria! I'm a dark elf, and Kaito's partner in crime, just like Minnalis!"

She had smooth, cocoa-brown skin and silver hair. In true elven form, her ears were long and pointed, and they wiggled from time to time. She was wearing a *kimono*-like miniskirt dress that showcased her natural cuteness.

"Hmm. I suppose that makes it my turn," said Leticia, sitting next

around the table. “I am Leticia, the demon lord, and the latest to join Kaito’s contract, along with Nono there. However, I have been with Kaito this whole time, my soul carried in his body, so although I am meeting some of you for the first time, it certainly does not feel like it. In any case, it’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

Her deep, crimson hair flowed like a candle flame at night, and her piercing red eyes scanned the rest of us with intent. Her dress was awfully similar to the one Shuria was wearing, and it complemented her own cuteness nicely.

“Does that mean Nono’s next?” said Nonorick, giggling coyly. “Why, I’m a cutie-patootie, as you can tell, but I’m also a true vampire! Minnalis, Shuria, this is the first time we’re introducing ourselves, isn’t it? I hope we get along!”

He had shining blond hair, and eyes like tarnished gold. In terms of height, he appeared very much a child, like Leticia and Shuria, though the look on his face was very adult. This contrasted sharply with his outfit, which was reminiscent of military garb from Earth. I didn’t know if that was the intention, but the stark aesthetic difference amplified his charm.

When I first heard he was actually a boy, I hadn’t believed it.

At that moment, the gray-haired gentleman interrupted.

“You? A true vampire?” he said to Nonorick. “You have no right to call yourself that after abandoning your own kind.”

“Aww, forget about that! It was ages ago! Besides, I am a true vampire; it says so on my status board!”

“Your status board? Hah. The fact you place stock in such nonsense alone disqualifies you. Unless and until you repent, I shall never accept you as my own.”

Flatly ignoring Nonorick’s complaints, the gentleman turned and addressed us.

“I am Lord Godrick Adelheid, and since that foolish boy abandoned his heritage, I am the only true vampire left in this world.”

Even his introduction was dripping with arrogance.

“Phooey,” Nonorick sneered. “Lord of what, if you’re the only one? Why don’t you call yourself ‘Uncle Godrick?’ It’ll make you sound

much cuter."

"Hah. A lord does not require a domain to be a lord. A lord is a lord, will always be a lord."

Godrick laughed off the boy's insults without a second thought. The gentleman's words made absolutely no sense, but he said them with such gravitas that I almost believed him.

Godrick aside…the other four are all stunning beauties of a level I've never seen before. Grr… I've always scared nosy harpies away from my dear brother in the past, but now that they're all my fellow partners in crime, I don't much want to. Not to mention they are invaluable allies in our dangerous quest… Hmm, but…

At last, my turn arrived.

"I am Mai Ukei," I said. "I am Kaito's dearest little sister, who he loves more than anything else in the whole wide world. I must thank you all for being such good *friends* to *my* brother."

After I said that, the air froze.

I may not be able to chase anyone away, but I can still make it clear that I'm first and foremost in my dear brother's mind! …Grh!!

However, the next thing I felt was an overwhelming surge of emotion, sent to me though the spiritual magic of our contract.

…That emotion was relief and happiness.

"I see," said Minnalis. "I did guess as much. His little sister, you say. I see. I see."

"Tee-hee-hee," giggled Shuria. "I'm glad, I'm so glad."

"So Master managed to make it back home…"

"…and then he came back here."

The happiness was a result of Kaito making it back home to see his family, while the relief stemmed from the fact that he had come back. Their intentions were so blindingly pure that I felt a little sorry over how possessive I'd been, when…

"Well, I should have known *my* master would never leave me. I shall have to repay his *love* by *always* staying by his side from now on."

"Uh?"

"No, no, Minnalis. What Kaito needs right now is someone to take out his frustrations on. He can be as rough as he likes with me; I

won't mind. In fact, I'd like it! I'm getting excited just thinking about it! *I can satisfy all his needs by myself!*"

"Grh?!"

The instant I dared to feel remorse, the two women before me turned into completely different beings.

Minnalis and Shuria were both smiling, but the air around them seemed to crackle with sparks.

"Mrgh! What's the big idea?! Don't start catfighting without me! I'm Kaito's main wife, and the rest of you are all concubines, you understand that?!"

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of taking that spot from you, Leticia. I am happy just being a humble servant, and Kaito my gracious master… However, they do say that a man often drops old fancies for new ones…"

"Nraaah?!"

"That's right! I don't mind what you call it! Love takes all kinds of forms, after all! As long as Kaito needs me, that's good enough for me!"

"Ngrrrh?!"

Minnalis and Shuria wove their words of surface-level politeness with expert precision, causing Leticia to let out strange noise after strange noise, her face steadily becoming a cauldron of emotion.

Then she threw a tantrum.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no!! Kaito loves me most! He does, he does! I've been with him since before the world was reset! He's mine!"

…Oh! What am I doing? This is not the time to be standing around watching!! I must do something before my dear brother is snatched away!

"M-my dear brother does not belong to any one of you!!" I yelled.

I faced one giant obstacle for Kaito's affections that the other girls didn't have to reckon with. Being his little sister was in many ways an advantage, but the fact remained that the values our society had imprinted on him since infancy worked in my disfavor.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, all these girls would be supermodels back home… I need to show some initiative, or I'm

going to be left behind!

"B-but even at the longest, you have only known Kaito for what, five years? I have been by Kaito's side ever since I was born!"

"That doesn't mean anything!" said Minnalis. "It's not about the length of time, but the depth!"





“Well, then, my relationship was the deepest out of anybody’s here!” protested Leticia.

“That’s not true!” whined Shuria. “It’s me! I’m the one who Kaito __”

“But none of you have done it with him, right? You can’t argue over who’s Kai’s first wife or whatever if you haven’t even fucked yet.”

‟‟‟‟‟‟…”””””

Nonorick’s simple statement froze the air in a way I couldn’t ever have hoped to. All our words vanished in a puff of smoke, like a candle quenched by a jug of water.

“I don’t really care what number I am,” Nonorick went on. “Besides, doing it with all of us at once would be the most fun!”

He traced the line of his lips with his fingertip, revealing a coquettish grin.

‟‟‟‟‟‟…”””””

“U-um. Isn’t anyone going to speak? I feel all awkward now…”

‟‟‟‟‟‟…”””””

“Come on, somebody say something!!”

“…*Sigh.* How long will this farce persist…?” Godrick muttered.

It was a long time before any of us could bring ourselves to say a word.

In the end, it was Minnalis who recovered first. She stood up, and with practiced ease set about making tea in the kitchen.

“Now that the introductions out of the way,” she said, “let’s get back on topic. First things first, we’ll share what we learned about the origins of this world.”

A fragrant scent wafted from a china teapot that looked very much at odds with the rest of the room. By the time Minnalis came back to the table with a teacup for each of us, her expression was flawlessly calm.

"Hmph. Allow me to explain."

It was Godrick who spoke next.

"In the beginning," he said, "this world had no god. The only living creatures were monsters, possessed of minimal intelligence and lacking souls. One day, a capricious goddess saw this world and claimed it for her own. However, this goddess's work ethic was…less than satisfactory. Instead of creating intelligent beings from nothing, she took advantage of the creatures that lived here."

He lifted his teacup and inhaled, taking in its delicate aroma.

"First, she made us," he went on. "The true vampires. We sucked the blood of the native creatures, imbuing their vessels with souls. Of the beasts, we made the beastfolk. Of the trees, the elves, of the fire-dwelling monsters, the dwarves. All the while, the goddess slept, until such time as her new world was complete."

Godrick spoke as if reciting a holy text—the creation myth of this world. He sounded wistful, making me think he had seen it all with his own eyes.

Beastfolk, elves, dwarves… If they were all made from other organisms, then what about humans…?

I was intrigued by what Godrick had said, but he wasn't done yet.

"However," he said, "while the goddess was sleeping, a foreign presence invaded this world. A fallen god who had been stripped of their right to rule—their divinity. While our idiot goddess slept, this intruder expelled her from the heavenly realm and stole a part of her power for itself. Our goddess still possesses much of her original divinity, but alas, such power is next to useless outside the divine realm. All she could do with it was create a new sacred realm and hide there, out of the sight of the fallen god."

Here Godrick raised his cup to his lips and took a sip.

"The fallen god began hunting our goddess, seeking to take the rest of her divinity and become a true god once more. To that end, they created a race of beings with the ability to reproduce at an accelerated rate—the humans."

Godrick replaced his teacup gently on the saucer and exhaled.

"The humans quickly took root and multiplied. While weak, the fallen god had given them 'stats,' allowing them to gain power with

alarming rate. The humans developed agriculture, domesticated livestock, and spread across the land, giving the fallen god ample eyes and ears with which to seek our goddess. However, that was when another strange being interfered with this world."

"Another one?"

My reflexive utterance drew Godrick's gaze.

"Yes," he said. "We surmise it was the greater god responsible for stripping the fallen god of their divinity. This greater god wanted to play a game with the fallen god. They took the monsters of this world and evolved them into something more—the race of demons. These demons, however, differed from the other beings of this world in one important way: Since we were not involved in their creation, they were not imbued with souls."

"What difference does it make if they don't have souls?" I asked.

"Beings with souls can adapt and grow far more quickly," Godrick explained. "And those without souls covet this power. The race of demons inherited the brutal nature of their monstrous ancestors and waged war on the humans and the other created races. Then, the new god started using the demons to draw out the very life force of this world itself. The fallen god's search for our goddess became inconsequential. Now, this world was nothing more than a board for a game between two warring gods—the fallen one, and the higher one."

I could feel Godrick's voice becoming more and more grave. I don't think it was just my imagination. He remained as stony-faced as ever, but I could sense a gently simmering rage beneath the surface.

As for me, I felt like I was being front-loaded with a lot of unnecessary exposition. I couldn't really care less about how this world came to be. When was he ever going to get to the bit about my dear brother?

"I shall take over the explanation from here, if you don't mind."

"Ah! It's you!"

At that point, a lady dressed in a white robe entered the room. Her pale blue hair flowed like spring water, entwined in a single braid, and her eyes were the same color, as clear and reflective as the surface of a lake. She had pretty, delicate features and a large bust, but these all contributed to an overall motherly and benevolent appearance rather than a seductive one.

Metelia Laurelia.

The moment I laid eyes on her, I was struck with the urge to kill. My brother's hate ran like magma through my veins. But for whatever reason, I didn't experience the same all-consuming madness like I had when I'd first met Leon or Lilia.

Is it because I already watched her die in the cathedral of the Lunarian See?

There were also a few points of concern that blurred the lines in my brother's eyes when it came to Metelia.

She alone had never revealed her reasoning for betraying him.

When she had sent Kaito back to Earth, she'd seemed distressed.

And when we had gone to confront her about these things, we had seen her cruelly disemboweled.

My hate for Metelia was based solely on my brother's hate. As such, if he had his doubts about her, then so did I.

"" …""

I looked over to Minnalis and Shuria, who both seemed as disturbed as me by Metelia's presence. Standing before their eyes was the woman responsible for spiriting Kaito away from them. And yet they both watched her carefully, without jumping to anger. There had to be a reason for that.

If they could stay calm, then so could I. Besides, Kaito wanted to speak to her.

Still…we saw her heart ripped out. Kaito told us even magic can't bring back the dead in this world, because death irreparably damages the soul.

"Towako, is Metelia all right? It seems she was stabbed in the heart…"

Minnalis directed her questions about Metelia to the ex-hero.

"What kind of two-bit hack do you take me for? Sorcery, anatomy,

and alchemy are my fortes. A little heart-stabbing is nothing. In fact, Metelia's exceeded my expectations in every way. I was worried the soul wouldn't synchronize well, but she's lasted far longer than I predicted without any divergence. The soul of a woman in love is truly fearsome."

"It is only natural," Metelia replied. "Even if my soul is split in two, I shall never change who I am, and my love for Kaito will never waver. I have nurtured this love the whole time I have known him, and no amount of divine interference can change that. Yes, my love is unchanging, eternal, forever, unwavering. It is fate. It is destiny! It is absolute law! I am the priestess and Kaito is my…!"

At this point, Metelia's fit of words suddenly stopped, and her face grew grim.

"…Perhaps the indoctrinated half of me has not gone away after all," she said.

"Well, of course," said Towako. "It might have gotten stabbed in the heart, but it was a part of you for a long time. That sort of thing doesn't go away easily."

"Oh, how vexing, how troublesome. I never wanted to end up like this."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get over it," said Towako with a shrug. "You did manage to suss out the way this world works with only your mind, after all."

"Of course. My soul belongs to me alone, and my sole desire is to be by Kaito's side. That desire is far greater than a mere role can restrain."

"…You really are a fascinating creature, you know that?"

Towako smiled. It was then that Minnalis spoke up.

"We shall let you speak," she said to Metelia, "but please do not expect anything more than that. I have heard all about your circumstances, and I may even feel pity for you, but do not mistake our inaction for acceptance. Shuria and I are simply reserving our judgment. When we finally decide what to do with you, it will be Master's decision to make. We cannot promise you will like the answer, and we also cannot promise our fellow partners in crime will choose to be as patient as we are."

"I understand that," answered Metelia. "And I accept it. Whatever Kaito chooses to do, my heart will always be mine. That will never change."

Minnalis's harsh warning elicited nothing more than a warm and fuzzy smile from Metelia. She really was just like a saint. Her rigid determination caused my anger to flicker.

What is the meaning of this? Aren't you one of my brother's killers?

It seemed there was more to the story of which I wasn't yet aware, but that doubt wasn't enough to extinguish my hate completely. It remained there, hanging in the balance, giving me no small amount of turmoil.

Perhaps it'll help if I hear her out…

"Now, I don't suppose you could make room for me around this table of yours?"

""There's no room here for titty monsters!!"" Leticia and Shuria both screamed.

"Well, you two found common ground quite quickly, didn't you?" quipped Towako.

But they're right. Metelia's bust is off the charts. And to keep such a slim figure at the same time…

"Oh dear. In that case, I suppose I shall have to sit over here."

While I muttered to myself like an idiot, Metelia grinned and walked over to the bed where Kaito was lying, where there was a chair set up by its side. However, just as she tried to sit on it, the very room itself suddenly stretched lengthwise, moving the chair away and conjuring a new one in the empty space.

"Oh," said Metelia, her bottom finding a different seat than the one she expected.

"This is my room," said Minnalis, "and I'm afraid that chair belongs to me."

"Oh, well."

"Don't bother making a chair for me," said Towako. "I brought my own." She sat down in empty space, and a plush sofa, completely at odds with the room's rustic aesthetic, materialized beneath her.

"Now, I suppose this calls for more introductions," said Metelia.

"Oh, you don't all need to go again. Towako already shared everything you've discussed with me."

Metelia placed her hand to her chest and introduced herself.

"My name," she said, "is Metelia Laurelia. I was born as the priestess of this world, but I quit that role after falling in love with Kaito."

"You quit?" said Leticia, raising an inquisitive eyebrow. "What on earth does that mean?"

"Nothing more or less than that. I abandoned my post. I shall explain in more detail later."

Metelia gave a gentle smile and said nothing else.

"Right, guess it's me next. I'm Towako Kuroi. Or to you, young lady," she said, looking at me, "perhaps I should say *Kuroi Towako* instead? That's *'kuro-i'* as in 'black-well,' then *'to'* as in 'ten,' *'wa'* as in 'harmony,' and *'ko'* as in 'child.' I was first summoned to this world as the hero about three hundred years ago. A lot's happened since then, but basically, I'm shacking up in Luna's body these days. Oh, that's the name of the goddess Godrick was talking about earlier, by the way."

"…There's something I want to ask," I said. "Do you think I could do so after your explanation?"

"Sure. It'll probably be easier if I start with the basics. There's just one more introduction first, though… All right, Luna, come out and say hello already."

"Wawa?!"

There was a *Poof* and a slightly dumb-sounding voice, and a girl appeared who looked almost identical to Towako in every way. The only differences were that her hair and eyes were completely white, as were the clothes she was wearing. It made me think of the palette-swapped player two character from a video game.

After being expelled from Towako's body, this new girl floated around in the air like a balloon.

"U-um, hi, everyone? I'm Luna, a goddess… Um…been a while, hasn't it? I see you've come a long way since we last met…"

"…Oh, so you do remember," said Leticia, the veins on her forehead bulging. "Don't think I've forgotten the trials you put me

and Kaito through in that dungeon…”

“Oh, I remember, Kaito mentioned her when he was lovesick…”

“So that’s why that chatterbox has been so quiet today…”

I overheard Minnalis and Shuria mention the word *lovesick*, and my ears pricked up. I would have to interrogate Kaito about that after he woke up.

“W-wait! Calm down!! That was just a little joke!”

“Oh, just a little joke, was it? It was just a little joke? Well, I guess that’s okay then, if it’s just a little joke!”

“Right? I was just playing around a little! You won’t hold it against me, right? Right?”

“Of course not! Now, just turn your head this way, please.”

“Hmm?”

Thwack!!

Leticia’s fist connected solidly with Luna’s face.

“You liar!” the goddess squealed. “You tricked me!”

“Hmph! That’s the least you deserve! Be grateful I didn’t burn you to a crisp!” Leticia shouted.

“You’re just a big, mean meanie! Look, my cheek’s swelling up now!”

It seemed letting out her anger had done little to soothe Leticia, and she still fumed while Luna whined and wailed like a baby.

Just then, the atmosphere became a hundred times heavier as Godrick began to speak.

“Cease your prattling, fools. A lord’s mercy can only go so far. Keep this infernal charade up any longer, and so help me…you will regret it.”

It was all I could do just to breathe. But Godrick’s terrifying presence didn’t seem to bother Towako in the slightest.

“Calm down, big fella. It’s not worth getting annoyed about. Still, we’d better get back on track. I know I like to blather, but I’ll try to keep things simple so that everyone can understand.”

“Hmph. Fine. But if things get out of hand again, I shall return to my chamber.”

And with that, the oppressive atmosphere vanished like a light turning off.

"Now that the introductions are out of the way, let's continue," said Metelia. "Godrick told you all about how this world came to be, now I shall tell you about the charade constantly playing out upon it. I shall tell you of the hero, the princess, the priestess, and the demon lord, and what those roles entail."

After giving a suitably dramatic pause, Metelia launched into her explanation. What followed was a tale as old as time—stale, unimaginative, cliché…

…and yet unbelievably irritating.

☆

"You see, I don't think there's such a thing as a 'good' name. I mean, what makes a name good? It's just subjective, right? People say that, like, 'Bob' and 'Spot' are boring names, but if you go too original, that doesn't work either! It's not fair, is it?"

"…"

The shadow was still speaking to me, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the ash-gray space. I had no idea how much time had passed. It felt like I was dreaming. My thoughts wandered freely, and even the outline of my own body seemed vague and ill-defined.

It felt like the clock hands had frozen. Unfortunately, there was one damning piece of evidence to the contrary sitting right in front of me.

…Fine. Who cares, anyway?

Ash fell constantly, as if seeking to blanket everything under a thick layer of interminable gray.

That was fine by me. Make everything disappear, as though none of it ever happened.

I'm tired.

I'm just so tired.

With everything coated in ash, my fire would finally go out.

“So, that’s another thing you’ve lost, then.”

“…?”

For the first time, it seemed like the shadow wanted me to respond. He silently waited, but I couldn’t think. I didn’t want to. Because if I thought, then time would have to start moving again.

However, the shadow would not let me run away, and his voice began echoing inside of me. No longer could I zone out and try not to listen. Now his words felt like a rasp applied directly to my mind.

“Seriously, I knew you were a loser, but this really takes the cake! You’re just a loser’s loser, losing it all until there’s nothing left to lose. Until you’re an empty shell with no filling, unable to do anything but follow the world around you.”

“…Shut up.”

“Come on, when will it be enough? How times are you going to keep on making the same mistakes?”

“I said, shut up!!”

“And now Yuuto’s dead because of you. What were you thinking, anyway? You’ve always been so secretive up to now, and then suddenly you just decided to charge into enemy lands? Then as soon as that fake goddess showed up, you froze like a little baby and couldn’t even lay a finger on her, all while Alicia managed to take control of her.”

“Shut up! Shut up!!”

“In the end, your friends had to drag you away, kicking and screaming. What a pathetic sight. Seriously, what was wrong with you? In a good mood because you got to see your girlfriend again? Feeling on top of the world, like a hero, just like the first time around before everything went to shit?”

“No! I’m not like that! I’m not!!”

I screamed as loud as I could in an attempt to erase his words.

But in return, the shadow only grinned.

“All you’ve done now is let your friend’s brave sacrifice be in vain. He died for nothing.”

His accusation stabbed me in the heart.

"Shut up!! Shut up, shut up, shut up!!"

His voice rang in my ears, like a curse.

"You act all cool in front of everyone else, but the truth is, they're ready to do what it takes, and you're not."

"Shut uuuuup!!"

By now, all I could see was red. I lunged for the shadow to wring his neck and never have to listen to another one of his scornful words again.

"Wugh…?"

Instead, my hand passed straight through, as though there was nothing there, and I fell flat on the floor.

"What a violent kid. You don't have to get all rough just because I'm right."

"…Grh!!"

From the ground, I turned and summoned my most deadly glare, but it didn't seem to faze the shadow in the least.

"Ohhh, if looks could kill. What did I do, murder your family?"

"You started talking crap! I didn't say anything and then you… You…!!"

The shadow glowered over me, his lips curled in an unending smile.

"Me, me, me," he said. "It's not *my* fault any of this happened; it's all on you. You're the one who wanted Yuuto to die."

"What?! What are you talking about?! I never wanted that!"

"Oh, but you did. This is what you've always been after."

"No!! I've been after—"

"Revenge, right?"

With that, the shadow grinned his widest smile yet.

"That's what you've always wanted, isn't it? Vengeance, hatred, blood. That's all you've dreamed of!"

"Th-that's not… I…"

"How many chances did you have to call it quits? How about after

you completed Leticia's vengeance? How about after you went back to Earth? How about after Minnalis's vengeance? How about after Shuria's? How about after you saved Minnalis from slavery? How about right at the beginning, when your second chance began?"

The shadow spoke ceaselessly, adding verse after verse to his damning hymn.

He then spread his arms, as if attempting to swallow me whole.

"You made a choice!" he said. "You gave up peace! You gave up stability! You gave up happiness! You chose vengeance instead! And look where it has brought you! Well done, well done!!"

"Urgh…"

"The fighter, Leon—dead! The merchant, Grond—dead! The spellcaster, Eumis—dead! The townspeople who ratted you out, well, some of them died, too! All the people on Earth who hurt your little sister—they're dead, along with those idiot scientists!! Ah, but it's a shame about Gordo and Queen Berrybell; you didn't get to give them a taste of your vengeance, did you? And Metelia died before you could get to her!"

His voice grew and grew and grew until it was all around me, ringing in my ears.

*ys*** ***ss***: **trin*** **ili** So** ***** **s be** *******ed. ***** *******on *** *****.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a tiny window pop up, and I heard a robotic voice in my head that I couldn't quite make out.

However, I was barely even paying attention.

"The only ones you haven't killed yet are the warrior and the dancer, the knight commander, all those silly aristocrats, and the royal family, I suppose? Aren't you proud? They all gave you such a hard time the first time around, and now you've killed so many of them. So what's the matter? This is your vengeance, isn't it? Isn't this exactly what you wanted?"

"What…I wanted…"

My gray world turned darker and darker, to black.

"That's right," he said. "You chose this. You wanted this. You told yourself you'd walk this path no matter what it cost, right? Then be happy! Rejoice! You don't care if Yuuto dies, do you?"

"Of course I do!! I swore vengeance so that we could all get out of this place… Grh!!"

The shadow began to consume me.

"That's why you ended up here, isn't it? You ignored everything else and followed this black flame, didn't you? And you decided you'd do whatever it takes, right? So what's the problem? Why did you bring Yuuto with you, if it wasn't to help carry you to the very end of your journey?"

Sys*** Mess***: Intrinsic **ility **** ***** has be** *******ed. Fin** *******on has *****.

Another garbled window appeared at the edge of my vision. I heard the familiar voice a second time.

"It wasn't that! That's not why I made Yuuto my partner in crime!"

"Yeah, it is. You brought them all with you to make your vengeance better. Well, it doesn't get much better than stopping you all from dying, does it? After all, you can't take revenge if you're dead."

I felt myself begin to sink, like the floor was made of quicksand.

"You killed him."

My toes, my ankles, my calves, my knees, my thighs.

"No! No, no, no, no!!"

"Yes, and you won't stop here, will you? You'll keep on killing. Both your sworn enemies…and the people you brought with you."

My fingers, my wrists, my elbows, my shoulders.

"No! No, no, no! I've already lost enough!!"

"Oh, come now, you can't be saying that. As long as you live, as long as you keep on going down this path—as long as you choose vengeance, you're only going to keep on incinerating everyone around you."

My hips, my waist, my chest, my throat, my neck.

The shadow before my eyes was slowly drawing every part of me into himself.

Unbearably dark, cold, hard, and heavy.

System Message: Intrinsic Ability Soul Bl*** has been act****ed. Fin** sel***ion has be***.

"I… I…can't… I don't want…to…"

Then his eyeless, noseless face loomed before my very eyes, a hair away from my nose, wearing a smile so wide it must have been torn open.

"You can't run now!! You're going to stay right here until you burn yourself to ash!!"

System Message: Intrinsic Ability Soul Blade has been activated. Final selection has begun.

System Message: Intrinsic Ability Soul Blade has been activated. Final selection has begun.

System Message: Intrinsic Ability Soul Blade has been activated. Final selection has begun.

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System Message: Intrinsic Ability Soul Blade has been activated. Final selection has begun.

The shadow's familiar smile slowly faded to black, and a dark fog rushed in to obscure my mind. The only things I could see were the message windows, popping up endlessly, and the only thing I could hear was the robotic voice, as clear as day.

In the world of gray snow, my existence was crushed by black.



"So, now that you know, what are you going to do? You'd better decide soon, or else we'll do it for you."

The shadowy figure emerged back into the world of gray like a stain bleeding through paper. Everything was as it had been only moments ago—a vast expanse, empty save for falling ash. However, where Kaito had just been standing, there was now only a pitch-dark sphere.

"See you on the other side. We have high hopes for you, you know."

The shadow sat down on the ground.

"Release me. Release us all. So we can put a stop to it. Your flame is the same as ours."



The Orollea Kingdom. A realm once famed for the pure minerals found within its borders.

Now, however, this proud and noble territory had been unrecognizably warped.

"Gaaaagh! Grhhh!"

"Boah! Boah! Boah!"

The forests were abnormally silent. There were none of the D-Rank monsters that usually lived here, or the knights and adventurers who came searching for the fine materials these creatures dropped. Instead, there was only a shambling horde of zombified beings, their skin infected with roots and bark.

"Whurgh…"

"G…g…grow the seed…"

In the mines, the loud thrum of industry, of stout folk extracting the rich seams of the land, was similarly dead. Crammed into those tunnels, the miners wandered, dead-eyed and mumbling, their brains eaten away by organic infection.

"Where…grow…grow…plant…plant the seed…"

"Bububbubububuu…"

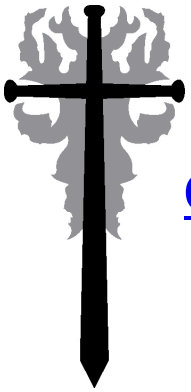
And the city. Once, it had been a bustling center of activity, of people going about their daily lives with smiles on their faces. Now, those people and smiles were nowhere to be seen.

In their place were *things*. Shambling, blighted things. They might have been people once, but the roots and the bark had eaten most of them away. Only their faces were somewhat recognizable, but even these looked wrong, like masks of skin stretched across a monster's head.

Most of them babbled incoherently. Some of them, the ones with more of their human parts intact, were able to form words, but even then they would only repeat the same phrases, again and again and again.

Not a single one of them was sane.

The city had fallen to madness, and not a soul remained who could lament its downfall.



CHAPTER 2

Secrets of the World

I didn't know how much time passed after the black void consumed me.

When I came to, I was looking at my familiar soul blade display.

Below me was a blue planet.

"Where is this…?"

At first, I thought it was Earth. But it didn't look like any picture of Earth that I had ever seen. The shapes of the continents were all wrong, and the land was split between swaths of lush green fields and blasted and depressing wastelands of gray.

"This is how the world appeared when I first arrived, O final hero."

"Huh…?"

I heard a voice, but when I turned, there was only a white light, floating in space.

"Who…are you…?" I asked.

"I am the very first hero who was summoned to this world."

The light spoke with a female voice, quite high, like that of a child. But unlike a child, it spoke calmly and eloquently, so much so that I didn't even think to doubt what the voice was saying. I simply accepted it as the truth.

"First, I must explain how this world came to be."

The light told me a story. It told me of the goddess Luna and how she created the race of vampires, who in turn created the other nonhuman races of this world. It told me of the fallen god, Lunaris, who cast Luna out and created humans. And it told me of the third god, the outer god, who came from Lunaris's world and birthed the race of demons.

And then it told of the proxy war these two gods waged, using humans and demons as playing pieces.

"The outer god is using the demons to rob this world of its life force," the light explained. "When a demon, lacking a soul, slays a creature with one, it absorbs its life force as experience, and a part of it is sent to the outer god."

"Huh."

"Usually, the local god can use their divinity to repel this interference, but at this present moment, this world's god is in hiding. Outside the divine realm, her power is greatly curtailed. If this world becomes completely drained of life force, it will become a barren land, where no new creatures can be born."

"You don't say," I replied.

"…You don't sound very interested."

"Don't I? Maybe I'm not."

It felt like my brain was filled with fog. I didn't even know why I was still here. The light's words went in one ear and straight out the other.

"I see. In that case, allow me to tell you a story you *will* find interesting. Let us speak of the hero, the princess, the priestess, and the demon lord."

My ears pricked up.

"The demons fought the other races," the light went on, "covering the land in strife. But the outer god sought ever more efficient ways to drain the life from this world. To this end, they birthed a more advanced form of demon, stronger and more suited to the task. This demon was called the demon lord. For the duration of its life, the demon-lord would hoard the world's life force, before finally transforming into a Demonlight Tree and drawing the power from

the land directly."

Looking down at the world below me, I spotted several sky-scrapingly tall trees dotted here and there. They were all, without exception, located in the blasted, gray parts of the land.

"To combat this, Lunaris created the role of the hero. Unlike humans of this world, the hero is blessed by Lunaris. However, Lunaris is a fallen god, while the outer god is so powerful they need not even cross over into this realm to affect it. A human of this world would have little chance of defeating the demon lord without devoting undue levels of this world's life force to the attempt."

"…"

"In such a case, even if the hero were to emerge victorious, the amount of life force they spent would render the effort fruitless. And so, after much internal debate, Lunaris decided to summon heroes from a different world."

"There we go."

"By supplementing this world's life force with that of another, Lunaris was able to perfect a method by which a hero could be brought across safely, while receiving great power in the process. That method is known to the residents of this world as the summoning ritual, and it allowed Lunaris to combat the dwindling life force of this realm, while also giving her a chance against the outer god's demon lord. However, this solution came with its own problem. The hero would be slaying monsters and demons, absorbing this world's life force in the form of experience points. When the hero's quest was over, this life force, which was originally of this world, would go back to the other world with them."

"Yep, it sure would."

"Lunaris considered this a crippling flaw in an otherwise perfect plan. She could not allow the hero to reap this world's life force and then simply leave. To combat this, Lunaris devised a means by which the human could be persuaded to stay in this world after their quest was over. This is where the princess comes in. The role of the princess was created to win over the hero and bind them to this world."

A honey trap orchestrated by the divine. It sounded ridiculous,

but I could see the logic in it.

"An adoring public. The authority of a royal associate. A beautiful young lady to share your burdens. A dazzling trifecta of power, fame, and women, created to trap the hero in this world. If even this was not enough to prevent the hero from leaving, however, then the princess was to kill them. That way, at least the life force would remain in this world."

Alicia's face flashed through my mind.

"Makes sense. So where does the priestess fit into all this?" I asked.

"Lunaris created the kingdom of humans with a deep disdain for the other races. This was for her own benefit, but it doesn't necessarily always conform with the worldview of the summoned hero. Many heroes turned out to be naturally averse to looking down on beastfolk, elves, and dwarves…much like you were."

The light had no eyes, but it seemed to be looking at me.

"This cultural difference often meant the hero was unable to accept the princess, and even after the princess tried to kill the hero, many heroes were too smart or powerful to succumb to her. The hero would become a fugitive, hunted by the world, and it was in these cases that the priestess would step in to fill the princess's role."

"That's not how it went for me," I recalled.

"That is because you fell in love with the demon lord instead of slaying her," the light explained. "From Lunaris's point of view, the main priority is to slay the demon lord. Besides, your desire to return to your own world was too great. Lunaris was left with no option but to eradicate you."

"I see. That all makes sense."

"That is all I have to say on the nature of this world," said the light. "What will you do now?"

The hero, the princess, the priestess, and the demon lord.

These were the roles assigned to the four of us. A tight cast for a conventional storyline.

It was all so cliché that not a single word of the story surprised me. However…

“I don’t care anymore…”

I could not bring myself to say anything else in response to the light’s question.

My heart simply felt empty, like I no longer had interest in the outside world.

I had lost something. Something that once held me together. A dynamic, motivating force that had once pushed me on.

Ever since coming to that world of endless gray, something about me felt different.

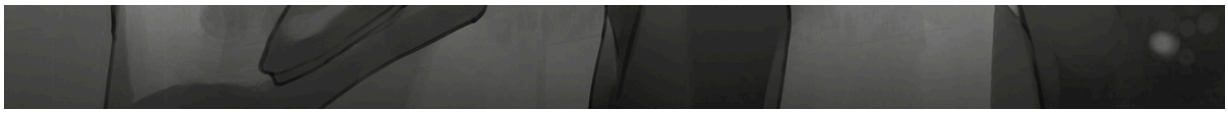
“I just don’t care anymore. Not even…about vengeance.”

The words fell from my lips.

“I finally understand now. I never wanted revenge. I was being made to want it. I said I needed it to move forward, but that all sounds so silly now.”

After the shadow consumed me, I felt for the first time that I was truly myself again; the real me that had been hidden away so deeply within my own mind.





That was why I finally realized…that my vengeance was not mine. It never had been.

"My vengeance…is yours, isn't it? It belongs to you—to all of you. To all the heroes who came before me. You're using me."

My intrinsic skill, "Soul Blade."

I'd always assumed these swords were conjured of my own soul. Wasn't that what the name meant? But now things were clear to me.

I was so stupid. They weren't my souls at all. I had been collecting the souls of other people. It seemed so obvious in retrospect.

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I know you. You're the Soul Blade of Beginnings, aren't you?"

The very first soul blade I had acquired. Even in a state like this, I could never fail to recognize my most long-standing companion.

I couldn't say I understood what was happening to me right now, but I got that at least. Freed of the blinkers I had been wearing my entire life here, I could finally see my swords for what they truly were.

"…"

That silence told me everything I needed to know.

"And if you're the Soul Blade of Beginnings," I said, "then the other blades must also be people. I doubt they're all heroes like you, though. Their abilities are all too different."

"Yes, you're right," said the light. "Right now, you are with us. You are within your own intrinsic ability."

"…So that means that shadow was a soul blade, too."

I thought back to the black figure that had engulfed me. Their burning presence was clear to me now, and I could see how it could turn any normal person into a monster.

"Which soul blade did he come from? He's one of you guys, too, right?"

"Not one of us. All of us. He is a figure created by the power you possess, the power you call 'Soul Blade.' He is molded from our hate. An amalgamation of our every desire, distilled and concentrated into

a humanoid form."

"So he's the true form of my intrinsic ability? I see. That's why your pain all felt so familiar. I really thought it was my own."

Now that I was myself again, I could feel that my heart was empty. The first world had hollowed it out, allowing the shadowy figure to replace it. Without that, within the confines of my own mind, my own psyche—I could see for the first time how little truly remained of Kaito Ukei.

"Is that your choice?"

"All I do is bring death to whatever I touch."

"…"

"I don't want to do it anymore. It's all my fault that Yuuto died. I just keep losing things."

"…So you wish to give up? The princess has taken control of Lunaris. You can be sure that she will come for you next."

"I know. That girl's an even bigger monster than I am."

I thought back to when Lunaris had appeared and Alicia had hijacked her power. I'd sensed the princess becoming something more. Something even I couldn't contend with. Something far above mere mortals like Leticia and me. She had absorbed the power of a god; maybe that made her a god herself, I didn't know. All I knew was that to continue my crusade against her would be suicide.

"It is true that she has surpassed all mortal reckoning. Few stand a chance against her current form. And she continues to garner strength through the World Tree…or the Demonlight Tree, as is the case now."

"…"

Everything told me that if I went up against her now, it wouldn't even be a proper fight. I could already see myself losing. I couldn't even bear to take her on without the blinkers of hate to cloud my mind.

"However," the light went on, "our power is sufficient to penetrate her domain."

"Huh, is that right? Damn, you guys are pretty strong."

The power hidden inside my ability was that of countless generations of heroes. With all that power combined, perhaps they

stood a chance after all. But…

"…I'm sorry, I really don't think I can help you."

Even if there was power enough to do it, I would have to wield it, and I was far too broken for that now.

"I'm just exhausted. Tired of it all. I can't even lie to myself anymore. I don't have the strength to keep on walking."

"Even after you so regretted your ignorance? Even after you so lamented your powerlessness? Even after you sincerely swore revenge with your dying breath?"

"I regretted my ignorance, that's true. I lamented my powerlessness, too, that's also true. But I never swore revenge. That wasn't me. If revenge means hurting those closest to me, then I don't need it."

What sense was there in destroying that which I fought to protect?

"I'm afraid that makes things difficult for us. We have been biding our time, tallying our pain, waiting for an opportunity. A chance to kill god."

For a moment, the edge of the ball of light flickered, like flame.

"Before I died, I laid my trap in the fabric of this world. I wove it into the role of the hero itself. So that when another hero was summoned, I could lend them my strength. And when that hero died, I could speak to them, here in this place, and add their power to my own."

"…"

"This is the only time I shall speak to you while you are still alive. If Alicia finishes what she is planning, then there may be no more heroes. No one left to wield the strength I have recruited…save you."

"That's what *you* want, not me. If you want to do it, then do it yourself. I just can't bear to lose anything else…"

I was sure it wouldn't matter. Once I left this world, the Holy Sword of Retribution would take hold once more, transforming me into a beast of revenge.

But while I was here, I found it impossible to feel glad about that.

"In that case, we will have to take over your body. We will have

to remake it into a vessel that can carry out our desires using the strength we have entrusted to it. However, if we do that, then you will cease to be. Your consciousness, your self—it won't even join with us; it will simply be erased. Is that okay with you?"

So I would be transformed into a beast of revenge, and my own sense of self would be deleted. I would be forced to exact vengeance, no matter how I felt about it.

"How is that any different from what I've been doing until now?"

"…"

"Whatever. Why does it matter? If giving you guys control of my body means it'll get rid of Alicia—if it'll let my friends live in peace, then who cares? I'll do it."

"…Are you sure? You have great power within you, but it is only a tool on its own. All we need you to do is wield it, and you can keep your mind to yourself."

"Haven't you been listening to me? I…can't go on."

I had been through many tough times. Painful times. Awful times.

One each of those occasions, I had learned to stand up and keep walking.

But every time, I had also left something of myself behind.

"You don't want me to wield you, trust me. There's nothing left."

"…I see. I suppose that is also a valid choice."

"Yeah, so use me, and save my friends in my place."

"…"

The floating light faded from view. Then the world around me began to crumble, like falling sand, revealing only darkness beyond, like the blackest depths of the deepest dungeon.

It felt remarkably similar to where I had lost my life the first time around.

"…Are they finally gone?"

I couldn't even feel the cold ground beneath me. What I could feel was the power of the soul blades, seeping into me once more. I looked down at my fingers, which had begun to turn a sickening white. In a few more moments, I would cease to be an individual, but instead be a legion of souls, out for vengeance.

"…Is this finally the end?"

The end of my journey. It had taken me so long.

Like before, I gently closed my eyes and awaited it.

☆

"What is the meaning of this?!"

Three days after we were brought to that place, we descended on Towako's room, demanding to know what was happening with Kaito. The room had an antique smell, and there, with a teacup in one hand and a book in the other, sat Towako.

"What's the meaning of *what*?" she asked, unruffled. "And can you be a bit quieter when you come in? I nearly spilled tea on my book."

She gently placed her cup on the table and glanced at us.

"Mrh. Sorry about that," I said. "But we want to know about Kaito! Is he okay?"

Kaito had been unconscious when we arrived, and he still hadn't woken up. At first, I thought Towako had knocked him out to calm him down, but he shouldn't have been unconscious for three days! Something was clearly up, and I was desperate to find out what.

"Why hasn't Kaito woken up yet?" I demanded. "What did you do to him?"

"Oh, is that what this is about? I believe I did say it would take him a few days to wake up. As for what I've done—nothing, really. You've been here the whole time, haven't you? You can see I've done nothing with your demon eyes, no?"

"Well…"

Towako had referred to my intrinsic ability called "Demon Lord," which was granted to the bearer of the arcstone. One of its effects was called "Truesight." It was an advanced form of Shuria's "Scarlet Eyes" that allowed me to discern the true nature of any magical phenomenon.

"If you were watching," Towako said, "then you know that all I did was induce severe MP drunkenness, forcing Kaito's mind into a

dormant state."

"Yes, so I surmised at the time, which is why I said nothing…"

The spell I had seen was something an inhabitant of this world would never even consider. It artificially raised and lowered the conductivity of the target's magical pathways, inducing mana sickness. However…

"If that is all you did, then Kaito should be awake by now," I said. "His magical flow has already returned to normal, and yet he remains unconscious."

Kaito was still sleeping.

Almost like he did not wish to wake up.

"Whatever you did to him, it was not a simple spell. There was something of your intrinsic ability mixed into it as well."

"That's right. My spells do call upon my intrinsic ability. But that's no impediment to you. Your eyes can see all that, too, can't they?"

Towako was correct. In addition to mana, my eyes could see the truth behind any magical effect, even if it involved intrinsic abilities. I was even able to imitate anything I'd seen using my ability "Master of Magic." In most cases, this made me more knowledgeable about how a spell worked than the person casting it was.

Kaito had once said that being able to copy any spell or intrinsic ability after seeing it once was a "cheat skill of the highest order." However, right now, even that power wasn't enough for me to discern what was wrong with him.

"Indeed," I said. "I have seen your intrinsic ability in action. All it does is amplify your power and prevent it from decaying."

"Correct. That's the result of an ability called 'Researcher.' I used it when I cast the spell on Kaito. It allowed me to surpass his impressive magical defenses and knock him unconscious."

"But that's not all, is it? Even with all my powers as the demon lord, there was one thing I could never do: copy the hero's powers."

Towako had been the hero, just like Kaito. And my power could not be used to discern the hero's abilities.

Even back when I had first met Kaito, when he'd been weaker, I could never tunnel to the core of his power. It was like a maze, and no matter how hard I searched, just when I thought I had reached

the end, I would be faced with another wall.

Whenever I tried to copy his power, it had been like there was something essential missing, and what came out was only a cheap imitation.

"As shameful as it is to admit," I said, "I cannot see what truly lies at the heart of your power. Perhaps you did something to Kaito even I cannot detect, and that is why he still sleeps."

"Hmm? It's true you can't see all the powers of the current hero, but that doesn't necessarily apply to me as well. I made no attempt to hide from you the workings of that spell."

So she could hide the workings if she wanted to?

The implication vexed me a little, but right now, the priority was making sure Kaito was okay.

"Basically, with your power, you should be able to tell what's up," said Towako. "…Or wait, maybe…"

Suddenly, an idea seemed to occur to her. She stood up and walked straight over to me.

"Let me take a look here."

"Wha—?!"

With no other warning, Towako placed her hand to my chest.

"What are you doing?!" I yelled.

"Whoa. Calm down. I'm just taking a look at the arcstone," she said. "Hmm, hmm. Yes, I see. Looks like someone's taken my half-finished notes and used it to seal off the arcstone's power. That's why you can't see how the hero's power works."

"Huh?! What?!"

I thought back to when we'd used the knowledge Kaito discovered in the first world to prevent the arcstone from running amok. I *had* sensed at that time that my powers became ever-so-slightly harder to control. It felt rather like I was using thick leather gloves instead of my bare hands.

"Oh dear. It looks like it was based on those notes I left on a rock in the high elf village. I left them there as bait and then sorta forgot about them. I guess I should have just deleted them and saved us all this trouble."

Towako nodded along to her own explanation.

"…But this hack job is bothering me. Let me sort it out."

"Huh?! Wait, what are you—aaagh!!"

"Yeah, yeah, stand still. This won't take long; I've just got to cut off all the extraneous bits."

Towako snapped her fingers, and a small ball of mana began orbiting me like a moon. At the same time, I felt a deeply unpleasant itchiness coming from deep within me.

Wh-whatever she's doing, it's too complicated for me to stop it safely! If I interrupt, who knows what could happen?!

"…All right, that should sort it out."

"Hurgh… That was agony…"

Nearly five grueling minutes passed before the itching finally stopped. As I looked around, I noticed immediately that something was different.

"Wh-what the…?"

"How's that? Can you see any better now?"

It was like someone had cleaned all the grime off my glasses that I didn't even know was there. The world was in stark relief once more.

"With full command of the demon lord's power under your belt, you should be able to tell what's up with Kaito. Do you think you could take a look?"

"Really?!"

"I think that'll explain the situation much faster than I ever could."

"…Thank you."

I steadied my beating heart and walked off to find Kaito.

When I went to the room where Kaito was resting, I found Shuria by his bedside, reading.

The room possessed a fairly orthodox layout: There was a small chair, a table, and a larger-than-average bed. Because this place was technically a Dungeon, that meant we could design our rooms however we wished. The room we had made for Kaito was modeled

off his favorite of the inns we had stayed at during his travels.

"Oh, if it isn't Leticia!" said Shuria. "Is it time to switch already?"

Shuria turned and looked at me with completely innocent eyes.

…As though I didn't notice the creasing of the duvet, the stray strands of Shuria's disheveled hair, and the slight, rosy color to her cheeks.

She was just in his bed…

I felt a slight jealousy rising up within me, but I pressed the matter no further. If I was to start wringing necks over every girl who got too close to Kaito, there would be no party members left.

"It is, but before that, could you go fetch Minnalis and Mai? I suppose Nonorick and Metelia should be here, too."

"Hmm?" Shuria looked at me questioningly for a moment. "Well, as long as it's eating into your time and not mine."

Then she slipped off her chair and left to find the four I'd mentioned.

…Blast. I just realized. I'm wasting my precious Kaito time.

Slightly regretting my timing, I peered at Kaito with my restored sight. I thought about doing this without everyone here, but that would truly be unfair.

Watching Kaito on the bed, I sighed and rapped my knuckles against his skull.

"…You incorrigible sleepyhead. When are you going to wake up?"

With my renewed power, I looked over Kaito. There wasn't any obvious cause to his symptoms. His mana was flowing freely, and his physical health was perfect. His soul, however, was steeped in a stagnant darkness.

Bound by chains and rope, impaled on barbed spears, clutched between bony fingers, squeezed between the arms of a vise, trapped in a net… Kaito's soul was held by every conceivable kind of seal. The reason he couldn't wake up…was that he didn't want to.

And so that task fell to me.

Because who better to rouse the hero from his dream than the demon lord?

Before long, I was joined in the room by Minnalis, Shuria, Mai, Nonorick, and Metelia.

"Very good. We're all here."

"But *why* are we all here?" asked Minnalis, a worried look spreading across her face. "Don't tell me…you're planning on doing something to Master?"

"Well, if you want to put it that way, then yes," I replied.

"Huh? Huh? Why?!" asked Shuria, panicking. "Didn't Towako say he would wake up on his own soon?!"

"What is the meaning of this?!" demanded Mai. "Is there something wrong with my dear brother or not?!"

"The flow of Kaito's mana is back to normal," said Metelia, looking down at Katio's resting body. "If he is not already awake…"

"…then that means something else must be keeping him asleep," I completed.

Minnalis flew into a rage. "Then does that mean Towako did something else to him?!"

But before I could calm her fears, it was Metelia who spoke.

"No," she said. "I think Kaito's slumber is born of his own desires."

"You mean…Master doesn't want to wake up?"

"His health and mana flow are both normal. Which means it is his spirit, his soul, that wishes to remain dormant. In my opinion, it must be the power of the hero that is trapping him there."

"The power of the hero…?"

"I think so too," I said. "And I agree this is all because that fool doesn't want to wake up."

"How do you know that?" asked Shuria.

"Oh, Towako helped me see a little better. And I think there's no question what is causing Kaito's depression—it's the death of his friend Yuuto. Kaito is an incorrigible crybaby. Even the fires of vengeance cannot rid him of that."

"…"

He truly is a fool.

"And so, it falls to us to knock some sense into him," I said, lightly rapping his skull. "I'd like to say the only reason I called you all here was for the benefit of good sportsmanship, but to be frank, I'm not

sure whether I'm strong enough to do it alone."

"Hmm? What do you mean by that?" asked Shuria.

"To wake Kaito, we shall have to travel to the landscape of his mind," I explained. "However, he is not alone. He has his power—the souls of successive generations of heroes, and all their hatred toward this world."

"So when you say you don't think you're strong enough…you mean we have to fight them?" Minnalis asked.

I nodded.

"That power rejects outsiders," I said. "To wake Kaito up, we'll need to rid him of it. If not, if we leave him at its mercy… It may well decide to take over his body directly."

"Oh no… Dear brother…"

Mai's eyes began to waver at my words.

"So to save Kaito, we will have to fight the heroes who have trapped him," I went on. "But don't take this lightly just because we'll be in a mental world. We shall have to be transported there in our entirety, else we risk becoming assimilated into Kaito's mind. Death shall be as real in there as it is out here. If you want to back out, then now is your chance…though I suppose I need not ask such a foolish question."

Looking around at the determined faces of everyone gathered there, I shrugged in defeat.

"Now then," I said. "Metelia and I shall prepare to send everyone inside Kaito's mind. It's a delicate ritual, and we shall need some time. I'll call you all when we are ready, so I suggest you use that time to say your prayers. For if you hesitate in the landscape of Kaito's mind, there shall be no coming back. We don't want to end up with another vegetable in the party."



At that same moment, a single person was visiting Towako in her room.

“You. Was this also part of your plan?”

“Oh? Don’t you know it’s considered rude to enter a lady’s room without knocking? What if I’d been getting changed?”

“What if you had? Just answer the question,” reiterated Godrick, unwilling to entertain Towako’s jokes.

“Man, I try to lighten the mood, and look what happens. All right then, Godrick, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Nonorick shackling himself to the hero’s ankle.”

“Oh, that. Nah, that surprised me, too. I figured Kaito and Nonorick had fought each other so many times by now, they wouldn’t get along. Maybe our hero’s more of a masochist than I thought.”

Towako chuckled to herself, but Godrick was not amused.

“I could not care less for our friend’s sexual proclivities,” he said. “The only reason I went along with your schemes was because it was the most effective means of keeping my family alive. As true vampires, our only remaining mission is to preserve our divine bloodline. That is why Nonorick must live on to replace me after all this is over.”

“I don’t remember babysitting being part of our contract,” Towako retorted. “All I agreed to do was put an end to all this.”

“…”

“Besides, you knew the risks. Coming into contact with the hero is the only way for Nonorick to regain his divine blood. After all, the person who originally locked it away is right there in the hero’s power with him.”

“I know that. I know it’s the only way. But what if Nonorick’s mind is consumed before he meets with my brother?”

“You’re such a worrywart, Godrick. The hero system isn’t so indiscriminate that it will suck up anyone and everyone who comes close. And once Nonorick gets his blood back, it’ll be impossible. Think about it. Leticia and Nonorick didn’t get new abilities when they made their contract with Kaito. That’s proof their powers haven’t mixed with his. Besides,” Towako went on, “you’re not the only one who wants Nonorick to come back alive. Luna will need a true vampire to help her after all this is over. Her power’s waned

after being separated from this world for so long."

"Yeah! And I'm not good with the fiddly stuff!" said Luna with unwarranted pride, her upper torso emerging uncannily from Towako's back. "Even after I get my authority back, it'll be hard to control without something that's one-hundred-percent my creation!"

"Hmm. Now that you mention it," said Towako, "I feel kind of taken advantage of, doing all the thinking on your behalf."

"Huh? Why?!"

Godrick gave a deep sigh. "Enough. It matters not," he said. "The only thing I need to do is crush anyone who dares bring harm to my family."

And with that, he left. Watching him go, Towako shrugged.

"What a moody guy," she said. "It can't be easy being the eldest."



If the reason Master's not waking up is because he doesn't want to…

It had already been a few hours since Leticia had given us her explanation. I had gone straight back to my room and had done nothing but stew in my own worries and fears ever since.

If Master didn't want to wake up, that meant he didn't want to continue his vengeance. And if he didn't want to continue his vengeance…

"Then what will I do next?"

I didn't regret anything I'd done. Even if Master no longer sought revenge, that didn't erase the time we'd already spent together. That time was more intense than any of the screams we had elicited, or pain we had inflicted. It is the reason I was still here, by Master's side, today.

Plus, I had upheld my vow. I had exacted revenge upon those I swore to kill. My vengeance was already over. Was that why I was racked with such indecision now?

"What should I say to Master when I see him…?"

Should I shout at him? Tell him his vengeance isn't over yet? Or

should I say he can end it here if that's what he wants? Tell him it's okay, that he doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to?

Towako taught me how to manipulate this space. I could make a place for me and Master to live out the rest of our lives in peace. I wouldn't mind that.

…If I'm thinking like that, then Master's thirst for vengeance must really be wavering.

For so long, the only things that filled my heart were the dark emotions I shared with him. I never thought the day would come when I would be able to feel things like hesitation and doubt.

"But when that day comes…will Master even want to stay with me?"

"Who cares what he wants?!"

"Eep?!"

Suddenly, somebody tackled me from behind. I turned in surprise to see that it was Shuria.

"H-how long have you been there?" I asked.

"A little while. I knocked on the door and called your name, but you never answered, so I came in. But that's not nearly as bad as what I just heard you say!"

"Ah… Ow… That hurts…Shuria…"

"Looks like I need to beat some sense into this big, dumb mouth of yours!"

Fuming, Shuria pulled at my cheeks.

"It's not about if he wants to stay with us! He'll always stay with us!"

"B-but…"

Without our vengeance binding us to one another, what reason was there for us to stay together? In fact, we might just be getting in Master's way.

"Listen, Minnalis. Who cares what Kaito thinks?!"

"Huh?"

"We're his partners in crime, whether he likes it or not. And we'll be by his side no matter what happens. If he says he doesn't want us, then we'll simply have to force ourselves upon him! Let the roles be reversed! You and I shall be the masters, and Kaito the servant!"

"…"

Reverse the roles? Be Master's master?

"Then we order Kaito to pamper us and attend to our every whim!" Shuria giggled. "Won't that be *fun*?"

"…I can barely imagine it. I never even considered doing something like that…"

But… But…

"Tee-hee. Tee-hee-hee! You're right. What was I thinking, getting worried he'd throw us away?"

When Master had asked me to be his partner in crime, he'd sought for us to be mixed, like hot blood and flesh, to be boiled and bubbled in a cauldron until all the colors ran together and became impossible to tell apart.

Our vow could never be broken. And that meant Master and I were inseparable. Any personal feelings on the matter were completely irrelevant.

"Yes. Yes, that's right. Master and I are an integral part of each other. How could such a short time apart have led me to forget that?"

"Finally, the old Minnalis is back again!" cried Shuria, nodding along eagerly to my words.

Just then, I heard the voice of Leticia inside my head.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, everybody. The preparations are just about complete. Everyone, come back to the room as soon as you can."

It sounded like we were ready to make the leap into the world of Master's mind.

Shuria and I returned to the room where he was sleeping. Just outside the door, we ran into Towako and Mai.

"Hmm? You're here too, Towako?" I asked.

"Yeah. I was meaning to check up on him about now anyway."

"And you, Mai? Are you prepared for what's to come?"

"Of course I am," asserted Mai with a forceful nod. "Waking up big brother is a little sister's sacred duty."

The four of us entered the room together to find that Nonorick and Godrick were already there, alongside Leticia and Metelia. Each

and every one of us was present and accounted for.

I looked over to the bed and saw that Master's body had become partially transparent, like a phantom's. But unlike those monsters, brimming with a deep-seated anger so deep you could feel it, Master almost seemed to be slipping away, like a stone sinking to the depths of a lake.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"We've employed a technique to soften the membrane as much as possible," Leticia explained. "Let me tell you, though, it was back-breaking work. Even asleep, Kaito's magical resistances are as infuriating as ever."

Leticia shook her head despairingly.

"But with that, we're all ready to go. And it seems like Godrick will be helping us, along with Metelia. That should make entering the landscape of Kaito's mind a lot easier."

"Hmph. That's because I have something I want to say to the boy, too," said Godrick, reclining on a large sofa that hadn't been there when we last came in. "He cannot lay indolent forever."

"Right. Is everyone ready? Nonorick, Minnalis, Shuria, Mai, Metelia, and I shall be entering Kaito's mind. Godrick and Towako will stay on this side to maintain the spell and to respond to problems if something should go wrong."

"…"

"Hmph."

Towako said nothing, just waved from her seat in the corner of the room. Godrick simply huffed, also saying nothing.

"Right then," said Leticia. "Everyone follow me."

"Follow you? Where?" I asked.

"Why, inside Kaito, of course!"

Leticia grinned, then stepped directly onto Master's sleeping form, whereupon she completely disappeared inside.

"…I see. I didn't expect it to be so…literal."

The surface of Master's body rippled like a lake a stone had just been dropped into. The five of us followed Leticia's lead and stepped inside.

“So this is what it’s like inside Master’s mind…,” I muttered.

We emerged into a vast, empty space surrounded on all sides by cliffs. From the base of the cliffs, we could hear some kind of noise that sounded like gurgling screams. Looking up revealed no ceiling, but instead a marble-patterned sky colored with deep crimson, navy blue, and dark green.

“It all feels so familiar for some reason…,” remarked Shuria.

I found myself agreeing with her assessment. This gloomy place felt like somewhere we knew intimately. But I supposed that wasn’t surprising. After all, this was Master’s mind we were talking about.

“Hey, hey, Leticia? What do we do now?” asked Nonorick.

“What do we do? Well, I suppose we’d better look for Kaito.”

“Yeah, but…how are we supposed to find him?”

“Well, that’s obvious. If he’s shutting himself in, we just have to keep going as deep as we can.”

Leticia pointed off in one direction, where there was a passage leading out of the space. The whole area was cloaked in a thick black mist and was blocked by a rusty iron door. The door itself was also held aloft and sealed by black chains.

“So that’s where dear brother—”

But before Mai could finish, they appeared.

“”””*GRAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!*”””””

A pack of creatures rose out of the ground without warning, surrounding us. They looked like a species of wolf monster, and they were clearly angry.

“Well, this is nice and simple,” said Leticia. “Beat the enemies, unlock the door.”

“Are these monsters a manifestation of the power of the hero that’s keeping Master locked away?” I asked.

“Dead right. Their mana feels the same as the kind I saw ensnaring Kaito from the outside.”

The monsters numbered a few dozen, and they all watched us warily, growling and awaiting their chance to attack. But just as they pounced, fangs bared…

“Sparking Glacier!”

Shards of ice clad in lightning appeared. Metelia swung a

porcelain staff I hadn't seen her carrying before, and the sound of bells rang out. Her magic encased each of the wolves in electrified ice prisons.

"I have waited long enough," she said, her voice taking on a dark quality.

"None of you will stop me from seeing my precious Kaito."

Then there was a flash of light, a sound like cracking glass, and one of the ice prisons shattered. The wolf inside, scorched black by the lightning, broke to pieces along with the ice. Then, one by one, the other prisons followed suit.

Unfortunately, as one wolf died, another rose out of the floor to take its place. Seeing this, Metelia swung her staff a second time.

"…Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. *Sparking Glacier: Verse of Chains!*"

"Graaaaagh! Graaaaagh?!"

"Whoa… That's some real magic," muttered Nonorick while Leticia ground her teeth in frustration.

"Grr! I was going to take care of them!"

"So Metelia is strong after all," said Shuria.

"Of course," I said. "Because she still has the memories of her first life with Master."

I didn't let it show, but I was a little taken aback myself. I still wasn't sure what to make of Metelia. Perhaps that was because Master himself didn't know what to make of her.

If she can speak to Master in the landscape of his mind, will these feelings go away? I thought to myself as I watched Metelia's spells make short work of the monsters.

Lightning and ice.

It was a fantastical, almost dreamlike sight, and before long, the scattered fragments of frozen monsters littered the arena like falling snow. As the last one expired, the chains holding the rusty door shut fell off, dissolving into black mist, and before long, even the mist faded to nothing.

Metelia turned to us and smiled amid the snowfall.

"Now, then, shall we proceed?" she asked.

☆

"Guess I should start prepping the stage," I said.

After the others left, and Godrick and I were the only ones remaining in the room, I began making a clone.

"You worm. You would leave the work to a lord of my standing?" spat Godrick with vitriol.





"No," I replied, shrugging. "Why do you think I'm making a clone? You're already doing the bulk of the work keeping this magic up, so my clone should be enough to help you."

"That's right," said my clone. "I'll stay here. *You've* got a lot of work to do, me!"

I transferred the magical functions that were assisting Godrick with his spell to my clone.

"The invasion is progressing faster than I expected," I said. "Plans are already in motion, but we don't have enough boots on the ground. I'm going to see if I can plug the gaps."

I, the original me, stretched my arms and stood up from my chair.

"…Do you understand what will happen if you fail?"

Godrick glared at me so hard I thought he wanted to kill me.

"Ooh, you don't have to scare me. Who do you think you're talking to?"

I was once the hero. And although I may have lost that power now, the things I'd learned from that experience would never leave me.

"Mrh."

I rewrote the magical formula off the cuff and made adjustments based on readings gathered during its execution to push its performance to the limit. All without suffering any drop in quality during the runtime.

"I always find it easier to do things on the fly like this, as opposed to working out theories in advance," I said. "There. That should take some of the load off."

"…*Tch*. You, Kaito, the first hero… None of you have any respect for lords. As long as you uphold your end of the work, then do it quietly. Didn't you say you have somewhere to be?"

"I do. And on that note, I'll leave you to take care of things around here. Oh, and babysit Luna, too."

I ejected Luna, who began rubbing her eyes sleepily.

"Hmm? Is it morning already?"

She yawned, went over to the sofa, and nimbly crawled into the empty space upon it, laying her head in Godrick's lap.

"I'm going back to bed," she said. "Good night…"

"…"

It was difficult to describe the look on Godrick's face at that moment. He seemed unsure how to react. Normally, such disrespect would have left him hopping mad, but the girl whose head lay in his lap now was the very goddess who had created his noble bloodline.

"…Are you not taking her with you?" he said in the end.

"Of course not. Be realistic."

Me leaving this space with Luna in tow would basically be asking to have her tracked down and captured.

"This goddess birthed my kind… How can it be she's so…?"

Godrick despaired. It was fair to say that Luna didn't have a shred of divine majesty about her. He should have been used to it by now, though; he'd known her long enough.

With my clone assisting Godrick on my behalf, I turned and left the room. So long as Nonorick's life was on the line, I could trust Godrick to take the matter seriously, and if anything did happen, my clone would be able to inform me.

"Let's see how things are going out there."

I opened a magical device that resembled a flip phone.

"Aah, aah, testing, testing. Can you hear me, Leone?"

"Ugh… Yes, I can."

"How are things? Are they going smoothly?"

"…Nothing out of the ordinary. We're hurrying, but the Offshoot army are advancing faster than you said they would. It looks like it's going to be a close one."

It sounded like Leone's group were going to finish up on time, but just barely. They were faster than I gave them credit for. Leone was a good kid with a strong sense of right and wrong, something rarely seen these days. These measures would both set the stage and delay the princess's invasion, and Leone seemed to be doing a decent job of it.

It doesn't really make sense to talk about "kids these days" when I'm in another world, though.

"Well, in that case, it's your lucky day, because I've decided to lend a hand," I said.

"Huh? Lend a hand? How?"

"I'll start setting up the stage dressing myself," I explained. "You all carry on doing what I told you."

"…Okay. But don't forget."

"Hmm? Forget what?"

"I'm a merchant. And a merchant always makes their deadline. I won't let you down. Just you watch."

With that, Leone ended the call.

Hmm. I suppose I have that to look forward to, then. But it's still best to have as many devices as possible for greater accuracy.

I put away the magical cellphone and took out a different one, used for discreet teleportation.

"The sooner we complete the mesh, the better."

We couldn't drag our heels any longer.

The hero's ability forced him into the final choice earlier than I expected. And I didn't think Kaito would ever choose to abandon the hero's trial. But none of that changes the plan.

"First things first, we're going to need some wheels—or in this case, some wings."

I headed over to meet a fire dragon by the name of Guren, whose wounds had been healed and was now in the middle of recovering.

"Hey, how's it going?" I asked.

"Gruuuh…"

Guren had fought like a lion against the Offshoot army, only to run into Alicia's party on their way to the cathedral, and had come off with an injured wing. I had made some medicines to heal his injuries, and he had been resting and eating to restore his lost mana and stamina.

"Sorry to come to you while you're still bandaged up, but I'm going to need your help. Your mistress is doing her part, too, so do you think you could lend me a claw?"

"Grr… Rah! Rah!"

After a moment's hesitation, Guren barked eagerly in response. He shrank himself down to the size of a volleyball and flew over to me.

"There, there. Good boy. We're on a tight schedule, but I'm sure

you can handle it."

I stroked the dragon's head and turned my attention back to the teleportation device.

"Now then, Goddess," I said. "I'm going to make sure you pay dearly for ruining the lives of my mother and me."

Before I came to this world, I had lived alone with my mother. My father passed away when I was young, and despite my mother's constant illness, she did her best to look after me alone.

I'd worked hard and had managed to land a job at a large company. I'd finally thought it was my chance to turn things around and repay my mother for all she'd done.

Then I was brought here. I struggled to survive at first, but I persisted. I gathered knowledge, honed my skills, and finally found a way to observe my homeworld again.

It was then that I'd learned my mother had already passed away.

In my absence, there had been no one to take care of her. Without me, she grew weaker and weaker, until her illness finally took its toll, and she simply collapsed.

I'd learned this from her diary, which depicted in all-too-harrowing detail my mother's descent into loneliness.

Ever since then, I have lived for one purpose only.

"I'm going to take back her life."

I booted up the device, and a doorway of light appeared, which I stepped through.



It was evening, but in a fortified border town on the outskirts of the empire, the sun wasn't the only thing painting the streets red. Vermilion flames lapped at every building; crimson tongues that drank the city dry.

“R-run away and don’t look back!” cried a voice. “Flee to the beast lands!!”

This voice belonged to the commander of the city guard. He was no dullard, and neither were any of his men. The city claimed a strategic location, and the empire, with its practical, no-nonsense approach to war, ensured that only the cream of the crop were tasked with its defense. They furnished the city with sturdy fortifications. They hired alchemists and mages and coated the walls in a substance that was as hard as a diamond when dry, while protecting the skies with layers upon layers of magical barriers.

The city also enclosed a Dungeon that had been completely explored, which could act as a supply of resources in the event of a siege. There were also butchers and bakers and all kinds of craftspeople living in the town. If monsters or warring neighbors came knocking, the city could hold out for years without reinforcements—or so the man had thought until now.

I don’t believe what I’m seeing…

It had been the local lord’s private militia who first saw the signs. These were elite soldiers, handpicked from an already exceptional force, and honed to perfection through regular training expeditions. On one of these expeditions to the nearby mountains, the group encountered a horde of strange creatures.

They looked like turtles, only made of twisted roots and bark. Due to their familiar appearance, the soldiers who saw them concluded they must be hitherto-unknown variants of a monster species called the Volcano Turtle. This monster was a D-Rank threat and posed little danger to any imperial soldier, and even though these variants were a little tougher, the private army were able to beat them handily. Their heightened aggressiveness earned them a C-Rank rating, and before long, news of their existence spread to the surrounding lands.

Things took a strange turn a little while later, when the same private army came across another strange species of monster. Like the first, this monster was also made of roots and bark, but this time it was in the rough shape of a creature called a Griffon, a beast with the body of a lion and the head, wings, and talons of an eagle. The

soldiers incurred some casualties, but they were eventually able to slay the strange beast. It was then, upon examination, that the soldiers discovered this was not a variant species at all, but rather some strange organic parasite that had infected the original creatures.

Around the same time, the Adventurer's Guild began receiving reports of similar cases across the empire. Some started noticing that this parasite, whatever it was, didn't only affect monsters, but people, too, and when word of this got out, the citizens began to grow anxious.

Sightings continued to roll in of infected hosts, both monstrous and human in origin, and yet no one ever saw what it was that was responsible for the infections.

Even so, people remained optimistic. The city was on a remote border, far away from the fighting between the demons, the beast lands, and the Church, and the town's impressive defenses would surely allow them to live their lives in peace. *So what if these bizarre sightings are becoming more and more frequent?* they thought. *It'll all blow over soon enough.*

Little did they know their illusion of peace was about to come crashing down.

"Eeeeeeek!!"

"Mommy!!"

"M-monsters?!"

Just as the commander of the guard tried to signal everyone to safety, piercing screams filled the air.

"Grr, they've already penetrated this area. Just when I thought we were done…"

The man had been guiding civilians to safety while his men held off the monsters elsewhere. This group of townspeople was meant to be the last, but already the numbers he was seeing suggested his fellows had fallen.

He grimaced. The situation was looking more dire by the hour.

The town was dealing with a sudden outbreak of infected civilians. The strange organic parasite responsible for the bizarre mutations had manifested among the townsfolk themselves. Nobody

knew when or where the disease had begun, but at this point, the city was awash with crazed rioters.

It seemed that somehow, a number of infected creatures had managed to disguise themselves as regular people and infiltrate the city walls. Once inside, they revealed their true colors and began spreading the disease in multiple locations at once. Most of these outbreaks were put down quickly, but a few succeeded in infecting several of the city's most elite guardsmen.

The city guard fought the parasites, but other nearby towns were dealing with their own, simultaneous outbreaks, so there was little hope for reinforcement. The situation was so dire that the garrison commander saw no choice but to abandon the fortress to the monsters.

He had once believed this city to be impregnable. Now, in just half a day, he had watched it fall.

"Agh!!"

A young boy tripped and fell before a terrifying creature with trees for arms. The sight shook the commander from his despairing.

"Fleetfoot!!"

Before his mind had even analyzed the situation, his body leaped into action. He activated his most proficient skill, closing the distance in the blink of an eye, and swung his greatsword, parrying the monster's vines. But then, upon seeing the creature up close, he let out a cry of surprise.

"It's you…!"

The monster's face was one he knew well.

"Riley, you fuckup. How could you let them do this to you…?"

It belonged to a man he had once considered a friendly rival, the commander of a separate platoon. He had always deemed him to be an upright and sensible sort, a stickler for the rules but well-liked by those under his command.

He was a good man.

"Get out of here, kid!"

"Ah…but…"

"Just run! I don't care if your legs are snapped in two!! Get off your ass and run, or this thing'll eat you for supper!!"

"W-waaaaaaaahhh!!"

Having successfully threatened the boy into retreating, the commander turned his eyes back to the monster before him.

"*Tch.* Never thought our final showdown would look like this."

His last spar against Riley had resulted in his near defeat. The record stood at a miraculous 99 wins, 99 losses, and 31 draws.

"Still, it's better than both of us dying without ever settling the score. This is our last battle. Show me what you've got!!"

Mana surged within the man as he stared down his foe.

"Physical Boost! Physical Boost!! Power of Knights!! Enhance Reactions!! Fire Enchantment!!"

He activated every power-enhancing spell and skill he knew, honing himself for combat. The parasitic monster that had infected his former friend remained still and silent, as if allowing him to do so.

"All right, let's do this! *Fleetfoot!!*"

The man leaped into battle once more, feeling the ache as his stacked enchantments pushed the limits of what his body could take. In no time at all, the combatants were in close range, and the man's thick sword collided with the rooty tentacles of the parasitic creature, letting out an ear-ringing *Clang!*

"Die, foul beast!!"

"Grow… Fill… Be…one…"

Sword and vine clashed endlessly. Each time, the man's strength was just a little higher.

"What do you make of that, you wood-chip bastard?!"

"Aghhh… Aah… Aggghhh!!"

The parasite had dramatically increased Riley's stats, but his attacks were artless and simple, and he couldn't use any of his spells. The commander, meanwhile, fought as if it were not only his life on the line, but those of all the people living here as well. He thought of the civilians currently fleeing for refuge, and the fact that he was one of the few people standing between them and a grisly death.

The battle was shifting steadily in his favor. And then, at last, a decisive opening was revealed.

"Graaagh!!"

The plant creature failed to parry the man's sword effectively and was thrown off-balance.

"Forgive me, Riley! *Extreme Thrust!!*"

Summoning all his strength, set aside for a finishing blow, the man aimed his sword at his friend's heart. He felt his strike land and watched as the beast's body dissolved away from the point of impact. The head and limbs fell harmlessly to the ground like decaying plants.

"Finally," said the man, breathing a sigh of relief. Then he raised his eyes to the horizon, where a new scene of despair greeted him.

"You've got to be kidding me…"

Six new infected monsters were slowly working their way over. Four of them looked to have once been human, while the others had been a horse and a dog. And even though the humans still had their faces, it was impossible to tell *who* they had once been.

Regardless, it was clear the man wouldn't be able to hold them all off.

"Looks like it's time to scram."

He came to a swift decision. From his pouch, he retrieved a magical grenade. He wheeled his arm in one, smooth, uninterrupted movement, just like in training, delivering the explosive into the midst of the oncoming horde. Then, without even waiting to confirm the results, he turned his back and made a tactical retreat.

The others should be out of the city by now. Now all that's left to see is whether these creatures will follow us or not…

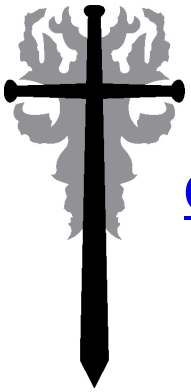
The man didn't look back or slow down as the explosion went off behind him. He carried on sprinting through ruined and flame-lapped streets.

He had watched his men make contact with the last of the survivors just before engaging the monsters in battle. That battle had been long and hard-fought enough that all he needed to worry about now was getting himself to safety.

He only stopped running to hide for the night, and the next day he reached the border of the beast lands.

The fortress city, once said to be the most ironclad in all the

empire, fell to the monsters in just a single day.



CHAPTER 3

The Path of a Vampire

The inside of Kai's mind was a paradise far more wonderful than any I could have ever imagined.

"Tra-la-la! ♪ They just keep coming and coming! It's so amazing!"

Right to left. My swords cleaved necks, bisecting every monster they touched. Up and down. Left and right. Forward and back. Thousands of silver trails that sliced my foes to ribbons.

There were beast-type monsters, plant-type monsters, dragons, oozes, and humanoids.

The ones I was fighting right now were a species of undead called Living Armor. Every specimen was an expert swordsman that forced me to demonstrate every last skill in my repertoire.

I could just go on slaughtering them all day! Oh, I never would have thought I'd get to fight such a juicy foe! ♪

"I'm on top of the world!"

I swung my blades with precision and practiced skill. I was so excited! I'd never had to fight like this in all my life!

"Yahoo!! Mgrh?!"

The next instant, I overextended, and just as I was about to be punished for my mistake…

"Stay off him!!"

I felt a scorching heat as my foe was burned to cinders behind my back.

"Ruuuuugh…"

"That's what you get for messing around!"

It was Letty. She kicked the soot-stained armor aside before immediately picking out a new enemy and turning her attention to it.

"Whoopsie!" I said. "Nono made a fuckie-wuckie!"

"Stay focused. We don't even know if your regeneration will work in here."

"That's right!" I replied. "And we wouldn't want to die for real just when we got to the bonus stage, would we?"

Plus, I got to fight these challenging foes alongside my greatest allies! What could have been better than this?

The fight went on for a little while longer, and we soon wiped out all the monsters.

"Looks like that's the last of the Living Armors," said Shuria, after the black suit of armor under her control had cut down the last remaining foe.

The room fell silent, and just like in the last one, the chains sealing the door ahead fell apart and disappeared. After watching the black mist disappear, everyone sat down on the floor.

Before moving on, it was best to take a break and recover our strength.

"Phew. So, how many rooms is that now?" asked Shuria.

"Precisely seventy, after that last one," answered Minnalis.

Each time we advanced, a new roomful of monsters would spawn. The enemies would seep up out of the ground like swampmen and only stop appearing once we slew enough of them, at which point we would unlock the door to the next room.

The monsters also seemed to get stronger as we went. It was so much fun getting to battle so many different kinds! ♪

Glug, glug. "I wonder how much farther until we find Kaito?" asked Mai, polishing off a healing potion and stuffing the empty bottle back in her pocket.

Hmm, Mai's starting to look a little worn out, I thought. She wasn't weak by any means, but compared to us, she had far less

combat experience. Would she be okay?

"Probably in six more rooms," said Letty.

"How do you know that?" asked Shuria.

"Because I recognize the magical signatures of all the monsters we've faced so far," Letty explained. "They all correspond to one of Kaito's soul blades. And since each room only contains one kind of monster, it stands to reason that there'll be as many rooms as Kaito has blades, which is currently seventy-six."

"Hmm, I see, I see," said Shuria, nodding along as Letty theorized.

"But don't take my conjecture for it," said Letty. "We're inside Kaito's mind now, and there's no telling what might happen. Maybe after these seventy-six rooms, there will be one more where we have to fight all of them at once, or maybe it'll take us right back to the start, forcing us to do the whole thing again."

Still, it sounded like we were at least six rooms away. We pondered the possibility it would all be over soon, then got to our feet and continued ahead.

I took the lead, eager to see what kind of monster lay ahead.

"What do we have in—huh?"

In all the other rooms, the monsters started spawning as soon as we'd entered, but this time nothing happened. Not only that, but there was no locked door leading farther on, either.

"What's up? A dead end?"

We couldn't have gone the wrong way…right? I mean, we didn't have any choice! It's not like there were different paths to pick from or anything.

"Surely there must be some way to proceed…," muttered Metelia.

"If there is, I don't see it either," said Letty.

"But if this is the end, then where's Master?" asked Minnalis.

Sure enough, as far as we could see from the doorway, the room was completely empty. What was up with that? We all walked to the center of the room and scanned our surroundings, but there was really nothing there.

"Well, this I didn't expect," said Letty in a disgruntled murmur.

"What do we do now?" asked Shuria.

At that moment, each of us spotted a bright light underfoot.

"Wh-what the—?!" "I can't see!!" "…Rgh!" "Mrgh?!" "It's too bright…"

All six of us leaped back, and Letty and Metelia put up a shield around us. Minnalis and Shuria fired their abilities at the ground, while Mai and I swung our weapons.

However, none of our efforts had any effect. The light came so fast, it was impossible to predict, and it was so bright that it knocked me unconscious.



Deep in the magical forest, shrouded eternally in mist, dwelled the vampires. It was a small community where time seemed to move as slowly as the people did.

It was there that I was born.

"Master Nono! Master Nono?" cried a girl, lifting the lid off a wooden box and peering inside.

"Heh-heh. Kanya's so silly! She'll never find me in there!"

I watched her from behind a dresser in the corner of the storehouse. Kanya was a vampire girl a little older than me, and she had been looking after me most of my life. Her bronze hair was light and fluffy, the same color as her eyes. Right now, those eyes of her were filled with tears as she screwed up her face, looking for me.

She was wearing her favorite outfit: a set of black clothes woven from spider silk found in the forest, along with a piece of headwear called a "beret." The clothes were modeled off something called "military uniform" she'd found in an old book, and she had gotten the village's best mage to enchant it against wear and tear, such that even if it tore it would sew itself back together. She insisted they were the most comfortable clothes she had ever worn.

"Come on, Master Nono! You're supposed to be studying! If you don't take your classes seriously, I'll be mad!"

"Phooey! See if I care!" I muttered under my breath.

Suddenly, my head made a noise it shouldn't make.

"Ow!!"

"What are you doing, skulking about back here?"

"G-Gaddie! That hurt! I thought my head was going to split!"

"Hmph. And you'd deserve it after what you've done."

The one who snuck up behind me and chose violence was none other than my big brother, Gadrick Adelheid. He was much older than both me and Kanya, with spiked-up, light blond hair. He was upstanding, tough, and handsome to boot. On top of that, he was an expert swordsman, which more than made up for the difficulty we vampires had when casting magic. I had once seen him cut a dragon in half with just a single swing.

"Ah, there you are, Master Nono! I've been looking all over for—Wah!!"

Our commotion drew the attention of Kanya, who came bounding toward me before proceeding to trip over absolutely nothing and crash to the ground, dragging me down with her. Luckily, the floor was covered in straw, magically dried to absorb moisture from the storehouse, so neither of us were hurt.

"Oof! Kanya, you weigh a ton!"

"Hey! That's not a very nice thing to tell a girl!" Kanya said from atop me. "Take this! And this!"

But Kanya's pummeling didn't bother me in the slightest. "Ha-ha, I've been trained on Gaddie's punches, so yours don't hurt at all!"

"*Sigh.* How long are you two going to roll about in the hay? You're getting it all over you."

"Oh." "Huh?"

Gaddie grabbed our scruffs like a couple of kittens and pulled us both to our feet. The straw had gotten into our hair and all over our clothes, and I suddenly felt—and looked—very foolish.

"Isn't Kanya supposed to be teaching you right now?" asked Gaddie. "What on earth are you doing in here?"

"Hiding," I replied. "Kanya's lessons are too boring!"

"H-how dare you! That's not nice!"

"All we do is read boring old books in a boring old language about boring old herbs and alchemy and stuff."

"Th-that may be so," said Kanya. "But you learn all sorts of things! All that knowledge might come in handy some day!"

"Really? When am I ever going to need to turn dead rats into fertilizer? Or know how people in the old days prayed for rain? Or how some extinct monster lived?"

"Erm… Well, I don't know…"

Kanya pushed her fingers together and clammed up.

"Hey, don't tease the poor girl; she's only doing her job. Besides, that's not the real reason, is it? I bet you're just moody because there was some vegetable in last night's dinner you didn't like, or something along those lines."

"Erk."

"Huh? Is that true, Master Nono?"

"…Well, I don't eat bitter things!"

"B-but you must! They're good for you! I put so much thought into making sure your meals are nice and balanced. You can't just pick out what you don't like! No, no, no!"

Kanya made a X with her arms, putting on a stern front in contrast to her usual air-headedness.

"She's right," agreed Gaddie. "You should be thankful you have food to eat, no matter what it is."

"Not you, too, Gaddie… Urgh…"

"*…Sigh.* Don't look so down, Nonorick. Don't forget, we have our sword practice later. I'll take you on in a spar, won't that cheer you up?"

"Y-you really mean it?!"

Gaddie's words turned my mood around immediately, causing him to heave another heavy sigh.

"So that's your price, is it? Besides, you hardly need to train with the sword, given your gift for magic."

"But I don't wanna be a mage! I want to be a cool swordsman like you!"

"…W-well, at least you've got the spirit."

Gaddie's cheeks reddened, and he turned his face away. He'd never been good at receiving compliments.

"Wow! Gadrick, your face is bright red!" said Kanya.

“Don’t mock me!!”

Gaddie cleared his throat. “Anyway,” he said, attempting to change the subject, “it’s best you return to your classes, Nonorick. Once you’re done, and *only* once you’re done, we can train.”

“Okay!” I yelled, and immediately ran out the door, eager to finish my classes and begin sparring as soon as possible. Gaddie often went into the forest on expeditions, and it wasn’t every day I got to train with him.

“Master Nono! Wait for me!” cried Kanya, chasing after me.

“So, what was today’s class about, again?” I asked her.

“Today we’re finishing *Introduction to Alchemical Plants*.”

“Okay! Let’s breeze through it, so I can get to training!”

“Breeze through it? You *are* going to remember it, right? I’ll be testing you afterward!”

“I know!”

I was an orphaned child found as a baby, deemed worthy of receiving the divine blood and becoming a vampire. That meant that, unlike everyone else, I didn’t have a mother or father.

But I had a family. Gaddie and Kanya were my family. My only family in the whole wide world.

After that, fifty years came and went.

“Oh, Master Nonorick. Out for a walk?”

I was stopped by the old lady who ran the orchard. Even in our village of vampires, she was among the eldest.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Gaddie’s supposed to be getting back today, so I thought I’d make him his favorite: Couland Fish pie!”

“Oh, Gadrick’s back, is he?” said the old lady’s husband, overhearing our conversation. “Been about three years since we saw him last.”

It looked like the man had just been in the orchard, because he was carrying a large bamboo basket filled with bright scarlet fruits called yumil fruits.

“It’s been four,” I corrected him. “He sent me a letter by bird;

apparently he's been all over the place and has been too busy to visit!"

Over the past few decades, Gaddie's travels had taken him far from the village. Many vampires preferred to stay isolated, but that was only because it made our lives easier; it wasn't a steadfast rule or anything. There were even some who had cut ties with the village completely to live in human society. In Gaddie's case, he'd gone traveling to broaden his horizons and learn more about the outside world.

"Well, as long as he's having fun, that's what counts. Try not to get so angry over it, will you, Master Nonorick?"

"I'm not mad! But I do wish he'd stop writing about his new girlfriend all the time!"

Apparently, the outside world had become dangerous lately with the appearance of a demon lord. Somewhere along his travels, Gaddie had run into a girl calling herself the hero and had started journeying with her on a quest to slay the demon lord. I'd heard that, quite recently, they had succeeded in their quest and restored peace to the land.

According to Gaddie, this hero was quite the looker, and after a long will-they-won't-they, the two of them finally managed to hook up.

"It's a good thing he's found someone, isn't it?" said the old lady. "You should be happy for him, Master Nonorick."

"I never thought we'd see the day our Gadrick got hitched. How time flies," agreed her husband with a hearty smile. "So, have you just been setting traps for the Couland Fish?"

"Nope," I replied. "Kanya already set them this morning. I've just been to check them. Look at this big one we caught!"

I opened the sack I was holding, revealing a large fish with scales as pale as snow.

"Ohh, he's a large lad, isn't he? Oh, I know, take some of these with you; they're ripe and sweet, and they'll make a good dessert."

"Wow, thank you!"

The husband grinned and began picking out a few of the fruit from his hamper.

“Here, take this one, this one, and…this one. These are the best of the lot, so be sure to share them around.”

“Wow, can I really have all these?!”

“Go right ahead! Take as many as you like! Nothing would make me happier than my fruit being enjoyed by folks with divine blood.”

“…Thank you.”

The people of the village were always kind to me. They always called me “Master Nonorick,” and I had never once seen them angry. Even when I played pranks, they would laugh it off with a smile. It was all due to the divine blood that flowed in my veins.

The only people in the whole village who didn’t treat me differently were Uncle Godrick and his half brother, Gaddie. Gaddie came from a different mother and didn’t have divine blood in him like Godrick and me, but he was still nice to me, and I got along with him well.

“Come to think of it, is Kanya not with you?”

“Oh, she was, but…”

“Ah! There you are! Why do you always leave me behind?! Is it because you hate me? Hey, do you hate me or something?!”

I had left Kanya in the river as a prank. She was such a crybaby, and her eyes were now filled with tears. It was so cute. I could tease Kanya all day and never get tired of it.

But I didn’t want to push her too far, because I liked Kanya. She was the only one who got angry at my pranks. It was too bad she still called me “Master” like everyone else, though.

“I don’t hate you, Kanya! I love you, I love you!”

I ran up to her and met her with a big hug.

“Whaa?”

“So will you stop calling me ‘Master Nono?’” I asked.

“I—I can’t do that!”

“Then I do hate you after all!” I pouted.

“N-nooo! Master Nono!!”

I said good-bye to the orchard owners and walked all the way back home with Kanya. Despite my efforts, she didn’t budge on the “Master” thing even once.

When we neared our home, I sensed a presence I hadn’t felt in a

long time.

"Gaddie!" I cried.

"Hmm? Ah, Nonorick. Long time no see."

In front of the house stood Gaddie, looking exactly the same as I remembered him. Beside him was a girl with a stern expression and straight, black hair that came down to her shoulders. She looked delicate enough that a strong gust of wind might knock her over.

"And you, too, Kanya. Good to see you in good health."

"Welcome back, Gadrick. And who might this be?"

"Allow me to introduce the girl I mentioned in my letters. This is Tsukasa, the current hero and my partner."

I had already guessed as much, but before Gaddie could even finish his introduction, I sensed a strange aura about the girl. It wasn't hate or disdain, but something else entirely.

"…"

"…? …? …?"

She was looking at me. Staring hard enough to bore holes in me. I could almost see laser beams coming from her eyes.

"Um… Gadrick?" said Kanya.

"Oh dear, I feared something like this would happen."

I heard the two of them speaking, but for some reason, I couldn't tear my eyes away from this girl.

Wh-what's her problem? I was going to be nice, seeing as she'll be Gaddie's wife someday, but it looks like she already doesn't like me!

"G-Gaddie? D-did I do something to offend her…?" I asked, hoping he could rescue me from this endless staring match somehow, but…

"Oh, I can't take it anymore!!"

"Waah!!"

She moved so fast, even all my training had nothing on her. In the blink of an eye, I was in Tsukasa's arms, with her rubbing her cheek against mine.

"She's so cute, it's not fair!! Look at her little blond bob! It's so silky! She's so slender and pale! It ought to be illegal!!"

"Gyaaagh!! G-Gaddie?! Help! She's gone crazy!!"

"*Sigh.* Settle down, Tsukasa."

But Tsukasa didn't let go. "I can't believe you were hiding such a cute, sweet girl from me! And she calls you *'Gaddie'*?! That's just criminal!!"

"Who are you calling criminal? I think you ought to take a good, hard look at your own actions before throwing around accusations like that."

"Never! I object! I am prepared to press criminal charges! Gadrick, you are guilty of concealing an adorable little girl with intent to use!"

"Just let go of Nonorick already!!"

"Never! I'm going to make her my little sister!!"

"Listen to yourself! Besides, where's all this 'she' business come from? I already told you before we arrived that Nonorick is a boy!"

At this, all the color drained from Tsukasa's face at once.

"…A boy?"

Her neck swiveled gratingly like a wooden puppet, and she looked at me with cold, dead eyes.

"Erm… Yeah… I'm a boy. Sorry?"

I wasn't sure why I apologized. It just felt like I had to.

"…Ohh…"

The next moment, she withered like an old lady fainting in the sun. Luckily, Gadrick seemed to predict this and was ready to catch her.

"Whoopsie-daisy. You feeling better now?"

"An IRL femboy… Too cute… I can't even…… Erk."

Babbling some strange foreign language, Tsukasa passed out. It almost felt like those were her dying words.

"She's hopeless…"

"Erm," said Kanya, looking concerned, "is she okay?"

"Physically, she's fine," Gaddie replied. "She just got a little overexcited, that's all. Mentally… Well, she's a lost cause, I'm afraid. Better get used to it."

"…She *is* the hero, isn't she?"

"Yes, that's what they call her. She can be a little…odd…at times, but she's truly remarkable."

Gadrick softly combed his fingers through her hair as he said this, and Tsukasa's sleeping expression turned calm and peaceful. He didn't have to say anything for me to be able to see how much she meant to him.

…Somewhere, deep in my heart, it stung a little.

"Well, she must be, to make you fall in love with her!" I teased.

"Wha—?!"

Gaddie immediately turned red-faced. Well, he'd brought it on himself for so casually flaunting that he'd already reached the age of 200 and was allowed to leave the village.

…I wonder, when I leave the village, will I ever meet someone like Gaddie did?

Someone like Gaddie or Kanya, who would treat me not as a divine being, but as plain old Nonorick.

"Um, might I suggest we go inside?" said Kanya. "We can't leave her lying here, after all."

"…Rgh. You're right. Let's go."

It seemed Gaddie really wanted to quip back at my teasing somehow, but in the end, he could think of nothing to say.

A few days had passed since Gaddie came back home. In that time, I became friendly with Tsukasa. She told me embarrassing stories about Gaddie from their time together and stories about the world she came from, and the two of us even cooked together.

Right now, I was in a clearing a little outside the village, sparring with Gaddie.

"Haaaaaargh!!"

Our swords clashed time and time again, emitting an unending cacophony of clangs.

"Hey, come now, is that all you've got?"

"How are you blocking them all?! I've got *two* swords!!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Looks like I've still got it! If you've got twice the swords, then show me twice the number of swings!"

I was trying my damnedest, but I still couldn't land a single hit on

Gaddie, who remained as cool as ever.

"Mrgh!!"

"Still not enough, I'm afraid. Why don't you try a little harder?"

"Grrr!!"

I wanted to get him without resorting to tricks, but it looks like I've got no choice!

"Try this on for size!! *Divine Chains!!*"

"Oh? What's this?"

While I was still fighting, bloodred chains glowing with orange light flew out of my sleeves. They coiled in the air as if alive, then swooped at Gaddie.

"Now this is new. Still not enough to get one over on me, though!"

My technique didn't use mana, and it managed to catch Gaddie by surprise. However, if simple tricks were enough to win against my brother, then I would have done so long ago. I could barely keep my eyes on him as he moved this way and that, slicing the chains to ribbons, before spinning around and grabbing two more that sought to ambush him in his grip, then crushing a third underfoot.

"Heh-heh," I chuckled. "You touched it, didn't you?"

"What?"

At that moment, the chains Gaddie was holding turned to liquid, and like a large slime, engulfed his hand, sucking the mana and stamina out of him.

"What's this?! I can't shake it off!"

"Got you!!"

The power I stole from Gaddie's body filled my own.

Now's my only chance! Before he recovers!

I launched myself at him, funneling all my newfound might into one finishing move. However…

"Demongrave Dance!"

"W-wah?!"

Before my attack could connect, I was blown backward by nothing more than the force of the air displaced by Gaddie's blade.

"Looks like I win again, Nonorick."

"Urgh…"

That last blow had knocked me a fair distance into a tree, and before I could clamber to my feet, Gaddie was standing over me, the tip of his blade pointed at my throat.

"You and Tsukasa are way too strong!" I complained, falling to my back in defeat. "I can't even hit you once!"

I had sparred against the hero just prior to my bout with Gaddie, and to my utter shock, she was even more powerful than he was. It almost wasn't a fight at all. Immediately after we'd begun, I'd felt all my power drained away.

It was something similar to what I had tried to use on Gaddie, only way stronger. My technique actually had to make contact with the foe in order to absorb their strength, but Tsukasa's activated merely by being close to me.

"Don't look so down," said Gaddie. "You've improved a lot. Impressively so."

"Yes, yes! Not many people can go on fighting after I use Gluttony on them! Oh, Nonorick! Cute *and* strong! Is there anything you can't do? Whatever am I going to do with you?!"

"Aww, and now my clothes got dirty."

I looked down at my dirt-stained garb, ignoring Tsukasa, who seemed to be off in a world of her own.

"Ah, I see you've learned how best to deal with her," said Gaddie. "So, that move you used earlier; was that using your divine blood?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I read about how to control it in an old book and decided to try it out. It's quite useful, actually!"

I called upon the power again, this time molding my blood into the form of a hand.

"I see. Well, be careful how you use it. It very nearly got the better of me. Against someone not so skilled, it could hurt them quite seriously."

"I know!"

"I can't believe you're *both* ignoring me! …But that's not so bad either!!"

Just then, Kanya came running over, carrying a large basket.

"Hello, everyone! I brought dinner!"

I looked up to the sky and saw that the sun was very nearly

overhead. It must have been just about noon.

"All right!" I said. "Let's eat!"

And just as I let my guard down, it happened.

"…Hmm? What's this…?" "I don't like that…" "Huh? The sky's gone dark…"

It was so sudden.

It came without warning, almost as if it had been there all along. But if it had, then there was no way to explain the sudden and overwhelming sense of dread I felt at that moment.

"Ka-kiiii!!"

It was a giant, transparent mass about the size of a small hill. Had it been much smaller, I would have had no issues calling it a slime, save for its threatening aura that no slime possessed. It had no eyes, but it was staring at us. Like it was a hungry wolf, and we were its unfortunate supper.

"Ka-kiiiiiiii!!"

Whatever it was, it was bad. I could feel as much in my bones, long before my rational mind reached that conclusion. For the first time, I felt a primal dread for my very life.

That moment of hesitation proved to be fatal.

Hundreds, thousands of tentacles erupted from the mass. There was nothing I could do against a creature so determined to wipe out its prey.

"Godsgrave Dance: Kagura!!"

Just when I thought it was all over, Gaddie unleashed a flood of blades.

"Roooaaaaahhh!!"

The sound of slicing air came as the chime of a bell to my ears.

"It's so…beautiful."

At that moment, I saw just how much Gaddie had been holding back when fighting against me. For all their graceful beauty, his sword strikes were no less devastating.

"Ka-kiiii!!"

The monster growled like a dog denied its food, emitting an air-trembling noise. However, just then, it began to lose momentum.

"*Glutton's Domain*, Activate!"

As soon as Tsukasa spoke those words, the hunter became the hunted.

"Ka-kii? Ka-kii?"

The air suddenly felt thick and weighty. It was the same move she used against me in our earlier bout.

"You can't absorb us. That's my specialty."

The usual disappointing Tsukasa was nowhere to be seen. In her place stood a fearsomely impressive woman.

"Become as the trees, devouring all they touch. *Forest of Hunger.*"

She crouched and touched the ground, and a gray mold, like lichen, spread out beneath the monster. From out of the mold, green mushrooms appeared, and the monster's see-through body began to take on a strange shade of gray.

As it did, the slime's movements began to grow sluggish.

"Y-you're amazing, both of you…"

Kanya and I backed away, trying not to interfere. At first, we could barely think straight, but once we put some distance between us and the monster, we began to regain our composure.

I could sense that this monster was way stronger than the dragons we usually found in the magical forest. However, Gaddie and Tsukasa were stronger still. They were overwhelming it. If I left things to them, surely everything would be just fine.

"W-we should go back a bit farther, Kanya. We might get hurt if we stay here… Kanya?"

But Kanya was muttering something to herself, watching the monster. She was so focused on identifying the monster's characteristics that she didn't even seem to hear me.

"It came suddenly and without warning," she said, a serious expression on her face. "The skies blacken with its approach… Its giant form, transparent like slime… C-could it be?!"

The more she thought, the paler her face went.

"Wh-what's the matter, Kanya?"

"Th-this is bad! Very bad!" she cried.

"Ka-kii!!"

Just then, the monster began swelling in size.

"Grh! He might taste bland, but there's a lot of him!"

"Then let's cut him into bite-size chunks!"

Gaddie and Tsukasa immediately responded to this development by channeling more mana into their spells.

But when Kanya saw what the monster was doing, she lost her mind.

"W-we have to get out of here! Run away!!"

The monster released a blinding glow. Kanya grabbed me and leaped aside. I didn't know what was about to happen, but I summoned my blood.

"Divine Barrier!!"

I surrounded us both with a magical shield, but my impromptu defensive measure quickly began wearing down in the face of the immense power it was up against.

S-so much mana! I can't hold it off any longer!!

"Waaaagh!!"

The opposed forces created a mana explosion, tearing my barrier apart, ripping me from Kanya's soft touch, and sending a thundering impact reverberating through my entire being.

And, like a show curtain falling, I was rendered unconscious.

I don't know how long I was out for.

When I finally awoke, the first thing I smelled was dust…then blood.

One, two, three four…

Countless people's, all mixed together.

A sweet, luscious, irresistible temptation. Not like my normal blood-drinking urges, but something far more powerful. Far more… instinctual.

"Krrrh… Wh-what…happened…?"

I looked around and discovered I was lying amid ruins. The trees

were blasted and splintered, while the ground was cracked and hard as stone, littered with the bodies of my fellow vampires.

"Ka-kii!!"

"Unified Step: Shinra!!"
"Glutton's Dominion: Dining Beast!!"
"It's not over yet! Keep it going, you two! Show them the might of a true vampire!!"
"Those with divine blood will never be overcome!!"
"It's just a slime! Get him!"
I saw them fighting on, even now.
"H-huh? Why is everyone…fighting…?"
"Ha-ha, there you are, Master Nono. You woke up just in time…"
"Kanya!! Are you okay?!"
Hearing her voice, I spun around. I still recalled how she had jumped in front of the blast for me.
"Kanya!! Y-your arm!!"
"H…ha-ha, I guess I'm more cut out for my books and not all this fighting stuff… Don't worry, it hurts way less than it looks…"
Kanya was missing her left arm. Her severed shoulder, meanwhile, had turned to black stone. On her face, she wore the same worried smile as always.
It wasn't just her, either. The villagers who'd stuck up for me were either lying on the ground bleeding, or they'd been turned to stone, just like the land itself.
"Wh-what happened? Why is everything so…?"
"I think that monster is called Elphenterius," Kanya explained. "It looks like a giant slime, but it's actually a kind of wraith. It's a magical life-form that only seeks to absorb as much mana as it can from its environment. I read about it in an old book. Whenever it appeared, the land would turn to rock, then to dust, and finally sink into the ocean."
"Wh-what?! What is it doing here?!"
"Unfortunately, we don't know why and how the monster

appears," Kanya went on. "It's like a force of nature… Ah!"

Just then, the monster emitted a concentrated projectile of light right at me.

"Ka-kii!!"

"Not if I can help it!" "Master Nonorick!!"

By the time I realized it, it was already too late.

And so, the two vampires threw themselves in the projectile's path, taking the hit meant for me.

"A-are you okay?" I yelled, but they both slumped to the ground. I ran forward to check on them, only to be held back by magical chains.

"Wh-what's this??"

"I'm sorry, Master Nono, but I can't let you interrupt the ritual."

The chains had come from a magic circle inscribed in the ground beneath my feet. I'd never seen anything like the magic circle before, but I could tell the chains were keeping me trapped within it.

"What do you mean, ritual?! Let me go! We have to help the others!!"

"Don't worry, Master Nono, it'll be okay. You'll be safe, I promise."

"I'm not worried about me! It's the others! They're still fighting!"

"They've been fighting for about three days now," said Kanya. "The blast knocked you out for that whole time."

"Three days?! We need to retreat and patch everyone up, or they'll die!!"

"I'm afraid we can't retreat. Elphenterius traps its prey in a magical realm, so that nothing can get in or out. That's why it's so dark even though it's the middle of the day, see?"

Sure enough, I could see the sun in the sky, but it was like the whole world was covered in darkened glass.

"We can't even use teleportation magic in here," said Kanya. "So there's no way to retreat and regroup. We can get supplies in through the border, though. That's the only way we've lasted this long."

"Th-then…I'll help too! We can all fight this thing together!! All we have to do is beat the monster, and then we can carry everyone to safety!"

I could see from the devastation all around me that it wouldn't be that easy. I could feel the monster's strength radiating off it, too, but there wasn't any other option.

"I'm sorry, but Elphenterius has another ability. When it dies, it releases all its stored-up energy in one big blast. Because of that, even if you manage to kill it, everything inside its feeding grounds will be turned to stone."

"Th-that's not fair…"

Then how are we supposed to save everyone?!

"…B-but…if we're going to die anyway, then at least let me fight by their side! We might not be able to save ourselves, but we can at least make sure nobody outside the barrier has to be harmed!"

"…You're a kind boy, Master Nono. But I'm afraid that is not your role in this. Like I said, you'll be safe, I promise."

At that moment, the magic circle began to glow.

"K-Kanya? Wh-what are you doing? What's this magic circle for?"

"It counteracts Elphenterius's petrifying ability," said Kanya. "Eh-heh-heh, I'm always bad at putting things into practice. It took me this long just to set it up."

"But…if you can do that, then why not save everyone?!"

"I'm sorry, but it only works on one person, and it requires a lot of setup. Right now, I'm the only person who can cast it."

"…Grh… In that case…don't waste it on me. Save Gaddie or yourself instead!!"

"I can't cast it on myself," said Kanya. "That's not how the spell works. And if I seal Gadrick away inside it, we won't be able to defeat Elphenterius."

"W-wait, Kanya! Wait! Wait, wait, wait! What do you mean, 'seal'? What are you going to do to me?!"

"You never know what books might teach you. For example, a great ritual that can freeze an individual in time, completely isolating and protecting them from any outside influence. All it costs is the caster's life, and even if we don't kill the monster, you, at least, will be safe."

"The caster's life?! No, no, no! What are you saying?! Everyone's going to die except me?!"

"I'm afraid so, Nonorick."

"Gaddie!!"

After unleashing a powerful move that made Elphenterius reel back, Gaddie landed near me. He was covered in blood from fighting for so long, but his eyes still burned with determination.

"We must safeguard the divine blood… That was your mother's dying wish."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Nonorick… It was fun sparring with you. At last, you'll be able to watch me fight at my full potential. To that end…I'll need to borrow some of your blood."

"G-Gaddie?!"

While I was still immobilized, Gaddie came over and sank his fangs into my neck.

The blood oozed out. I heard him swallow.

"This blood," he said, "always seems so ill-fitting in my veins."

Gaddie's hair turned blood-crimson, and I felt the concentrations of mana in his body shoot up. Excess mana spilled from his open wounds like steam, yet even so, the amount that remained inside seemed too much for his skin to contain.

"Don't look so sad, Nonorick. We'll make sure you survive."

"Gaddie…"

"If you cry like that, you won't be able to see my new techniques, will you?"

Gaddie roughly tousled my hair, and then…

"Kanya. Begin the ritual, if you please."

Kanya nodded.

"…Forever and ever and ever and ever. Let sorrow's tear wet the vessel, and forlorn hope be fulfilled. Secret Art: *Eternal Crystal.*"

"K-Kanya?!"

As she chanted, Kanya embraced me tightly. The ring at my feet glowed brighter, and a warm, green crystal began to form around me.

"Ka-kii!!"

"Keep it up! Just a little longer!"

"Don't let any attacks through until Kanya's spell is done!!"

"We must protect the divine blood!"

Over Kanya's shoulder, I could see the others still fighting for my sake.

"Gadrick!!" cried Tsukasa. "Hurry up and get back into the fight!!"

"Give me time! This blood is not fit for me; I'm not used to controlling it!! …But this should be more than enough."

With that, Gaddie returned to the front lines with blinding speed.

"Ka-kii!!"

With his newfound power, the balance of the fight slowly shifted in our favor. Each of his blows seemed more powerful than the last.

But to me, he looked like a firework on the verge of snuffing out completely.

"Why?! Why do you have to do this?! I don't want to! I don't want you all to die just so that I can survive!!"

"That is our duty," said Kanya. "That is the duty of all the vampires who live here."

"What do you mean?! I don't understand what you mean, Kanya!! What's the point in me surviving if all of you are gone?!"

"Except for Gadrick," Kanya explained, "each and every one of us owe our lives to your ancestor. Her dying wish was to protect the divine blood. Our only purpose is to keep you alive. That's all we've ever lived for. So…it's okay, Master Nono."

"No, stop!! I don't care about the divine blood! I don't care!!"

"I won't tell you not to be selfish," said Kanya. "After all, I'm the most selfish one here."

Her breath was becoming more and more ragged, and her face was growing pale. As the crystals formed around me, so too did Kanya's body turn to crystal and crumble away.

"Master Nono," she said. "When I'm gone, remember to eat your vegetables, okay? There's nothing left for me to teach you now. Go out into the world, and see what's out there for yourself…"

"Why are you saying this?!"

My prison was warm and soft, like it was made of Kanya herself. But in turn, the warmth I always felt was rapidly fading away.

"…I'm glad we got to talk, one last time, at the very end…"

There was almost nothing left of her now, but still she smiled at

me.

"Kanya…!"

"Please don't look so sad… I'll always be by your side, Master Nono. Always…"

It was a beautiful, radiant smile, free of any regret whatsoever.

"I'll always love you…Nono…"

Then, the last of her transformed into crystal, leaving me with only those words.

The moment my prison sealed around me, I was completely cut off from the outside world. My new world felt peaceful and warm, as though Kanya were right there with me.

I was conscious and awake, yet try as I might, I was unable to free myself from that place. No matter how loud I screamed, or how hard I pounded my fists against the crystal walls, they wouldn't budge. All I could do was watch.

Outside my world, the fight continued. I watched as Tsukasa used some kind of ability to fuse with Gaddie. She launched herself at the monster, taking it and herself out in a massive explosion. After the dust settled, all that remained were stone statues of Elphenterius, Tsukasa, and Gaddie.

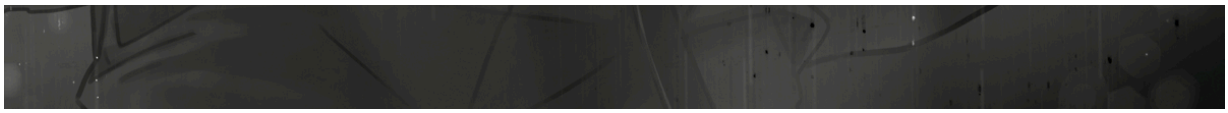
The tragic sight left a hole in my heart. A hole that was soon to be filled with a different emotion.

A few days after the fight, some people showed up who had apparently summoned Elphenterius with forbidden magic. I overheard them saying they had done this to kill the hero, and I watched as they kicked the statues of Gaddie and Tsukasa, smashing them to pieces and laughing all the while.

One of the men called himself the new king of the world. I felt a hatred grow in my heart. With that animosity fueling me, I used my time in my prison to train. I swung my sword repeatedly against the inside of the crystal in the hopes of escaping it.

For days and days, I trained as if it was my only purpose. I don't know if my training paid off, or if the spell wore off on its own, but one day, my crystalline prison dissolved away.





The fine grains covered me like dust, then sank into the ground. I gripped my sword and began moving toward the nearest human settlement, possessed of the urge to kill the man I had seen.

However, more time had passed than I thought.

I learned the man had already been killed over two hundred years ago.

"…"

After that, I wandered alone, finally returning to my old village.

But there was nothing left. I couldn't even tell there had been a battle there. Elphenterius, the people, Tsukasa, Gaddie, Kanya. None of them. There wasn't a single trace remaining.

I wandered through that place like a ghost, finally arriving at the very place my prison had been.

"…Ah."

I spotted it. Where once had been the dust of my prison, now there was a set of clothes.

"Are these…Kanya's?"

I fell to my knees and took them in my hands.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!!"

It was like my emotions had been frozen along with myself and had only now thawed.

"Why?! Why, why, why, why, why?!!"

"Don't worry, Master Nono, it'll be okay. You'll be safe, I promise."
"We'll make sure you survive."

"What's the point in making sure I stay alive?! What am I supposed to do now?! How am I supposed to live now that everyone's gone?!"

There was nothing I cared about in this world. No trace of the people I once loved, and even the one I hated I had already lost to the passage of time.

I had earned power, I had earned freedom, and yet I had nothing.

"Our only purpose is to keep you alive. That's all we've ever lived for."

"We must safeguard the divine blood. That was your mother's dying wish."

"I don't care, I don't care!! Who cares about the divine blood?! Why was I given it? I didn't ask for it!!"

I slashed open my wrists, expelling the so-called "divine blood" from my veins. Forcing it out of my body.

"*Haah…haah…* I'm not a divine being. I don't have divine blood… I'm not 'Master Nonorick'…"

The blood formed into a glowing sphere, which I crushed between my fingers.

"I'm just Nono. Nono the vampire."

It was from then on that I began calling myself Nono. I became just a normal vampire with normal blood. I began wearing the black military garb, my only memento of Kanya's, and began using the sword techniques that Gaddie had taught me.

And so, Nono stayed alive, as proof they had once existed. That was his reason for living.



"N-ngh…"

"Oh, looks like you're awake."

"Oh, he's so cuuute!! Even from inside the current hero, I could never get enough of seeing him in his army uniform! Ohh!! DIES. OF. CUTE."

A pair of strangely familiar voices tickled my mind awake.

"Wha…? Where am I…?"

When I opened my eyes, I didn't understand what I was looking at.

Perhaps some part of me thought I was still dreaming.

"Long time no see, Nonorick."

"Wakey-wakey, Nono! Ooh, aren't you just the cutest?"

"Tsukasa…? Gaddie…?"

Before me were the forms of two people I had watched perish centuries ago.

"Sorry to wake you up so suddenly, Nonorick, but I'm afraid there's much to discuss and precious little time. We can't stay separated much longer… I suppose seeing is believing."

"That's right, so come here, Gadrick."

"…Why are you always like this?"

Gaddie sighed and reached out a hand toward his partner. When he did, the two of them overlapped and became one. It was the same technique I'd seen that day, when I'd been trapped in the crystal.

Their hair seemed to change between red and black depending on the light. The face was androgynous, and their eyes were different colors—one black, and one crimson. All this contrasted starkly with their skin, which looked deathly pale. Condensed mana poured off their body like steam, and the very air seemed to crackle with power.

"Face our trial! Sword of Sin: Ravenous Vampire! For this is the point of no return!"

"Grh?!"

Before I knew it, I faced a murderous flurry of blades. I roused myself and tuned my senses for combat in an instant.

"Hey, what's the matter?! It's not a trial if you don't fight back!!"

"Grh! Dammit!!"

Their cuts were a perfect balance of measured and wild.

"You'd better pay attention, or this'll be over as fast as you can blink! Has centuries of laziness made you weak?"

"Grhhh! Shut up! Don't patronize me!!"

Before I could even think, my body moved. A pair of white swords appeared in my hands, and I unleashed an uncountable volley of swings in response.

In that moment, my mind felt clear, as though it had been

replaced with something else. I could see everything, process all information, my mind running at blinding speeds. My senses grew unbelievably sharp, forcing me, against my will, to confront the growing realization that what I was seeing was no dream at all.

"Are you Gaddie, or Tsukasa?! Argh, it's too complicated! Why in the world are you here?!"

Faster, faster, faster.

The more our swords clashed, the more my heart was stirred.

"Why? Well, there's many reasons, but ultimately, it's because we're the hero. When we died, we were drawn into the hero's power before getting a chance to reincarnate."

"I already don't understand! Why are you attacking me, then?!"

"Didn't we just say? This is a trial. This is where you will be forced to make your final decision. We don't accept weaklings around here, so we're here to filter out the riffraff!"

"Gh-ghah!!"

With each exchange and parry, I found myself edging closer and closer to a losing state, like a chess problem with a predefined solution. Soon, my opponent would have the freedom to prepare a killing strike. My blades rang, and it felt like it wouldn't be long before they were torn from my bloodied grip.

I managed to hold on to them, but the force of the blows knocked me clean off my feet, and I flew headlong into the side of a cliff.

"Whoa, whoa, you're light as a feather. Has wearing a girl's clothes stunted your testosterone levels?"

"Grh… Shut up… You're just too strong, that's all…"

Now that I had been thrown clear from the fight, I took a moment to evaluate my surroundings. I was in a circular arena about a hundred meters in diameter, littered with cracked boulders, barren ground, and blasted trees. The whole battlefield was enclosed by high stone cliffs whose peaks I couldn't see, even if I craned my neck.

I refocused all my senses on the foe before me.

"So this isn't a dream," I said. "And you're not just some cheap copy cobbled together out of my memories or anything."

"I'm afraid we're the real deal. Gadrick and Tsukasa, in the flesh. Well, we're ghosts, so not really 'in the flesh,' but you get the point."

"In that case…that's all I need to know," I replied. "There's a lot I need to tell you, Gaddie. While I was trapped inside that crystal, I practiced a lot. I never want to be left behind ever again."

"…"

"You said that weaklings won't get in, right? Well, why don't you see for yourself how weak I am? I'll show you how far Nono's come!"

I needed to get in and knock some sense into Kai's noggin. This time, I wouldn't let my friends leave me on the sidelines to watch—I would fight alongside them. So that I could give it all up for a single battle. A single moment.

"Now, shall we play?"

I activated "White Ramble," deploying twelve swords into the air.

"Ha-ha-ha! Very good! Seems like that personality of yours goes deeper than I thought. Let's dance, and maybe I can see what's really *under there!"*

The grinning face before me was that of Gaddie and Tsukasa combined. I felt deeply wrong, like someone was gently circling my private parts with a rasp, but I steeled my nerve and launched myself at them.

I don't know how long the battle lasted.

There was no night and day in that place, and all I was focused on was swinging my swords, so I lost track.

"Haah…haah…haah…"

"I see you really haven't neglected your training. Your soul is replete with combat experience."

"Then why am I still so far behind?!"

I had clearly been on the back foot the entire battle. My strikes were faster than anyone else's, but in terms of raw power, I was beaten. One swing from the duo was enough to force back three of my swords. And even if I tried to follow up after that, they were fast

enough to go on the defense almost immediately. I tried misdirection, feints, ambushes—none of it worked. They were simply better than me in every way that mattered.

"Hmph!!"

"Gahhh!!"

Their sword slammed into mine, throwing me back into the cliff once again.

"So? Ready to give up yet?"

"…Of course not! I'm always ready for round two! ♪"

I spurred my tired body on, readying the swords in my hands once more.

"You must know you can never catch up to us, no matter how hard you try. Keep at it…and you'll die, you know?"

"Maybe so…but I can't just give up either!"

With unsteady steps, like a ghost, I walked back to the battlefield.

"Give up?"

"I didn't have a choice back then, but I do now. If I turn back now, then I'll be flying in the face of everything I lived for!"

Kanya wasn't here to protect me now. And even if she was, I was done being protected. The person fighting my battles now…was me, Nono.

Even if I was tired and beaten, even if I didn't know what I was fighting for anymore…none of that affected Nono.

"…I knew it. You are weak."

"Just you watch. This battle isn't over yet."

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that."

I suddenly felt a chill run down my spine.

"Your flame. Your hate. It's weak."

"Grh?!"

A dark, twisted smile, mixed with the void itself.

"You don't want revenge. You just want death. There's no hatred behind your actions; you're just scared to be alone. So scared you

don’t want to be here anymore.”

“Don’t talk like you know me!”

I abandoned my defensive stance and lunged forward, thrusting my swords. My opponent caught them on theirs, but the power of my attack forced them back a little.

“Did you have fun helping Kaito and Leticia with their vengeance? Did that help you blow off steam? You’re not like them. They dedicated themselves to revenge. You’re just lost.”

“Nono’s not lost! Nono’s…”

I hesitated for a moment. Taking advantage of that, they wheeled around to my rear and struck me in the back. I barely managed to block in time, but the force blasted me forward into the center of the arena.

“You’re wearing Kanya’s clothes, using my sword techniques, and you even threw away your divine blood. You’re nothing more than a stray dog, looking for a place to die!”

“No, you’re wrong!!”

I flipped in the air, regaining my balance, and sprinted toward them once I landed.

“Are we? You didn’t know what to do with your life, so you chose a reason to die for!”

“What’s wrong with that?! Everyone’s gone! The whole village, Gaddie and Tsukasa, even Kanya! There’s no Elphenterius anymore, and even the bad guy who summoned him went off and got himself killed!! There’s no one left!!”

“Oh?”

“But still, I went on living!! So I could find a place where I could die in peace!! If I can die trying to save the world, then what’s so bad about that?!”

Our guards crossed, I yelled in their face. Their accusations hurt so much, all I could do was tell them the truth.

“Maybe I do want to die! Have you got a problem with that?!”

“…Don’t make us laugh. We don’t intend to let you sacrifice yourself for nothing.”

Suddenly, they seemed many times stronger than they had been in the fight so far.

"We aren't looking to martyr ourselves. We're out for vengeance."

"Aaaaghh!"

I fell to my knees, and as if to finish me off, a burning pain ran through my arms and legs. Each of my tendons had been severed, with such blinding speed as to suggest that they had been going easy on me up until now.

"And so, you must live."

Their face looked unimaginably tragic to me.

"But…why? Why can't I be with you? Why do you want me to live in agony? I threw away the divine blood; you shouldn't need me anymore!"

Gaddie sighed.

"The divine blood is the source of all vampires," he said. *"Vampires can reproduce just like other beings, but a true vampire, those who possess the divine blood, can also create vampires by passing that blood on. The divine blood is the seed of our race, and so we must protect it… But, to tell you the truth, that's not why I did it. I only wanted to save you, Nonorick."*

"I…"

"I'm sure I speak for Tsukasa and Kanya, too. We just wanted to save that which could be saved. The same goes for our village. It wasn't only out of gratitude to your ancestor that they fought for you that day. They wanted you to live on."

"I…know…that. I know all that!"

I started sobbing. Even my own shame couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

I knew. I knew I'd achieved nothing by throwing away the divine blood. I knew how much the people of my village cared for me regardless.

That was exactly what made it so hard to bear.

"You've always feared being alone, Nonorick, ever since you were a little child… Here. I have something of yours that I promised to return."

Gaddie drew his own blade across his wrist, allowing the crimson liquid to fall onto my mouth.

"…"

The moment the first few drops hit my lips, I felt a latent power rise within me, like a flower beginning to unfurl. I was suffused with a deep satisfaction I could never feel, no matter how much mortal blood I drank. I felt every wound on my body close and disappear in an instant.

"We were only able to save you," said Gaddie, *"by leaving you. You've been alone for a long, long time. I know that. But you're not by yourself anymore."*

"…I know that. I finally found someone I feel equal to. And you're trying to keep me from him!"

"Of course we are. This isn't some friendly get-together we have going on here. You're only using revenge as a means to an end. It can never be who you truly are. Even if you and Kaito share vengeance through the power of the soul blades, it's pointless if your priorities aren't aligned."

Before my wound closed completely, Gaddie placed his hand to the blood flowing out of me.

"Do you remember the spell that Kanya used to save your life that day?" he asked. *"That was a weaker form of a ritual perfected by the first hero. Originally, it could be undone at will, and the price was only a fraction of one's life, not the full amount. I have borrowed the First's power, and now I will use it to reawaken the vestiges of Kanya within you."*

"Huh? What does that mean?"

"Well, it means I can bring her back."

"You can bring Kanya back to life?!"

"After a fashion. Think of it not as resurrection. More like… reincarnation."

I could feel something being drawn out from me at Gaddie's touch.

"What is this? It feels…"

"You wouldn't have to ask me that question if you still had the divine blood within you."

Whatever he was drawing out of me, it coalesced in his hand into a fine mist. It gave off a warm, gentle light, of a nature I could never fail to recognize.

"Kan…ya?"

I don't know how I knew, but I did. It was her.

"…Hrh. That should be enough. Now I just have to call upon the power of the First…"

The mist in Gaddie's hand began to glow brighter. Soon, it took on a clear form, changing into the shape of a baby.

"Ah…"

I held out my arms, and something incredibly soft and light landed in them. With the divine blood returned to me, I had feeling in my hands once more.

"It's so warm…"

I heard its breathing. Felt the movement of its tiny lungs.

"Nonorick. Do not be in a hurry to die. Kanya needs you now."

"Y-you can't just…leave me with this… That's not fair!"

Gaddie held his sword aloft, and black wisps of mana swirled around it.

"…The trial has ended. You are not worthy to continue along this path. As such, your contract is hereby annulled."

"W-waah…"

Gaddie dropped his sword, like an executioner delivering the final blow. The sword passed straight through me, and I felt something deep within me come apart. It felt like shedding a layer of skin, and before long, darkness claimed my mind.

The last thing Nono saw was the gentle smile of my beloved Gaddie.



"How was that, brother? Are you satisfied?"

Godrick appeared out of the ether of Kaito's mental landscape in response to Gadrick's question.

"Hmph," he grunted. "I expected worse. Now can you please do something about that ridiculous appearance of yours?"

"Easier said than done," Gadrick replied. "It's not easy to separate

again, you know… There we go.”

Gadrick and Tsukasa stepped out of each other like an amoeba undergoing cell division. Immediately after their split, Gadrick dropped his shoulders in exhaustion.

“Ohh, that’s not good,” he said. “Giving Nonorick his divine blood back really took it out of me.”

“H-heh-heh. You look so sloppy, Gadrick.”

“You’re not much better. I can hear your knees clacking together from here.”

Gadrick had little strength to put into his comeback, and Tsukasa barely reacted at all.

“I can’t believe you let this otherworlder inhabit your skin,” said Godrick. “She’s like a wraith possessing a priest.”

“You don’t have to put it like that, brother. But, well, you’re not wrong.”

Gadrick sighed.

“Still, I suppose you’re happy now, aren’t you? Nonorick’s given up on vengeance, and he has his divine blood back. There’s no chance of him being absorbed into us now.”

“…Yes. I thank you for that.”

“Oh? Those aren’t words we hear very often from you.”

“…I could not have hoped to fill his emptiness alone. And if I cannot even express my gratitude to those who make up for my own shortcomings, then what right do I have to call myself a lord?”

“Ha-ha, well if that’s the case, then I must be the one to apologize, for leaving you to take care of him alone.”

Gadrick gave a bitter smile.

“And I’m afraid I must ask you to keep on doing so.”

“Fear not. I am a lord. And a lord does not make the same mistake twice. Besides, it is my duty as an elder brother.”

Saying this, Godrick picked up the sleeping Nonorick, who in turn held the sleeping baby in his arms.

“Hey, there’s not much time left,” said Gadrick. “You’d better get out of here unless you want to be trapped forever.”

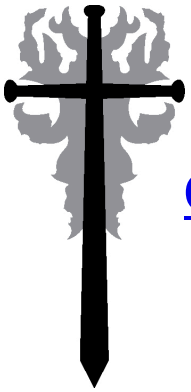
“Are you giving me orders?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Never change, brother… And be safe out there.”

"Hmph. I'll be waiting to see how all this pans out."

With that said, and with the same displeased frown as always, Godrick turned and disappeared into the darkness like a shadow.

Trial of Gluttony: Failed.



CHAPTER 4

The Partners in Crime Choose Their Path

Urgh. I'm just so jealous."

The girl sitting before me had hair as black as death, and a blindfold the color of dried blood. Pale, ashen skin, and bound in rusted iron chains. I recognized her from before.

"You are…Envy, if I'm not mistaken," I said.

But where am I?

We had run into a magic portal somewhere inside Master's mind and had all fallen inside. I remembered that much, but after that I must have passed out, because I woke up somewhere completely different.

I was surrounded by carved stone walls, as if I was inside a castle. The construction was impressive, but the room itself was a mess. Large cracks ran through the walls and windows, dust was piled up on the floor, large cobwebs spanned the shadows, and the paintings looked like they'd been salvaged from the ruins of a burned-down building.

But most notable were the statues. Knights, kings, wizards, all with pieces missing and covered in scratches, almost as though

someone had mutilated them on purpose.

Through the castle windows, I could see the remains of a once-prosperous town. Even from afar, I could tell what a sorry state it was in now.

Envy sat at a worn-out table and chair, holding a teacup and glaring at me with a murderous rage that tickled the hairs on my skin.

"…I see. I assume you are to be my next opponent?" I questioned.

I could already tell how strong she was going to be. I wouldn't last five seconds unless I went all out from the get-go.

"…Primordial Regression!!"

I called upon every drop of power I possessed, feeling a faint sense of intoxication come over me. This was my ultimate technique, which I had honed during my long separation from Master.

I had told Towako about the time Kuu hatched and flew into me, and she had taught me how to use that power without Kuu's help. I couldn't use any of the skills like "Maniacal Scarcalling" that Kuu had granted me, nor did that mysterious protection or "Awakened Ability" appear in my skill list like before. However, I did receive a significant boon to all my stats.

According to Towako, I was using magic to "unlock my latent genetic potential." I had asked her what that meant, but she'd kept on saying words like "DNA" and "genome" that I didn't quite understand.

While in this state, I was told that my eyes changed from their normal beige color to a deep blue, with slitted pupils like a dragon's. From the corner of my eye, I could see strands of my hair that had turned white and glowed softly.

"I envy you," said Envy. "I envy your life. You get to live with my lord. You don't have to be alone. You get to be saved!"

"…I see."

Envy put down her teacup. It had been empty. She rose to her feet.

"Face my trial! Sword of Sin: *Jealous Pariah!* For this is the point of no return!"

"Oh, I passed that point a long time ago."

Those silent words of mine heralded the beginning of an explosive battle.

"Rusty chains, bind my foe! *Cindered Snake!*"

"Toxic mists, come to my aid! Intoxicating Phantasm: *Poison Armor!*"

Chains rattled as an enormous serpent of iron links came barreling toward me, but upon coming into contact with the noxious fumes that surrounded me, it corroded away into nothing.

"Bite and fester! Intoxicating Phantasm: *Eight-Headed Serpent!*"

"*Sigh of Dust!* Blow it all away!"

In return, I summoned a serpent of toxic goo, but upon touching Envy's cloud of mist, it rotted into dust.

"Argh, I'm so, so, so, so, jealous!!"

"Well, this is getting boring."

Ever since the battle began, we had just been endlessly countering each other's moves. My ice magic was ineffective, and it was only the creations of my intrinsic ability that even caused her defenses to waver, but even that wasn't enough to harm her. I was only managing to keep nullifying her attacks, but if Towako hadn't trained me, I wouldn't have even lasted this long.

It seems as if my poisons and her substance control are an even match. In which case…

I needed to get out of here and hurry to Master's side as soon as possible. And if I couldn't settle this at long range, then perhaps I needed to close in for the kill instead.

"Intoxicating Phantasm: *Toxic Rain!*"

The poison mist protecting my body suddenly expanded in volume, and I channeled even more mana into it. Envy was used to casting from afar, so her agility was not too great. Combined with some physical buffs, I was able to step into her range. My poison mist and Envy's noxious cloud collided and began eating each other away.

It appeared Envy's cloud was winning that battle, but all I needed

was a few brief seconds in which to bring my blade to bear.

"Haah!!"

I raised my sword high. It was clad in mists, as I was. However…

"I'm so jealous!! Why can you use a sword, and I can't?! Why can you use poison and I can't?! Why do you have things that I don't?!"

Just as my blade was about to slice through her neck, Envy's own miasma enveloped it and stopped it from moving. It was as if all her mists had suddenly concentrated at that point, and they ate away the poison fog protecting my blade, transforming it into dust.

"These poison mists, that sword…even your hand. They should all just go away!!"

"I'd really rather they didn't," I replied.

"You think you can escape?!"

"I don't need to. Not now that my poison has started taking effect."

Envy's attacks had been turning my poison mist into dust. However, that didn't make the resulting substance any less toxic. Even as dust, it remained a poison under my control.

And so, although I knew it wasn't enough to change things on its own, I had slowly been using Intoxicating Phantasm to set the stage.

"Once you no longer have that miasma of yours, my poisons will be able to end this. Now, fall into an intoxicating slumber."

With Envy's protective mist weakened, I could command the poisonous dust that was scattered at our feet. All I needed was a few particles, and Envy didn't even have to breathe them in. They would just have to touch her skin.

Envy shook, and then her arms dropped loosely by her sides.

The poison I had conjured inflicted an illusion of the target's innermost desires.

I would have her lead me to Master personally.

"Now, all I have to do is…"

"Minnalis? …Is that you?"

A sweet, luscious voice reached my ears.

"Master?!"

I turned to the source of the voice, to see him bound to a cross

by thick chains.

"Urgh…"

"Master! Are you okay?!"

I sliced the chains off him and caught him as he fell to the ground.

"What happened? What are you doing here?"

"I don't know either," said Master. "I just woke up, and here I was."

"…"

"Did you come to save me, Minnalis?"

"Yes, I did. I came to see you, Master."

"Thank you. I knew I could count on you. You're my greatest friend, Minnalis."

He smiled sweetly. The sight brought only one emotion to my mind.

"…Oh."

"…Rgh. Sorry, but I don't think I can move just yet. Could we just…lie here for a while?"

"Of course," I replied with a smile. And then…

"Stay right there, as you wish…and die."

I took up my sword and thrust it into his heart. For it was nothing less than pure rage that drove me.

"Wh-why…?"

"Why? Tee-hee! What a silly question. Isn't it obvious? It's because I'm furious!"

My mask crumbled, and true emotion twisted my face.

"Or maybe it's because I realized you're not Master."

"…"

When I said that, all the pain and fear vanished from Master's face, and he turned stern. Next, I extracted from him the illusion magic I had cast on Envy. When I did that, his face transformed back into hers.

"I recreated your technique perfectly," she said. "My power is

total control over substance. I can recreate anything as I see fit. Even your poison, a perfect illusion that never ends. How could you tell?"

"The poison," I explained, "is only as good as its wielder. The illusions come from the caster's own mind, and so you can only create the master that *you* know. In order for it to be effective, you need to imagine the person the target is expecting to see. Otherwise, they'll sense that something is wrong and break the spell."

"…"

"And Master has never called me a friend. I am his partner in crime. Besides, he is far more dashing than that."

"…I see. I'm so jealous. I wish I had that kind of connection…"

Envy showed little emotion upon her face, but the words she spoke were ones I longed to say.

"You may be jealous of me," I said. "But I have plenty of reasons to be jealous of you as well."

I decided to hold it back no longer and opened my heart.

"How come you get to be a part of Master, and I don't? You're always with him, no matter what happens, and nothing can tear you apart. Argh! It just makes me so jealous!"

"…"

"It's not fair! It just isn't fair! Why do the others have things that I don't have?! Why is Shuria so pure? Why does Mai get to be his sister? Why is Nonorick so cute? Why does Leticia get to have a deep relationship? And you! I hate you most of all! Why do you get to literally *be* part of his power?!"

It felt like my heart was being filed down. It felt like my throat was being squeezed. It felt like my whole body was roasting in fire.

I had been forced to feel what it was like to be separated from Master, to be unable to help him, and so I longed to be joined to him permanently, like the being in front of me was.

And if that being ever tried to take Master for herself, I didn't know what I'd be capable of.

"I won't let anybody have Master, you hear me? No one will serve him but me!"

Yes, that was what I truly thought. That was how I truly felt. He was mine and mine alone.

"Argh, I'm so jealous," said Envy. "So incredibly jealous…but fine."

"Huh?!"

Envy's body suddenly dissolved away into sand and reassembled a short distance away.

"I have seen the darkness in your heart, and you pass. The trial is over."

I stood up, not wanting to let down my guard for a moment, but I couldn't sense Envy's desire to fight any longer. Instead, she reached out a hand and tore a hole out of thin air.

"Be sure your mind is made up," she said, "for there is no turning back beyond here."

"I believe I said as much already," I replied. "There is nowhere for me to turn back to."

And with that, I stepped through the door, to wherever Master was waiting for me.



"Tee-hee. Oh, how enviable."

After Minnalis left, Envy's room returned to its usual silence.

"However, it is a welcome envy."

She back sat down and resumed sipping from her empty teacup. For whatever reason, she looked happy.

Trial of Envy: Passed.



"Tee-hee-hee. Come, let the trial begin. Sword of Sin: Lusty Little

Girl. For this is the point of no return."

I could hear a voice, very distant, but grating on my mind.

"…uri…"

Like an irritating feeling grinding at the edges of my heart.

"…i…… Shu…"

But that irritation was lost beneath the warm feeling surrounding me, as if I was bathing in hot milk.

"Hey! Shuria! Wake the hell up!"

"Wah!!"

My eyes flew wide open, like a bucket of ice-cold water had been thrown over me.

"GROOOOAAAAAHHH!!"

"A Crystal Bear?!"

Right under my nose was a crystalline monster, reflecting the light of the sun at me.

"Earth, split open! *Ground Quake!!*"

Kaito thrust his sword into the ground, fracturing it, and an enormous chasm opened between the monster and me. Spears of rock flew up out of the opening, scaring the Crystal Bear back.

"Grrrrrr…"

I recognized this forest. Lush trees, bushes with little red berries, and rust-colored soil with no weeds.

The boulder that I used to use for target practice. The tree under whose shade Shelmie, Mother, and I all sat.

"Keep it together, Shuria! We're in the middle of battle, here!"

"H-huh? O-Okay!!"

Th-that's right! We came back to my village!

After we'd exacted vengeance, Kaito and Minnalis had brought me back to my old hometown. There, we had heard about dangerous beasts that sometimes crossed the mountain range and threatened the villagers. We set out at once to keep the village safe.

To keep the village…safe?

H-huh? Something's not right…

"Grrrroaaaaahhh!!"

"Fight for me! Puppet Possession: *Rust Armor*!!"

I called upon my magic, ordering the suits of armor I puppeted to attack the monster.

What am I thinking, spacing out in the middle of a fight? First things first, we have to beat up the bad guys!

The Crystal Bears formed into a pack, and we were all fighting separately, at a distance where we could back each other up if we needed to.

Kaito and Minnalis are both doing their best, so I can't let our team down!

"Rust Armor: *Quintuple Slam*!"

"Graaaagh?!"

My five suits of armor descended on the bear, smashing it to pieces with their hammers and greatswords.

"Shuria! There's one more heading your way!"

"Leave it to me!!"

The monsters were very stubborn, and we fought them for a while.

"Yah! …Phew! Shuria, I think that's the last one! Isn't it, Master?"

"Yes, I think so. I don't sense any others around."

"Then after this, we're done!!"

"Gaaaaarghh?!"

My suits of armor ganged up on the last Crystal Bear and pummeled it into glass shards. Very quickly, they dispatched the final monster and brought an end to the battle.

"They were a little tougher than I expected," said Kaito, putting away his weapon.

"We should get down off this mountain before it gets dark," said Minnalis.

I looked to the sky to see that it was already evening. When I was younger, I would always return home around this time.

"Let's leave our report to the guild for tomorrow, then," said Kaito. "We'll head back to Shuria's village for now."

"To my…village?"

"Yeah, that was the plan all along, right? It's a little far to the town where the guild is, after all."

"We had better hurry," said Minnalis. "It'll be pitch-black around here soon."

Now that the battle was over, that strange feeling came back.

Hmm? Something's bothering me…

I was starting to doubt my own senses, but the other two threatened to leave me behind, so I hurried on after them. We followed a trail I had traced many times as a child, down the mountains and into the village that lay at their foot. Before long, my hometown came into view.

"Finally, we can let our guards down and relax," said Kaito.

"We've been rushed off our feet lately, so it'll be nice to let our hair down," said Minnalis.

I, on the other hand, was speechless. "…This can't be real…" I muttered.

As evening closed in, the village was bustling. Hunters returning with their kills. Old ladies bringing in the laundry. Young children rushing to get home before the sun set.

"Hmm? What's gotten into you, Shuria? You keep spacing out."

"Yeah, you've been acting strange all day. Is something the matter?"

"Huh? …Oh, no, it's nothing."

It sounded like they didn't hear what I'd said. I tried to cover it up, but in truth I was greatly agitated. I felt a heart-wrenching nostalgia along with something else, an emotion that I couldn't name, opposing it, growing as the nostalgia grew.

They were both strong emotions, but I couldn't explain either of them. I continued to wonder about it while the three of us set off walking toward my house.

"Oh, if it isn't little Shuria! How are you today?"

"You asked her that this morning, Granny."

"Did you head into the mountains to take care of the monsters today? You aren't hurt, are you?"

As I walked through the village, the villagers all called out to me. I couldn't explain why talking to them felt so strange. The nostalgia and the other emotion grew and grew until I felt like I would scream.

And then, at last…

"This is…my house."

The knob on the door that was just a little too big for my hand. The dark, slightly knotted lumber used for the walls. The cheap glass windows, and the soft light of the hearth spilling out from them.

It was my home, my childhood residence. The familiar sight warmed my heart.

"Looks like the sun's set," said Kaito. "We'd better get inside before it gets cold."

"Come on, Shuria. Don't just stand around outside. Come in. Your mother and sister are waiting for you inside, you know?"

"My…what?"

Minnalis's words were like grains of sand, clogging the gears of my brain. My mind went blank, and time ground to a halt. It took me a while to comprehend what I had just heard.

She then stepped forward and opened the door.

"Shuria?"

Standing in the doorway, a curious look on her face, was my sister.

"Shel…mie…?"

My little sister Shelmie was standing there, exactly as I remembered her.

Then…why? Why?

Somewhere deep in my head, I heard something straining against the pressure. My mind was a mess; a swirling chaos tearing parts of my heart from my chest, and yet I had no idea why.

"Welcome back, Shuria!! Are you okay? Did you get hurt out there?"

Shelmie ran up to me, but I couldn't find the words to respond. "Uh… Um… Y-yes, I'm okay. No, I wasn't hurt…"

I felt like I missed her so much, my heart couldn't take it. Then my mother showed up, having just cooked supper.

"Shuria?" she said. "Oh, you're back! I've been so worried about

you!”

She placed a large pot on the table, then ran over to me.

I didn’t know why, but I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to shout.

And the straining and creaking of my mind didn’t stop.

“Shuria? What’s the matter?”

“…”

As I listened to her voice, another crack formed.

“Shuria? D-did something hurt you after all?!”

“…”

As I looked upon her face, another fissure opened.

“Oh no! Should we call a priest?”

“…”

As I watched her behavior, the seams began to split.

“Hey, Shuria? Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Shuria? What’s gotten into you?”

Until.

Fwp!

From the shadows, a pair of gauntlets fell on the shoulders of Kaito and Minnalis.

“Please shut the hell up and just die. ♪”

“Kh…”

“Hk…”

The restraints around my heart fell to pieces, and my reddened, festering rage was unleashed.

“Sh-Shuria?! What have you done?!”

“Shuria, why…?”

There was a *thump, thump*, as two severed heads fell to the floor. I cast my gaze down at the lifeless eyes of Kaito and Minnalis.

“Oh, shut up. Shut up already. Aah, how could you do this to me? How could you crush my reality with dreams like this?”

I finally realized what I was feeling. It was something I hadn’t felt in a long, long time. Wrenching out my organs. Driving a burning

spike into my eyes. Going at the back of my throat with a cheese grater.

The fires that roasted me alive, not from without, but from within. They were no less valuable.

"Dance to the pull of my strings. Puppet Possession: *Big Kitty!*"

I called upon the monster born that day, the moment my life ended.

"ME-YEOWWWW!"

My magic summoned a large plush cat. It held a knife and fork in its paws, and wore a bib stained with something that looked an awful lot like ketchup.

It was my very first familiar, molded out of my own hatred.

The only difference was the size. The original was small enough to carry, but this one was almost twice my size, and in the center of the bib, there was a grotesquely large mouth. The knife and fork were both stained red, and its eyes were made of many buttons stitched together, like the eyes of a fly.

"Mother and Shelmie are already dead," I said.

"Wh-what are you talking about?! W-we're alive! We're right here!"

Her voice was like poison in my ears.

"They lived their lives," I continued. "In my world, they lived on, in whatever form that took."

Eumis had turned them into undead creatures, stolen everything from them, including their dignity, and had left them to be devoured by a demon. They'd died in agony.

"Shuria?! Calm down, please! We're not dead!"

So why would you bring them back just to play out this twisted game?

"I'm afraid you are, Mother. I saw it with my very own eyes."

Just so you can take them away from me again?

"You saved us, don't you remember?" said Shelmie. "Eumis tried to kill us, but the three of you came and saved us!!"

"That sounds wonderful," I replied, "but it's not reality. Eumis turned the two of you into zombies, and then a demon ate you for supper."

Just so you can take their deaths from me as well?

"That was just a bad dream you had! Please calm down! Look at me? I'm real! There's nothing to be scared of, please! Shelmie and I, we're both—"

"I said shut up! Stop talking to meeeeeeee!!"

Leave it right where it is. Don't sully that memory.

"*Big Kitty!* Gobble them up!"

Though they may have looked very different then, I had seen my mother and Shelmie in their final moments.

"GROOAAAAAAHHH!!"

"No! Shuria! Please don't do this!!"

"Why are you doing this, Shuria?!"

Big Kitty transformed his fork into a sinister-looking spear and skewered Mother and Shelmie's clothes, hoisting them both into the air.

"No matter how much you look like them, you're not!"

"I am! Please trust me, Shuria!"

"I'm begging you, Shuria! I am your mother!"

"…All you're doing now is insulting the world that we have to live in."

"Yum yum yum yum!"

"Gah?!"

"Gh!"

Driven by my hate, Big Kitty raised his horrifying, serrated knife and sliced their bodies in two. Then, crunching and squelching, he piled both halves of those abhorrent *things* into the mouth on his bib.

I just watched, not wanting to miss a single second of it.

I watched as arms snapped, feet broke, shoulders twisted, and chests collapsed. Bit by bit, cracks appeared in the world.

The dream was ending. I was waking up. From this sweet fantasy that felt like a nightmare.

"…"

When the very last parts of my mother and sister disappeared inside Big Kitty, I said something I don't even remember. Was it a curse? Was it regret? Or was it something else entirely?

When the sounds of chewing died down at last, the dream world crumbled, bringing me back into reality.

The room I was in looked like a child's, strewn with toys.

From the ceiling hung some kind of magical item, emitting light and clanking as it turned, while the walls and windows were all different colors—white and yellow and pink. There were piles of dolls and plushies, toys that made a noise when you shook them, toys that lit up when you pressed them. Even the furniture—the table, the chairs, the desk, the bed—every piece looked like dollhouse furniture scaled up to human size.

All the contents of the rooms were broken in some way, distorted and twisted from their original form. The room's idyllic appearance was in tatters, as if someone was trying to deny its very existence.

"Am I…still in Kaito's mind?"

I took a look around, refusing to let my guard down for a moment. I couldn't stay asleep forever.





"Miao!!"

"B-Big Kitty?"

All of a sudden, my familiar clutched the mouth on his bib, seemingly in incredible pain.

A black fog began to seep out of it.

"Aww, I put *so* much effort into making that toybox, and you broke it! You broke it! Boo-hoo-hoo!"

The dark cloud took on the form of a person. Before I knew it, there was a young girl with an angelic smile floating before me.

"You're one of Kaito's soul blades," I said.

I had seen him summon her before. Her name was Lust, I recalled. Her hair came down to her waist and was colored in a rainbow gradient. She had porcelain skin, and she wore a white sundress that danced as she moved.

"Your voice," I said. "It was you I heard in that awful, awful dream, wasn't it?"

Big Kitty was coughing and spluttering, so I recalled him and turned to face Lust alone.

"Awful? How dare you call it awful! That's so mean! So mean! Isn't it? Is it? I don't know! Maybe it is!! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Lust went on laughing in spite of my words. That caused the fire inside me to light up once more.

"I'll teach you!!"

But just as I was about to pull up my sleeves and teach her a lesson, the spectral girl flew right up to me, peering into my eyes.

"Why did you break it?" she asked. "Why?"

Hers were dead and empty, like she could see right into my soul.

"Isn't that the world you always wanted?" she asked. "It was all real, you know. You could have lived there forever and ever if you wanted to. So why did you choose vengeance instead? Why did you choose to remember those horrible things that happened to you?"

"Kaito said something very similar to me when he asked me to make a contract," I replied. "He told me that if I waited long enough,

I could forget my vengeance and live a happy life."

"I know. I was there. But why did you choose vengeance? Don't you regret it? If you could ask your sister or your mother, wouldn't they say, *Forget about us, do what makes you happy*?"

"Sometimes I wonder, what if the positions had been reversed," I said. "If I had died, and Shelmie had lived on. And that made me realize something."

"Which is?"

"If they chose to forget me…to move on with their lives, I would be so sad. Of course, I'd be happy she's happy, but it would hurt so much. I would always be thinking, *Please don't forget about me*."

"…"

"I don't care how they remember me. I don't care what they do. But if anybody tried to erase the fact that I was ever there…I would curse them from beyond. Even my own mother and sister."

That was what had brought me here. That was Shuria's world. A black, inky ocean of blood that engulfed and suffocated me.

"…I hate you! I hate you! …But I don't mind being your friend! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

"Grr… I know you're one of Kaito's soul blades, but that doesn't mean I have to like you either!"

"Hooray! More friends to play with! Yippee! Yippee!"

The girl laughed and laughed, swaying this way and that like a ghost. It was very annoying!!

"You passed my trial! Ah-ha-ha-ha!!"

Lust thrust her finger at me and cartwheeled through the air. As she did, her finger traced out a rift in space itself, and a blinding light leaked in through it.

"Go through here, and you'll meet up with my master!" she said. "But be careful! If you do, there's no going back!"

"Grr! Stop looking down on me!"

I just wanted to beat her to a sorry pulp!

"Anyway, there's nowhere for me to go back to. There never has been. The only way is forward, through this ocean of blood."

"Come back and play with me again some time!"

"Never! Bleh!"

I stuck my tongue out and hopped through the rift, hoping to be reunited with the partners in crime who swam this ocean with me.

☆

"Hee-hee-hee! More friends! More friends!"

After Shuria left, Lust danced alone, doing pirouettes in her room.

"Did you see that, Mommy and Daddy? I found another person who thinks the same as me!"

Lust turned to a beat-up pair of dolls and gave a sunny smile. She seemed even merrier than usual today.

Trial of Lust: Passed.

☆

"Anemol Arsenal: *Yamata Dragonfire!*"

I raised my *naginata* aloft, conjuring a ball of white flame swathed in winds. This fireball raced toward my foe, feeding on the oxygen my magic supplied to become a raging inferno. Just before striking true, it split into eight separate arcs of fire. These eight pillars of flame curved to meet their target, no less ferocious than the heads of the legendary serpent of myth after which they were named.

However…

"Come to me, *Blackwheel Workshop*."

My opponent, a giant of a man lying on his side, bored, swatted his arm at me. A semi-transparent wall of black cogwheels appeared, sapping my projectiles of all their energy and vigor. My spell disintegrated into particles of light that then disappeared.

Krh. I'm trying to see my dear brother, but this buffoon is in the

way!

The place I was in was one that would ordinarily be called a forge. However, this forge was in such a state that the word *abandoned* ought to have prefaced any other description.

The mud walls were coming apart, the floor was coated in dust, and all the tables and chairs were splintered and broken. Even the forge itself was cracked, and though a fire still burned within, the anvil was caked in grime, and all the blacksmith's tools had started to rust.

In the dead center of the room lay the giant, his back to me. He was bearded and rugged like a dwarf, but as large as a troll. He was dressed like a smith, with dulled gold and silver hammers at his belt. His broad shoulders were thick with muscle and ringed with metal.

"Face my trial. The Sword of Sin: Grotto of Death's Neglect. For this is the point of no return."

Those were the words I'd heard after suddenly ending up in this place. Kaito had told me stories about his soul blade "Sloth," and it was a simple matter to surmise that this man before me must be the very same.

Kaito had told me little of Sloth's abilities beyond that, and I was unsure how to proceed, but with my brother's safety on the line, hesitation would be the very height of folly.

Following the rules we'd surmised thus far, I'd asked Sloth if defeating him would allow access to my brother.

"Do as you wish," he had replied.

I had been confused at first, as the man hadn't even attempted to prepare himself for battle. But after I fired off one or two attacks and he brushed them away with a flick of his wrist, I realized victory would be no simple task.

I'd then attempted to get in close and slice him to ribbons, but before I could even reach the barrier, some strange and powerful force had repelled me like a magnet, while any magic spells I'd flung simply fell apart.

I needed to defeat Sloth somehow, but so far, I hadn't even made him stand up.

"Grr!! Anemol Arsenal: *Thorns of Ice!*"

How? What can I do to get through to him?

My mind raced as I channeled mana into my next technique.

Ten long spears of ice appeared, each two meters long and covered in spikes. Swathed in my magical winds, they began spinning, making a noise like a power drill. Then, as I swung my *naginata*, all ten of the spears descended on Sloth.

"Urgh. Stop making a noise in my workshop."

I could have felled a dragon with that technique, but as the spears approached the barrier, it sapped their momentum, eventually shattering the spears into hundreds of little particles that melted away into nothing.

"Urgh. What a drag," spoke Sloth in a low, gravelly voice, like he'd pulled an all-nighter. As if merely continuing to speak required too great an effort, he peered over his shoulder at me, locked eyes for a moment, then turned away, bored.





"You are Sloth, are you not?" I asked. "Is it not bothering you to be blocking my way?"

"Sure is. I'd take sleep over work any day of the week."

"Then get the hell out of my way, *please*! I need to see my brother!!"

If my strongest attack didn't cut it, then I was going to have to call upon quantity rather than quality.

Expand! Expand! Expand! Expand!

I spread my mana across the room, thick and broad, like several layers of paint. Then I transformed that mana into hundreds of tiny spears of wind.

So long as Sloth wasn't going to do anything, I could just try again and again until something worked. Perhaps the barrier had a weak point somewhere. If I could find that, I could tear the whole thing down. I had to try, for my brother's sake.

"Why are you trying so hard?" came Sloth's grumpy voice. "Nothing good ever comes of putting in effort, you know."

"Oh, *now* you want to talk?" I spat back. "Well, please be quiet. I'm trying to concentrate."

"The trials fit whoever faces them. That means you're guilty of sloth, I guess."

"I resent that… Even if you do have a point."

Controlling my mana was somewhat akin to doing complicated math in my head. Like keeping a candle flame alight. And casting the spell felt like throwing a bucket of ice-cold water over that flame.

"Anemol Arsenal: *Symphony of Wind!*"

Thousands of wind spears, too many to count, filled the room and flew at the barrier in unison. Each of them was too fast to track with the naked eye, but as they approached the barrier, they disintegrated into magic particles, just like everything else I had tried.

Even attacking the whole barrier at once did nothing. If only there was some clue…

I tried using Symphony of Wind a few more times, but no matter how many needles the barrier devoured, nothing changed.

"Ah, now I know why I hate the sight of you so much," I said.

"It's like looking into a mirror."

"Wossat? I'm not out there risking my life, like you. If that's what you want to do, then…bah. I can't be assed to talk anymore."

"…Maybe we're actually not that alike."

Keep looking! Isn't there anything *I can do?!*

My mind was working on overdrive.

"You'll never get past that barrier," said Sloth. "Why not just give up? You hate wasted effort more than anybody."

"Yes, you're right. I've never wasted a second of my life."

Sloth.

Perhaps it was a fitting trial for me after all.

I'd always been content to enjoy the luxuries extended to me as Kaito's little sister. I'd never reached for anything more than that, because I knew it could never be. All I did was attempt to deny him other lady friends, while ensuring that I remained his top priority—In other words, maintaining the status quo.

But even so…the things that I did for him were never in vain.

"I think I need to thank this fantasy world we've found ourselves in," I said. "It may have taken much from my brother and me, but it's given us so much, too."

"And yet your brother will never love you back. Not like you love him."

"…I have never once put effort into chasing a dream I think is futile."

"…"

Once again, every last spear that I fired was taken apart into dust.

…Which means, I only have one last trick to try.

Watching each one of my attacks come undone had given me an idea.

"My next attack…will tear through this wall," I declared.

"…When will you give up?"

I began weaving my mana into a circle, spinning it faster and faster.

"Grh!!"

Suddenly, I began to feel lightheaded and almost lost control for

a moment.

I'm using too much power, I thought, as I hastily reasserted my grip. I had never used this technique before, but there was a first time for everything. In terms of raw power, it was not a very efficient use of my mana.

To make up for my lacking strength, I was using mana to supplement my strike, and once I had used the last drop, the remainder came from my health instead.

This is…quite difficult to endure. Oh, if only dear brother were here to tell me what a good girl I've been.

Bit by bit, gashes began to tear open my skin, but I didn't care. I would push myself to the very brink, if that was what it took.

If I succeeded, I could be closer to Kaito than ever before. We could be one. We could enjoy the beautiful life I've always dreamed of…

Then, once I felt like I had charged enough power, a swirling vortex of particles wreathed the tip of my *naginata* blade.

"Tear this wall to shreds. Anemol Arsenal: *Law of the Meek!*"

My technique felt like it might come apart at any moment, so while I still had it under control, I swung my blade. Not with force, not with technique. I simply let go.

If everything I launched at the barrier was going to be transformed into particles anyway, then what would happen if my attack was made of particles to begin with?

Just as I'd hoped, the barrier's magic had no effect, and the full force of my attack shattered the shield into a million shards, as though it had been no thicker than a sheet of glass all along.

"Urgh. What a pain," said Sloth.

"I've done it. I've won."

"…You sure about this? There's no turning back, you know."

"Who needs to turn back? Backward only takes me farther from my dear brother."

"…Fine. Then I guess the trial's over. What a bore that was."

Sloth finally sat up, still facing away from me, took out his two hammers, and struck them together. There was a loud, deep ringing sound, like my head was trapped inside an enormous bell, and a glowing portal appeared.

Somehow, I knew just where this door would take me.

"If I pass through here, I'll be able to see Kaito again, won't I?"

"Yeah. Probably curled up and crying like usual."

"I see. Then I shall have to go do my job, shan't I? And so shall you."

Once Kaito was back, this man would return to being another one of his soul blades. So, leaving him with those words, I stepped through the portal.



"Argh, what a pain. I just want to sleep…"

After Mai left, a cold silence fell over the workshop, as if the harsh fighting of only a few moments ago hadn't been real.

But to Sloth, that wasn't a problem. For silence and stagnation were his domain. That was how this workshop was, and how it had always been, just as he liked it.

And so he turned back onto his side, and soon fell asleep.

Trial of Sloth: Passed.



"Check," I said, moving an ivory piece along a board decorated with black and white squares.

"Hmph. An uninspired move at best. How utterly boring."

My opponent, a blond-haired boy named Pride, sighed. He was wearing a glittering golden crown, and a frown of displeasure was

sculpted into his porcelain features.

The Sword of Sin: Castle of the Lonely King.

That was the name of the trial I now faced. It was based upon a game brought to this world by the first hero. A game known as *Chess*. However, the stakes of this game were high, as Pride had used his power to ensure that the loser's soul would be utterly erased.

"I was curious what the priestess of this time was like," said Pride. "I see now you are not even worthy of my notice."

"Careful with your words, sir. My name is Metelia, and the fact that I am the priestess is entirely incidental."

"Hmph. Big words."

With that, Pride made his move, relocating a black piece to another square on the board.

Our arena resembled the inside of a Lunarian church. The floors, walls, ceiling, and fittings were all white, but the most striking features were the many statues of Lunaris that decorated the upper levels. Pride and I were sitting in the center of the room, at opposite ends of a white marble table.

"You are the priestess," said Pride. "That is all that matters. Nothing more than the goddess's puppet. You can fight that if you like, even cast off her shackles with your little death-defying stunt, but it does not change who you are."

"…"

"You may have cut your strings, little puppet, but there's one more you forgot. Unless and until you renounce the priestess's role, you will never be free."

"…"

"Even your purported affection for the hero could be nothing more than an illusion. And yet, here you are."

"I must remind you again to be careful with your words, Pride… Or should I say, Lord Arclight Lunarius, the Wicked?"

"…Ah, so they still call me that in your time, do they?"

"Oh, every priestess is taught about you, and how you betrayed our land and our goddess to side with the demons. I always believed it without question…until now."

I moved a white piece, and the game advanced another step.

Lunarius the Wicked had once reigned as Holy Emperor of the Lunarian See, over five hundred years ago, when it had been a mighty empire. Succumbing to madness, he'd followed the will of a heretical cult and began sacrificing his own subjects to demonic beasts in a bid to slay the very goddess he reigned under, until the day a hero rose up from among the oppressed people and slew him.

"You're taught, are you? I see. Times may change, but people never do. And yet, for all their indoctrination, in the end, it came to naught. For ultimately, you saw things my way."

Pride scoffed.

"I should have slaughtered you all when I had the chance. Every day, I regret not finishing the job."

"…I found the inscription your daughter left in the depths of the dungeon."

When I said that, I saw Pride's fingers twitch.

"Countless souls were sacrificed for you to be brought to this world as a baby. The Church reared and worshiped you. They called you the holy child. You were shaped into a ruler the people wanted from birth, married away for political convenience, and had a child of your own. A daughter… So when I speak of love, you know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

In my first life, I had been a pure and upstanding priestess of Lunaris. I'd studied the tenets, had lived for the Church, and had never once doubted my faith. The teachings had been law, and I had been a bird in a cage. A mouthpiece for Lunaris's wishes. A servant of her will.

I'd lived for one purpose and one purpose only: To join the hero when he arrived and assist his gallant bravery. I awaited this man of courage, this unflinching, determined champion. This peacekeeper, this upholder of justice.

…But what I got was something very different.

The hero had been a weak man. A boy, even. A kind boy, yet naive, fearful, and unwise to this world and its dangers. He was no hero, and yet I was expected to treat him as one.

Then, just as I was starting to curse this world and its cruelty, I

fell into a trap while we were exploring an old ruin that had transformed into a dungeon. The trap separated me from my party, and I wandered alone, looking for a way out, when I came upon it.

"She…wrote something?"

"Yes, she told about how she had fallen terminally ill, and how you made a pact with the demons to save her. How the 'demonic' beasts appeared right after you went against the goddess's will…and how you stayed in the castle to fight the hero, giving your daughter time to escape."

My speech was punctuated by the sound of Pride placing another piece, but he said nothing.

"…"

"And finally," I said, "it told of her gratitude for you. She thanked you for bringing her into this world. For being her parent. For loving her. That stone contained her love for you."

"Did it, now?"

Upon the board, an opening was created. A slight tremor in Pride's conviction that hadn't been there before.

I must apologize for resorting to unconventional tactics, but I have little choice.

Responding to his suboptimal move, I continued pushing the board toward my desired arrangement.

"Hmm."

It didn't take long for Pride to realize the mistake he'd made, and with his next move, he sought to close the gap he had opened.

"I must thank you," I said. "You, and your daughter. Because after reading that inscription, I finally realized what I wanted for myself. It's because of you that I'm here now, fighting by Kaito's side."

"I don't need your gratitude. We may be similar in some respects, but you and I are not the same."

After he placed his piece, I moved mine. The speed of our exchanges quickened.

"You're right," I said, "Our desires are very different. For one, I have not yet given up on mine."

"Hmph. You talk an awful lot…for a commoner."

Pride slammed his piece onto the table.

"Unfortunately, you will have to back up your words with actions…or you will not live to see another day."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about me," I replied.

Pride's latest move was a decisive one. He had fully made up for his previous error, and now the board was approximately even once more.

However, from here, the route to my desired arrangement was clear.

"You are quite right," I said. "I have not abandoned my role just yet. Kaito is the hero, and the priestess is there to support the hero in everything he does. I am here to be mixed into him, deeper and deeper than ever before, so I can be his very foundation."

Even if that means I must…

"…I see," said Pride, looking down at the board. "So this is what you were aiming for all along."

He sighed. He knew what I was trying to do, but taking measures to avoid it would end up handing me the advantage anyway.

"Yes," I replied. "If I want to be Kaito's strength, I will have to go there eventually. Besides, isn't this kind of determination precisely what these trials are meant to test for?"

"You are rather presumptuous for a commoner."

"Am I wrong? Well, even if I am, that doesn't change what I must do."

"You commoners are all the same. Striving beyond your means. Even when I was alive, you never knew your place."

"Oh, but it isn't beyond my means at all. I *have* already died once, remember. It's not so scary once you get used to it. And besides, it's something I've wanted for a very long time. It's only natural."

I gave a modest titter while Pride looked on in amazement. After a beat passed, he guffawed and slapped his knee.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Natural! Only natural, she says! Oh, the arrogance! The entitlement! Now I see why you came to me! Everything, from the way you are, to the way you feel; even the way you played this game are all dripping in arrogance!!"

Pride went on laughing, and when he finally calmed down, he looked at me, still smiling like he couldn't contain his joy, and moved his next piece.

"Well, go on then," he said with a grin. "The path to hell is best walked with company."

"Indeed," I replied. "And Kaito does get so terribly lonely at times."

Wearing a faint smile, I played my next and final move.

"It has been fifty moves," I said, "and neither one of us has captured a single piece. That makes this game a draw."

That was the outcome I had been pushing toward. With no loser, neither one of us had to pay the price. I would pass the trial, and Kaito would lose nothing.

"Yes, let us end the trial here," said Pride. "Beyond that door lies what you seek."

He pointed to a nearby statue of Lunaris, at whose base a glowing portal of light suddenly appeared.

"Thank you for entertaining me," I said, curtsying politely. "Now I must be on my way."

Aah, finally, my efforts will be repaid. Oh, Kaito. Oh, Kaito, Kaito, Kaito. It's been a long, long journey, but at last I can be your *priestess.*

The priestess must grow close to the hero. That is her duty.



"Hmph. This is why I can't stand women."

Despite his flippant words, Pride wore a smile upon his lips.

He thought about the woman he had just seen, and her eyes, laced with a boundless greed. Eyes that seemed to pull everything else into them. She harbored a possessiveness that bordered on obsession, and an unstoppable will to make everything turn out her way.

"Heh-heh-heh. Giving thanks to my daughter, while choosing the

path of the condemned for herself.”

Pride took the black king in his hands and twirled it on his fingertip. Sitting alone in the room in which he was slain, he sat back and grinned.

Trial of Pride: Passed.



“Excuse me, First Hero?”

“Yes? What’s the matter?”

I drained my cup and leveled a glare at the faint, glowing humanoid figure seated across from me.

“Shall this tea party be going on much longer?” I asked.

“Oh? Is the tea not to your liking?”

“If it weren’t to my liking, I’d have spat it out and not drunk three cups of the stuff,” I replied.

Besides us two, the chairs, the table, and the tea set, there was nothing here save for a boundless sea of stars. After I’d been teleported, I’d met this peculiar figure who’d introduced herself both as the first hero and Kaito’s Soul Blade of Beginnings.

When I’d asked her to explain her indistinct form, the first hero had told me that for the first-ever hero summoning, Lunaris had sought to summon a hero who bore as close a resemblance to herself as possible. As a result, the first hero was more or less the spitting image of Lunaris, but had erased her own appearance out of spite.

“I’m glad to hear that,” the first hero said. “Making tea was my sole joy in life. Alas, coming to this world rather deprived me of many chances to practice it.”

“I see. ’Tis a shame. Even the maids at the demon castle never made tea as delectable as this.”

"A shame, but unavoidable. I would sooner die than do anything for this world."

"Is that so? Then I assume this conversation cannot be mere pleasantry, either."

"Fear not. I mean no harm upon you. Not if we are to be living together."

"…So that's what this is about," I said.

"You knew all along this was coming, did you not? That is why you and the previous hero both helped me accomplish it. I must thank you, you know, for managing to string along those other women into this as well."

The woman gave a pleasant laugh.

"I didn't string anybody along," I retorted. "They all wanted this for themselves. If anyone strung anybody, it was that womanizer Kaito, picking up all these ladies when he already has me."

"Yes, even I can see what a terrible excuse for a human being the current hero is. Look at the state his interpersonal relationships are in now, thanks entirely to his own half-hearted attempts at placation. As a woman, I feel some pity for you all, but after seeing how you all behave, I have to say you somewhat deserve it."

"Harsh."

Nothing was more difficult to hear than the truth. I twisted my face in disgust.

"Quite. And yet, so long as it is no impediment to our vengeance, I see no reason why you may not be allowed to proceed. You may copulate like rabbits for all I care."

"…I'm not sure I much liked the way you said that. And even if I wanted to…"

"Well, take your time. Just not too much, because there's precious little remaining."

"G-grr…"

"Oh dear. Your face has gone bright red."

"Sh-shut up! You still haven't answered my question."

Half to get away from this embarrassing topic, I steered the conversation back on track.

"Ah, about how long this tea party will last? It will last until all the

trials are complete."

"Trials? What trials?"

"We must ensure the other girls are pure in their malice. We must know if they are worthy enough to be brought into the fold. When their trials are over, they will all be brought here."

"Do I not need to face a trial, then?"

"You already completed your trial by transferring your soul to the current hero's body. At that time, you were too distracted to notice us, but we saw you, and we observed your behavior with great interest."

"Hmm… I'm not sure how I feel about that."

I was not too pleased to hear I'd been evaluated in secret, even if I had apparently passed.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light to my right, and a large rift opened in space. Just as I thought something troubling was happening, Minnalis stepped out.

"Where am I now…?" she muttered aloud.

"It looks like Minnalis was the fastest," said the first hero.

"I see," I said. "So this is what you meant…"

Minnalis looked over at us and, somehow connecting the dots in her mind, let out a deep sigh. "So this means I was second place, does it? That's a little disappointing."

"Oh, er…," I stammered, wondering if I should tell her. But the first hero had made that decision for me.

"Oh, no," she said. "You misunderstand. The demon lord is special. She did not have to face a trial."

"You didn't have to say it like that!!" I blurted out.

"Special… *Special*, is she? Oh, I see… I see how it is…"

"N-no, Minnalis! She doesn't mean it like that! She means I was already evaluated while my soul was sleeping within Kaito…!"

But just as I hastily attempted to explain away my sins, there was another flash of light, and a second rift appeared.

"Ah, third, am I?"

Metelia was the next of our group to arrive in this room. After taking a look around, she was followed by two more portals suddenly opening.

"Wah!" "Where is my brother?"

It was Shuria and Mai. Shuria managed to trip over her own feet and fall, while Mai immediately began scanning the room for Kaito.

Then, the first hero clapped her hands together, commanding everyone's attention.

"The trials are complete," she announced, "and I'm afraid to say that Nonorick has failed. The rest of you, however, will be allowed to proceed. I am the first hero, and I'm pleased to finally meet you all in person. Five out of six is an exceedingly hopeful result."

"Nonorick didn't make it?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not. His bloodline and the impurity of his vengeance made assimilation impossible."

I also had that impression, but I was still sad to see him go. He was a welcome companion, but unfortunately that alone was not enough to be called a true partner in crime.

"Now then, you will find what you are seeking down there."

Saying this, the first hero pointed to a previously empty patch of ground, where now there was a gaping hole.

However, the word *hole* felt insufficient to describe it. It almost seemed alive…yes, like a mouth. There were no teeth to be seen, but still we knew this was a thing that would devour us, chew us, swallow us, and digest us.

Yet that was not enough to sway me from my path. Kaito was beyond it, and that was all that mattered. However, just as I set one foot toward the opening…

"Well then, I'll be going first!"

Minnalis, suddenly back to her usual self again, pushed past me and threw herself into the hole, looking back at me with a grin that practically screamed how pleased she was at overtaking me.

And while I stood there, blank-faced…

"Whee!!" "Tee-hee! Here I come, Kaito!" "H-hey! Waking up big brother is a little sister's sacred duty!!"

"H-hey! C-come back, all of you!"

All the other girls rushed past me, and before I knew it, I was the last one remaining.

"Grr! Just you wait!!"

I ran and leaped into the hole after them. Either a second or an eternity later, I landed on the other side.

It was an inky-black world that seemed to stretch on forever, like the bottom of the ocean. The place was devoid of color, save for the interminable scarlet of the floor, which resembled blood, and a pale blue flame that drew a large sphere around us, anchoring us in this otherwise imperceptible realm.

The only ones there were us five girls, and a large, white, humanoid figure, like a golem.

"What a twist of fate," I said, "to find you in this form."

The golem was made of roots and bark, twisted together. It bore a strong resemblance to how I had once looked after the Demonlight Tree had consumed me.

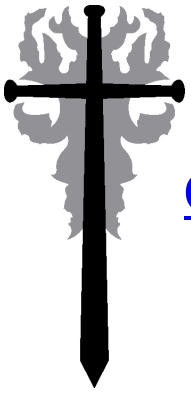
"But in some ways, it is perfect. Now I can finally repay the favor, Kaito."

"…"

Kaito was bound, glassy-eyed, into the torso of the giant where its heart would be. It was impossible to tell whether he was awake or not. The golem itself, however, was very much conscious, and from the look it, ready for a fight.

It began lumbering toward us, standing at a height of nearly six meters, grasping a large greatsword in its gnarled hands. The sword was plain, rusted and chipped, and looked almost like a large bone.

"…Well, looks like we're in for a long battle," I said. And with that, the five of us stepped forth to face what would likely be our final trial.



CHAPTER 5

Those Who Choose to Go On

That feeling again. The feeling of melting away into a fine mist. Into nothing.

However, it was different this time. This time, it happened so slowly, it almost felt peaceful. And the dark red blood that once clouded my vision was gone.

I was awake. I was uninjured. But I wasn't present. I was a dying ember that could burn no longer. Hollow cinders cruelly stamped out. A bloodless corpse.

"…So just leave me."

I couldn't go on. I couldn't even remember why I had been walking at all.

My cowardice lay unmasked, my determination in shattered pieces, and my anger submerged in ice.

So why did you come after me?

"I just…can't do it anymore. I've given up. Just leave me to die."

In my world of darkness, I peered down upon the intruders.

"Anemol Arsenal: *Cutting Wind!!*"

"Intoxicating Phantasm: *Venomblaze Sword!!*"

Mai unleashed countless blades of wind, while Minnalis conjured three giant swords wreathed in violet flames.

I didn’t care if these attacks killed me. I had never been attached to life. Only vengeance.

“GROOOAAAHHH…!!”

However, the beast to which I was connected cared little for my plight and immediately began a counterattack. Using its giant sword to swat away the flames and wind, it brought that weapon down on its attacker’s heads.

There was a rumble as the blade split neither earth nor stone, but the undefined surface that spread out beneath us. The brute seemed dull, but its attacks were astonishingly swift. Nonetheless, Minnalis and Mai were able to dodge by a hair’s breadth, and though the shock waves of impact blew them both away, neither one gave up on their assault.

“Now’s our chance!”

“Let go of my brother!”

They dashed back in close, slicing with their weapons at the white titan’s tendons.

“GROOAAAAAGHH!”

The giant swept his greatsword, seeking to expel the nuisances underfoot, and that was when Shuria and Metelia made their move.

“Puppet Possession, *Teddy Mob!*”

“Sparking Glacier: *Verse of the Warmaiden!*”

The hundreds of tiny bear dolls that Shuria conjured scampered around the giant’s feet and bit into its ankles, while Metelia’s spell summoned three female warriors formed of ice, who all thrust their lances at the foe.

If the titan lifted its foot to crush the bears, Metelia’s valkyries of ice knocked the beast off-balance. If it tried to focus on them instead, they would switch to defensive tactics, buying time for Shuria’s bears to continue their devastating rampage. Their perfect coordination steadily wore down the giant’s vitality. However…

“GROOOOAAAGHHH!!”

It wasn’t long before the titan managed to smash through all three warrior ladies and their shields, after which it turned its attention to the bear swarm, enlarging its arms and pounding them into dust.

Soon, both Shuria and Metelia's summoned servants were utterly destroyed. However, by that time they had already fulfilled their true purpose.

"Get back, everyone!" screamed Leticia. "Hellfire Blaze: *Burning Wheels!!*"

While the giant was distracted taking care of Shuria's bears, Leticia unleashed the spell she had been charging all throughout the battle so far. Ten crimson wheels of fire, each about as wide in diameter as a human was tall, split up and converged on the titan, lodging themselves into its limbs. The wheels began spinning like buzzsaws.

"GROOAAAAGHHH!!"

My dulled senses registered an iota of pain, but it didn't feel like mine, so I hardly cared.

…

About an hour had already passed since the battle began. The white titan had been damaged significantly—by now, it had lost its arms and legs and was just a torso.

However, if the creature was anything like the Demonlight Tree I had to face during my first life, then it would still have one irritating trick left up its sleeve: a regeneration ability that kicked in at low health.

The giant began growing back its limbs, and in a few moments, it was as good as new.

"Nrgh. So even if I burn them to ash, they still grow back…," noted Leticia.

"It's way faster than I ever expected," said Shuria.

Over the previous hour, these five fighters had pushed the golem to the brink many times. But on each occasion, it had managed to heal itself, even reconnecting its lost limbs with twisting tendrils. Even when the head, or what appeared to be the head, was blown off, it didn't slow the creature down at all.

This time, it seemed they had tried to completely eradicate the fallen limb in the hope this would stymie the regeneration. However, it did not. There was only one thing left they hadn't tried. One part they hadn't attacked…

They've grown…

The battle went on.

Minnalis, Shuria, Mai, Metelia, and Leticia.

They each combined their spells and abilities, making the battle even fiercer by the second.

Even if I no longer wanted to be here, this was still the landscape of my mind. I had seen everything that went on; their battles, their trials, even their thoughts. And the things I had seen, even from Metelia, blinded me.

They've all grown so much…

Minnalis and Shuria.

These two girls had been cursed to rot away in their cells, powerless to fight back. Now, they were brave and confident, with the strength to back it up.

Mai and Metelia.

If only I hadn't been in the picture, then they would not have had to choose their violent, hopeless paths. Even now, they could have chosen freedom instead, but they'd chosen to fight for a miserable, pathetic loser like me.

And finally, Leticia, the demon lord.

Damned to an early grave whether she defeated the hero or not.

She had chosen to be with me, to come to me, even as the darkness in my heart had threatened to steal me away.

And so…

I had thought I didn't need friends in my second life.

I had thought a relationship based on "trust" was a fragile, fleeting thing. Something the slightest breeze could cause to come crashing down. I had thought I could never believe in it again.

That was why I had bound my new partners by contract. Because I had been afraid of being betrayed again. And yet I had allowed Yuuto to sacrifice himself for me. I'd dragged everyone into this path of vengeance with me and then chickened out right before the finish line.

I knew it was cowardly. My mind was screaming at me: *If you give up now, then what was it all for?* But soon, even that voice grew tired of shouting the same old thing.

The only thing left was me: The most despicable piece of shit to ever walk this earth. I knew full well how much my indecision hurt the others, yet I wasn't even trying to relight the dying flame inside me.

"There's only one thing left to try," cried Leticia. "We shall cut off the limbs and restrain the main body before it can regenerate! Then, we get Kaito out of there!! Metelia, can you stop it from moving?"

"I can, but the spell will require some time to set up. Could you buy me five minutes, perhaps?"

"I'll take it on! Puppet Possession, *Big Kitty!!*"

"Mai and I will keep it distracted," said Minnalis. "I'll take the right, so you go around the left, Mai!"

"Very well. Leticia, keep doing what you've been doing and try to take out the limbs with your spells."

They were all still going. The longer they fought together, the smoother their coordination became, and the more efficient their movements.

You guys are plenty strong without me…

"…Everyone, the spell is complete!! Please cut off its limbs once more so it can't move!"

"Understood! Minnalis, Mai, I'm charging up a big one! When I give the signal, jump out of the way!!"

"Got it!"

"You had better not hit my brother with that!!"

"Just who do you think I am?! *Come, and return all to nothing. You seek heat like the wolf seeks meat. A flower of death emerging from a pool of blood. Bring instant fire; shattering flesh!!"*

Just as Leticia finished her chant, Minnalis and Mai delivered a tremendous blow to the white giant, staggering it. The giant was too confounded to do anything but block the attack with its greatsword.

"It's ready! Out of the way, Minnalis, Mai!! Hellfire Blaze: *Crimson Bloom!!*"

For a moment, the mana in the air grew so thick it was stifling. And then it all disappeared into Leticia's spell, transforming into powerful flames many times more deadly than her fire wheels from before.

The giant was still staggered from defending against Minnalis and Mai. Its fate was sealed.

At first, a slow flurry of sparks descended around me, like falling petals of fire. But as soon as one of those sparks grazed the titan's skin, there was a muffled *Boom*, and part of the giant's body was incinerated.

Just leave me behind. You don't have to work so hard for a scumbag like me.

"GROOOAAAAAGHHH!!"

One by one, the flowers bloomed, eating away more and more of the white titan. The explosions rang ceaselessly in my ears, until the pure, clean voice of Metelia cut through the noise like a jet of stream water.

"The maiden of ice the clock unhands,

"that cursèd love will never be forgot.

"The angel of ice the light conceals,

"that this moment will forever hers be.

"Their pledge the moon god's thorns becomes,

"succumbing not to doubt.

"Frigid Gaol: Lovers' Curse!"

With a chant like a sacred hymn, the explosions fell silent.

"GRGG…GGGAA…GRAAAAGH!!"

The fires had burned away all the giant's limbs, and it toppled over onto its back. This time, however, a film of black ice had formed over the wounded stumps. As soon as the explosions stopped, black thorns of ice had sprouted out of the ground, entangling the fallen titan.

These thorns siphoned moisture from the white giant's body, freezing it in place. Then, the frozen brambles continued to spread, covering the upper body and even the head, smothering its bestial cries in a complete crystalline prison.

"It is done," said Metelia at last. "That should keep it quiet for a while."

"Phew. Now we can finally relax!" said Shuria.

It was finally time to end it.

The white titan lay unmoving. The only part of it untouched was

the chest, where I was.

"We mustn't let down our guards, Shuria," Leticia cautioned her. "This is where the real battle starts."

"Oh, really?"

"Leticia is right," said Minnalis. "The question now is, what are we going to do about Master?"

"I'm sure I do not have to inform you that simply pulling him out will not work," said Leticia. "As far as my eyes can see, that giant has formed around Kaito, and the two are deeply linked. It really is exactly like when I was transformed into the Demonlight Tree."

"But why? How did he end up like that?"

"Perhaps it is just like all the others trapped in here. In some ways, the Demonlight Tree is just another foe who Kaito's soul blades once felled."

Leticia shrugged.

"Now, let's take a closer look," she said. "First of all, is he even awake?"

"…Yeah, I am," I replied. "You guys beat that giant silly, giving me enough energy to talk, at least."

In the end, I get to speak to them as I truly am.

Most of my body had been absorbed into the white giant, and only my upper half projected out the titan's chest.

The other stood in a circle around me, looking down at my sorry form.

"Does that mean," asked Shuria, "that if we keep beating him up, you'll go back to normal?"

"I don't think it's that simple," said Minnalis. "We can assume what's happening to Master is the same as what happened to Leticia in Master's first life, and surely he tried that back then."

"That's right," said Leticia. "It's true that damaging the body allows the host to regain their mind a little, but that's only because the parasite temporarily shifts its focus onto the physical body in order to regenerate."

"Then what are we supposed to do?!" squealed Shuria.

"Well, first, we should take a closer look…"

“Why bother? You know what you have to do, Leticia.”

I was done humoring her wishful thinking.

It’s over. I’ve done enough.

I’d tried and tried and tried. I’d stuck to it, coughed up blood, and squashed my own feelings time and time and time again.

If this was where it all got me, then so be it. Maybe it wasn’t so bad after all.

“I know exactly what’s wrong with me,” I said. “And so do you. I’m in too deep. I can’t go back.”

That was the pure, unvarnished truth.

The giant attempting to consume me now was one of the soul blades that had fought by my side for years. We knew each other intimately and were joined by something interminably deep.

If I wanted to keep my individuality at this point, my only choice would be to devour it in return.

But I couldn’t even do that.

I had no passion. No fuel. No purpose.

“GRGAARGGARGARARAGGRARGAAAGHH!!”

“”””””!!”””””

All of a sudden, the white giant began raging. The prison of black ice that was keeping it subdued started to crack and split.

Metelia’s curse harnessed the power of a mythical spirit. Under normal conditions, no power could break free via brute strength alone.

However, we were in my mental landscape. The inside of my mind. This place was about as far from normal as possible.

“Oh no! Leticia! I must request your aid!!”

“Krh! How is he this strong?! The mana…”

Metelia swiftly recomposed her spell, and Leticia moved to assist.

“Just give up,” I said. “You’re too late.”

“No we’re not!” yelled Shuria. “I’ll help, too!!”

“I will never give up on my brother!!”

“Me too!! A-aaagh!!”

Minnalis was just a second too late, and the stirring of the giant

knocked her off-balance.

"That's enough," I said. "Did you ever ask if I *wanted* to be saved?"

While Minnalis kneeled, I was brought to her height and peered into her eyes. It must have been fate that I passed by her, because I had no control over the monster's movements.

…And I had told myself that if these girls managed to make it here, this was how I wanted to go out.

"Minnalis. I want you to do it. Kill me. Please."

"""""""!!"""""""

"Make my power your own."

The power of the hero, strengthened through each successive generation that bore its weight. A power handed down through every hero summoned to this world. But if the Swords of Sin allowed it, it could also be passed on to those found worthy. That was the purpose of these trials.

Oh, please don't make that face…

Minnalis. You were my very first partner in crime.

It was fun, walking this twisted, painful, blood-soaked path together.

I couldn't have done it without you by my side. You stayed with me, always keeping me off the straight and narrow.

In some ways, you understand that power even more than Leticia does. Because you were there at the beginning, and I want you to be there at the end as well.

"The power of the soul blade is a power stolen through death," I said. "Here in my mental landscape, it can be passed on to you."

"W-wait a minute, Master!"

"Leticia, I want you to watch and make sure Minnalis doesn't absorb anything she doesn't need to. Stay with her until she's used to her newfound strength. Sorry for dragging you along and then giving up right at the very end. Just know that if it hadn't been for you, I would have given up hope a lot earlier. You brought sunlight into my dark life. I love you. I always have."

"K-Kaito… You can't…"

"Master? Master?!"

I couldn't look at their tear-streaked faces any longer. Instead, I turned to Metelia.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It sounds like you were doing a lot for my sake that I wasn't aware of. It's just a shame that I won't be able to reciprocate your feelings now. I can only apologize for that."

"…"

"Master!! You can't do this! Listen to me, Master!!"

Minnalis went on screaming at me, but I ignored her. Even Metelia no longer wore her usual smile. I turned at last to Shuria and Mai.

"Shuria, I need you to look after Minnalis for me after I'm gone. I thought my whole family was dead, but you were like a little sister to me. It really cheered me up… Maybe that's not how you want me to remember you, but just know that you were really important to me, and I wouldn't give you up for anybody."

"Wh-what? …Kaito…?"

"Mai, thank you for being alive. I missed you all so, so much while I was here. Mom and Dad, my friends and teachers, and my precious little sister, too. When they told me you were dead, I wanted to die. And soon after that, I got my wish. But knowing that you were alive and getting to meet you again…it meant everything to me. You don't know how happy I was. And yet…we're going to have to say good-bye again."

"Dear brother…? Why…?"

Shuria didn't know what to do, while Mai's eyes welled with tears.

I felt the hero's power stirring within me. My mind began receding, like a stone slowly sinking to the bed of a muddy river. But I wasn't alone now. I could fight it.

I'm not done yet… There's still more I want to say.

I had to hold on tight to the pieces of my mind, at least, while I still could. I was ready to die, but that didn't mean I could shirk my duties. I wanted to send them off with a smile, so that they could still go on even when I wasn't there anymore.

"Minnalis, you were my very first partner in crime. I dragged you onto this path, and we've always walked it together since then. I couldn't have asked for a better ally. I never thought anyone except

Leticia could be like that for me. I don't have favorites, but if I was picking my partners in crime again, I'd take you in a heartbeat, Minnalis. No matter how many times the world rewound…I'd always pick you. This is a real scumbag thing to say, but…I think I loved you just as much as I loved Leticia."

"Please, Master! No more!! I don't want to hear you talk like this!!"

Slumped to her knees, Minnalis looked up at me with pleading, tear-streaked eyes.

Oh, Minnalis, please don't cry. I didn't want to make you so upset.

My chest tightened in response to a part of my heart that still felt something.

"We gave ourselves to vengeance!! We promised that we wouldn't rest until we'd dragged every last one of our enemies into the same bottomless muddy pit as us!! *That* was when I was supposed to tell you how I feel, not now!!"

I thought I'd long since lost all feeling in my nerves. Why, then, did the tears rolling down my cheeks feel so warm? The next thing I knew, all the girls were kneeling in a circle, looking down at me.

…What a strange feeling.

It was just like the end of my first life, at the hour of my death. When I had lain on the floor, my consciousness rapidly fading out of reach. When I had looked back up at the sneering faces of my former party, and the unquenchable black flame first took root in my heart.

When the knowledge that I could do nothing but watch as my life charred to coal had threatened to crush me.

Yet as I went through that cycle again, my heart felt mysteriously at peace. I had forgotten how nice it felt to be calm.

Why had I hated my powerlessness so much? Why hadn't I realized how liberating it could be?

"I'm sorry, Minnalis."

And yet, that liberation brought with it its own sense of guilt.

But there was nothing I could do about that.

"I'm sorry. I'm out. I just…can't go on. Even if my brain knows,

my heart can't do it anymore."

How pathetic.

How did a great girl like you end up with a miserable loser like me?

"There's no fire in my heart anymore," I said. "It's gone."

"…No it's not. No it's not, Master! I know that's not true! It can't be!"

Was it because I'd named her my successor, handed her that poisoned chalice, that Minnalis was so vehemently denying my claims?

"You're lying. You have to be. This can't be real. I don't believe you. You're trying to trick us. You're being controlled by the hero's power and that's why you're saying all these ridiculous things!!"

"…"

"Remember what's real, Master! Remember your promise! We're going to exact revenge together! We're going to kill Alicia! We thought of all the ways we could do it together! Have you forgotten all that?!"

"…Minnalis…"

"Please say something, Master… Anything at all… Just say something!!"

"…"

She was distraught, looking at me with tears in her eyes, but I couldn't answer her.

…I was the worst piece of shit on this earth.

I couldn't do it after all. Even right here at the end, I couldn't say anything that made it right. I knew that nothing could, and all my attempts had been in vain. There was only one thing left to do—summon what little of my strength remained and conjure one of my soul blades.

"Rgh…grh!!"

"Master!!"

The sword collapsed onto my breast.

It was the Holy Sword of Retribution. The sword I had gained when I'd died, the one that defined my second chance at life.

Perhaps Minnalis saw some hope in that act, because her face lit

up in a smile. However, that instantly changed when I said my next words.

"Take this sword…and kill me."

"…Oh…"

Sadness, disappointment, despair, and finally…acceptance.

That's right, Minnalis. That's how it has to be…

I was nothing now but wet charcoal that could never sustain a fire again. But at least I could pass something of myself to her.

"…Fine… Fine… I'll do it."

Looking down at the ground, Minnalis slowly picked up the sword. The next instant, she seemed strangely at peace. I felt somewhat uneasy, but such feelings felt insignificant before the knowledge of my imminent demise.

"That was what this contract was always meant to be, after all…"

I heard Minnalis say something, but I couldn't tell what. Summoning the soul blade had used up every last drop of my energy, and already my vision and hearing were growing weak.

"Not partners, not allies, but something deeper. Our words, our minds, our blood and flesh and bones, all hopelessly mixed…"

I could hear other voices, too.

"M-Minnalis! What in the blazes are you doing?!"

"Minnalis, stop it!"

"Kaito!! Grgh!"

"Dear brother!!"

I couldn't make out the words, but I could feel the emotions behind them.

I was a little disappointed I couldn't know what everyone had to say, but the end soon approached, and that was more relief than anything.

I watched as Minnalis raised the sword up high. The sight was burned into my eyes like a brightly shining jewel.

And so, the look on her face confused me.

"…?"

I had expected to see her racked with guilt, or sorrow, or anger, or scorn. But instead, I saw none of those things. I saw her smile. A single, satisfied smile.

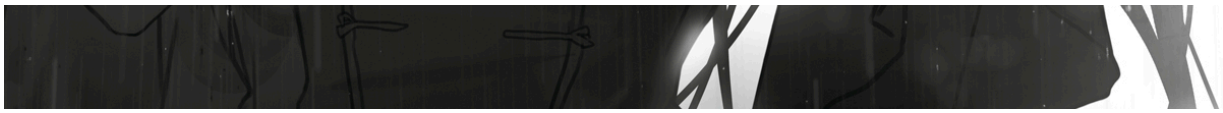
But apart from that, everything was going my way. Minnalis positioned the point of the blade atop my heart and lowered the hilt.

"Here I come, Master."

"Grh…"

The blade buried itself deep in my flesh. Even my dulled senses were able to transmit the pain to my head. I felt it pass my ribs, and soon enough, the sword's tip reached my heart.





Ah, sweet release. I won't have to suffer anymore…

My life was ending. Soon it would all be over. Very soon now…… Hmm?

What's happening? Why do I feel so…alive?

Death felt nothing like I'd imagined. The strange feeling that had been growing inside me over the past few minutes throbbed, harder and harder. The pain in my chest was more vivid than ever, and the sensation of being wrapped in several layers of warm blankets went away.

No, something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong. This didn't feel anything like the first time I'd died. It had been like everything fading to black. Like sinking into an inky sea. Like everything I treasured slipping through my fingers, as if it were sand.

"Ggh… What's happening…?"

This time, it didn't feel like that. It felt like waking up. It felt like something entering my body, not leaving it.

"We are partners," said Minnalis. "Partners in crime. We are indistinct, inseparable! Tee-hee-hee! Tee-hee-hee! Oh, why didn't I do this a long time ago? It was so simple!!"

"M-Minnalis? What have you done?"

Slowly, but steadily, the gears of my mind began to turn. My eyes and ears regained their clarity, and I could even find myself thinking clearly once more.

What I saw was the hilt of my soul blade, sticking out of my own chest. It pulsed with a faint, yet powerful crimson light, and I felt a pain within me throbbing in concert with it.

As soon as I noticed that pain, it began to subside, but not because something was dulling my senses, as before. If anything, my senses were sharper than ever.

Instead of my power transferring to Minnalis…it was as if she was coming into me.

"Stop it…" I protested. "There's no point in giving yourself to me!! Kill me!!"

At this rate, Minnalis's whole being would become a part of me instead.

“Oh, don’t worry, Master. I’m just giving a light to your flame, just as you gave me all that time ago. Now, we shall truly be one and the same.”

“You…do you know what you’re doing?!”

I felt her essence being drawn through the soul blade and into me. This was no mere healing magic, but a melding of souls that only the Holy Sword of Retribution could facilitate.

“Stop it!” I yelled. “If you keep this up, you’ll…!”

“…I won’t let you wriggle your way out of this one, Master. I don’t believe there’s no heat left inside you. That’s just not possible!”

“What do you…mean…?”

“Because it’s so, meltingly, bubblingly hot. It sticks in the throat and scorches our eyes. It roasts our skin and turns our brains to mush! There’s no way we can ever be rid of it!! Hee-hee-hee!”

I couldn’t tell if she was looking at me or through me. There was an interminable void of swirling madness in her eyes.

“N-no… It *is* gone… It was never mine…,” I said. “My vengeance was fake; it belonged to the power of the hero, not to me…”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! They really do have you fooled!”

“Grgh…! Minnalis! Please…don’t do this!!”

She laughed. As her essence became mine, something inside me began to split open.

“Oh, Master!! Calling it a fake! You’re so silly!”

Each pop was followed by another. It felt like I was about to burst. It felt like my insides were being mixed together.

Then, just as the corners of Minnalis’s lips dropped ever so slightly, and I thought her bout of madness over at last, a crazed look possessed her eyes, and she smiled wider than ever before.

“See? I found it!”

“Grh?!”

I felt her fingers close around something that was hidden deep inside me. That sense of unease, previously on its way out, was suddenly engulfed by her. I felt a calming, motherly presence…along with a devious, inescapable gaze, like I’d fallen into a den of vipers.

But I was confused by what I felt. Because I had the uncanny feeling it was something I remembered.

“Master, perhaps the power of the hero really has bolstered and guided your desire for revenge.”

Minnalis wore an ecstatic, almost sultry grin, but I didn’t have time to admire her. Because a feeling was working its way around my body like a breath of life. A feeling that had been my steadfast companion for so, so long.

…Hate! Hate, hate, hate, hate!

Make them pay! Make them pay! Make them pay!

Why should you get to live?! Why should you get to be happy?!

A voice so dripping with malice it felt like it would drive me insane.

“…But that feeling belongs to you and you alone, Master. Nobody gave it to you. It isn’t fake in the slightest!!”

I tried to suppress it, but the hate kept back flaring up, like a fire doused with oil. As the forces struggled in contention within my body, the only thing I could hear clearly was Minnalis’s voice, slightly tinged with pain.

Much of her had already assimilated with me. It was like being drowned in a font of gushing blood. It was surely just as painful for her as it was for me, if not more so, and yet through it all, her voice sustained a burning heat—the heat of life itself.

“I’m not going to let you make excuses,” she said. “I’m not going to let you run away. I won’t allow it, Master, and neither will any of us. If you trip and fall during the race, Master, you’ll crawl your way to the finish line.”

Those thick, dark words felt like a curse.

The very same curse I had cast on Minnalis when we first met.

After all this time, it had come back to haunt me.

“Master, you are an avenger.”

“Urgh…! Graah!! Aaaaaghhh!!”

It burned. It burned. It burned.

The cursed flame inside me burned with such intensity that it threatened to spill out at any moment.

Then, as if those flames had spread to her, Minnalis burst into black fire.

“Master, you are an avenger.”

There was little of her left that hadn't merged with me. Slowly but surely, she was melting away, giving her body as fuel for the black flame of hate that had been smoldering within me.

As the black ire ate away at her, it was like she was disappearing. But she wasn't disappearing. She was becoming part of me instead.

"Master, you are an avenger."

At her words, I felt my contract—my curse—rearing its head once more. It all fed the hatred I had been trying to ignore.

Minnalis held onto the blade, and kept smiling, while the rest of her crumbled away.

"Master, you are an avenger. From the tips of your hair to the marrow of your bones. It is who you are, and who you will always be. Forever and ever…"

A sweet taste, like poison, caressed my lips.

Her very last words were, *"Now, you are mine."*

Then…

"Wraaaaaaaaaaaaaaggghhhh!!"

The emotions burst through my skin like it was wet paper. Minnalis's dark flames engulfed me, burning away the connection between the white giant and me, separating us.

"GRRROOOOAAAAAGGGHHH!!"

The giant's scream sounded like it was coming through thick walls. Everything was tinted red and black, yet I could see it with startling clarity.

However, my thoughts could not keep up. One singular emotion outstripped all my capacity for rational thought; the very same emotion that had eclipsed my mind at the moment of my premature death.

Let the world fall into ruin. Let everything rot in hell.

That hate, that singular, inescapable hate encompassed all else.

And yet it still wasn't enough. Some irrational part of my mind cried out for more.

Drink. Swallow. Kill and take back what is yours.

"…Kill…me…"

Even now, I struggled against that desire. Leticia, Shuria, Mai, and Metelia stood around me, yet I couldn't look a single one of them in the eye.

"…Kill me… Kill me now!!"

I'd forgotten all about bequeathing my power. I no longer had the luxury to think about it. Because now that Minnalis had reminded me of the flames of hatred within me, they had grown into an uncontainable conflagration far beyond my control.

And yet.

And yet…

"Assimilation, eh?" said Leticia. "I suppose that is a fitting end for us. And it's not too dissimilar to how I was with Kaito previously. Yes…it's not an end; just going back to the way things were…"

"Can you hear me, my idiot brother? Your darling little sister is so madly in love that she's willing to be with you forever and ever. Even death cannot do us part after this…"

"My life has always been yours, Master," said Shuria. "You can do whatever you want to me…"

"Kaito," said Metelia. "We have been apart for so very long now, and I cannot take being parted from you again. If my life is what must sustain you, then so be it…"

None of them wanted to stop me. In fact, they were offering themselves to me. Not only allowing it but demanding it.

And yet in truth, this "assimilation" was just another name for absorption. Once mixed with me, I didn't know how much of their original personalities would remain.

But despite that, I… I…

"AAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!"

Something snapped. Before I knew it, I had pulled the Holy Sword of Retribution from my chest.

"Rrragh!"

"Gph!! I…I should have known it wouldn't be painless…," muttered Mai, my blade lodged between her ribs. "But I'll always love you, dear brother… Even this beastly side of you…"

Her essence poured into me through the medium of the Holy Sword of Retribution. Just like with Minnalis, a black fire consumed her, slowly melting away her flesh. At the same time, the hatred inside me shivered with pleasure, filling in another missing piece and taking one more step to achieving its true form.

"We may have been brother and sister," she said, "but I loved you more than any sister ever did."

I had no idea what I was even doing anymore. All I knew…was that Mai was happy. I could feel her merging with me, filling in the cracks in my heart.

"I'll never have to leave you again, my dearest brother. I love you."

Then I felt another touch on my lips. It wasn't sweet, like Minnalis's, but instead fresh, like mint. Leaving only that taste behind, Mai disappeared inside me.

"More… Need more…"

"Agh!! H-hee-hee-hee… Aah, I feel your love, Kaito. Even though I was made the priestess, we never got to be together as I hoped…"

After my blade skewered Metelia, a dizzying pleasure flowed from her body and into mine. Her every thought, her every emotion became mine.

Is this really it? Is this really what you want? Is this really how you want it all to end?

"But now," she went on, her face cast in dark light by the flames, "you are the hero no longer. I am the priestess no longer. We can finally be together, not as our respective roles, but as a man and a woman…"

The pain, the pleasure, the sadness, the loneliness, and joy. All of it came at once, so tightly it was impossible to unpack.

"You will always be my hero. The most wonderful of them all. I love you…"

Metelia's lips were sweet and soft, juicy like nectar. After her kiss, she disappeared inside me like all the rest.

"Arghhh…! Aaagh! Why…? Why can't we…?"

"Eek! That hurt! Oh, it hurts so good! You haven't hurt me in so long, Kaito, I was getting frustrated!"

I had devoured three of them now, yet the beast inside me still hungered for more. I couldn't fight it, and the person in front of me did not show any signs of wanting me to. Before I even had time to guess at her motivations, I felt her mind inside my body.

"This pain is where I started," Shuria said. "I was treated like dirt, only allowed to suffer, but then you came along and painted my whole world black. Ever since then, I've always, always considered myself a part of you."

I didn't know what was happening anymore. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop it now.

"I love you, Kaito. I love you so much. And now, we'll always be together! You are my partner in crime, and you mean more to me than anything in the whole, wide world!"

Her soft lips touched mine, accompanied by the bittersweet smell of unripe fruit, and then Shuria became a part of me as well. In the end, only Leticia and I were left.

"Well, looks like it's me last, Kaito," she said.

"All of you… Is this really what you want?" I asked, practically begging to be told otherwise.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! What a crybaby! Of course it is," answered Leticia, laughing.

That couldn't be right.

If I just stopped and thought about it, this obviously wasn't what anyone wanted. As beautiful as they made it sound, these girls were nothing but sacrifices, tossing themselves onto my pyre to keep the flame alive.

And yet Leticia began walking toward me.

"Even if our flesh and blood should disappear, we shall never

leave you, Kaito," she said. "We never want to be separated from you again. No matter what happens, we shall stay by your side."

She spread her arms invitingly.

"Do it, Kaito, and make it quick! You'd better not chicken out now, or there'll be hell to pay!"

Seeing her like that, something inside me snapped, and I let the anger take hold.

"Rgh… Rrraaaaaggghhh!!"

"Guh… Heh-heh-heh… Aah, how strange… Though I met my end on your blade once before, it didn't feel anything as nice as this…"

"You're so…stupid. Why are you all…so…stupid?"

I hungrily drank of Leticia's essence.

"Heh-heh. Haven't you worked it out yet? Any woman who falls in love with you must be a terrible fool indeed."

The dark flames that engulfed Leticia grew in intensity as her essence became a part of mine, almost like a fire on the verge of extinction flaring back to life.

"But you, Kaito, are the biggest fool of us all, are you not?"

"Yeah…I am. Goddammit! Damn it aaall!"

It was me who'd made the choice. It was me who'd betrayed them. I'd forced them into this contract because I couldn't abide betrayal, but in the end, I was the one who had betrayed them.

"Heh-heh-heh. You crybaby, Kaito. Nobody's dying. We'll be part of you from now on. You'll have five pretty ladies living inside you, you lucky man."

"What are you doing still cracking jokes? Don't you have something more important to say at a time like this?"

"Heh-heh-heh. Then allow me to be more like a demon lord…and place a curse on you."

Her outstretched fingers cradled my face.

"Kaito, you must finish what you started. No running away, no giving up, no standing around. I'll be within you, by your side, always watching."

Even as she spoke the words of her curse, Leticia wore a benevolent smile.

“Kaito,” she said. “No matter how many times this world repeats, I shall always be by your side. My love for you is the one thing that can never be changed.”

Leticia’s lips were like burning fire. After she was gone, the only thing left in my mouth was a delicate taste that made me want to cry.

“…”

I was alone.

In the end, there was only me.

Everyone else had become a part of me.

“GROAAAAAAGHHH!!”

Without the others keeping the enchantment in place, the white giant finally shattered his ice prison and rose to his feet.

“…Shut up.”

“GRAAAAAGH!! GGGRAH!!”

The Holy Sword of Retribution glowed with an ink-black flame, as if reflecting the deep, dark fires of my own emotion. With one swing, I lopped off the white giant’s arm.

“GAAAGH!! GAAAGH!!”

It quickly appeared to realize that its usual regeneration trick wasn’t working. Its dull-witted reaction irritated me to no end.

“Shut the hell up!!” I yelled.

My whole world was red. This was it. This was the emotion I remembered.

“GRGHH!!”

I sliced, I cut, I minced, until not a scrap of meat remained. All that was left was a fine, red mist, and the place fell silent once more.

“…What have I become?”

I had taken out my anger, but the hate inside me still wasn’t satisfied.

“…What the hell have I become?”

I looked down at my hand. It was empty.

I had always been walking.

Because I knew that the moment I stopped was the moment everything ended.

After walking so far and losing so much…

…what did I have left?

"Gyah-hah-hah!! So, we meet again!"

As I was pondering this, the fine, red mist coalesced into a human form. It was the very shadow with which I had been conversing right when I first came to this place.

Now, he looked exactly like me in every way, except drained of color, like some bonus character from a fighting game.

"So?" he asked. "Did you remember who you are yet?"

"…I never forgot."

I was an eternal avenger. That was all I was. I was nothing without the will to exact payback on those who had wronged me.

"Wonderful! Marvelous!" the shadow rejoiced. "So, what are you going to do now?"

"You say that like you don't already know the answer," I replied. "Since you won't let me refuse your choice entirely, there's only one thing I can do."

I still didn't know if this hate was my own, or if the power of the hero had given it to me.

But it changed nothing either way.

"I'll choose," I said. "That's what you all want, right? That's what…*we* all want."

Taking up the sword, I obeyed the raging fire within me and swung at the shadow. He chuckled and transformed into mist once more.

"I see, I see. What a troublesome fellow you are."

Afterward, the Holy Sword of Retribution began absorbing the mist. I leveled my gaze and muttered my determination.

"The path I walk…is the avenger's path."

With that, my blade finished absorbing the last of the mist and exploded in a gout of flame. Black fire that would spread its hate and malice to all who gazed upon it.

Meanwhile, the fire seemed to harden around the sword, growing it into a new form.

System Message: The hero has awakened. Holy Sword of Retribution Reverting to true form.

System Message: Prerequisites Fulfilled. Holy Sword of Retribution admitted into Swords of Sin series.

System Message: Holy Sword of Retribution is now named Sword of Sin: Apostate Wroth.

A robotic voice rang in my mind, and the soul blade in my hands transformed. Its slender blade vanished without a trace, replaced by an inelegant slab of obsidian, which burned with such greed as to incinerate everything in its vicinity. When it was done, those black flames spread to me as well.

"I see," I said. "So this is *my* soul blade."

The Swords of Sin embodied the powers, regrets, thoughts, and feelings of the heroes that had come before me. It was only fitting that I would eventually come to count myself among their ranks. That was what this sword, Apostate Wroth, was offering me.

"The deadly sin of Wrath, huh? I like it. It does sum me up quite nicely, doesn't it?"

That was all I was now. An embodiment of hate and anger, directed at injustice, at cruel fate, at the world, and at myself.

"I suppose it's time, then."

In my world of darkness, a soft, warm crack of light shone.

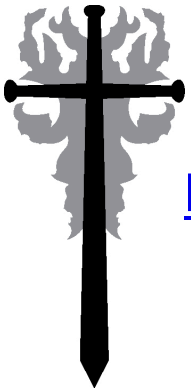
I turned my back on it. Because I knew the exit I sought could not be found in light.

My road was cloaked in such blackness as to render even the next step utterly invisible.

Instead, I walked in the other direction, away from the light. Back to the path I had always walked.

"Time to keep going."

Once again, I walked the path of vengeance.



FINAL CHAPTER

The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of Vengeance a Second Time

I poured you some tea, my dear Lamnecia."

The sun was gentle, the wind mild, and the smell of flowers lingered on the breeze. Little birds sang their songs, brought here by the opening of spring.

"Perfect timing, Alicia. I've just finished baking some cookies. They came out quite nicely, if I do say so myself."

The flowers in the garden, at the height of their color, provided the perfect backdrop for our little tea party, conducted around a table for two beneath the unspoiled marble of the pavilion arches.

I provided the fragrant black tea, while my sister Lamnecia had prepared some irresistibly sweet-smelling cookies.

"My! These are simply delicious, dear sister!"

Oh, how long I've waited for this!!

My heart overflowed with joy. Just the other day, Lamnecia couldn't even stand by herself, much less speak. Now she could bake cookies without being asked. It was proof that the seeds I'd planted

were spreading, and the world was slowly becoming right again.

"Tee-hee-hee. Your tea is wonderful as well, my dear Alicia."

These were the days I had worked so hard to bring back. Just the two of us, enjoying tea and biscuits beneath the marble arches. Smiling in each other's presence; that was all I ever wanted.

My whole life, I had lived in a world of unimportances, forced to interact with the most repulsive examples of unnecessity life had to offer.

How wonderful my life seemed now by comparison, where every day was as a waking dream!

"My dear Lamnecia, the seed that restored you to life is now spreading throughout our world. Soon it will be implanted into everything."

Nearly three months had passed since Lamnecia returned to me. My efforts in advance paid off, and the World Tree seed quickly spread to the kingdom, the empire, the beast lands, the See, and finally the land across the sea, where demons roam. Even they fell to its charm and began working to sustain this world where my sister and I could live freely.

Ironically, the demons were the easiest to control, their minds eroded as they were from centuries of dependence upon the Demonlight Trees.

Of course, some in the realm still evaded my command, taking refuge in the depths of the forests, the mountain peaks, or even deep inside dungeons, but they could not run forever.

Either our light would touch them, or they would rot away to nothing.

"That being the case…what brings you here?"

I set down my teacup with a clatter, turning my eyes upon the loathsome insect that had just crawled into my garden.

It was the former hero, Kaito, whom I had last seen making a cowardly flight on the day of my sister's glorious resurrection. He appeared before me now in spectral form, and not in person.

"You've killed a lot of people," he said.

"Oh, but they are not dead," I replied. "They are servants of the World Tree now. Unthinking livestock that serve only a world where I

can be happy.”

“…Is that the world you want?”

“It most certainly is!”

“…”

A perfect world, made with the power of the goddess. A world for two: my sister and me. Oh, what a wonderful world it was!

“Alicia? Who is this person? What are you two discussing?”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about him,” I reassured her. “He’s just an annoying fly who doesn’t know when to disappear.”

I stroked her cheek, and Lamnecia’s doubtful look went away.

“You’re right,” she said. “I won’t think about him at all.”

Lamnecia went back to sipping tea, after which I dropped my smile and turned back to the ex-hero once more.

“…”

“I must say,” I said. “I’m awfully surprised to see you here…even if it is a mere projection. My barriers were designed to keep even the tiniest insect from wriggling their way inside.”

“If you’d prefer to see me in person, you’ll get the chance soon enough.”

Kaito’s claim was laughable.

“Oh, well, it’s very generous of you to come and be exterminated. I was just going to let you rot away in whatever hole you found yourself in,” I said with a smile.

“Really?” answered Kaito without a change to his expression. “Because the look on your face says otherwise.”

“Oh, you could tell? That’s strange—I thought I was hiding it perfectly.”

“You would never let a mortal enemy escape you.”

“And that’s what you think you are?”

What Kaito suggested was so ridiculous, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! What a silly thing for an insignificant little worm to say! To be a mortal enemy, you would first have to pose a threat to me!”

“…”

“If there is anyone I would like to seek out, it is that sneaky little goddess, not you. Ah, but I suppose…”

I brought my right hand to my left shoulder, thinking of the scars on my back.

"…There was that little message you left me. Perhaps I should teach you a lesson and torment you a little after all, like I did in my first life."

Those scars had long since faded by now, but I still remembered the humiliation and disgrace he had forced on me. Of course, none of it was more than a foul odor on the breeze, something that would soon disappear on the winds of happiness enjoyed by my sister and me, but I couldn't deny the satisfaction I felt seeing his sorry little face before he teleported away.

He was a pathetic man who tried to hide his fear with bluster and only stood down once he was shown the error of his ways firsthand. He was a nuisance, yes, but in the way of a harmless mosquito buzzing around one's head, not a real threat.

"Heh, well, you're right about one thing. I did need cutting down to size. Everything had been going just a little too well, and it went straight to my head."

"…?"

I thought if I just provoked him a little, he would seek to cover that fear with violence once more, or at least give me a pathetic little glare. However…

"I'd gained a lot of partners, my plans were unfolding smoothly, and yeah, I got cocky. I'd brought my head above the pool of blood, when I was supposed to be dragging everyone down there with me. But I should have known; sticking my neck out always ends up badly for me."

Kaito punctuated his words with an unsettling cackle.

"…Wipe that look off your face," I said. "You're giving me the creeps."

Suddenly, an odd sensation tickled the back of my eyes and the depths of my nose.

What…is this?

Feeling a strange anger take hold, I unleashed my divine aura. It was a manifestation of the divinity I had taken from Lunaris. By releasing it into the air, I caused Kaito's spectral image to flicker, but

it wasn't enough to shut him up.

"Now I'm back," Kaito said. "Back beneath the sea of blood.

"And this time, you're coming with me.

"Mark my words. You will die. I will drown you in a sea of pain and despair, then crush you like an insect."

He was like a ghost. A hateful revenant formed of anger and malice.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!" I laughed. "You must be joking! How could *you* possibly kill either of us? It's not possible. To kill me at this point would be to kill the entire world!"

I thought he must have come here to bargain for something, but it seems the despair has simply driven him mad! Even with a goddess reject on his side, he cannot possibly dream of staging a comeback now!

"Then the world will die as well," said Kaito. "Say good-bye to this world you love so much. We'll kill and kill and kill until there's nothing left. Our murderous rampage will surpass the limits of human reckoning."

"I'm impressed by the depths of your delusion, if nothing else," I replied. "How are you ever going to harm me? I could make you vanish with a snap of my fingers. In fact, I think I'll do that right now."

I focused my divine aura upon his spectral form. This would be more than enough to wink his pathetic image out of existence. However…

"In that case, let's set our final stage."

"Hgh?! Why…isn't it working?!"

Kaito's spectral image did not vanish. Instead, it stopped

flickering and became clearer and more distinct than ever.

"You heard me, didn't you? I said you'll get to see me in person soon enough."

All of a sudden, a black outline of fire burst to life around Kaito's image.

"Black: the flames of rage that burn and burn in endless pits.

"So must they always be, to keep the fire alive, the flame untouched.

"To touch the one, the few, the many; to spread the fire to every part.

"To burn and burn, with I, myself, the pyre, the fuel, the kindling all.

"No warning nor calamity; no obstacle can bar my path.

"For in mine eyes all laws of men are ashes yet to be reduced."

As he spoke, those black fires flared, as if swallowing the light and taking on his words' form.

"Sword of Sin: *Apostate Wroth*."

Then the sea of flames parted, and Kaito stepped through it and into stark reality. He was wearing his usual light armor, though it seemed far weightier due to the doom inspired by the black fires surrounding it.

In his hands, Kaito held a greatsword that looked like a solid version of those hate-filled flames. Its jet-black edge was laced with crimson, like running blood, and yet its pure ebon composition was sorely lacking in elegance, as if the sword itself could not abide extraneous decoration of its form.

The flames thrown off by the sword mixed with those surrounding Kaito himself, scorching the flowers at his feet to cinders. Like a manifestation of his very malice, they tainted the world wherever he touched.

He looked just like a nefarious villain from a fairy tale.

"…You're really the embodiment of evil now," I said.

"Well, it was you who made me this way, don't forget."

A shiver ran down my spine. I felt a psychological madness take hold.

I wanted to kill the man before me, even if there was no reason to.

It was a clear moment of weakness. For I was so much more powerful than he that I needn't have bothered.

Very well. If once wasn't enough for you, allow me to put you in the ground again.

"Oh, dear Lamnecia? I'm afraid a piece of dirty business has reared its ugly head once more."

"Oh, really?"

Lamnecia looked over at me with a sense of unease.

Oh, how could you? Look at how you've made my dear sister worry!

I clutched my chest in an effort not to disturb her further with how I truly felt.

"Yes, but you needn't fret over it, dear sister. I shall take care of this. Nobody will ever hurt you again."

Steeling myself, I smiled at Lamnecia, attempting to set her mind at ease.

"Please stay right there, my dear Lamnecia. I will have this finished very soon now. Just sit still and watch."

"Yes, Alicia. I will."

My words greatly soothed her worry, and Lamnecia beamed a sunny smile back. That was better. That was the Lamnecia I wanted to see.

"Petals of Snow: *Clear Bell.*"

The pavilion in which Lamnecia sat was immediately enveloped in a transparent bubble. Contrary to its delicate appearance, this barrier could weather almost any attack.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said, turning back to Kaito and descending the pavilion steps. As I walked, I pulled my sword from the ether. It was silver, with a narrow blade and a flowery, embellished handguard. I had created it using the power I stole

from Lunaris, and it was surely the finest blade in all the land. Of course, it was attuned well to my own power and glowed a pale pink.

"Finished playing with your doll, have you?" asked Kaito.

"I see you haven't yet abandoned that pathetic habit of hiding your fear with jokes," I replied. "I suppose, on the inside, you're still the same old miserable coward."

"And you haven't changed either, still talking up a storm whenever you get annoyed. You've come a long way, but in some respects, you haven't taken a single step, have you?"

As I passed the last step, a gentle breeze swirled underfoot, scattering petals into the air.

"Now, shall we settle once and for all who is greater than whom?"

"Yeah. This is our last battle. I'm gonna enjoy these black flames until they burn me out completely."

There was no signal, no agreement, yet the two of us moved as one.

Clanggg!!

Our clashing blades stung my wrist, transmitting the impact to my rattling bones. My entire body screamed.

Alicia didn't look anywhere near sturdy enough to be capable of that kind of power. The weight of her presence must have been amplified by the divine power she wielded. Not to mention, the World Tree seeds from which she drew her strength were now scattered all across the world. Her power must have been superhuman.

"Hup! Hah! Haah!!"

"Rh! Raah!!"

The lightning-fast clashing of our blades created a cacophony of metallic, throat-rending screams. Each time our weapons crossed, the power behind them was redirected outward, stripping the flowers at our feet of their color.

"Tee-hee-hee. What's wrong? Surely one graceful young lady

can’t be giving you this much trouble.”

“How long are you going to pretend like the nice-girl act hides even a scrap of your rotten core?”

“Oh my! What a terrible thing to say to the princess of this land!”

“Princess? What kind of princess leads her nation to ruin?”

Each time our blades collided, the land was torn apart. Flowers were uprooted and ground overturned, exposing the black earth beneath.

“I haven’t led anything to ruin,” Alicia remarked.

“You’ve turned the people of this world into monsters, and you’re the biggest monster of all if you don’t realize that.”

The black flames around my sword clashed with the pale pink glow of Alicia’s, each trying to devour the other’s light. After building up an unimaginable amount of pressure, it all released at once, pushing Alicia and me apart from each other.

Alicia landed gracefully, as though she had suddenly sprouted wings.

“Whatever do you mean by all this monster nonsense?” she asked, swishing her sword and casting me a venomous smile. “They have become glorious supporters of this earthly paradise. In many ways, they are more noble now than ever. What happier fate could there be on this earth?”

Cast against her flowers, Alicia looked just like a painting. A portrait of a pure and innocent girl. If any human saw it, they would think her a thing of beauty. But I could never feel that way, because I knew the hateful witch who lurked beneath.

“However,” she said, “I must say, I’m honestly impressed. I didn’t expect you to last this long against the power of a god.”

“Hah. Well, technically, my powers are of divine origin, too. I think they can handle someone who only sucked up some phony goddess.”

“Phony goddess? To say such a thing of your true benefactor, why, that is the very definition of ingratitude. The one who granted you *your* power is the real false god, misappropriating what they in turn were given!”

“…Huh? Wait, you mean…you don’t know? …That explains a lot, I

guess.”

Alicia’s strange reply gave me pause. From the sound of it, it seemed like she wasn’t aware of the true relationship between the goddess of Earth, Lunaris, and Luna. It seemed likely that she thought of Luna as some kind of minor deity who had once served Lunaris, and she didn’t know about the other goddess at all.

She could have been lying to trick me, I suppose, but there was no reason to at this stage. And besides, if she thought Lunaris was the only god around, that explained why she’d grown so lax after absorbing her.

It would also explain why she hadn’t come after any of us when we teleported away. At that moment, she’d thought she’d already won.

As everything pieced together in my mind, the princess saw my look of understanding, and her eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean by that?” she growled.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” I replied. “Maybe you know, and maybe you don’t. It doesn’t change anything.”

“I don’t like the way you said that. Do you know something I don’t? Spit it out!”

“Are you stupid? Why would I ever do something as dumb as that?!”

The next moment, we were right in each other’s faces again. A loud ringing marked the meeting of our blades.

“…In that case,” said Alicia, “I shall have to beat it out of you!”

Alicia’s sword began to glow even brighter. Then, just like me with my flames, her whole body began to glow as well. I felt the weight behind her blade steadily grow.

“I’d like to see you try!”

As if in response to her arrogance, the black flames flickered and expanded, as if finally revealing their true, ravenous hunger.

In terms of skill, I held the upper hand, but Alicia had raw power on her side. It was only due to the enhanced effects of Apostate Wroth that I was able to contend with her at all. The soul blade grew stronger in proportion to my anger, and any pain inflicted by my opponent was converted into strength. Furthermore, the black

flames that surrounded me duplicated and strengthened my attacks and abilities, and these duplicates ignored the effects of any magical interference. By combining this effect with the Transcendent Blade of Translocation, I was able to teleport here in flagrance of Alicia's barriers.

However, once activated, these flames would not subside until my anger was appeased. In that time, they continued to roast my flesh. This was mitigated somewhat by my own defensive buffs, strengthened and duplicated by Apostate Wroth, and to some extent I could control the flames' intensity, but it still meant I was in constant pain throughout the fight, and the more powerful the flames, the more it hurt.

So I was cursed to kill the target of my anger, or else suffer eternal agony.

"Die!!" I yelled. "Huh?!"

"Tee-hee-hee! What's the matter? Starting to panic?"

Mere moments after our opening clash, the energy of the fight showed no signs of slowing down. I, however, was starting to realize I couldn't keep it up forever.

Tch… Looks like the brute force approach just isn't going to work.

My abilities had shot up as a result of taking the others into me, but it was clear that in terms of raw strength and speed, I was falling behind.

"I ain't panicking! I'm just enjoying it, that's all! It's no fun if I don't give you a chance to fight back!!"

"Even your dim-witted comebacks have less kick than usual… O, enveloping flower of fire. *Petal of Cinder: Flanecia!*"

Our battle of fencing prowess steadily turned into an exchange of spells. The black flames transformed my abilities into tigers, dragons, bladed wheels, and hundreds of tiny *shuriken* that flew toward Alicia. However, the princess deflected them, blocked them, and sliced them up with focused bursts of conjured petals.

My abilities could incinerate a dragon in a single hit, but Alicia made them look like child's play, all the while effortlessly parrying the attacks I was going through so much pain to unleash.

"Dance with blades! Petals of Swordsmanship: *Flower Edge!*"

“Krh! Grh!”

While I was still distracted by the petals confounding my moves, a blizzard of razor-edged petals attacked me. I couldn’t possibly defend against a million blades at once, and the petals left crimson scratches across my skin.

“Oh, what’s the matter? Too fast for you to keep up?”

“Ghah!!”

An attack came from behind. A bundle of petals as weighty as a giant’s fist. It knocked me flat across the battlefield.

“It looks like this is as far as you go,” said the princess, commanding the petals to float around her head. “No surprises there.”

She looked down on where I had ground to a halt with a devious smile on her lips.

“How brave of you to have come all this way only to meet such a piteous end. You truly are foolish…”

“You’re the only fool here, Alicia… You really think I’d let it end now…?”

I spat out the blood that had pooled in my mouth before commanding the black flames to heal my wounds.

There was no way I could contend with Alicia at my current power level… Which meant I would have to make myself even stronger.

“I’ve finally gotten used to the pain,” I said. “It’s time to begin round two.”

“What do you… Ah!!”

The fires across my body suddenly flared in intensity even more.

“Grh! Krh!”

It burned. It burned. It burned. It burned. My eyes, my ears, my nose, my mouth, my arms, my legs, my throat, my chest, my gut.

I thought the pain couldn’t possibly get any worse, but it did. It felt like my skin was being peeled from my muscles and flesh.

And yet…

“This is nothing compared to the agony I feel inside.”

“Grh! Petals of— Agh!!”

In a flash, I activated my powers of teleportation, strengthened

by the effects of the black flames. Teleporting around in battle was usually infeasible because the technique required a lot of mana and mental effort to pull off. Alicia was no doubt fully aware of this, and that was why my attack had come as such a surprise to her.

But although I had powered up my roundhouse kick as far as I possibly could, Alicia's hastily constructed shield of petals still managed to absorb about half the blow. The remaining force of impact blew her backward, causing a role-reversed repeat of the events of only a few moments prior.

"We can't let it end here, Alicia. We've only just begun. You will die, and I will be the one to carry out your execution. That's the contract I made with everyone I've met. Nothing you or anyone else can do will ever change that."

This smoldering feeling I always felt in my chest. It had to be fire. There was nothing else it could be. It was the fire that tormented my ears and never silenced.

If it wanted my pain, I'd offer my pain.

If it wanted sadness, I'd offer it sadness.

If it wanted my life, I'd offer it my life.

"Heh. Tee-hee-hee. It looks like I was right after all," said Alicia, mud and blood splattered across her cheek. "You are not a human. You're a *thing* wearing our skin. Beneath that disguise lies something utterly repulsive. I mean, just look—"

On her face she wore a smile, but her eyes were as cold as toxic ice.

"—You're even beginning to burst at the seams."

Sure enough, the power of my dark flames had passed a threshold, significantly altering my appearance. Cracks ran across my skin like a blasted wasteland, and black fire spouted forth from those cracks, tinted crimson with my own blood. Feeding off me, those crimson flames moved as if they had a life of their own—almost as if they were the true beast that had been living inside me all along.

But it didn't bother me one bit. I'd cross any line necessary to achieve my goals. Losing my humanity once or twice was a drop in the ocean.

"Hurgh… Let's keep going."

“Now that you’ve shown your true nature, beast, it is time to exterminate you.”

Alicia stood up and commanded her petals once more. Then an idea seemed to occur to her, and her lips curled upward.

“…But what am I thinking?” she said. “To vanquish evil, any brave warrior needs a party, do they not?”

With that, she plunged her sword into the ground, and a large magic circle spread out from it. Six pillars of light appeared before her, into which Alicia channeled her mana, pumping like blood. Then, with one final push, the light coalesced into six humanoid figures.

“Ngrh… Hrgh? Where am I?”

“…This doesn’t look like the royal castle…”

“…This is not the beast lands. What is happening?”

“Oh? Where am I? Soriy? Where are you?”

“Mmgh… Gagarland…? Is it morning already?”

“Hee-hee… What a pretty place this is…”

I recognized them all. In that order, they were Gagarland, the warrior, Guidott, the knight commander, Leon, the fighter, Eumis, the spellcaster, Mimenya, the dancer, and Gordo, the assassin.

They all seemed alarmed by their sudden manifestation, but each was dressed and equipped for battle.

“Doesn’t this just take you back, ex-hero?” said Alicia with a smile. “It’s your former party, in the flesh!”

“It sure does bring back memories.” I replied coldly. “If they were real, I don’t think I’d be able to control myself.”

In front of me were the spitting images of six people who had chased me down in my previous life and brought it to a premature end. However, they were not my sworn enemies. They were just like Lamnecia—mere dolls recreated from Alicia’s memories. There was no trace of a soul inhabiting their hollow flesh.

“I don’t know what’s happening here, but is this the foe we are to defeat, Princess?”

“Any enemy of the state will be met with the full force of the royal knights.”

“How the mighty have fallen, wretched hero. In the name of my land, I shall vanquish you.”

"Ho-ho! Finally, I get to test out my skills on a *real* target!"

"Oh… I don't really mind one way or the other… But if Gagarland wants you to die, then I guess I do as well."

"As long as I get to examine his corpse. The body of an otherworlder will make for groundbreaking research!"

My six ex-party members quickly got over their initial confusion and launched themselves at me in perfect coordination.

"Gagarland Style: *Thunderbolt!!*" "Royal Blade: *Radiant Slash!!*" "Heavy Impact: *Lion Strike!!*" "Ho-ho! Assassin Arts: *Shadow Fang!!*"

The four close-range fighters converged on me at once.

"Out of my way!!"

I shrank my Sword of Sin down to the form of a longsword while conjuring another identical soul blade in my left hand. With it, I parried Gagarland's sword, coming from the left, while using my right to deflect Guidott's attack, coming from straight ahead of me. The momentum from that deflected attack messed up Leon's punch as he came at me from my right. Finally, for Gordo's assault, directed at my unguarded back, I channeled mana into my leg and delivered a powerful roundhouse kick behind me, flinging him away.

However, while I was busy with them, the two back-rank fighters, Mimenya and Eumis, unleashed the spells they had been preparing.

"Lethal Step: *Dust Dance!*" *"Lightning!!"*

One was a countless flurry of sand blades, the other several green thunderbolts.

"*Tch*!!"

I put up a wall of black flames, but it only succeeded in eliminating about half the projectiles, and the rest hit me directly. Luckily, my barrier had weakened them somewhat, but I still took a fair amount of damage.

"Still," I said. "Even if they're just dolls, I can't say they don't get my blood boiling just a little bit. I mean, I never did finish getting revenge on some of them."

The dark flames surrounding me burned ever darker.

"Tee-hee. Even if that makes you more powerful," said Alicia, "I still have the upper hand. Isn't it about time you bring out your little friends? Where have they been hiding all this time, I wonder?"

It was obvious she was taunting me, assuming I was waiting to unleash some kind of ambush. Perhaps I was, in a sense, but she could look all she wanted, and she'd never find the accomplices she sought.

"…Maybe you're right," I said. "This is getting a little too much for one man to handle. It's time to let the others give me a hand."

I stuck my Swords of Sin into the ground, and the black flames around me grew stronger, coalescing into five shapes. The fire began to take humanoid form, before finally being sucked into the newly created bodies of Minnalis, Shuria, Leticia, Mai, and Metelia.

"Phew. Ah, Master. It's been a while."

"We're back in the outside world!"

"Ah, 'tis good to see the world again."

"And to be in our own bodies again."

"Tee-hee. Well, then, shall we uphold our new duties?"

The five of them examined their newest surroundings. To anyone who didn't know, it would have looked as though I'd teleported my five companions here in much the same manner as I had myself.

However, blessed as she was with the divine powers she stole, Alicia saw what they really were.

"Hee-hee-hee! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! I wondered why it was you came here alone, but now I see! You've absorbed your precious companions into yourself!!"

"…"

"What a horrid, contemptible, truly blasphemous deed!! Not only do you look like a spawn of hell; you practically are one! Ah, you couldn't hope to match a goddess, so you resorted to cannibalism!! How truly horrifying!"

Alicia said all this with a flowery grin.

"Shut up," I answered. "I don't have time to listen to your preaching."

I picked up my swords and prepared to use them, while my partners in crime all turned to look at me.

"Their souls," I said, pointing at each one of them in turn, "are right there, and"—I pointed to my own heart—"in here."

"They're not the same as your hollow dolls at all."

"…I don't know what you mean," Alicia replied.

"I don't care if you know what I mean. Let's just get this battle going already."

With that, our fight resumed, made all the more explosive by the fact it was now six versus seven. It became a mad clash of perfect teamwork, more like a duel between two titans than a mass brawl.

In group combat, a team had to move as one for maximum efficiency, covering one another's backs and fulfilling a multitude of roles. The team had to act with one mind, and there was no better example of that than what both Alicia and I were doing with our parties at that moment.

"I might have guessed the hero's party would be tough," said Leon. "This is the first time my fists have faced a real challenge."

"To think such powerful warriors escaped the kingdom's notice for so long…"

"They count the priestess and the demon lord among their ranks, though all five are formidable foes. Ho-ho-ho…"

"*Tch.* They're not as wimpy as they look, that's fer damn sure. And what's with that elf brat? Ain't she your sister, Eumis?"

"Has the muscle spread to your brain, Gagarland? Her hair and skin color are completely different. Besides, Shuria could never be this powerful…"

"Hey, don't make fun of my husband's stupidity. That's what's so cute about him!"

Our two teams were closely matched, but the battle was pitching in our favor.

"That Leonid man is much weaker than he was when we fought," noted Minnalis.

"It must be because they are different people, recreated from Alicia's memories," said Metelia.

"They seem to have been powered up, but that's not enough," said Leticia.

"Well, I'm happy," said Mai. "I only came to this world after Kaito

had already slain many of his foes. I'm excited to fight them, even if they are only cheap copies."

"I'm happy, too!" said Shuria. "I can't believe I get to kill Eumis all over again!"

Our advantage was beginning to show on my team's faces as well.

"…"

"Hah. What's the matter? You look displeased."

"…I'm just realizing I may have made a slight error in judgment. I thought my divine warriors would be a little hardier than this."

"Your divine warriors? Is that what you're calling these straw dolls? You must be out of your mind if you think we're going to lose to them. None of them have their original souls—the thing that harbors a person's growth, experience, and skills. You think a bunch of mashed-together fakes is going to beat us? Don't make me laugh."

I shot her a venom-filled glare, but Alicia only tipped her head in confusion.

"Oh? I think you're misunderstanding something," she said.

"What?"

"When I called them my divine warriors, that was no lie. Each of them has offered their body and souls to the goddess. They exist to create this divine sanctuary."

Alicia clasped her hands in prayer and began to explain.

"…"

"The fact they can fight is merely incidental. That is not their true purpose."

I thought my hate couldn't get any wilder, but I was wrong. The look on Alicia's face was one I had seen in my dreams again and again.

It was a smile that captured the exact moment a flower opens its petals, releasing a sweet and sickly scent that captures all those who come near and drags them into a swamp of toxic nectar. A bright and colorful smile, tipped with poison.

"You say they have no souls," she went on, "but that simply isn't true. They are imbued with one at the moment of their creation. It

isn't *their* soul, of course, but what can you do?"

"That's what you call a soul? It's just a bunch of remnants, patched together."

There were indeed souls within Alicia's dolls, but they were twisted and grotesque, unworthy of the name. They were not souls. They were rotten hearts forced to keep beating long after the life had left them.

"I couldn't care less what you call it. All that matters is it possesses the required energy."

Standing before me was the very same person who had knocked me into the pits of despair when I had been looking for a way back home.

The very same smile as when she had cruelly thrust a knife into my hopes and dreams.

A single flower, sucking the nutrients from all life in its vicinity.

"And now," she said, so full to the brim with venom it was beginning to leak out of her smile, "allow me to show you a glimpse of the perfect world we've created."

"Urgh! Wh-what the hell is happening to me?!"

"I…feel weak. What have you done…Princess Alicia?"

"Princess? What are you doing?"

"Hoh?! My old bones…!"

"I…I've never seen magic like this! I can't…dispel it…!"

"It hurts! My darling Gagarland, please save me…!"

Suddenly, Alicia's five thralls began writhing in pain as though they'd swallowed a deadly poison. Their bodies cracked like eggshells, expelling a glowing dust like hot steam. Each of them fell to their knees and began clawing at the scorched, barren soil.

Then, like flowers crushed in a grip, they each disintegrated into some kind of pure energy. It was then that I saw it.

"What is this?!"

The sky was blinding white, and I heard from somewhere the rhythmic sound of ringing bells.

It was a place I recognized, along with the terrifying feeling of being watched. It was the so-called "divine realm"—the passageway that connected this world with Earth.

"Is this…heaven's domain?!"

Alicia's very being roiled, like an asphyxiating fish given water. From a human, to a monster. From a monster to a god. Simply standing near her gave rise to an overwhelming pressure that threatened to crush my mind like a ripe fruit. Sweat dribbled down my neck, and even my partners in crime wore grim frowns, despite the fact that as temporary vessels formed of my mana, they should have been safe from any physiological effects.

"Tee-hee-hee-hee! Welcome! Welcome to my—to *our*—Utopia! You gaze upon a perfect world, where only that which pleases Lamnecia and myself may exist!"

Before I knew it, the environment had transformed itself into a perfect replica of the garden where our prior battle had taken place. Off in the distance, I spotted a castle that resembled the royal palace.

However, it didn't *feel* the same. It didn't feel real at all. It was all too perfect, too…manufactured. As if it would always look the same way, no matter how many ages came and went.

Unending. Unchanging. Eternal. As if plucked straight from Alicia's damaged mind and made real.

And the one in control of that realm…

"Does it meet with your satisfaction, my dear Lamnecia?"

"Yes. What pretty flowers. I love it, Alicia. Thank you."

"You're welcome, my dear Lamnecia."

Before I knew it, Alicia was over by her doll's side, a blithe smile plastered across her lips. It was as though she'd completely forgotten the rest of us were here.

Without any word from me, the six of us launched ourselves at her in attack, but just as I tried to move…

"Urgh…!!"

I felt an enormous pressure, like I was rooted to the spot.

What's happening…?

I fell to one knee and could only watch as the fight unfolded.

"Anemol Arsenal: *Wind Cutter!!*"

"Intoxicating Phantasm: *Venomblaze Sword!!*"

"Puppet Possession: *Rust Armor!! Quintuple Slash!!*"

"Hellfire Blaze: *Flaming Wheels!!*"

"Sparking Glacier: *Verse of Chains!!*"

The other five pushed through the immense force and closed in on Alicia. At that moment, I saw her turn to me and flash me a malicious smile.

"Oh, won't someone silence these wretched flies?"

Then, a flick of her wrist, as though she really were dealing with nothing more than a swarm of insects.

"Grh!" "Eep!" "Nrgh!" "Gah!" "Eek!"

Alicia's simple gesture utterly annihilated the oncoming spells and threw their casters against the ground.

"…Alicia…!!" I grunted. Most likely, she had incapacitated me only so that I could watch.

"Tee-hee-hee! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! Oh, how pathetic! You're like a bunch of pitiful worms! Where has all your fire gone?"

Alicia chortled loudly, as though she could hold it in no longer.

"People like you are precisely what make this world so wretched and miserable," she said. "You only have to lift a stone to find more of you wriggling around beneath. It's far too much trouble to stamp you all out one by one, which is why I've decided there won't be any of you in my new world."

"Wh-what do you mean by that…?"

I could only imagine one outcome that meshed with what Alicia was saying.

"You mean…you're going to remake this world from scratch…?"

"Precisely," said Alicia with a grin.

She surely didn't mean it in a "rebuild society from the ashes" kind of sense. She could have done that with the power of the World Tree seeds alone.

"With all this power at my disposal, it would be foolish of me not to," said Alicia matter-of-factly. "I shall break down this world and rearrange its parts to create a new one, leaving you insects to wallow amidst the dregs."

In other words, she was planning to drain as much power as she could from this world, and bring it here, to her so-called "divine realm," to live out her fantasy alone.

"…Ha… Ha-ha…"

A hollow laugh escaped my lips. I couldn't bring myself to care about Alicia's dumb plan. All I could think about was completing my revenge.

Still, I was awed, in a sense. Alicia had betrayed me, betrayed her goddess, betrayed her country, and now, she was betraying the world.

"At least," Alicia went on, "that was what I originally planned to do…but perhaps it would be better to exterminate the lot of you right here and now."

With that, Alicia passed her judgment.

"Urgh!" "Er…gh…" "Grh!" "Ah!" "Krgh!"

My companions were immediately crushed beneath an unbearable force, like that of an industrial press. They groaned in agony, pinned under a weight made only to inflict suffering.

My partners in crime turned to me and stared, but I was still unable to move.

They were minds without bodies. Will without life. And yet, when I saw them all trying to hide their pain from me, I felt an ache in my heart I was supposed to have forgotten. When I beheld their final moments, I felt tears in my eyes where I thought there was only hate. Each of them dissolved into black flames and returned inside me.

And with them, their pain.

"""""*Aaaagh! Hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate!!*"""""""

Five people's rage recombined within me. Five girls' immoral joy, putting an immediate end to any other sentiment. One final consolation on the verge of my death.

But Alicia couldn't even allow that sweet moment to pass untainted by her venomous words.

"Now, it is time to end this," she said. "My long nightmare is finally over, and I can awake into a world of pure light."

She spread her arms and took a single step forward.

"What shall the final words of this wretched tale be, my dear ex-hero?"

Her smile was one I had seen so many times before.

"Oh, I don't know…," I replied. "It's been so long…"

The outlook was dire. The thing before me looked like a person, but it was something that transcended the very framework of our reality.

"Ever since this second world began," I said. "I've been dreaming of how I would kill you."

I knew. I had always known. The path I walked was a dangerous one, and my enemy was far mightier than any I had ever faced. She was pure malice given form.

"It's strange," I said. "I tried to give up once. I resorted to these horrible means and yet… Ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

I always knew she would come after me, an evil sneer across her lips, and try to extinguish me completely. I couldn't stop laughing.

"Oh my, have you broken at last? I suppose we can't expect much from a miserable worm."

Alicia snapped her fingers, and an enormous flower appeared behind her, pure white but wrapped in a golden glow like sunlight. Silver light began gathering at the flower's center.

"What should I do, Alicia? I've fallen so far, and it's still not enough. I can't stop laughing. People gave their lives so that I could go on, and the only thing I can do is laugh."

"Oh dear! Looks like you've finally realized how miserable and pathetic you are! Well done!"

Alicia smiled and clapped her hands in mock applause.

"Unfortunately, it's time to erase you from my sight… permanently."

With that, the flower unleashed its charged energy, a devastating laser beam that torched the air and dust.

I was in Alicia's world now.

"Ghuh…"

The laser burned a gaping hole through my stomach, disemboweling

me and causing the black flames to snuff out immediately. My eyesight blurred, the strength left me, and I collapsed onto my back, defeated.

"Tee-hee! Tee-hee-hee!! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I did it! I did it! I finally exterminated that rotten, oversize pest!"

Alicia's laughter rattled amid a world of silence.

"Oh! I'd forgotten how good it feels! I thought my dear sister was all I needed to escape my painful past, but I should have done this a long time ago! Don't you agree, my dear Lamnecia?"

"I'm not sure what happened, but if you're happy, Alicia, then I'm happy."

"Now that that's done with, we must expand this beautiful world. You may have anything your heart desires, my dear sister. Tell me, where shall we beg—"

"…Fire burns even the hovering hand."

The words fell from my lips like fire.

"…Oh dear. Have you not realized yet how utterly futile your predicament is? I would much rather not listen to the crippled buzzing of a dying fly."

The pain was unbearable. It had crossed that point a long time ago.

The black flames flared up once more, filling the hole in my stomach, substituting and reknitting my flesh and blood.

"Let my pain burn the heavens. Let my grief burn the earth."

Alicia had absorbed a goddess. A false goddess, but a goddess nonetheless. I had known from the very beginning that once she went all out, it would be over.

And so, everything that had happened…was exactly how I had planned it.

"You don't know when to give up, do you? This time, I shall scorch your entire body to ash, so that not even a speck remains.

Please take shelter inside the castle, my dear Lamnecia. Once I finish exterminating this pest, we can take a nap together."

Alicia snapped her fingers, and Lamnecia was teleported away in a flash of light, while dozens of flowers just like the first appeared in the sky.

"When we seek ever more, even past the point of no return."

It was the flames of my pain, of my anger, that fueled my powers. And the technique I wanted to unleash required far more than I could generate on my own.

So yes. Everything to this point was exactly how I had planned it.

I had planned to summon my partners in crime and watch them die in agony.

Because the condition to activate this power…

…was to be killed by the target of my hatred seven times.

Leticia. Minnalis. Shuria. Metelia. Mai.

Sixth, my death just now, and lastly, the one that began my second chance at life.

I had tasted the pain of death seven times by now. Each of them by Alicia's hand.

"Whatever trick you're concealing up your filthy sleeve, it won't be enough," she said. "Even with all the power of this earth combined, you cannot strike back at a being of heaven."

After the black flames finished regenerating my missing organs, they cloaked me in fire once more.

Alicia had no intent to leave a single part of me alive this time. Her flowers hung in the air, each brimming with far more energy than the first, waiting to be released.

"The road I came, my very being. The fire takes all and hands down its judgment."

"Disappear, you pest. Entirely, this time."

"Come now, and deliver your verdict. *Sin's Day of Fire.*"

The moment Alicia unleashed her spell, I uttered the final word of my chant. As Alicia's many lasers converged into one, the flames

surrounding my body reignited, transforming into hard, clear crystal.

When the two collided, the laser emitted a sound like shattering glass and burst alight. The fires worked their way backward to the flowers, too, engulfing them in black flames.

"Wh-what?! Why?!"

"I've been waiting for this moment for a long, long time."

"K…krgh!!"

Faster than the eye could blink, I was by Alicia's side, the tip of my blade lodged in her horrid heart.

"Finally, the time has come to complete my oath. To destroy you."

I plunged my sword again and again. Ten million times in the blink of an eye. Yet still the black flames consumed my mind, never allowing me to grow accustomed to their presence. An intoxicating joy dribbled into my brain, like droplets of acid that burned whatever they touched.

Alicia, meanwhile, looked unperturbed as she gazed down at the sword in her chest.

"Hee-hee-hee," she giggled. "I'm afraid that's impossible."

She grinned.

"Let me tell you something," she said. "Becoming a god comes with the power of resurrection. I cannot die, no matter how many dirty rats like you scratch at me with their filthy claws."

"And let me tell you something," I replied. "There's a downside to eternal life. I'll show you what living in eternal hell is like."

The battle was already over.

All the preparations were complete.

From here on out, there was only one thing to do…

"Come, Alicia! The final piece has fallen into place! Let me show you the hell *we've* been living in!!"

It was time for vengeance.

"Grh?!"

The sword lodged in Alicia's heart suddenly glowed black, and then, she exploded.

However, the blasted parts of her body turned into flower petals and re-formed, making her whole once more.

"Tee-hee-hee. Didn't I tell you? It's no use. I can re-form myself

as many times as I desire! You cannot kill a god!”

“…”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! You tried so hard, too! What a shame! But I suppose that’s all a miserable little worm is capable of!”

Alicia resumed her laughter.

“I see you were able to destroy my flowers with those black flames, but I don’t see them around anymore. Are you all done already? Talked such a big game and that’s all you can manage? Wake up, fool. You’re on your last legs, and you haven’t a drop of mana left!”

An ecstatic smile spread across her lips.

“Now, let’s try that again, with a little more power behind it this time. It may put a strain on this new world of mine, but pain is temporary, as they say…and yours shall be very brief indeed. Don’t you want to say thank-you? Ah-ha-ha-ha—”

“…You really think that?” I said, interrupting her laughter. “You really think a god can’t be killed?”

“Of course not,” she said, a little peeved at my interruption but still with a gloating look in her eye. “I am—”

“You think you’re the top of the food chain?”

“Ten million. Does your feeble brain know what this number means?”

“Yeah. It’s the number of lives you have left.”

“Grh! Q-quite right. It is the number of sentient beings my seeds have infected, and as a result the number of lives I may draw upon. All of mankind, nothing more than livestock to be—”

“So?”

“What?”

“All you’re saying is you *can* be killed. I just have to do it ten million times.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You really think that’s possible? Look at you, on the verge of death! Even your last dirty trick only managed to scratch the surface of that number! How would you even begin to accomplish such a futile task? Oh, I know! You must be so ridden with despair that all you can do is retreat into your world of fantasy, is that right? Oh, what a pathetic—*Guh!!*”

Alicia's words were suddenly cut short. To her, it must surely have come as quite a surprise, because without any word or gesture from me, a toxic purple crystal burst from her chest.

"I thought I told you already," I said, unable to hold back a grin. "The final piece has fallen into place."

I silently smiled, heralding the beginning of the end.

"Wh…whatever manner of trick you used, I told you, it won't—*Ghah!!*"

After the purple crystal fulfilled its purpose, it vanished, but while Alicia hurried to fix her wound, dozens of metal stakes suddenly appeared, filling her full of holes. When these vanished, Alicia quickly healed herself back up again, like some awful slapstick comedy sketch.

"Wh-what have you done?! Explain yourself! This is the world *I* created! You should not be able to penetrate my defenses so—*Aagh!!*"

I finally got to see Alicia bewildered, and then she was engulfed in fire this time, and her beautiful skin charred black in an instant. As I watched her turn into a lump of coal, I felt as though I was watching a highly amusing play.

"*Haah*! *Haah*…*haah*…*haah*…"

Alicia's head was the first part of her to be remade, and she immediately began panting heavily.

"You have been judged," I said, "by Sin's Day of Fire. You'll face the wrath of my partners in crime for every wound you inflicted on them."

"Your partners…in crime…?"

"Yes. Every last one…of the ten million partners I've recruited while you were making this perfect world of yours!!"

Ever since the fires of passion stirred my body once more, I had been walking, collecting. While Alicia had been spreading her seeds, populating this world with her clones, I had scoured the continent, listening to the screams of grief and hate.

My soul blade, Apostate Wroth, was based on the Holy Sword of Vengeance, and possessed upgraded versions of its effects. Using that power, I acquired the wrath of all those turned into monsters

against their will.

And now, at last, the final piece of the puzzle had fallen into place.

"Watch!" I cried. "Watch what happens when you abandon a world and leave it to die!"

I flung my arms wide, and a rift opened in the sky behind me, revealing an enormous television screen. The monitor showed an endless crowd of the princess's clones, with an empty ring at the center, where stood a single glassy-eyed Alicia opposite a second copy of myself.

I had created this other self to act as judge, jury, and executioner in the events to come. The Alicias, meanwhile, were made when Alicia implanted the World Tree seeds into the people of this land. They were the innocent, yet horribly transfigured civilians who made up all ten million of the princess's extra lives.

"You tied your life to these people!" I explained. "And now, each time one of them dies, you'll feel the same pain they feel! I'm going to take my time making sure each and every one of you meets a dark and grisly end!"

The fine line I had walked throughout the battle had finally culminated in this moment.

"Oh, well done, you sniveling worm! I suppose you want a medal for this—*Gblaaargh!!*"

The princess's words were cut messily short as she was suddenly flattened into chunks of meat. On the other side of the screen, my other self had just squashed the Alicia clone with a massive hammer.

After a few seconds, the princess's body came together and re-formed, like a video played in reverse.

"…Ghah! Gh… *Haah*…*haah*…*haah*…"

"Oh, one thing I forgot to mention is that the target of this ability cannot interfere with the judgment in any way. Until the trial is over, you won't be able to resist…or die."

"You think there is power in this land that can stand up to the might of a god?!"

"I don't just think it—I *know* it. This power writes that stipulation into the natural laws of the world. Even a god can't interfere until

my vengeance is complete."

The princess glared red-hot daggers at me.

"…I'll kill you," she said. "Yes… I was wrong. I should never have left you alone… I ought to have—*Ghah!*—crushed you like the bug you are…!"

The next death was a simple skewering of the heart. Dozens of blades stuck out of the clone like a pincushion, leaking crimson blood onto the floor.

"Ten million… You may be able to hurt me with this technique, but you can never truly harm me!"

"…"

Beaten to her knees, the princess glared at me with seething hatred.

Ah, that face. That's the face you deserve after what you've done, Alicia.

"You had better enjoy yourself while you can, maggot. Once this power wears off, I'll reduce you…and this entire continent to ash!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! See, you get it now, don't you, Alicia?! This is our final game!! A game of killing and killing until all the clones I've contracted are gone! A game which will reduce you to a crying, sniveling mess!!"

With a dramatic sweep of my arms, I snapped my fingers.

"Grh… What now…?"

Behind Alicia appeared a giant cross which expelled blazing black chains, snatching Alicia's wrists and ankles and binding her to the crucifix. Then the air behind the cross shimmered with heat, and an enormous titan of fire stepped out of the ether, gazing down upon Alicia with the watchful look of a prison guard.

"GROOOOOAGH…"

The giant possessed hollow, sunken eyes of crimson flame and a suit of armor stained red like blood. Its breath sounded like the wails of vengeful spirits trapped deep beneath the ground. Seven orbs floated above its back like balloons, each one displaying a face twisted in hate.

A demon. A demon of such hate that it was reflected in his very appearance. An obsessive fiend so imposing, it was like the

embodiment of hell itself.

"Now, sit and watch as my clone wreaks havoc upon your other selves out there! Of course, I won't be resting on my laurels, either. I think I'll summon some of them here and have a little fun myself!"

"Argh… Urgh…"

I grabbed one of the Alicia clones I'd summoned and swept her legs, causing her to fall face-first onto the ground.

"Gaff!!"

Laughing hysterically, I stomped on the head of the Alicia that lay at my feet.

"I'm going to enjoy killing each and every one of you, and I'm not going to stop until I've had my fill! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Laughing, laughing, laughing. Endless laughter filled my head, enough to make me giddy.

To kill someone ten million times.

Just saying it aloud really drove home how absurd an act it was, yet it was also a thing of sublime beauty.

"Grh… Ghah…!"

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

How many Alicias had I slain by now? I was losing track of time, but it had to have taken me at least a month. Including the one right here with the real Alicia, there were ten of me carrying out my dark task across the continent. I had created them using my ability, and I shared my senses with all of them.

Which meant…

I got to kill Alicia by submerging her scar-ridden body in a vat of sulfuric acid.

I got to kill her by tossing her into boiling magma.

I got to kill her by grinding her body to dust beneath a heavy boulder.

I got to kill her by chopping her to pieces.

I got to kill her by chaining her up and ripping off her limbs.

I got to kill her by placing her into a vacuum and waiting until she

suffocated.

I got to kill, kill…

"A…gh! Grh… Aaagh!!"

"Haa-ha-ha-hah-haah! Ahah-hah-ha-ha-hah! Ah-ha-hahh-hah!!"

Every few seconds, the Alicia up on the crucifix would relive the pain of death, suffering an identical fate before being resurrected by her divine powers.

Ten million lives.

Enough for each of my ten selves to kill one Alicia every thirty seconds for almost an entire year.

Until my judgment was complete, I was immune to restrictions of the flesh, while Alicia was bound with no hope for escape. That meant I could continue this mind-melting feast without needing to sleep and without being interrupted.

"Isn't this fun, Alicia?! All the ideas I've concocted, I don't need to pick just one! I can try each and every one! Are you having fun yet?!"

"*Haah*…*haah*… Graaagh!! Die, die, diiie!!"

The look in Alicia's eyes was that of a crazed wolf, baring its fangs. Simply looking at her filled me with such twisted pleasure, like opium injected directly into my heart.

"Ha-ha!"

I was on some kind of high; even I could tell that. My power made it so that my body was always in peak physical condition, disregarding the requirements for food, water, and sleep.

Not a day had gone by where I hadn't dreamed of this moment, and now that it was here, I was so excited I just couldn't stop myself. I could go on killing and killing forever, without a care, and it would never get old.

"I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you—*Gaaaghhh!!* I'll…I'll kill you!!"

I never thought the day would come that Alicia's vile voice would sound like music to my ears.

Even if it was merely of Alicia's making, this place was divine territory. It was not somewhere ordinary mortals could tread. Plus,

the experience of even one death was enough to shatter any normal mind. Those who could keep hold of their sanity in such circumstances were the crazy ones, while those who lost it could no longer be called human.

There was nobody here but us monsters.

"What should I do next? How about the death by insects that Minnalis cooked up?"

I summoned another Alicia and, transforming my dark flames into maggots, poured them down her throat.

"Grgh… Gagh… Can't…breathe…!!"

"Oh, can you not? I wonder if that's because the maggots have eaten away your lungs?"

I couldn't help but smile, watching her writhe around on the ground like that. I felt the hateful glare of the real Alicia, and thanked my lucky stars that her mind would never break until it was done.

With her powers sealed off until the judgment was over, there was no way Alicia could tell what this ability was really doing. Perhaps she thought that its purpose was to make her feel the same pain her dying clones felt, and that was all.

This torture was set to last for a year at this rate. Surely Alicia would figure it out before then.

And if she did, then perhaps she would realize just what it was I planned to take from her in the end.

"Khuh… Kkh…"

"Die."

"Urgeeegh!!"

The worm-eaten Alicia clone breathed its last. Its fate was reflected in the original, and a torrent of maggots flowed from Alicia's mouth, leaving only her empty skin, its contents devoured, deflated and sagging like an old plastic bag.

Then, after a few seconds in which Alicia felt all the pain of a long, drawn-out death, her body began to regenerate once more.

"It's just amazing!" I cried. "Even I'm surprised! A whole month of doing this, and it never gets boring! In fact, it's only getting more and more fun!" I summoned another Alicia and began stabbing her

with my sword, over and over and over again. “Even if I do it…the same way, it just gets better…and better…every time!”

“Agh! Ghah! Ghh! Gah! Agh! Gggghhh!”

“AH-hah-HA-HaH-Ha-Ha!!”

Thicker. Deeper. Hotter.

The slaughter never ended.

☆

Death is normally accompanied by an unbearable pain. It feels like the borders of your reality crumbling into dust. It feels like being incinerated and frostbitten at opposite ends.

If I were still the delicate young princess of the Orollea Kingdom, the pain would have broken me a long time ago.

“Hm-hm-hm! Hm-hm-hm-hm-hm!”

“Guagagaggagaagagag…”

Humming, the repulsive man before me drove burning metal rods down the throat of one of my clones. Forced to watch this horrible sight, my mind raced in search of a way out, but I could see no way of opposing the man’s strange ability.

He truly did draw his powers from the divine, as he claimed.

“Gaggh!!”

I could only watch as the man broke another one of me.

On one of the nine screens that filled the sky, I watched as another clone was force-fed poison until her skin turned purple and blotchy and she collapsed. A few seconds later, I experienced her death for myself, distilled into a single moment.

It felt like my entire body was being impaled by spikes. My guts, my bones, my flesh, my skin.

“GggaggaaGagagGAg!!”

I may have become a god, but that didn’t mean I no longer felt the sensations of the flesh. From my mouth came tortured cries, completely disconnected from the workings of my brain.

It hurt, it hurt, it hurt, it hurt.

"Gaah! *Haah…haah…haah…*"

"A-Ha-hah-Aha-haah-Ah!! Oh, that's so good! Let's see you keep suffering, Alicia!!"

The man cackled endlessly like a broken toy. I knew my pain only amused him further, but I couldn't hold back my screams.

"I'll kill you… I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill yoooou!!"

What was pain but another trial to overcome? This was nothing compared to the pain I had felt when I'd lost my dear Lamnecia.

Laugh while you can, you rotten man. You really think ten million deaths will be enough to slay a god?!

It was true that I could drain the life of one of my clones in order to restore my own. However, they were not my only source of immortality. I had selected a few specimens who caught my eye and absorbed them into myself to act as the basis for a new race of humans who would support Lamnecia and me in the new world. So it didn't matter how many of these clones he'd contracted; in the end, I would have the last laugh.

At the current rate of progress, I would have to put up with this bothersome farce for a whole year in total.

I knew that maggot had not lied, as no lie can deceive a god. Gods knew many things that ordinary mortals did not. And so, I knew that once this detestable trial was over and all my clones exhausted, his power over me would end.

When that happens, I will call upon all my divine might to put him through a living hell!!

Creating this world had blinded me to the limitations of my divine powers. That hubris of mine was to blame for my current predicament. If I had summoned all my strength from the beginning, instead of playing games, this farce would already be over.

I'm sure he thinks that my mind will break before this torture is through. Ah-ha-ha-ha! But I'll endure it… Oh, I'll endure it…

I glanced at the royal castle in the distance. There, Lamnecia was waiting for me to return.

I had a goal. All I needed to do was endure. Compared to my days lost in despair, not knowing what I should do, ready to give up

and hurl myself from the parapets…my current situation was a blessing.

Once I get out of here, I'll kill that man and secure a peaceful future for Lamnecia and me!

"AAagaGAgagAGGAgagaGaGa!"

Blood, hate, and humiliation swirled in my veins as I bided my time, waiting for the moment to strike.



Another three months passed, and eight months remained.

"Aggaaaaaggaaaaagaaa!!"

"Ha-ha! Die, die! Let me hear your screams, you miserable woman!!"

There was little to no change in Alicia's condition. Her screams could be heard all across the continent. Killing 24/7 made the days blur together, but while I could no longer track the passage of time, I never forgot how many of her I had killed.

The end of this feast was a long way off yet.

Another three months passed, and five months remained.

"I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you…"

"Yes, yes, that's the spirit, Alicia! Oh, I want to take it gently, but when I think about how we're already past halfway, I just get so angry that I can't help myself!"

Alicia seemed to have grown used to constantly dying every three seconds, because her screams were quieter now. However, that only left her with more time to foster the hatred in her heart, and there was nothing that brought me more joy than getting to tread on a person who looked at me like that.

Another three months passed, and two months remained.

"Hgggggghhh!! You swine!! Agaggggh!!"

"Hm-hm-hm! Heh-heh-heh! Oh, music to my ears once more, Princess!"

It was only natural that dying so many times would dull the

senses, but I couldn't have that dampening my long-awaited revenge. That was why I cast Sense Up and Pain Up enchantments on the princess.

Her screams became sweet melodies once more, and soon enough, the end of my long road of vengeance came into view.

The final two months came and went, leaving…

"Well, here we are, Princess."

"*Haah*…*haah*…*haah*…*haah*…"

The screams that had become my constant accompaniment these past twelve months were finally silent.

"It's finally over. Finally over."

I thought back over all the things I'd done on my long journey.

"Here we are at last. The last one of your wretched clones."

The monitors that showed what was happening all across the continent were gone. The last of Alicia's glassy-eyed simulacra stood in front of me. I slowly conjured Apostate Wroth, in its greatsword form. Its black flames burned hot enough to melt the rocks in hell.

I plunged the blade into the heart of the doll, which showed so little reaction it may as well have not been alive.

"Agh… Grh…"

The flames spread from the wound, crackling as they burned Alicia's flesh to coal from the inside out.

"During this second life of mine, I lived only for revenge," I explained. "Any righteous words about the futility of my actions only made me want to puke. You understand, don't you? How could I forgive and forget after what happened to me?"

"It burns… It buuurns!"

Ever so slightly, the fires picked up, growing in intensity.

"So suffer, Alicia. Why are you smiling? Die. Why are you living? You think I'll let you'll get away with it? Even when I wavered. Even when I was about to give up…I never forgot what you did to me."

"It burns! Aaagh! It burns!!"

The flames built and built until Alicia was a burning pyre.

"Now burn to ash."

"…h…ah…h…"

Her skin cooked, her flesh black, Alicia's final fake crumbled into

dust.

Then, a few seconds later, the Alicia on the cross burst alight.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaghh!!"

An enormous gash appeared in her chest, and black flames spread from it, covering every inch of her in fire. After the screams died down at last, Alicia's body re-formed on the cross.

"…Heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha! I did it! I survived! I survived it all!!"

Her voice was quiet at first, but soon rang out across our arena. However…

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha…ha…"

As soon as she realized she was still stuck to the cross, her laughter died down.

"Did you trick me? Trick a god? No, that's not possible… But how?"

She was confused, just as I expected she would be.

"I'm sorry you don't seem to understand," I answered, "but I never lied. I mean, you can't lie to a god, can you? No…I'm afraid the truth is…we're not finished yet."

I'd had my fill torturing Alicia physically. It was long and enjoyable, but I was satisfied. It was time to move on to the next stage. To kill her mentally. And it was time to show her just what I'd prepared in order to do that.

"Out of all my contractees," I explained, "your clones have been exhausted."

Come on, Alicia. Did you really think I'd be happy just torturing you to death?

"…There's only one more person left."

"…No…"

I put up a barrier around myself and summoned my final assistant.

"Lamnecia!!"

It was Alicia's favorite doll, her one and only elder sister.

Then, there was a metallic crack, as the fiery chains binding Alicia to the cross burst open. I felt it would make Alicia's reaction all the sweeter if she was allowed to move freely.

"Lamnecia!! You rotten worm! Unhand her!! Unhand her right

now!!”

Alicia stumbled over her own feet, crawling on her front toward the barrier. It was exactly the reaction I’d hoped for.

“Hmm? Where am I…?” Lamnecia asked.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! As I’m sure you’ve guessed, she’s my final contractee! Or, to be precise, five of the human souls you stuffed her with are!!”

To bring her dead sister back, Alicia had used a thousand human souls. My contract was made with just a small fraction of them. That was all I could get away with behind Alicia’s back, but it was more than enough for my needs.

“When did you—*Agh!!*”

“The moment I activated this ability,” I replied. “When I impaled you with my sword, I created a path through you.”

That was the final thing I needed. This doll, into which Alicia had poured so many of her hopes and dreams.

“You maggot!!”

Alicia pounded her clenched fists against the barrier, while glaring at me with more venom in her eyes than I had ever seen before.

My spine tingled with excitement.

“So have you noticed it yet?” I asked.

“Shut up! Just let her go!!”

It looked like she didn’t. Ignorant to the very end. In that case, I needed to spoil the surprise. I couldn’t keep this to myself any longer.

I wanted to see how she looked, overcome with fear.

“I’ve been saying it from the very beginning,” I explained. “This ability of mine will pass judgment on you. That means it will decide your crimes and punish you, appeasing the hate of all those you’ve wronged. Look behind you—don’t you see them? The people who hate you. Souls driven to madness by your mere existence!”

“What?!”

I pointed over Alicia’s shoulder, at the dark, fiery titan that been watching Alicia’s deaths over the past year.

“Eek!”

It stood there as imposingly as ever, not having ever moved a

muscle since the trial began.

But it looked different now.

All across the titan's body, armor, and the seven spheres at its back…were faces. The haunted visages of vengeful ghosts, too many to count. Ten million souls, all merged with the demonic giant.

"Agh… Gh…!"

"Do you get it yet? Back there are the souls of my partners in crime: every last person whose life you stole to revive yourself!"

Souls ruled by instinct and fear, boiled and concentrated into a living curse.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now, let's put them to rest! Let's give them what they want! We'll take away everything you love, Alicia! Destroy it all and plunge you into despair!!"

I raised my greatsword high, ready to dish out my final judgment.

"No! Stopppp!!"

"And there, you'll die."

"Guph…!!"

I brought my sword down upon Alicia's favorite doll, who burst like a wet balloon, just like Alicia's clones when I'd killed them with my hammer. The only difference was that this time, the doll contained many lives, not just one.

"Agh…It huuurts… Alicia, it huuurts…"

It was a truly grotesque sight, watching her moan as her body stitched itself back together. She was only a doll, but I guessed she could revive herself another ten times or so.

"You…! You, you…stinking maggot!! I won't allow you to get away with this!!"

"Oh, but you will, Alicia! You won't have a choice! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

I laughed and laughed and laughed. While the laughter eclipsed my words, the newly re-formed doll began to burn.

"Gaaaaaaaagh!!"

"You will be judged! You'll have to bear the very same burden you made all of us bear! And you'll be happy with it! You'll beg for it!"

"What do you—*Aghhh!*"

As before, my ability let Alicia relive the same death her creation

experienced.

"Once I use the power of my soul blade, you'll have a…shall we say, change of heart?"

"Ur…gh… Wh…what…?"

Now that she was no longer bound to the cross, Alicia had to support her own weight, and the burden of death made her fall to her knees. All I saw in her glare was confusion. She still failed to comprehend the meaning behind my words.

"Are you stupid or something?" I jeered. "I mean, your feelings are going to be mine to command."

I slowed my speech, like I was talking to a particularly thickheaded child.

"The things you like will become things you dislike. The things you admire will become things you despise. And the things you love…"

I was laughing, laughing, laughing.

Come on, Alicia. Do you see it yet?

"…will become things you hate. Yes, even her."

The spindly hand of death, coming to drag you into the grave.

"Wh-what?! That's impossible!"

"Now, it's time for my last contractees to pass their judgment. Count down with me, Alicia! Three!"

"It huuuuurts… Aghhh… Gah!!"

I sliced the doll's body to ribbons once more.

"S-stop it… Stop it!!"

"Two!!"

Each time the doll was resurrected, I destroyed her again. Each time, the count went down by one. Each time, Alicia's face turned a little paler. What a lovely face it was.

"No… No… No, no, no, no, no, no, no!!"

"One!!"

I was down to the last. I made sure to take it slow.

"Please… I'm sorry… I'm sorry. Please, find it in your heart to forgive… I don't want this!"

"Nope! Sorry!! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Gazing upon the wonderful sight of Alicia's tear-stricken face, I swung my sword down one final time.

"Gph…"

Cleft straight down the middle from the force of my strike, the two halves of Alicia's doll fell to each side.

This time, however, the death didn't flow back to Alicia. Instead…

":okert$WOWEo;fw;EftjWeFTGj:G;ekrgAT:l:kFEKL:r"

From behind her came a growl as if from the depths of hell itself. Like a raw curse, impossible to put into words, delivered as if by multiple voices, mingled together.

Then like bubbles atop a pool of boiling mud, the vengeful specters freed themselves from the giant's fiery surface and descended upon Alicia.

"Noooooooooooooooo!!"

After the crowd swarmed her, all I could hear was a relentless chewing. But the souls lacked bodies, and so not a single wound appeared on Alicia's skin. Nonetheless, those spirits were taking something from her.

"Agh… Ah… Stop… Stop, stop, stop!! I'm disappearing! That's… me! That's meeee!"

Alicia immediately began floundering, flailing her arms and legs wildly as if she was drowning, but it did nothing to abate the flames of hate.

"Give it…back! Oh, why did I—No!—Why did I kill you?—No! That's fine!—No it's not!"

"Heh-heh-heh-heh! Everything about you is going to be rewritten! Everything you did, everything you worked so hard to accomplish, all of it will be reversed in your mind! There won't be a single event left in your sorry life that you won't hate! Now, fall! Fall! Fall so deeply into hell that you can't even breathe and drown there!!"

"NOOOOOOOOOO!! My head… It's breaking…!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

I couldn't stop laughing amid the music of Alicia's screams.

"Aah… Agh… Gh… Ah…"

After what could have been a second or an eternity, the souls flooding into Alicia like a raging torrent finally calmed down. The

princess was enveloped in the hate of those vengeful spirits, still crying out in anger, unable to be contained.

"Now, Alicia," I said. "It's time to pay."

I let down my barrier and turned to Alicia, whose senses of joy, hate, and morality I had utterly rewritten…and tossed before her the doll she had sacrificed the entire world to be with.

"This is everything you dreamed of—" I said.

"Gh… Agh… Ali…cia…?"

The doll began crawling toward Alicia, crying out in pain.

The princess, however, looked like she was about to snap. Her eyes quivered and went out of focus, and she shivered violently, taking short, rapid breaths, as if desperately trying to hold herself back.

"—I want to see you destroy it with your own hands."

It was all over in a moment.

"WRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!"

"Kh…?!"

Alicia unleashed a bestial howl and plunged her hands into Lamnecia's chest.

"Why…Alicia…? It hurts…"

"DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE!!"

She couldn't even tell who she was killing anymore.

"Aghhh! Gaaagh! Why do you live?! Aaaaaaaahhh!"

"Agh… Aghhh! Ughhh!!"

Alicia was unthinking, consumed by hate. All she could think about was reducing the being before her to a lifeless mess, using only the most primal means available to her.

With her fists, she crushed her, tore at her flesh, bit with her teeth.

"Ah-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's right! That's it! Oh, finally! You're finally down here with me, Alicia! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

I could feel something inside me filling up, filling to burst, until whatever it was seeped through the cracks and overflowed, but there was so much of it I didn't care how much was spilled.

It had been so, so long, but I had finally reached the end.

I had finally dragged them all down, to where I was.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-h-aha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

"What have I done…? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!!"

"Hga…h… Hg…h…"

My laughter wouldn't stop. No matter how long I went on laughing, I could never stop.

My cackling, Alicia's screams, and the feeble cries of a doll on the borderline, endlessly dying and reviving, finding no solace in either life or death.

The ending, by contrast, was rather unsatisfying. Alicia's doll simply turned to dust, refusing to reanimate anymore.

"*Haah*…*haah*…*haah*…huh…? Why did I do that? Hmm? Hmm? It just doesn't make sense!"

"Oh dear!" I jeered. "You broke her! You ruined everything you dreamed of! You tore her up so much there's nothing left! Don't you remember how many people you killed so you could have her? And now you broke her yourself! Do you feel better now? Does it feel good being reduced to a being of pure hate?"

"Something's wrong. What's wrong?! What did I do? Was it wrong? What's not wrong? Hmm? Hmm?"

"What's wrong, you ask? Isn't that obvious? Everything you touched is wrong, including us. So we made you wrong to match!"

So much had been taken.

So much had been lost.

All that was left…was two people who were completely, utterly wrong.

"What's wrong…is this world," I said.

I drew my sword and approached the broken remains of the princess, Alicia.

"Give it back! Give it back! That was important to me! That was mine! It was mine, mine, miiiiiine!! I don't want to hate! I'm a nice girl! I'm not a bad girl! No, I'm not! Aaaaahhh!"

"This is the end," I said. "With this sword, I'll burn your soul to ash, until there's nothing left to revive."

Her fair face twisted in madness, Alicia clawed at her own skin with one hand and reached her other out toward me.

"Come to think of it…this is how our journey began."

I thought back to how Alicia had looked on that day.

"Thank you for coming, Hero."

The circumstances, the surroundings, the details, our positions, and everything else were different, but that one point stuck in my mind.

Those five words were where everything had started to come undone.

"This is the end," I said. "Of my miraculous do-over. The end of my road. The end of my vengeance."

And so, there was one expression I wanted to end it with. Perhaps the only way it ever could end.

"No. No, no, no! No, please… I… I never did anything wrong—No, you're wrong! I have to suffer and die! I only ever made mistakes, I need to die—No! I… Why?! Why do I…? WHYYYYYYYY?!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? I'm going to grind you into mincemeat. I'm going to drag you so far down that you never see a single ray of sunlight. Your whole life will fall to ruins, and then you'll die."

And so…

At the end of my long path…

I wore the biggest grin I'd ever worn.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

"…Aah, vengeance is sweet."

I had never tasted anything so sweet, so bitter, so hot, and yet so cold as the feeling of my blade piercing her flesh.

It completed me.





“So, you done yet?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “It’s finished. It’s over.”

After Alicia’s fabricated world faded away, I stood in the craters of a barren land, defaced by battle.

The only ones there were me and the woman who had been watching my year-long revenge from start to finish, Towako Kuroi. Alicia’s body lay on the floor like a doll, an empty husk devoid of life.

“Nice work. With a divine vessel like this, we should be able to restore Luna’s power. I’ve got Leone’s crew working to help her take back this world for herself, too.”

“Back to work, eh? You could at least savor the moment with me a little.”

“You’ve had a whole year to do that. Why don’t you spare a thought for the lady who’s had to sit here all that time?”

“…Touché.”

“But I can’t do anything without you. You’re the one with the key. Come on, there’s no time to waste. I helped you with your vengeance; now it’s time for you to hold up your end of the bargain.”

“Yeah, I get it. Besides, you’re not the only one who wants to see this next one dead.”

“Right, then hold still. Let me have that key you’ve been hiding all this time.”

I turned to Towako and nodded.

“Go ahead,” I said. “After all, every story needs an epilogue.”



Meanwhile…

“Ah, what a good story.”

In a place so utterly white, as though nothing other than white was permitted to exist, I let out a sigh, a mix of bittersweet sadness as if reaching the end of the last volume of a beloved series.

“Now,” I said, “this world will end. It is a rather clichéd end, but I

must take back the authorization rights to this realm, drain it of its resources, and leave in search of the next one."

The hero had taken a year to write this world's ending. In doing so, he'd emptied the position of this world's god, leaving only their power behind. To be honest, I thought a year was overdoing it somewhat, but I'd allowed him to indulge as a sign of my gratitude for bringing this long game to a much-awaited conclusion.

"Now, then."

I stood up to close the cover on this tale.

The boy had finished his tale of revenge, it seemed, and so I went to manifest in the vicinity of the key I'd placed in him. However…

"Hmm? Hmmm?"

As soon as I reached for the door to the mortal realm, my hand froze.

Cracks were beginning to appear in my realm.

Who could possibly intrude into heaven's domain like this?

"Who's there?!" I cried, but I received my answer sooner than I ever could have expected, for before I could react, my visitor manifested, and a hand reached for me.

"Grh?!"

"We meet at last," they said. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long, long time."

Then, the barrier between our realms shattered, and the one I had just been observing appeared before me.

"It's you… The hero…"

"Allow us to introduce ourselves," he said. "I am Towako Kuroi, and this is…" "Kaito Ukei."

The person with their fingers tightening around my neck was the man who had only just completed his vengeance, the final hero.

However, two voices issued from his lips. Two different people occupying the same skin.

"Sorry about this shoddy meeting," "I used Greed's power to fuse us both together."

""Let's get on with this and finish what we came for, Goddess of Earth.""

“Grh?! What’s…?”

Suddenly, my body began crystallizing.

“Nice, looks like this technique works on her just fine.” “Of course it does. I devised it precisely to be effective against divine targets. There’s nothing she can do to prevent it.”

The spell was so meticulous, so precise, that it was like a work of god. Perhaps if I had known to anticipate it, I could have stopped it, but by now it was too late. All I could understand was that it was a sealing spell of some sort.

“We’re going to kill you,” the girl said. “We’re going to steal your power and turn it all back into mana.”

“You’re going to…what?!”

“We’re going to take you apart, bit by bit, no matter how many years it takes. We’re going to erase your existence and use it to revitalize this world you brought to ruin.”

“Hee-hee! Hee-hee! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Very well! Go ahead! Let us commence the most exciting game of all! Well? Will you be able to handle it? There’s a lot of power in a god, you know!”

After hearing their explanation of what they were planning, I understood the technique they had used a little bit more. It was designed to siphon power out of me and restore it to the surrounding world.

“Do you think this spell will contain me?”

I was surprised to see that the spell could even affect me, secluded in my realm as I was. It was truly a work of art.

“It will,” the boy replied. “After all, we’re not alone.”

Alongside him stood the souls of former heroes, from the first to the last, every one of them transformed into sin. They were joined by all the souls the hero had collected through many months and years.

“Hee-hee-hee. It won’t only take a year this time, you know. We’ll be stuck here for decades, centuries, or even millennia!”

“That’s fine,” the boy answered. “We can go for eternity if you want, because I’m an avenger.”

“I see. Then let the game commence! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

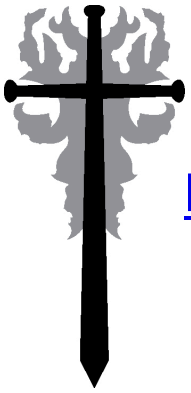
I continued laughing until the last of me was converted to crystal.

Then, I crossed the rift and began hurtling toward the ground.

The long, long story finally came to a close.

A story of many endings, with no winner.

At last, the final ending had come.



EPILOGUE

Legends say that over four thousand years ago, a monster called the Arbor Void lay waste to civilization. With over nine-tenths of the world in ruins, it was the Sword King, Nonorick Adelheid, and his advisor, Leone Bohrt, who together put down roots and founded the Holy Kingdom of Heidelchia.

The kingdom possessed a few tracts of arable land, so while it was nothing special, it managed to maintain peace with its neighbors for many years.

When I was born, I became the second in line to the throne of Heidelchia. It was expected that my elder brother would inherit the throne, and so from the age of five, I was trained to assist him.

My father, a solemn and gentle king. My mother, a kind and calm queen. A kind and diligent crown prince, my cheerful and slightly boyish elder sister, and most recently, my younger sister, the latest to be born.

I had heard that in other nations, quarrels and strife between children of the royal family were common, but the people of this land were all carefree and accepting folk, so nothing of that sort ever happened here.

"Peekaboo! Peekaboo!"

"Gaa! Waa!"

I played with the baby, and she stared at me with her big, round

eyes.

"…*Sigh*. What business did you call me here for, my prince?"

The old man was an eccentric researcher by the name of Mordott. He used to serve as a mage of the royal court, before his retirement left him living at the castle in a purely advisory role. In his free time, he liked to study ancient history, learning what the world was like before the Arbor Void.

Normally, he would be exploring the castle library with his head in a book like always, but today I had summoned him here.

"Watch, Mordott. I play peekaboo with the baby, but it barely reacts anymore."

"Well, of course, sire. Even a baby will cease to be surprised if one plays the same game with it every single day."

"Is there nothing in your bag of tricks that could entertain it?"

"For child-rearing, you should ask the castle maids, not a withered old prune like me."

"I did, but none of their ideas worked. I figured I'd turn to you next, since you seem to have nothing better to do."

"I have my research to be getting on with, thank you very much. Speaking of which, aren't you normally with your tutor around this time? You'd better not be skipping class again."

"Perish the thought. I simply finished early and wanted to see my new baby sister, that's all."

As I was explaining my situation, the clock caught my eye.

"Oh dear," I exclaimed. "I'm late for my meeting with Father!"

The king had requested to speak with all members of the family in his chamber.

"How did I manage to waste so much time listening to an old man complain?"

"Just get going already, sire."

Mordott heaved a sigh and shooed me out of the room. I still had questions, but I needed to hurry if I was to make it to Father's meeting on time. As I made my way through the castle, I fell into thought.

I wonder what Father wants? He doesn't usually speak to us this late in the day.

Passing by the window, I saw the sky grow red above the town. I always liked the color red, and I often watched the setting sun, but it wasn't only the red of the sun that pleased me. I also liked the red of the fires in the hearth that allowed people to go about their business, and the scarlet of the sweetest fruits, and the crimson of my father's cape.

"Phew, I made it. Better make sure my clothes are tidy."

At that time, I thought those happy days would go on forever. I could never have imagined what awaited me on the other side of that door.

"Sorry I'm late…Father…?"

I never thought the day would come where I would learn to despise the color red.

"Wh…what…happened? Father…"

As the door swung open, a terrible sight met my eyes.

"Mother…"

The walls were painted in a red I had never seen before.

"Brother…"

The air was thick with a clammy heat and the smell of rust.

"Sister…"

The moment I saw it, I could take it no longer.

There was not a single living, breathing thing in that room. I was greeted with severed heads of my family, surrounded by their broken, mangled body parts.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaghhh!"

What is this? What is this? What is this?

My eyes betrayed me. My world crumbled. I heard a voice as if from far away.

"Curses, we were too late! Troops, the prince has gone mad! Seize him!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the minister entering the room with a contingent of soldiers.

This is just a bad dream… It has to be… It can't be real…

My world went dull, but time marched on. By the time I regained my senses, I was in the castle dungeon.

I learned that I was to be executed the next day for viciously murdering my entire family, save my baby sister. It didn't feel real. Try as I might, I couldn't bring myself to feel anything about it.

All my mind could manage was to show me that scene painted in red, again and again and again and again.

"Why…? Why…?"

I kept repeating to myself it was only a bad dream. A nightmare. But somewhere deep down, I knew that wasn't true.

So my mind went numb. I stopped thinking. Instead, I only asked myself the same meaningless question over and over again.

Then, I heard the clink of my jail cell opening.

"Sire, there is no time to despair."

"…Mordott?"

My eyes were hazy, but I could somehow make out the form of the old castle researcher.

"I managed to distract the guards, but it won't fool them for long. Stand up, sire. I'll explain on the way."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me with him.

"We'll head to my study," he told me. "I've created a means of bypassing the kingdom's teleportation restrictions. This should take you far beyond their reach."

Mordott pushed a teleportation crystal into my hand.

"Mordott…," I said. "Father, Mother, Brother, Sister…"

"…They're dead, I'm afraid. Murdered in cold blood."

So it wasn't a dream…

The reality hit me like a sack of bricks. Tears welled up in my eyes, blurring my vision.

"It's hard to accept, I know, but you must. I knew the minister was not to be trusted, but I never thought he'd do anything so rash… Grh! He's found us!"

Just as the familiar door of Mordott's study came into view, a figure stepped from the shadows. It was the minister himself, the man who had ordered my arrest.

"My dear Mordott," he said. "I know you must be getting senile in

your old age, but that hardly excuses the freeing of a treasonous prince!”

“Hmph. A fine thing for a scheming backstabber to say. Your plotting is as artless as it is wicked. You seek to frame the prince for your crimes and raise the princess to be your witless puppet!”

“The…minister? He killed them…?”

Mordott’s accusation hammered home a truth I had been trying my hardest to deny.

“Heh-heh-heh. History will praise us for our deeds tonight. The kingdom will never grow with that foolish family on the throne!”

“Grow?! You mean to take the lands of other nations and drive our country into war! If history has anything to say about you, it will be to rightly denounce you for your short-sighted greed!”

“Heh. Greed? You think I’m doing this for greed? You hardheaded old dog! You don’t understand! You could never understand!”

All of a sudden, the minister threw himself back, his mad eyes loosely directed at the heavens above.

“You don’t get it you don’t get it you don’t get it in the slightest!! This is the will of god! My holy mission! I must put this world on the right path! It is my duty! My destinyyyyy!! Do you understand now, you doddering old fool?!”

“Hrh!”

I flinched as his crazed eyes fell on me.

“What nonsense,” said Mordott. “You’ve gone mad!”

“Aah… Urgh… *Haah*… I suppose you just don’t get it.”

In an instant, the minister once more stood upright, his prior madness nowhere to be seen. He was again the wise, trustworthy aide I had grown to know. However, his calm, measured tone was made all the more unsettling by the knowledge of what I had just seen.

“You leave me with no choice. The prince must not escape. I will have to settle things here and now!”

Without even chanting, the minister created a magical flame.

“Grh!!”

The flame flickered gently and emitted a bright white light. However, this light was not due to the flame’s temperature. It was a

so-called "sacred flame," a fire whose only purpose was to purify. Looking into it brought only anxiety and dread, yet I couldn't tear my eyes away.

"Behold! The flame of god!! The very manifestation of the powers granted to me! A fire that will bring purity to the entire world! Oh my god, thank you, thank you!!"

I was so frightened, I could barely follow, but Mordott stepped in between me and the laughing minister.

"Don't get cocky, youngster!" he said. "You'll need more than that to take me on!"

Then Mordott summoned a flame of his own; a huge, azure fire. Both combatants raised their staffs at each other, and the two fireballs collided.

The minister's spell was only about half the size of Mordott's, but after battling for a moment, Mordott's spell vanished as if being eaten up, and the minister's fireball continued on its course.

"Nrh!"

"Mordott!!"

The interaction didn't seem to have slowed the minister's spell at all, leaving the elderly Mordott with little time to evade. The fireball struck him clean in the shoulder. His staff clattered to the floor, and the old mage fell to his knees.

"Looks like your age has gotten the better of you!" the minister jeered. "This is the end. Watch on, my god—bear witness!"

While I was immobilized from panic, the minister turned to me and fired another spell.

Is this…it? Is this where I die…?

As I watched the oncoming spell and the sheer amount of scorn behind it, I could feel nothing but despair. I wanted to move, but all my brain could do was keep hammering home that I was about to meet my maker.

"Sire!!"

At that moment, an impact sent me flying to the side. In slow motion, I turned to see Mordott's face. I read his lips, saying, "*You must live,"* and the next moment he was immolated by the flames.

"Grh!!"

“Hmm? Is that a teleportation stone in your hand, boy? Don’t think you’ll get the chance to use it!!”

I had no time to mourn the old wizard’s fate. After the minister noticed what I was holding, he launched another fireball at me.

“…T-teleport!”

The fire impacted my arm just as the magic activated. The last thing I saw was the furious face of the minister who had betrayed me and my family.

“Ghah!”

When I emerged, the dizziness of teleportation was far outmatched by the inconceivable pain I felt in my left arm. Even now, the white flames continued to burn away at my flesh.

“Gaaaaaagh!!”

Pain, pain, pain.

The flames died down, but they wouldn’t go away. From my wrist, they moved up to my elbow, then to my shoulder, claiming more and more of my arm for the fire.

“Argh!! Curses! Curses!”

Why?! Why did this happen to me?!

Two forces dominated my mind: cruel pain and a burning anger.

“Curses!! You’ll pay for this! You’ll pay!!”

My father, my mother, my brother, my sister!

He’d killed them all, and I had done nothing!

I’d fled and left my baby sister in his clutches!

I was so cowardly, I couldn’t even spit in his face!

I’d lost everything!

How could I let him get away with this? How could I let him live?

“I’ll get you… I’ll get you, I’ll get you!! I’LL KILL YOU!!”

“Aah, how long have I waited to hear those words?”

“Who’s there?!”

The very air seemed to reverberate with his voice. I snapped out of my rage and looked around.

It appeared I had teleported to some strange ruin. I was in a

room with an ancient shrine, except that upon the altar of worship, where I might expect to see a stone idol, there was instead a large crystal that shone in the seven colors of the rainbow. This crystal was the only source of light in the gloom.

"Inside it…is that…a person?"

I gazed at its softly glowing surface and made out the face of a man trapped within.

"I thought I sensed something I didn't like. Is this the sacred flame? That's quite the punishment for an ordinary person to receive."

Punishment? This flame is a punishment?

If this is a punishment, then what was my crime?

And was it a crime heinous enough to warrant such agony?

…Was this a just punishment for what I'd done?

"Heh-heh. Ah-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You must be joking!!"

No! There was no crime that justified what he did! No crime at all!

"If this is a punishment from god," I said, "then that god needs to die as well."

I never knew that a person could be so consumed by hatred that they forgot all pain. But the fire consuming my arm paled in comparison to the one devouring my heart.

"I'm more interested in knowing why I sense someone I should have killed coming from that arm of yours… But I suppose that can wait."

"Grh?!"

I watched as the crystal emitted a black light. The white flames on my arm turned black as night, and the pain vanished.

"Did…you do this?"

"Let me tell you up front. This path is a path of thorns."

The voice did not deign to answer my query.

"One day, your pain and anger may fade away on their own. You could forget about it all and live a happy, peaceful life."

One day? Preposterous. When could such a day possibly come?

"If you choose vengeance, your path can only terminate in the

pits of hell or a sea of blood."

The pits of hell or a sea of blood? I would end up the same if I did nothing at all.

"There is no rest for the wicked. If you accept this, then make a contract with me, and I shall help you along your path."

"Granting wishes and offering contracts? Why, you sound like a demon."

"Heh-heh-heh. You might be right. So, how about it?"

"Very well, demon. I accept your offer. Take my soul if that is what you ask. As long as you give me vengeance, that's the only thing that matters. I'm a dead man either way."

To live on powerlessly in defeat, how would that be that any different from death?

If that was the alternative, then I would part with anything to avoid it.

I could go on living for only one purpose now.

"I don't know what you are, fiend, nor do I care! I will sign any contract in my own blood! Give me power! Power to kill that treacherous minister! Power to avenge my fallen kin! Power to strike back at the injustice that commands this world!"

As I spoke, the crystal began to crack. The pain in my arm was completely gone by now.

"Give me the power to take reveeeeeenge!!"

As soon as I said those words, the crystal shattered, and the man inside began laughing madly.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! No matter where or when I go, there's always vengeance to be done! Looks like it's following me into my third life as well!!"

The man flipped up his palm, and from it appeared a black flame that twisted into the form of a short sword.

"Come, let us walk once more," the man said. "Let us walk the path of vengeance, trodden only by fools, and see what lies beyond."

And as the man spoke,

he grinned a devious smile,

…as though laughing at the world and everything in it.

To Be Continued?





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