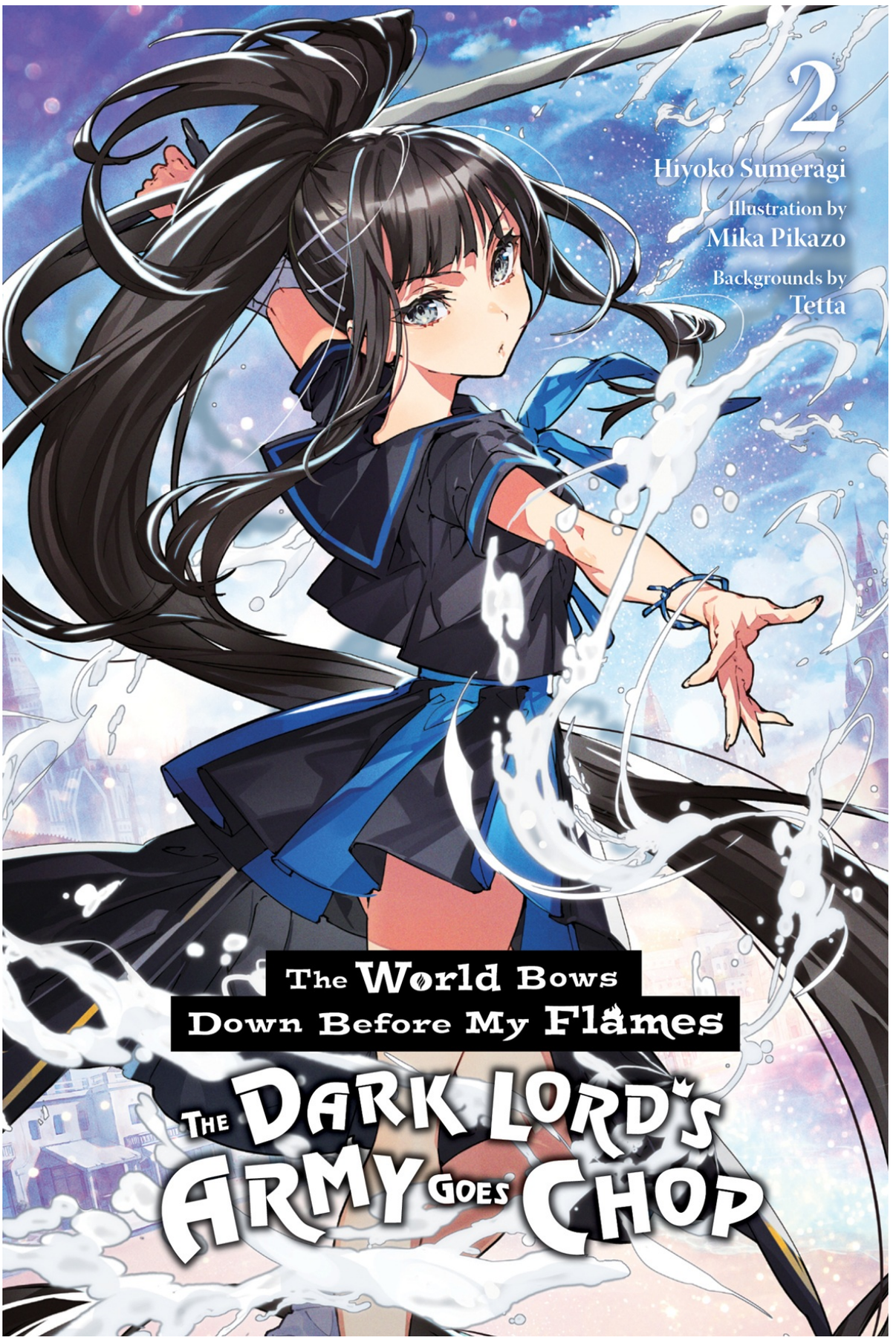
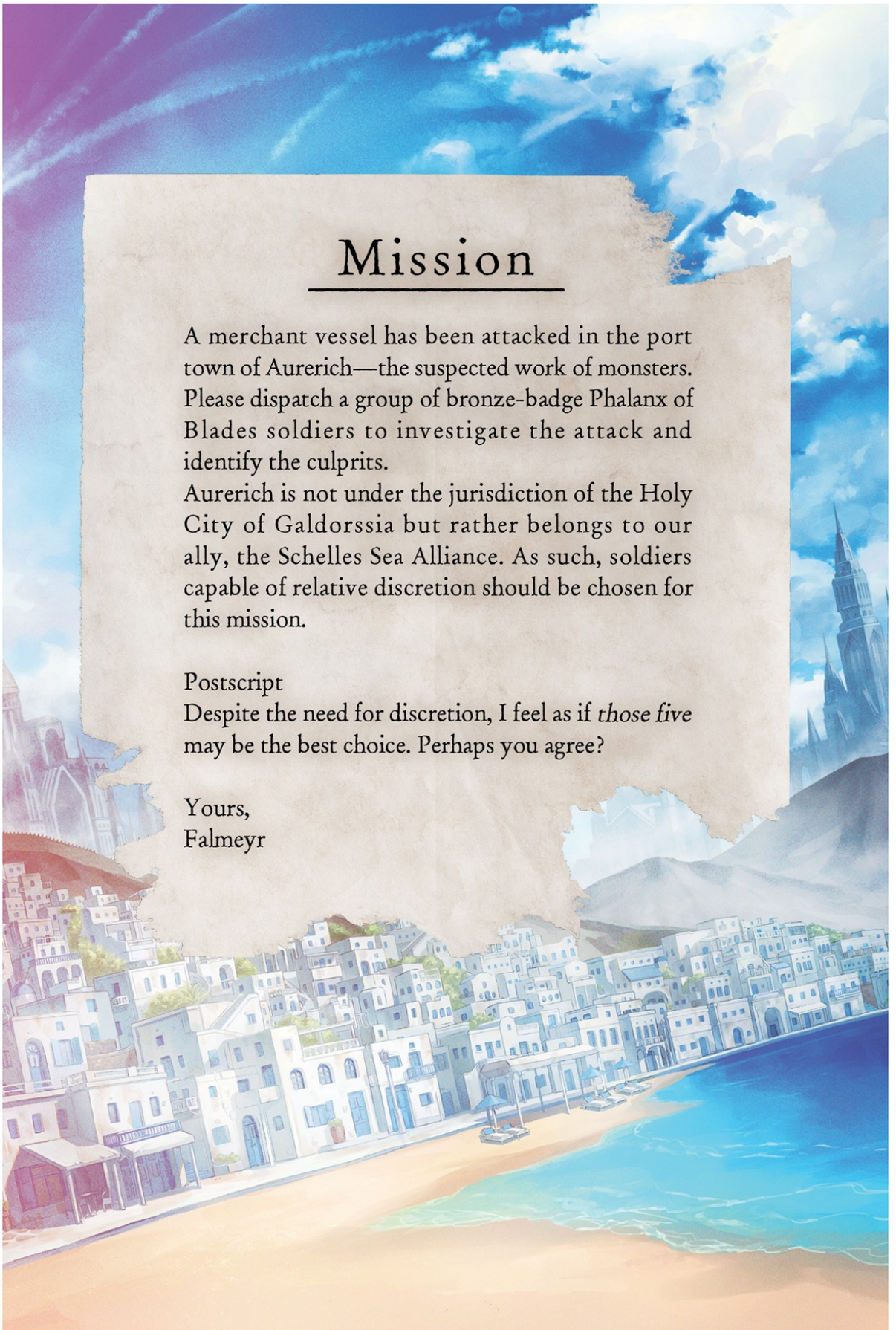

2
Hiyoko Sumeragi
Illustration by
Mika Pikazo
Backgrounds by
Tetta
The World Bows Down Before My Flames
The Dark Lord's Army Goes Chop


2
Hiyoko Sumeragi
Illustration by
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Backgrounds by
Tetta
The World Bows Down Before My Flames
THE DARK LORD'S ARMY GOES CHOP


Homura


Proto



Mission

A merchant vessel has been attacked in the port town of Aurerich—the suspected work of monsters. Please dispatch a group of bronze-badge Phalanx of Blades soldiers to investigate the attack and identify the culprits.

Aurerich is not under the jurisdiction of the Holy City of Galdorssia but rather belongs to our ally, the Schelles Sea Alliance. As such, soldiers capable of relative discretion should be chosen for this mission.

Postscript
Despite the need for discretion, I feel as if *those five* may be the best choice. Perhaps you agree?

Yours,
Falmeyr



JIN

The Assassin

The World Bows Down Before My Flames

The Dark Lord's Army Goes Chop

2

Hiyoko Sumeragi

Illustration by
Mika Pikazo

Backgrounds by
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2

Hiyoko Sumeragi

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WAGA HOMURA NI HIREFUSE SEKAI Vol. 2 MAO GUN, BUTTAGITTEMITA

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Afterword
Yen Newsletter


Incredible Girls
Introducing the Insanity!
Proto
The mechanical life-form. Proto was created in outer space but then refashioned as a robot girl by Japanese engineers. She may be the product of advanced technologies, far beyond anything found on Earth, but she'd still rather solve problems with her fists. She's kind of a brat.
Homura
The pyrokineticist. Homura possesses supernatural abilities that allow her to create fire from her body. She prides herself on being the normal one of the group, but what fiery desires does she harbor within her own soul...?
Psycho
The mad scientist. Psycho loves two things, human experimentation and B movies, and is determined to keep making her grotesque creations even in this new world. She may be smart, but she prefers to use those smarts to toy with others.
Jin
The assassin. Jin comes from a long line of assassins who lurk in the seedy underbelly of Japan. Once upon a time she was only interested in cutting down evil, but since coming to this new world she has discovered a passion for testing her strength. She loves plain white rice.
Tsutsumi
The living bioweapon. Tsutsumi was designed to emit poisonous gas but was considered defective by her creators. Despite her ephemeral appearance, Tsutsumi has an insatiable appetite and zero qualms when it comes to killing. She is the squad's mascot.

Prologue
Smells Like Vacation

“I sure do love burning the trash.”

The expression on Homura’s face was every bit as cheerful as the clear blue sky overhead. Ever since the incident at Guadhari Village, the five girls had been spending their time carrying out missions to eliminate low-level monsters and bandits.

They had just finished one such mission where they’d hunted bandits and were arriving back at Geldorf’s estate—home sweet freeloading home. Psycho was walking at the head of the group.

“Putting the rest of us aside, I would have expected a normal person like you to be at least a little resistant to the idea of bandit hunting. You’re becoming a regular reprobate!” said Psycho, taking a dig at Homura. “In fact, you didn’t even bat an eye!”

Back in Japan, Homura had just been a normal person, so of course, she had never done anything as crazy as *bandit hunting*. Her own upbringing had been a far cry from things like human experiments, assassination runs, and living bioweapons. And unlike *a certain someone*, she wasn’t an extraterrestrial life-form incapable of understanding puny Earth conventions.

“Well, the people we’re taking out are evildoers, so really, we’re just helping to make a better world. Besides, I always make sure to pump up the heat so that it doesn’t hurt too much when I burn them to a crisp…”

Homura had no reservations about raining fiery death on their foes, seeing as it was all done to help people in the end. If anything, she tried to make her flames as fiery as possible so that the bandits wouldn’t suffer as they died—it was a kinder, gentler cruelty!

“Well, so long as you save your pyro-loving bloodlust for those who deserve it, that must mean you’ve got at least some sanity left. But don’t forget, if you ever go all *loopy* on us again, I won’t hesitate to waste your butt.”

“I understand… I’ve actually been training to keep from losing control again, but if I ever do lose control, please do whatever it takes to stop me.”

Homura reserved her flames for evildoers in order to avoid feeling guilty about what she was doing, but she actually had another motive for incinerating people. Deep down, she just wanted to burn something. Anything. And the incident at Guadhari Village had already shown that once she entered a complete trance, she would try to incinerate everything in her path indiscriminately. But since she didn’t actually want that, Homura was doing everything in her power to ensure she could apply the brakes when needed.

“In any case, we’re lucky we’re so well suited to living in this world. Teaching evildoers lessons like this is so much fun. In fact, I don’t know what it is, but I almost feel more at home here…,” said Homura, relieved. This whole “getting summoned to a different world” thing was working out great in the end.

“Speak for yourself,” interrupted one of the other girls. Surprisingly, it was Jin. Though she was as stone-faced as ever, there was a clear tone of discontent in her voice.

“I didn’t know you could make jokes, Jin!” said Homura. The gap between Jin’s general demeanor and what she had just said was so great that Homura assumed she wasn’t being serious.

“It is not a joke. Don’t be foolish. Where is your respect for human life?” said Jin, clearly put out. She rapped Homura on the head lightly with her knuckles.

Homura crouched down and cradled her head. That little tap hurt!

“Ow! G-geez, sorry. You’re always so stone-cold when you cut people down, so I just assumed…”

The other four girls left Homura crouching in the dirt as they hurried toward the front door of Geldorf’s estate.

“I don’t get what the big fuss is, just because your opponent happens to be the same species as you. You humans are so annoying,” said Proto, as confused as ever by the workings of organic human life.

Tsutsumi, meanwhile, was fending off sleep. She let loose a massive yawn.

Psycho pushed open the front door to the manor. As the door creaked on its hinges, Homura and the others were greeted by the voice of a young woman.

“Welcome home,” said Geldorf’s live-in maid, bowing her head respectfully. Despite the maid’s stiff facial expressions and manner of speaking, Homura had recently discovered that the maid had a mischievous side, which included a strange tendency to sneak up on people from behind. No matter how many times it happened, Homura never failed to be surprised.

I bet she’d make a fine assassin, thought Homura, privately geeking out. Homura had read one too many manga.

“We’re back,” they said, giving their usual greeting and starting toward the bathing quarters as they always did. It was their established routine after a mission, and it had already become second nature…

…but today, the maid lifted her head from her bow and called them back before they could leave.

“My apologies; you must all be tired, but Master Geldorf is expecting you. After your baths, please visit him in his study. Apparently, he wishes to discuss your next mission,” said the maid mechanically, bowing once more before taking her leave.

“We just finished one job, and they’re already nagging us about the next. This place is a sweatshop… Actually, I guess this whole world is a grind,” complained Psycho.

“Now, now, we have to get stronger anyway if we want to defeat the Dark Lord. There’s no use complaining,” said Homura, trying to soothe Psycho’s feelings. Deep down, however, Homura felt pretty much the same.

Monsters had grown more active due to the Dark Lord’s return, and the uneasiness this caused was having a negative impact on public order. The only reason the girls were in this world in the first place was because they had been asked to eliminate the Dark Lord, but regardless, it was the world they lived in now. In the end, if they were going to live their lives the way they wanted, this was the only way.

Still…there was no denying that these endless, repeated missions were starting to take their toll.

“Speaking of which,” said Psycho, “once we defeat the Dark Lord and bring peace to the world, who am I supposed to use as materials for my human experiments?”

“I am almost positive you’ll find yourself rotting away in some dungeon long before that day ever comes, so I wouldn’t worry about that too much if I were you,” replied Homura.

“Look who’s talking. If anyone is going to take up residence in a dungeon anytime soon, it’s you.”

“…”

“……”

Let the scuffle begin!

“You heard I wanted to speak to you, correct? Let’s get right down to business, then.”

The master of the house, Geldorf, was sitting at his desk in a room that doubled as both his study and office. As usual, his sharp-cut facial features seemed out of place atop his portly body.

“Your next mission will be in the port town of Aurerich, where… Wake up! The five of you look like you’re already half asleep!”

Although Geldorf was ready to get down to business, the girls looked like they were ready to get down to some z’s. *Half asleep* was an understatement. Several of them had already zonked out completely.

Not only were they full of pent-up exhaustion, they had also just taken a hot bath to relax. The smell of old books in the room, and the afternoon light filtering in through the window, immediately began to lull them to sleep.

Proto had entered sleep mode while sitting by the window and absorbing the sun, and Tsutsumi was sprawled on the room’s sofa, wheezing softly. Jin was standing at attention with her eyes quietly closed. It was hard to tell for sure whether she was asleep or awake, but it seemed pretty likely that she was asleep.

“You can hardly blame us for being tired,” said Psycho.

“We did just take a bath, after all,” Homura agreed.

After wearing themselves out like that, it was natural that they would grow sleepy once they took a break. It was just bad timing on Geldorf’s part, really.

“But if I had asked you girls to come see me before taking a bath, you would have hit the roof. I know you girls—your tempers are enough to give an old man a heart attack.”

“You could hardly blame us for being tired.”

“We’d be about to take a bath, after all.”

After wearing themselves out, it was natural they would lose their temper if they couldn't take a break. It was just bad timing on Geldorf's part, really.

"Yes, but if I had waited until you had all gotten a good rest, you would have sneaked off to town at some point, and then I would have had no idea where you went."

"Whatever, just tell us about this job already."

"That is what we're here for, isn't it?"

There was no point in arguing. The two girls decided to hear Geldorf out. If only he would get on with it!

"Hmph… These girls, I swear…!"

For some reason, Geldorf seemed about to lose his cool. In a profound display of *human* civility—something the girls were highly lacking in—he managed to rein himself in. He took a series of deep breaths—which were mostly sighs.

"Fine, let's get back to the matter at hand… An incident has occurred in the port town of Aurerich. It seems a merchant ship was attacked and sunk by unknown forces while out to sea. There is a high possibility that the attack was carried out by monsters, and someone is needed to investigate. The mission has been assigned to you girls. Further details will be waiting for you when you arrive."

"A shark! The culprit must be a shark!"

"That's enough creature-feature nonsense out of you, thank you very much."

Poor Psycho—all those B movies about sharks she had watched must have infected her brain.

"So you're saying we're just there to investigate this time… right?" Homura was a little taken aback. Most of their tasks involved hunting and eliminating something.

"Correct. Your mission this time is only to investigate. While you could encounter monsters along the way, regardless of your findings, someone higher up will take over."

In short, once they identified the attackers, their mission would be complete. Perhaps there wouldn't be any fighting involved at all this time.

"So this mission should be easier than usual!"

"A port town! We can take in the sights and get some R & R!"

"Yes, more or less," said Geldorf, smiling in satisfaction as he saw the two girls' faces light up. It almost seemed like this was the real point of the assignment. He couldn't let them go

without a warning, however. “Remember, though, you’ve still got a mission. Make sure to behave yourselves.”

Homura frowned. Geldorf really knew how to spoil the mood.

He did have a point, however—they were already starting to get carried away at the mere mention of the phrase *port town*. As this request was being assigned to bronze sword badges, which was the lowest rung among the Phalanx of Blades, it was unlikely to be very dangerous in the first place. Considering how desperate the girls had been for a break, this almost felt like a reward—but Homura knew they had a tendency to take things too far the moment they were allowed to stretch their wings.

And besides, Homura still remembered what happened the last time.

“Umm…I hate to ask this, but what is the garrison at Aurerich like? We aren’t going to run into any…problems, are we?”

Reading between the lines, it was clear that Homura was checking whether there were any weirdos there like Rotraud. She didn’t feel comfortable asking outright, though, seeing as Rotraud had once been one of Geldorf’s disciples.

Geldorf seemed to understand what Homura was getting at. While his tone dipped, the answer he gave was reassuring.

“Rest easy. Aurerich’s captain, Torreque, is an old friend. Despite appearances, he is a very reliable man. He won’t be hiding a second face, not like Rotraud,” he said, showing concern for Homura’s feelings.

“I see…,” said Homura without further context. Geldorf was the one who deserved concern.

“Hmph… Rotraud was my student; I should have noticed the sickness he was harboring,” said Geldorf, lowering his gaze. “Rotraud was always gifted. When I first came into contact with him, he had a tendency to look down upon other children his age. He was smart, talented, and came from a good family. Perhaps he had too many advantages to understand those who were not as blessed. Nor, it seems, could he understand the ‘justice’ of persons such as Seigrat and myself. The ‘haves’ who found a different way to interact with these ‘have-nots’ who he despised. How we must have appeared to him.”

Geldorf lifted his head and turned his eyes toward Homura and the others. There was a hint of both regret and relief in those eyes.

“In any case, thank you for stopping him for me. Truly, I have been avoiding speaking about what happened there, as I still haven’t come to terms with my own feelings on the matter, but I should have expressed my gratitude sooner.”

Rotraud was the one who had cunningly disguised himself as a good person. It was Rotraud who was in the wrong, not Geldorf for failing to notice that rottenness. Regardless, Geldorf seemed to harbor guilt for failing to see his erstwhile student for what he had really been. He also seemed to feel responsible for the heinous acts that Rotraud had committed. Geldorf was a kind man, which made things that much harder for him.

“Of course, I suppose I should have saved that speech for a time when all of you were awake. Two or three of you seem to be sleeping.”

“Well… Yes, maybe you should have,” Homura admitted.

Bad timing struck again. Even Psycho was drifting, so for all intents and purposes, Homura was the only one who had heard Geldorf’s heartfelt speech.

“Okay now, wake up! The meeting is over!” shouted Geldorf, clapping his hands together loudly to rouse the sleeping girls.

While most of them looked grumpy about being woken up, Jin’s eyes snapped open, wide-awake and alert.

“I was not asleep,” she fibbed. However…

“What were we talking about, then?” said Geldorf.

“Speaking of which, there was something I wanted to ask—”

“See, you *were* asleep!”

Jin’s bright-eyed and bushy-tailed appearance was just a ploy to fool them into believing she hadn’t dozed off.

“—can I find a sword similar to the one I carry anywhere around here? I am not sure how much longer this one will hold up.”

Jin placed a hand on the katana currently jutting from her waist.

Depending upon rank, as soldiers, they could request Phalanx to provide them with new weapons, though this came with restrictions. However, the girls had not seen any weapons yet that resembled a katana while here in Galdorssia, so even if Jin asked, it seemed unlikely her request would be fruitful. Which was why Jin had been on the lookout for such a sword herself. Even something similar would do.

“Actually, I remember seeing something like your sword previously in Aurerich, the very place you are heading. It is a key trading town, so items from near and far find their way there. I asked about the weapon since it was such a rare piece. If my memory serves, there is a village close to Aurerich where such weapons are made. It was called…Sou…no, Skoo…? I’m sorry, I can’t quite remember…”

Geldorf cocked his head, but he couldn’t seem to recall the village’s name.

“Don’t worry, that is more than enough. I thank you.”

“Yes, well, I am sorry I could not help more.”

Jin’s face relaxed. Geldorf may not have been able to give them further details, but by a massive stroke of luck, she now had a lead, and it was located in the very place they were currently headed to on a mission.

“That reminds me. I almost forget to mention this, but the city of Aurerich is in a very unusual position. Although Galdorrsia dispatches soldiers to Aurerich, the city is not actually under Galdorssia’s control. It is part of the resource-rich Schelles Sea Alliance, which is located farther south. In exchange for our protection, we receive preferential trade treatment. That was part of what I meant when I said that you need to behave yourselves. Any damage to our relationship with Aurerich could hurt Galdorssia economically.”

“This place is starting to sound less fun than I thought…”

And just when Homura had gotten her hopes up. She had been expecting, if not a carefree vacation in a scenic seaside town, a nice, calm refresher at the least. But it sounded like this place was going to be much more restrictive than she had first assumed. Homura’s shoulders slumped.

“Don’t look so disappointed. It truly is a beautiful town.”

“Fine…,” said Homura, still not buying it.

“I know I told you to behave yourselves, but so long as you just act normal, you should be fine…or at least, that’s what I would like to say. But there’s one of you who particularly worries me…”

“Aye, aye, normal it is!” shouted Psycho, full of vim and vigor.

As if they didn’t all know that she was the one Geldorf was talking about.

“I don’t trust you when you get so chipper all of a sudden… Something about the sound of your voice when you’re in a good

mood gives me a sharp pain right in the pit of my stomach," said Geldorf.

"If you like, I could use my healing magic to fix that for you."

"No, thank you."

Homura knew what it was like to get burned by Psycho's freewheeling behavior. She took a step forward to reassure Geldorf, who was their guardian in this world.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure to keep an eye on her," she said, puffing out her chest with pride.

"That does not inspire confidence…"

"What? I thought you'd be happy for my help!" said Homura, in shock.

Apparently, Homura was also giving Geldorf stomach problems. Who knew?!

"It's fine. But one more thing. A group of Aegis Guard soldiers will be accompanying you on the journey to Aurerich, so try to play nice!"

"Aye, aye!" shouted Psycho, just as chipper as before.

Chapter 1
Ares and Rhiann

The soldiers whom Geldorf had mentioned would be accompanying them on their trip turned out to be the very same ones whose exam the girls had wrecked when they decided to crash the enlistment exams. There were four soldiers in total. Ares, who was dressed in fancy armor and carried a sword and a shield. Rhiann, who held a magic user's staff. A gentle giant dressed in thick, heavy armor. And a sharp-eyed young woman with a bow strapped upon her back.

Naturally, as soon as the soldiers saw them at the stables and realized whom they were stuck with, Ares couldn't help groaning.

"It just had to be you guys…"

Never one to pass up the chance to stir up trouble, Psycho extended her hand, smiling as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "A pleasure. Have we met?" she said. Homura's hand shot out at the speed of light, grabbing Psycho by the back of the head and forcing her to bow politely.

"The Aegis Guard is supposed to be the shield of the people; we aren't supposed to run… I disappointed myself that day by showing weakness, but even worse, we let down a lot of people who were counting on us. That said, I don't like you girls. You stuck your noses in where they weren't needed," said Ares, bitter and ashamed.

He was dressed in full-body armor and an indigo surcoat, with his helmet currently resting on his knees. He had a bold face, with blond hair that gave off a valiant impression and intrepid, steely-blue eyes. At the moment, however, those eyes were clouded with anger and regret.

"So you disappointed people, big whoop—just go out there and prove them wrong. What, you can't be 'the people's shield' without everyone fawning all over you?"

"Psycho!" Homura yelled. "He's right; we did stick our noses in where they didn't belong."

“A thousand apologies,” said Psycho. She spoke with a straight face, but it didn’t seem like she meant it one bit.

Even though the girls had stolen their slot in the exams, Ares and his party had been able to pass the next exams and enter the Aegis Guard without issue. They were being assigned to Aurerich, hence why they were traveling with Homura’s group, who just so happened to be heading that way on a mission.

The wagon trundled along, with Homura’s party, Ares’s party, and a generous helping of awkwardness packed together inside. Incidentally, the wagon was currently being pulled by Proto, who had insisted that she was much faster than “some bunch of horses.” While the journey did proceed more quickly with Proto at the helm, the wagon’s suspension was all but useless at her speed, and the shaking and rattling was doing a number on their rear ends. It was not a happy trade-off.

While Ares was twitching with anger, Rhiann, who was sitting next to him, spoke up instead.

“Do you think ‘sorry’ is going to cut it? Everyone says Ares could be a Holy Protectorate of the Shield someday. Do you have any idea what you’ve done, getting in the way like that?” she said.

Rhiann appeared to be a strong-willed magic user, a young woman with elegant features. Her gently wavy brown hair helped give her a more sophisticated appearance. She was dressed in a black robe and cradled an orestone-tipped staff.

“O-oh…? It sounds like Ares is really something,” said Homura, following Rhiann’s lead in an attempt to mollify the girl.

“Yes, he really is! Ares is the absolute best!” said Rhiann, leaning forward with a twinkle in her eye. She was suddenly all excitement.

“Yikes, I wasn’t expecting that strong of a reaction!”

“He’s also gotten way more powerful since the last time you saw him. If you fought him now, he could cut you all into ribbons before you could even blink an eye!”

“Rhiann, you’re exaggerating,” said Ares.

“Yes, exactly! Absolutely! I am exaggerating!”

“O…kay…,” said Homura, overwhelmed both by Rhiann’s enthusiasm and her ability to change her opinion on a dime.

“But I won’t run away again,” said Ares, glancing toward Jin with conviction in his eyes. He was probably remembering how

Jin had intimidated them into submission the last time with her mere gaze.

Currently, however…

"…"

"I'm sorry, I think she might have fallen asleep," said Homura.

…Jin had quietly dozed off while still sitting upright.

"You five girls really are infuriating…!"

"I'm sorry! She didn't mean it!"

First, Psycho had purposely antagonized him, and now Jin had slept through his inspiring speech. Ares's face twitched with repressed anger. Homura bowed her head in an attempt to soothe him, not sure what else she could do.

"You've certainly got your work cut out for you…," said Rhiann, casting Homura a sympathetic glance.

Homura's party and Ares's party were sitting opposite each other on long benches that ran lengthwise along the two sides of the wagon. Homura was starting to wish she could sit on their side.

"You're a student at the Academy of the Black Arts, right?"

Although Psycho and Ares continued to stare daggers at each other from across the wagon, Rhiann was a bit of a chatterbox and seemed willing to engage in small talk. She had been quiet and sullen at first, but she must have gotten bored of the awkwardness.

"Wait, I don't recall mentioning I attended the Academy?" said Homura.

"You guys know you're famous, right? You're the insane new rookies who everyone is talking about."

"I see. Hee-hee, I did not know that…"

Homura blushed. Despite being new recruits, they had defeated a powerful and dangerous monster—Rotraud. Of course people would be talking about them.

"I didn't say it was all good, though. Besides, I've got a personal grudge against you."

"I see. That I did know."

Homura's facial expression went flat. They had crashed the enlistment exams, they traveled around accompanied by suspicious entities of unknown origin, and Homura's inability to control her flames had resulted in unnecessary damage to Guadhari Village. Of course people would be talking about them.

“In any case,” said Rhiann, “are the things they say about the Academy true? I heard they’re incredibly strict and that many students have even been killed there.”

“Really…? I had no idea the rumors were that bad.”

Psycho had mentioned hearing similar rumors, but nothing so extreme. The Academy clearly had a less-than-stellar reputation among the public.

“There are barely any students there in the first place, and everyone is super kind,” said Homura. “Any time you do something right, they fall all over themselves to tell you what a good job you did.”

“That’s the complete opposite of what I pictured!”

The Academy, which was located underground, was damp and gloomy. The gap between Homura’s first impression of the place and the way she had actually been treated once inside had taken her completely by surprise. It wasn’t hard to imagine that the rumors circulating here were even further disconnected from reality.

“Of course, I haven’t actually been a student at the Academy for very long yet, and I only attend in between missions, so there’s still a lot I don’t know about the place.”

“Well, since you’re not originally from Galdorssia, I guess that makes sense. Usually, people who want to enlist as magic users start attending while very young… Still, though, it sounds completely different from what I’ve always imagined. It just goes to show you can’t believe rumors. From what you’re describing, it almost sounds like the Seminary is the stricter place of the two.”

“I’ve heard that students at the Spellcraft Seminary are actually a lot more studious and dedicated. The Academy is just full of weirdos with an unhealthy interest in the black arts or, like, dangerous people obsessed with dangerous magic.”

Most people hoping to become magic users attended the Spellcraft Seminary. The Seminary was where people could study the “normal magic” of this world: simple and easy-to-control techniques, such as how to transform magical power into projected waves of force or use it to increase physical attributes.

The Academy of the Black Arts, on the other hand, dealt with the difficult-to-control magics, such as pyromancy, and other undesirable pursuits. As a result, those connected to the

Academy were often labeled as dangerous weirdos. Which, in fact, many of them were.

"It sounds fun, at least. The Seminary has its good points, but it can be pretty stuffy sometimes."

Fair enough. Homura was enjoying herself over at the Academy.

"Well, you've changed my mind. I guess it's not as dank and spooky over there as I believed," said Rhiann flatly. She sounded half relieved, half disappointed.

"Apparently, part of their job is to help out with tortures and assassinations, though."

"That is exactly what I pictured!"

Homura had yet to witness any of it in person, but on more than one occasion, she had seen Academy members cheerfully saunter off on their way "to work," to torture some prisoner or whatever it was they got up to.

"The Vice Precept also runs a bakery using fire magic."

"A bakery?! What in the heck is going on over there?!"

A smile escaped Homura's lips at Rhiann's reaction. Rhiann began to laugh as well. This Rhiann girl wasn't half bad—at least she was sharp.

"Speaking of rumors, I also heard that you can use magic without chanting. Is that true?"

"Well…the thing is…"

Rhiann leaned forward with a new sparkle in her eyes. She must have been really interested. *Silent casting.* Even people at the Academy liked to harp on about it, although Homura insisted that it had nothing to do with her.

As the name suggested, silent casting referred to the ability to cast magic without the need to chant a verbal component. A caster's mental state had a powerful effect on magic use, and casters generally recited incantations when casting spells in order to more reliably activate the spell and better stabilize its effect. Chanting made it easier for the caster to conceptualize their magic. As a result, the ability to cast spells reliably without the use of incantations supposedly required a high level of skill.

This was why people were so surprised Homura was able to create flames without chanting an incantation. But according to Homura's teacher at the Academy, her pyrokinesis was not actually magic. Homura could only shrug. Apparently, that was just how it worked in her case.

“The thing is…I don’t really get it myself, but my flames aren’t actually magic.”

“They’re…not magic?”

“Something like that. I’m not really sure how to explain it… but I use a slightly different method to emit flames from my body.”

From the look on Rhiann’s face, it was clear that she didn’t understand what Homura was saying. But the concept of supernatural abilities didn’t make much sense to Homura, either, so there was no way for her to explain.

“Hmm… Well, it’s a big world; I guess there’s all sorts of stuff out there. Either way, I’m jealous that you can do what you do without chanting. My older sister is always telling me that I *need to be able to use beginner spells without an incantation*.”

“Is your sister a soldier, too?”

“Not just a soldier—she’s a Holy Protectorate of the Shield.”

“A Holy Protectorate?! You’re kidding!”

Only a small number of elite soldiers, the most accomplished among the Aegis Guard, ever became Holy Protectorates of the Shield. And apparently, the younger sister of one of those Protectorates was now sitting in front of Homura.

“My sister, Serena’s, forte is magical barriers. In fact, her skill at creating barriers is considered to be an integral part of Galdorssia’s defenses. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m pretty confident in my own magical barriers as well. One day, I hope to defend Galdorssia just like she does.”

It was clear that Rhiann greatly looked up to her sister, Serena, from the way she spoke about her as well as the way she spoke about her own dreams for the future.

“Ares’s older brother is also a Holy Protectorate of the Shield,” said Rhiann, pulling Ares into the conversation. Ares continued to stare daggers at Psycho as he responded:

“He is. But my brother is stationed far away. I haven’t seen him in some time. Both Serena and my brother are everything a soldier is meant to be. That’s why we’ve been working so hard. We hope to become like them one day.”

“Which is where we barged in, I guess…”

“Hmph…!” Ares snorted.

Unlike Homura and the girls, who did whatever they wanted, Ares’s group had big dreams for the future as well as equally big expectations that had been placed on them by those around

them. Although Homura had just been tricked into one of Psycho's harebrained plans, that didn't change the fact that she had actually interfered with their goals. Homura slumped her shoulders and turned her eyes toward the ground, feeling guilty.

Psycho, however, was not about to bite her tongue. Her words almost seemed aimed at Homura.

"Well, at the moment, we're the ones with someone almost as strong as a Holy Protectorate. It's only because we enlisted before you that we were able to defeat Smiley McPervFace before he could cause more damage."

That reminded Ares. "Speaking of which, I heard reports that Captain Rotraud— No, I guess he no longer deserves to be called captain. I heard reports that Rotraud transformed into a monster with someone's assistance. Is it true that this *someone* claimed to be the Dark Lord?"

"Wait, are we allowed to talk about that now?" Homura asked. "I thought that only Galdorssia's top echelon and a limited number of soldiers were being told in order to limit chaos."

"I learned about it from my father, who is part of that 'top echelon' you mentioned. But I wanted to hear it from you all directly, seeing as you were the ones who were actually there."

"Wow, I didn't know you were the son of such a big shot…," said Homura. "We should probably try to get on his good side," she added, her voice too low to hear. "Yes, it's true. The phrase 'Dark Lord' was mentioned."

"I knew it…," said Ares, folding his arms, anxious over the possible upheaval. "And after Rotraud succumbed to evil and was transformed into a monster by the Dark Lord, you were the ones to defeat him? Rotraud was already strong, even for a gold badge. As hard as I find it to believe, you girls must really be strong. There was no way we would have gotten lucky and beaten you that day."

Homura was surprised. She had expected sour grapes from him.

"What are you making that face for?" Ares asked.

"I'm sorry! I just…didn't expect you to acknowledge us so quickly."

"Why shouldn't I? Even if my personal impression of you isn't very good, as long as you use your strengths to protect the people, there's no reason to dismiss your capabilities and the

things you've done. After all, we would have probably had no chance of defeating Rotraud."

"It was not easy; I'll tell you that."

Ares was not about to let his own personal circumstances get in the way of recognizing all the good they had done, even if he did so reluctantly. It was part of his integrity as a soldier of the Aegis Guard.

However, there was one thing Homura still needed to say.

"I know we've already moved on, but please don't forget that we did, in fact, get in your way. You have every right to hate us."

"Don't tell him that, you moron! Not when we were finally getting him to move on!"

"You are a lost cause…"

Ares was beginning to worry about what the future might hold if he had to associate with reprobates like Psycho.

"I'm sorry, I'll have a word with her later…"

Just as they were all starting to get tired of squabbling, Ares announced that they would soon be catching sight of the next village, one of the waypoints along their journey. They were expecting to take three days to reach the port town of Aurerich, stopping at the closest settlement each night before sunset.

People generally suspended traveling during the night hours. It was much harder at night to keep a lookout for monsters and bandit attacks. It was why settlements were often spaced close enough to allow people to leave one settlement in the morning or during the day, then arrive at the next before nightfall.

"Still, is he—or she—? I can't tell. But have they been okay pulling the wagon like that this whole time?" said Ares, expressing his concern for Proto, who had volunteered herself in place of the horses. She had been dragging the wagon along all this time without rest.

"If he gets tired, I can always take his place. Don't hesitate to ask," said the beefy guy in Ares's party. His voice was gentle. Proto, however, was a mechanical life-form. It would take much more than this to impact her functions.

But there were a lot of people in the wagon she was pulling. If they weren't careful, someone might piece together that Proto wasn't human. There were probably other people in this world with superhuman stamina like her, but considering that Proto also never showed her face, it would probably be better to avoid drawing suspicion.

Proto must have sensed Homura's unease. She stopped pulling the wagon as she heard Ares and the others express their worry.

"I'm fine. After all…"

Whatever was coming, Homura was pretty sure it was not, in fact, going to be fine.

"…I'm not even human!"

With a leisurely gesture, Proto removed her helmet and then promptly swiveled her head around one hundred eighty degrees, her eyes flashing frantically.

"What's happening?! It must be some kind of evil eye!"

Ares and his friends ducked and tried to cover their faces with their arms, as if to escape from Proto's gaze. Homura felt like she was having déjà vu.

"Bwa-ha-ha! I never get tired of seeing that reaction!"

"No more eyes!" Homura shouted at Proto.

According to what Homura had learned at the Academy, evil eyes were a rare phenomenon in this world whereby, for whatever reason, a person's eyes transformed and took on magical power. Evil eyes were difficult to control and often had very sinister effects. They were no laughing matter. As a result, those with the evil eye often had their vision sealed or—in worst-case scenarios—had both of their eyes removed.

Proto may not have been aware of it, but this gag of hers could easily give the people of this world a heart attack.

"Sorry, sorry—I just don't feel right until I've pulled this trick on new people."

"Well, if you do it again, I'm going to lose my temper with you! Ares, Rhiann, everybody, relax. That wasn't an evil eye. As for what she said about not being human, well…well, just relax—that's all!"

Homura's words did little to reassure them, seeing as they had just seen Proto's head swivel around and her eyes flash in a way that would be impossible for a human. Homura was still trying to smooth things over when Psycho suddenly decided to add more fuel to the fire.

"Yeah, relax, this one's not human, either!"

"W-wait!"

Psycho suddenly yanked off Tsutsumi's mask, dashing any hope of sweeping everything under the rug.

“Huh…? Are we at the village already…?” said Tsutsumi, glancing around bleary-eyed. The tug on her head had just woken her up.

“Sh-she’s so cute…,” said the two girls in Ares’s group, staring at Tsutsumi with confused expressions. The big guy smiled uncomfortably, while Ares turned his eyes up toward the wagon’s roof in exasperation.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a group of people with less common sense…,” he muttered. He was too exhausted at this point to even be angry.

Dealing with these five oddballs was getting to be too much for Ares. But if he really wanted to become a Holy Protectorate of the Shield someday, he was going to have to develop thicker skin!

“D-don’t worry, though… Lady Falmeyr and wee little Eirene have signed off on everything!” said Homura.

“At this point, I don’t even care that you just referred to our Goddess as ‘wee’ and ‘little.’ I already knew that you guys were getting special treatment. I’m sure there must be a good reason for this as well.”

None of this was making much sense, but the most confusing part was the fact that the Holy City had sanctioned all this. Ares took a deep breath to calm himself, before fixing Homura and the others with a piercing gaze.

“I cannot fully trust people who aren’t even human, even if they did help to defeat Rotraud. And since you are friends with these creatures, obviously, that means I can’t fully trust you, either. So know that if you ever turn against Galdorssia, I won’t hesitate to stand in your way.”

Ares sounded like he meant what he said. The people of this world harbored strong feelings when it came to monsters.

“Yes, we are soldiers, just as Ares says. That means that some things come first, despite whatever personal connections we might share,” said Rhiann, turning toward them in apparent agreement. “However, I have faith that nothing like that will ever happen.”

Rhiann grinned. Even if she thought they were strange, she had apparently chosen to trust them. Homura, however, could only smile weakly and give a half-hearted answer in response. She was far less certain than Rhiann was that they wouldn’t step out of line.

“We…we’ll try out best…”

Psycho, for her part, was brimming with confidence. “Don’t you sweat it,” she said, beaming. Homura reminded herself to give Psycho a cautionary conk on the head later, just for good measure.

Chapter 2
The Other Day I Met a Bear

It was already the third day of their journey to Aurerich. At dawn, they had departed the village they'd stopped at the night before, hoping to reach Aurerich by midday. Despite the animosity on the first day, they had been getting along fine with Ares and the others ever since.

However, a new problem had reared its ugly head, slowly eating away at the nine travelers. And that problem was… boredom.

On the second day, they had still managed to maintain some semblance of conversation, thus keeping themselves occupied. But the small talk ran out abruptly on the third day. The lack of conversation left them so bored that they now no longer even had the energy to, well, make more conversation.

They tried pulling open the wagon canopy to take in the scenery, but there was nothing to see but the uninterrupted tableau of forest and plains. There was absolutely nothing to comment on. Just the droning creak of the wagon, looping endlessly through their heads.

Psycho was far too exhausted to even tease the others anymore, though at this point, they would have welcomed the distraction. Instead, she just stared listlessly at the roof of the covered wagon.

The boredom brought silence, and the silence brought boredom.

All nine agreed. What they needed right now was stimulation.

Because the road they were on led to the trade hub of Aurerich, extra care had been taken in ensuring that it remained well guarded. As a result, they had not encountered even a single monster or bandit along the way. That was all well and good, but even Ares and his party of go-getters were starting to grow antsy.

Just when they had nearly memorized the pattern of stains on the canopy swaying overhead, Ares spoke up in a fatigued tone

of voice.

“Once we pass the next summit, we should be able to see Aurerich…”

“Finally…”

It should have been a happy announcement, but Homura no longer had the energy required for joy. Maybe once they actually spotted the beautiful port town, it would lift her spirits, but at the moment, her brain refused to go through the steps of imagining what might be waiting for them. At times like this, she missed the ever-present distraction of modern technology.

“I wish I had a game to play…,” she muttered.

An odd clanging sound began to echo faintly inside the dull emptiness in her head.

“I hear fighting,” said Jin, suddenly alert. Up until a moment ago, she had been sleeping quietly in her seat. She placed a hand on her sword. Homura thought she saw the corners of Jin’s mouth twist up slightly in a smile. She must have been as hungry for stimulation as the rest of them.

Jin was far from the only one to get excited, however. Before Homura realized what was happening, the whole group had poured out of the wagon. Homura felt her listless brain ignite with vicious fire at the prospect of some good old-fashioned, violent entertainment.

Homura began running. She knew they were behaving like animals, but her legs just moved of their own accord.

As long as it was to help someone in the end, they could forgive themselves for being a little craven—or at least, that was Ares and his friends’ thinking. Homura’s group, for their part, was simply hungry for a fight. They held their weapons at the ready.

Despite their different motivations, their enthusiasm was the same. The road was hemmed in by trees, the visibility poor. They ran down the road as fast as they could.

Just then…Jin, who had been at the head of the pack, came to a sudden halt.

“It’s already over, it seems…,” she muttered.

As the others caught up to Jin, they stopped as well. They were confronted by the sight of a massive monster, which had only now collapsed to the ground, surrounded by four unknown soldiers who, despite their injuries, were raising their voices in exultation.

Too bad. Though, of course, it was a relief that the soldiers were okay. Homura and the others were not so desperate for something to do that they wanted to see someone get hurt.

As the others shuffled awkwardly, Ares quickly stepped forward.

“Are you all right?!” he said, rushing toward the injured soldiers with genuine concern.

“Yeah, we’re fine. I wish you had seen the show, though. We put on quite the fight!”

The body of a bear, significantly larger than was normal, was lying slumped on the ground next to the soldiers.

“This is a clawbear, isn’t it?”

Not only was this fearsome monster unusually massive, but as its name suggested, its misshapen paws were also studded with a plethora of huge, hooked claws. The creature’s power was apparent from the sight of several trees that had been swiped down in the area.

“It is. I’ve never seen one around here before, but clearly, it was no match for us. Ha-ha-ha! At this rate, we’ll be silver badges in no time,” said one soldier, who appeared to be the leader of the squad. He smiled. Although he was covered with grime and riddled with injuries, he beamed with pride as he spoke.

Based on what he had said, the soldiers must have been bronze badges. As one would expect for bronze badges, their equipment consisted of only basic swords and armor.

In comparison, despite being a mere apprentice, Ares was already decked out in some of the most finely crafted equipment available. This preferential treatment, compared with other soldiers of the same rank, attested to his position of privilege.

“Well, our mission is done now; we should head back. Are you on your way to Aurerich as well? We can go together. Come, we shall regale you with tales of our heroic exploits!”

“It would be an honor!” said Ares, a twinkle in his eyes at the prospect of hearing more about the accomplishments of his senior soldiers. Homura’s group, meanwhile, was unsure of how to react, having already experienced battles far more brutal than what had evidently just unfolded here.

The soldiers sheathed their weapons and began preparing to go. Now that the excitement and intoxication of battle had worn

off, however, they were beginning to feel the pain. A few pressed hands to their wounds or grimaced.

“Ugh… I hate to ask this, but are there any magic users in your group capable of using healing magic?”

On a closer look, the leader’s left arm was hanging limply by his side. It may have even been broken.

“Sorry, chumps, you’re plumb out of luck. Although, if some cash were to be placed on the table, maybe such a healer would suddenly appear…,” said Psycho as she glanced at the soldier’s injuries. What an ass! Homura quickly gave Psycho a little rap with her staff.

“This is no time for your stupid jokes. Just hurry up and heal them already.”

“Geez, I was just trying to lighten the mood. You see what I get for caring?”

“Ngrrrh… NGRRRH!!”

“See what you’ve done now? All your goofing off has gone and upset our friend, the clawbear…” Homura paused. “Errr, wait a second…”

A bestial snort came from the woods. As they turned their heads in the direction of the sound, they found themselves face-to-face with another clawbear, this one slightly larger than the last. It was poking its head out from the trees.

“This one’s bigger than the laaaaaasssst—!”

“GWAAAWRRR—!!”

The bear issued a thunderous roar, clearly hostile. Homura responded by promptly going weak in the knees and collapsing on the spot.

It wasn’t just big. The living version was an even further cry from what a normal bear should look like. Its forelegs were unnaturally long and as thick as logs. Its size was terrifying enough to begin with, but its forelegs caused it to tower in an upright position that no normal bear would have been able to imitate.

Its eyes were cloudy and hollow, making it difficult to know for sure which direction it was staring in, but Homura sensed it was fixated on them as prey. Rows of fangs, even sharper and more twisted than its claws, filled the creature’s gaping mouth, silently waiting to rend its victims asunder.

“I-it’s going to eat me…!” Homura gasped, unable to do anything more than mutter pathetically as she watched the

creature's drool stream heavily from its slack jaw.

Her skin broke out in goose bumps. This thing thought she was food! The fear she felt now was nothing like the fear she felt against human foes.

"It's bigger than the last one; it could be the mother," said Ares. While everyone else assumed battle positions, Ares slipped his helmet on and began walking straight toward the clawbear.

"Wait, we were barely able to defeat the last clawbear with all four of us fighting together! This one's even bigger!" shouted the bronze-badge leader, trying to stop Ares from going alone as Psycho continued to heal him.

"Please listen to him, Ares! It's too dangerous on your own!" said Homura, gripping her staff and trying to stand back up. Her legs, however, didn't want to obey her.

Ares ignored them.

"I can handle this by myself," he said boldly, without even turning around.

"But…," said Homura, feeling uneasy.

Rhiann, however, calmly extended a hand.

"Don't worry, Homura. Ares is more than strong enough to handle a creature like this on his own," she said proudly as she helped Homura back to her feet.

Although Ares's party held their weapons at the ready, Homura realized that none of them were stepping forward to help. They evidently had faith in Ares's ability to get the job done.

Homura continued to grip her staff, less than reassured. Meanwhile, Jin, who had been standing by Homura's side and observing, calmly returned her katana to its sheath.

"Feel free to get yourself killed while you're out there, bucko," teased their resident dumbass, Psycho. "I'll make sure to put your body to good use once you're gone!"

"I don't know what you're planning to do, but I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed!"

Ares adjusted his posture and lifted his sword before his face. It resembled a salute more than any kind of combat form. For Ares, however, this was apparently what a fighting stance looked like.

"Azure thunder—," muttered Ares, his lips moving furtively. He was chanting a magic spell. *"—Fill me with your power, raise*

your battle cry!”

Instantly, Ares’s armor, along with the sword and the shield he was wielding, began to crackle with dancing blue lightning. A shrill whine, like hundreds or thousands of birds chirping in unison, filled the air.

“GWAAAAARRRRRRRR—!!”

The clawbear howled threateningly in response to the human’s unusual behavior. But Ares stood firm.

Without further warning, the clawbear, perhaps instinctively sensing its opponent’s power, attacked with all its strength.

It moved faster than its massive, twisted body would seem capable of, closing the distance in the blink of an eye. Its huge, powerful mass quivered, and the earth shook beneath its feet as it prepared to make quick work of this gnat and its steel and lightning.

Ares met the giant, rampaging bear’s attack by twisting his body ever so slightly and raising his shield.

It had taken less than a second for the beast to reach him. Its prey now in reach, the clawbear lifted a mighty paw into the air and swung downward at the human below with full momentum. The wind whistled as the jagged claw cut through the air, on a collision course for Ares. The claw, however, never reached its mark.

Just as he was about to be shredded, Ares snapped his shield upward. The shield left a trail of blue lightning in its wake as Ares reacted with godlike speed. It happened too swiftly for the eye to see. The shield easily rebuffed the clawbear’s mighty paw, causing pieces of shattered claw to rain down around them.

The clawbear, however, was already following up with a counterattack.

Carrying through the recoil from its right paw, it swung wide and hard with its left. The massive, hideous claw barely grazed one of the trees lining the road along the way, but even that touch was enough to reduce the tree to smithereens. A direct hit would spell instant death. But Ares never flinched.

Instead, he swung his sword with electric speed, lopping off the creature’s paw.

The clawbear’s throat trembled with rage and pain. Irritated that its attacks were not effective, it began flailing about wildly, colliding with the trees and felling them as if they were sticks.

“It’s time to finish this,” murmured Ares, dodging the creature’s massive, club-like paws before suddenly darting in close to the creature’s side. The point of his longsword was already buried into the thick hide.

“Dashing thunder!”

The moment that Ares chanted the spell, the azure lightning that enshrouded him discharged, streaking forward and ripping through the clawbear’s body.

The giant, monstrous beast convulsed dramatically as it was electrocuted, like a broken toy. In the blink of an eye, the creature was dead.

The clawbear’s muscles twitched and stiffened. A moment later, it staggered to the side and collapsed, as if it had simply forgotten to do so earlier. Wisps of smoke, along with an unusual smell, rose from the clawbear’s body. It crashed into the ground, sending a small cloud of dust into the air.

Ares had just single-handedly downed an even bigger specimen of clawbear than the one the four soldiers had barely managed to defeat together earlier.

“I-incredible…”

Homura was the only one to speak. The others, who were also seeing Ares’s strength for the first time, were at a loss for words.

“See?! I told you! Ares is incredible!” said Rhiann, adding to Homura’s praise with barely contained excitement. “Do you understand now why everyone has such high expectations for him? And he’s not even fighting for real yet!”

“I see…”

The magic that Ares had just used allowed him to electrocute any opponent he could reach with his sword—that was pretty phenomenal in and of itself. What could he be capable of once he began to “fight for real”?

“Rhiann, I was already fighting pretty seriously.”

“Yes, exactly! Absolutely! Ares was already pretty seriously fighting for real! Ares never cuts corners, even against minor enemies!”

“You agree with everything, don’t you…?” said Homura, unsure whether she should take everything Rhiann said at face value. Ares was breathing heavily, his shoulders heaving, which suggested he had, in fact, been fighting “for real.” The spell he had used seemed to take quite a lot out of him.

The other soldiers, however, were clearly stunned.

“If this is what new recruits are like, I guess we won’t be making silver badge anytime soon after all…”

“Talk about a real slap in the face…”

There was no denying Ares’s talent; they had just seen it for themselves. Before they even finished basking in the lingering victory, however, they were interrupted by the irrepressible sound of Psycho’s voice.

“It looks like it’s our turn next.”

“Our turn?”

What was she talking about? Homura glanced toward Psycho, but Psycho was just standing there with a laid-back smile on her face. Our turn for what? *Poor thing*, thought Homura. She couldn’t stop herself making things up. It was like a sickness. Just then, however, something massive seemed to pass overhead.

In the next instant, the cause of the massive shadow slammed into the ground beside the clawbear.

It felt like an earthquake. Homura knew immediately what they would find at the center of all that ruckus, whether she liked it or not.

“It’s another clawbear…isn’t it?”

Homura could barely believe her eyes. This clawbear was even bigger than the last. Upon closer inspection, however, not only had its head already been crushed, but the smooshed remnants were also still soaring through the air.

There was only one person—correction, one *unit*—in their squad capable of something like that.

“Got ’em! And *I* wasn’t even fighting for real!”

Proto stood next to the clawbear’s body, drenched from head to toe in red blood. She lifted her war hammer into the air, evidently enjoying herself. She struck a pose for Ares’s benefit, as if to brag, grinning from ear to ear.

“You’re strong; I won’t deny it. But you girls really are infuriating…,” said Ares, once again exasperated.

Homura suspected this was just going to worsen the rift between the two groups, but she decided to give up and roll with things. Besides, that dumbass Psycho was sure to stir up trouble either way.

The other soldiers were clearly stunned.

“At this rate, we’ll be lucky if we ever make silver badge…”

“Talk about a real punch in the nose…”

They continued on their way toward Aurerich, placing the soldiers who had just fought inside the wagon while Homura and the others walked. According to what Ares had said earlier, they only needed to pass one more summit, and they were almost at the peak already. They would probably arrive at Aurerich before they could tire of walking. As they drew closer to the peak, the trees grew sparser, and the view opened up.

Ares was walking in front of the group. As he reached the top, he came to a halt.

“I see it now; that’s Aurerich over there.”

Homura picked up the pace, jogging slightly, eager to catch a glimpse of the town.

“Wow…”

Homura couldn’t help but gasp. The sight beyond the ridge was truly breathtaking.

Glittering white buildings as far as the eye could see. Like a unified piece of art, pristine and invigorating, topped with colorful blue roofs. Windmills of various sizes dotted the town, giving an exotic impression that differed from that of Galdorssia. The vivid blue sea and vivid blue sky, visible in the backdrop, only further enhanced the town’s beauty.

The town was built along the side of a gently sloping mountain, with the salt breeze rising up to meet it. The scent of the ocean ruffled their hair lightly as it passed them.

The port town of Aurerich was surrounded by a sturdy defensive wall, though not as sturdy as the one that surrounded Galdorssia. The town itself was nestled between two ridges that extended from the mountain, with one end of the wall bridging the gap between the two ridges. The wall continued along the two ridges, although at a lower height, just enough to support a walkway for the guard. If viewed from overhead, the ridges and the wall would have formed an almost perfect A.

“It’s so pretty.”

“It is…”

Homura had been talking to herself, distracted by the beauty of the scene before her. Psycho spoke up to agree with her. Homura was a little taken aback. She had assumed Psycho didn’t care about such things.

“Hey, Rhiann? There aren’t any monsters who can disguise themselves as people, are there?”

“Hrm… I don’t know; maybe. I’ve never heard of any monsters like that.”

It was worth asking. And here Homura thought she had just stumbled upon the first confirmed sighting. But if it wasn’t a monster, what was this creature supposed to be?

“Just what do you take me for?! Even I can appreciate a piece of beautiful scenery, you ignoramus—I’m not made of stone!” said Psycho, narrowing her eyes in anger.

Homura sighed in relief. There was the grumpy Psycho she recognized.

“Stop acting ridiculous—let’s just get to the garrison already,” said Ares in exasperation. He began walking without waiting for a reply. Everyone followed after.

A crowd of merchants, apparently traveling for trade, passed in and out of the town gates along a separate road that was different from the one Homura’s group had used. The town was obviously bustling. Everything was so gorgeous and exciting, but there was another unexpected sight waiting to greet them.

“Is that…?”

“Yes—it looks like they showed up here as well.”

The corpse of another clawbear lay abandoned by the gate. It must have shown up very close to town. The body was about the same size as the one that Proto had slain, and its head had surprisingly been split in two.

Whoever defeated it must have been very powerful in order to be able to slice the creature’s head in twain with a single slash. Homura and the others glanced at the body out of the corners of their eyes as they filed in through Aurerich’s gates.

The town of Aurerich had more than just beauty going for it.

Aurerich had a thriving food culture due to the rich variety of ingredients imported via the ocean to the south, and the girls spotted numerous food stalls in one of the small plazas they passed, selling meats, fish, and fruit. As they passed by, the wafting scents tickled at their noses. They agreed to come back later and peruse the stalls.

After passing a second plaza, they soon spotted the garrison. The building was just as pretty as the rows of houses in the area. It was surrounded by a fenced-in yard, with several Aegis

Guard soldiers on standby inside, getting some light exercise. Some were still warming up, while others were sparring.

Additionally, a suit of black armor and a thick, heavy sword, perhaps belonging to whomever had slain the clawbear, were being cleaned by several other soldiers. The faint smell of blood hung in the air.



As Homura's group observed the activity, one of the men noticed them and waved a hand.

He had a five-o'clock shadow and an easygoing air about him. He looked to be around forty, perhaps. A gold shield badge glittered upon the chest of his shabby, threadbare shirt.

"Captain Torreque, this is the help we've been waiting for!" said one of the soldiers they had been traveling with, waving to the older man in return.

Torreque. The captain of the Aurerich garrison whom Geldorf had mentioned. Geldorf had told them that Torreque was a man who could be relied upon, but that was hardly the impression he was giving off at the moment. He wasn't rail thin, exactly, but…

"Oh, of course, so you're the ones they sent to help."

The other soldiers paused to greet them with smiles.

"Captain Torreque, Your Grace, it is an honor to—"

"Pish, pish, there's no need to be so formal. Relax, kid. I'm too old for that sort of thing."

"O…okay…"

Perhaps it was due to the value that Ares placed on hierarchy, but Ares seemed a little discomposed by Torreque's frank manner of speech.

"Come inside already and let's have a chat. Can I put out some refreshments, maybe?"

"Thank you. Your offer is appreciated, but allow us to decline," said Ares, still unable to loosen up despite Torreque's welcoming tone.

After quickly introducing themselves, Homura and the others were shown into the Aurerich garrison office. In addition to desks, bookshelves, and other similar furniture, the room also contained a sofa and a low table. There wasn't enough space for all nine of them to sit on the sofa, so Homura's group occupied it for themselves. As soon as their butts were seated, they immediately kicked back and began digging into the snacks that had been placed out for them. Ares, of course, glanced at them angrily out of the corner of his eyes.

"All right, then, let's get right down to business. Lately, monsters have begun to show up out at sea, even though the waters had always been peaceful up until now. Alarming, no? So naturally, we figured we should get a few more hands on deck. As for the details of your assignment…I'm afraid that will

have to wait for now. There's something else I would like you to do first," said Torreque, grinning in an extremely informal manner.

"What…do you mean, 'something else'? How can anything take precedence over our mission?" asked the good and upright Ares. He seemed dubious.

"Now, now. Hold your horses. What I'm about to discuss is something very important for your mission."

"…My apologies, Captain," said Ares, realizing he may have been less respectful than he had intended.

"Let me ask you something. What do you think it takes to protect a town and its people?"

"Is it…skill?"

"Yes, that is also required, but there is something even more important than that…"

"What is it…?"

After a dramatic pause, Torreque finally spoke.

"Love."

"Love?"

After all that buildup, Ares was not sure how to respond. Homura and the girls continued to munch on the cookies that had been placed out for them as they contemplated what Torreque could possibly mean.

"I'm talking about attachment, a real desire to protect this town and its people. Those feelings are where true strength comes from. Which is why, first and foremost, I would like you to go out there and experience the joys that Aurerich has to offer. I'll explain your mission once you return."

Why yes, that did sound important! Very important indeed! Homura and the other glanced at one another, making an unspoken agreement that they would be touring the food stalls first. Soon, it was all they could think about. Well, that and how delicious these cookies tasted.

"Yes, Captain, I understand!" said Ares, his eyes sparkling, as he placed a fist stiffly to his chest in a noble salute.

"Yeah, okay, just loosen up already, kid," said Torreque, smiling uncomfortably. "Oh, I almost forgot. Don't go too close to the central plaza."

Although the expression on Torreque's face was as laid-back as before, his tone of voice was far less easygoing. The tension in the room increased. Torreque blanched slightly, realizing he

had just stuck his foot in his mouth, but he quickly recovered his usual happy-go-lucky tone.

“There’s just a bit of uncivilized business that goes on there sometimes, that’s all.”

“What do you mean…?”

“I’d rather not say, myself. Just go out there and learn to love the town for now.”

The way Torreque’s expression oozed with discomfort made it difficult to ask any follow-up questions. Homura felt herself deflate, worried they were about to get caught up in more trouble. There was something she need to know.

“Speaking of ‘uncivilized’…you don’t happen to have any weird nicknames, do you, Torreque?”

Torreque looked confused. It took him a moment to grasp what she was asking.

Not that Homura didn’t trust Geldorf’s judgment. But she wasn’t going to rest easy if she didn’t at least ask.

“Oh, I see, you must be the new Phalanx of Blades recruits who defeated Rotraud. Relax, relax. Not only do I *not* have any crazy secret nicknames, but I also don’t have *any* nicknames at all. I guess my fighting style is just too normal for that. Although, some people do call me ‘chump’ or ‘brownnoser’ behind my back!”

“That’s not very good, either!”

Homura was starting to worry this Torreque fellow might be unreliable for entirely different reasons.

“Anyway, like I said—you guys go out there and see the town! I’ve got plans to go get drinks with the governor right now anyway!”

“Are you sure you’re not really a brownnoser?!” interjected Homura as Torreque turned to leave. He flashed a happy-go-lucky grin as he jauntily exited the room.

“I don’t know about that guy…,” Homura muttered.

But there was someone in the group who was even more fed up with this situation than Homura was.

“If I don’t find some way to vent what I’m feeling right now…,” Ares muttered, staring off into space.

“You could always shove your feelings in the trash. I’m sure they’ll be nice and safe there,” quipped Psycho as she left the room, followed by Homura and the others.

Chapter 3
Public Punishment

After stashing their equipment in the barracks, which happened to be located directly next to the garrison, Homura's group immediately headed toward the food stalls. Ares and the others, who were taking their task of observing the town very seriously, said they were going to head to the harbor to question people about the attack on the merchant vessel.

The food stalls were mainly found in Aurerich's plazas. These plazas were located throughout the city; some functioned like simple food courts, while others included places to rest as well as full-scale eating and drinking establishments to boot. The tantalizing smell of delicious food hung heavily in the air.

"Tsutsumi, what would you like to eat?" Homura asked.

"Give me meat!"

Even with her mask on, it was obvious she was smiling.

"Okay! If there's one thing guaranteed to put a pep in Tsutsumi's step, it's the prospect of devouring some meat…"

Tsutsumi loved meat so much, you would think she was a carnivore. She could almost always be found chomping down on a hunk of meat the moment a mission ended. Obviously, she needed a lot of protein to maintain her stupendous powers of regeneration, but Homura was pretty sure Tsutsumi just loved the taste of the stuff.

Tsutsumi had gotten her hands on a giant haul of skewered meats, which were wrapped in paper. As she couldn't take her mask off in public to eat, she was currently cradling the meat in her arms, a happy skip in her step. She looked adorable, almost like a puppy let loose in a pantry.

"Now then, what should I get?"

There was a wide variety of food, just as one would expect of such a bustling and prosperous port town.

"I'll have one of these, please, sir." Homura pointed to some sort of fried fish and vegetable dish, which was wrapped in a thin, pizzalike crust.

“Coming right up! I see you girls are with the Phalanx of Blades. Good work you do out there!” the stallman replied affably as he handed Homura her food in some paper packaging.

“Yes, well… Ha-ha…,” said Homura, smiling vaguely, unsure of how to respond. The Phalanx of Blades had more than its share of rough-and-tumble characters, meaning Phalanx soldiers were often not looked upon too favorably. As a member of the Phalanx, Homura wasn’t used to receiving such open encouragement.

Incidentally, so long as they showed their badge and signed a check, the Galdorssian army was willing to cover most expenses for its soldiers. As a result, soldiers were often quick to make purchases. Thus, Aurerich’s shopkeepers tended to welcome the soldiers as some of their best customers. It explained why the shopkeepers were so friendly, even if the girls were with the Phalanx of Blades.

“I wish you could have seen how lively this town was before the incident, though, miss. But I suppose we’ve got other entertainment to offer now that— Errr, never mind, I shouldn’t mention that to a soldier. Forget about it, ah-ha-ha!”

“‘Entertainment’…?”

Homura wanted to ask the man what he meant, but he had already started dealing with the next customer, putting further questions off the table.

All the same… Homura glanced at the stallman out of the corner of her eye.

Unlike in Galdorssia, Homura noticed a fair number of dark-skinned people out in the town. The islands of the beautiful deep-blue Schelles Sea, which was located to the south of Aurerich, formed an archipelago nation known as the Schelles Sea Alliance. Apparently, that was where many of them were from.

“We’ve bought everything we wanted, so we should find somewhere to take a break soon,” Homura suggested.

Somewhere with no other people around, where they could relax and enjoy their food. The barracks were always an option, but since they were here in this scenic port town, it would be a shame not to find somewhere with an ocean view.

“In that case, why don’t we go down to the beach? It’s apparently off-limits to normal people right now because of the

ship attack," said Psycho.

That was good to know. They began making their way there immediately.

The town overlooked the ocean to the south. Following the coast westward led to the harbor, while the beach was located in the other direction to the east. The western end, centered around the harbor, was the more bustling area of town, whereas the eastern end was quieter, with the beach, residential areas, parks, and so forth.

As they walked, the streets grew quieter. Before long, the hustle and bustle of town was replaced with the sounds of the tide. The rows of white-walled buildings petered out slowly, and the view unfolded before them.

Sprawling sands.

No one had set foot onto the beach anytime recently. The sand looked pure and unblemished, as if someone had spilled an even coat of sand-colored paint over the area. Clear waves stretched toward them, throwing up white breakers of foam as the tide drummed against the coast.

"It's very pretty."

As embarrassing as it was to admit, the beach was almost too pretty, which left Homura feeling oddly flat. It was so perfect that it nearly looked like cheap CG. Sharp and vivid to the point of appearing fake, as if each individual pixel had been systematically placed.

"It's been a long time since I've seen the ocean this close…"

For Homura, the ocean was something you saw on TV, not in person, so she couldn't help but feel something, witnessing it with her own two eyes. If only it hadn't been so perfectly CG-pretty, she might have even stared at it in amazement.

"I wish we had bathing suits so we could go swimming."

Homura wanted to try swimming in the ocean at least once in her life.

"They probably sell them around here somewhere. Of course, they're probably not the kind of bathing suits we're used to," said Psycho with little interest as she stood next to Homura and stared out at the water.

"Just once would be enough, but I'd like to try on a really cute swimsuit."

"How about a school PE swimsuit?"

"I doubt they have PE swimsuits in this world!"

“No, probably not!”

A PE swimsuit, like the kind they wore in schools in Japan, was definitely not what Homura had in mind, but she did hope swimsuit fashion was a thing in this world. Surely, there were cute bathing suits out there somewhere.

Homura and the others were enjoying their food in a pavilion located toward one end of the beach. The food was delicious, and the view was beautiful. Naturally, they had little need to speak, absorbed as they were in both the cuisine and the scenery…or at least, it would have sounded sophisticated if that were the truth. But actually, they were mostly just focused on their grub. Finally, something rich and flavorful enough for even their modern palates!

Homura’s fried fish, wrapped in crispy batter, and the fresh, juicy vegetables mingled perfectly with the savory and strongly spiced sauce. Her body experienced a rush of salty umami euphoria.

While Homura was still savoring her own food, Tsutsumi’s stomach was already rumbling again. The massive quantity of skewered meat she had purchased had disappeared almost immediately, and she was still complaining that it hadn’t been enough.

“Here you go, Tsutsumi. Say ‘ahh’!” said Homura, deciding to share a bite of her own food since Tsutsumi was still hungry.

“Ahhmph!”

“Oh… I wasn’t expecting you to eat all of it. I guess you *were* hungry! Who’s a big girl, eating so much?! Who’s a big girl?! You are!”

“Tee-hee…”

Homura shamelessly patted Tsutsumi on the head.

The girls were each enjoying their own food in their own way, with the exception of Proto, who had no need to eat and was instead bathing in the sun’s rays while taking the occasional dig at the “inorganic life-forms” and their “inefficient means of energy acquisition.” Proto’s much more efficient means of energy acquisition involved opening her chest panel and exposing her core, which explained why she was currently bare-chested.

It was a sight that was far too immodest to escape Homura's notice.

Proto's external appearance may have been 100 percent artificial, but bare-chested was bare-chested, and Proto was exactly Homura's type. Homura knew she had to play it cool! Instead of looking directly, she tried to steal sly peeks, certain her friends would be none the wiser.

"You know we can see what you're doing, right?" said Proto.

It wasn't just Proto—they had all noticed. Homura could feel their stares boring into her soul.

"But my disguise was so perfect…," said Homura, distraught that her crime had been so easily exposed.

Psycho began deliberating on her punishment. "Now, let's see, should we bury you in the sand, or should we toss you out to sea…? Oh, that's right. You did say you wanted to go swimming, didn't you?!"

"Not like this!"

If they were going to drown her, the least they could do was give her a cute bathing suit to wear.

While Psycho was still pondering Homura's sentence, Jin's hand suddenly froze midmeal.

"I just wish there was rice…," she muttered with profound despair.

"I mean, there *is* rice, but it's not the same, is it?"

It made sense since they were in a different world, but the lack of properly sticky rice, like they had back in Japan, had been a sore point for the girls ever since their arrival in this world.

"My Japanese blood cries out for rice…," said Jin as her craving grew so great that she began to spout nonsense. They were suddenly interrupted by a familiar voice, barely audible over the tide.

"Oh, you girls are here, too."

It was Ares and his party. They had been exploring the town separately. They sat down at the table next to the girls, tired from all the walking around they had done.

"Wait…you're the one that was in that armor. Did you get smaller?"

Ares and the others were seeing Proto without her armor for the first time. Once they finally noticed her, they stared in shock. Although they knew that Proto wasn't human, there was

no way for them to understand what sort of creature she actually was. Even in their wildest dreams, they would have probably never imagined that she had been filling out her armor with wirelike tentacles that extended from her technological core, thus animating herself like an exoskeletal creature.

“This is my real form… Well, actually, this is my real form,” she said, exposing her core to them.

“Please, enough… Leave us at least some shred of sanity…,” said Ares, turning his eyes upward toward the roof of the pavilion.

To avoid further damage to their mental stability, the two groups spent the next few moments ignoring each other, enjoying the beach separately. Once Ares regained his composure, he took a deep breath and then spoke to Homura and the others.

“Well, what did you all think of the town?”

“It seems really nice. The streets were pretty and very lively… although supposedly, it used to be even livelier in the past.”

The girls had thoroughly enjoyed their time and had already developed a fondness for Aurerich. They were clearly beginning to experience some of that “attachment” that Torreque had mentioned.

“I see. The parts of town we saw were a bit more somber.”

“You visited the harbor, right?”

“Yes. Trade has mostly been restricted due to the sinking of the merchant vessel. The merchants who travel by sea, in particular, are feeling the squeeze. It won’t be long before that discontent spreads to the rest of Aurerich. We need to solve this incident quickly, before the situation grows any worse,” said Ares, clutching his fist with resolve.

Homura cast her eyes toward the far-off harbor, on the western edge of town. There was a lighthouse topped with a massive orestone out in that direction, as well as an artificial island off the coast. This artificial island was apparently for larger vessels, but despite its size, there was only one such large ship docked there at the moment.

“There’s more. Despite a gag law being in effect, rumors of the Dark Lord’s return have begun to circulate. That can’t be good. The Dark Lord’s reappearance would mean more than just intensified fighting between humans and monsters. The

instability could lead to confusion among the people and throw the world into even greater chaos. The kinds of incidents that would never happen in times of peace could start to become commonplace," said Ares, staring off into the sea forlornly.

Very little time had passed since Homura and her friends first arrived in this world, but they had heard similar talk several times before. That the destabilizing effect of the Dark Lord's return was driving not only monsters but also bandits and other ne'er-do-wells to egregious behavior.

But what of the Dark Lord, who was responsible for stirring up all this chaos…?

"Umm… What is this Dark Lord person like?"

"How can you not know who the Dark Lord is? Also, don't call that creature a 'person.'"

Ares's exasperation was evident from both his voice and the expression in his eyes.

However, the girls had been dropped into this world out of the blue. They had enough on their plates just trying to figure out what was happening in front of their noses. They couldn't be blamed for not knowing things…or at least, their newness was partly to blame. Another reason they didn't know too much was because they were enjoying themselves so much in this new world that they tended to completely forget about all this Dark Lord stuff. In fact, that was probably the main reason.

"Oh, that's right. Our backstory is we're a bunch of village hicks what don't know nothin'."

"'Backstory'…? You know what, never mind. If I start questioning every word you say, it will probably drive me mad. Just save your comments for now."

At last, Ares was finally starting to get the knack for how to deal with these girls!

"Humans and monsters have been at odds for as long as anyone can remember, but humans have always had the advantage due to our cohesion and unity. That is, until the Dark Lord led the monsters in a unified assault a hundred years ago. The Dark Lord's army usurped our territories one after the next. He even had demonkind on his side that were skilled at fortification magic. Some of the cities he stole from us were transformed into demonic strongholds that have yet to be recovered to this day."

"But the Dark Lord was defeated, wasn't he?"

“Not exactly. We managed to successfully repel him, but no one knows what became of him afterward. We say the war a hundred years ago ‘came to an end,’ but essentially, the Dark Lord disappeared from sight and simply ceased his attacks. If the Dark Lord was to return, then naturally, his surviving generals and minions would begin to stir as well. New monsters would likely join him as well. That is the Dark Lord’s nature.”

The Dark Lord wasn’t just strong. He was a symbol of the demise of peace.

“It’s why I’m trying to become a Holy Protectorate and defeat the Dark Lord. To protect our way of life.”

Ares was determined. He had a distant goal in mind and was powering toward it with implacable resolution.

“It’s too bad we’re the ones who will be defeating the Dark Lord,” interjected Psycho teasingly.

“Nuh-uh—Ares is going to be the one to defeat the Dark Lord!” snapped Rhiann.

“Watch out, here she comes—the high priest of the church of Ares!”

“I mean, we were asked specifically to defeat the Dark Lord. By the Goddess,” said Homura timidly. In fact, it was why they had been summoned to this world.

“Calm down, Rhiann. As long as the Dark Lord is defeated, it doesn’t matter who actually defeats him. Our ultimate goal is peace.”

“Yes, exactly! Absolutely! It doesn’t matter who does it! I hereby give you permission to defeat the Dark Lord.”

“What do we need your permission for?!” cried Psycho.

As always, Rhiann’s opinion was quick to change depending on how Ares felt.

“All the same—you girls have set some ludicrously high expectations for yourselves. You really are impossible.”

Despite what he said, Ares was not mocking their goal or dismissing it as nonsense. If there was one thing Ares could appreciate, it was when people took their mission seriously.

“You’ve got it the wrong way around. It’s *because* we’re impossible that we have ludicrously high hopes!”

“You’re not helping, Psycho… Not that I disagree, but still,” said Homura.

Psycho was right. At the end of the day, they were just plain weird.

“In any case,” Ares began, “this rumored Dark Lord may not even be the same Dark Lord as the one from a hundred years ago. According to your report, he’s using something called the ‘Curseblood of the Dark Lord’ to create allies?”

“I’m…not sure if they’re actually allies or not. After all, it didn’t seem like Rotraud was receiving any particular orders.”

“Either way, I’ve never heard of the previous Dark Lord using such measures. This may indicate that a successor has appeared. One that has intentionally assumed the title of ‘Dark Lord.’ He must have a lot of confidence if so. We can assume it’s someone strong enough to handle himself even if a Holy Protectorate of the Shield came knocking.”

Hierarch Falmeyr had stated something similar when Homura and the girls delivered their report. The fact that both Falmeyr and Ares had reached the same conclusion went to show how wary they were of this Dark Lord.

Homura recalled the giant cleft in the earth she had seen while atop the defensive wall surrounding Galdorssia; it was a vestige of war that’d been left behind by the Dark Lord. What would it mean to fight the Dark Lord…? It gave Homura pause.

While Homura was still pondering the nature of their enemy, she suddenly heard cheers of excitement rise up from the center of town.

“Huh? Is there some sort of event going on?”

The crowd did not sound small. Based on their cheers, there was some sort of show in progress. Ares’s face grew grim. “That must be the central plaza that Captain Torreque mentioned.”

“Do you think so?”

“We heard a little about what’s been going on there. It’s nothing you’d want to see.”

Torreque had referred to it as “uncivilized business.”

“You’re right, that does sound like something we should check out!”

“Did you not hear what I just said?!” exclaimed Ares, and who could blame him? “Still…as much as I hate to say it, even if it’s for different reasons, I think I agree. We don’t want to see this—but that’s why we should. Before we can protect this town, we need to understand its true nature. There’s a *sickness* in this town, and it’s happening in the plaza.”

A large crowd of citizens and merchants had gathered in the central plaza, and they were currently hooting and hollering with excitement.

The round plaza was quite large and paved with stones. An impressive manor stood at the farthest end, which was apparently where the governor lived. Unlike the standard homes in Aurerich, which generally had simple exteriors, the governor's manor had been built with attention to design and included ornate, fine molding details.

A wooden structure, much like a stage, had been erected at the end of the plaza closest to the manor. It was around this stage that the spectators were gathered.

"Behold, you stupid plebs!" shouted a high-pitched voice.

A swarthy and gaudily dressed girl stood atop the stage. She looked to be about fourteen or fifteen and was tall, lithe, and slender. But despite her frame, she hardly looked weak, and her muscles were subtly defined on her exposed limbs and abdomen. Noticeably, she was wearing an unusual pair of gauntlets on her wrists that looked as if they would serve as highly effective weapons.

She seemed to enjoy the attention she was receiving. She bathed in the fevered stares of the crowd with an expression on her face that looked both ecstatic and sadistic.

"The punishment is about to begin! It's the needle-mitts for this piece of filth!"

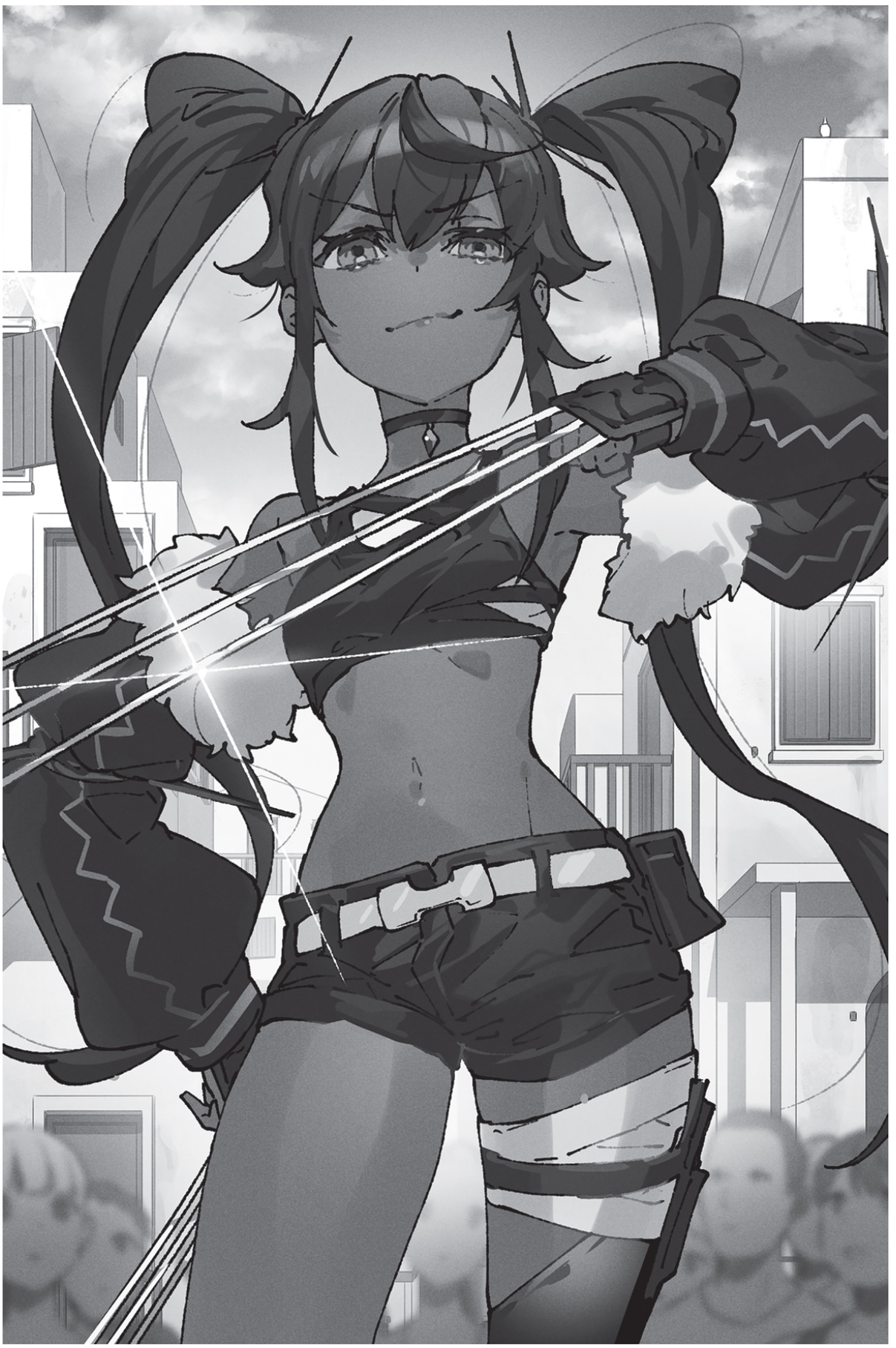
There was a man hanging like a sandbag from a trestle frame on the stage next to her. His upper body had been laid bare, leaving his scrawny flesh exposed. A cloth gag had been wedged between his teeth, muffling his shouts.

"That's the governor's daughter, Elyliyah. Apparently, she's had free reign over this town ever since the governorship changed hands a year ago," said Ares, glaring at the girl. The outrage he was feeling was evident in his eyes.

"The charge, I'm told, is theft, and you pilfered three loaves of bread. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Elyliyah viciously tore away the prisoner's gag. As soon as the gag was removed, a stream of invective poured from his lips.

"It's your fault! You're the reason everything has gone wrong here! You forbid alms from the church, so now people like us—"



“Did everyone hear that—? This man doesn’t even acknowledge his own guilt!”

A ripple passed through the plaza. Shouts of “no mercy” rose from the crowd.

“It falls on us, then, to help him realize the truth.” Elyliyah’s mouth warped into a broad grin, leaving her teeth exposed. “Punishment by needle-mitts, three blows!”

Elyliyah raised her what she called her *needle-mitts*, a set of gauntlets affixed with three long, sharp protrusions.

“N-no, don’t—!” the man pleaded, his voice quavering with fear. The girl, however, had no plan to stop.

“Ha-ha-ha, yes, that is the look I like to see in a person’s eyes! It gets me so excited!”

The muscles of the man’s exposed limbs grew visibly tense.

“Ready! Set…! One!!”

Elyliyah punched the man hard in the stomach, carrying through with her weight. The punch caused the man to jerk and bounce, but the spikes on her gauntlets had pierced through his torso, causing him to slump back over her fist like a half-limp noodle.

“Nrgh, aaaaaagh—!”

The man screamed in agony.

Elyliyah swiftly withdrew the spikes as blood seeped from the three round holes left behind. The long, thin needles responsible for those holes were now red, dripping wet blood.

“Yes! Yes! Look at how your eyes cringe with terror! The way the screams tear from your throat! Yes, fear me more! Thrill me more! Your Elyliyah!”

Elyliyah’s voice as she grew frenzied at the sight of the prisoner’s terror was loud enough to be heard even over the mad jeering of the crowd.

Homura and the others watched the display from a step behind the crowd. It was all so bizarre and unsettling. The punishment and the jeers of the crowd were revolting. Jin’s sharp gaze, in particular, brimmed with hostility as she watched what was occurring.

“I know a crime is a crime, but all he did was steal a little bread,” she said. “Does that really merit a punishment as harsh as this? And the way everyone is taking so much joy in it…”

“It’s probably the recent instability,” replied Ares. “Apparently, these punishments weren’t always such a huge

event, but the recent talk of unrest has helped transform them into a form of mass entertainment."

The crowd, which was filled with the poor and the well-to-do alike, continued to shout their filthy jeers. There was no way that every citizen of Aurerich was okay with such behavior, but there were enough.

The sight alone sent shivers down Homura's group's spines.

"Our world is no different, though," Psycho noted. "Back in the day, executions used to be public entertainment, and similar things happen even currently."

"But nothing like this…," Homura countered.

"I don't know about that. Dragging down those above you while stomping on those beneath you is a time-honored pastime. You can find it happening almost anywhere."

"M-maybe, but still…"

Like Psycho said, hurting others was a form of entertainment that transcended worlds and generations. People only needed an excuse, and if one wasn't readily available, they could always make one. Humankind loved to trip up those who had it better and to laugh at the misfortunes of those who had it worse.

"We're not much different ourselves. Just think about how much you love to 'burn the trash.' Never forget that the only reason we don't face punishment ourselves is because we take refuge in justice and claim to *set the world right*."

Homura felt her heart skip a beat. Psycho's words had hit close to home.

"Still," Homura began, "there's no way this punishment can fit the crime… You heard what he said; this girl is the one who forbids alms from the church in the first place. She's the real bad guy here…"

"That may be so, but it takes a reasonable mind to see things that way. And reason can easily be eroded."

According to Ares, this raucous spectacle was a daily occurrence. Constant exposure to such iniquity had likely altered the sensibilities of the spectators, to the point where they now saw these excessive punishments as justifiable and right.

"I don't like it, but that doesn't change the truth. Boredom and insecurity can easily corrupt people. It was only for a moment, but earlier today, I, too, found myself craving a fight simply to

satisfy my own desires. It's the burden of being human, one we have to shoulder throughout our lives," said Ares.

His face soured. He took great pride in being a soldier, but he was still human. The look only lasted for a moment, however. The fierce light soon returned to his eyes.

"Which is all the more reason why it is incumbent on each and every one of us to guard our hearts against such corruption. Doubly so for those of us with power."

"Ares…"

Homura was touched by Ares's words. Although she didn't particularly think of her and her friends as righteous, they still had their own lines and boundaries. It was never fair to lash out unjustly. But the lines that people drew for themselves weren't always very firm. If it wasn't for the circumstances, Homura might have easily found herself among that jeering crowd.

All the more reason—that was what Ares had said. All the more reason to guard against the blurring of those lines. Obviously, it was a difficult task. But it was nevertheless important.

"Beautifully said, Ares!" shouted Rhiann.

"I didn't know you had it in you!" said Psycho.

Their voices momentarily cut through the constant jeers of the crowd, but they were soon swallowed up once more.

"Hey! Don't go passing out on me! It's time for…blow number two—!!"

Elyliyah delivered her second punch to the man. His screams rang out loudly as fine splatters of blood rained through the air.

"You're nothing but a filthy, dirty criminal, but at least your blood is pretty! Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

There was a warped smile of pleasure plastered across Elyliyah's face as she tortured the man. It was clear from her expression that meting out justice was not her main motivation right now.

"Aurerich does not belong to Galdorssia. We were just dispatched here to defend the city," Ares explained. "As long as they do not do anything to blindly injure citizens or threaten peace, we cannot take action. We do not have the authority to stop this."

"Even if the punishments are this excessive…?"

"Look toward the back of the stage."

Homura peered past the platform, as Ares had told her to. She hadn't noticed earlier because of the crowd, but a priestess from the church was waiting there.

"If this behavior hasn't become a problem for the town, it must mean they are keeping the punishment of prisoners within the confines of law and order. The person being punished is a criminal, and their wounds are being healed immediately after. Having a system like that in place probably makes it difficult for people to openly criticize them."

The governor's daughter was more circumspect than they had thought.

"That's why we need to hurry up and become stronger, defeat the Dark Lord, and return peace to the world. If we don't eliminate this instability taking hold among the people, similar things will just continue to happen. Whereas simply stopping this gruesome spectacle would not fundamentally solve anything," said Ares with conviction.

Meanwhile, the man hanging from the trestle was about to receive his third blow.

"Don't die on me now—I'd hate to never get the chance to beat you again! Here comes…blow number three—!!"

This time, the man didn't even scream. He lost consciousness the moment the third blow landed. Regardless, his punishment was now over. Now that the disgusting show was at an end, they expected the plaza to sink into quiet again.

However, that was not the case. Unlike the first two blows, as Elyliyah withdrew her spikes from the man's stomach, blood spurted into the air with incredible force. There was something clearly unnatural about the way the blood shot out. Likely the effect of some sort of magic.

"Your punishment is over. Be grateful—your crimes have been settled."

The smell of blood reached all the way to Homura and the others in the back of the crowd. The jeers of the crowd, meanwhile, had grown to a fever pitch, likely spurred on by the stench.

The sound of their odious chanting rattled Homura to her core.

However, the crowd's frenzy dissipated swiftly. Not because calm had returned—rather, a new source of terror had arrived.

"Mii, come get your dinner!" cried Elyliyah.

In response to Elyliyah's call, a monster suddenly slunk forth from thin air—or more specifically, from inside Elyliyah's shadow.

"What…is that?" said Homura, going pale at the eerie sight.

"I've seen one before in a book at the Seminary. It's a bloodlicker cat. They're a fairly dangerous breed of monster," explained Rhiann.

The bloodlicker cat was about the size of a lion or another large cat, and it had a thin, emaciated physique. Its appearance was horrendous, with neither eyes nor fur. Its pale skin was slick and clammy like a leech.

The crowd, which had been in an uproar just moments ago, immediately fell silent, holding their breaths so as not to startle the grotesque creature.

"How can the governor's daughter keep a monstrous beast like that as a pet? What is wrong with this town…? Monsters like that aren't usually friendly to humans. How did she even manage to train it? Although, seeing those weapons on her fist, I think I can imagine."

The bloodlicker cat extended an elongated tongue from its gaping mouth. The long, thin organ began licking up splatters of blood, much like an earthworm wriggling in the dirt.

It was hard to tell what part of this hideous, perverse creature was supposed to be a cat. If someone had told Homura it was an alien, she would have believed them just as easily.

"Yes. Monstrous beasts that are this obviously deformed usually have abilities that are just as unusual. If that creature ever got out of control, we would probably be hard-pressed to stop it."

Even Ares, who had single-handedly defeated a clawbear, seemed to view the bloodlicker cat as a formidable threat. It must have seemed even more terrifying to the ordinary citizens, who lacked his fighting abilities.

Elyliyah's booming voice suddenly filled the quiet plaza.

"I can't hear you…"

Her voice was devoid of emotion, her eyes dark and bottomless. But there was an edge to her words, which made it clear she was furious that the eyes of *these plebs* were no longer upon her.

"E-Elyliyah… Elyliyah! Elyliyah!"

"Elyliyah! Elyliyah! Elyliyah! Elyliyah!

“Elyliyah! Elyliyah! Elyliyah! Elyliyah!
“Elyliyah! Elyliyah! Elyliyah! Elyliyah!
“Elyliyah! Elyliyah! Elyliyah! Elyliyah…!”

The crowd chanted her name, eyes wide, mouths frothing.

They weren’t praising her. They weren’t even showing respect. They were terrified of this girl, desperate not to be the next to feed their blood to the cat. This girl was so cruel that she frightened them even more than the grotesque monster standing beside her.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Enough. Let’s go, Mii.”

Having basked in their cheers to her satisfaction, Elyliyah turned on her heel and headed back toward the manor. The bloodlicker cat slunk after her, cozying up to Elyliyah’s side.

The chorus of chants continued even after the governor’s daughter disappeared from sight. Even after the prisoner was released and the priestess finished healing his wounds.

“I’m not really in the mood for fun anymore,” said Psycho. “Let’s head back.”

“Yeah…,” Homura agreed.

Despite how much they had been enjoying the beautiful port town earlier, the mood had been thoroughly ruined. Homura’s thoughts were gloomy as she turned to leave. As she turned around, however, she realized that Tsutsumi, who was much shorter than the others, had been watching the events from atop Jin’s shoulders. And Proto, who was similarly short, had *quite literally* craned her neck into the air in order to see the show.

“What if someone sees you?!” Homura shouted in a hoarse whisper.

Fortunately, Homura and the others were at the back of the crowd, so no one had been looking their way, but if they had, there would have been hell to pay.

“We’re going to stay and observe the town for a little while longer,” said Ares.

“That’s very diligent of you.”

“Someone’s got to be.”

Homura and the others began walking, leaving Ares’s group behind.

No one spoke on their way back to the garrison, likely preoccupied with their thoughts. About the governor's daughter, Elyliyah. About the crowd that had gathered in that plaza. And of course, with thoughts about themselves.

As they walked in silence, however, Homura swore she caught sight of something in one of the shop fronts. Something that had no business being in such a place.

"H…huh?" she said reflexively.

"What? What is it?" Psycho asked.

"I must be imagining things. For a moment, I could have sworn that store back there was selling school PE swimsuits…"

"Don't be a moron. There's no way they'd be selling Japanese school swimsuits in this world."

"You're probably right…"

It sounded just as crazy to Homura as it did to Psycho. She still glanced back at the shop, however, one last time. There it was, out in broad daylight: a navy-blue one-piece swimsuit hanging at the front of the shop!

"No, I was right! It's right there, a PE swimsuit! Over there, in that shop!"

Homura pointed in the direction of a shop that seemed to sell nothing but school PE-style swimsuits.

"Don't be stupid, there's no— Holy shit, you're right…!"

Psycho flinched in horror.

Chapter 4
Swimsuit Quest, PE in a Parallel World

Homura and the girls craned their necks to stare up at the shop's sign.

There it was. SCHOOL SWIMSUITS, written in the language of this world. And hanging in the shop was something the girls thought they would never have to see again.

"Why, good day there, young ladies! I see you have an appreciation for school swimsuits?" said the shopkeeper, beckoning them over as he noticed them. He was a friendly older man. He looked them over with an appraising eye. There was nothing obviously lecherous in his stare, but it was clear what he was thinking.

"Yes, yes—you're just the type of girls I would love to see in one of these swimsuits. Ah, the bare limbs, the curve of the silhouette in a one-piece suit—pure works of art. There is nothing more beautiful in this world than a young lady in a school swimsuit."

"Geez, what the hell kind of a thing is that to say?! Shove it—the only thing I'm interested in hearing from you is what kind of screams you make when you die, so how about you get lost and take your stupid shop with you?!"

"Yes, yes, I know exactly how you feel. And I've got just the thing for a fine young lady such as yourself. A school swimsuit!" said the shopkeeper, ignoring everything Psycho had said in order to further extol the virtues of his swimsuit wares. There was something wrong with this guy.

"Ugh… Whenever I see these kinds of swimsuits, it makes me think of swim class. All those eyes, the boys' and the girls'. So many creepy…stares…"

Everyone had their own cross to bear. For Homura, the sight of school swimsuits brought back memories of the creepy, lecherous stares of her classmates. She trailed off, however, as she remembered that she herself had just been perving on

Proto in a similar fashion. The other four girls were staring at her, as if point out her hypocrisy.

“Eyes…? Yes, now that you mention it, I, too, was often subjected to staring.”

Homura sensed instinctively that Jin’s experience had been a little different from her own.

“That’s probably because you’ve got such a nice figure, Jin. Like a supermodel’s. I have a feeling the way they looked at you wasn’t the same way they were looking at me.”

“Is that so? I’m not sure I understand.”

In any case, who would have imagined they would stumble upon school PE swimsuits in an entirely different world…? Homura touched the fabric of one of the swimsuits laid out at the front of the shop, rubbing it between her fingers.

“Hmm? The texture seems a little different… It’s stiffer than I remember.”

The sensation against her fingertips felt off. While there was some stretch, it was a noticeably heavier fabric than the kind she had worn in the past.

“Oh, so you understand the difference between swimsuits, young lady? Quite the discerning eye!”

“…”

“Yes, yes, ignoring me is an excellent touch. The perfect complement for any young lady in her school swimsuit best!”

What the hell was this guy talking about?

Synthetic fabrics probably didn’t exist yet in this world, so it made sense that the cloth felt different. Although they were similar in appearance, these “school swimsuits” were, in fact, something different. Just the fact that they were similar, though, was already strange enough.

“As you are aware, these swimsuits are a specialty of *School Village*. Functionality and quality guaranteed! You’ll want to buy at least one if you plan to enjoy the beach.”

“I’m not aware of that. I’m not aware at all…! But of course, I see. ‘School’ is the name of a village, then.”

It seemed *school*, in this case, was not the same thing as an elementary *school* or a high *school*. It was a place.

“Um, sorry, but are there any other stores around here selling bathing suits?”

Having come all this way to another world, Homura would rather not be forced to wear a PE swimsuit. She did want to

play on the beach, however.

"Sorry, until recently, there were plenty of shops selling all sorts of bathing suits, but…due to the ship attack, the beach is currently closed. I'm the only shop eccentric enough to keep trying to sell bathing suits when the beach isn't even open. Not that I'm making any sales, though, obviously."

"I wouldn't say 'eccentric' so much as 'crazy'…"

It was almost like he wanted to go bankrupt.

"Wait a moment, did you say 'School Village'?" said Jin, suddenly realizing something. Her face twisted up slightly in thought. "What was it that Geldorf said about the name of that village where they make swords that resemble katanas…?"

Jin placed a hand on the katana at her waist.

"You're right! He did say it was something like 'Skoo' or whatever, didn't he…?"

"Yes, yes—in addition to the most beautiful swimsuits in all the world, School Village is also famous for selling somewhat unusual weapons," said the shopkeeper helpfully.

Jin nearly fainted at the news. She managed to power through and only fell dramatically to one knee instead.

"That is terrible news… Terrible news indeed…," said Jin, placing a hand to her face, aghast.

"I understand how you feel, Jin. We finally find a village that makes katanas, and it turns out to be a den of weirdos…"

"Yes, yes, I have the perfect thing for a young lady in despair. Why, it's a school swimsuit!"

"You be quiet!"

Seriously, what in the hell was this guy on about?

In any case, the long and short of the matter was that the very object that Jin had dedicated herself to finding was made in a very odd village. Even as stouthearted as she was, the shock must have been great.

"You girls are soldiers, aren't you?"

"Yes. Speaking of which, you don't know if any of the stores in town sell katanas, do you?"

"If it's weapons you're looking for…you'd do better to visit the village directly. Katanas are only used by soldiers from School Village and by people from across the sea. The only kinds you'll find in Aurerich are showpiece versions for the rich."

Unfortunately, it seemed they weren't going to be able to get their hands on a real katana while in Aurerich. The one that

Geldorf had mentioned seeing had probably been an impractical decorative piece.

"It can't be helped… Once we finish this mission, would it be all right if we pay this village a visit?"

There was a resigned look in Jin's eyes. But if it was necessary, then it was necessary.

"I'm honestly shocked at just how little I want to go there…but I guess we've got no choice."

"My gratitude."

Their next port of call had unfortunately just been decided. Necessary or not, Homura was less than thrilled.

"I really, really, really don't want to go…," she muttered.



"I guess we're wearing PE swimsuits after all…"

"Them's the breaks. Nowhere else is selling swimsuits anymore," said Psycho.

Homura and the others were staring out at the sea, dressed in school PE swimsuits. Their trail of footsteps was visible behind them, across an otherwise attractively even blanket of sand. They weren't quite in the full swing of summer yet, but Aurerich's climate was hotter than Galdorssia's, meaning it was more than warm enough for beachside fun.

"At least it's deserted; that's one bright spot."

Since the beach was currently off-limits to ordinary people, they had the whole place to themselves. There was no need to worry about anyone else seeing them. Even Proto and Tsutsumi were able to take their disguises off and bask openly in the sun.

Homura turned her eyes toward the sea.

"Let's not sweat the small stuff, right? At least we get to have some fun. Look at how beautiful the water is!"

The only oceans that Homura had ever seen before were dark and cloudy. Clear blue seas were something that had only existed in the world on the other side of a TV screen. Homura's heart beat with excitement. They might as well get into the vacation mood, kick back, and enjoy the beach to its fullest.

"Oceans are…full of fish…aren't they?" said Tsutsumi, standing by Homura's side and staring at the sea. Her strangely colored eyes sparkled from the sunlight reflecting off the surface of the water.

“That’s right. Maybe we’ll find some cute fish or some unusually colored ones. We can look for them together!”

Tsutsumi reacted with excitement, just as you would expect for a young girl her age. Homura was relieved. It was rare to see Tsutsumi take an interest in anything besides combat and food.

“What if I release poison…into the water? We’ll catch so many fishies, and then I can eat them all…!”

“I don’t think that would be a very good idea in this world, either! But hey, I don’t see why not!”

“Don’t even think about it, you dimwit.”

Even though it was Tsutsumi’s idea, Jin rapped Homura on the head instead for some reason.

“Besides, you should stay where it’s shallow. Whatever monster attacked that ship is still out there, after all.”

“Fine…”

Although there wasn’t much for them to do, just moving their bodies and running around for leisure’s sake was fun enough. The five girls frolicked on the beach while keeping one eye on the water.

They splashed one another with waves, kicked sand at one another, paddled about in the shallows, built sandcastles, kicked sand at one another, kicked sand at one another, kicked sand at one another…and before anyone knew it, it had turned into a fight.

“No more kicking sand!” shouted Homura, who was receiving the brunt of the attacks. She had finally lost her temper. “Let’s find something else to do!”

The others reluctantly relinquished their sand.

Now, then. While trying to think of something they could do, Homura suddenly remembered—

“I’ve always wanted to try watermelon splitting. But we don’t have a watermelon or a stick.”

They didn’t even know if there were watermelons in this world. They could always use a different fruit instead, but Homura really wanted it to be a watermelon.



“‘Watermelon splitting’? What the hell is that?” asked Proto, who was not entirely familiar with these Earth customs.

“Watermelon splitting is… Well…” Now that Homura thought about it, she didn’t actually know the rules. “If I remember correctly, one person is blindfolded, and they move around according to the instructions given by the other people and try to split open a watermelon by hitting it with a stick…I think? Wait, do you spin the person around first?”

“What…? What’s so fun about that?”

Homura’s explanation had been somewhat muddled, seeing as she didn’t actually know the rules, but she had a feeling that even if she had explained properly, Proto wouldn’t get what was supposed to be so fun about it to Earthlings.

“You’d have to try it to understand…maybe?”

“Why do you keep wording everything like a question?”

“I can’t help it! I’ve never actually seen it in real life, just in manga or anime!”

Watermelon splitting was as foreign of a concept to Homura as clear blue seas had been.

“So there’s…no watermelon…?” asked Tsutsumi, standing off to the side. Her stomach growled once more, even though she had just consumed a full haul of meat kebabs.

“Tsutsumi…”

Tsutsumi’s disappointment sent pangs through Homura’s heart. That settled it. Tsutsumi deserved to smile. She deserved watermelons, dammit!

“Here you go, Tsutsumi. Here’s some watermelons, just for you! Eh-hee-hee…”

Homura shoved Tsutsumi’s face into her breasts and hugged her tight.

“Hey, Jin—it looks like we found a replacement for the watermelon.”

“Great, and I’ve got a replacement for the stick.”

“Come on, it was just a little joke! They’re big and round, aren’t they? I just wanted to give Tsutsumi a chance to see what watermelons are like! A-and besides, touch is a very important part of emotional bonding!”

“Let the Homura splitting commence!”

“Can’t we play a less violent game?!”

But the girls' minds were made up. It was time for some Homura splitting. Homura's pleas for her life went unheard.

"Okay, what are the rules?" asked Proto, finally taking an interest in these stupid Earth games.

"Jin doesn't wear a blindfold, she relies on her own sense of sight to move around, and she cracks Homura's head open with the business end of her katana," said Psycho, explaining the rules—mostly for Homura's benefit.

"What…? That does sound like fun," Proto deadpanned.

"That just sounds like an execution!"

Three sets of eyes turned to stare coldly at Homura.

"After we split Homura…can I eat her?"

"I don't mind getting eaten so long as it's by Tsutsumi!"

"You heard her! Then let the Homura splitting begin!" said Psycho.

"No, wait! I'm not ready to die!" cried Homura, begging to be spared. She was starting to believe they were really going to go through with it.

"You're right, this is fun," mused Proto.

"She looks awful. This is great," added Psycho.

They all watched Homura sob for a few moments before finally calling off the game.

"Obviously, it was only a little joke, you birdbrain."

"I thought you were genuinely going to kill me…"

A "little joke" that had almost ended with Homura getting her skull opened. Homura wasn't sure they actually were joking, to be honest. Even now, the no-nonsense look in their eyes was threatening to cause Homura's soul to leave her body.

"Still, I didn't expect you of all people to want to frolic with us on the beach, Psycho."

Believe it or not, Psycho had been the one who said PE swimsuits would be fine and suggested goofing around on the beach. Outside of when she was ridiculing people or gutting bandits, it was rare to see Psycho so actively enjoying herself.

"Yes, but this is all part of my plan for the mission."

"Plan…?"

Apparently, Psycho had a deeper motivation all along. This wasn't play—it was for the mission.

"The beach, beautiful young girls in swimsuits, carefree fun. When combined, these three elements create a synergistic

effect, causing the dreaded man-eating shark to appear! The man-eating shark and likely culprit behind the boat attack!”

Okay, maybe her motivations hadn’t been that deep after all.

“What kind of nonsense are you spouting now?” Homura asked. “You watch way too many B movies—”

Just then, a panicked shout interrupted the sun and fun. It was Proto!

“Shark! It’s a shark!”

“You’re kidding!” shouted Homura in shock both at the sudden appearance of a shark and at the sound of Proto’s voice. Proto rarely sounded this panicked.

Homura almost gave herself whiplash as she turned her head in the direction Proto was pointing. It was there, on the beach, which had been so peaceful up until a moment ago. Even Psycho, who was almost never thrown for a loop, suddenly looked as if she had seen a ghost.

“I’ll keep it busy! You guys go get the Aegis Guard!” Psycho called.

It stood where the waves lapped against the shore. Although misshapen, it was undoubtedly a shark.

The dark eyes of a predator and sharp fangs that could easily shred a human body to pieces—both features differed little from an ordinary shark. But there was one feature that was a major departure…

This shark had legs.

It looked like its pectoral and pelvic fins had mutated. The legs ended in sharp claws, with ridged bones evident beneath the skin. Its four legs clutched the earth powerfully, and its belly slid along the sand like a lizard’s as it crawled out from the sea.

“Leave me and go, quick!” Psycho ordered.

“We can’t leave you on your own! I’ll stay, too!” Proto insisted.

“Thank you… Between the two of us, we might just stand a shot.”

Proto and Psycho were usually first to step up to the plate when it came to goofing off, but this time, they were stepping up to protect the others. The monstrous beast continued to slither its way onto human land, undeterred by the two girls now blocking its path.

Now that the mutated shark had sprouted legs, it was able to extend its hunting grounds to dry land. But there was something else unique about it.

The most distinctive thing about this creature…

“He’s so widdle!!”

…was that it was about the size of the palm of their hands.

After squealing in surprise, the two girls collapsed in the sand, staring bug-eyed at the strange little creature. The shark with legs opened its mouth wide, baring its sharp teeth in a threat, but unfortunately, it was so tiny that the gesture was more adorable than frightening.

Psycho and Proto opened their own mouths in response, as if to answer its threat with one of their own. The whole display was ridiculous, but at least this monster wasn’t dangerous. They were safe for now.

“It’s so small… Do you think it’s a child?” Homura wondered.

“Maybe,” said Psycho. “But the adult version might be the monster we’re looking for.”

Homura crouched down to stare at the tiny creature as well. It was all alone and didn’t seem to have any backup. Maybe it had gotten lost. Tsutsumi and Jin had also approached, peering closely at the tiny monster.

“So cool… So cute…,” said Tsutsumi, baring her own teeth in mock threat and imitating Nitwit One and Nitwit Two.

“Don’t copy those morons, Tsutsumi,” Homura warned.

Psycho and Proto were a bad influence. Better to keep Tsutsumi as far away from them as possible.

The shark-human standoff continued, with both sides intensifying their threats. Belligerence soon devolved into aggression. As the fearsome little shark monster continued to boldly bare its fangs, one of the girls tried poking it with a stick. The shark promptly chomped down on the stick with its jaws, unwilling to back down.

“Ha-ha, take that, you stupid shark—”

“C’mon, would you stop that?” Homura begged Psycho. “If you keep teasing that thing, the mommy shark is gonna come for payback.”

“Let her try. I’ll turn her into shark fin soup! Bwa-ha-ha!”

The shark suddenly skittered away, back toward the ocean. Perhaps it had been intimidated by the sustained attacks from this gigantic foe.

“Aww, he ran off.”

The fierce battle with the monstrous beast was now at an end. Victory belonged to the humans this time.

Homura couldn't help but feel a little guilty, seeing the creature's panic as it ran away. Maybe if they fed Psycho to the mommy shark, it would forgive them. It was worth a shot, at least.

"I was just bullshitting earlier," said Psycho. "I can't believe a shark actually showed up."

"I knew you were making all that up…!"

Homura hadn't really believed it had been a ritual to summon a shark, but she had thought Psycho had some deeper purpose in mind. It turns out she had been spouting complete nonsense the whole time.

That said, if it hadn't been for Psycho's goofy "plan," they would have never donned these PE swimsuits and fooled around on the beach in the first place. It was the first real breather they had enjoyed in a long time, and they had Psycho to thank for that. Not that Homura was going to say as much out loud.

"Well, I guess we should head back and give our report," said Psycho.

The sun had already begun to set at some point, bathing the beach in orange light.

"You don't think Torreque will be mad that we goofed around so much, do you?" Homura asked Psycho.

"Who knows?"

"We were supposed to behave ourselves…"

They had gotten a little carried away. Homura didn't want to be a model soldier or anything, but maybe they could try a little bit harder.

At least they had gotten something out of it, though.

"I do feel like I've learned to love this town a little bit…even if there are things about it I don't like," Homura mused.

They felt pleasantly fatigued. The town, too, was beautiful at this hour in a way that differed from its appearance during the day. Discovering more of it had increased their attachment to it, just as Torreque had suggested. At the very least, Homura now felt a need to protect its beauty. Like a bud of resolve blossoming in her chest.

And just as expected, Torreque was angry.

“I know I’m hardly one to talk, but could you take your jobs a little more seriously?!” he said.

Chapter 5
The Governor's Daughter

"I know I told you to go out and enjoy the town, but you took so long coming back, I was worried you had gone back to Galdorssia!"

Torreque had been waiting, stiff-backed, for them at the entrance to the garrison. While the expression on his face remained soft, a hint of anger had begun to creep into his words. Apparently, he was the type to smile when angry. The furrow between his eyebrows was like a canyon.

"Sorry," Homura said, "it's just been so long since we've been able to kick loose…"

The anger started to fade from his smile as he saw where they were coming from. His eyebrows now seemed to furrow with a different emotion.

"Well, it's hard to stay angry when you put it like that. You've been working pretty hard, after all, considering your ages."

"We're really sorry…"

This was their first day in town, and already, they had gotten carried away and been yelled at. However, something else grabbed their attention at the moment.

"I'm sorry, who is this?"

There was another man standing next to Torreque. The two had just been engaged in discussion. He was stylish, with a nice build. It was obvious that he was fairly well-to-do, but his complexion seemed poor. Not that he appeared unhealthy so much as tired.

"Oh, don't mind me." The man sounded as exhausted as he looked. "I'm going to get going, Torreque. I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused you girls as well."

"Trouble…?" Homura repeated.

But the man left without explaining himself.

"Forget that for now—there's someone else inside who would like to meet you," said Torreque. "Someone who is just around

that age when they can be a bit of a handful, so see that you keep her entertained."

Although his tone was nonchalant, there was a stiffness to his facial expression. Homura didn't like where this seemed to be going.

Torreque led them inside, toward the office. Homura held her breath as the door swung open. The atmosphere in the office was already tense. And the person responsible for that tense atmosphere was currently sitting *on top* of the desk.

"It's about time you all got here."

An arrogant girl in flashy clothing—the governor's daughter, Elyliyah. The red gemstones embedded in the choker she was wearing glittered enigmatically beneath the orestone lighting.

Elyliyah was perched on top of the desk, leaning against her bloodlicker cat, which was sprawled out on the desk beside her. The documents and books must have been in her way, because they had all been pushed off the desk and scattered onto the floor.

Her tone of voice was barbed, suggesting she had grown tired of waiting.

A beat later, the sprawled-out bloodlicker cat raised its head and issued a strange cry. For whatever reason, Elyliyah grinned at the cat's reaction.

"Where were you…?!" hissed Ares, who was standing in a corner of the room, stiff as a board. The other three members of his party were lined up next to him, as still and silent as statues.

The relationship between Aurerich and Galdorssia meant they had to put up with this girl's behavior. Given the bustling streets of this town, it was obvious that the southern kingdom was thriving. Any disturbance to the relationship between the two nations would be a major blow for Galdorssia. And Elyliyah was well aware of that. It was what allowed her to behave so arrogantly.

"What are you waiting for? Take a seat," said Elyliyah.

It wasn't an invitation; it was an order.

It didn't feel right to Homura to sit while their colleagues and captain remained standing, but the other four girls didn't seem to care. In fact, Psycho tossed her feet onto the low table with a *thud*, as if to provoke Elyliyah.

Homura thought about scolding Psycho, but when she saw the look on Elyliyah's face, she decided to let it slide. She didn't

want to start a diplomatic incident, but that look was too satisfying. Elyliyah must have been trying to make them uncomfortable. Too bad for her that kind of stuff only worked on normal people.

“You’ve got a bad attitude, you know that?” said Elyliyah.

“That’s so kind of you to say, but it obviously doesn’t hold a candle to yours,” said Psycho with saccharine contempt.

Like Psycho was one to talk.

“I don’t know, you’re both probably about the same— Ack!” Homura clamped a hand over her mouth in a panic. The words had just slipped out.

“I’m sorry, these girls are new,” said Torreque, trying to mollify Elyliyah. He really was a brownnoser.

“No need to apologize. I, Elyliyah, enjoy putting the fear into those who underestimate me,” said Elyliyah, baring her teeth in a sadistic grin. “I saw you all watching me with those looks of defiance in your eyes.”

Apparently, she had picked them out from among the busy crowd and had even recognized that they had not been afraid of her.

“That’s not all, either. You can’t fool Mii’s nose. There’s something unusual about more than one of you.”

Elyliyah petted the languid bloodlicker cat on the head. The misshapen beast purred, much like a common house cat would.

“You there, the munchkin. Take off your mask,” she said, singling out Tsutsumi immediately.

Tsutsumi hesitated at first, but Psycho nodded. Tsutsumi timidly removed her hood and took off her mask. The result was what you’d expect. The corners of Elyliyah’s mouth twisted into a grin as Tsutsumi’s strangely colored skin came into view.

“Ha-ha-ha! I knew it! You’ve got a demon with you—how mad! Feel free to cause all the trouble you like while you’re here. I’ll be sure to punish you thoroughly when the time comes!”

“What is happening…?” Torreque cradled his head in his hands.

“You next.”

It was Proto’s turn. Understandable, seeing as she was conspicuously disguised. It was too late now, but Homura was beginning to regret not sending the two girls back to the barracks earlier.

“Welp, I guess the secret’s out of the bag!”

Proto removed her hood—telescoping her head into the air as her eyes flashed furiously.

“What the hell is that?” said Elyliyah, taken off guard. Whatever she had been expecting, it certainly wasn’t that. Torreque was at a loss for words. He looked even more shocked than before.

“Wh-whatever… It doesn’t matter what you are. I’ve got you in the palm of my hands now—”

Finally regaining her composure, Elyliyah stared off into space for a moment, as if she was trying to remember something.

“Oh yes, that’s right! This isn’t what I wanted to talk about!” exclaimed Elyliyah in a flurry, as if just recalling why she had come. “You were sent to Aurerich because of the incident with the ship, correct? Forget about that. I, Elyliyah, have something more important for you to do. I want you to retrieve my collection.”

“Your collection…?”

The question wasn’t really about the collection itself, however, but rather about whether this “collection” was really more important than the attack on the ship.

“Yes, the ship that was attacked was carrying pieces from my collection. I was having them shipped from home. They should be washing up to shore by now, and you will be retrieving them for me.”

“And why should we be the ones that have to do that?” said Psycho, her displeasure evident. She could see there was more to this.

“You don’t *have* to; I am choosing to *make* you. Hya-ha-ha! Refusal is obviously not an option. Because if you refuse…you understand what will happen, don’t you?”

Elyliyah glanced pointedly at Proto and Tsutsumi. She was implying that if the girls didn’t obey her, she would reveal their identities. They had Falmeyr’s approval to travel with nonhumans, but Falmeyr’s approval only went so far. There were many people out there who had strong feelings when it came to creatures that weren’t human. And besides, the Holy City of Galdorssia’s influence was much weaker here, and the people were hungry for all manner of decadent entertainment. If the wrong folks were to discover the truth…

The atmosphere crackled with tension. Torreque chose that moment to insert himself between the two groups, speaking pleasantly so as to diffuse the situation.

“Well, there were weapons loaded onboard the ship as well, so they’ll need to be retrieved either way. I had planned for other soldiers to take care of that, but as you just heard, you girls have been personally requested. I hate to ask, but if you wouldn’t mind?”

A painful smile was plastered across Torreque’s face. His desperation reminded them how dangerous it was to offend Elyliyah.

“For the sake of argument, assuming we do what you ask, what is this collection exactly?” asked Psycho.

“There are a variety of items, but what I’m most interested in having you retrieve is a weapon much like the one she is holding over there,” said Elyliyah, pointing rudely with her foot.

“A…katana?” Psycho said, glancing at Jin’s katana.

“In fact…,” said Elyliyah suddenly, “I’ve got an excellent idea! As a reward, I will let you keep it.”

Something didn’t add up.

“You’re not making sense. Didn’t you just say the katana was the thing you wanted to recover most?” Psycho asked.

“What has to make sense? All that matters is that you accomplish your goal.”

“You’re up to something…”

“Maybe. But what reason do you have to complain? It’s a much better sword than that butter knife you’re carrying. If anything, you should be thanking me.”

They could tell from Elyliyah’s twisted smile that whatever she was up to, it was nothing good.

“I’d say this was a stroke of luck…if I didn’t know better. Even if we do get our hands on this weapon, I have no interest in charity from some petty thug,” said Jin, not even bothering to glance in Elyliyah’s direction.

Rather than lose her cool, Elyliyah gave a smile of pleasure.

“Yes, there’s that look of defiance I saw earlier. I’m taking more of a shine to you by the minute.”

It sounded like it was Jin she was actually after.

“If we refuse, it could cause trouble for Geldorf…,” said Homura, whispering into Psycho’s ear.

She was less worried about Galdorssia and more worried about their benefactor. If they messed things up, it would obviously be their guardian, Geldorf, who would have to take the fall.

“Hmph… So you’re saying if we refuse, we could lose our swanky digs. Fine then, we’ll accept the request.”

Meanwhile, Psycho was less worried about Geldorf and more worried about hanging on to their sweet living arrangements.

“And this way, I get to keep my head on my shoulders as well,” said Torreque. His words seemed like a joke, but the expression on his face was full of genuine relief. “We’ve collected some information when it comes to where articles come ashore. Based on tides in the area, there’s a strong chance the items would have washed up at a nearby fishing village. Although it may be a little dangerous, you can probably get there and back by boat in a single day.”

Torreque paused for a moment, as if the rest of what he had to say was difficult.

“Unfortunately…we haven’t had any visitors from the village these past several days. Usually, people from the village come on a regular basis to sell their fish to the merchants. In other words, it’s highly likely that trouble has occurred. We were planning to investigate the village soon and pick up any stranded goods while we were there, but, well, it looks like it’s up to you guys now. I’m sorry, that’s just the way it is.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!” Psycho demanded.

“Yes, I’m very sorry, but it is what it is.”

“What is what it is?!”

Torreque had conveniently waited to reveal this important piece of information until after the mission was already decided. They were starting to catch a glimpse of what Elyliyah was hiding, and it sounded like they were getting themselves mixed up in something big.

“Then we’ll leave first thing tomorrow morning,” said Elyliyah, moving things along.

Hold on, what did Elyliyah just say? What did she mean by “we”? It almost sounded as if she intended to go with them.

The confusion must have been evident on their faces, as Elyliyah’s expression of satisfaction slowly morphed into a blank stare.

“I, Elyliyah, will be accompanying you, of course,” she announced, as if that were the most obvious thing in the world. As much as they hated the thought of traveling with Elyliyah, surprisingly, it was Ares who was first to raise objections.

“That is unacceptable!”

“Excuse me? I don’t believe I was talking to your group.”

“Perhaps not! But regardless of your behavior, you are an important figure in this town. As soldiers, we cannot simply stand by and allow you to be sent into unnecessary danger.”

Elyliyah looked bored. “Then you’ll just have to protect me, I guess.”

“Merely allowing you to go to such a place—”

“Fine, fine, I get it—you’re not confident in your ability to protect me. Or maybe you’re just scared of fighting? Feel free to tuck tail and run if anything happens—I don’t care.”

Elyliyah picked at her nails with disinterest. The defiance in Ares’s eyes grew stronger. Her complete lack of faith in them and her final words—*Run, I don’t care*—seemed to have touched a nerve.

“Run…? I never run… I will protect you to the last no matter what happens—you’ll see!”

The emphasis in Ares’s tone made Elyliyah realize she had hit a soft spot. Her eyes widened for a moment, but she quickly narrowed them again as she smiled sadistically.

“Well, well. You’re more intriguing than I thought. Fine, protect away, little soldier boy. I look forward to seeing what you can do.”

They could practically hear Ares clenching his teeth. Rhiann stared at Elyliyah as well, quietly seething. The fact that she didn’t raise a hand, despite her anger, was very impressive. It wasn’t just that Elyliyah’s position made her off-limits, though. Rhiann’s integrity as a soldier would never allow her to do something like that.

Completely ignoring the angry stares directed her way, Elyliyah hopped lightly from the desk, along with her bloodlicker cat.

“It’s all settled, then. I look forward to tomorrow,” she said, exiting the room.

The silence after she left was glaring. The anger in the room was so palpable that it gave them the chills.

“Captain Torreque! Why do you let that girl lead you around by the nose?!” said Ares, exploding in a fit of anger, after having apparently waited for Elyliyah to be out of earshot.

“Don’t be so angry, Ares. Can’t you give an old guy a break? I don’t have the authority nor the prowess to go up against young Ely.”

“Be serious—!” Ares realized suddenly that Torreque wasn’t joking around this time. He had spoken with a straight face. “I’m sorry… I let my emotions get the better of me.”

“No, no, you’ve got a point. I’m just trying to avoid what needs to be done, after all,” said Torreque, patting Ares lightly on the shoulder. “Homura, the man who you and the others met earlier was Elyliyah’s father. In other words, the governor of this town.”

Homura recalled the stylish, well-built, and extremely tired man they had bumped into earlier. The expression on his face didn’t seem fitting for the governor of such a beautiful and bustling town.

“According to her father, Elyliyah used to be a very sweet and well-behaved child. But after getting wrapped up in an incident of sorts, her personality changed into what you just witnessed.”

“I heard about that while we were in town.”

“Good job, Ares. I knew I could count on you. You take your work seriously. But as that is the case— Although, I won’t exactly ask you to forgive Ely, but maybe you can find it in your heart to understand.”

“I suppose if there are extenuating circumstances…,” said Ares, though he could hardly get the words out through his gritted teeth.

“Ely’s father and I are doing everything we can for her, but as we don’t understand the root of the problem, we have little resort.”

Come to think of it, Torreque mentioned that he had an appointment to go get drinks with the governor earlier. He didn’t smell like booze, though. Perhaps they had actually been having a serious discussion about Elyliyah the whole time.

“In any case, I’m sorry for sticking you all with this completely unrelated task when you were supposed to be here to investigate the attack on the ship. Don’t worry about that now—we’ll figure something out with our own men.”

“Actually, we had something to report regarding that…”

Now that the subject of conversation had finally returned to the merchant ship, Homura suddenly remembered that they had information to share.

“While we were fooling around on the beach, we came across a shark with legs. We thought it might be related to the incident.”

“A…a shark with legs!”

Torreque’s expression suddenly froze. He went to the bookshelf in silence, withdrew one of the books without hesitation, and began flipping through the pages.

“Did it look like this?”

They peered at the open page, but the picture there looked nothing like what they were expecting. This was a drawing of a “sharklike human.” It was obviously a demon, not a monstrous beast.

“No, what we saw was a monstrous beast. A monstrous beast with legs where its fins should be.”

“Oh, a sharklike monstrous *beast*! Not a demonkind, then.”

Torreque’s face relaxed in apparent relief. Monsters were divided into two major categories: “demonkind” and “monstrous beasts.” Demonkind were humanoid monsters, which possessed intelligence just like humans, and were also referred to as “demi-humans” in some places. Monstrous beasts referred to the wide range of other monsters out there.

“Then perhaps it was this one.”

Torreque showed them a different book, this one with a picture of the exact monster they had seen at the beach. If there was one point in which it differed, it was that the surface of the shark in the book looked coarse and tough. It was probably a difference between juvenile and adult specimens, though.

“That’s pretty much it. Except that the one we saw was tiny.”

“Hmm…”

Torreque twisted his face up in consternation.

“These are known as crawler sharks, but usually, so long as their territory isn’t disturbed, they remain peaceful. And their territory is far from here. If they’re showing up near Aurerich, that could be a bad sign.”

“A bad sign?”

“Very bad. There is no way a young crawler shark would wander so far from its territory. It would be better to assume that either something has caused its habitat to shift, or it

traveled here with an express purpose in mind. In other words, there may be a whole school of them somewhere nearby. Perhaps the reason we haven't had any visitors from the fishing village is because they're too scared of crawler sharks to set sail right now."

"So by going to the village, we'll be investigating the incident after all."

"I guess things have worked out in a sense, though I would hardly call it a happy development… In any case, perhaps the reason for tomorrow's job is starting to make a little more sense now?" said Torreque, directing his last statement toward Ares.

"Y…yes, I suppose…," Ares reluctantly agreed, although he still didn't seem entirely convinced.

"Now then, you should get some rest tonight," said Torreque cheerfully, as if to banish the gloom in the air around them. "Tomorrow will likely be a very tiring day, in particular for your spirits!"

But of course, several of them were already asleep.

"Hmph… You girls really are hopeless."

"Sorry, we just got so worn out by all that fun on the beach…," said Homura, smacking the other four awake as Ares stared at them in exasperation.

Chapter 6
Hidden Feelings

Upon returning to the barracks, the five sat upon their beds and reflected on the events of the day. The beautiful streets of the town, and the hideous central plaza. Their original mission, and their new orders. Naturally, the subject eventually turned toward Elyliyah.

Her despotic behavior annoyed them all, but they couldn't help but wonder if there was an even more malicious reason behind her actions.

"She's up to something; I know it," said Homura.

"It's certainly nasty, whatever it is," agreed Psycho.

The beds were lined up in an orderly fashion. The somber mood lent a sense of gloom to the orestone-lit room.

"And if anyone knows nasty, it would be Psycho."

"You want me to dole out some capital punishment right now?"

"Punished for the crime of telling the truth!"

Homura's and Psycho's shadows began tussling with each other against the wall.

"Anyway, why is she so focused on you?" asked Psycho once the roughhousing had died down. She was speaking to Jin. But obviously, Jin didn't know any better than she did.

"I'm not sure…but perhaps she sees some value in attempting to knock me down a peg."

"Maybe. You do seem like the kind that would be hard to make submit."

Perhaps it was just a dominance thing. They had interacted with Elyliyah only briefly, but they could already tell that she was extremely sadistic. Based on the way she had spoken to Ares after he defied her, she seemed to prefer dominating those with a backbone.

"Although if we do get a katana out of this, the timing would be perfect. It sounds like it's quite a fine blade," Homura pointed out.

“Didn’t you hear what I said? I have no intention of using it.”

“Come on, don’t be like that! You’re our star player when it comes to a fight!”

Homura may have been the one with the most firepower of the group, but Jin was the best at staying deadly in a long battle.

“I said I won’t be using it, and I won’t.”

“Hmph…”

Jin was stubborn. There were some lines she wasn’t willing to cross, no matter what, and apparently, accepting charity from a villain like Elyliyah was one of them. But if they couldn’t get their hands on a katana, they were going to have to visit that oddball place known as School Village. Which was the last thing Homura wanted to do.

Homura didn’t want to twist Jin’s arm or anything, but she couldn’t help but wonder if there was some way to change her mind.

Just then, Proto spoke up. “You know…I’ve been wondering this for a while, but why are you so insistent on using a katana? There were some pretty wicked weapons back on Earth, ones that could even shoot my people out of the sky. If the point is to kill someone, wouldn’t a weapon like that be more dependable? Like guns and whatnot? Nobody here has one, either.”

Homura was curious to know exactly what kind of scientific technology had been used to shoot mechanical outer space life-forms “out of the sky,” but she decided to hold off on asking right now. Homura had also been curious to know why Jin was so insistent on fighting with a katana.

Jin quietly lowered her eyes and began to speak.

“My clan has operated as assassins since time immemorial, but we have always valued a *direct touch* when killing. The act of taking a life should never be treated lightly, even when your foe is an evildoer.”

“Hrmm,” Proto mused. “Maybe—but you seem to enjoy yourself quite a lot when cutting people down.”

Jin froze, seemingly taken aback. “You’re referring to the enlistment exams, aren’t you? Did Psycho tell you about that? It was the chance to test my strength that I enjoyed—”

Homura thought back to the exams as well. Jin had had a maniacal smile on her face while fighting the exam proctor, even after her arm had been crushed. Either one of them could

have killed the other in that situation, but Jin had never stopped smiling.

But that wasn't what Proto was referring to.

"No, I'm talking about when you kill bandits and stuff. You realize you've always got a little smile on your face when you mow them down, don't you?"

Jin pursed her lips. The look of surprise in her eyes made it clear that she was even more taken aback now than before. Silence momentarily filled the room.

"That can't be…"

"It's just a little one."

"But I don't take enjoyment in killing."

"Well, I don't really understand human values, so I don't get the big deal. But if you don't enjoy it, then why are you smiling?"

Jin's eyes flickered to and fro in distraction, as if she was investigating her own feelings. Her lips, however, remained pursed. She seemed to be at a loss.

"In any case, it seems like you don't entirely understand yourself. Not that I'm one to tell anyone how they should want to live their life—that's your business."

"I see… How to live my life. Up until now, I've always lived as *someone else's tool*. I don't entirely understand how to stand on my own two feet…"

Jin stared at her own hands. Hands that had always clutched a katana at *someone else's bidding*.

It took coming to another world before Homura finally understood what she really wanted for herself, so she could sympathize with Jin's present uncertainty.

"I know! You could just embrace yourself like I did! We came all this way to another world; does it really matter if you enjoy slaughtering a person every now and then, as long as they've got it coming?!" said Homura, trying to be encouraging.

"I just told you, I don't enjoy killing," said Jin, using a single finger to flick Homura in her optimistic face.

"Ow!"

"Besides, if anyone should embrace themselves a little less, it's you. A grim fate awaits the churl who abandons themselves to the base pleasures of the material world."

Homura rubbed her now-red face.

“That hurt…and what’s so bad about being a churl anyway? As long as you’re the good kind of churl, at least. Why not make peace with your own wickedness and accept the occasional reward that comes your way? I’d rather be true to what I am, however awful that is, than allow myself to *be killed again*.”

Homura remembered those people who had driven her to her death back in her past life, and her eyes slowly turned glassy. Those who took without mercy deserved to be burned without mercy.

Jin stared at Homura closely.

“What am I saying? You’re right. It’s people’s lives we’re talking about here…,” said Homura, suddenly remorseful as she remembered what they had seen in the plaza earlier that day.

Jin didn’t believe it was as simple as saying that those who were wicked deserved to be slain. It was rude of Homura to suggest she found enjoyment in such an act.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have spoken so flippantly— Hello? Are you even listening to me?”

At some point, Jin had turned her gaze upward. Homura had to get up close and peer into Jin’s face before Jin finally seemed to come back down to earth.

“What? Yes… I mean, no, I was just thinking about how glad I am that we came to this world.”

“Y-you were? Why is that?”

“Because here, I can cut you down at a moment’s notice.”

“Oh no! She’s angry!”

Homura retreated into her bed before she could be summarily executed.

Jin fell silent once more. The quiet that filled the room was eventually interrupted by a question from an unexpected source.

“Is there…something wrong…with being ‘someone else’s tool’?” asked Tsutsumi, sounding uncomfortable. Tsutsumi had been born and raised as a weapon.

“Tsutsumi,” said Proto, “you, me, and Jin all lived our lives as someone else’s tool, but we each had our own circumstances, and what was wrong for me and Jin might have been just fine for you. In other words, it’s one of those things where what matters most is your own intentions and what you yourself want.” She sat down next to Tsutsumi and stroked her head.

“Is there room for me in that sandwich?” asked Homura, poking her head back out from the covers to ask if she could insert herself into the comfy space between Proto and Tsutsumi.

“Only if you don’t mind getting your skull crushed, along with the socially inept pea brain inside it.”

“Ooh, can I think about it? That’s a tough choice…”

“It seems pretty cut-and-dried to me…”

Homura gave it some thought but decided not to get her skull crushed today.

Jin grew quiet once more. There was no need to answer now. She could take as much time as she needed to work things out—which was what Homura was about to say when they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“I’m coming in.”

“Go away!”

“It’s fine, come in!” said Homura, ignoring Psycho and giving Ares permission to enter the room.

“Aieee! What’s the big deal barging into a girl’s room like that, you pervert?!” Psycho shrieked. Everyone ignored her.

“I have something to discuss—”

“Hey, what’s the big deal, huh? Barging in a young girl’s room and not even having the common courtesy to get turned on!” shouted Psycho, her brows knit into an angry V as she got up in Ares’s face.

Silently, without taking his eyes off Homura and the others, Ares grabbed Psycho’s jaw in a talon grip and squeezed it audibly shut.

“Gyahhhhhhh—!”

A ragged scream escaped Psycho’s mouth—it was hard to believe a human could make such a sound—as Ares shoved her backward onto the bed. The fact that he’d pushed her onto a bed instead of just randomly aside was an act of kindness. A small one.

“Ow… I think you might have cracked my jaw…,” said Psycho, rubbing her face.

“You really are an idiot, you know that?” said Ares.

No one cared about Psycho’s jaw.

“As for what I wanted to discuss, it concerns this town and Elyliyah. I thought you should all hear it as well.”

After the needle-mitts punishment in the main plaza, Ares and the others had decided to investigate the town more. They must have heard something in their investigations that he thought was worth sharing.

“The short version is that there is something suspicious about Elyliyah.”

“Suspicious?” said Homura.

Barbaric, yes. Despotic, yes. But in what way was she suspicious? Putting aside this suspicious plan of hers they seemed to be getting wrapped up in, of course.

“The criminals she punishes in the main plaza? Strangely enough, once a criminal is punished like that, no one seems to see them around town again.”

“What? What does that mean…?”

“It would make sense if they no longer felt welcome in town after being made into a spectacle like that. Usually, such people would either get sent to different settlements or fall into banditry. But there aren’t many reports of banditry happening around Aurerich.”

There were many different reasons that people became bandits, but it wasn’t strange for bandits to have committed other crimes to begin with. And even if these people attempted to relocate to a different settlement after finding themselves no longer welcome around town, it was unlikely that people from other settlements would be very open to strange drifters, meaning that, in the end, many people who attempted to move settlements would turn to banditry as well.

“Additionally, groans have been heard coming from the governor’s manor night after night.”

“Well, that’s pretty much your *answer*, isn’t it…?”

Disappearing criminals and mysterious groans coming from the mansion. Homura could easily picture Elyliyah continuing her punishments inside the manor’s walls. She purposely made a spectacle of the criminals in order to keep the people of the town in check, and at the same time, she also created conditions where it would not be strange for the people she punished to suddenly go missing. Perhaps the punishments were all an excuse to satisfy her own sadistic desires. Unforgivable. Homura felt her temper begin to flare.

“Calm down. We don’t know for sure yet if that is the case. Plus, I can’t get over what Captain Torreque said. Elyliyah’s

reputation around town is mostly negative, but people from the Schelles Sea Alliance—meaning people from where Elyliyah originally came from—seem to have a slightly different impression of her. According to those who knew her before she grew troubled, nothing about her really stood out. In fact, to be blunt, most people don't seem to remember her at all."

"Torreque said that she changed after getting wrapped up in an incident of some sort."

"Apparently, she was once kidnapped several years ago."

"Kidnapped…?"

"But the important part isn't the kidnapping. Elyliyah killed the kidnappers herself. It just so happened to be when her magical talents awakened. She didn't simply kill them, either. There was evidence that they suffered for an extended period of time. Which was apparently when her love of inspiring fear through violence began."

Homura was speechless. There was nothing clear she could point to, but something about that story reminded her a little of herself.

"What's wrong…?"

"Nothing, I was just thinking that Elyliyah and I resemble each other a little. The idea, I guess, of discovering your own feelings through some sort of trigger…"

"Are you suggesting her personality didn't change, but rather that she just revealed her true feelings?"

"Maybe, who knows?! But what she is doing is unforgivable either way."

"True, her punishments are excessive. That's why we're going to keep investigating. Just don't stick your nose into things until I ask, okay?"

"I see. You didn't come to ask for our help; you came to cut us off at the pass…"

"Once you girls get involved, things tend to get complicated. We still wanted to let you know, though. Just in case the unexpected happens."

Homura couldn't argue. She may not have been Elyliyah's biggest fan, but it remained to be seen whether her evil really needed to be cleansed with fire. And Homura had enough self-awareness to know that they lacked the delicacy needed for fine reconnaissance. Better to leave matters to Ares…for now, at least.

“But you promise to tell me as soon as I’m allowed to burn her, right?”

“Burn her—? I will do no such thing! If anyone decides what to do with her, it won’t be you five! It will be the law!” said Ares, giving one last warning before leaving the room.

“He’s so serious…”

Apparently, justice was something that was supposed to be administered by “the law.” Go figure. Well, if the offense was serious enough, Galdorssia was sure to get involved eventually as well.

“Poor guy—we should help him out!”

“Don’t even think about trying anything stupid!”

If there was one thing Homura knew, it was that she couldn’t let Psycho do anything stupid.

Chapter 7
A Quiet Fishing Village

“This ocean breeze feels nice. You agree, don’t you?”

The band of new recruits, led by Elyliyah, was on its way to the fishing village via boat. Blue seas and a blue sky surrounded them as the bow of the boat plowed forward through great open waters. Elyliyah was enjoying the voyage, her long hair whipping in the ocean breeze.

“It would be nicer if you weren’t here…”

Naturally, Elyliyah was the only one enjoying themself. Psycho, meanwhile, was in an even grumpier mood than usual, perhaps because of how early it was.

“What was that you said? You are grateful that I, Elyliyah, am here to mask the dingy scent of filth that clings to you all?”

“The only people on this boat who smell like filth are you and Homura.”

“Hey, what did I do?”

She didn’t stink…did she? Homura sniffed herself surreptitiously.

It was a small boat, though still large enough for ten people to fit inside with room to spare. Back on Earth, sailing a ship was complicated, but here, they could use magic to manipulate the wind and create propulsion. Usually, when traveling by boat, you would travel with a professional magic user known as a “ventmaster,” who made their living by such trade, but for this voyage, Rhiann had taken on the role. Manipulating the wind was beginner magic, apparently.

The boat hugged the shore tightly. They weren’t sure yet who was behind the previous attack, so they wanted to avoid the more dangerous deep waters insofar as possible.

The coast was beautiful, without a speck of trash to be seen. But as they continued along, they began to spot bits of wood that had washed ashore—likely fragments of the sunken ship. Elyliyah sat on the edge of the boat and scanned the debris for any sign of her collection. They began to spot what looked like

cargo among the debris, but based on Elyliyah's reaction, none of it was what they were looking for.

As they proceeded, the wreckage grew more abundant. According to what Torreque had said, Homura was pretty sure they should almost be at the fishing village by now—just then, a faint, unusual odor began to tickle her nose.

"There," Elyliyah said. "I see it—the village."

Homura turned her eyes in the direction Elyliyah was looking. A wooden wall came into view, built to obstruct the coast, with multiple piers jutting out into the water. Several small ships and rowboats were moored to the weathered piers.

Homura was a little surprised by the lack of activity, having expected the people of a fishing village to be out early in the morning for the catch. However, Homura was not the only person onboard to react with surprise, although for different reasons.

"What is the meaning of this?" said Jin, suddenly stepping into Elyliyah's personal space. Anger, which was rare for Jin, oozed from her face, and ice-cold hostility saturated her voice. Homura flinched, her skin breaking out in goose bumps.

"The meaning of what? It seems pretty obvious, doesn't it?" replied Elyliyah, fairly blasé.

Homura wasn't sure what they were talking about, but Psycho and Tsutsumi began checking their weapons as if they understood.

"I'm sorry, what's happening…?" said Homura, building up the courage to ask despite the grim atmosphere taking hold. Jin answered, the expression of anger still on her face.

"The stench of blood is in the air."

Ares and the others looked as shocked as Homura.

So that was the source of the unsettling odor mixed with the tide. It was the scent of blood wafting out from the silent fishing village. Something had happened to the village, just as Torreque had feared.

"I don't know why you're staring at me, though—it's not my fault," said Elyliyah, claiming innocence. The sneer plastered upon her face, however, made it clear that she knew exactly what was going on. She continued to grin provocatively, despite the fact that something was obviously wrong. The atmosphere on the boat quickly grew volatile.

"Urk—!"

As the choking stench of blood hit, Homura suddenly felt sick.

“Bwaaarrrgh—!”

The foul scent now invading her nose made Homura imagine what was waiting for them on the other side of that wall.

“Is that all it takes to make you throw up? Are you sure you’re really a soldier?” asked Elyliyah bluntly as she saw the sorry state Homura was in.

Homura wanted to say something as a comeback, but she was in no position to do so at the moment. Fortunately, Psycho spoke up for her, although maybe not in the most helpful of ways.

“You’ve got it all wrong—this is how they go fishing back where she’s from. Homura must have just decided that now would be a good time to catch some fish.”

“Your village sounds really strange…”

“Obviously, that’s not true!”

The fish gathered around as Homura’s breakfast dispersed into the clear waters.

While everyone else goofed around, Ares, who had been silent so far, started to lose his patience. He demanded an explanation.

“Elyliyah, ma’am, would you explain what this is all about?”

“I *told* you, it isn’t my fault.”

“It may not be your fault, but you know what is happening, don’t you?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Elyliyah seemed to want to play dumb.

No amount of pressing was going to get them anywhere. The boat grew quiet once more. Homura resigned herself to the prickly silence.

The silence continued as the boat reached the pier. Clutching her staff, Homura disembarked into the village, which was shrouded now in a foul stench. Ares’s group was just about to follow Homura and the others when Elyliyah told them to stop.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she said. “You guys are waiting here.”

Ares stumbled, his foot already in midair.

“What?! Why?! Something has clearly happened to the village!” shouted Ares, pointing toward the random smattering of houses. There was not a soul in sight nor a voice to be heard. Without people, it couldn’t truly be called a village. At the

moment, it was just a collection of drab wooden houses arranged in sparse rows.

“Why? You said you would protect me, didn’t you? I, Elyliyah, have no plans to dirty my shoes in some grimy little village. I am staying here.”

“What kind of a reason is that—?!”

Ares nearly let his anger get the better of him. He wanted to ask her why she had even bothered to come in the first place, but he managed to barely rein in his emotions. Homura whispered to Psycho, who was standing next to her, as they set foot in the village.

“Do you think it’s safe to leave Ares and the others behind? He seems like he’s about to smite her.”

Ares’s anger was motivated by a strong sense of righteousness. It was unlikely he would take matters into his own hands and administer justice for himself, but Homura couldn’t help but feel uneasy.

“Maybe he’ll kill her, and then it will be a happy ending for everyone.”

“Be serious…!”

The only thing that remained in the village was the scent of blood. The residents seemed to have disappeared abruptly. Nets used for fishing had been left out to dry, and the boxes used to pack fish were piled up in stacks. There was even washing forgotten outside. For some reason, the doors of each and every house had been left open, but there was no sign that anything had been ransacked.

“This definitely doesn’t look like the work of bandits,” Psycho noted. “That little shit Elyliyah has tricked us into dealing with something even more troublesome than we thought.”

Even as they walked farther into the village, they did not spot a single person. Silence, heavy enough to cancel out even the lapping of the tides, spilled forth from the open doorways. What had *once been the owners of those houses* likely waited inside. The stench suggested as much. They thought about calling out for survivors, but whoever had caused this devastation might still be lurking out there. They couldn’t be too careful.

As they continued to walk, fully on guard, Jin suddenly came to a halt at the head of the group.

“There it is.”

Jin placed a hand on her katana. There was a figure crouched over at the center of the deathly quiet village.

“Is that…an ogre?”

To Homura’s eyes, the man resembled an ogre. Two black horns extended from his head. His skin was reddish, and his body was abnormally sturdy and muscular. He held a crimson-bladed katana, but in his massive hands, it looked as scrawny as a twig.

His tattered clothing was splattered with blood from the carnage, but that blood seemed to have been there for some time as it had already turned a rotten brown.

The ogre finally noticed them, jerking its head upward in surprise. Even from this distance, they could see that its eyes were hollow and vacant. It gritted its teeth, as if it was afraid or experiencing some sort of strain.

As soon as they made eye contact, a garish light flashed in the ogre’s eyes.

I’m going to be killed! thought Homura, but in the next heartbeat, the shrill *clang* of metal filled the air.

“Back off!”

At some point, Jin and the ogre had locked swords directly before Homura’s face. It had all happened so fast, a burst of explosive power too quick for the eye to see.

“Get smashed!!”

A moment later, Proto swung her war hammer as hard as she could. There was a tremendous whiffing sound, however, as the hammer flew through open space. The ogre was no longer there.

The creature’s reaction speed was incredible. There was no way they were going to hit it with a proper attack. Homura knew it was a long shot, but she pumped her staff full of flames.

“Buuurrrnnnnnn—!!”

Although Homura was resistant to heat due to her benediction, the burning white flames now spouting from her staff exceeded even her own resistance. The ogre had leaped into the air to avoid the war hammer and had yet to land on the ground again. This was her chance. She targeted the spot where it would come back down. It didn’t matter how fast the ogre was. While it was still midair, there was no way for it to avoid the flames…or so she thought.

The ogre seemed to have a moment of inspiration. It swung its katana hard in the air. A red mist erupted from the blade, and the squall of wind created by the blade swipe obliterated the flames.

“No way!” shouted Homura in shock, knocked onto her ass by the wayward air pressure.

The fact that her flames hadn’t worked was already mind-boggling enough, but there was more. A tremendous *crash* came from behind them. It sounded like something was being destroyed. Turning around to see, Homura realized that one of the houses had just been cleaved in half. A spray of blood had been splattered along where the cut bisected the house. What Homura had assumed to be a wind-based torrent attack had, in fact, just been the fallout from a blood-based attack.

“H…huh…?”

“I repeat, get back.”

“But—!”

Jin can’t fight it alone! However, as much as Homura wanted to say that, the truth was that she was powerless to do much right now. She was more likely to just get in the way.

“You need help,” said Proto.

Proto was the only one who remained by Jin’s side, holding her war hammer at the ready.

“Don’t take too long.”

“Good…luck…”

Psycho and Tsutsumi were already sitting and watching from a distance, happy to be spectators.

“Don’t you think we should be trying to help more…? Er, no, I guess you’re right. We’d just be in the way.”

After a moment’s thought, Homura decided to join them and watch the fight.

Now that there were no more obstructions, the fight with the ogre grew serious. Jin was a precise and highly trained swordswoman, whereas the ogre seemed to be all over the place. It relied on its monstrous strength instead, swinging its katana about wildly in ridiculous patterns that were a far cry from anything that might be called proper swordsmanship. The only reason it hadn’t been injured yet was because its fast reaction speed allowed it to leap out of the way of Jin’s strikes. Unlike Jin, who was dodging each of the ogre’s blows with paper-thin precision.

However, the creature was still tough.

The only times Jin's blade managed to get close was after one of Proto's heavy attacks had created an opening. Proto's war hammer was powerful enough to rend the earth, which forced the ogre to dodge more dramatically than usual, thus giving Jin a chance to lunge in. Conversely, if the ogre decided to target Proto, who was slower, Jin was quick to seize on the opportunity.

Regardless, the fight continued to drag on with neither of the opposing sides scoring so much as a graze. It was a tense, life-and-death struggle. And yet…

"Jin, you're smiling again!" said Proto. It was only a little, but the corners of Jin's mouth had lifted upward. Even at a time like this, when a momentary distraction could spell instant death, Jin seemed to be enjoying herself.

"Just focus on the battle!"

"Sure thing!"

However, whether Jin was enjoying herself or not, she was genuinely trying to slay her opponent. Although it was a stalemate, each and every one of her swings were aimed at vital spots. The ogre, on the other hand, did not attempt to use its blood slash again. Perhaps the move was a last resort, or there was some condition for using it. Instead, it continued to unleash a flurry of standard blows, any of which would have also been fatal were they to hit their mark.

None of the combatants had yielded an inch, and Jin watched the ogre's moves like a hawk.

Just when Homura was beginning to think this stalemate would go on forever, there was a sudden upset. The edge of Jin's blade caught the ogre's right hand, lopping it off at the wrist and sending it flying. The ogre must have been growing tired, because it was moving a little slower than before. Jin was not about to let such an opportunity slip by.

The ogre's right hand tumbled across the ground, still clutching the katana firmly.

"Yes, that's it!" shouted Homura in celebration. The fight was in the bag now.

"It's over."

It was time to eliminate this creature. Jin lunged forward, aiming for the ogre's neck. Her blade kissed the earth before

taking flight, inches from separating the ogre's head from its body.

—Just then, the ogre's mouth suddenly moved.

"__"

Its lips moved furtively for the briefest of moments. Homura and the others could not hear what it said, but it caused Jin to stay her blade midstrike, creating no more than a shallow cut on the creature's skin.

"Jin!"

Frozen in shock, Jin never noticed the ogre's left hand lift into the air. Proto's warning came too late. They heard a dull *thud* as the punch sent Jin flying.

"Urk!"

A groan escaped Jin's lips as her body flipped through the air and then skidded across the earth. A cloud of dust rose up from the impact and then drifted back down slowly.

Jin's right arm did not look broken, but it was trembling now and hung limply. With great effort, she managed to open her numb fingers and switch her katana to her left hand instead.

"This time, let us help! You'll be killed!" Homura shouted.

"The two of us…will be enough…," said Jin, dismissing Homura's offer despite the obvious strain in her voice.

"Jin…"

Jin and the ogre were both injured, but Proto was present and unharmed. They still had the advantage. The ogre was persistent, however. It reached down and grabbed the fallen katana with its left hand, despite the groans of pain spilling from its lips.

The ogre then did something strange. While moving clumsily, almost as if being controlled, it dragged the severed end of its right arm over the blade of its katana.

As the blood from the ogre's stump coated the crimson blade, it began to take on an even more startling shade of crimson. The blade of the katana began to pulse, as if alive. Homura and the others stared in disbelief. Soon, the blood shrouding the katana began to writhe, growing longer and more fiendish. Before long, it was a carmine greatsword even taller than the ogre itself.

"That doesn't look good," said Proto.

"I wouldn't be so sure. I suspect that's eating away at the creature's own life force."

Jin was right; the blood blade seemed to have created itself by feeding on the ogre's blood. It was likely the ogre did not have much longer to live. But the fact that it was willing to take things so far meant that it intended to show no mercy.

Although the ogre was running low on both stamina and blood now, its movements became even quicker and more agile than before. Its strikes almost seemed compelled. The blade was sharper, its reach longer, and it left behind crimson channels where it touched the earth.

The ogre's defense, however, was left completely open. It was impossible to effectively wield a sword that long with a single hand. The ogre swatted the blood blade randomly, almost as if he was trying to bash Jin with a club.

And yet, for some reason, Jin seemed to be struggling more than before. Even when Proto created openings, she barely lunged forward. At this rate, it seemed unlikely that any of her blows would connect.

"Jin, what's gotten into you?!"

"It's nothing."

Jin readjusted her grip on her sword, but her expression remained grim. During the enlistment exams, she had continued to fight with joyful abandon even after losing the use of one arm. Now, however, she seemed reluctant to attack. Her hand was gripping the sword so tightly, you could almost hear the hilt creak, and yet she seemed loath to do what needed to be done.

Now that the pressure was off, the ogre was able to strike at Proto as well. Proto's war hammer descended through the air in an attempt to crush the ogre. The ogre dodged, then struck the fully armored Proto with the handless stump of its right arm hard enough to send her flying.

"Son of a—!"

Proto was launched into the distance, temporarily leaving Jin and the ogre to carry out a one-on-one sword fight. Their movements were too fast for Homura or the others to intercede.

Perhaps it was because they were both already injured, but the edge of their blades slowly began to hit home. Thin sprays of blood danced in the air, tracing fine red lines in the dirt at their feet. But it was not an even exchange. Each time the ogre's blade cut Jin, it absorbed more blood, growing stronger.

If things continue like this for much longer, Jin's going to lose, thought Homura as she watched from afar. In the next instance, however, there was a snag in the ogre's movements. Its legs faltered, likely due to how forcefully it had been moving about despite the blood loss.

"I have you!"

The ogre was wide-open. Jin lunged forward quickly to chop the creature's head off—and then for a brief moment, she hesitated.

The ogre was backed into a corner now, and it responded like a trapped animal. It lashed out ferociously in a panic. And its blade, by coincidence, swung straight toward Jin!

The blow never reached her. In the very next instant, the ogre was flattened into the ground.

"Get it together," said Proto. She had managed to race back to Jin and the ogre's position. The ogre was slow enough by then for one of Proto's attacks to finally land. She had well and truly splattered the creature.

Jin still seemed in shock. Not even Proto's pointed jab had been enough to snap her out of it. She stared at the ogre, which was sprawled out beneath Proto's war hammer, her mind seemingly elsewhere.

"If we didn't kill him, Homura and Tsutsumi would have been killed instead. Psycho, too, but who cares about her?" said Proto, venturing a joke. She did not get the reaction she expected, however.

"Th…that's true…," said Jin.

"Come on, snap out of it already. At least look at the bright side. Now you know it's not the fight-to-the-death part that gets you so excited."

"I already told you—I find no pleasure in killing. Doing so is unforgivable," muttered Jin, mostly to herself, as she turned away.

"Good work."

With the battle over, Psycho began healing Jin's wounds. Jin stood in silence, allowing the healing magic to stitch her up.

"What did he say?"

Nothing got past Psycho. It was obvious that Jin's behavior had only changed after the ogre said whatever it was that it had said.

"He said…"

Jin hesitated, and Proto answered in her place.

“He said, ‘Help me.’”

“That’s what I figured,” said Psycho, inspecting the ogre’s body closely. “Does anyone see a scabbard anywhere?”

Homura began searching the area. She found the scabbard surprisingly easily. “I see it!”

“Attagirl!”

Homura handed the scabbard to Psycho. It was highly ostentatious, its appearance both refined and ominous.

“This is a cursed item—a malefic sword. Our friend here was probably one of the villagers, driven mad by the power of the sword. His clothes look the same as the other villagers’,” said Psycho, pointing to some of the laundry left hanging out to dry. “I guess we know what kind of *collection* that little shit Elyliyah was talking about now.”

Psycho glared at the katana, which had finally fallen from the ogre’s hands. The blood that formed its blade had dissolved, likely because its owner had expired, staining the ground beneath it red.

“A cursed item…? But I just touched it!” said Homura.

“The scabbard is probably fine. There always has to be a way to seal things like this. Otherwise, a massive incident would occur every time anyone so much as sneezed in the thing’s vicinity.”

“Oh? Yeah, I think I’ve seen stuff like that in anime and manga.”

“Or you could just try using common sense, you nincompoop,” muttered Psycho, scolding Homura faintly for being such an otaku. “In any case, he was hardly fighting because he wanted to…”

“So then he wasn’t an evildoer who deserved to be slain?”

Jin nodded silently and took the scabbard from Psycho’s hand.

“Careful, you don’t want to go touching that thing if you don’t have to.”

“I’ll be fine. Probably.”

“Probably?!”

Jin picked up the crimson blade—which had likely feasted on untold volumes of blood—in her bare hand without hesitation. Her vision immediately turned dark red, and her hand tightened on the hilt. Almost as if it was the sword that had picked up Jin in an iron grip, rather than the other way around.

“Just as I expected.”

The moment she took the sword, hazy images seemed to appear, overlaying the figures of Homura and the others. The malefic sword was trying to show her something. Jin looked away, instinctively afraid to see.

But while it seemed clear that the sword did, in fact, lure its wielders to attack people, unlike the ogre, Jin strangely did not feel compelled to commit violence. Rather, she felt an uncanny clamor building in her chest, one that caused her to cling more tightly to her own senses. Not a bewitching clamor, but an alluring one.

Her white-knuckled hand shook as she returned the malefic sword to its scabbard. Once the sword entered its sheath, the stiffness evaporated immediately, as if it had been a dream.

“There… I took care of it.”

“Yeah, and what were we supposed to do if you turned into a monster like that ogre?! You felt something, didn’t you?!” Psycho yelled.

“Forgive me. For some reason, I just sensed I would be all right,” said Jin, although there was doubt on her face. Even she didn’t understand why she had been so sure.

Jin tried grasping and releasing the hilt repeatedly. It felt completely normal, nothing out of the ordinary. The curse seemed to remain inactive so long as the sword was tucked away within its sheath.

There was no way for them to know the intentions of whoever had made this sword. But the thing certainly felt malicious. Whoever had unsheathed this wicked sword after it washed up to shore had likely been unaware of what was waiting for them. And now, as a result, an entire village was dead.

Homura and the others returned to the piers. They had questions for Elyliyah. Collecting the rest of the washed-up goods could wait until later.

“Ugh, that smell!”

The stench of blood, when they returned to the piers, was even thicker than it had been in the village.

“Psycho, look at the water…”

It was red. The chunks of flesh and fragments of metal bobbing on the surface gave off a powerful smell that caused them to wrinkle their noses in disgust. The debris looked as if it was swimming in a pool of blood.

Elyliyah, meanwhile, sat on the edge of the boat amid that carnage, leisurely staring out to sea.

“Eh? How did you get back in one piece? That katana was supposed to… Oh, you brought it with you. I see,” said Elyliyah, sounding less than apologetic as the other five girls glared daggers at her. “What are you looking at me like that for? It’s not my fault. If monsters hadn’t sunk that ship, none of this would have happened.”

While they would have liked to vent their anger on Elyliyah, it would be a pointless endeavor. The way she was treating them made the bile rise in their throats, but the creature responsible for this awful predicament was the monster that had attacked the ship. In a sense, Elyliyah was also one of the afflicted parties.

With nowhere to direct her rage, Homura swallowed it back. “More importantly…Rhiann, what happened here?”

There was an inordinate amount of blood floating in the water.

“Oh, this? Some of those shark monsters you mentioned attacked.”

“I see… Well, at least you’re all right.”

It didn’t seem as if anyone was hurt, and even though there had been an attack, no one seemed stressed. Hardly what you would expect from a party of new recruits. Based on how red the water looked, it must have been more than just one or two monstrous beasts. Homura was amazed they seemed so laid-back…

Homura was staring at them, impressed, when Ares interjected in a quiet voice.

“I think you’ve misunderstood…”

“Misunderstood?” Homura cocked her head in confusion.

“She fended them all off on her own.”

“Huh?!”

Homura turned her eyes toward Elyliyah. Elyliyah continued to pay them no mind. She was still staring happily out to sea, almost as if she was on vacation. However, Homura realized she was wearing her needle-mitts on her wrists.

“Didn’t she tell *you* to protect *her*?”

“Yes, but I think that was just for show. I guess she wanted to demonstrate how we aren’t on the same level.”

She had intentionally tasked them with keeping her safe, only to throw her own superiority in their faces once the time came. Likely as a way to put the “little soldier boy” in his place.

“She’s some piece of work…,” Homura grumbled.

“Like you’re one to talk,” said Ares.

“Eh… Well, I can’t argue there.”

She did like to think she wasn’t as bad as Elyliyah, though. Now that the situation at the pier had been explained, Jin stepped forward.

“You can have this back,” she said, taking a step toward Elyliyah and thrusting the malefic sword in her direction.

“The person who was wielding the sword—what were they like?”

“They lost their mind. They were a mutated wreck of their former self,” said Jin. She seemed ready to strike Elyliyah down at any moment.

“I, Elyliyah, was never told there was curse on the sword that transforms people into monsters. All I was told was that those who draw the sword are overcome by fear. This thing isn’t at all what I thought it was,” said Elyliyah, taking the malefic sword into her hands and staring at it with a disinterested sigh.

“The part about showing you fear is true,” said Jin. “I experienced it for myself.”

“Don’t lie to me. I can see that you’re perfectly fine.”

“I do not lie,” said Jin. Her eyes were firm.

“Is that so…?” said Elyliyah, staring at Jin with a mixture of doubt and faint amusement.

“What is that you were trying to accomplish here?”

“Me? I was curious to see the look in someone’s eyes when they beheld me, Elyliyah, while wielding that sword.”

“And you wanted that someone to be me?”

“Yes, because you were seeing me the least.”

“You’re speaking nonsense,” said Jin.

Homura didn’t understand what Elyliyah was trying to accomplish, either. She cocked her head in confusion at the last part of that exchange. Back in the plaza, when Elyliyah had been carrying out that man’s punishment, Homura had been pretty sure that Jin had been staring directly at her with

unbridled hostility. It seemed like a contradiction to say that Jin wasn't seeing her.

"Whether you understand what I mean or not, I, Elyliyah, consider it very important." For the first time, the expression on Elyliyah's face was serious. There was a powerful glimmer in her eyes. "It doesn't matter, though. Here. I really don't need this. It's not what I expected it to be."

Elyliyah thrust the katana back in their direction, deciding she no longer wanted it. Obviously, no one took it.

"It belongs to you. Dispose of it yourself," said Jin.

Although Jin was trying to recover her composure, her tone was barbed. But at least she didn't attempt to strike Elyliyah.

"Fine, I'll just throw it away, then."

As Elyliyah reached out a hand to drop the katana into the ocean, Jin seized it from her in a panic.

"That's better. You could have saved us all some time and just taken it to begin with," said Elyliyah, baring her teeth and staring into Jin's face with delight.

Elyliyah was willing to make a fool out of all of them. But apparently, she had other reasons for smiling.

"Do you have any idea why this malefic sword makes people see what they're afraid of?"

"I do not."

"To compel the wielder to attack people, so that the sword can feed upon their blood. That must be why it turns people into monsters as well."

"What is your point?"

"My point," said Elyliyah, pausing provocatively, "is that the reason the sword didn't bewitch you fully must be that it already knows you will feed it plenty of blood on your own!"

"That's not true!" shouted Jin, suddenly enraged.

Homura had never seen Jin display so much emotion at once before. It came as such a surprise that, at first, Homura wasn't even sure who had shouted.

"Are you sure? According to what I was told, a person usually falls under the sword's spell as soon as they take it in their hand."

Of course, Jin didn't like to kill. However, when she touched the sword, she had felt something strangely alluring. Was that the curse, or was it just her own imagination? She wasn't interested in drawing the sword again to find out.

“By the way, the sword is known as Crimson Rain. I have a feeling you’ll make good use of it,” said Elyliyah. But she didn’t mean it as praise.

Chapter 8
Walking Jaws

Homura and the others were at the beach once more. But this time, it was for work, not for play.

After returning to Aurerich, they were placed on night patrol. Some of the crawler sharks at the fishing village had gotten away, so they were worried that with Elyliyah in town, Aurerich might be targeted for revenge.

At night, the port town waited in breathless silence, a contrast to the day. The light seeping out from the closed wooden shutters of the buildings hinted at the normally bustling nature of the town.

A full moon floated overhead in the sky, causing the beach to appear much brighter than expected. The perfect night for a patrol. Additionally, in the case of an emergency, the orestone lighthouse out on the cape would also be lit.

The moon's reflection on the surface of the ocean rippled with the waves. Although mesmerizing, under the current circumstances, the sight filled their hearts with unease. They had grown attached to this town, and their desire to not see it destroyed caused them to find something ominous in the beautiful scene laid out before them.

Even after some time had passed, however, their patrol remained uneventful. Although it was important not to grow careless, they finally allowed themselves to relax a little.

"I still don't really understand what she was trying to accomplish," said Homura.

They were making small talk as they stared out at the sea.

"It's pointless worrying about it," Psycho told her. "There are plenty of people who just can't be understood."

"Maybe, but something about it is still bothering me."

Despite all the trouble they went to, once Elyliyah had handed back the malefic sword, she no longer seemed interested in the rest of her "collection." Apparently, the only thing she had cared about in the first place was that accursed Crimson Rain.

Homura and the others gathered up only the weapons that had washed ashore, then immediately returned to town, leaving the rest.

“Crimson Rain. A cursed, blood-starved sword…”

Jin placed a hand on Crimson Rain, which was now strapped to her waist. She still wasn’t ready to examine the feelings the sword had given her. But she remained troubled. If she was ever going to get answers, she would need to reach out and grasp them for herself.

“What do you plan to do, Jin?” asked Homura, staring at the sword.

“For now, we should hand it over to the Academy of the Black Arts. They have people experienced in handling curses, don’t they?”

“That’s right! We’ve got a whole specialist in cursed items!” said Homura, bragging that she had a personal connection who could help them.

“The list of things we need to do, in addition to defeating the Dark Lord, continues to grow. I will need to search for more malefic swords. I doubt anyone malicious enough to create such an abomination would have stopped at a single blade.”

“That’s a good point. If there are more swords like that out there, something like what happened to that fishing village could happen again…”

Homura recalled the ghastly scene in her mind. Swords weren’t the only cursed items out there. If any of those items were to get loose, all sorts of terrible things could happen to innocent people. The girls couldn’t allow that to happen. Malefic swords, in particular, were weapons. They were created with the express purpose of causing harm.

“For the time being, my plan is to strike down whatever swordsmith created Crimson Rain. If they are still alive, that is. Evil must be eliminated at the root,” said Jin solemnly.

Homura stared into Jin’s face. She could see the anger there that Jin harbored for the wicked. Although Jin was almost as stone-faced as ever, between the light of the moon *and the light from the lighthouse*, the slight difference in her facial expression was noticeable.

“Huh…?”

Homura’s stomach did a somersault. Turning her head, she realized that the massive orestone near the top of the

lighthouse was shining brilliantly. Garishly lit, just as it was meant to be—in the event of an emergency.

“Don’t look now, but we’ve got trouble!”

As they turned to stare in the direction that Psycho was pointing, they nearly did a double take. Once Homura and the others spotted what was coming, they began racing back toward town.

A frothing armada of cutlass blades raced across the distant ocean surface—they were the fins of countless crawler sharks, cutting through the water on a furious collision course straight for the harbor.

“I knew it; they’re coming after that little shit! They must want revenge!” Psycho spat. “What if we just hang her up on the docks for them? That would probably solve everything.”

“Or maybe they’re here because you bullied that little baby shark!” Homura shot back.

“You shut up! I’m not responsible for that!”

“Let’s try apologizing! It’s fine—I’ll even join you for moral support! And if that doesn’t work, maybe we’ll just let them take a little bite out of your head!”

“See something, say something! You stood by and let bullying happen—you’re as guilty as I am!”

“But the one who actually does the bullying is still the worst!”

Finally, a chance to offer Psycho up as a sacrifice! Unfortunately, Psycho was having none of it. Just then, the ringing of a loud bell broke the silence. It was an alarm signaling the monsters’ attack.

Although the attack was sudden, Torreque and the others seemed to have done a good job of getting the word out. Despite some screaming and shouting, the citizens immediately began fleeing for the evacuation centers. Large crowds had already begun to take refuge inside the giant windmills and atop the fortified town walls. People were climbing up near the watchtowers and gates.

As the girls turned their attention toward the artificial island, they spotted the Aegis Guard engaged in combat with the shark monsters. These crawler sharks were slightly larger than great white sharks, and the surface of their bodies was coated in thick, calcified, armorlike hides.

The seasoned soldiers were managing to repel the attacking horde for now. Their greatswords bisected the giant sharks’

torsos, and the war hammers crushed their heads. But the enemy's numbers were too great. Monster after monster hurled itself forward, barreling straight through their fallen comrades. The soldiers could not help but be gradually pushed back.

The monsters' sharp teeth tore through their sturdy metal armor as easily as paper. Fortunately, the monsters did not seem to be focused on killing their foes, as once a soldier was incapacitated, they simply ignored them, charging forward instead.

"I'll go first."

"Ah… Wait!" Proto called.

Jin began racing ahead of the others once it became apparent what was happening. Proto, likewise, used her earth-rattling strength to take leaping steps off the ground and propel herself forward, keeping pace with Jin.

The army of sharks was steadily gaining the advantage, carried forward by its own momentum. It was about to pour onto the great bridge that connected the artificial island to the town…or so they thought, but the sharks had other concerns.

Before proceeding any farther, they began to destroy the rows of warehouses located on the artificial island. They chewed through the metal doors with their teeth and rammed the stone walls with their bodies, smashing them to bits. Each act of destruction sent booms and crashes echoing through the air. The sounds sent vibrations across the girls' skin.

"What's happening? They seem to be targeting things, not people, don't they?" Homura asked.

"Something doesn't fit."

Like Psycho said, there was something off about the monstrous beasts' behavior. Fortunately, the fact that they were focused on destroying buildings gave the soldiers breathing room to help the injured retreat. The soldiers who still had the strength to spare supported those who could not walk as they fled back toward town. The soldiers did not, however, have enough time to regroup. Once the shark army finished thoroughly destroying the warehouses, they began proceeding toward the great bridge once more. Before long, they were infiltrating the town.

Even after passing through the harbor district, the majority of the monsters remained focused on property destruction. This

allowed the soldiers to just barely hold their ground. Hope remained.

“Everyone, do what you can!” ordered Psycho once they reached the chaos.

Homura and the others dispersed.



After leaving Psycho and the others behind, Homura focused on providing cover for the fleeing soldiers. A small number of sharks had broken free from the main herd and were pursuing runners. All the other soldiers were occupied, leaving few hands available to intercept the attack.

Homura pointed her staff at one of the sharks, which was just about to chomp down on one of the stragglers.

“If it weren’t for you walking soup bowls, that village would still be alive! Aghhhh—!!”

Scorching hellfire shot from the end of her staff, engulfing the crawler shark. It was instantly reduced to a charred mass, collapsing into the dirt. The remaining sharks cowered in hesitation.

“Thank you, you saved me!”

Homura faced off against the sharks as the soldiers behind her fled. She channeled more flames into her staff. She was going to put an end to this atrocity, or at least, this small part of it.

“All right, who’s next—?”

“Hrwaaarrrr—!!”

Just then, the charred hunk of shark on the ground released a howl.

Before she could even register that the shark wasn’t dead yet, the creature’s jaws were already hurtling straight toward her, inches away from tearing her apart. She could see the rows of sharp teeth, almost as if she was watching them in slow motion.

Death was imminent. All she could do now was squeeze her eyes shut and tense up for the inevitable. Everything went black as she waited to be turned into shark food.

Time seemed to slow. Homura had only just begun her second life. What a waste. She had actually been having fun this time. As she waited for death to come, her thoughts grew detached. She wondered if there would be a third life.

But the end never seemed to happen.

She heard her staff hit the stone pavement. It must have slipped from her hand when she tensed up. That moment of darkness felt eternal, but it had actually just been a short blip, lasting no longer than the amount of time it took for her staff to fall from her hands and hit the ground below.

Homura timidly opened her eyes.

As soon as she did so, the light came flooding back. A lone warrior was standing before her.

The thick, heavy armor he wore was as black as night. Virile curved horns rose triumphantly from his helmet, reminiscent of bull antlers. He gripped a plain and rugged greatsword in his hands—a ponderous chunk of metal that could have easily been mistaken for a blunt weapon.

Homura remembered seeing that equipment before. It was the same weapon and armor the soldiers had been cleaning when Homura's group had first arrived at the garrison. It was now smeared with blood once more, attesting to just how many monstrous beasts the warrior must have slaughtered.

Homura noticed that the shark that had been about to bite her was now lying on the ground behind the warrior, completely cleaved in two from the top of its head to the tip of its tail.

"Phew, I'm glad I made it in time. You okay there, Homura?"

"I know that voice… Captain Torreque, is that you?"

She could hardly believe it. Her image of Torreque, who'd seemed so apathetic, was incompatible with this juggernaut now standing before her.

"Whoops, looks like chitchat will have to wait for later." Torreque easily swung his greatsword into the air, slicing through one shark after the next. The sword was as tall as he was. "I wish I could stay to keep you safe, but I'll have to leave that job to the up-and-comers. Good luck out there!"

Torreque proceeded farther into town, mowing down sharks as he moved. He had mentioned "up-and-comers." There was only one group he could be referring to.

"Homura, you're okay!"

"Rhiann!"

As Torreque departed, Ares's party arrived. Since they arrived from the rear, they must have been providing cover for the fleeing soldiers as well.

“Don’t worry, now that Ares is here, everything is going to be A-okay! He’ll clear out all these monstrous beasts in no time!”

“That would clearly be impossible.”

“Yes, exactly! Absolutely! That would clearly be impossible! Ares is still growing! But he’ll be ready tomorrow!”

“Tomorrow? Talk about a growth spurt…!”

Despite what Rhiann said, however, Ares’s party was all out of breath. She could tell they had been through some intense fighting already.

They had been thrown smack-dab into the middle of a knock-down, drag-out battlefield on their very first mission, just like Homura’s group had been. But there was no time to sympathize right now. They all needed to do what they could.

Homura took a glance around. They were on a long, wide road, which was rare for this winding and densely built town. There was a row of smaller windmills nearby. This gave Homura an odd idea.

“Sorry, do you think you could shoot down those windmill blades?” she asked the female archer in Ares’s group.

“I’m not sure what you’re up to, but leave it to me!” said the girl, eyes wide. She quickly nocked an arrow, not even bothering to ask what Homura meant to do.

Homura had barely registered the *twang* of the greatbow’s string when one of the windmill shafts suddenly splintered with a *thwack*. Once the shaft was broken, the blades fell to the ground, cracking loudly into pieces. The girl destroyed the next windmill, and the next. Soon, the road was littered with a carpet of broken windmill-blade pieces.

“That should be plenty…!”

“Just what are you up to?” asked Ares uncertainly. It seemed like such a bizarre thing to do.

“I’m going to build a wall of flame to stop the sharks from going any farther! Please protect me while I use my flames!”

“You can’t be serious! A wall this long…?! Fine, whatever. We’ll keep you safe like our own lives depend on it. Yours does, too—so create that wall!”

“That’s the plan. But…if I start acting funny, don’t hesitate to cut me down.”

Homura already had a trick up her sleeve to make sure she didn’t fall into a trance again like last time, but there was no way to know how effective it was going to be.

“What are you talking about? Are you nuts?”

“Actually…you’re right, maybe just try to knock me out instead if you can…”

Come to think of it, getting “cut down” sounded kind of scary. Homura ignored the unamused look on Ares’s face and raised her staff high above her head.

“Sorry to anyone who’s still trying to run away. Try to hang in there!”

It wasn’t as though it was some sort of difficult spell that would require an incantation, but Homura rattled off the first words she could think of as a way to psych herself up.

“These wicked creatures threaten the peace. O raging wall of flames, stop these creatures in their tracks!”

And then in a fluid motion, she set the staff aside—the same staff she had just raised high into air—and placed both of her hands upon the chill stone pavement.

“Crimson gaol!”

“What was the staff for?!” said Ares.

“Vibes!”

The truth was the power of Homura’s flames could vary depending on how she was feeling, so getting herself worked up was actually a very important part of her process.

Flaming jets erupted from her hands, creating blazing towers. The flames began to spread outward in both directions, traveling along the rows of wooden fragments to form a soaring wall. The roar filled their ears, and the air shimmered with intense heat. It was a wall of hellfire, large enough to strike terror into the hearts of any who saw it.

Homura was a natural at using her supernatural ability to summon flames, but when it came to controlling them with magic, she was much less skilled. That was why she had used the wood fragments: to direct the flames and make the process easier on herself.

“This is insane…”

“You’re telling me… Not even gold badges can manage magic this large.”

Ares and Rhiann stared in shock, taken aback by the size of the inferno, which nearly dwarfed even the walls of the city. They were soon pulled back to reality by the voices of their other party members, however.

“Ares! Rhiann! Monsters are coming!”

“From what I can see, it looks like twelve or thirteen of them!”

The archer was scanning the area from atop the roof of one of the houses, her bow on her shoulders. The sharp-eyed sharks had already identified the source of the flames blocking their path and were now furiously charging toward them down the road.

“Sorry. Let’s get back to our mission.”

Now that his composure was recovered, Ares chanted a spell, cloaking himself in azure lightning. Even the shrill crackle of Ares’s lightning was no match for the earthshaking rumble of the flames.

“Rhiann, you cover Homura!”

“Got it,” answered Rhiann shortly.

She closed her eyes, raised her staff into the air, and chanted a spell.

“Wall!”

The piece of orestone affixed to the end of Rhiann’s staff shimmered, and a wall of light—a magical barrier—appeared, enclosing Rhiann and Homura. The crawler sharks charged the barrier repeatedly, trying to destroy it, but it was too solid. It didn’t even budge.

“Thank you, Rhiann!”

“You don’t need to thank me. We’re friends now, after all. And you don’t need to keep being so polite!”

“Friends…”

At the sound of the word, Homura felt a gentle warmth fill her chest. How long had it been since she had been able to call anyone a friend? Just a friend. Not allies or party members like Psycho and the others. A different kind of closeness. The fact that Rhiann was willing to think of her that way left Homura feeling energized.

“I understand. Thank you!”

“You just thanked me again!”

“Ack, I’m sorry! Being polite is a habit for me. I find it hard to loosen up. Unless, of course, it’s with cute, younger girls…!”

“What is that supposed to mean?!”

On the other side of the magical barrier, the remaining three soldiers were fighting the crawler sharks. A swarm of monsters continued to pour out of the sea before them, one after the next. And behind them stood a wall of flames. There was nowhere to run. But they had no interest in running in the first place.

Despite their lack of experience in actual combat, Ares and the others were able to fend off the attacking shark monsters through overwhelming strength and skill.

Although the number of monstrous beasts was steadily decreasing, the consecutive battles were taking their toll. Just then, a scream suddenly pierced the air.

They quickly turned in the direction from which the sound had come. Homura saw a gaggle of beleaguered Aegis Guard soldiers. It was the same group they had met on their way to Aurerich. The ones who had fought that clawbear.

"Azure thunder, strike!" shouted Ares, quickly pointing his sword at the shark and chanting a spell. A blinding flash immediately arced from the tip of his sword. A lance of blue electricity shut through the column of sharks that was huddled together closely in the street, frying them with high-voltage force.

The soldiers were saved. They lifted their voices in praise.

"Wow, I knew it! As strong as ever!"

"Someday, we're going to look back and say we knew him when!"

But Ares no longer had the strength to respond.

"I'm going to have to leave it up to you guys for a little while."

Ares had discharged most of the electricity circling his body. The sustained use of magic had left him both physically and mentally exhausted, and he fell to one knee, breathing heavily.

""You can count on us!"" the other two shouted without hesitation.

The girl with the bow shot at the monster's legs, piercing them through the feet and pinning them to the ground, while the massive warrior used his ax to hack and slash. Homura's group was capable of teamwork as well, but their version didn't compare with the level of coordination that Ares's group was demonstrating.

"Phew… It looks like things have calmed down a little for now."

The choking stench of blood filled the air as a lull hit in the waves of monsters. The massive warrior on Ares's team was finally able to relax for a moment, though he still didn't let his guard down. The break was short-lived, however, lasting no longer than a single deep breath.

“Hey, great news—there’s even more of them coming our way!” shouted the female archer, sounding exasperated.

Ares slowly rose back to his feet. “Fine by me. I don’t care how many of them there are—they won’t get through here.”

The lightning cloaking Ares’s body suddenly flared back to life.



There were no other soldiers in the area; they had already retreated. The homes in the area were being steadily destroyed. Tsutsumi was fighting alone. In order to be able to release her poison freely, and to be sure that no one else would see her, she had to pick her battlefields carefully.

She leaped from the roof of one building as it began to collapse, landing on the roof of the next, scattering poison mist as she went.

“Huh, now what…?”

The swarm of crawler sharks continued to writhe and moan below, despite inhaling her poison. She had spread it over such a wide area that the concentration was low. As a result, it only slowed them down slightly instead of incapacitating them completely.

“I’m…hungry…”

Tsutsumi’s stomach growled along with the sharks. She needed nourishment if she was going to create more poison. She needed to eat. She began to drool as she remembered the meat kebabs she had consumed earlier in the day.

She could always try eating one of the monstrous beasts, but she doubted they would sit there and let her enjoy her meal in peace. What was she supposed to do? Her stomach was so empty, she could hardly think straight.

“Ack!!”

Tsutsumi stumbled. The sharks’ wave of destruction had just reached the house she was currently standing on.

“Wa…ahh!”

She teetered to the side and lost her footing, falling headlong, straight into the teeming swarm of sharks. Where she promptly disappeared into a ravenous toothy mouth.

Its powerful jaws clamped shut. Tsutsumi’s leg, which hadn’t quite disappeared into the shark’s mouth, was severed and hit the stone pavement with a quiet *splat*.

Although the sharks weren't interested in eating prey at the moment, if a juicy morsel happened to fall straight into one of their jaws, they were hardly going to refuse. Counting itself lucky, the shark began to chomp and gorge, breaking the tiny girl down into even more manageable bites.

—It didn't take long before the shark started to feel funny, however. It was suddenly struck with sharp discomfort like no pain it had ever felt before.

Although it had already grown slightly numb from Tsutsumi's poison, it was writhing and thrashing about too violently to feel the poison's effect. The other nearby sharks noticed that something was off, but they continued their stampede of destruction, paying their comrade no mind.

The shark contorted bizarrely, trying to hack up whatever foreign substance it had swallowed, but no matter how much it strained, the thing remained lodged deep in its throat, refusing to be vomited up. Soon, the shark had swelled to an even larger size. It fell to the ground with a *thud* before ceasing to move altogether.

Although the shark was no longer moving, its stomach continued to writhe grotesquely. It didn't look as if the thing inside it was struggling to get free. Instead, it seemed as if it was poking around, exploring.

The writhing continued for a few moments, before the movement suddenly changed. The creature's white stomach began to protrude outward as if something was pushing on it from within. The protrusion steadily grew more pointed, until eventually, a small girl burst free, slathered in blood. There was not a scratch on her. Her crushed bones, broken skin, and shredded leg had all healed completely.

"That's better…," said Tsutsumi, clapping her hands together in gratitude for the meal.

It was only when they saw the little girl tear out of their comrade's stomach that the other sharks noticed the dangerous enemy in their midst. But it was far too late by then. Belly now full, Tsutsumi began to spread her bony wings, like the bare branches of a withered tree. Once her strange transformation was complete, the skeletal limbs pulsed sharply. In the next instant, the surrounding area was enveloped in a cloud of black mist.

The poison this time was widespread and highly concentrated. In mere seconds, the sharks found themselves unable to move. Those closest to Tsutsumi fell asleep, and they would not wake up again.

The poison was more than enough to take care of the sharks in this area. Tsutsumi retracted her wings and set off in search of her next battlefield.

“Yum, shark fins!”

Along the way, she took a bite out of the back fin of one of the sharks. Her powerful jaws chomped through the tough hide, and the texture underneath was pleasantly crisp. The taste may not have been very noteworthy, but the crunch was highly addictive.

“They say shark fins…are a delicacy…”

Of course, that was only when they were properly prepared, but Tsutsumi didn’t care.

“I thought I’d find you here, Tsutsumi,” said Psycho, who had shown up out of the blue, pushing her way through the black mist as she stumbled upon Tsutsumi enjoying her gourmet feast.

“Watch out for…the poison…”

“I cast an antidote spell on myself; it seems to be doing the trick.”

“Okay…”

Tsutsumi picked up the shoe she had “dropped” earlier, emptied out its *contents*, and then retrieved her mask, which had slipped free, from inside the shark’s stomach. “What are you…here for?”

“Me? Obviously, I came to see how the baby of the family was getting on!”

“Really?”

Psycho tousled Tsutsumi’s bloodstained hair. “I was healing the injured in the back, but I must have been doing too good of a job of it, because they started calling me their *saint* or something. It was creeping me out.”

Injured soldiers and citizens had been carried to the church and evacuation centers in great numbers. Psycho’s healing magic was much more effective than those of the priestesses in this town, so she had gone around tending to the wounded and earning their profuse adoration in the process. Obviously, this was a terrible situation to find oneself in from Psycho’s point of

view. As far as she was concerned, Goody Two-shoes types could go eat dirt.

"Don't worry. *I* know you're garbage, Psycho…!"

"No one's ever said anything that nice to me before. You're a good kid!" said Psycho, deeply touched. "And for being so clever, I'm going to take you on a date. Let's go see the harbor—we can travel by private luxury car."

Psycho placed her hands on the bodies of two crawler sharks that were lying nearby. A glow emerged from Psycho's hands, and the two bodies began to separate into strands, as if they were being peeled apart, and then intertwine together.

This was Psycho's creature-fusion magic, which she had developed from ordinary healing magic. It allowed her to create a patchwork from the residue of multiple creatures' souls, transforming them into new and strange abominations. Desecrating the souls of the dead was strictly taboo, however, so if anyone ever caught her doing it, the punishment was likely to be severe.



Before long, the two bodies had transformed into *something new*. All that *something new* needed now was a name.

"All righty, climb aboard the Two-Headed Zombie Shark!"

What had once been a shark with legs was now a shark with two heads and legs! It was also slightly larger than before, making it the perfect size for a comfort ride.

Tsutsumi climbed aboard and hugged Psycho, who was already straddling the creature's back fin.

"All right, let's go, Sharky!"

It looked like its new name had already been abandoned. The two-headed crawler shark groaned like an engine at Psycho's command, speeding forward at breakneck speed. It had enough sharkpower to cause the earth to rumble beneath them, but it also came with an unexpected design flaw—the shock was going straight to their behinds. Their fancy luxury car may have been spacious and accommodating, but it chewed up the road like a jalopy.

The other crawler sharks sprang forward to attack. Apparently, they no longer considered the deformed shark creature, with two humans riding on its back, to be one of their own. Sharky, however, fought them off admirably with its two heads. When an attack came from the right, it bit with its right head; when an attack came from the left, it headbutted with its left. Its one weakness was that it had some difficulty countering any attacks that came down the middle.

"Why does it have…two heads?"

"For double the attack power, of course!"

"Wow…! What else…does it do…?"

"Beats me!"

There was no point asking Psycho. She had just slapped the creature together on the spot and was making up answers as she went. What were they doing? What were they riding? Who knew? But at least they were headed toward the harbor!

Once their luxury-model sharkmobile reached the great bridge connected to the artificial island, it began to lose speed, eventually sputtering to a stop.

"Must be out of gas. Meh, this is far enough anyway."

The amalgamation that Psycho had created had been built from the residue of multiple creatures' souls, but soul residue

was also what it used as fuel. In the end, it was just a forcefully animated corpse. And once the fuel ran out, it became a plain corpse once more.

The two disembarked from the now-stranded vehicle, following after their two friends, who had arrived before them.

“Hey!” Psycho called. “What’s shaking?! I didn’t realize you two were here as well.”

Jin and Proto turned around to greet them.

“I felt a dangerous presence at the harbor,” said Jin.

“Ugh, what gross thing did you make this time?” Proto griped.

The four of them were there for the same reason. Well, three of them were. Tsutsumi had just been dragged along for the ride. Namely, the “dangerous presence” that Jin had mentioned. Something on a completely different level from the marauding crawler sharks. Whatever the presence was, it was likely the mastermind behind this attack. They were able to spot glimpses of it from even the farthest reaches of the town.

A humanoid figure waited for them with a monstrous creature by its side. There was also a valiant bulwark of a man standing in the pair’s way—although he was barely standing upright. He leaned on his greatsword, which had been thrust into the ground, for support.

“Need a hand?” said Psycho, speaking to the warrior in black armor.

“Yeah, I’d appreciate that. I did just lose one of my own after all.”

The man’s left arm was completely missing. The armor had been ripped off cleanly at the shoulder, and blood was spouting from the wound.

“Oh, Torreque, it’s you!”

His injuries were hideous, but Torreque seemed determined to prevent the enemy from proceeding any farther. Despite the flippant tone in his voice, however, it was clear that he was reaching his limit.

Psycho quickly chanted a healing spell to stop the bleeding.

“Careful, those two are dangerous.”

A young demon girl and a massive, monstrous beast were standing before them, illuminated by the light of the moon, their backs to the ocean.

“Finally. I was about to die of boredom, old man.”

The demon girl tossed Torreque's arm high into the air. The monstrous beast reared up and caught the arm in its mouth, swallowing it in a single gulp.

The girl was an anthropomorphized shark demon and was wearing nothing but a strip of cloth tied around her bust and her waist. Her exposed skin was a mottled white and bluish gray, with strong, supple musculature apparent beneath the skin. Her teeth, which poked free in a sadistic smile, were as sharp and pointed as a shark's.

She resembled the picture in the very book that Torreque had shown them earlier, but unlike the book, her arms and legs were covered in a tough, dense carapace of scales.

"Now, you four look like something I could sink my teeth into! Finally, some entertainment!"

She must have been excited, because the tail sprouting from her waist beat against the ground several times.

The giant, growling monster standing next to the girl, meanwhile, was a supersized version of a crawler shark. It was large enough to easily swallow a clawbear whole, and it was covered in a much tougher armored hide than a standard crawler shark. Its shell was so thick, it may as well have been real armor.

The demon girl was completely uninjured, but a large cleft had been made in the head of the monstrous beast. Unfortunately, it looked as though only its thick armored shell had been damaged, and the wound itself was not that serious.

"Who are you two? What are you doing this for?" asked Psycho. They had attacked out of the blue. The scale of this onslaught was massive, which suggested they had a very serious goal in mind.

"If it's answers you want," the girl replied spitefully, "know that I am here under the Dark Lord's command to crush your pathetic human lands!"

The others balked. They hadn't been expecting that answer.

"So you're one of the Dark Lord's followers?"

"A raid commander, glorious spearhead of the returning horde!"

Another figure connected to the Dark Lord had appeared. And unlike Rotraud, this one seemed to be receiving orders.

Psycho smiled. Finally, they were getting somewhere!

“I guess the Dark Lord really has returned. Just my luck…,” muttered Torreque dejectedly. He hadn’t expected to find himself standing at the crossroads of history today.

“Enough—let’s fight already,” said the girl, laughing fearlessly as she readied her trident. “I’ll take all five of you on at once. I don’t care.”

She obviously had the strength to back up her words. After all, Torreque was a gold badge, and she had easily backed him into a corner. Maybe she really could take on all five of them at once.

However, Psycho and the others knew they fought best when they could fight their own way.

“I will handle this one,” said Jin. “Proto, can you take care of the other?”

“Yeah, yeah, just leave the big one to me, I guess.”

Jin and Proto bumped fists and then stepped forward to face their respective foes.

“The two of us will make sure none of the other monsters get in the way,” said Psycho.

Several crawler sharks were approaching from the other end of the bridge.

“Okay…!” said Tsutsumi.

“I know I’m just an old man on his last legs here, but are you sure they’ll be all right on their own?”

“Who knows? But we’re stronger when we fight how we want. Try not to get in anyone’s way, okay?”

“Oh, to be young again… Whatever happened to my own spark?” said Torreque as he pulled this greatsword free from the ground and cradled it over his shoulder. And yet there was a clear fire in his eyes.

“It’s up to the old, however, to clear a path for the young. I, too, will do what I can.”

Torreque turned his attention toward the town, where the crawler sharks were continuing their rampage. He was loath to leave this powerful enemy to the younger soldiers, but even if he still had enough hands for the job, he no longer had the stamina. He was too old for such fierce, sustained fighting. Still, he would do what he could. Which, in this case, meant sweeping out the smaller monsters before they could get in the way.

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but you look about five fingers short for the job,” Psycho noted.

“Maybe, but as much as I would appreciate you lending a hand, I think you two had better stay here to protect this spot.”

“Slow down there, Captain. I wasn’t going to lend you a hand; I was going to make you one.”

“Make me one…?”

Torreque cocked his head in confusion. Was she claiming she could use magic capable of regenerating lost body parts? That would be some of the most powerful healing magic in existence. Of course not. If that was the case, there was no way she would be putzing around with the Phalanx of Blades. The church would have snagged her up for themselves long ago.

“You’re in luck, old man. We’ve got plenty of raw materials right here at our fingertips. And just the stuff when it comes to regenerative ability,” explained Psycho without really explaining anything.

“I don’t understand what you mean—but I don’t like that smile on your face. I don’t like that smile one bit!”

“Relax, relax. There’s just a teeny, tiny part of you that will no longer be human, that’s all!” said Psycho, grinning like the mad scientist that she was.

Chapter 9
Sharkbane

“I guess you’re my opponent, then?” said the shark-demon girl, pointing the tip of her trident at Jin.

The demon girl was tall, but not as tall as her trident. The left and right prongs of the tripartite head curved gently outward, their edges sharp. The unusually shaped head allowed the treacherous weapon to make both thrusting attacks and sweeping slashes.

But right now, Jin had other concerns.

“Before we cross blades, I wish to ask a question.”

“Go ahead…”

“Why did you attack this town?”

Jin was struggling to shake off the feeling that something didn’t add up.

“I already told you. I’m here to crush you humans.”

If what she said was true, this invasion came at the Dark Lord’s orders. But Jin didn’t think the demoness was only acting according to somebody else’s command. Nor did she believe the girl had come for revenge. After all, she didn’t seem interested in Elyliyah, the person who had actually killed her fellow shark monsters.

Jin watched the girl’s eyes. There was a powerful light inside them, the kind of light that Jin had seen many times before. The eyes of someone with a strong will, who was out to accomplish something. Jin could feel it. Whatever was responsible for that light—that was her true motivation.

“It seems you have no interest in telling me the truth…,” said Jin, narrowing her eyes. Her question had been fruitless.

“You talk too much! If you think I’m lying, then why don’t you beat the truth out of me? If you can, that is!”

The girl didn’t seem to realize that she had just more or less admitted to lying.

“So be it. Be prepared to talk.”

“Bring it on!”

Despite Jin's trash talk, the girl looked thrilled. Whatever her reasons for attacking the town, she was eager for a fight.

Jin unsheathed her sword. The dark surface of the blade, saturated in moonlight, gave off a dull light. The two readied their weapons and stared at each other. The tension was electric.

Just then, the giant shark released a thunderous roar, kicking off the fight. Taking that as her cue, Jin dashed forward, lowering her body and skirting the ground closely.

She closed the distance to her opponent in a heartbeat.

Before Jin could get within striking range, however, the demon girl thrust her trident with flawless precision toward the spot where Jin's shoulder met her neck. She used the polearm's long reach to maintain the advantage, striking from outside Jin's range. Jin twisted away, dodging the strike by a hair's breadth. Jin carried her momentum into an upward swing aimed at the girl's arm.

But Jin was knocked back before her katana ever reached its mark. The girl had swept with the shaft of the trident as soon as Jin dodged its point. The upward scooping motion struck Jin hard in the abdomen.

Jin twirled in midair, landing without a sound. Her legs still had the strength to stand, but the pain was so severe that it took her a moment to recover. Her abdomen throbbed dully where she'd been struck.

Jin hadn't expected to end the fight with one hit, but she also hadn't expected such a perfect counterattack. The girl had more than just physical strength, Jin realized. She also had a better reaction speed than Jin.

"You're not bad with a sword. What is your name?" asked the girl, recognizing Jin as a worthy opponent.

"Jin."

"A fine name. I am Nadja—Nadja, Warrior Princess of the Stormy Seas!"

"Nadja. Understood."

They both adjusted their stances.

This was not an opponent who could be brought to submission though sheer force, so trying to coerce an opening would be difficult. Jin's only chance would be to observe the girl closely. For Jin, this battle would be decided by perception and skill.

She steadied her breathing and made eye contact once more.

Jin moved in to strike. Faster this time, but tuned in to every detail. This time, Nadja responded with a sideways sweeping attack. The sound of the *whoosh* alone made Jin suspect the strike could easily slice her in two if it was to connect head-on.

In the split second before the tip of the trident reached her, Jin dropped her speed. The polearm whiffed through the air. However, Nadja swept a second time, returning in the opposite direction faster than Jin could get close enough to strike.

Jin had expected this counterattack and hadn't planned on following through too deeply. As a result, she was able to kick the shaft of the incoming trident and leap to safety.

Nadja flashed Jin a smile of strength and confidence. Her sense of superiority was on full display.

"Interesting moves."

"I'm glad you approve."

Jin attempted a second and a third strike.

She dodged the trident as it swooped through the air, closing the gap once Nadja's defenses were open. However, each time she drew near, she was forced to back off again before she could deliver a mortal blow. The battle wore on, and the two were trading no more than trivial scratches.

But this was just preparation. Jin's blade did not need to hit home yet.

"Ha! Nothing like a fight to the death, don't you agree? Enough messing around—why don't you attack me for real? Come a little closer, and I'll chop that head off for you!" said Nadja, smiling.

Nadja could tell that Jin was choosing not to commit to her attacks. But if Jin was to listen to Nadja and lunge in fully, the fight would probably turn out just as Nadja said: with Jin's head separated from her body.

Despite her rowdy demeanor, Jin's opponent was observing the fight closely and with a level head. The situation was dangerous. Jin needed to be just as calm and collected. However…

"There is no need to take enjoyment in killing."

"Really…? Because it seems like you're enjoying yourself plenty," said Nadja, pointing out Jin's smile.

…Jin covered her mouth. Nadja's words had left her shaken.

"You are mistaken…"

“What a pathetic way to live life. Why not just be honest with yourself? You would have more fun that way.”

“I am honest enough.”

Though previously composed, Nadja grew irritated.

“Have it your way, then…”

Jin took a breath to calm her frazzled nerves, and the fight recommenced.

As before, Jin was the one to initiate the strike. Despite her irritation, Nadja remained focused. She fell into her stance, preparing to intercept Jin’s blow.

Jin moved at a high speed, closing in to swing with her katana. From Nadja’s point of view, it seemed as if Jin was once again repeating the same move. This time, however, there was a twist.

For a split second, just before entering into striking distance, Jin added an extra burst of strength to her lunge. The small change was enough to place Jin in Nadja’s face, catching her by surprise, almost as if she had teleported there.

Jin seized on the opening, swinging her katana upward to hack off Nadja’s arm. Just as the sharp blade was about to slice Nadja’s flesh and cut through the bone, she felt the sword rebound, leaving her hand numb.

“That was close!”

Jin’s eyes went wide. Her blade had been stopped by the carapace on Nadja’s arm. Although the carapace looked thin, it was much tougher than Jin had expected. Stronger than any makeshift metal armor, at the least.

Jin was finally within reach. Nadja quickly regained her composure, batting Jin’s katana aside and reaching out to grab her. But Jin swiftly leaped out of the way.

“What was that? What did you do?” Nadja demanded.

“All I did was dash forward and swing my sword.”

“Ha! Interesting.”

Nadja’s face twisted up in pleasure once again. She almost seemed to be enjoying this situation.

But Jin’s explanation wasn’t entirely accurate. She had timed her change in speed to coincide with the moment that Nadja blinked, thus upsetting the demon’s depth perception. The timing and length of a person’s blinks were a matter of habit. Jin had used their previous exchanges to ascertain Nadja’s patterns.

The more closely an enemy focused on tracking their opponent's movements, the more confused they tended to be by anything that happened outside their scope of awareness. The trick was to read their habits and catch them by surprise. This was Jin's strategy. A skill she had picked up naturally in her days as an assassin.

"This time, I will be the one to attack," said Nadja. "Try not to die too easily on me, okay?"

"I will do my best."

Nadja swung her trident into the air, closing the gap in an instant. Jin's speed was no match for the demon. With Nadja already in striking distance, there was no chance for Jin to leap out of the way. All she could do was lean her upper body backward and parry the trident with her blade.

The shrill crash of metal on metal filled the air as sparks flew before Jin's eyes.

Jin had evaded the blow by a paper-thin margin. However, while she had been able to avoid getting hit directly by the sweep, she was unable to parry the force completely and was sent flying backward from the recoil.

Jin broke her fall, rolling smoothly across the stone pavement. No sooner had she recovered her stance, however, than Nadja's next thrust came flying her way.

Jin lunged forward, feet gliding gracefully as she closed in on Nadja to avoid the blow. The tip of Nadja's trident obliterated the sturdy pavement as it struck the ground, sending shards of stone flying into the air.

"It looks like you finally got in a good hit," said Nadja. As she retrieved her trident, blood began to stream down her leg. Jin had slashed her on the thigh as they passed each other.

Although Nadja's limbs were partially protected by her tough carapace, Jin's blade was apparently still effective against the parts of Nadja's skin that were bare. The cut was not shallow, but Jin wasn't sure if it would be enough to interfere with Nadja's mobility. At the very least, it would probably prevent her from launching another attack as ferocious as the last one. Jin moved to press her advantage.

However…she heard a strange sound all of a sudden. It was barely perceptible, but Jin instinctively sensed that she needed to get out of the way. Her legs moved almost unconsciously. The *thing*, however, was already coming toward her.

It grazed her side. For a graze, however, the pain was substantial. Piercing and hot, like she had been stabbed.

Glancing down, she saw that a tiny hole had been made in her left flank, no bigger than the tip of her little finger. Blood welled up from the hole, staining her clothes red.

“Did I forget to mention that I use magic?” said Nadja. Patches of water swayed in the air around her. “I had planned on toying with you for a little while first, but I’m starting to see that you won’t let me through unless I fight seriously.”

One of the clusters of water floating in the air seemed to undulate like a snake, suddenly shooting toward Jin too fast for the eye to see.

This time, Jin managed to dodge. Nadja’s spears of water moved in a straight line, making them relatively easy to avoid. If they did connect, however, they were more than powerful enough to open up holes in her body.

There were two more clusters of water floating around Nadja, and a third smaller cluster was now beginning to form. It looked like it took the clusters a little bit of time before they grew large enough to be used.

If Jin tried to keep her distance, Nadja would just hit her with her water spears. Jin no longer had the latitude to fight the way she had been fighting up until now. Only one option now made sense.

Jin immediately closed quarters, ignoring the spear of water that sped past her face as she entered striking distance. There was one water spear remaining. Nadja swept with her trident, but Jin dashed in close, timing her speed to Nadja’s blink.

Nadja’s spear magic was powerful, but her accuracy with it was poor. Perhaps the deep cut on her leg was distracting her. Using magic also gave Nadja more things to keep track of, which slowed her movements down imperceptibly.

After evading Nadja’s attack by a hair’s breadth, Jin swung her sword, aiming for Nadja’s arm…but Nadja twisted out of the way as well, avoiding serious injury by a similar breadth.

The blade scratched Nadja’s sharklike skin, releasing a spray of blood into the air.

“I missed—!”

A kick suddenly came out of the blue, straight at Jin’s now-serious face. Nadja had carried through with the momentum from her dodge.

Jin hadn't expected Nadja to kick while her leg was so badly injured. Jin quickly brought her blade up to block the blow. It was hard to believe her leg was wounded—the impact was tremendous enough to send Jin hurtling through the air.

Jin hit the ground hard, failing to break her fall. She bounced and rolled with the impact. Blood spurted from the hole in her side, leaving a pattern of red splotches on the stone pavement beneath her.

Jin staggered to her feet. Her back had hit the ground hard, and she could barely breathe. On top of that, her legs and arms were trembling. She had trouble resuming a proper stance.

And worst of all, her katana had broken in half.

She glanced down at the black fragments of the blade, which now lay scattered upon the pavement.

"It finally happened."

She had known the sword was going to break eventually. It was why she had been searching for a new weapon to take its place. But why now of all times? If Jin fell here, her comrades would be in danger. Jin didn't blame the sword. Instead, she clenched her teeth, ashamed of her own weakness.

There was still one option left, however, currently hanging at her waist.

"It looks like I may have to use this thing after all…"

It was her last resort at the moment. The malefic sword, Crimson Rain. All she had to do was unsheathe it to end this mess. For some reason, however, her hand shook as she clutched the hilt.

"What's wrong? Aren't you going to draw your sword?" asked Nadja, her sharp eyes noticing Jin's hesitation. "It's fine by me either way. Once I kill you, I'll get right back to hunting down the humans."

Nadja sounded bored, and she didn't appear to be bluffing.

"I'll start with those two over there. They look like easy pickings," she said, turning to point at Psycho and Tsutsumi with the tip of her trident. Psycho and Tsutsumi were fighting as hard as they could to keep the horde of monstrous beasts at bay and allow Jin and Proto to focus on their own battles.

This was no time for Jin to worry about herself.

"I won't allow that to happen."

Jin had to protect her friends.

She drew Crimson Rain.

“Obviously, I’m the one most suited to fighting this thing, but that doesn’t get me any closer to actually beating it,” muttered Proto, staring up at the giant shark that stood opposite her.

Every last warehouse in the area had already been destroyed, leaving them surrounded by rubble.

“I wish I could just run—,” Proto said, kicking one of the pieces of rock lying at her feet.

The size of the monstrous beast was overwhelming. It almost felt like she was staring at a craggy mountain. Proto was starting to wonder if she was nuts for even considering fighting this thing.

Basic attacks were unlikely to scratch the creature’s surface. Its bite, meanwhile, was probably strong enough to leave her in pieces, perhaps all the way down to her ultra-durable core.

“Welp… Might as well give it a try!” she said, readying her war hammer. Risky or not, she wasn’t about to back down. “I’m gonna make you regret baring your teeth at me.”

“Gwarrrghhhh—!!”

The monster howled in response, and the sound made the earth shake. The roar was so loud that Proto’s auditory sensors had trouble fully registering it and resorted to a burst of static.

It seemed unlikely that monstrous beasts could understand human language, but this one did appear to grasp that the tiny little creature standing before it had just announced plans to clobber it.

“I didn’t know sharks could howl. You learn something new every day—!”

Proto suddenly dashed forward. She didn’t shrink. Each step crushed the pavement beneath her feet, scattering stone fragments into the air. Leaping into the air, Proto leaned backward as far as her range of motion would allow her, carrying the momentum through to swing her war hammer and strike the fiendish beast in its massive side.

There was a dull *thud*, like something dense being struck, and the huge shark tilted backward.

“How do you like that?!”

The blow felt solid. A moment later, however, Proto’s vision was suddenly awash in static. She realized she had just suffered

a heavy blow, but the source of the impact was unclear. Based on the sensations she was registering, she had likely been hit by a single powerful attack and was now bouncing and skidding across the ground.

The errors in her visual sensors soon corrected themselves, allowing her to realize what had occurred. She was confronted by the sight of the shark's tail, which had whipped through the air in the blink of an eye.

The crawler shark must have unleashed its own counterattack the moment Proto struck. The fact that it was able to retaliate so quickly proved that the blow from Proto's war hammer had not actually been very effective.

"Hey, that hurt! Not that I can actually feel pain…!" shouted Proto as she stood up. She'd never had a chance to break her fall. The tail had flicked her pretty far away. "Best suited to fighting this thing or not, I still feel like I got the short end of the stick… Aren't there any easy enemies I can take on?"

Proto was not fast and agile like Jin. Her one forte was hitting things as hard as she could. And as their heavy hitter, Proto knew she was the one person in the group with a real chance of defeating this behemoth. But even if she had a chance, the margin of victory was slim. The slightest mistake could end with her shredded to pieces.

As Proto leaned down to pick up her fallen war hammer, she noticed that she was having trouble moving her body. Her armor had been partially crushed, and the hinges and other moving parts seemed to be damaged.

"Well, I guess that's how the cookie crumbles…"

With a sigh, Proto began removing her helmet and armor. For Proto, armor was just a disguise, as well as a tool to extend her reach. Against an opponent as massive as this, little tricks like adding a few centimeters to her reach were going to be practically useless anyway.

Proto detached and extended the right wrist of her girl-shaped exterior, deploying wires from inside the opening to entwine around the war hammer, making it quite literally a part of her "body." The hammer would be easier to swing around this way, and there would be no risk of it slipping from her grasp.

The gargantuan shark began trudging in Proto's direction. With each step, the ground shook, tossing rubble into the air.

“If, at first, you don’t succeed—smash, smash again!”

Proto’s one tactic in battle was to hit, hit, and then hit again.

She took a running start this time. The extra speed would translate to pure force. There was nothing between her and her target. Perfect for a charging attack.

With each step, she dialed up her power, her feet crushing the stone tiles below her. Her power source began to interfere with spatial continuity, glaring brightly and emitting a high-pitched resonating sound. She was like a shooting star as she raced across the nighttime harbor.

The monstrous beast must have been unimpressed by their last exchange, because it showed no signs of attempting to move out of the way. An opportunity this perfect would not come again. If she couldn’t make an opening with this attack, there was no chance for success.

She leaped into the air with the speed of a meteorite, twisting her body to accelerate herself even further.

It was a resounding blow!

The strike landed on the creature’s nose with explosive momentum and a faint cracking sound.

This time around, the attack felt truly solid. Proto saw a crack form in the creature’s armored hide, right where it covered the tip of its nose… Unfortunately, the injury was far smaller than the one Torreque had already inflicted with a single blow.

“You’re kidding me! How is this thing so tough?!” shouted Proto as she landed on the ground once more. She stared up at the behemoth, comparing the two injuries on its head. “That shark lady must be real powerful for a creature like this to follow at her beck and call.”

Torreque was unbelievably strong, and the giant shark creature was like a brick house. And yet the demon girl’s strength evidently dwarfed them both.

“But hey, I still hurt it…!”

Proto’s war hammer had been effective. It was too soon to stop now, though. Proto began running forward again immediately. The monstrous beast was still stunned from the unexpected blow. This time, Proto swung upward at its lower jaw.

The crawler shark’s underside was not coated in the same tough, armored hide, making it considerably softer than its back. The giant beast groaned as Proto’s war hammer caused it

to teeter to the side. It seemed to feel this blow much more strongly than the previous two.

Proto didn't have time to pat herself on the back, however. She soon realized that the monstrous beast's groans of pain had transformed into howls of anger. Now furious, the creature swung its massive teetering body back toward the ground with the full force of gravity.

"Ack!"

Proto was nearly crushed to death, but she managed to leap out of the way just in the nick of time.

The earth shook violently as the creature's tremendous mass crashed into the ground. The wind that rushed out from underneath the creature's body created a dust storm that obscured Proto's vision.

She needed to make distance. Proto had barely even formed this thought, however, before she realized a massive shadow was already charging straight for her through the swirling dust.

"Oh crap—"

Proto was struck by one of the monstrous beast's massive forelegs and sent flying. She was launched into the air like a pebble, before tumbling head over heels across the ground.

For a moment, all systems went black, but she quickly got back onto her feet.

"Thanks for kicking me so far away, Sharkbrains. Now I've got enough room for another running start. You must want to die!" shouted Proto, full of bluster.

She began to charge. The monster took off, too, as if in response. Its stolid body parted the air as it barreled forward.

"That's right, come straight for me, stupid!" said Proto, rotating her body to the side as she ran. "Now try this on for size!"

Proto pivoted rapidly as wires shot out from her waist, temporarily affixing her to the ground for a moment. At the same time, she struck the ground with her war hammer as hard as she could, gouging the stone and sending it flying.

A hail of rubble shrapnel struck the frenzied monstrous beast in the face, robbing it of any remaining composure. Taking advantage of the distraction, Proto charged in close to the gargantuan monster's side.

She wasn't aiming for its head now; she was aiming for its legs.

Using her incredible strength, Proto swung her war hammer down upon one of the creature's defenseless front legs. The sound of something large and thick being crushed echoed across the harbor. A howl of intense pain rose into the night sky.

The enemy had more explosive power than was immediately apparent, meaning that before anything else, she needed to target its ability to move. That was the first step toward achieving victory.

"This is what you get for coming onto land where you don't belong, you dumb sha— Arghhh!"

The monster swung its head sideways, tossing Proto into the air with the tip of its nose.

Proto may have crushed one of its legs, but naturally, it was still perfectly able to attack with its head. She hadn't been careless, exactly. The counterattack had just come far quicker than she had anticipated. The creature's anger had allowed it to push through the pain before Proto even regained her own footing.

Proto was tossed higher and higher, helplessly into the air. The ground waited for her far below.

"Perfect!"

Proto gripped the shaft of her war hammer firmly. As she fell toward the ground, she used its weight to rotate her body. She spun twice, three times. As soon as the war hammer picked up enough momentum, she hurled it straight down, her right arm still attached. Her arm was connected to the rest of her body by a glowing bundle of wirelike tentacles, which created a bluish-white stripe of vertical light that descended through the sky.

The war hammer plummeted toward the ground at ultra speed, striking the monstrous beast directly on its brainpan. The attack pulverized the thick, armored hide covering the crawler shark's skull, leaving the creature dazed.

The cleft that was left behind this time was far larger than the one that Torreque had inflicted earlier.

Proto retracted her wires, reeling the war hammer back in. All that was left now was to deliver the finishing blow. This was her chance while the creature was defenseless.

Just as Proto was about to deliver her follow-up, however, she felt her body jerk awkwardly. Despite the damage, the gargantuan monster had only remained stunned for a brief moment. Having already recovered its bearings, it had clamped

its jaws shut on the war hammer, which had been suspended over its head. It hung on tight, yanking the wires downward and instead reeling in Proto.

The inside of the shark's mouth was lined with rows of sharp, massive, and serrated teeth. The creature's jaw strength was overwhelming. If it managed to bite down on her core, there was no way she would survive.

It was a life-and-death situation.

"This could be bad."

The monster finally opened its mouth again in order to crunch down on her when the time came. Proto hurriedly began reeling in her arm again. But even if she freed it, there was no way she would have enough time to swing her war hammer once more.

The massive jaws began to creak shut again, aiming to catch Proto when she fell helplessly into range. Proto escaped being chomped into pieces by the seat of her pants.

"Phew, that was close…"

Her right arm, however, was now firmly clamped between the monster's powerful teeth, and her war hammer was still trapped inside its mouth. The monster must have been woozy from getting hit in the head and having its brain shaken in its skull, because it had miscalculated the distance slightly and bitten down too early. This less-than-half-a-second error had transformed a moment of "certain death" into a much more preferable "narrow escape."

However, the monstrous beast wasn't going to open its mouth a second time unless she let go of her war hammer. It understood that as long it could keep her from using her weapon, it was unlikely to lose this battle. With its jaws still clamped firmly shut, the shark began shaking its head back and forth in an attempt to tear her arm off.

"Son of a—!"

Although exceptionally strong, Proto's wire tentacles began to accrue surface damage under the circumstances. If the shark managed to work its teeth deeper, not even Proto's repair systems would be able to fix it.

Proto swung her free arm high into the air. Even without a heavy weapon like her war hammer, she was still capable of producing a fair amount of force.

"Let go, you creep!"

Proto began punching the shark in its tooth. The tooth was much more brittle than Proto had expected, and new cracks appeared with each punch.

But while the tooth may have been brittle, the girl-shaped exterior covering Proto's true form had its limits as well. The metal frame that gave her exterior its shape grew more crumpled and dented with each punch. By the time she finally destroyed the shark's tooth, her left hand was a bent and misshapen mess.

But at least she had created enough of an opening to attempt to free herself.

Just as Proto was about to yank her arm loose, before the monster could have time to readjust, it instead chose to open its mouth slightly. While this worked out well for Proto, she braced herself for the worst. What was it planning to do?

Its mouth only remained open for a very brief moment—far too brief for it to have time to readjust its bite. Far too brief, that is, as long as its tooth was still missing.

But amazingly, a new tooth had already emerged where the previous one had been. Normal sharks had backup teeth to replace the ones they lost, but apparently, this species could replace its teeth almost instantaneously.

She could struggle all she like, but the monstrous beast was not going to let go of her hand. If Proto didn't try something new, she was going to lose.

"In that case…!"

It was time for Proto's trump card.

"Hyaaahhhhh—!!"

Leaving her right arm trapped between the creature's teeth, Proto began racing across the giant creature's head. As she ran across its lower jaw and right cheek, she purged her now-useless exterior left-arm fitting, detaching it at the shoulder from her chassis. Once she reached the top of the creature's head, she began to deploy a flood of wires from the opening at her shoulder.

The wires began to swiftly extend along the monstrous beast's massive body, caressing its surface and circling two, three layers thick around the creature's head. The creature grew frantic as it tried to free itself, but the wires had already wrapped snugly around the creature's head. They wouldn't budge.

Proto suddenly shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Override initiated! Exceeding critical power levels!”

This would allow Proto to boost her output exponentially, but the mechanical burden was extreme. She was unable to maintain override status for very long, and one wrong step while at critical levels could leave her deactivated instead. This was Proto’s last resort.

But she had to win. She doubled down on her choke hold with single-minded fury.

Her reason—the reason she needed to win so badly—was her friends. Despite having developed an attachment to this town, she didn’t really give a damn about what happened to it or to this world. But if she didn’t win this fight, she would no longer be able to spend time with the new friends she had made.

Something about being with them just felt right. For some reason, they clicked. It may not have been much of a reason, but it was enough of one for Proto.

“Drop dead! You…inferior…life-form…! Hyaaahhhhh—!!”

Error messages were exploding inside her head. Proto ignored them, using every ounce of her overclocked power to begin retracting her wires. The bluish-white light intensified, and the high-pitched whine grew louder than ever.

The monstrous beast squirmed and struggled violently as the crack along its head began to steadily grow larger. The armor gave off shrill pops and squeaks, which mingled with the rumbling vibrations that it made as it bucked and heaved. The sounds continued for a moment longer, until eventually, the creature stopped moving.

“Phew…that was…easy…”

Despite her tough talk, the tiny warrior had used up most of her energy and was on the brink of shutting down. She stood atop the behemoth’s head and stared off into the distance—toward her comrade, who was still fighting her own fight nearby. But when Proto saw the expression on Jin’s face, her own face lit up.

“It looks like you’re finally getting it, Jin.”



The moment Jin unsheathed the malefic sword, she felt a chill rise up from somewhere deep inside her. Her vision took on a

dark-red hue, like blood, and a gravelly *hum* and *pop* filled her ears. She had trouble forcing her body to move the way she wanted it to.



Additionally, and most concerning of all, multiple shadows superimposed themselves over the image of Nadja, standing before her. These figures were not clear, but Jin intuitively understood that they were the shadows of those she had slain in the past.

“Why are you trying to confuse me…?”

A strained look crossed Jin’s face. Even attempting to speak now took a mental toll.

“I don’t know what you’re going on about, but I guess it’s time for round two!”

Nadja dashed forward in high spirits, now taking the offensive.

Jin was having trouble moving. She had to do something! Before she even realized what was happening, however, the crimson blade moved to intercept Nadja’s trident, blocking the blow.

“Wh-what is the meaning of this…?!” Jin cried.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you seem to have improved suddenly!”

Jin’s every move felt powerful. Come to think of it, the ogre they’d fought had originally just been an ordinary villager, jerked about so that he could stand his ground in a battle against Jin and Proto, who were more experienced. Crimson Rain also seemed to amplify the physical attributes of its wielder.

Jin had not blocked of her own accord. The sword had acted to protect its wielder. Jin’s body remained stiff with fear, her vision growing steadily cloudier.

Nadja continued to unleash attack after attack, while Jin repelled them through brute strength. Nadja also continued to launch her water spears, which Jin only avoided through blind luck. She was being manipulated like a puppet, just like the ogre back in the fishing village.

As the situation dragged on, the curse seemed to grow more powerful. The red hue deepened, her vision stained with the blood of her past victims. Shadows coiled around her arms and legs.

“What are you trying to do?! Why are you showing me these shadows?!”

If all the sword wished for was to feast upon blood, using fear to drive her bloodlust would have made sense. But this fear

seemed to be interfering with her ability to fight. On the other hand, if that was the sword's intention all along, then why was it also protecting her?

It seemed like a contradiction. She hadn't lost control of her mind, either, like the ogre had. With each passing moment, Jin understood what the malefic sword was trying to do even less.

But this fear was real. She could see the flickering eyes of the shadows, and she wished she could look away.

"What are you babbling about?!" shouted Nadja.

Jin was sent flying, unable to block Nadja's last attack fully. Crimson Rain, however, remained firmly grasped in her hand.

Jin was covered with injuries; she could barely make herself move. Her mind and her vision were clouded with fear. Her thoughts were all over the place.

Nadja was charging toward her. Jin remained sprawled on the ground as she stared at Nadja in a haze.

"You don't seem to be putting up much of a fight anymore, but there is something I need to do, and not even death will stop me. You're not the only one with a cause. I've got my own cause, and I'll kill you. I'll kill anyone who gets in my way—I'll crawl on bloody stumps if need be to see it through! If you want to stop me, you'll have to get up and kill me first!"

A fire burned in Nadja's eyes, overlapping with the chimerical eyes of the shadows.

"A cause…," muttered Jin weakly.

Nadja's fearsome trident descended through the air.



"Sakura, it is time. Insert the blade into your stomach."

"Yes, Father."

"It is unfortunate. But this is our code."

Their exchange had been short.

They were a clan of assassins that had been operating in Japan since ancient times. Clan members proficient with the katana inherited the name *Jin*, which meant "blade" or "sword." Sakura Karasuma had inherited this name as well, and even now, she was referred to as Jin by her associates.

She had cut down many people in her time. Young, old, male, female—it didn't matter. They had all been *evildoers*.

Jin always looked her targets in the eyes. This was partly to watch for openings in their guard, but it was also to get a measure of them as a person. With the majority of evildoers, you could see it in their eyes.

Jin believed that cutting down the wicked, those who trampled upon others, was the right thing to do. This was her own way of helping and saving people. She may have been *someone else's tool*, but she took pride in that fact.

However, a time eventually came when her convictions wavered.

Occasionally, she encountered targets who carried out evil in the name of some great cause. These were the ones who took revenge against atrocities, who sacrificed the few in order to save the many, or who took extreme measures to correct the wrongs of this world. Unlike the fallen, these people held a fierce light within their eyes.

They did not fear death. They held firm to their beliefs until the very end, often insisting that Jin would have to "kill them first" in order to stop them.

Jin began to feel fear. It wasn't merely that their spirits had overwhelmed her. She felt something else, a stirring in her chest. One that made her afraid to look away.

It was both anxiety—a vague premonition that if she didn't change course, she would regret it in the end—as well as a craving for something more than the pride that she had always clung to.

Jin continued to carry out her assassinations, ignoring these painful emotions, until a certain job arrived. The target was a group of young boys and girls—people who in no way appeared to be evil. And the reason for the request was top secret.

"Why should we slay children?"

"We don't know the reason. We don't need to. Don't think—just do," said her father.

Of course. She simply had to cut them down. Like she always did. But something inside her rebelled. She knew that if she did this, she would regret it.

Time and again, she went to the targets' locations and peered into their eyes. But she did not see evil. From whichever angle she looked, they just seemed to be ordinary children.

"As Sakura…I cannot do it…"

That was her final decision.

Of course, she knew what happened to those who defied orders. She knew, but she chose her path anyway. She did not regret her choice.

“Sister, I came to see you one last time.”

“Oh, Fujimaru, it’s you. I’m sad to say good-bye.”

Fujimaru was Jin’s brother, and he was three years younger. Jin did not regret her decision. If there was one thing she did regret, however, it was that this mission would now fall on his shoulders.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t know. It’s just what I wanted to do.”

“*Just what you wanted to do…?*” repeated Fujimaru through clenched teeth.

“Fujimaru… No, I should call you ‘Jin’ now. I’m sorry I wasn’t a better sister. I’m sorry I forced a mission like this onto your shoulders.”

“Don’t say that…”

“We have to say good-bye now.”

“O…okay.”

Jin stroked her brother’s head in farewell, and then she ended her life. She felt strangely at peace as she sank down toward death. She wasn’t entirely sure what she had been reaching for, but she had grasped it in the end. That was enough for her.

But then in a strange twist of fate, she had been summoned to another world with one of the very targets she had been tasked to kill.

“N-n-now, now, now! How about we introduce ourselves, first?! This is probably all just a big misunderstanding. Come on, what do you say?”

Jin understood her true mission at last. She hadn’t foisted it off onto her younger brother; she had carried part of it with her here, into a different world.

Her target was crass and lacked self-control. Jin was not impressed. Until one day, that is, when she saw a powerful light flare to life inside the girl’s eye. A glow of determination. At times, it literally burned.

Many of her other new friends held powerful lights of their own, but the fire in this girl’s eye was something special.

She just lived her life as a normal person, pandering to her own selfish desires, unafraid of being burned.

On the one hand, Jin found her shallow. On the other, this girl was vaguely frightening, as well as alluring.

But why should Jin be captivated by something that she found appalling? As the thought formed, she could swear she saw Homura's eyes where the eyes of Nadja and the wavering shadows met.



A shrill *clang* echoed throughout the harbor.

Jin had just swung the malefic sword upward, this time of her own free will, blocking Nadja's trident as it fell down toward her.

"Now I understand…"

That powerful light of determination. She finally understood why it had frightened her so. Deep down, she was jealous. Jealous of those with the commitment, and the strength of will, to dedicate themselves to something they believed in, even if it meant adopting the mantle of evil or even doing the unthinkable.

Such people didn't just drift through life. They stood upon their own two legs; they chose their own paths, lived by the strength of their own convictions. That was the true meaning behind that sense of peace she had felt while on the verge of death in her previous life.

"So that's what I was feeling…" So many things suddenly came together. "Ah-ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"What are you laughing about?"

How long had it been since she had last laughed?

"It's nothing; I just came face-to-face with my own baseness. Ha-ha, I guess there's no hiding it. Who's the churl now? In the end, I want to live just as selfishly as everyone else. It actually feels like a weight being lifted."

Nadja leaped backward, putting distance between them.

"It was never the killing I enjoyed. It was the experience of fighting of my own free will against other people who were also fighting of *their* own free will. Conviction, even in the face of death. What better way to prove that we're really here?"

Jin's eyes now shone with a light of her own.

"I like this new look in your eyes. I'm still going to kill you, though, of course!"

“I can’t believe this strange sword has actually taken a liking to me. Incredible. Who would have thought that what I feared was the very thing I envied…?”

The blood-starved malefic sword now felt comfortable in her hand. Jin’s mind and vision grew clear once more, and she sensed new strength welling up inside her. She wasn’t sure if the malefic sword had a will of its own, but either way, it was thanks to Crimson Rain that she finally understood how to stand on her own two feet again.

“I guess the real fight begins now?”

“I warn you, this new self-aware me is much stronger.” Jin smiled. She gripped the crimson blade in her hand and, with a single fluid motion, thrust it deep into her own stomach. “I’ll never get used to this feeling…”

She grimaced in pain.

“Whoa, whoa, don’t be in such a hurry to end it. I didn’t realize that was where you were going with this!”

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan to die until I kill you first.”

The blade pulsed as Jin withdrew it, absorbing her blood. Nadja stared at the ghastly blade, finally understanding what was happening.

“Of course…it’s one of those. I thought you were simply trying to get out of fighting me.”

“Relax. I was just about to chop your head off. I hope you’re ready.”

The bloodbath could now begin in earnest.

“Here I come,” said Nadja, readying her trident. A serpent of water undulated in the air.

“Prepare yourself.” Jin made her blood, which now coated the malefic sword, transform into a sinister blade.

Although the stakes were deadly, both women smiled as they faced off against each other.

No army, however great, could have interceded in the ferocious match that soon unfolded. Jin’s blade of blood rent the sky; Nadja’s water spears gouged the earth. One second, one moment of carelessness could have spelled instant death for either combatant. Their injuries only seemed to fuel their enjoyment.

They both found themselves inching closer and closer to death. But the end came suddenly, like a moment stitched into the battle.

“The fight is mine!”
Jin’s strike finally landed home.



Chapter 10
Chainsaw Girl

Time seemed to stop as silence descended upon the artificial island. It felt like the island was isolated from the rest of the world.

In the wake of the clash between those two unyielding warriors, the island had been left unrecognizable. Their surroundings were blanketed with wreckage from the destroyed warehouses, and the stone pavement was etched with traces of the battle. It would have been impossible to judge from the carnage alone what had occurred here.

“Tsk…you only cut off my arm in the end.”

“Now that I think of it, I had something I wanted to ask you.”

Nadja’s arm had been cleanly severed where the carapace covered her skin. Blood poured freely from the wound. Although she was responsible for that wound, Jin had lost a significant amount of blood herself.

In addition to her stomach, where she had stabbed herself with the katana, blood was spouting from the holes left in her body by Nadja’s water spears. They both sat on the ground, unable to take another step.

“I did say that if you wanted answers, you should beat the truth out of me, so I guess you earned it.”

“Make it quick, then. I think I’m at death’s door.”

“Ha-ha, you’re crazy, you know that? Fine, I’ll get to the point. I came to free my brethren who have been kidnapped. Although, I guess that wish won’t be happening now…”

Regret and resignation crossed Nadja’s face…but only for a moment.

“Of course,” said Jin. “Leave that to us, then… However, healing comes first.”

“Huh? Leave it to you? Healing?” Nadja looked confused.

“Psycho, hurry up already! We’re dying over here.”

“You’re not the only one who’s tired, I’ll have you know,” said Psycho. “I’ve been breaking my back out there.”

Having now eliminated the horde of crawler sharks, Psycho approached to apply her healing magic to the two combatants. Like she said, the sustained fighting and repeated use of healing magic had left her visibly exhausted. But unfortunately for Psycho, no one seemed to care.

“Wait, what is the meaning of this? Aren’t you going to kill me?” Nadja asked.

“Why should we? You don’t plan to keep fighting, do you?”

“Well, no…,” said Nadja, looking away, embarrassed.

“I’ve got an idea where they might be. Let’s hurry up, free them, and finish this job.”

“I never knew humans could be reasonable…”

Jin and Nadja allowed themselves to be healed. The holes in Jin’s body closed, and Nadja’s arm was reattached to her body. Psycho tried to work quickly, because Tsutsumi was staring at Nadja’s severed arm with a hungry gleam in her eyes.

“I owe you my gratitude, humans.”

“Save your thanks. If what you say is true, it sounds like our side started this mess in the first place,” replied Psycho dismissively.

“All the same.”

Both sides had taken lives, but the humans seemed to have been the instigators. An obligation was an obligation, however, according to Nadja.

With her arm reattached, Nadja stood back up.

“Okay then, where is this place…? Wait, first things first.” Nadja turned her attention toward the massive crawler shark. “Hey, you, how long do you plan to keep sleeping for?!” she bellowed. “Go on, you head back first!”

In response, the immobile beast slowly trudged back to its feet. Apparently, it had only been unconscious. Once it grasped the situation, it shook its head back and forth in an attempt to dislodge Proto.

“Ow!” complained Proto as she was roughly tossed away. A moment ago, she had been absentmindedly bathing in the moonlight.

“—!!”

The monstrous beast released a skull-splitting howl. They all covered their ears, but the sound rattled their eardrums regardless.

In response, the army of crawler sharks that was still laying waste to the city immediately turned around and began to retreat toward the sea. The extensive wall of flame bisecting the town disappeared as well.

There were no more sounds of fighting. There were no victors and thus no cries of triumph, either. A humming silence descended upon the rubble-strewn city.

“Huh? What happened? Is it over?” said Proto, joining the others. She dragged her war hammer, which was still tangled in her right arm, behind her. She had finally recovered enough energy to move.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Proto,” said Jin.

“Sorry, what?” Proto responded, still somewhat dazed.

Outcome aside, she owed a lot to Proto.

“Well? Where is this place you mentioned?” Psycho and the others began walking with Nadja now in tow.

“It’s gotta be there,” Jin replied. “At least, I think so.”

They were heading straight toward the center of town.

“Ahh… In the end, it looks like I’m the only one who gets what I want. I hope he doesn’t mind,” muttered Nadja apologetically.

“‘He’? Do you mean the Dark Lord?”

“Yes.”

“This Dark Lord guy—what’s he like?” asked Psycho as they headed toward their destination. This was important information. The Dark Lord was the whole reason they had been summoned to this world.

“I’ve never met him in person, either. A woman claiming to be the Dark Lord’s servant showed up out of the blue. According to what she told me, the Dark Lord wants to expel every last human from the land and provide salvation for all monsters.”

They passed all sorts of rubble along the way. The sight left them feeling conflicted.

“According to the woman, if I agreed to become one of the Dark Lord’s followers and help him in his goal, he would lend me power. I just so happened to be in the process of planning my own attack on this town, so I figured I could make use of this Dark Lord person.”

“And then she gave you something called curseblood?”

“What? How did you know?”

“We fought some people before who had used the curseblood. You have similar mutations, though not as extreme as theirs

were. Well, I say that, but I've never seen your kind before except as an illustration in a book."

Both Rotraud and the bandit leader he had manipulated had completely abandoned their humanity, reduced to strange aberrations in the end. Nadja was also different in some ways from the shark demons they had seen in the book.

"You're right. The curseblood made me stronger," said Nadja, tapping the carapace covering her arms. It was one of the features that hadn't been included in the book's illustration. "After I drank it, I felt power well up inside me, and my arms and legs changed into what you see now. But I feel like I've also grown more short-tempered… Meanwhile, my partner ended up massive, as you saw."

Nadja sounded proud at first, but she suddenly lowered her eyes, her face stern.

"At first, I only planned to use the Dark Lord, but after I drank that curseblood, my thinking began to change. It only took a few sips for me to realize how messed up that stuff was. There's a powerful curse mixed with the blood, one that can mangle your very soul. There's no way anyone with that blood in their veins can find any pleasure in their life. Pain, fear, despair. He must be constantly plagued by such feelings. But despite it all, he's still trying to save us monsters. Of course I want to help, knowing that. How could I not?"

"It sounds like we're taking on an even bigger nemesis than we thought," Psycho mused.

Nadja's expression suddenly changed again. This time, she looked confused.

"Come to think of it—the word 'help' suddenly made me remember this. The woman told me there would be another person helping me in the attack. In the end, though, it looks like it was just me."

"Lucky for us. You were more than enough trouble on your own."

They continued to walk along the demolished streets with a monster in their midst as groups of soldiers stared at them from afar. Nadja was not the only target of their suspicion. They seemed to be eyeing Proto and Tsutsumi.

"This is where I think we'll find them," said Jin.

They had arrived at the central plaza, where Elyliyah carried out her public beatings. Their true destination lay beyond the

plaza: the governor's manor.

"There have been rumors of strange, unidentified moans coming from inside."

The rumors that Ares had reported. At first, they had assumed those sounds were coming from the missing criminals, but what if they were actually coming from the imprisoned demons? Nadja soon confirmed their suspicions.

"Yes, I can smell my brethren's blood."

A hideous, bloodstained box wrapped in a beautiful facade—that was the manor's true nature.

Homura was currently resting in the open plaza along with Ares and his party. They quickly rushed toward the girls.

"Everyone, you're okay…! Hey, who's the demon?"

For Homura, it was just a simple question. But Ares and the others knew trouble when they saw it.

"This is Nadja, the mastermind behind the attack. Everyone, say hello and try to get along!" Psycho announced.

"If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times, but don't you girls have any common sense…?"

Ares and his comrades readied their weapons, suddenly tense.

"See, I knew it," said Nadja. "This is how normal people behave. It's you guys who are the odd ones."

"I don't know about no common sense—I just know this is the quickest route to resolving this mess," said Psycho, seemingly unbothered that by the fact that even the shark lady considered her to be odd. "To make a long story short, Little Miss Shark's friends were kidnapped, and she came here to get them back."

"Wait, are you saying this may have all been Elyliyah's fault?!"

The attack on the merchant vessel, the fishing village that was massacred due to the malefic blade, and the current attack on the town.

"*This* was to blame?" said Ares, glaring at the manor.

As the pieces of the attack fell into place, Ares found his anger being redirected toward Elyliyah. But that still didn't absolve Nadja of their skepticism. Freeing her people might technically resolve this issue, but she was still a demon. And the fact of the matter was that she had attacked this town and its people. They were hardly going to be eager to trust her.

The four members of Ares's party surrounded them closely as they headed toward the governor's manor.

“By the way, Homura—nice job creating that huge wall of fire without bugging out and going on a rampage,” said Psycho. She had secretly been worried about how she was going to stop Homura if the girl lost control again.

“As long as I keep my attention off the flames, I’m fine. I just thought happy thoughts about Tsutsumi instead. Eh-hee-hee…,” said Homura with a sleazy smile on her face. It was pretty clear what kind of “happy thoughts” she had been thinking about Tsutsumi.

“Good to hear. Unfortunately, it’s to the dungeons with you!”

“But why?!”

Homura and Psycho did not seem to understand the urgency of the situation.

“Jin,” asked Nadja, side-eyeing the two girls goofing off behind them. “Don’t you have any normal friends?”

“No, they are all strange.”

“You have my sympathies…”

“They’re actually pretty fun.”

“Then you’re as strange as they are.”

Jin was too shocked to reply to that.

The fenced iron gate had been left open. In addition to the large manor that stood at the center of the grounds, they discovered a smaller hut sitting off to the side. It looked like it had been plopped down unceremoniously in the manor garden, its door slightly ajar.

Nadja pointed her nose toward the hut and sniffed.

“There. The smell is coming from that hut.”

They approached the hut, with Ares’s group remaining behind.

Once they stepped through the open door, the stench of blood was thick enough for even Homura’s nose to detect. A small desk had been placed inside, and there were several weapons lining the wall. There were no other items around, but there was a door built into the floor. This trapdoor was currently open, and they could see a stairway leading underground. The odor was coming from deeper within.

They passed through the trapdoor. The chilly, mold-scented air caressed their skin. Once they made their way down the stairs, they discovered a row of black iron doors, illuminated faintly by orestone lamps.

“It’s a dungeon. Perfect timing, right, Homura?”

“No, it’s not at all!”

There was already another person there at the end of the hallway. She stood before one of the gloomy doors where the orestone’s glow did not reach. It was difficult to tell in this dim light, but she appeared to be an adult woman.

The woman held a large key ring in her hands and had just been on the verge of inserting one of its many keys into the door when she jumped in surprise at the sound of their voices. Noticing them, the woman held out a knife in her trembling hand, pointing it toward the intruders.

“D-don’t come any closer! I mean it!”

The woman was a priestess. The same one who had been waiting behind the stage during Elyliyah’s public spectacle.

“Please, I’m almost finished. Just pretend you didn’t see what I’m…about to…” A look of confusion crossed the priestess’ face as she noticed the demon among the group. “Wait, why is there someone from the Sharktooth Tribe with you?”

“Her? We’re here to free her friends. What’s it to you?” said Psycho.

It was like a cord had snapped. The priestess’s knees wobbled, and the tension drained from her shoulders.

“I see… Forgive me, I had no idea we were here for the same reason…”

“Wait, you’re here to free them? That must mean he’s still alive, right?!” Nadja asked.

“Y-yes!”

Nadja sighed in relief. She was probably hiding how worried she had been.

“I was ordered to feed and heal them, but Ms. Elyliyah has been amusing herself with them almost every single day. He is not in good shape, but he is alive.”

“It’s enough to know that.”

This time, the priestess inserted the key and turned the lock. As the heavy iron door swung open, the thick stench of blood rushed out to greet them. The dank air clung unpleasantly to their skin.

The priestess entered the cell and touched the orestone lamp located directly next to the door, activating the light.

Nadja was grinding her teeth hard enough that it was audible.

There was an emaciated demon inside the cell, bound to the wall by chains. Unlike Nadja, there was no carapace on this

demon's arms and legs, but it was evident that he was of her race.

Although he was uninjured, the dried blood on the floor spoke to the sort of treatment he must have been receiving. The moans that people had heard, night after night, were the sounds of demons being tortured.

"Papa!" Nadja embraced the man inside the cell.

"Nadja, is that you? What happened to your arms…?"

"I've been working hard, Papa! I've been doing special training, and I'm really strong now! My body also changed a little due to a curse…but I never gave up. I knew I would save everyone!"

Nadja could no longer hold back the hot tears from pouring down her face. A single tear trickled down the haggard cheek of Nadja's father as well.

There was so much Nadja wanted to tell him, but she was too overjoyed now for words. No trace of the stone-cold warrior from before could be seen in her sobbing face; she was just a young girl again. This was likely who she really was.

Nadja's face suddenly grew stern once more as she remembered that the humans were standing behind her, watching.

"Shut up! I was fighting for the dignity of our people! I'm still part of the Dark Lord's army!"

"No one said otherwise! Go on, enjoy your touching reunion!" yelled Psycho.

"Enough! We're heading back outside!"

"Nadja, when did you learn to talk like that? And what is all this about the Dark Lord's army?!"

"Papa, you be quiet, too!"

Everybody looked away awkwardly, but right now, the most important thing was to free Nadja's father and the other Sharktooth prisoners. They removed everyone's chains and checked to make sure they weren't injured. While the prisoners weren't in the best shape, they could still stand, so they quickly left the dungeon behind before Elyliyah could have a chance to notice them.

Ares and his party members cradled their heads in their hands when they saw the band of demons emerge from the hut. The people they thought had been the villains turned out to

have been the victims all along, and the person they had given the benefit of the doubt to had turned out to be in the wrong.

"I feel like I've just gotten a glimpse into true evil…" Despite his initial wariness, Ares quickly lowered his weapon, his face turning dark. "You two, go with them. Keep them safe until they get back to sea."

"Okay."

"You can count on me."

Ares's two companions acknowledged their mission to guard the freed prisoners. They did not even question Ares's decision, immediately accepting it as the right thing to do. It was evident how much faith they placed in him.

Ares stood steadfast as his former enemies departed, his eyes devoid of hostility. The Sharktooth people departed toward the sea, huddled together loosely. Those who could still walk normally lent a shoulder to those who were having trouble.

"If I ever have the chance to repay you, I will do so," said Nadja before she departed as well. She never looked back.

Ares watched as the demons disappeared into the distance, before finally turning his attention toward the task at hand.

"Rhiann, we need to find Elyliyah and—"

A loud *crash* filled the air.

It happened so suddenly that they all froze.

Rubble rained down across the plaza. At the center of the chaos, they saw that the plaza stage used for Elyliyah's punishments had just been destroyed. Something had been thrown into it, splintering it to pieces. A warrior in a bull-antler helmet—it was Torreque!

Once they realized Torreque had just been flung into the stage, they turned their eyes in the direction that the original sound had come from. A half-destroyed building was standing there. It had withstood the crawler-shark invasion, but now it'd been devastated by an explosion from within.

Torreque's body was riddled with sharp metal shards that had pierced his armor. He was moving slightly, indicating that he was still breathing, but the amount of blood that was welling up from his wounds was immense. Without help, the blood loss would turn critical.

"Captain Torreque!" The priestess quickly rushed to Torreque's side and began applying her healing magic.

“I thought it seemed quiet out here. What did you do with my toys?! You’ve completely put me off my tea now!”

The clouds of dust drifted past on the night breeze, revealing Elyliyah in the doorway, which had just barely managed to remain upright after the blast. Elyliyah hadn’t gotten stranded like some of the others. No, while the city was under attack, she had been enjoying an elegant cup of tea.

“This was all your doing, wasn’t it? Look at your gross arm—you’re turning into a monster, aren’t you? Clearly, I was in the right to attack you. If I killed you now, no one would blame me.”

Looking closely, Torreque’s left arm was covered in a thick carapace, similar to the crawler sharks. It was the arm that Psycho had hastily constructed for him, deformed and obviously inhuman. Although sturdy and powerful, it obviously did not belong on a normal human body.

“It looks like I managed to keep her busy…just long enough. But I think…I made her angry. You guys should…probably run…,” said Torreque, his breathing ragged.

“I know what you’ve been doing, sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong. All those convicts who people didn’t want around here anymore—you’ve been sending them to live in your old village, haven’t you? And now you’ve gone and let my little toys escape. Providing aid to criminals and monsters—you deserve to be punished!”

In Elyliyah’s mind, she was the law. And as long as there was no one to stand up to her, for all intents and purposes, that was, in fact, what she was.

Elyliyah needed to be handled with kid gloves. Angering her could hurt the relations between Galdorssia and Aurerich. Despite this, Ares stepped forward to stand in her way.

“You were the cause of this attack. If you hadn’t laid a hand on those demons, none of this would have happened.”

“And? Soldiers like you kill monsters all the time.”

“Only to protect the people. Not to indulge our own wants and desires, like you were doing.”

“What exactly are you trying to say…?” said Elyliyah, growing more and more irritated with this lippy new recruit.

“As a soldier of the Aegis Guard, I am taking you into custody for disturbing Aurerich’s peace. You have kidnapped and tortured demons, provoking their allies and thereby inciting

chaos. As soldiers of Galdorssia, we, too, are pledged to act in accordance with the law."

"Huh…?" Elyliyah was so taken aback by Ares's response that she just stared at him foolishly for a moment. "Custody…? The law…? Are you kidding me…? If you think you can stop me, then go ahead and try it, but be prepared to kill. Not that someone like you ever could."

She sounded exasperated to the point of disappointment.

"I am well aware I cannot defeat you. That does not change what I need to do."

Elyliyah saw the spark in the defiant soldier's eyes. Why was there no fear there? This coward, too gutless to even take a life! Elyliyah's entire agenda was to inspire fear. For someone like her, a person without fear was a cold slap in the face. A repudiation of all she was.

"Fools, cowards! All so dead set on getting in my way…! Why won't you look at me? At your Elyliyah?!"

As Elyliyah shouted, something flew from her hand. Ares quickly held up his shield to deflect it. The helmet he had still been attempting to put on fell to the ground with a *clunk* and rolled away. Although he had been taken by surprise, Ares calmly readied his sword and shield, summoning his lightning to shroud his body.

"Those damned eyes!"

At some point, a whip made of connected blades had appeared in Elyliyah's hand. The coiled blade was exceptionally long, and it writhed in the air like a tentacle, even when she wasn't doing anything.

"Prepare yourself," Ares said before dashing forward.

He was able to close the distance swiftly, moving like a falling bolt of lightning. His feet, shrouded in azure thunder, split the stone pavement as he shot forward.

But although he moved too fast to blink, Elyliyah intercepted him with her coiled blade. The whip writhed in the air, targeting Ares with fine precision.

The whip moved erratically, but she still aimed it perfectly for his vitals. Ares blocked with his shield and parried with his sword, and the harsh sound of clashing metal and electricity filled the air.

Ares took a final lunge, swinging his sword high into the air. Unfortunately, the follow-through never came.

“Did I forget to mention that I’ve got two?”

A second coiled blade extended from Elyliyah’s left hand, piercing Ares through his right arm.

“I’m not done yet—!”

It took more than that to stop Ares. Although the bladed whip was piercing his flesh, he dragged his arm forward through sheer will, pointing his blade toward Elyliyah.

“Azure thunder, str—”

Just as Ares was about to release his lightning, countless metal thorns suddenly burst out of his arm from within.

“Aurrrghhhh—!!”

Ares screamed and fell unconscious.

“Hmph, no fair. I wanted to see what his eyes looked like after he lost hope,” muttered Elyliyah, sounding profoundly bored. “Oh well. There’s still more punishment to come!”

Elyliyah stroked her other coiled blade, lashing out at the now unconscious man. The chained blades would probably cut through the metal armor he was wearing like butter…

“Barrier!”

A wall of light suddenly appeared, repelling the whip. Rhiann had leaped in front of Ares to deploy a magic shield.

“What do you think you’re doing? Get in my way, and I’ll kill you, too.”

“The fight is already over!”

“This isn’t a fight, you nincompoop; it’s punishment. Wait, was that what you thought this was? I’m sorry, he was so weak, I didn’t even notice!”

Rhiann gritted her teeth. She knew if she opened her mouth now, something awful would come out. The mortification and fear in Rhiann’s tear-filled eyes seemed to have put Elyliyah in a good mood once again.

“Ah-ha! Fine, you can be next. I’ll tell you what: If you can protect that little worm, you win. I’ll even let you take me into custody. But I doubt you’ll manage to put up much of a fight.”

“I don’t mean to brag, but I was the best at magical barriers in the entire Seminary.”

“Such confidence! In that case, allow me to crush both your barrier and your confidence in a single blow.”

Ares collapsed to the ground as the bladed coil that had been suspending him off the ground diffused into red mist and disappeared.

“Barrier upon barrier, multiply and protect me!”

A new wall of light appeared, overlaying the first. The magical barrier protecting Rhiann and Ares was now three layers thick. The crawler sharks had been easily capable of breaking down stone walls, but a single one of Rhiann’s barriers had repelled wave after wave of them. With multiple layers, she now had a veritable fortress.

When it came to defense, at least, Rhiann was confident that she was second to none. People had high expectations for her, even whispering that one day, she might become as strong as her sister in the Holy Protectorate of the Shield.

It was the fate of those like Ares and Rhiann, who were born with such exceptional siblings; from a young age, they had gotten used to being compared to their gifted brothers and sisters, and they had grown up wrestling with the sense of inferiority this instilled. After much blood, sweat, and tears, they had finally become strong, having come far enough at last to at least stand somewhere on the same playing field.

Rhiann couldn’t fail now; there were important people she needed to protect. How was she ever going to reach her sister’s level if she lost now to Elyliyah? It would be proof that no amount of effort could ever catch up to inborn talent.

Rhiann poured every ounce of hope and willpower she had into her triple-layered barrier. And then Elyliyah shattered it with a single strike.

“What?”

It happened so quickly that even after the blow hit her, Rhiann still didn’t understand. Elyliyah had flicked a single drop of blood from her hand. The drop had then transformed into a series of steel poles that tore through the magical barrier, striking Rhiann head-on.

As Rhiann lay on the ground, staring up at the sky, tears came unbidden to her eyes.

“What did I tell you? Weak. A bunch of talentless lowlifes like you could never defeat me, Elyliyah. I know you don’t want to believe that you’re ordinary, but it’s time you accepted the truth and—”

Before she could finish speaking, Elyliyah was suddenly sent flying.

It took Homura a moment to realize she had just punched Elyliyah. By the time she registered the heat and pain coming

from her flaming hand, a fountain of invective was already streaming from her mouth.

"*'Don't talk back, or you'll be in trouble!' 'What about the relationship between Aurerich and Galdorssia?'* Well, boo-hoo, guess who *doesn't fucking care*?!" Homura's eyes had ignited, causing the air to shimmer with heat. "I won't let you talk about my friend like that anymore!"

Elyliyah's mockery had finally spurred Homura into action. Elyliyah was still a little dazed, having just been punched in the head, after all.

"Punched? Me? Elyliyah?" she muttered, incoherently, before finally turning her gaze toward her attacker. "Again with those eyes…I told you not to look at me like that!"

"Don't worry, I'm sure I can put up more than enough of a fight for you. Don't feel too bad if you turn out to be the one to get 'punished' this time, okay?" said Homura as she pointed her staff toward Elyliyah. She was talking a big game in order to psych herself up.

Homura couldn't just stand by while injustice occurred.

Someone had to stop Elyliyah, and right now, Homura was the only one who still had the strength left to do it. She hadn't meant to punch Elyliyah like that, but her mind was made up. She was ready. Deep down, she already knew what she needed to do.

"A fight? Punishment? You don't get it…," said Elyliyah, standing up slowly. The burn on her cheek had already healed. "This is about to be an execution."

Homura did not flinch. The two squared off, creating distance between themselves.

"I, Elyliyah, use bloodtempering magic. Do you know what that is? I manipulate spilled blood, using it to create iron weapons and armor," she explained dryly, her words laced with venom.

"I think I figured that out already…"

After watching the fight earlier, Homura didn't need Elyliyah to explain how her powers worked. But that wasn't the point Elyliyah was trying to make.

"And just *how much blood* do you think was spilled in Aurerich today…?"

"Hold on a second…"

A trickle of cold sweat ran down the side of Homura's face.

Elyliyah forcefully stabbed her needle-mitts, already coated with her own blood, into the stone tiles at her feet. The ground began to pulsate, centered on the point where Elyliyah's fist met the ground.

"This looks bad… Everybody, run!" shouted Torreque as he began to hightail it. The priestess, who had healed him, followed hot on his heels, as did the other soldiers in the area. Psycho and the other girls, however, stopped once they were outside the plaza, taking up positions to watch the fight.

The pulse spread beyond the plaza, soon engulfing the entire town.

"Oh shoot, oh shoot, oh shoot…!" said Homura.

"Gouge! Rip! Crush! Tear! Rend them to pieces!"

Slowly, gravely, Elyliyah began to withdraw her needle-mitts from the ground. As the long spikes rose out of the ground, bloody pillars of mist began to rise throughout town in tandem to the movement of her fist, like liquid being drawn through a pump. The pillars drew closer, converging on the plaza.

"Hurricane…"

As Elyliyah loudly chanted her spell, the torrent of blood began to swirl into a circle, creating a massive spinning wheel of blood mist.

"…chainclaw…!!!"

Large, sharp metal fragments began to form along the outer edge of the bloody whirlwind, transforming it into a gigantic circular saw—or perhaps a chainsaw.

The enormous, fearsome wheel reminded Homura of a piece of ultra-large heavy machinery known as a bucket-wheel excavator.

"……"

As Homura stared at Elyliyah's creation, slack-jawed, all her extra rage and fire promptly sputtered out.

"Um, guys…maybe we should fight this one together?"

For a huge enemy like this, wasn't it better to join hands and work as a group?

"Hey, you started this fight!"

"I'm rooting for you!"

"Good luck!"

"Good luck…Homura…!"

Unfortunately, none of the others seemed particularly interested in holding Homura's hand right now. Homura's

friends continued to watch from positions of safety outside the plaza.

“Come on, you guyyys… Whoaaaaa!!”

Homura’s first act of battle was to dive blindly out of the way as the chainsaw hurtled toward her, chewing through the stone pavement as it passed. She had really messed up this time!

“In case you were wondering, I don’t plan on killing you quickly,” said Elyliyah.

But if that was the case, she should probably put that chainsaw away. Homura would be lucky to survive even a nick from that thing!

Whenever Elyliyah thrust her needle-mitts forward through the air, the chainsaw hurtled across the ground as if it was being pushed. The thing was fast. However, it moved mostly in a straight line, and after each strike, there was a pause before she could redirect it again.

A counterattack—that’s what was needed! Homura spouted flames as she ran away. Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough strength behind her fire. The chainsaw was circulating at such high speeds that it had created its own sheath of wind, preventing Homura’s half-hearted flames from reaching the metal claws inside.

Homura’s eyes darted back and forth. She needed to find a weak point. Just then, she realized there was something strange about Elyliyah, the caster of the spell. Elyliyah hadn’t moved one step from where she stood when she had first cast the spell. In fact, she looked a little wobbly on her feet. Perhaps using such an enormous spell had made her woozy.

“I’ve got it! A direct attack!”

Before the chainsaw could come her way again, Homura began running. After getting torn up by so many passes of the chainsaw, the ground was now littered with rubble, and the footing was poor. Homura nearly tripped several times, but she ran like her life depended on it.

If Elyliyah was woozy, that meant she was open. Attacking her now was Homura’s best bet.

“I’ve got you—!!”

Homura charged her staff with flames, drawing close enough to ensure she would flambé Elyliyah even if she fired randomly.

Elyliyah showed no signs of trying to get out of the way. Just as Homura suspected, using such powerful magic seemed to

have divided her attention.

But something wasn't right. Just as Homura was about to release her flames, she began to wonder why Elyliyah would even use such a spell in the first place if it left her defenses wide-open. She must have something else up her sleeve.

But it was too late. Elyliyah had already kicked, her foot centimeters from the side of Homura's face.

The kick hit Homura hard and sent her flying. Her staff clattered loudly against the stone pavement.

"What, did you think I couldn't use martial arts while in this state? I could kill a talentless worm like you while half asleep," Elyliyah said, sneering at Homura, who was sprawled on the ground. For Elyliyah, mere reflexes were enough against someone so unskilled in close combat.

"That's one tough girl."

"Yes, she is a very skilled fighter, though she would be no match for my blade were I in top form," said Torreque.

While Homura was fighting for her life, Psycho and the others were kicking back and sharing their opinions on the match.

"Tsk… Remind me to punch *them* in the face later…"

Homura gritted her teeth. Elyliyah had the advantage, both from up close and far away. But if Homura tried to drag the fight out in an attempt to tire Elyliyah, she would just place herself that much closer to death.

"Finally! There's the look I wanted to see in your eyes! But there's still not enough despair!"

Elyliyah raised her arm, causing the whirring chainsaw to float into the air over the heads of Ares and Rhiann, who were still lying unconscious toward the edge of the plaza.

"Because you tried to make a scene, these two disgusting worms will have to pay with their lives!"

"Rhiann!"

"Yes! Feel the despair crush you!"

"Rhiann, run!"

As Elyliyah lowered her hand, the chainsaw began to descend according to the laws of gravity, as if a string holding it up had just been cut. The incredible mass of iron shards bore downward upon the immobilized pair, already inches from crushing them.

Suddenly, a booming explosion rang out, and the plaza was enveloped in blinding light.

“H-huh…?”

As the light faded and Elyliyah grasped what had happened, she could only groan in confusion.

“I almost let something happen again that I would regret… If I don’t fight, if I don’t burn, I could lose the people who matter most.”

Homura’s right hand flickered with the vestige of flames. The treacherous chainsaw blades had been blasted into pieces by a fiery explosion before they could reach Rhiann. Homura was at the peak of her rage, her body once again imbued with flames. A penumbra of fire manifested at her back.

“I hope you’re ready. My fire is brutal.”

Wildfire crept outward from her feet.

“Wh-what…are you? What in the hell are you…?!” Fear had begun to surface in Elyliyah’s eyes as the flames licked at her feet. “I’ve still got power left! *Hurricane chainclaw!*”

Elyliyah thrust her fist into the ground once more, causing chainsaws to reappear in the air above the plaza. Four, this time.

As Elyliyah punched forward, all the chainsaws hurtled toward Homura simultaneously. Moving four at once took a major toll on Elyliyah, leaving her barely able to stand.

The chainsaws tore up the stone pavement as they charged forward, coming at Homura from all sides. As Homura dodged one, another took its place. There was no place to run, no opportunity to get close to Elyliyah.

But Homura didn’t intend to run.

Homura’s bangs drifted upward on the shimmering heat. Her right eye, previously hidden behind her hair, flared with brilliant light and seething flames as she studied the approaching chainsaws. Instantly, four explosions were traced upon the air.

“Nrk…”

When the explosions faded, only fragments of the chainsaws remained. Elyliyah began to scream in disbelief.

“How can you have so much power?! You’re supposed to be afraid of me, not the other way around! No! No! No! Why should I, Elyliyah, be afraid of you?!”

“There’s the look I wanted to see in your eyes,” said Homura. “But there’s still not enough despair!”

The flames enshrouding Homura flared even higher. The fire that had ignited in her eye, however, had already disappeared. The toll must have been great, because tears of blood began to stream from her right eye. Homura, however, continued to smile.

“Those eyes! Those eyes! *Those eyes…!!* I hate them, I hate them, I hate them so much—!!” shouted Elyliyah.

Elyliyah must have been on her last legs, because she didn’t attempt to summon another chainsaw. Barely able to stand, she instead assumed a close-combat stance and attempted to punch at Homura with her needle-mitts.

“You didn’t put up much of a fight in the end, did you?”

The plaza shook with brilliant flames.

A merciless inferno enveloped the exhausted Elyliyah. Naturally, Homura held back so that the flames would not kill Elyliyah, but there was no way she would be moving for the foreseeable future with injuries like that.

Part of Homura felt like this wasn’t enough, an underwhelming conclusion to this sad saga. Her compulsion to burn everything to the ground threatened to take over. But Homura told herself to be calm. It didn’t need to be “enough.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Homura saw Ares’s two friends hurrying back. They pulled Ares and Rhiann away to safety. Now all that needed to be done was to heal Elyliyah and place her into custody.

The incident was finally wrapped up—or so it seemed. But Homura suddenly felt a powerful chill at her back. She had spoken too soon. Intuitively, she turned toward Elyliyah. An ominous red light glowed around her where she lay on the ground.

The source of the light was the choker that Elyliyah wore around her neck. Specifically, the ornamental red gemstones that studded its surface.

“Huh? What’s happening…?”

“Be careful, Homura. That choker gave me a bad feeling the first time I saw it. I think it’s a cursed item, just like my sword,” said Jin, who had grown familiar with the aura these items gave off.

“Do you think it’s controlling her?”

“A cursed item? Controlling me? I don’t know what you’re talking about…but I can feel the power surge within me!”

Elyliyah's red and blistered skin began to visibly heal before their eyes.

"I'll kill you all! I'll demolish this entire town!"

On her feet once more, Elyliyah thrust her needle-mitts into the ground, summoning every last drop of blood from the town into a torrent that converged upon the plaza.

"Chainclaw...! Finale...!!"

Elyliyah's chainsaw "finale" was even more massive than the previous five. The random metal shards were deadly sharp. Elyliyah herself already seemed to be out of power. It was the cursed item around her neck forcefully amplifying her abilities.

"I'll crrrussshhh you—!!"

Rotating at a speed far faster than the previous chainsaws, the finale shot forward, sending pieces of crushed stone pavement flying.

Homura held her left hand up before the barrage of death that was hurtling straight toward her.

"Burrrnnnnn—!!"

In the blink of an eye, the plaza was enveloped in a tremendous cacophony of heat and light. The sound of the explosion echoed throughout the town. Homura's left arm dangled limply at her side, scorched to a crisp by the massive explosion she had just created.

"Ah...!"

However, the fearsome chainsaw remained intact. Only its surface had been singed.

The chainsaw sliced straight through the explosion. Homura barely dove out of the way in time, landing hard on top of a pile of rubble. The fall left her scraped all over, with random fragments and bits of rubble embedded in her skin.

"Nrk—!"

But there was no time to worry about pain now. The chainsaw was already turning around, chewing up the streets outside the plaza as it rotated.

This time, it was Homura who was exhausted and on the run. She could barely see out of her right eye, and her left arm had been rendered useless. Nevertheless, she managed to repeatedly dodge the chainsaw as it hurtled her way.

Meanwhile, the massive chainsaw continued to destroy more of the town as it barreled to and fro. It looked like its path of destruction would soon reach the giant windmills and the

fortified wall where the people had evacuated. Screams rose into the air with each pass as the wheel grew closer.

Homura focused on the caster, Elyliyah. Her only chance was to attack Elyliyah directly. But Elyliyah had surrounded herself with countless strands of undulating barbed wire.

“H-how am I supposed to get close?! Wait…what’s wrong with her…?”

That was when Homura realized that Elyliyah’s condition had taken another turn for the weird. Obviously, the toll on Elyliyah for using such powerful magic must have been tremendous. Blood was spouting from her nose, and tears of blood were streaming from her eyes. Her eyes were vacant, and blood gurgled from her open mouth.

“Elyliyah, you need to stop! You’ll die!”

But Elyliyah didn’t respond. It didn’t seem as if she could hear Homura. Earlier, Elyliyah had insisted that she wasn’t being controlled, but this obviously wasn’t normal.

“Hey, Homura!” shouted Psycho. “Didn’t that shark lady say she was supposed to have help? Maybe whatever’s happening to that little shit is the Dark Lord’s doing!”

“Come to think of it, the whole reason Elyliyah was sent to this town in the first place was because her violent impulses were getting out of control…”

Elyliyah’s personality had first started to change after she was kidnapped, supposedly. But for whatever reason, she had apparently grown even more violent at some point. About a year prior, she had finally been sent to Aurerich because the increasingly violent changes in her personality were getting out of control.

“Do you think it’s possible she had fallen into the Dark Lord’s hands even before then…?!”

Homura turned to stare at Elyliyah again. This time, her vacant eyes almost seemed to be begging for help. The meddling in her mind might have been eating away at Elyliyah without her even being aware of it herself.

“We have to help her…” Homura clenched her right hand, riddled with injuries, into a fist. “Forget about punishment—forget about fighting. What Elyliyah needs right now is an intervention!” she shouted, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the pain wracking her body. “And I’ve got just the fist to do it!”

If Homura screwed this up, she was going to get herself killed. It had to be done with a single strike. No hesitation. Homura knew what she needed to do, and the fear of death wasn't going to stop her.

"Hold on. I'm coming, Elyliyah."

Elyliyah's life force was draining away by the moment. Homura could simply run and dodge until Elyliyah was dead. It wouldn't take long. Then this whole ordeal would be over without Homura ever needing to expose herself to danger.

But Homura would rather die herself than allow that to happen.

A new fire kindled in Homura's breast. She was going to save this girl.

"Burning…"

Homura began running toward Elyliyah as if her life depended on it.

"…fist…"

When she brought her right fist into the air, it burst into flames. Pillars of fire rose up beneath her feet.

"…of…"

The undulating strands of barbed wire lashed out at Homura, piercing her skin, embedding in her flesh, and encircling her. But Homura never stopped. She was incandescent. The entangling barbs melted away. She ignored the gigantic chainsaw hurtling toward her from behind. She burned with a single-minded determination to save Elyliyah.

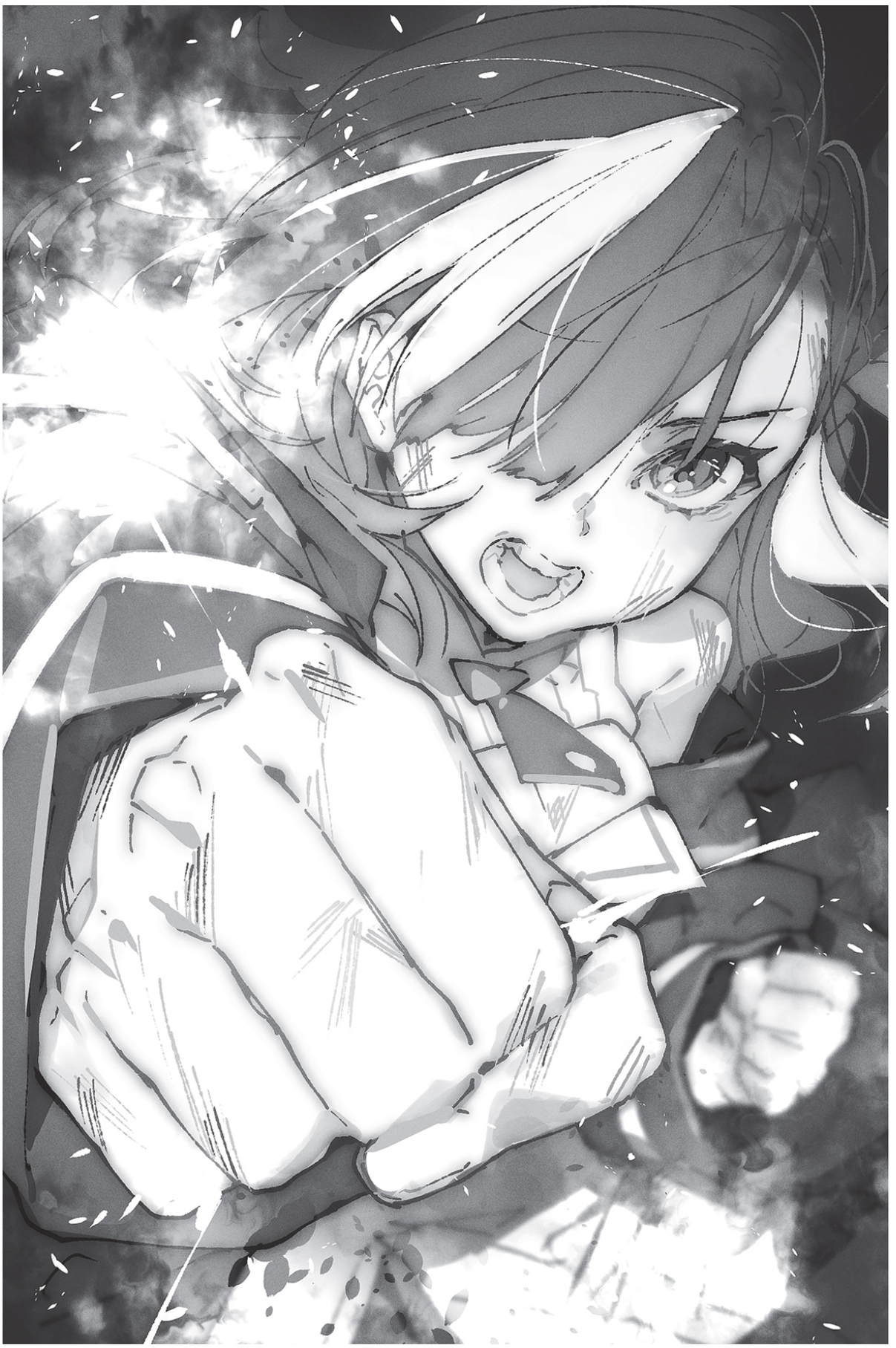
"…salvation!!"

Elyliyah was sadistic, and she was diabolical, but she was also tragic. Homura punched the girl, hitting her in the vile source of this entire catastrophe—the choker around her neck—with a fist imbued with all of Homura's strength and fire.

There was an explosive roar, scorching heat, and a dazzling burst of radiance. It was like an illusory sun descending unto the earth. Homura's flames lit up the entire town as if it was noon.

Homura spoke quietly in the stillness that ensured.

"I…may have overdone that a little…"



Epilogue
Opening Up

“If you’re going to kill me, just kill me already, you worms! Bwaaahhhhh!”

Elyliyah sat in a heap on the ground. She was a sobbing mess.

“I already told you—we’re not going to kill you. Calm down already,” said Homura, as if she was comforting a small child, but Elyliyah wouldn’t listen.

“Geez, how can this little brat be so loud? Maybe we should just give her what she wants and kill her already,” growled Psycho, growing increasingly irritated.

“Maybe if you didn’t say things like that, she wouldn’t be crying so much!”

The fighting was now truly over, and quiet had returned to the town…with the exception of the wails coming from the central plaza, of course.

Torreque, Ares, and Rhiann had all been seriously hurt. But they had already been healed and were now helping to clear the rubble around town.

Elyliyah’s upper body had been covered with serious burns after Homura’s punch, particularly her face. She had just barely managed to survive. At first, Homura had freaked out, convinced she had put a little too much shine on her punch and killed the girl, but thankfully, Elyliyah’s self-buffing magic was tenacious, and the worst-case scenario had just barely been avoided.

“Elyliyah, are you okay?!”

“Be quiet! You have no idea how I feel!”

Healed and conscious again, Elyliyah understood the situation she was in and was currently bawling her eyes out, convinced that she was going to be executed as a criminal of the highest order. Even her father, who had come rushing to their side, was unable to get through to her.

“Elyliyah, relax. We’re really not going to kill you.”

“So then what are you going to do…?! Oh, I know, you’re going to humiliate me in front of everyone!”

“We’re not going to do anything of the sort.”

“You’re lying. I don’t believe you…”

With enough gentle reassurance from Homura, Elyliyah eventually recovered her composure…until Homura immediately dashed that composure to pieces.

“We’re going to subject you to something much worse than that!”

“Waaahhhhhhh!!”

“Now who’s scaring her?!”

“I can’t help it. She just looks so cute when she cries…”

“You need help…”

Homura felt a sleazy tingle of excitement at the sight of the spoiled girl crying her eyes out. Whereas Psycho felt a sleazy tingle of horror at the sight of Homura in tingles.

“Honestly, we really aren’t going to hurt you, Elyliyah.”

“Then what are you going to do…? What’s going to happen to me…?”

Homura crouched down next to Elyliyah and made eye contact.

“Can I ask you something first?”

“What…?”

“Elyliyah, do you think that no one really sees you unless you make them afraid?”

Elyliyah nodded softly. “I’m not a normal girl, so I understand. People never saw me as *Elyliyah* and always as *the rich girl*…but when those kidnappers took me, when I was about to kill them, I wasn’t some *rich girl* to them. They were afraid of *me*, of *Elyliyah*… It was the first time I ever felt like I was really here. That was when I knew I had to make people afraid…”

“I’m sorry, Ely, I didn’t know… I failed you as a parent. I thought so long as I gave you a life of convenience, that would be enough. You never complained as a child, so I just assumed you had no worries. All this is my fault…”

“Don’t say that now…”

Upon hearing Elyliyah’s confession, the governor seemed ashamed that he had never noticed what was bothering his daughter.

“That’s only one reason your personality became violent,” said Homura, casting her eyes toward the choker. Its stones

were now crushed. “The other was that choker. Where and when did you get your hands on that?”

“I got that… It was before coming to this town, so maybe about a year ago? I was taking a walk outside town, looking for some bandits or something who I could beat up without getting into trouble, when I happened to come across a merchant who was being attacked, so I saved them. The merchant said it was a reward… They mentioned how pretty it was, and how it suited me, as they placed it around my neck.”

“Some other parts of that story were a little concerning as well…but let’s ignore that for now.”

It sounded like Elyliyah had already been pretty violent even before the curse came into play.

“Whenever I wore the choker, I felt so good inside and full of power. I thought it was protecting me, like a good luck charm. But…”

“Right,” said Homura. “It was actually cursed.”

Elyliyah cast her eyes toward the ground.

“Hey, brat face, was this merchant a woman by any chance?” Psycho asked.

“Yes, a very pretty woman.”

“The person who gave the curseblood to that shark lady was also a woman, apparently. There’s a chance the gemstones on that choker you were wearing had curseblood mixed in with them.”

“But the merchant was just a normal person,” Elyliyah said.

“Maybe she was a monster in disguise. Or maybe she was a person working with the Dark Lord. Anything is possible.”

“No way…”

The Dark Lord’s forces were much larger, more fiendish, and more cunning than they had imagined.

After hearing everything, Homura knew what to do.

“I’ve made up my mind. Elyliyah…”

Elyliyah braced herself, waiting to hear her fate.

“…you will be put in charge of protecting this town.”

Elyliyah’s brain seemed to stall for a moment, failing to understand what Homura had said.

“Is that…all?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

“How is that ‘something much worse’?”

Elyliyah didn't seem to understand, so Homura explained as gently as possible.

"Elyliyah, even if that cursed item was partially to blame, the fact of the matter is that you hurt a lot of people."

The way she punished the prisoners and tortured those demons. The massacre at the fishing village, and the resultant attack on Aurerich. Even if a cursed item was to blame, Elyliyah's personality was—or more accurately, had already become—sadistic to begin with. The damage wasn't fully the curse's fault.

But she could still start over and make things right. At least, that was what Homura believed, now that she understood why Elyliyah had behaved the way that she had.

"The people you've hurt probably hold a grudge against you. They will talk about you behind your back. Your punishment will be to dedicate yourself to this town while carrying the weight of what you've done on your shoulders. A fate that will be much more difficult to bear than death."

Living with the weight of one's sins could be difficult indeed. Most people's instincts were to run from the things they'd done wrong in order to protect themselves. In that sense, at least, being forced to face up to the things you've done could sometimes be the greatest punishment of all.

"But if you do that, Elyliyah, the people of this town will come to see the real you in time."

Elyliyah's eyes went wide, as if a whole new world was opening up before her. "Really?"

"Yes, really. I doubt things will be easy for you at first, though."

"Why are you being so kind to me…? I did something wrong. That's why you punched me, isn't it? Even without the cursed item, I hurt a lot of people."

"Because we're similar. I once lost my way, too, because of the people around me."

Elyliyah had fixated on making others afraid of her as a way of asserting her own existence.

"So that's that, but do you think you can make it happen?" Homura asked.

Torreque was now listening to their conversation as well, having already finished directing the initial cleanup.

“I think so,” Torreque replied. “I’ll do my best to persuade everyone.”

“And I’ll speak with the Alliance,” added the governor.

“Besides, I’ve got this arm now, too, so I guess I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

Psycho, the one responsible for the arm, stared up at the sky and whistled as innocent as could be.

“In any case, you’ll need to be on your best behavior moving forward and put in an effort to impress people.”

“I don’t think I can…,” said Elyliyah, already giving up before she even started. But encouragement came from an unexpected source.

“Don’t worry whether you can do it—just do it. It’s your responsibility as one of the *haves*,” said Ares. His face was stern, but his eyes were free from hostility. “Those with power have a responsibility to serve as a shield for those without. I don’t know if they say that where you’re from, but it’s our creed, and I genuinely believe in it.”

“‘Those with power have a responsibility to serve as a shield for those without…,’” Elyliyah echoed.

“As much as it irks me, I have to admit that you’re stronger than I am. Instead of using that strength to hurt people or for your own benefit, you should use it to protect people.”

Ares maintained his unwavering integrity even when dealing with someone who had wronged him. His words almost came across as a jab at Homura and the others, who simply used their powers however they saw fit. Even if they did wind up helping people in the end.

“If you really believe what you’ve done is wrong, you need to remember that and try to make up for it. It’s the only way. And if anyone complains that it isn’t just, I will be there to protect you.”

“All right, all right, I get it. I’ll do it. Just you watch—I won’t allow anyone to be hurt. Not while I, Elyliyah, am protecting them.”

“There you go. That’s the spirit.”

With a good word from a gold badge like Torreque, Galdorssia was unlikely to be too hard on her, either.

“Don’t forget—we’re going to be stationed here for a little while longer, so I’m going to hold you to your word,” said Ares. “As long as I’m here, don’t expect me to go easy on you.”

“Honestly, I don’t like you, but if Ares insists, I suppose I could be persuaded to help you learn,” Rhiann added.

Like Ares, Rhiann took a strict but kind approach to Elyliyah. Not that Elyliyah’s personality was likely to change overnight.

“Whatever. You’re still weak, though…” Elyliyah snickered under her breath.

“I *heard* that!”

Rhiann thumped Elyliyah on her head. In response, the bloodlicker cat suddenly leaped from Elyliyah’s shadow, apparently convinced its master was under attack.

“Hissss—!”

The cat made a sound that was both creepy and threatening.

“Mii, down!” said Elyliyah, scolding the creature gently. The cat began licking its master and purring steadily.

“Huh. And here I thought you were keeping that thing in line through force…,” muttered Rhiann, inadvertently letting her thoughts slip out.

“Force? What are you talking about? Papa got me Mii as a present. I’ve been taking care of her since she was little. We couldn’t be closer.”

“Yes, the thing was just so cute, I couldn’t resist getting it for my Ely as a pet.”

“So she’s just a normal pet?! Who buys a monster as a present for a child?! Rich people make no sense!” cried Psycho.

But it went to show that deep down, Elyliyah was a gentle person. Turning away, Torreque began speaking to the five girls.

“Don’t worry about what comes next. I’ll make sure it all works out somehow. Aurerich’s recovery, Elyliyah’s relationship with the town, and her relationship with her father, too. Looking back, I can’t help but feel that Ely’s father and I were just burying our heads in the sand. We didn’t step in when we should have, maybe because we were scared of getting hurt,” said Torreque, grimacing. The adults had made a big mess of things.

“There was also one other reason…why I couldn’t take action,” said Torreque, dropping his voice low so that only Homura and the others could hear. “Those imprisoned demons were sent in secret by the Schelles Sea Alliance as an outlet for Elyliyah’s aggression, supposedly. But now that everything’s out in the open, we know there was someone on the other side

collaborating with the Dark Lord's forces. Either that, or someone who is actually in the Dark Lord's army was behind this. There were countless ways that Elyliyah's issues could have been handled, including even disposing of her. The fact that this method was the one that was chosen makes me think that someone wanted to cause that attack on the merchant ship and sow chaos. This is all my own conjecture, though, of course."

"No, conjecture or not, the possibility seems high," replied Homura. "We'll report this to Lady Falmeyr. Of course, we'll leave out some of the details in order to avoid confusion."

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

As the conversation seemed to be wrapping up, Proto raised her voice in annoyance. "Hey, can we go already? I don't like people ogling me like this; it's creepy."

Just as Proto said, people were staring at her and Tsutsumi from a distance. No one was going to start anything with Torreque there, but if it wasn't for him, who knew what might happen? After all, this town had just been decimated by monsters moments before.

"Of course, let's go," said Homura.

"What, are you leaving already?" said Ares, calling out to them when he saw them preparing to leave. "You five never cease to amaze me. For better or for worse. I could have never managed to resolve things the way you did." Ares's lips twisted up slightly in a smile. "You know, this world might need people like you after all."

"Obviously!"

"Not you," said Ares dryly, not even bothering to look Psycho in her smug face. As usual, a scuffle ensued.

"Homura, let's meet again."

"Okay, Rhiann!"

"I hope you'll still think of me as one of the 'people who matter most' the next time we see each other!"

"Ah…! You were awake for that?!"

Come to think of it, Homura did say something like that back when Rhiann was about to be killed.

"Only barely. Next time, I want to be fully awake to hear it! And remember, you don't have to be so polite!"

"I'll try my best…"

Homura had never noticed before how overly polite she could be. After struggling for so much of her life to be a “good girl,” the habit had just ingrained itself in her. But she was going to try harder to loosen up with people.



Without any further chitchat, Homura and the others left the plaza behind.

Torreque told them they could use any of the wagons they liked, so they borrowed one randomly from the stables. Proto was pulling it.

“Well, our job’s done here. Should we head back to Galdorssia?” Homura asked.

“Wait,” said Jin, who had her own request. “There’s a place I’d like to visit along the way.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this…”

Homura had been worried this was going to happen. It was why she had been trying to rush them along before anyone could bring it up.

“Yes, School Village. I was hoping someone there could take a look at my broken katana. I know creating an identical sword will be impossible, but perhaps they could at least make something similar.”

School Village was a weird place where the weirdest bits of Japanese culture all seemed to have accumulated.

“I knew it! But why? You wound up using that malefic sword in the end, didn’t you? Why not just stick with that?”

“It’s too difficult to handle.”

“Well, I guess it is a cursed sword that feeds on blood, after all…” Homura sighed. It couldn’t be helped, then.

“It’s not just the katana. I was hoping we might find *something else* there as well.”

Although always stone-faced, Jin’s expression suddenly grew even more serious than before. Whatever she was hoping to find, it must have been something very important.

“‘*Something else*’…?”

Yes, something else.

“Rice.”

“Let’s go!”

“Finally, some rice!”

“Can I have mine…as *onigiri*…?”

Suddenly, they were all on board. Their Japanese blood cried out for rice!

“Ugh, humans… I’ll never understand you,” said Proto, unable to join in their excitement. She stared dully at them from outside the wagon. “But that’s what makes us us, isn’t it? The way it just feels right to be together, even with all our differences.”

“Sorry? Did you say something, Proto?!” snapped Psycho.

“I said it must be tough for inferior life-forms like you, making such a fuss over every little source of energy!”

“Hey!”

The forest was quiet, lit by the moon overhead, as the wagon full of noisy girls trundled along.

Afterword

Hi, everyone, long time no see. It's me, Hiyoko Sumeragi.

I can't believe it's here already, Volume 2. The first volume was out in December, and now Volume 2 is out at the end of another December, a year later, just as yet another year is about to begin. Obviously, there must be a pretty important reason for such a long delay between volumes. That goes without saying, right?

Ha, joke's on you, you fools! I just write slow!

…Okay, not really. A lot did happen! But the instigating factor was still how slow I write! And then one thing after another happened, like dominoes falling over, and the project just kept getting pushed back further and further. Whoops!

In fact, the editor in charge changed twice.

Both times were due to factors outside their control, but in the end, a real legend among editors was kind enough to take their place. Someone whose name everyone knows and who has even helped turn books into anime adaptations. This person had temporarily left light novel editing, but when they decided to pick it up again, I just so happened to be puttering around in the vicinity. What a twist of fate!

In any case, each time the editor changed, the direction of the work took on a new turn, and there was more revision to be done…which was one of the major reasons that publication became so delayed.

However, with so much time to reflect, and after receiving analysis and advice from so many points of view, I think both the series and I, as an author, have grown. In particular, it gave me a chance to rethink what kind of work I want *The World Bows Down* to be.

In the end, the book really came out the way I wanted, so when all is said and done, I guess being a slow writer worked out for the best this time around.

But that still doesn't change the fact that I made readers wait for so long. Moving ahead, I plan to pick up the pace. I think I've

leveled up a little as writer, so I hope you'll look forward to what's still to come!

Now then, the main editor is not the only relationship that has changed. The background illustrator for *The World Bows Down* has changed as well! Our new background illustrator moving forward is Tetta! Tetta, thank you for your vivid, gorgeous illustrations. It suits Jin so well. I hope you don't mind the hotheaded subtitle (*The Dark Lord's Army Goes Chop*). Oh, and don't worry, everyone. It's not like the previous background illustrator, mocha, and I parted on bad terms or anything like that!

Mika Pikazo was kind enough to continue as main illustrator. Thank you for the dynamic, amazing character designs once again! And Proto's thighs in the front insert! *I wish I could be double guillotined by those thighs*...is something I'm sure that many readers thought. As did I. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I would like to go to one of your solo exhibits one day.

The comic adaptation of *The World Bows Down* has also kicked off, with Koyuki in charge of planning. She is an amazing manga artist who has done a very skillful job of representing the way this works veers between humor and sincerity. A comic adaptation involves more than just making a manga version of the book, such as adapting expressions in the novel in a way that suits manga or changing the contents in a way that flows naturally within the space of a manga. The method of working information into a novel and into a manga are very different, and although I come from a different field, as a creator, it was a learning experience for me. I always enjoy seeing the proofs—especially the fan-service scenes.

Every time I receive illustrations or manga sheets from the three artists involved, I run around the house like a chicken with my head cut off, releasing little squeals of excitement. No, really, it's true! (Okay, I'm lying.)

Now then, now then. It's time to talk about the contents of the book. This time, Jin and Proto played a major role. Although, once you dig down deeper, it was Jin who was the main star. Volume 2 was a story about Jin facing up to her own internal conflicts. In the end, she turned out to be the awkward type. But by discovering her own feelings, she learned to move forward

in a more positive manner… Is *positive* the right word? Well, I suppose, but it's not the kind of positivity I would want people to imitate!

But I know some people start by reading the afterword first, so that is all I will say about Jin's story for now.

It may be a slow process, but Homura's continued to grow, too. Not just in terms of her power, but in character as well. And we learned about an unexpected connection between herself and Jin. Although, I suspect Jin will probably always keep that connection to herself. Either way, the five girls keep growing closer.

In this volume and the last, we learned about Jin's and Homura's pasts, but this information is known only to themselves. There is no need for them to tell the others if they don't want to. The reason they haven't said anything is because they don't need to. And they're both fine with that. They do what they can as friends and comrades. Although they maintain just the right distance from one another, not too close and not too far away, these five girls are connected on a deeper level.

In any case, I'm glad I was able to include some really over-the-top characterization once again. As well as some goofy parodies. Moving forward, I plan to go on writing a hamburger style of work, with over-the-top junk-food characters and a classic story. So stay tuned. Well, I say *go on writing*, but the future remains uncertain, so I hope you'll keep rooting for me! Keep getting the word out! I really hope to see this series to the end!

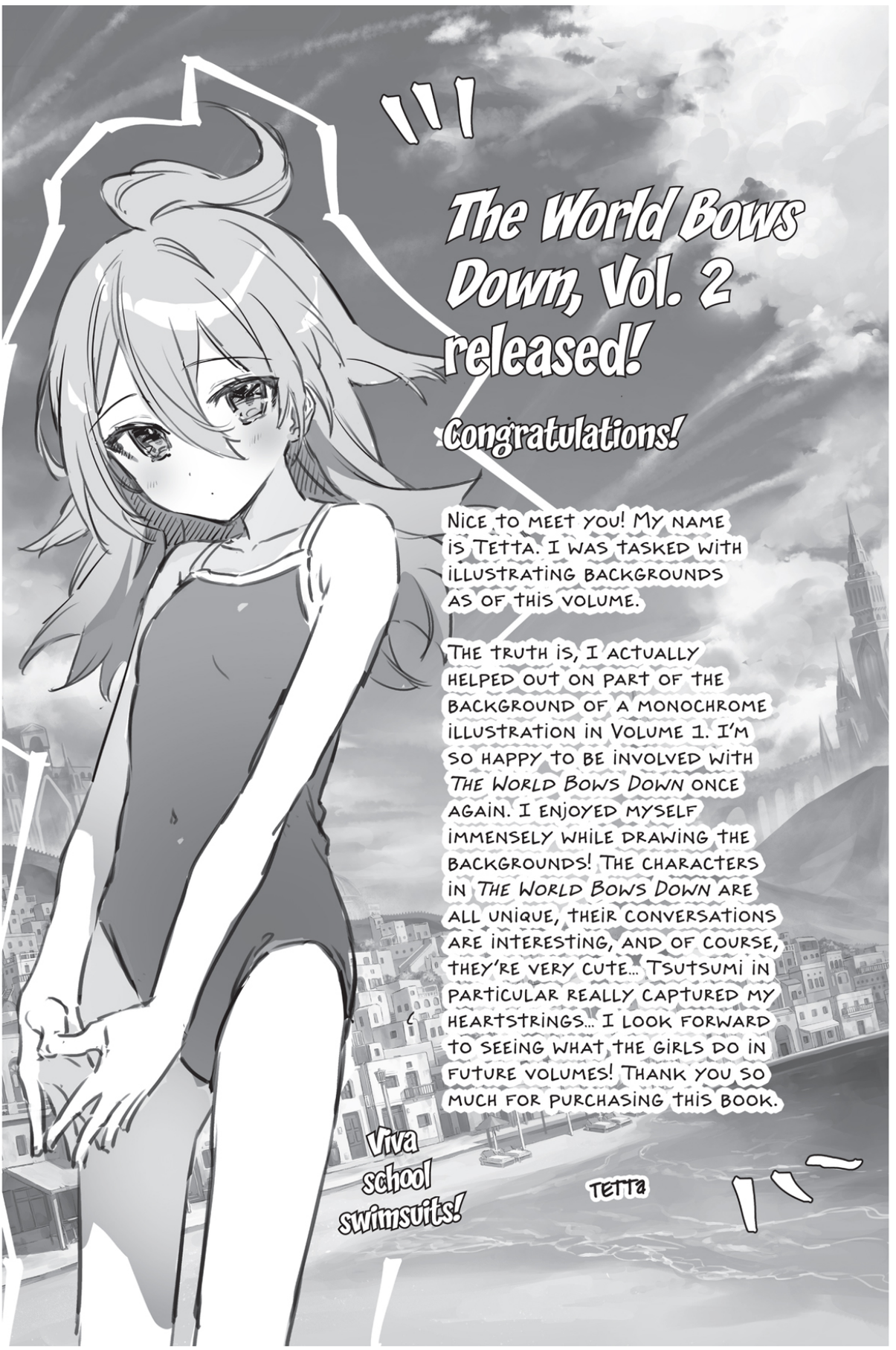
Which is, well, where I'd like to leave this afterword, I suppose. Let's meet again in Volume 3! In the next volume, we're going to see the Holy City of Galdorssia in another pinch. But this time, it will be Psycho's and Tsutsumi's turn to step up to the plate! I also plan to touch on Homura's supernatural powers just a *teeny tiny* bit more and to take a quick peek at the inner circle of the Dark Lord's army.

In any case, I hope you're looking forward to Volume 3! I'll work hard to get it out there!

PS: I've now surpassed a thousand hours of play in *Apex Legends*, but I just can't seem to get good. I've picked up several

two thousand damage badges, but I can never pass that... It's the same in all things, but you can only get so far just by cruising through. It goes without saying, but whether in my hobbies or in my work as a writer, every day demands dedication.


THE WORLD BOWS DOWN, VOL. 2! EVERYONE WAS all INJURED AND BLOODY AGAIN. IT WAS SO EXCITING. GO GET 'EM, GIRLS—YOU'RE all SO CUTE...!! THE NEW CHARACTER WAS CUTE AS WELL; THIS REALLY IS THE BEST. THANK YOU!
MIKA PIKAZO


The World Bows Down, Vol. 2 released!
Congratulations!
Nice to meet you! My name is Tetta. I was tasked with illustrating backgrounds as of this volume.
The truth is, I actually helped out on part of the background of a monochrome illustration in Volume 1. I'm so happy to be involved with The World Bows Down once again. I enjoyed myself immensely while drawing the backgrounds! The characters in The World Bows Down are all unique, their conversations are interesting, and of course, they're very cute... Tsutsumi in particular really captured my heartstrings... I look forward to seeing what the girls do in future volumes! Thank you so much for purchasing this book.
Viva school swimsuits!
Tetta

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