

The background of the cover is a complex, layered collage of anime characters. At the top left is a woman with long dark hair and blue eyes. Next to her is a blonde woman with red eyes and pointed ears, wearing a brown school uniform. To her right is a large, green, horned demon-like creature with sharp teeth. On the far right is a man with long black hair and blue eyes, also in a dark uniform. In the center foreground, there's a woman with white hair and red eyes, looking down. Below her is another woman with white hair and pink highlights, wearing a white top. The overall aesthetic is a mix of traditional anime and futuristic, cyberpunk-inspired elements like circuit boards and glowing blue energy fields.

DEMON LORD 2099

CYBERMAGIC CITY AKIBABARA

DAIGO MURASAKI 2
Illustration by KURETA 2



DEMON LORD 2099

2. CYBER MAGIC CITY AKIHABARA

DRIGO MURASAKI Illustration by KURETA

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DARK PEERS RECORDS

Six books engraved with the mana of the Six Dark Peers, the Demon Lord Army's top brass. Conceived and produced by the Duke of the Bloody Arts, Marcus, in preparation for the Peers' eventual separation, these magi-gadgets automatically record all their movements, allowing one to confirm their status and location. The Records were lost amid the chaos following the Demon Lord's demise and the Immortal War.

DARK
PEERS
RECORDS

CYBERMAGIC CITY
AKIHABARA

CYBERMAGIC CITY AKIHABARA

A peculiar city divided in two by Hokoten Avenue, which extends from north to south. To the east is Electric Town, with its uniquely innovative development and expansion, and to the west is Magic Town, which continues to honor the traditions of old. Each side has its own independent armed forces—the city is perpetually on the brink of civil war. The Three Great Houses, bestowed with regalia by the goddess Meldia, wield enormous power.

**Duchess of the
Dazzling Blaze
Machina**

One of the Six Dark Peers and the Demon Lord's faithful vassal who spent five centuries awaiting his revival. Her undying loyalty to Veltol is second to none.

"Let them know your splendor, Lord Veltol!"

"It's basically a cliché at this point."

**Aether Hacker
Takahashi**

A skilled hacker, operating undercover in the Cyberpunk City of Shinjuku. Turns out she's a student at Shinjuku First Municipal High School.

We've got some serious weirdos in here.

**Demon Lord
Veltol**

The Demon Lord of legend who reappeared in the far future. He arrives in the Cybermagic City of Akihabara as an exchange student at the prestigious School of Magic looking for the whereabouts of his closest vassals, the Six Dark Peers.

"Etch the name into your very souls! I am Veltol Velvet Velsvalt! I've come to this Akihabara School of Magic from the faraway lands of Shinjuku for a short-term exchange program!"

THE DEMON LORD AT SCHOOL

CYBERMAGIC CITY



**Head of the Reynard Clan, One of
Akihabara's Three Great Houses**

Hizuki Reynard-Yamada

Heir of the Reynard family, one of the three houses ruling Akihabara. A high school student at Akihabara School of Magic, where she met Veltol and his friends. Due to certain circumstances, she works part-time at a maid cafe.



“...I really
don't like you
after all, Veltol.
Truth be told,
I dislike any
man with
black hair.
Men should all
be blond.”

Goddess Meldia

The goddess of joy and misfortune. Faith in her drastically declined after the Fantasian and almost led to her demise, but she was able to maintain herself thanks to her regalia, the Three Sacred Treasures. Bestowed the Hero Gram with eternal youth.

A DEMON LORD VS A GOD

CYBERMAGIC CITY

DEMON LORD 2099

CYBERMAGIC CITY AKIHABARA

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Daigo Murasaki

Illustration by Kureta



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It is quite easy for you of natural flesh and blood to prove that you are indeed yourself, for your mind and body are connected. How would I of separate mind and body go about proving the same?

—Tratte Götel, *Adding a Soul to a Metal Box*

PROLOGUE

An Exchange Student at the School of Magic

A single man exited Keizan, a small, dingy BBQ joint tucked away in one corner of a rooftop bar. It was barely past noon, and yet the streets of the bar district were already full of life and the smell of booze.

Lights and wires and holographic ads covered the skies, the aether neon colorfully dyeing the surroundings with such saturation, in fact, that it was dizzying to even look at. The sensory overload wasn't just visual—there was the voice of a half-therian maid beckoning clients to her shop, the latest song by a recently popular five-ogre idol group, the moans and angry yells of nearby drunkards...

The blond-haired man was wearing a tattered blue cloak over old military armor and had a naked rusty blade hanging from his waist. He'd just finished eating his offal-only barbecue alone in silence and was now looking utterly satisfied. The cold, cutting wind stroked his face.

"Still some time left...," he whispered after checking his virtual retinal display. He brought his sleeve up to his nose and inhaled the smell that had permeated his clothes after sitting in the restaurant for so long. "I wonder if I'll get yelled at showing up like this."

Oh well. He decided not to worry about it. The smell, nay, fragrance of barbecue was a most pleasant one, after all. It was no reason to get yelled at.

Right then, his *Familia*—the device implanted into his nape—received a message with a picture attached. The image showed a sea of rabbit-shaped objects, round and pink, and a similar number of open capsules.

"'I haven't gotten the secret one so please wait a little longer.' She pulled all of these?"

He looked up at the sky, which was covered in thick, wintry clouds from the massive climatological shift eighty years prior.

"So much for a triumphant return. How we've both changed. Though, I guess it should be no surprise, since it's been five hundred years..." Then he looked down at the city. "She's changed, both in name and form...but she's still here,

even now.”

He reminisced about everything he left there, in that place, in the long-gone past.

Surely *she* must’ve been worried as well. People pegged her as this kind, loving entity, but truth be told, she was extremely simple and sensitive.

And so, his breath coming out in white puffs, he apologized:

“Sorry.”

His words had no way to reach the past.



“*I’m sorry.*”

She heard a voice calling to her from deep within her chest. A voice she had heard since she was a child, or perhaps even since the moment she was born.

“*I’m sorry.*”

Why was it apologizing? The girl asked, but no response came back.

Who was it apologizing to? The girl was closest to the voice, yet she didn’t know even that.

“*I’m sorry.*”

I’d gladly help you find peace, if only I could.

Her plea didn’t reach the voice.

She heard it again. Something was about to awaken within her. Perhaps the person it was apologizing to was already near.



“Haaah...” The girl, Hizuki Reynard-Yamada, sighed.

Birdcage-shaped lamps dangled from the ceiling of the wide classroom, the

white glow of the artificial will-o'-the-wisps inside them illuminating its interior. Hizuki sat gloomily in a corner, the light reaching her pigtailed blond hair and heterochromatic eyes—one scarlet and one golden.

At the front of the classroom was a big holoboard—a holographic blackboard—and the teacher's desk; tiers of long, pure-white desks were stacked like terraced fields of an era long gone.

The girl was dressed in the School of Magic's characteristic blazer uniform and seated at the very back of the room, at the end of the last desk right beside the window. With her beauty and her melancholic expression as she rested her chin in her hand, she would have made for a fantastic painting. But that wasn't what was on her mind. She heaved another heavy sigh, already too many to count for the day.

“Haaah...”

Someone, somewhere, had once said that happiness went away with each sigh, though she couldn't remember what world that saying was from.

The blue sky outside the window was clear, and off in the distance, a sacred mountain peaked out from among the clouds; a thick forest teemed with singing birds and flying wyverns. It made for a fantastical landscape.

This was all, of course, a hologram. The actual view outside the unfiltered window would show a cloudy sky and the much-too familiar townscape.

Hizuki looked around the classroom. People of various species were passing the time before morning homeroom in their own way. Some were chatting, some were reading, some were studying even before class, and a few were asleep at their desks.

Her classmates, whose names she barely remembered, looked the same as always.

Suddenly, she met the gaze of one of the noble girls chatting among their clique. The girl whispered something to her friends while glancing at Hizuki, and immediately after, they all turned to look at her and giggled.

“Ugh, I made eye contact.”

“Hee-hee. Guess she doesn't let being a deadbeat stop her from coming to class, huh?”

“By the way, have you heard? Just the other day...”

Hizuki couldn't hear them. She was sure they were gossiping about her, but that was such a common occurrence that she felt no anger or sadness. No point in reacting so long as they didn't say those things to her face.

“Haaah...” She sighed away some happiness instead of expressing any

emotion, putting her in an even gloomier mood.

“Life is so boring...”

Day in, day out, things were both changing and stagnant. This youthful period of school life was bright and colorful for most students, but to Hizuki, it was all a monotonous gray.

“I wanna get out of here already...”

The bell rang over her grumbling, signaling the start of the school day. Hizuki stared absentmindedly as her classmates got back to their seats. Then the classroom door opened, and a woman in a cloak—the homeroom instructor and mediumship mentor—came in.

She walked up to her desk, then put her hands on it.

“Good morning, everyone.” She was a full-borg, and her voice through the artificial processor had a thick elvish accent. “Ehm, today, I’d like to introduce you all to someone. Strange timing, but we have an exchange student.”

The classroom was abuzz with whispering, naturally. They didn’t typically get exchange students this time of year.

“Ahem. Everyone, silence, please. Come in.”

The entire class—even Hizuki—turned to look at the door. Hizuki was the only one who was hit with an indescribable feeling, a premonition of sorts. A feeling that told her this monotonous day-to-day routine would soon be over. The door slowly opened, and the new classmate stepped inside.

“...!”

Hizuki gasped, frozen in place.

For a split second, she thought the new student was a woman—he looked feminine due to his long black hair and shapely face. He was tall, his limbs slender, and his eyes the color of darkness.

He walked with pomp and majesty. The school uniform looked strange on him because he didn’t feel like a student in the first place. Yet at the same time, he also looked unbelievably good in it, as though it had been tailored specially for him.

“I’m sorry.”

She heard that voice again. Someone was calling to her.

Her right eye—the golden one—started twitching. It was glued to him, unwilling to look away no matter what.

The voice within her chest ceased.

“Ehm, allow me to introduce him to you all. He’s here from Shinju—”

The man took one step forward, interrupting the instructor. He puffed out his chest, lightly brushed away his bangs with one hand while placing the other on his hip, took a deep breath—

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

—and cackled.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” He spoke clearly and resonantly. “I sincerely doubt anyone here is as ignorant as to not know my face...but I am a courteous man! My apologies for wasting your time with introductions! I am merely following school etiquette!”

His booming voice seemed to shake the entire room. With a bold smile on his face, his every single move and gesture felt as though they were calculated to charm whomever he faced.

“Etch the name into your very souls! I am Veltol Velvet Velsvalt! I’ve come to this Akihabara School of Magic from the faraway lands of Shinjuku for a short-term exchange program!”

Hizuki met his gaze. At least, she thought she did.

“I look forward to experiencing school with you all in this city with its vestiges of the magic world of old! It is a true pleasure to make your acquaintance, however short it will be in my eyes!”

A gust of wind blew past. Or so Hizuki thought, at least.

“You should feel honored to have none other than myself leaving his mark on Akihabara!”

A black wind gusted through the Cybermagic City’s historic landscape.

CHAPTER ONE

Cybermagic City—Akihabara

Month of the Behemoth, Day 7.

“Let us put an end to this—the end...of my journey.”

Veltol Velvet Velsvalt was on the verge of death. His enemy, the king of the demons, was many times his size. Veltol was in the enemy fortress, his final destination. The enemy’s attacks were getting stronger with each moment, but none could compete with Veltol’s focus as he kept on dodging.

Flames billowed, ice rumbled, and thunder boomed. Veltol’s armor was broken, and his shield was shattered; the only thing that remained was the chain in his hand. The lightest graze would kill him for sure.

He was at the end of a long, uninterrupted seventy-four-hour journey. The fatigue would have any regular man incapable of coherent thought at this stage, yet Veltol’s concentration showed no sign of faltering. Perhaps his unwavering spirit was indeed his greatest weapon.

Now the long adventure was soon to end.

“Time to finish thiiiiiiis!”

Veltol howled.

He activated his ultimate skill, and a dragon made of mana pierced straight through the demon king. The ensuing explosion flooded Veltol’s vision with white. The next thing he knew, he found himself standing atop a cliff with a fortress visible in the distance. That fortress—the scene of his final battle—began to crumble.

And so ended the seventy-four-hour long fight.

“Grahhhhh, it’s overrrrrr! Behold! You all claimed this game would be far too difficult for me, and yet I won! Also, who the hell was saying it would only

take ten hours?! Oh wait, that was me!”

Veltol put down the controller and leaned back on his throne—his gaming chair. The holodisplay in front of him showed the ending screen of the gothic horror action game *Super Fortressvania Gaiden*: a vampire-slaying vampire-ninja knight atop his noble white steed, the rescued princess safe in his arms, and text reading THE END.

Comments extolling his triumph scrolled by on another display.

SO THIS IS THE GUY WHO HACKED AN AD INTO SHINJUKU’S HOLODISPLAYS...

DUDE SOMEHOW MANAGED TO STREAM FOR 74 HOURS STRAIGHT WITH JUST HIS FACE, VOICE, AND OVER-THE-TOP REACTIONS

I’M DYINGGGGG OVER HERE

The comments weren’t as lively as usual. The viewers seemed tired.

“Well then, a swift and peaceful death to you fools.” He said his customary farewell and put an end to the festivities.

He tapped away at the 3D keyboard connected to his PDA, stopped the streaming app, and shut down the device. The holodisplays showing the comments closed immediately.

“Camera off, recording off, stream off, secondary display off—all good!” He pointed at and read out every single step to ensure the stream had successfully ended.

The only thing still open was the web browser holodisplay.

“Ooooof!”

Veltol yawned.

He was a good-looking fellow. He had long, raven-colored hair, dark eyes, and a finely defined yet virile face. His artfully handsome body was clothed in an all-black tracksuit and a T-shirt with the words *Demon Lord* printed on it in Japanese.

He didn’t look sloven despite his rough outfit, all thanks to his majestic aura, which leaked from every pore. A sculptor trying to mold the form of the perfect man would likely end up creating his image—that was just how awe-inspiring he was.

And for good reason: Veltol was beyond immortal; he had defied death and ruin. This was a man who had lived thousands of years.

Since time immemorial, people either feared or worshipped him. They called

him the king of the demons—the Demon Lord.

Five hundred years earlier, before the fusion of Earth and Alnaeth, he had tried to conquer the latter of the two worlds. He was the enemy to all mortals, having fought against even gods, making him a menace to humanity. He fell at the hands of the Hero Gram only to be revived five centuries later.

And yet...

“Seventy-four hours is too long for a single stream... The game was so good, I ended up getting far too carried away. My viewers will likely have trouble following the archived footage, so I should think of what to do about that...”

Veltol looked at the analytics of the latest stream on his browser, reflecting on what this could mean for his following.

The Demon Lord, who had once tried to conquer all Alnaeth, was now making a living as a livestreamer, playing games and broadcasting them through the aether network. One room of his apartment had been dedicated for his streams, flooring changed anew as soon as he moved in. It was furnished with a desk and chair, along with all the devices needed for streaming, and his own streamer merch. This was the current throne chamber of his Demon Castle.

Veltol stared at the game’s holodisplay, still open in midair. He had created the avatar of the vampire-ninja knight to closely resemble himself.

“An avatar, huh?” he muttered while looking at his character.

A person’s physical appearance was extremely malleable in this day and age. Be it an avatar on the aethernet or mechanization of one’s entire body, you could freely change your looks so long as you had the time and money.

Appearance, species, and gender no longer factored into someone’s identity either online or in real life. Take, for example, a goblin man who could turn into a beautiful elven boy on the net or maybe even transplant his brain and spinal cord to a borg body to obtain the appearance of a female ogre.

There were many financial drawbacks to physical mechanization: the surgery, hospitalization, the mechanical body, post-op rehab, and periodic maintenance and upkeep expenses. Some cities required registering for a full-borg physical examination, plus there was a borg tax. Changing avatars on the net was much easier and cheaper.

But so long as you had the money, you could become anyone you wanted. This consequently brought opposing movements to the post-Fantasion world, such as neo-naturism and neo-speciesism.

Immortals, meanwhile, depended on the strong connection between body and soul, meaning they could only implant machines in a few parts of their body. It

was only natural that Veltol found full-borgs, who replaced most of their bodies with machinery, to be deeply fascinating.

“To think the soul doesn’t disappear even after fragmenting the body and replacing most of it with steel... The world still has plenty of surprises left.”

Then someone knocked on the door behind him.

“Come in.”

A beautiful young woman entered with her king’s permission. Her hair was long and silver, her eyes a light crimson, her skin white as snow, and her countenance bewitching yet innocent. She looked around sixteen or seventeen, but she was an immortal just like Veltol—her true age was over a thousand years old.

Her name was Machina Soleige. Personally chosen by the Demon Lord to be his aide, she was one of the Six Dark Peers, his most powerful immortals: the Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze. She was wearing a T-shirt printed with an image of a tanuki, a mystical beast that went extinct fifty years earlier.

“You must be tired, Lord Veltol.” She politely bowed her head.

“Indeed,” her master replied.

“I was watching your stream. *Super Fortressvania Gaiden* is known for being a difficult game, so much so that I had to give up in despair after being unable to clear the first stage... But in the end, it was no foe for your orichalcum will. I’m in awe.”

“Heh, no big deal... It was about as difficult as the conquest of Fort San Breda in 711 CE.”

“But please, from now on, take a break every twenty-four hours. You mustn’t go at it for so long without rest,” she said with a pout, then continued in a small voice. “...I might collapse from a Lord Veltol deficiency if I have to spend another three days without seeing your face.”

Machina, his loyal subject, had to wait for five hundred lonely years for his return. A mere three days of him cooped up in his room should be no longer than the blink of an eye from an immortal’s point of view, but he understood that Machina truly treasured every single moment spent with him.

“I have good news. Thanks to this stream, my channel finally reached three million subscribers. The advertising campaign carried out through hacking Shinjuku’s holodisplays must have been highly effective.”

“Really? That’s great! Congratulations. I’ll go make some celebratory red rice. Or would you rather go out for sushi?”

“No, there’s no need to celebrate. In any case, more fans means more faith,

and as a result, I am now able to unleash Vernal's second form. Come to think of it, it feels a lot like I just leveled up and unlocked an upgrade. These games must really be getting to me."

"Really? That's great! Congratulations. I'll go make some celebratory red rice. Or would you rather go out for sushi?"

"You really want to eat sushi, don't you? I don't mind, but...this second form is rather limited in its use."

"What do you mean?"

Veltol frowned and *hmmed*. "...You see, it is for executing immortals."

"Oh..."

Awkward silence.

The number of immortals had dropped dramatically in the modern era. In fact, neither Veltol nor Machina knew the whereabouts of any of their fellow immortals. They were an endangered species in every sense of the word, so there was no real opportunity for utilizing the aforementioned Vernal form.

"I doubt I will ever use it again..."

"Yes...there is rarely a need to cut through the soul itself in this day and age."

"Besides, this form is too similar to Gram's. It simply doesn't feel right on me."

Gram was the Hero who defeated the Demon Lord Veltol five hundred years earlier. After the goddess Meldia granted him eternal youth, Gram wandered the globe until meeting Veltol yet again. Due to various circumstances, these former foes had to join forces to solve a certain incident.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking after what happened with Marcus, and..."

Just two weeks ago, Veltol learned that Marcus was burning immortals to provide Shinjuku with electricity and mana. Veltol branded his former retainer and the director of IHMI a traitor and defeated him, thus putting an end to the Immortal Furnace.

"...I believe it's time to look for the rest of the Six Dark Peers."

"..." Machina listened in silence.

"The Duke of the Bloody Arts betrayed me, and the Duke of the Karmic Sword perished in the Immortal Furnace. That's two out of the six whom we've lost. And the only one I know who's still safe is you, Machina."

Veltol recalled his two vassals. The latter, Zenol, was a stubborn man, but quite loyal and strong. Marcus turned out to be a traitor, but his talent was unquestionable.

“So we only know the whereabouts of the three aforementioned Peers. The other three—Ralsheen, the Blue Storm; Sihlwald, the Black Dragon; May, the Mournful Firmament—remain missing.”

“I knew May’s and Ralsheen’s whereabouts back before the Immortal Hunt, but I’ve heard nothing from them recently...”

“Machina, Marcus never mentioned anyone besides Zenol, correct?”

“Yes. The traitorous fool said he fed Sir Zenol to the Immortal Furnace but made no mention of the other Peers.”

“Considering his twisted personality, he would’ve bragged about throwing the rest in as well, if he had done so.”

“True... He certainly would’ve told me that, at least eventually, when he’d truly gone off the deep end.”

“So we can deduce that Marcus did not kill any others in the Furnace. That is why I want to look for them. Will you help me?”

“Of course, my lord. Between the wars and the ever-changing landscape, I was unable to search for them myself, but I feel the same way as you. Please let me help you.”

“The fact that you couldn’t look for them proves how arduous the situation must have been. But there is no need to worry now.”

Between the two worldwide City Wars and the Immortal Hunt, many immortals met their doom, and the remaining ones scattered.

Veltol motioned to the stool in the corner of the room with his chin, and Machina brought it over to him. For some reason, she knelt atop the stool, but Veltol didn’t comment.

“We have no choice but to look for the Dark Peers Records.”

The Dark Peers Records were six books engraved with the mana of the Six Dark Peers, the Demon Lord Army’s top brass.

Marcus had conceived the idea five centuries earlier in case the six of them were to get separated after the Demon Lord Army’s defeat during the Immortal War. He created these magi-gadgets to automatically record all their movements, making it possible to confirm their status and location. However, following the army’s defeat and the Blood Alliance’s rebellion, the Records were lost to the chaos.

Machina, naturally, looked for them afterward but was unable to locate them.

“The only way to know whether they are still alive is by checking the Dark

Peers Records,” Veltol explained. “If we don’t even know their fate and they have ended up like Zenol, we will never be able to find them. Though, of course, we have no idea where the Records might be.”

Then someone rang their apartment’s intercom. Machina opened a holodisplay showing a girl’s face: Takahashi’s.

“Hey, hey, I’m here! Open up, please!”

She was already at their door. The apartment complex’s entrance was locked, but Takahashi was an expert aether hacker—this building’s security was a mere trifle.

Machina used the Familia connected to her nape to remotely unlock the front door. A moment later, they heard the door open.

“She’s here again today, then?” Veltol said.

“She swore she would never visit us here, and yet now she’s coming over five times a week... She also stopped by while you were streaming, by the way.”

Veltol and Machina’s apartment had some...issues. The previous owner was murdered in the bedroom, hence why Takahashi refused to visit at first, but just three days after they moved in, she was coming over to hang out.

“But you’re nonetheless happy to have her over, aren’t you?” said Veltol.

“Well... I won’t deny that...”

“Heeeeeey!” A young human—Takahashi—quickly burst into the room.

The bubbly Asian girl had black hair with a tuft of her bangs dyed red. That day, however, she wasn’t wearing her usual qipao and dwarven jacket, but her school uniform—specifically, the one worn by students of Shinjuku First Municipal High School, many of whom Veltol saw along Waseda Street.

“Takahashi...,” he stammered. “You... That uniform... You’re a high schooler...?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you?”

“Did I forget to mention that?” Machina asked as well.

“No one told me, no...”

Veltol was shocked to his core. Not so much from learning that Takahashi was in high school, but that neither she nor Machina had ever told him.

“And you’re taking on such risky hacking jobs? No student should be doing a thing like that...”

Not only did she hack the net, but she also put her life in danger by doing risky on-site work.

"Aw, c'mon, what's the big deal with a student taking a few shady gigs here and there?"

"Perhaps it's not my place to say this, but that *is* a big deal, generally..." Machina said.

"Anywho, whatcha guys talkin' about?"

Machina was sitting properly on the stool now, and Takahashi parked herself on Machina's lap and leaned against her.

"Hey, Takahashi, you're heavy!"

"No, I'm not! I'm as light as a feather!"

Machina gave up and held Takahashi in her arms.

"So what were you gossiping about?" Takahashi asked. "Lemme in on the secret."

"Nothing that has anything to do with you," Machina replied.

"C'mon! Don't ice me out!"

"Very well," said Veltol. "We were talking about looking for these ancient magi-gadgets called the Dark Peers Records that will help us locate the remaining Six Dark Peers. The problem is we don't know where the Records might be."

"Ancient magi-gadgets?! Treasure hunting?! Seriously, you guys gotta let me in on this stuff sooner! I'm an aether hacker, remember? Investigation is my whole thing! Aw yeah, now we're talking!"

"I wasn't so sure about relying on a mortal for immortal matters...but this certainly wouldn't be the first time you've done that for us."

"Right? Anyway, let's just gargo it."

Gargo was shorthand for using the Gargoyle search engine to look things up on the net. Takahashi coined the term herself and was trying to get it to catch on with little to no success.

"Come on, Takahashi, there's no way it could be so easy," said Machina. "We're not looking for hidden items in a video game, you understand? The aethernet isn't as omnipotent as you might think. Hee-hee, silly girl."

"Tsk, tsk. Who the hell do you think I am? Of course it's not gonna come up if you just type in *where's the Dark Peers Records!* I know better than that."

"Indeed you do," Veltol added.

"So what we're looking for won't come up with the usual methods. What do we do, then?" Takahashi lifted her index finger. "We turn it on its head."

"We what...?" Veltol asked.

Takahashi nodded. "We look at it from a different perspective. We don't

search for the thing itself, but rather *where* it might be. For instance, some person or organization that collects pre-Fantasion artifacts—museums, research labs, that sort of thing. That's where we look.”

Multiple holodisplays popped up around Takahashi, and she mirrored her VRD to them through the aether. Several small windows appeared as she inputted a number of commands using her spherical 3D keyboard and telepathic keyboard. Artificial spirits combed through the data at lightning speed.

Veltol watched with deep interest. His supernatural mana reserves couldn't possibly grant him the processing power that Takahashi so deftly wielded.

“Granted, looking for this stuff ourselves would still be too hard, so we've gotta provide the artificial spirits with the right parameters. That way, they can penetrate beyond the search engine's reach and sift through the copious amounts of data on the aethernet for us. Then we find the most likely hits from there. This is what we call artificial spirit mining.”

“I've been using the aethernet since its early days, and yet I'm nowhere near this adept. I think Takahashi's talents are its own separate category from the usual magical talents...”

Takahashi didn't react to Machina's comment. She was so focused on her task, so deep in the net, that no voice could reach her. She was too immersed to even bother wiping the sweat from her brow.

“Aha! Found it!”

Takahashi rose from within the annals of the aethernet ten minutes later.

“That was fast! Perhaps even too fast?!”

“I'd expect nothing less,” said Veltol. “I'll reward you later, Takahashi.”

“I don't have three artificial spirits for nothin'. Futaba's a real ace at this sort of processing.”

The job didn't look all that special from the outside, and Takahashi laughed it off, but such a feat usually required specialized personnel and facilities.

She'd hacked into restricted depths the search engine couldn't reach, collecting info from all sorts of places. Even with the help of technology and artificial spirits, at its core, this was a type of magic—proof of her talent as an aether hacker, particularly the skills needed for on-the-fly modifications to rewrite technics in real time.

“One final touch, aaand...there we go!”

Takahashi revealed a map of Shinjuku's environs on one of her holodisplays.

The city itself appeared as a big yellow dot surrounded by other smaller red dots —Shinjuku's satellite cities. The display zoomed in on one red dot that was slightly northeast before showing a 3D aerial map of the satellite city. It was called:

“Akihabara...”

Veltol muttered the name. “You’re saying this is where we should look?” he asked Takahashi.

“Yep. There’s an underground treasury below Akihabara School of Magic, one of the few and the oldest in the world. Futaba narrowed this place down based on the parameters I used.”

“That School of Magic?” Machina asked.

“Yeah, in Akihabara.”

“Oh-ho. I’ve never heard about this place,” Veltol commented.

“Lu Xel, the Akihabara School of Magic, was founded after the end of the Immortal War. It’s an educational institution specializing in sorcery,” Machina explained. “It’s also the oldest remaining school of magic. Legend has it that there exists a hidden treasury underground that hasn’t been opened for almost five hundred years.”

“I see. That must be around the time the Records were lost, after my defeat.”

Machina fiddled with the 3D map of Akihabara to zoom in on the school building. “But how will we infiltrate the school’s underground? Do we barge straight in and fight our way through?”

“Please, we’re not barbarians,” said Takahashi. “Let me handle the security, and we’ll just sneak in—”

“What? No, we can’t break the law—”

“And is *fighting our way through* supposed to be legal or something?!”

“Calm down, you two,” Veltol interrupted. “No need to take such risks. There is one very simple way to infiltrate a school.”

“What could that possibly be?” Machina asked.

“Easy. Like hiding a tree in a forest, or a corpse in a catacomb.”

To put it bluntly...

“What better way to get into a school than to enroll as students?”

Machina and Takahashi froze momentarily, mouths agape.

“I-indeed... I did not consider that... But that would require certain documentation, and this isn’t the right season for—”

“Wow! You sure come up with some wild stuff, Velly! Sounds great—let’s do it! I’ll handle the issues Machina brought up!” Takahashi proudly thumped her chest. “I just gotta get some exchange-program applications from my school, then me and my buddies’ll do a bit of tampering, and boom, we’re golden.”

She put it so simply, but the reality was much more complicated. Nonetheless, Veltol trusted her to take care of it.

He stroked his chin and pondered for a few seconds.

“Strike while the iron is hot; make hay while the sun shines; steal the treasure while the dragon slumbers. There are similar sayings across various lands, even various worlds. Everlasting beings such as immortals may value time differently than mortals do, yet I think those adages still ring true.”

“Um, so what do you wanna say, exactly?”

The Demon Lord smiled.

“Don’t leave for tomorrow what you can do today.”

Veltol got to his feet, then thrust out his hand. “Our course of action is set!”

Machina and Takahashi straightened up at his regal decree.

“Our destination is Akihabara! Our objective: locate and obtain the Dark Peers Records! I, the Demon Lord Veltol Velvet Velsvalt, proclaim this quest’s commencement henceforth!” he declared bombastically.



The view from the bus departing Shinjuku for Akihabara was truly bleak. There wasn’t a single leaf on the ground, just an unnatural mix of ashmoth stone known as reprod, and asphalt. It was a graveyard of decayed buildings and abandoned automobiles, all effects of the catastrophic Fantasion, which merged both worlds roughly eighty years ago.

Traffic was light; the only other vehicles that passed through were caravans of trucks that protected passengers and cargo from the bands of raiders inhabiting the wasteland. The bus, of course, had its own escort as well.

The bus’s interior wasn’t exactly pleasant, either. The seats were hard, the

vehicle swayed a lot, and it was nowhere near insulated enough for the chill outside the cryotolerance zone.

At last, a city appeared on the horizon.

The Cybermagic City of Akihabara.

The city was divided in two by a pedestrian mall extending from north to south; Electric Town was on the east, and Magic Town was on the west.

The name of the old city in that location was Lu Xel, just like the school's. It had a storied past, but during the City Wars, it merged with the old Akihabara, keeping the latter's name.

Then one man finally stepped foot into the city.

“Here we are...”

They arrived at the western side, Magic Town. It was nothing like the tumultuous Shinjuku—this side of Akihabara still had remnants of an ancient far east Alnaethian cityscape.

“Here we are!” The view filled the man’s heart with joy.

Tall stone lanterns called starsas glowed with faint bluish-white aether light. White smoke blew from the chimneys. The street was stone-paved. There were faded copper signs, grimoires lining the displays of magic bookshops, and magigadget shops with dried mandrakes and chicken legs hanging on the storefront. Brooms, a type of flying vehicle, passed by overhead. Pedestrians wore cloaks of many colors, and far in the distance, there was a giant wall.

“Here we are, in Akihabara Magic Town! To think that such vestiges of Alnaeth still remained in this world!”

The Demon Lord’s roar echoed throughout the quiet town.



Takahashi arrived at the School of Magic’s VDX building and was soon shown to the principal’s office.

It took less than a week for her to go through First High’s exchange-program procedures, forge some documents, and get to Akihabara after a bumpy bus ride. It helped that the exchange program was only a month long, but still, everything

went extremely quickly thanks to her stellar grades.

“Hmmm...,” came a suspicious grumble.

There were five people in the principal’s office, three of them wearing the school’s blazer uniform: Takahashi in the middle, Veltol to her right, and Machina to her left. They were facing two women, one seated and one standing. The seated woman had a holopaper spread out across her desk.

“Hm-hmmm...,” the woman murmured.

Takahashi was sweating bullets mentally, though not because she feared the forged exchange-program documents weren’t up to snuff. In fact, she had no doubts that they were in perfect shape. She’d be more concerned if she left the task up to another hacker, but she oversaw all of it herself.

My forgery is foolproof. I copied some spy’s technique and then added my own improvements. Not even the most seasoned aether hacker could easily see through that... Besides, I also had someone with a different type of artificial spirit examine it.

Lu Xel had a six-year system, and Takahashi, Veltol, and Machina enrolled as sixth-year students. Takahashi had forged two extra applications using fabricated identities; it might’ve been easy to notice that Shinjuku First High had two extra students as a result, but as Takahashi mentioned, that shouldn’t have been a problem.

Transferring to a satellite city—although technically, Akihabara was more of an allied city to the bigger Shinjuku—and for a short-term exchange program at that, involved comparatively lenient scrutiny.

So why was Takahashi so nervous?

“I see, I see...”

My forgery’s perfect. It should be fine...I think...

The reason was right in front of her: this woman who was still grumbling to herself.

“Veltol Velvet Velsvalt...”

The young elf woman read the name on the holopaper out loud.

“That is, um...your real name, yes?”

She looked from the name to the attached photo and then at the Demon Lord standing brazenly in front of her.

Suspicious, right?! And spying is a serious crime, I know that! thought Takahashi.

The Demon Lord had enrolled under his real name. The suspicion was reasonable, and there was no guarantee that this wouldn't blow their cover.

Forgery was, naturally, a felony.

Most modern cities depended on their corporate enterprises, and industrial espionage was always on everyone's radar. It wasn't uncommon to hear that a city's entire economy collapsed due to such spies. The punishment had become stricter over time, too.

Takahashi wouldn't get away with just a scolding even if all she did was forge some student documents. Worst-case scenario, she might get arrested and tortured.

She did her best to act normal as she turned to look at Veltol. He seemed entirely unfazed by the woman's question and nodded majestically.

"Indeed. I am Veltol Velvet Velsvalt. That is my name."

Too unfazed, actually. Common sense did not apply to this man. He would never use a fake name, no matter how necessary it was. He was the one and only Demon Lord Veltol.

"Mm-hmmm..."

The woman brushed a strand of her black hair from her face as she stared at the holopaper. Takahashi eyed her cautiously; she knew all about her.

Tratte Götel... Current head of the prestigious Götel clan, one of Akihabara's Three Great Houses that dates back to the end of the Immortal War five hundred years ago. She's also principal of Akihabara School of Magic and the de facto leader of the Magic Town half of the city...

It was no use trying to guess an elf's age by their appearance, but Tratte still looked young, and for good reason—her entire body was mechanized. She was a full-borg.

According to Takahashi's sleuthing, Tratte had been so gravely injured during the City Wars that her brain and part of her spine needed to be unitized, or transferred to a mechanical body.

Her body was an older full-borg model, an Atropos. The most common model in the modern era was the Prometheus, which involved replacing the patient's body with machinery over time, making rejection much less likely.

Tratte hardly looked much different from someone with a flesh-and-blood body, however. Were it not for the unit-wiring on her cheeks, it would've been impossible to tell she was a full-borg. Her face was well-shaped, and the skincover was top-class.

Naked full-borgs—those without skincover—and bucket-helms, which

lacked detailed faces, were still the standard, since the price of unitization skyrocketed the more a borg resembled a person.

Tratte looked away from the documents.

“Very well, then. The documents are legitimate. I accept. Welcome to Akihabara School of Magic.”

She didn’t contest them one bit.

Seriouslyyy?! Takahashi screamed internally, although she immediately felt relieved.

The elven woman standing behind the principal was also a high-grade fullborg. The plain-looking assistant opened her artificial eyes wide as she glanced back and forth between Veltol and the holopaper. Takahashi wondered if she was just as incredulous.

“Let me ask one last question.” Tratte stood up with a metallic *clang*, revealing a sword hanging from her waist with a magnificent scabbard and metallic hilt. “Why this school?”

Aaand there it is.

Just saying they wanted to study magic at the best institution or whatever probably would’ve worked fine.

But right before Takahashi could put that thought into words...

“We’re here to inspect the building’s underground treasury,” Veltol answered.

D-don’t just say that!

Takahashi broke out in a cold sweat.

Tratte furrowed her brow. “How do you know about the treasury? Only a select few are aware of it, even in Akihabara.”

“Heh... No secret is rival to my keen eye and inquisitive mind. The truth always reveals itself; it cannot resist my charms.”

“I see... So you’re telling me it’s no coincidence you found out about it.”

“Maybe so... Or maybe not.”

“Cyplicusian logic, huh? *The truth always wavers when viewed subjectively.*”

“I don’t have much to say.”

“Silence is golden, as the saying goes... It seems you didn’t come here out of mere curiosity.”

Man, this really feels like walking a tightrope, thought Takahashi. I dunno how their meaningless blabbering is holding up this conversation, but okay, just

don't fall!

"I'm impressed by your enthusiasm," Tratte said pensively. "I would really like to allow you inside the treasury, but..."

"We shouldn't go in?"

"No, you shouldn't, but more accurately, you quite literally cannot go in. The treasury is sealed shut."

"...A seal, you say?"

"That's right. It was sealed five hundred years ago."

"Interesting... And I gather it is not an easy one to break?"

"Correct. To release the seal, the heads of the Three Great Houses—the Götels, the Seburds, and the Reynards—must gather with their regalia, the three magi-gadgets that act as keys." Tratte tapped her golden sword as she continued, "This is one of them, the Götels' Blade. The Seburds have the Crown, while the Reynards were entrusted the Orb."

"Hmmm...? So we only need those three keys, correct? Rather straightforward requirements for a five-hundred-year-old seal."

It was the obvious question. Merely collecting these three regalia sounded like an uncomplicated task.

"It's not as easy as it sounds, but yes, the mechanism is quite simple."

"So if I can borrow these regalia from the two remaining houses, will you allow us to—?"

"Yes, I will gladly release the seal if you can bring them to me. It is the wish of the Götel family to gather all three regalia, and I also have interest myself in seeing what is inside this treasury. However...there is one big problem."

She put her hand on her cheek, then sighed with melancholy.

"And what would that be?" Veltol asked.

Tratte smiled uncomfortably. Her ability to make such delicate and natural expressions was proof of how top-class her borg model was. Each and every one of her gestures had this sort of bewitching charm to them.

"The Reynards' Orb is missing."

She sounded truly regretful, so much so that one wouldn't imagine it was being produced by a speech processor.





The Akihabara School of Magic building was based on the former Akihabara's VDX building and thus inherited the name. It was twenty-two stories high and just over a hundred seventy meters tall. The school's design was a result of the ideological backgrounds and political negotiations between the old Akihabara and the old Lu Xel.

Floors one to seven contained the school, while floors eight and up were government offices and residences, including the school's dormitories, where Veltol and his crew would stay during their exchange program. A medium-sized aether reactor was installed beneath the school, providing Magic Town with mana and electricity.

Veltol, Machina, and Takahashi had just arrived by elevator at the seventh floor, where the sixth-year classrooms were located.

"Ehm, my name is Mag Rosanta, and I will be your homeroom mentor. I also serve as the principal's aide. Pleased to meet you."

The unremarkable full-borg instructor spoke with a thick elvish accent.

"Magro Santa? Quite a strange name," said Veltol. "Reminds me of a particular Earthly holiday."

"Rosanta! Mag Rosanta! I'm no Claus!"

"Hmm? Yes, it's nice to meet you, Santa."

"Did you even listen to me...? And by the way, I am your mentor, I'll have you know!"

The school's teachers made a point to use the word *mentor* instead of *teacher*.

Only Mag's and the three exchange students' steps and voices echoed through the otherwise quiet hallway.

"It's super disorienting without my Familia. My vision alone just doesn't cut it..."

"You're right... I never thought about it too much, but now I know I took mine for granted."

Takahashi and Machina rubbed their napes. Their Familias had been removed, the protective covers' I/O ports now closed.

Akihabara Private School of Magic was a prestigious academy with a long history of traditions and wearing a Familia inside its premises was strictly prohibited. As primitive and ironic as it might sound, this analog approach to

studying magic helped mold people into outstanding magical engineers.

"I find it to be an excellent education policy. A good sorcerer must not rely on his wand. One needs to experience the abyss of magic in all its forms to truly understand its essence," Veltol said.

Mag stopped in front of one of the classrooms. "Come in one by one when I tell you to."

"Gotcha!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

"Sure."

The three of them nodded.

Once Mag entered the classroom, Veltol turned to Takahashi and Machina.

"So now what do we do?" he asked.

"Whatcha mean?"

"Oh, please, Takahashi. Where did your sharp wit go?" Veltol shrugged and sighed. "It's a custom for transfer and exchange students to stand at the front of the class and introduce themselves, correct? I know this from an adventure game I recently played that took place in an old Japanese academy. I never attended such a school myself, but I've learned all about the culture and etiquette from these games. You can learn anything from video games. What a truly marvelous invention."

"Ah! N-now that you mention it, yes, I've seen that, too! In anime! These important rituals always happen when the story is set in a school! It's a momentous occasion! Gosh, now I'm getting anxious...!"

"It's basically a cliché at this point, yeah," Takahashi noted.

"As the Demon Lord, I will enter first. Heh... Can't ruin our first impression."

"Yes! Let them know your splendor, Lord Veltol!"

"Can't say I've ever seen anyone this excited to introduce themselves."

Then they heard Mag's voice come from the classroom: "*Ahem.* Everyone, silence, please. Come in."

"It's time. I'm going."

Veltol put a hand on the door, slowly opened it, and entered the classroom.

Birdcage-shaped lamps dangled from the ceiling, the white glow of the artificial will-o'-the-wisps inside them illuminating the room. Unlike the more commonplace aether lights and aether neon, these lamps were reminiscent of the lanterns used in the mansions of court sorcerers. Natural wood was considered a luxury, yet the desks and chairs were made of a type of charred oak called fehm.

This school wasn't prestigious in name only.

The students eyed Veltol curiously. He gleefully lapped up the attention.

"Ehm, allow me to introduce him to you all. He's here from Shinju—"

He took one step forward, interrupting the instructor. Then he puffed out his chest, lightly brushed away his bangs with one hand while placing the other on his hip, took a deep breath—

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

—and cackled.

A new city, a new student identity—everything felt fresh to him.

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

His voice was strong and clear, his royal splendor so charming that everyone present hung on to each and every one of his movements. He was not holding back an ounce of his Demon Lord charisma.

"I sincerely doubt anyone here is as ignorant as to not know my face...but I am a courteous man! My apologies for wasting your time with introductions! I am merely following school etiquette!"

And so began the Demon Lord Veltol Velvet Velsvalt's first day at school.



After all three finished introducing themselves, they were shown to their seats at the very back. They were now in the middle of mediumship class, although the pupils' curiosity over the unusual exchange students remained unabated.

One student—a blond half-elf girl—stole occasional glances at Veltol, but he paid her no mind and listened intently to the lecture.

"As you can see, modern ethics consider mediumship a taboo much like—or perhaps even more than—soul cloning in necromancy or homunculi in alchemy. So why do we learn mediumship in the modern era? Simple: because this point of view is a misunderstanding. Mediumship involves observing the soul, which contributes greatly to the development of humanki—"

Mag stopped midsentence to stare at Veltol, who was comfortably reclining in his seat without a care in the world.

"What's the matter, Ms. Santa? Please continue the lecture."

"Stop calling me that! Please tell me you're at least taking notes?"

“No need to worry, it’s all in my head.”

“What...? Are you serious? Well then, please explain what happened in 722 CE, the event I talked about at the begi—”

“The Railrod incident. Railrod, a court sorcerer for the Ruestand Kingdom, went berserk during a mediumship experiment. The heroic soul he summoned took over his body, and this led to the demise of the Ruestand Kingdom. Railrod’s infamy was then immortalized in the history books, and his name is now used to describe when an unstable subject of a medium summoning goes on rampage. It was a real disaster. I just happened to be passing by Ruestand around that time and could scarcely believe that his wife’s infidelity would lead him to use such a mediocre technic—”

“Stop, stop, stop! That’s enough!”

Veltol’s flawless answer, extraneous details included, had the classroom astir.

“He seriously had it all in his head...”

“The way he talks, plus that name... It really is the livestreamer...”

“Wow... Guess he’s not just a pretty face and voice... What an exchange student we’ve got here...”

Machina smiled as she saw Veltol inspire such praise, envy, and confusion in these mere mortals.

“...Hee-hee-hee.”

“What are you acting so high and mighty about...?” Takahashi said.

The next moment, the bell signaling the end of the first period rang.

Second period was applied mana studies. A short, male orc with thick Coke-bottle glasses stood at the desk.

“As you all know, mana is just as important as electricity to today’s society. We transform aether into mana to create electricity...or utilize mana itself as a source of energy. Its uses are many, and every individual possesses their own source. Every student in this school is brilliant, so I’m sure you all can make great use of this source of energy...”

His voice was high-pitched, his tone pushy, and he had the habit of clicking his tongue in the middle of sentences. It was extremely painful to listen to.

“Though, there are some exceptions...”

He looked at the blond girl in the corner of the classroom, and everyone

snickered.

“I believe the day where we’ll be able to sell our individual mana will come soon. Perhaps we’ll see a mana tax system... Now then, you, the exchange student. Yes, you, with the long black hair.”

“Hmm? Oh, me?”

Veltol was looking at the ridiculed classmate, but then he turned to the mentor.

“Have you done your mana measurement yet?” the orc asked.

“No, I haven’t.”

“All right, then come here, and we’ll get it over with.”

Veltol stood up as instructed and walked to the mentor’s desk. On it was a machine with numerous cables connected to it, and on top of that was an octagonal natri, a blue magistone.

“This is our school’s mana-measuring device. We take measurements twice a year and publicly announce them to the student body. I’m personally quite interested in seeing just how good Shinjuku’s students are.”

The mentor held his hand up to the natri, and numbers appeared on the holoboard, going up and up until the two figures stopped at three digits.

“The upper figure is my reserve, and the lower one is my release. This machine converts your amount of mana into numerical values, as you can see. I’m slightly above average.”

“Um, sir? I should warn you...”

“Yes?”

“This will break if I try it.”

Veltol’s warning seemed to befuddle the orc mentor. He immediately burst out laughing.

“Ah-ha-ha! You don’t typically use these in Shinjuku, do you? They cost a pretty penny, but rest assured, these machines are hard to break by accident. Oh, but do take care handling the natri; it’s quite precious. Don’t worry, though—even if you do wreck it, the school will charge me, not you.”

“Hmmm...”

“Really, it’s no problem. No need to feel ashamed even if your results are low. Well, as long as it’s not *too* low...” The orc shot the same blond student a mocking glance. “Mana reserve and release depends a lot on inborn talent. Your classmate Albert is a prime example. In any case, go on, try it.”

Veltol did as requested and held up his hand. In that same moment, the natri turned to dust, unable to handle the Demon Lord’s mana.

“Ah... Oh... Uh...?”

The numeric values on the holoboard were corrupted. The orc mentor stared aghast as the AC’s gentle breeze blew the natri’s remains away.

“I warned you,” Veltol said without surprise, arms crossed as he glanced at the mentor, who was now on his knees.

“I-impossible... Th-this can’t be... No... There’s no way... It turned to dust... Even if he could destroy it, shouldn’t it have exploded...? M-my pay...”

The orc’s lamentations brought a smile to Machina’s face.

“...Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee.”

“Seriously, though, what are *you* acting so high and mighty about...?”

With that, the bell signaling the end of the second period rang.



We’ve got some serious weirdos in here.

Hizuki Reynard-Yamada was now in one corner of the cafeteria eating her beef croquette. She liked having hers with Worcestershire sauce.

She kept on thinking while dismantling the croquette with her chopsticks. Not only was this a strange time to get exchange students, but all three of them were in the same class, too.

No, that shouldn’t matter. There has to be a perfectly good reason why they’re here, and it’s not my place to pry. What’s really bothering me is...

Hizuki glanced to her side. The three exchange students were eating lunch at the table right next to hers. The silver-haired girl got a curry set, and the girl with a streak of red in her hair was eating a fried-chicken set.

...that man with the udon... His name was Veltol, wasn’t it?

She looked at the black-haired, obscenely handsome man, and her right eye started twitching.

Veltol Velvet Velsvalt. Hizuki knew that name. It was the Immortal King’s, from five hundred years in the past.

There was a crackpot theory on the net that said Veltol was, in fact, alive and well in the modern era, but Hizuki in no way believed this exchange student was the real Demon Lord. Considering the Demon Lord was an immortal, the likelihood that this historical figure was still living wasn’t zero, but she figured this Veltol person was either using a fake name, or his parents were tremendous

lunatics.

If it's the latter...that means he also streams under his real name? I don't want to ask him myself, though...

Such thoughts tormented her as she detached the breading from the croquette's contents.

Suddenly, something bumped into her seat. She turned to look at what it was and found that it had been a male student sitting at the table right behind her.

"Pardon me... Well, if it isn't the head of one of the Three Houses, Hizuki Reynard-Yamada— Oh, excuse me, that's *Ms. Yamada*. I suppose you don't go by Reynard since your family has fallen out of grace."

"Albert Heygrams..."

The elf student flicked his long blond bangs with a finger.

Albert was Hizuki's classmate, and she didn't like him one bit. He always found time to annoy her and make her feel bad with his sarcastic remarks.

He was from a noble family, and his father was president of the Akihabara City Council. An aristocrat through and through.

"And what does such a talented and promising young man want from this failure of an ex-noble? I certainly have nothing to say to you," Hizuki said bitterly in self-deprecation.

Not only was Albert a blue blood, but he also had the top grades in the entire school. Hizuki, on the other hand, had the worst grades in practical subjects. They were like chalk and cheese, like chicken and cockatrice.

"Oh, but I do have some words for you. Part of my duty as noble."

"What?"

"Part of the *noblesse oblige* is to guide the common people, at least in my opinion. But what do you do in that regard?"

"..."

"You have no talent in magic, and yet here you are in this prestigious school, merely because of your Three Houses status! You spend all day in the corner staring at the ground—you call that being a noble?! Just looking at you makes me sick!"

Albert spread his arms wider and wider and spoke louder and louder as he went on. Murmuring chatter could be heard throughout the cafeteria.

Stop it...

Hizuki's spine trembled. She felt as if she'd swallowed a mass of lead. No one tried to help her out, and she understood why.

All because I'm not a pureblood...

She had a shaky standing between her classmates. Some expressed sympathy, but no one dared help. No one wanted to get that kind of attention, and even then, those who felt for her were few. Most of the students were of noble families, and most of them agreed with Albert.

“Wouldn’t it be better for you to go to another school? At the very least, I don’t think there’s any reason for you to stay here if you can’t use magic.”

What did I even do wrong...?

Hizuki cast her eyes down and bit her lip. She felt sad, angry, miserable, powerless. All kinds of negative emotions swirled inside her.

Just leave me alone.

“Well, that’s what your mother gets for having a kid with an Electric Town man. Dirtied her bloodline. And to have a half-elf on top of it! Half-assed all the way through!”

“—!” Hizuki instinctively got to her feet.

“What’s with that look? Have something to tell me now?”

“You can say anything you want about me, but I won’t let you get away with insulting my parents.”

“Ha! You won’t let me get away with simply stating the truth? You—”

Just as Albert was about to mock her once more...

“Cease your screeching.”

...someone spoke.

The voice hadn’t been loud. In fact, it was more like a whisper. But someone who didn’t mind the attention finally spoke up.

That short command silenced the murmuring that had been rippling through the cafeteria, and everyone unconsciously turned to look at the source.

“Can’t you see I’m having udon? Let me eat in peace,” Veltol said calmly from his table, next to Hizuki’s.

“Wh-what...?”

Veltol slowly stood up and approached Albert, covering for Hizuki. Albert was about 170 centimeters tall, while Veltol was around 188 centimeters, so there was a whole head of difference. Add Veltol’s dominating aura on top of that, and Albert was completely overwhelmed.

“Y-you’re...”

“We are in the same class, correct? I’ve already introduced myself, but I don’t recall catching your name.”

“Ah, s-sorry. I—I am Albert Heygrams, eldest son of the Heygrams family.”

“Heygrams?” Veltol stroked his chin. “No matter. You’ve interrupted my udon meal... You see, udon must be eaten in silence—with utmost focus—and you’ve ruined it for some hollow nobility trash talk and meaningless insults?”

There was no trace of provocation or contempt in his tone. He was simply speaking his mind.

“...Excuse me?!” Albert’s eye twitched for a second, but he immediately took a deep breath to calm down. “I don’t think a livestreamer without a real job has any right to say my observations are hollow. You’re the one making dirty money by having the net fawn all over you.”

“Oh-ho, you sound quite familiar with me. Have you watched my streams? Thank you for contributing to my ad revenue, then. It’s because of bizarre fellows such as yourself, watching me despite all your grumbling, that I get to eat such delicious udon.”

“Imbecile! I just heard the rumors about you from our classmates! Don’t you dare talk to me like that, you damn pleb!”

“Pleb...?”

Quiet bloodthirst emanated from the girl seated across from Veltol. It was Machina, ready to pounce on Albert for insulting her king.

“It’s fine, Machina.” That was enough to extinguish her anger. “You call me plebeian, hmm? I see. That’s funny. Machina, what do you make of this man?”

“If I may.” She eyed Albert up and down with an icy stare. “He seems unable to discern your splendor despite your close physical proximity. Or perhaps he is simply not intelligent enough to comprehend it. Either way, he’s a gofer, at best.”

Machina closed her eyes and gracefully took up her teacup.

“You...! You dare say I, the eldest of the Heygrams, am a gofer?! You ignorant fool! This is beyond any sort of excusable insolence!”

Veltol raised a hand to stop the agitated boy. “Wait. Heygrams, Heygrams... Oh! You’re the descendant of Ganfall Heygrams?!”

“What? H-how do you know the name of my firstfather?”

Veltol’s sudden statement baffled Albert, and rightly so. Why would an exchange student, who had just arrived at school, know his ancestor’s name?

“Ha-ha-ha! I knew it! Don’t tell me that fool’s bloodline continues to this day! I see, I see... The coward must have survived.” Veltol wasn’t making things up—he did, in fact, know him. “I clearly remember Ganfall Heygrams. The poor fellow was so frightened before me, he soiled himself in the middle of

the battlefield and ran off. He was so pathetic, I decided to let him go... I see now that I forever changed his destiny. Did this episode become legend? Truly, the cogs of fate work in mysterious ways..."

"Wha—?!" Albert's face was getting redder and redder. "Urgh! St-stop your slander! Don't you dare speak ill of my firstfa—"

Veltol snapped his fingers. "But what I find most bizarre of all is..." He smirked. A truly devilish smile.

"...you ridicule that woman despite being less talented than her. How do you manage to be so pompous?"

He glanced at Hizuki.

"But I guess it's no surprise, coming from the descendant of that cowardly deserter."

"—!" Albert's face tensed up. "You say...my talent is lesser than the Reynard girl's?"

"Reynard...?" Veltol reacted to that word.

"Fine." Albert's voice was quiet, though slightly trembling—not out of humiliation but ire. "Surely you won't run away now that you've said so much. I'll show you how we do things here in Akihabara!"

"Oh? How exactly do you mean?" Veltol asked with honest anticipation.

"Let's..."

"What was that?"

"Let's duel!" Albert declared, pointing at him. "I challenge you to a duel! I'll show you how big of a sorcerer, of a noble, of a man I am!"



That escalated quickly.

Hizuki was baffled.

She was in the school's practice hall on the second floor. Students usually called this bowl-shaped arena the gym.

The dark-haired exchange student was about to duel against the school's top pupil. Rumors spread quickly, and students gathered in great numbers. It was still lunchtime, but they had nothing else to do.

I wonder, do I count as involved in all this? ...Or am I already a third party?

She didn't know whether she should be in there, but she had gone with the flow and followed everyone to the gym.

She was in a corner, alone. No one attempted to get close to her. She was already infamous, plus she had been the spark to this duel in the first place.

"Sheesh, what a mess, right?" The exchange student with the streak of red hair came up to her, already acting friendly. She put a hand on Hizuki's shoulder and nodded.

She's awfully touchy-feely for someone who barely knows me...

"Sorry for all the fuss our Velly's causing."

She said her name is Takahashi, I think... What was her first name again?

"They sure don't like you, huh? What'd you do? Kill someone? Rob a bank?"

Someone here doesn't hold her tongue.

Hizuki didn't feel like Takahashi was being snarky, however. And she wasn't; this was her usual self.

"Takahashi, you shouldn't say that!" The silver-haired exchange student reprimanded her.

It all seemed like some sort of sick joke to Hizuki. Veltol, Machina... These were names that came up if you studied even the slightest of Alnaethian history.

"It's fine," Hizuki told Machina. "I guess it's not totally accurate to say I haven't done anything... People just don't like seeing a failure like me coming to this school."

"Huh, you're a failure?" Takahashi said.

"Yeah, a pretty big one."

"You don't look like one to me, though..." Machina interjected.

"I mean, my theory grades are pretty good if I do say so myself."

Hizuki smiled in self-deprecation for speaking of her faults with such ease.

"But I can't use magic."

Takahashi opened her eyes wide. "What?! For real?! Why come to a magic school, then?!"

"Taaakaaaahashii! Stop being rude!"

"Ack, sorry!"

"That's all right. Besides, it's the truth. I'm used to being told that. Apparently, I don't have enough mana to use magic. Enough to boot up my Familia, but that's it." Hizuki paused for a second before continuing, "My mother was an alumnus of this school and wanted me to graduate from here, too.

Principal Tratte's been really good to me since she and my mother go way back. But yeah...there's a lot going on, even with me."

"Whoa, sounds rough," said Takahashi. "Also, it's kinda weird that the school's not trying to stop this duel."

"Yes, they seem quite lenient in that regard," Machina added.

"Our school's ultimate objective is to raise sorcerers who can hold their own in combat. It's a tradition as old as time."

The student handbook even said duels were allowed, so long as both parties and a mentor consented, and the mentor had to oversee it.

Magic was a tool for making life easier, but it had also been used for war since time immemorial. The school did nothing to challenge this and even encouraged students to better themselves through combat.

It just so happened that the arbiter for this duel was Mag Rosanta, whom Veltol had spotted in the cafeteria, much to her dismay.

"Ms. Mag has it rough, too. She's too soft." Hizuki looked at Mag and giggled.

"Why do I have to do this...?" Mag grumbled, standing in between Veltol and Albert. "Lunchtime will be ending soon, so let's finish this quickly, shall we?"

"Wait. Hey, you," Veltol called from the center of the hall. He was staring at Hizuki. "Yes, you. Hijiki, was it?"

"Zu, not *ji*! Hizuki!" she yelled.

Their shouting grabbed further attention, which made Hizuki extremely uncomfortable.

"Pay close attention, Hijiki!"

"Stop calling me that! I'm not seaweed! My name is *Hizuki*!"

Is he even listening? She held back from yelling at him more.

Veltol chuckled. "Do not miss a second of Veltol Velvet Velsvalt's brilliant fighting."

"You're rather brazen," Albert said.

"I'd say you're the brazen one, given your lack of talent," Veltol replied.

"Geez... I suppose an exchange student like you wouldn't know, so let me tell you: I have an S in mana release, mana manipulation, and mana reserve—all practical aspects tested in school. That's the highest grade, by the way. I'm this school's top pupil in magical warfare," Albert boasted, hand to his chest.

Veltol snorted. "Ha! You? The top pupil?"

"Of course."

“Then I think the school should reconsider its evaluation process. If your mana reserve can earn the highest grade, then there ought to be an even higher scale for that woman you like ridiculing so much.”

Albert was incredulous—as were all the other students present. Everyone knew Hizuki had no magic talent.

“Ooh, really, Hizuki? Nice!” Takahashi said.

“Um, no, I got an F in mana reserve and all other practical tests.”

“There must be something wrong with this school’s evaluation methods,” Machina offered. “After all...Lord Veltol said so. There is absolutely no way he could be wrong. Indeed... He is always right...”

“How does that make any sense...?” Hizuki said before asking Takahashi, “Hey, is this girl okay...?”

“Mm, yeah, this is pretty typical for her.”

Hizuki winced at Machina’s eerie dedication.

I know for a fact that I don’t have a lot of mana... They’ve even measured it. So where is he getting this idea from? ...Also why does she call her classmate ‘Lord’?

Hizuki turned to look at Veltol and Albert again. The latter’s eyebrows were twitching in anger.

“You must be quite sure of yourself,” said Albert. “That, or you’re just an idiot.”

“Heh. Would a dragon show any fear when facing a kobold?”

“In that case...prove to me you have the strength to back up your confidence.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to simply fight you straightforward. Let us add a handicap. Listen carefully!” Veltol lifted his arm, pointed at the heavens, and raised his voice. “I will win this duel without taking a single step!”

The audience went wild.

And how would they not? The good-looking exchange student was dueling with the school’s best pupil, on his first day, and had declared victory before starting.

His voice was oddly charming—he instantly had his audience’s hearts in the palm of his hand.

“You won’t take a single step? You must be joking, Veltol! You’d better not use this as a petty excuse when you lose!”

“No offense meant. I am serious, Albert. I think it would be boorish of me to not hold back this much.”

“I think you’re being plenty boorish already.”

“Fine, fine. Let us make an oath, then.”

“An oath?”

“Yes. If I take even one step, then I will do anything you want.”

“Interesting. I accept.”

“And since you ruined my udon meal, you deserve punishment in case you lose. If I win...” Veltol pointed at Hizuki. “You will stop bothering that woman. It’s high time you ceased such unsightly pestering. You won’t talk to her again, not in the classroom, not ever.”

“—?!” Hizuki gasped.

She never expected someone she’d just met that day to lend her a helping hand, let alone make such an oath.

“Okay,” said Albert. “Not like I care anyway. I’ll hold you to that promise.”

“It’s not a promise. It is an oath. You say you’re a noble, so surely you must understand what I mean, right?”

“Of course. I pledge that on my name as Albert Heygrams.”

Oaths were beyond just words among nobles. Breaking an oath would mean dirtying their house’s honor. A noble had to fulfill their oath to keep their dignity.

The stakes were now sky-high. Hizuki finally realized how serious the matter had become.

“H-hey, you’re his friends, right?” she said, turning to Machina and Takahashi. “You should stop him—actually, stop him, *please*. Albert is strong; there’s a reason why he’s the top student. I know this is just a mock duel, but Albert’s actually capable of defeating a member of Magic Town’s aerial mage force!”

“It’s fine, Hizuki. That boy hasn’t the slightest chance of winning.”

“Yeah, you’ll see. Velly’s gonna wipe the floor with the poor guy.”

They’re insane.

Hizuki didn’t know what else to think. The two of them didn’t seem to be bluffing. They actually believed Veltol would win without taking a single step and that Albert wouldn’t even put up a fight. It was pure, raw insanity. And yet Hizuki, deep in her heart, was starting to feel like it wasn’t as crazy as it sounded. Veltol’s tone was convincing enough.

“Santa, let’s get started already.”

“Rosanta! I’m Mag Rosanta! You’re doing this on purpose!”

“Give me the signal.”

Mag shrugged, annoyed. “Ehm, very well, then. I, Mag Rosanta, will be overseeing today’s duel. Combatants, please name yourselves.”

Albert took one step forward. “On the right, the eldest son of the Heygrams! Albert Heygrams!”

Veltol also took one step forward. “On the left, Veltol Velvet Velsvalt.”

They stared at each other.

“Begin!”

“Here I go!” Albert roared as he initialized his magic.

“Come now,” Veltol chided him. “Albert...please. I can’t handle this much disappointment.”

“What...?”

“You don’t intend on killing me with that much mana, yes? I could tell immediately by your initialization. Don’t get cocky, you little runt.”

Albert finally lost it.

“You’ll regret this!”

He put even more mana into his initialization. He was serious now, and everyone in the audience could tell. The school’s top sorcerer was about to release his full power in the first attack. Veltol wouldn’t come out of it unscathed.

“Heygrams, calm down! A duel’s purpose is not to kill each other!” Mag yelled.

“It is fine. Do not stop him, Santa. This will be a splendid learning experience for him.”

“What are you talking about?!”

Albert’s mana kept on rising, and it became clearer and clearer that this was no longer a game. The other students had not expected such a serious battle—the air around them tensed in a second, except for a certain pair.

“Velly’s having a ball,” said Takahashi.

“It’s a good old-fashioned magic duel. Of course he’s excited,” Machina commented.

How are they still so calm?! thought Hizuki.

Among the uneasiness, only Machina and Takahashi remained lighthearted.

“All creation gathers here to fill the vast skies; my body takes arrow’s shape to defeat my foe!”

Albert enounced the spell’s incantation engraved to the technic, the step of magic activation that was usually omitted in this era due to the wide spread of the Familia.

“The incantation! Yes, this is it! Now this is more like it!” Veltol said with delight.

Albert’s attack spell had been used since ancient times. Its name was:

“*Aether Arrow!*”

Albert’s mana solidified aether into an arrow shape on his hand which he held up in front of him. He then shot the blue aether light at full speed—not holding back, with enough power to pierce a thick concrete wall or kill a man—right at Veltol.

“Run already! What are you doing?!” Hizuki screamed despite herself, yet Veltol did not budge.

Everyone in the practice hall had the same thought: Veltol was about to die. However...

...he flicked the arrow away as if it were a fly.

The aether arrow turned to dust in the wind.

“No way...,” Hizuki whispered, astonished.

Veltol had used a very simple defensive tactic—releasing pure mana around his hand to repel the arrow.

“Wh-what the...?”

“Are you serious?”

“Holy...”

Veltol, meanwhile, was dissatisfied despite the voices of wonder and admiration.

“Hmmm...is that all?”

He looked at his hand, opening and closing it repeatedly.

“I-impossible... He flicked my magic away w-with his bare hand...? S-something must be wrong here...”

“Do not despair. That wasn’t bad at all. You might be a bit more interesting with another hundred years or two of training... But right now, you’re hardly even a clown.”

“Enough with your bullshit!”

“Oh, don’t fret. This was the expected outcome. Actually, your mana release and aether manipulation was better than I anticipated. Pretty good for a modern

mortal.” Veltol stretched out his arm. “That said, the gap between you and me is more cavernous than the great castle walls of Velnall. But don’t let it get to you. After all, who would laugh at a kobold for losing to a dragon? No matter how great your magic talent might be relatively speaking, you are still a commoner up against me, the Demon Lord.”

The aether reacted with his mana, engulfing his body what looked like bluish-black flames.

It was obvious its quality and volume far surpassed Albert’s. His grandiose mana focused at one point—Veltol’s finger.

“Here, have a reward: a brief taste of true magic.”

Veltol flicked his finger.

“Gargh?!”

Then a bluish-black splash appeared in front of Veltol. A small bullet of the same color shot right at Albert, burying itself into his torso faster than the blink of an eye.

Albert was blown away, crashing into the wall and cracking it.

“Wh...a...?”

He instantly passed out.

Most of the audience couldn’t even process what had just happened. Hizuki, one of the few who could visually follow the bullet’s trajectory, was still confused.

“What...was that?”

“He shot a compressed lump of mana. To experience Lord Veltol’s mana directly... Truly an honor. Such a waste for a mere mortal!” Machina replied. Hizuki disregarded everything after the first sentence.

“Huh...?”

Anyone who had studied the slightest bit of magic knew how impressive an attack of pure, compressed mana release was. Mana dispersed the moment it left the body and touched the atmosphere, so at most, it could only envelop a person’s surroundings. One had to go through the aether to not have it instantly disappear.

“Achieving an attack like that should require an unthinkable amount of mana and compression skill... That’s not something a student should be capable of... or any mortal, really...”

The amount of mana needed equaled that of a large-scale destruction spell. Using it purely as release wasn’t efficient—one had to properly give it the shape of magic to get the most out of the mana.

This didn't even count as magic. It was a primitive feat of sheer strength. Even so, no sorcerer could ever say this hadn't been a magic duel. This attack was the very essence of sorcery.

"It's been a while since I had a proper magic duel. You have my thanks, Albert." Veltol commended the young man from the bottom of his heart.

"Wh-what...did I just...witness...?" Mag stared at Veltol, dumbfounded.

"What's wrong, Santa? Declare my victory already."

"Right! Th-the winner is Veltol Velvet Velsvalt! Per the combatants' oath, Albert Heygrams is prohibited from any further interaction with Hizuki Reynard-Yamada!"

A moment of silence, followed by cheers throughout the hall.

"I suppose it was fairly decent entertainment." Veltol responded by raising a hand to the applauding crowd, then started heading over to Machina and Takahashi.

"He really won...," Hizuki said.

"See? I toldja," said Takahashi.

Machina was smiling cheerfully.

Veltol called out to Hizuki nearby. "Hijiki, did you pay attention?"

"Hi-zu-ki!"

"I dedicate this victory to you."

The statement was annoyingly pompous, and yet Hizuki felt inside her chest like everything was all right now. She could feel her head getting hotter and her cheeks redder.

"Um...thanks, Veltol." She looked down and played with her hair. Keeping her emotions in check, she added, "But you should stay away from me..." Her voice trailed off.

"Hmm...?" Veltol stared at her.

She didn't dare meet his gaze. Instead, she turned and walked away, leaving just one statement behind.

"Otherwise, you, too, will meet tragedy."





“Sheesh, guess cocky little rich boys like him exist in real life... And here I thought they only existed in fiction,” Takahashi said.

“Akihabara is unique in that it’s still rife with a lot of Alnaethian culture,” Machina replied.

All classes in their first day of school had ended, and now they were walking through Twilight Street, the biggest street in Magic Town. They were headed east for Electric Town. Their objective: gathering intel to get in contact with its leader, Korneah Seburd.

Akihabara’s sky was just like Shinjuku’s—covered in thick clouds, dark as night despite it being only evening. Too dark even for Twilight Street.

The three of them were wearing their uniforms and carrying their bags, like any other normal student. One would be forgiven for not realizing their average age went beyond a thousand.

“I didn’t expect we would have to find the three regalia in order to open the treasury and look for the Dark Peers Records. We have a long road ahead of us. We don’t even know if the Records are in this treasury...,” Veltol said.

“And one of the regalia appears to be lost, on top of it all,” Machina added.

“Can’t you just open the seal with your magic? Like, just a little bam, boom, and seal’s broken or something?”

“Opening the treasury by force is possible, but with such an old seal, you risk having the treasure within disappear,” Veltol replied. “Not the best course of action.”

“Welp. So where do we start?”

Veltol nodded at Takahashi.

“Let us recapitulate.”

On the other side of an apothecary’s window was an old woman making potions in a MAGTEC multipurpose cauldron.

“Our objective is obtaining the Dark Peers Records. We still don’t know where they are, but there’s a chance they might be in the sealed treasury. And to open it, we need...”

“The three regalia,” Machina said.

"We know one of 'em, the Blade, is with the principal. She promised to help us," Takahashi added.

"Indeed," Veltol said with a nod. "We have two missions." He then raised a finger. "First, obtain the Crown regalia. Best-case scenario, the Seburd leader happily lends it to us."

"Yep. And that's Korneah Seburd, who rules over Electric Town. He's also chairman of the Seburd Company."

"I would rather stick to nonviolent tactics, but we must consider the possibility of seizing it without permission. Heh... Though, ripping the Crown from Seburd's head doesn't sound too bad!"

"Seriously, I can never tell if your immortal jokes really are just jokes!"

"In any case, first thing we should do is try to get in contact with the Seburd clan leader," Machina said.

Takahashi looked for info on the Seburds on the aethernet after school. The Seburd Company and Korneah himself were at the top of Akihabara Electric Town, so getting hits on them was easy.

Although Familias were prohibited at school, both Machina and Takahashi brought theirs undercover and were now wearing them. Machina needed it in case of unexpected battle, but Takahashi only wanted it because she was addicted to the net.

Veltol raised another finger. "Our second mission: search for the third regalia—the Orb—and obtain it."

"Can we even do anything about that? How're we supposed to look for lost treasure?" said Takahashi. "...Although, that's exactly what we're doing with the Records."

"It might not be as hard as you think."

"Whatcha mean by that?"

Machina then answered Takahashi's question:

"Hizuki Reynard-Yamada, correct?"

Veltol nodded. "Indeed. Don't you remember the conversation at the cafeteria, and the name of the third Great House?"

"Ah! You're right, the Reynards!"

"Yes. That girl is a Reynard, and gathering from what Albert said, she must be the clan head. He also mentioned something about the family falling from grace, and that must have something to do with the loss of the Orb, the symbol

of their power. Therein lies our clue.”

“What?! So that’s why you helped her out at the cafeteria?! You planned the whole thing?! O Dark King of Terror, I kneel! We’re all but puppets dancing in the palm of your wicked hand!”

“No, I simply wanted to punish that brute for ruining my udon meal.”

“Oh, please, you’re just saying that! You saved a damsel in distress! That nice side of you is so cool!”

The three entered a small shopping arcade at the edge of Twilight Street. The arcade ceiling contained holograms of a beautiful sunset rarely seen these days.

“Been a while since I’ve been to Electric Town,” Takahashi said.

“What sort of place is it?” Veltol asked.

“Oh, right. The bus arrived at Magic Town, so you still haven’t seen it.”

“Hee-hee. I’ve been there only once, but it really is amazing,” Machina commented.

They exited the arcade, arriving at Hokoten Avenue, the pedestrian mall.

“Wh-what the...?!”

Veltol gasped at the imposing sight he had just laid eyes on.

“Yep,” said Takahashi, “this is the flip side of Akihabara. The antithesis of Magic Town! The city of lust and vanity!”

Also known as Electric Town.

“It’s huge...!”

That word would come up first in anyone’s head, so it wasn’t surprising that such an exclamation had unconsciously left Veltol’s lips. After all, the gigantic wall seen from Magic Town was itself another city.

There were buildings with houses built on their rooftops and ramen shops right beside them, and directly behind those shops were more buildings—tightly packed structures of various sizes, extending horizontally and vertically. The whole town was just one building, the most densely populated place in the world.

Near the end of the City Wars, the former territories of Lu Xel and Akihabara merged. Then came an influx of war refugees and people exiled from Magic Town. During this chaotic time, they and the citizens of Akihabara—which was not under Lu Xel’s control—constructed and expanded buildings at their own discretion, without proper planning. The result was this massive conglomeration of residential and commercial structures.

Holographic ads of all sizes plastered the wall facing Hokoten Avenue, alongside a multitude of outdoor air conditioning and laundry units.

It was compressed chaos. Monumental, in a way. The complete opposite of Magic Town's beautiful townscape.

It was the modern-day Kowloon Walled City. Van Vern reborn.

This was Electric Town, the other half of Akihabara.

"Just seeing it from outside gives you a sense of how densely packed this area is... I can only imagine the labyrinth it is on the inside. Conquering this fortress and gathering the information we need will require some serious strategy."

"Heh... Please, Velly. I'm a super genius hacker babe. Gathering intel is my profession, my *specialty*."

Veltol nodded. "Indeed. I trust you."

"Anywho, it's intel we're missing, so we'll have to go to where all the intel is. But this place is true pandemonium... They say it'll take you a whole day to get out if you end up lost. An experienced guide is absolutely essential."

Takahashi grinned darkly, and the other two gulped.

"So...what do we do?" Machina asked.

"Follow me. I know exactly where to find intel in Electric Town!"



The inside of Electric Town was even more chaotic than it appeared from outside. The paths were narrow and dark. These weren't streets—they were hallways. Hallways littered with trash, people, and stalls, upping the density even further. The rich colors of the aether neon and the risqué illustrations on the holographic ads were even more in your face than the sights along Shinjuku's Kabukicho Street.

Buildings were connected by holes in the walls, with improvised corridors and narrow stairways that didn't feel the slightest bit planned. Adding to the total chaos were the QR codes plastered everywhere, which forced one's Familia to open ad sites just by looking at them, unless they had installed an ad blocker. And Machina had not updated hers.

"Eek! So many ads, and they're all for such lewd websites! Argh, I keep trying to close them, but more just keep popping up! What are these, invisible pop-ups?!"

As the name suggested, Electric Town was home to electronics stores of all

kinds: laptop stalls, shops selling old-school wireless devices, contractors for illegal add-on modding, and collections of undecipherable electrical equipment.

There were many tiny towns inside Akihabara Electric Town.

“Is this really...the place?” Veltol muttered as he descended the dark stairway, so long it seemed to reach the underworld. This one particular establishment was at the lowest level of the city.

“Yep, we’re here.”

“Heh, interesting. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I suppose. Or rather, only those who venture into the dungeon gain the treasure...”

Veltol slowly pushed the door open.

“Welcome home, Master!”

A bell chimed as the timeworn door opened, and the trio was met with a girl in a frilly dress complete with a headpiece, apron, and short skirt—a modern-era maid uniform. She received the group with a smile and a sugary-sweet greeting. Needless to say, all the girls who worked here spoke as if their every word were followed by a heart symbol.

The shop’s interior glowed with aether neon in an alluring pink color. With ten tables seating four people each, it was fairly spacious.

This was the maid café Helheim, the establishment at the lowest level of Electric Town where Takahashi had taken Veltol and Machina.

A pink-haired maid showed the group to their seats. A retro electricwave song was blasting at full volume for the customers’ enjoyment.

“Flawless taste. Koharuko Orimoto’s ‘Asunaro!’ is a great choice. That’s how you know you can trust these folks.”

“If I may, Takahashi,” Veltol interjected.

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“Not to doubt your judgment, but...how are we going to gather intel in a place like this?”

Veltol’s question seemed quite reasonable, but Takahashi replied by wagging her finger.

“Tsk, tsk. So naive, Velly. All sorts of people visit maid cafés, and according to my research, maids love gossip! Don’t you think that’s reason enough to gather intel at a maid café?! You know how in video games you always gather intel in bars? Maid cafés and bars are basically the same thing. They even serve booze here.”

“If you say so. For a moment, I thought we’d come here for mere entertainment. Forgive me for doubting you.”

“Ah-ha-ha, no way! Of course not! No, no!” Takahashi averted her gaze and whistled awkwardly.

“Th-this is quite the place... I was expecting something more like a cafeteria with very polite waitstaff... Just making sure—will we be okay here? This place is, um, safe, right? In many ways, I mean. Actually, what sort of establishment is this in the first place?” Machina asked.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re kinda like their masters, see, and the maids have to attend to us.”

“Seriously, is everything okay here?!”

“They’re not quite like the maids I know,” Veltol commented.

“Nah, these are *real* maids,” Takahashi replied.

It went without saying that details had been distorted by the game of telephone across time.

The effects of the Fantasion were staggering. The collision of these two worlds brought traces of their respective cultures and traditions, leaving future generations with warped, incongruous information.

“This is the face of Akihabara! The good ol’ classic-style maid café! The authentic tradition! By the way, this is no lewd establishment. It’s totally family-friendly,” Takahashi explained while pointing at a poster on the wall that read NO TOUCHING THE MAIDS.

“It certainly has a special aura, though I can’t put my finger on it... Very special, yes.”

“Y’know, Machina, you really say a whole load of nothing sometimes.”

Machina ignored Takahashi’s remark and opened the holodisplay of the device attached to the table. She then opened her eyes wide at the sight of the menu.

“...You’re kidding me! Takahashi, what on Alnaeth are these prices?! This isn’t anything like fine dining!”

“Machina, you...you gigantic dope!”

“Whoa?! Wh-where did that come—?”

“You don’t understand! This is the price to pay for dreams!”

“Dreams...?”

“Yes, dreams! The dream of having a cute maid waiting on you hand and foot! The opportunity for a little fantasy, something different from the everyday! *This* is the thrill of maid cafés! It’s here you get to experience the

extraordinary!"

"We had maids and butlers serve us all the time without the need to buy any dreams, though," Veltol noted.

"Indeed, although it's been a while for me," Machina added.

"What?! O-oh, right, you guys used to be royalty! I always forget, you two are dreams in the flesh!"

"Don't they have maid cafés in Shinjuku?" Machina asked.

"They've got some knockoff maid cafés, but they're totally different from the real ones. I used to frequent this one place with a friend after school, but my friend kept harassing the maids, and then they freaked out and told us to stay away from them, so now I'm kinda banned."

"Stay away..." The words reminded Veltol of what had happened during lunchtime.

That was the last thing the gloomy, lonely girl said to him back at school, which was her entire world.

"You should stay away from me."

The words pierced Veltol's chest like tiny thorns.

"Lord Veltol, is something the matter?" Machina shot him a worried glance, immediately noticing he was lost in thought.

"No, I was just remembering what that Hizuki girl said. It's been on my mind..."

"Do you mean when she said to stay away from her? She seems to keep people at a distance, avoiding any contact. I doubt she'll be open to talking with us outside school."

"And the upside is we can see her at school, so it's not like we need to force her to talk to us, y'know? We still have time left in our exchange program," Takahashi said.

"Right. I think we should stay on her good side; it can't hurt to get to know her better. She doesn't strike me as a bad person, either," Machina added.

"This is a small city. We're bound to bump into each other sometime," Veltol said.

"Yep. Okay, time to call our maid! Oh, hold up. Looks like we can request a specific maid... Cool, let's go for the one with the biggest tits."

Takahashi rang the bell on the table.

"Here I come!" A maid approached them from the back of the café, smiling

ear to ear.

“What can I get...for...y-y-yo...” Her smile stiffened as soon as she saw the group, and her voice grew hoarse. “...y-y-y-you—youuuu...?”

They knew her.

“Hmm?”

“Oh?”

“Buh?”

They *all* knew each other.

Their maid had two different color eyes—one scarlet and one golden. Her blond hair was tied up in pigtails, and the nameplate on her chest read *Yamada*.

It was Hizuki Reynard-Yamada herself, wearing a maid outfit.

CHAPTER TWO

Kawaii Culture Protocol

Awkward. Actually, *awkward* wasn't even the half of it.

Why?! What are these three doing here?!

Hizuki was sitting down at the maid café where she worked, head down and gripping her skirt.

I just told him to stay away from me!

She kept her head down, turning only her eyes upward to look at her customers. Takahashi was sitting beside her, gaze flitting between the menu and Hizuki. Across from Takahashi was Machina, fidgeting. And across from Hizuki was Veltol, leaning back haughtily.

“By the way, Hijiki.”

“Hizuki! And what is wrong with you guys, seriously...?”

“Oh-ho, are you sure you should be talking to us like that? We are not fellow students right now, but your customers... Nay, your *masters*. You shouldn’t be treating us as classmates. In this café, we are lord and servant.”

“Rrgh...!”

She had no defense. It didn’t matter that they were classmates; here, they were her masters, and she had to follow through. They’d even summoned her through the special-request system, paying an extra fee to have their chosen maid stay at the table for personal service.

“I-I’ll have you know I’m quite popular here! Most times, you can’t even request me. You just got lucky...!” She puffed up in a desperate show of pride.

“Makes sense. You’re real cute,” Takahashi said.

“I would request you all the time,” Machina added.

“Bwuh? Sheesh... You guys took me seriously...” Hizuki looked away, embarrassed. “Anyway, what can I get for you...Masters?”

“Yes, let’s see... I’ll have that.” Veltol pointed at a group in one corner of the café.

“Tasty, yummy, just for you! *Moé, moé, kyun!*”

“Mmm... Ms. Mananan’s *moé-kyun* omelets just hit different... Now *this* is

what maids are all about..."

"You honestly can't have a maid café without *moé-kyun* omelets..."

"So true... And these maids are triple than normal... Oh, did you catch that reference, Ms. Mananan? *Triple than normal* is from this classic robot anime..."

Veltol was pointing at a tall ogre maid chanting a mysterious spell as she wrote something with synthetic ketchup on an omelet. Her orc customers with visor-type artificial eyes watched, captivated.

"Ah! Huh?! Oh... U-um...", Hizuki stammered.

"Hrm... I guess that's a no...", Veltol said, disappointed.

She absolutely *could* do it. Hizuki had been working there for three years, so actually, she was confident she was more capable than any other maid at the café.

However.

Still... Doing it for acquaintances is a whole different deal!

"You don't have to force yourself...", Machina said to help calm her down, but it only added fuel to the fire.

"I'll—!"

"Huh?"

"I'll do it. I'll show you how a real maid does things."

She pulled all her brain's resources to switch to perfect-maid mode.

"Oh-ho, now she's serious," Veltol said.

"She's going to do *that* move," Machina commented.

"Does this sound like battle dialogue to anyone else?" Takahashi said.

The trio's banter didn't reach Hizuki's ears. Her mind was in complete focus. She had to deal with this robotically, but softly. Emptying her head of worldly thoughts and reaching a maid-Zen state was fundamental for customer service.

Their food arrived a couple minutes later: three sodas, a serving of pancakes, a parfait, and an omelet.

"Here I gooo!" Hizuki said in the cutest voice she could muster, smiling broadly as she grabbed the ketchup bottle.

Not an ounce of embarrassment. Her mind was steel, laser-focused on doing her job.

"Tasty, yummy, just for you! Tasty, yummy, just for you!" She did a little dance as she sprinkled the omelet with the stuff of dreams.

This was peak maid.

The traditional CKAMS: Classic Kawaii Akiba Maid Style.

It was the first skill a senior maid taught Hizuki when she was first hired.

Unfortunately, the aforementioned maid was a no-show the following week and then quit.

“*Moé, moé, kyun!* There we go! Enjoy your meal!”

She had drawn Veltol’s face and written *Lord Veltol* next to it along with a heart symbol.

Hizuki felt she’d done an exceptionally good job this time.

“Oh my! Hizuki sure is deft,” Machina said.

“W-wow... Now that’s craftsmanship...”

“Marvelous. It is a work of art. Easily on the level of the works of Leo Velbadore.”

“Yes, yes, now pleeeease dig in already, Maaaster!” Hizuki urged, a vein in her temple visibly throbbing.

“Almost seems a waste to eat it.” Veltol grabbed a spoon and took a bite of the omelet.

Hizuki gulped as she waited for a reaction.

“...Mm, delicious!” Veltol gleefully tucked into his meal.

Hizuki was relieved.

Wait, what the heck?! Why am I acting like a real maid?!

“Heh, see now, Velly? This is one of those dreams I was talking about.”

“So this is what dreams taste like...”

“Oh! Th-then I’ll make you one at home, Lord Veltol. *M-moé, moé, kyun!*” Machina exclaimed.

“No, that’s quite all right.”

“H-huh...?!”

With that, he finished the food.

“That was scrumptious. You have my praise.”

“Thank you very much! I’m sooo glad!” Hizuki said in a saccharine tone.

“Mm...you can go back to acting normally.”

Hizuki swiftly looked around. They were at the café’s innermost table, and the customers who had been near had since left.

“Phew. It’s been a while since I went all out... Geez...”

No longer in maid mode, Hizuki plopped down on her seat, crossed her legs, and grabbed the glass of synthetic orange juice in front of Takahashi. She inhaled the entire contents through the straw.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Takahashi whined.

“Hmph!” Hizuki snorted before slamming the glass on the table.

Not a trace of her maidly attitude was left. She had no use putting airs in

front of them anymore.

“So what are you guys doing here?” she asked.

“Ummmm, well, we’re investigating something...,” Machina answered.

“Investigating what?”

“None of your business,” said Takahashi. “Anywho, we never expected you’d be working here. I didn’t even know your school let students work part-time jobs. Mine doesn’t, not that it makes much difference to me.”

“Actually...the school forbids working over here in Electric Town. I’m doing it in secret, under a fake name and record, too. I can’t work in Magic Town due to, well, other reasons, as you might guess.”

Hizuki considered lying, but she decided to tell the truth. It was no use anyway—they could easily find out if she was being honest.

“I see...,” said Veltol.

“...What, you’re gonna rat me out?”

She was keeping a cool front, but internally, she was sweating bullets. This maid job was barely keeping her afloat; she couldn’t afford to quit.

“Such trifling matters don’t bother me in the slightest.”

“Oh, that so?” Hizuki felt relieved.

“Moreover, there is something I want to ask you, Hizuki Reynard-Yamada. You are the current head of the Reynard clan, correct?”

Hizuki hesitated for a moment.

“...So you knew.”

“I simply heard that buffoon mention it during lunch. So do you know of the regalia?”

“The regalia...”

“I need it.”

“...Why?”

Veltol replied calmly, directly, frankly:

“To take over the world.”

He showed no hesitation. His voice was strong, enough so to not make her dismiss the statement as a mere joke. She felt the same aura that she had sensed during the duel earlier.

“What? Are you all right in the head?”

“Very much so. I am serious. Akihabara is but a stepping-stone on my way to world domination. I want to gather the regalia to open the School of Magic’s

underground treasury and verify its contents.”

“That won’t be happening, unfortunately.”

“Because you lost the regalia?”

“You knew about that, too.....”

“Yes, Tratte told me.”

“Oh. Yes, the Reynards lost their regalia, and that brought about my house’s downfall. Now I’m just a deadbeat student, part of the Three Great Houses in name only. I don’t have the power of one, not without my house’s royal symbol.”

“Question for you!” Takahashi raised her hand.

“Did you have to interrupt the conversation, though?” Hizuki asked.

“So what’s this whole regalia thing anyway?”

“...You don’t even know that much, and you still want it?”

“I’m just along for the ride! I don’t actually want the regalia myself.”

Along for the ride? As in, an exchange program? Hizuki had questions of her own, but she decided to answer Takahashi’s. The girl’s friendly, laid-back demeanor loosened her lips.

“Basically, it’s a symbol of sovereign authority. Proof of the owner’s kingship.”

“Ooh, so that’s whatcha mean.”

“That’s it.”

Hizuki thought back to what her parents had told her long ago.

“*I’m sorry.*”

She always heard that voice whenever she looked into her memories.

“Five hundred years ago, when the Hero Gram defeated the Demon Lord at the end of the Immortal War, the goddess Meldia bestowed him with the regalia, the territory of Lu Xel—present-day Akihabara—a wealth of treasures, and a blessing,” Hizuki said. “That’s the beginning of Lu Xel and the regalia.”

“*Lu Xel...* Translated literally, it means *brave one*, and so it came to mean *hero*. Meldia must have chosen the name. Sounds like something that happened after I lost to Gram.”

“You’re right,” said Machina. “Back then, we were enemies to many nations, and after our defeat, they began fighting among themselves. I don’t recall the particulars, but I do remember that much.”

“Nother question! Is this Meldia the one I’m thinking of?” Takahashi asked.

“Indeed... One of the Six Great Gods, the goddess of joy and misfortune.” There was disgust in Veltol’s tone. “Pure yet lustful, serene yet delirious, fickle yet possessive. Capable of ruining an entire nation out of jealousy but expects everyone to adore her, she uses her godly powers to bring about a fated encounter with her target, then destroys those who threaten her love for them. Easily provoked and difficult to mollify, Meldia is undoubtedly the most tyrannical romantic in all Alnaethian mythology.”

“Sounds sorta typical of mythological gods, but...seriously?” Takahashi said.

She was also the one responsible for granting eternal youth to the Hero Gram after the Demon Lord’s defeat, but Veltol didn’t state that.

“Moving on,” Hizuki said. “After receiving the goddess’s gifts, the Hero Gram’s fate was just as the epic poems say: The famously foolish king Araquel III exiled him, and he disappeared.”

Machina noticed Veltol’s expression stiffen as Hizuki talked about Gram.

“Before absconding, Gram gave the regalia to someone. This person governed Lu Xel while Gram was fighting in the Ohm Kingdom’s Unification War,” Hizuki went on. “That was the ancestor of the Three Great Houses. He was a magnificent ruler of Lu Xel in Gram’s stead...but his three heirs weren’t as talented. He gave each of them one of the regalia and directed them to collaborate and rule the land... That’s how the legend goes.”

“So they joined hands and lived happily ever after?” Takahashi asked.

“If only...,” Machina commented.

“They didn’t. They couldn’t possibly share that fortune and power diplomatically. Not only did they not cooperate, but the three factions were also literally at one another’s throats,” said Hizuki. “That eventually led to the creation of the Three Houses and a parliamentary system to manage Lu Xel, which was the mold for present-day Akihabara. The rivalry’s still there, but the current generation gets along relatively okay.”

Hizuki regretted saying so much. She didn’t usually get the chance to speak with people her age, and these three were somehow easy to talk to, so she unconsciously got really into it.

“Hmmm... So that is why Tratte said the seal hadn’t been broken for five hundred years. An utterly nonsensical reason, but I suppose this is expected to happen when money and power are involved,” said Veltol.

“Thanks for the deets! You’re so nice, Hizuki. Attagirl.” Takahashi beamed and rubbed shoulders with Hizuki, who instantly blushed.

“Hey... Keep your distance!” She looked away, unused to so much physical

contact. Then she cleared her throat and straightened her back. “We kind of went off on a tangent there, so let’s get back on topic. I don’t have the regalia, and I don’t know where it is. There’s no use asking me for it.”

“Yes, we know. What I want to ask of you is something different.” Veltol recrossed his legs and stared right into her eyes. “I want you to get us in contact with Korneah Seburd, head of the Seburd clan.”

“Mmm... I guess that’s not totally impossible. Good thing you asked me instead of Principal Tratte. The Götels and the Seburds are kind of rivals, being leaders of the west and eastern sides of the city and all. Korneah’s more likely to listen to me.”

“Then...,” Veltol began.

A cute tummy growl interrupted him.

“...Hizuki, you hungry? Wanna order something?” Takahashi asked, grinning.

“Agh! Shut it! Okay, fine, I don’t like being in your debt, so I’ll help you out! But on one condition!”

The whole debt thing was very clearly an excuse to divert the topic. Her real reason to help out was quite simple: She liked being around them. Though she would never dare say it, Hizuki felt like they could turn out to be friends.

“Treat me to a meal right now.”



“It’s not Akihabara without some good meat!”

Hizuki slammed down her third beef bowl.

“You have quite the appetite, Hizuki...,” Machina commented.

The group had moved to the restaurant area in the second level. Hizuki had already changed into her school uniform and called Korneah Seburd, and they were now killing time until they met with him.

“Man, it’s pretty awesome that you managed to snag a meeting with the head honcho of Electric Town on such short notice,” Takahashi said.

“There’s nothing particularly awesome about it,” Hizuki replied.

The four of them were in one atrium-esque corner of the cramped building. The simple tables were made of scrap materials while the chairs were just

upside-down bottle crates. Surrounding the seating area were food stalls.

This was, in essence, a food court. The main offerings were meat—beef bowls, kebab, gyoza, *kushiyaki*. Some stalls sold noodles and bread, too.

“It’s no wonder they call this area beef town. The meat industry is clearly booming here. Also, this yogurt sauce is so good,” Machina said while munching on her kebab.

“Cultivating genetically modified pork and chicken is expensive, but GM beef’s actually cheaper than the real thing,” Takahashi noted.

“Securing land for livestock must be difficult these days, hence the strides in developing lab-grown meat and meat substitutes made from soy,” Veltol said as he reached for his third beef-cutlet sandwich.

“Yeah, ’cause there’s still demand for pork and chicken, if you’re willing to overlook the cost.”

“What are you eating, Takahashi?” Machina asked.

“Pork liver.”

“...Raw?”

“Yeah, no need to worry about food poisoning! Wanna try?”

“No, thank you...”

Modern alchemic engineering made it possible to cultivate genetically modified pork cells suitable for raw consumption, without any worry of parasites or infectious disease. Nonetheless, Machina was under the impression that not even immortals should eat raw pork. She couldn’t bring herself to do it, despite knowing it was safe.

“This is leagues better than the synthetic meat in Shinjuku,” said Veltol. “They’re both artificial, but for some reason, they taste so different.”

The food court was packed—they were lucky to have found an empty table.

“What meat do you have there, Hizuki? Skewered beef?” Machina asked.

“This? Dragon *kushiyaki*,” Hizuki replied.

“...Dragon?” Veltol muttered.

“Dragon...?” Machina repeated.

They looked at her with slight disgust as she stuffed her cheeks full of dragon meat.

“Huh? Why are you looking at me like that...? What’d I do?”

“It’s just, well...we happen to know a dragon...,” Veltol responded.

“Hence why we’re a touch put off...”

“Wait, what?”

Hizuki didn’t know their true identities, so she was uncomprehending. Only

Takahashi was nodding in understanding.

“Ohhh, Sihlwald, the Black Dragon...”

“Indeed... I don’t want to eat my vassal’s brethren.”

“That’s great and all, but don’t knock it till you’ve tried it,” Hizuki said while taking some pieces off the skewer, then she held them out to Veltol and Machina. “Heh. You say you want to take over the world, but you’re too scared to eat dragon meat?”

“Rrgh... You insolent girl, I’ll show you!”

“It’s been a while since anyone spoke to us like that...!”

They grabbed a couple of disposable chopsticks from the table and picked up the meat with apprehension. They squeezed their eyes shut, as though they were about to eat something inedible, and took the cultivated meat to their mouths. They chewed, then swallowed, and their expressions softened.

“Oh, this is surprisingly good,” Veltol said.

“It’s like beef that tastes like chicken. Very nice texture,” Machina added.

“Perhaps we should have tried this all those years ago.”

“We wouldn’t have run out of meat, either, since Sihlwald is an immortal.”

“Machina, Velly, that’s a joke, right? Like, another of your immortal jokes, right? Oh, by the way, Hizuki, gimme your Familia ID. You’ve gotta be wearing yours now that we’re out of school.”

“Huh? No way.”

“Aw man, ice cold!”

“I’m joking, I’m joking. I’ll give it to you.”

While this was happening, in another corner of the food court, a group of hooded Magic Town residents were arguing with Electric Town’s magiborg workers.

“What’re you scrawny Magic Town bastards looking at?!?”

“Eh? Don’t try picking a fight. Unless even your head’s full of metal, too? Actually, I guess it would function better that way.”

“Don’t think you can get away with actin’ all high-and-mighty, you clown!”

The argument started heating up and was about to break into a fistfight.

“Oh man, they’re sure having fun over there. Those guys in the robes are from Magic Town, right? They’re like cats and dogs, them and the Electric Town folks. Also...” Takahashi looked around while taking a bite of her skewered chicken covered in lightly seasoned soy sauce and artificial *yuzu kosho*. “...I’ve kinda been feeling for a while now like we’re being watched.”

“Oh, you noticed, too, Takahashi?” Veltol asked.

“You didn’t seem worried, so I figured you hadn’t,” Machina added.

“Who the hell do you take me for?!”

Takahashi was right; they were being watched. The observers weren’t uniform in species, age, or gender, and they did nothing but watch them, but they weren’t friendly glances.

“That’s a Magic Town uniform, right? What’s a Magic Town student doing here?”

“Hey, check her out. She’s a Reynard...”

“Blegh, that opportunist’s daughter. Why’s she here?”

“That her entourage or something? Must be nice.”

Hizuki could hear the whispering, but she was used to that. She wasn’t welcome, not in Electric Town nor in Magic Town. But that was her problem and no one else’s—she didn’t want the others getting bad-mouthing because of her. She didn’t show the pain on her face, though.

“The people here in Electric Town don’t get along with the Magic Town people,” said Hizuki. “You’ve got the Magic Towners walking around in their flashy robes, and then there’s us in our school uniforms... It’s easy to see how arguments break out. There’s even some shops here that don’t allow Magic Towners in. The same happens to Electric Towners over in Magic Town, though.”

“I mean, the cultures are pretty different,” said Takahashi. “No wonder there’s friction.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say Akihabara’s like a powder keg...but the power struggle between the two sides is very real, and it feels like the city’s about to split down the middle.”

“Wha—? I didn’t see anything like that when I searched the net, though.”

“A lot of information’s restricted on Akihabara’s aethernet these days.”

“Oh, right, right. You gotta bypass the filter to access the global aethernet. It’s a pretty common barrier.”

Then the arguing groups finally broke out into fists, turning over a nearby table. An uproar ensued. Tableware flew this way and that, while Hizuki very calmly kept taking bites of her beef bowl.

“They don’t want rumors spreading, since tourism brings in a lot of money. But lately, a lot of powerful people from both sides have been disappearing or dying under mysterious circumstances. Not that this stuff is anything new...”

“Hey, can we have a second? Are you students from Magic Town?” Someone brazenly opened a path from the crowd to speak to them. “What are

you kids doing here? Where are your parents? Think you could take a moment to talk with us?"

It was a pair of guards, from the Electric Town side of Akihabara's City Guard. One was an ogre, and the other was a human. They wore black uniforms and black caps, and both of them seemed well-built.

"...It's her," the human guard said while looking at Hizuki with contempt.

The City Guard was a lower branch of the city's army, so all guards were military personnel. Akihabara's had unusual circumstances, however. Despite being a single city, Electric Town and Magic Town each had their own Municipal Army and City Guard. Very exceptional and inefficient.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, you guys should be stopping that fight there, not us!" said Takahashi.

"You, the blond girl—you're from the Reynard family, aren't you? What are you doing in here?"

The guards didn't even glance at Takahashi—fights like this were common enough to ignore her objection. They kept on menacingly approaching them.

"Magic Town students shouldn't be wandering about these parts, you know."

"Yeah, people will report you."

"Uh, u-um... We're just doing some sightseeing..." Takahashi stammered, then glanced at Machina, whose eyes were saying, *What a bother. Let's just burn them.* As for Veltol, he was still feasting, completely disregarding the situation.

They shouldn't cause problems before meeting Korneah, and Machina knew that, hence why she didn't actually intend to use force.

"Anyway, mind following us over there for a little chat?"

The ogre guard tried to grab Hizuki's arm with his huge hand, but then...

"That's enough. Stop."

...someone standing behind the guards spoke up to help them out.

"Such dedicated guards, forcing an interrogation on some students."

She was a full-borg elf, carrying a golden blade at her waist: the principal of Akihabara School of Magic.

"Tratte Götel..." The guard leered at her.

She was the top dog of Magic Town, and the head of that side's Municipal Army—no way he didn't know her. Her mere presence there should have stood out, but everyone's attention seemed to be on the fight.

"We're only doing our job. It's none of your business. May I remind you that

we still have the authority to arrest even the likes of you in this town?” The ogre guard took a step forward.

Tratte looked unfazed, however, her face still as cool as ever.

“Did you not hear me? I told you to stop. That wasn’t a request. It’s an order from the top commander of Akihabara’s Municipal Army.”

“We are under no obligation to hear orders from a Magic Town member. And even if we were, who’d listen to your crusty old—?”

Then a golden glow flashed. The ogre’s cap flew off his head and, in midair, split in two.

“Nice clean unsheathe,” Veltol muttered, only Machina and him realizing what had happened.

Tratte had sliced the ogre’s cap by unsheathing her sword at lightning speed.

She fixed him with a cold, piercing glare. “You were saying?”

“Tch… Let’s go.” The guards gave up and left after giving Hizuki one last stare.

Finally free, all four turned to look at Tratte.

“Sorry about that,” she said once the guards left. “It pains me that out-of-towners like you three had to see the sad state Akihabara currently finds itself in. Magic Town and Electric Town should be joining hands, but the city is far too deep in chaos. At this rate, Akihabara might actually fall apart. I’m doing everything I can to unify the city under our long-lasting traditions…but too many people only look for immediate profit.”

Tratte flashed a self-deprecating smile.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Machina.

“For real, you saved our bacon. I was scared Machina might go berserk….”

Hizuki stood up and approached Tratte. “Good evening, Principal Tratte.”

“Good evening, Ms. Reynard. So what are you all doing here?”

“We figured we ought to do a little sightseeing while we’re here, and so we asked Hizuki to show us around,” answered Veltol, the only one who’d kept on eating during the entire encounter.

“Oh my, is that so? Good for you, Ms. Reynard. Glad to see you have new friends,” Tratte said, putting a hand on her cheek.

“W-we’re not friends!” a flustered Hizuki objected.

“Hey, Takahashi—Hijiki’s acting the same way Machina did with you,” Veltol whispered.

“Some folks just aren’t honest with their feelings.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Machina asked dubiously.

“Ms. Reynard here tends to isolate herself too much,” said Tratte. “Please be good to her, okay?”

“Please, Principal Tratte, quit it already,” Hizuki begged.

They seemed somewhat close, like aunt and niece.

“I’m always telling you not to wander around Electric Town in uniform, Ms. Reynard. This place is dangerous for Magic Town students. We were lucky those guards were understanding, but not everyone will be like that.”

“I know, I know. And what are *you* doing here, Principal Tratte?”

“I’m meeting Mag. She wanted some help with swapping out borg parts, and our clinic is near here. Have any of you seen her around? I can’t get a hold of her...”

“Mag? Ohhh, you mean Santa!” said Veltol. “No, I haven’t seen her.”

“Nor have I.”

“Me neither.”

“Hmm...I see.”

Then someone from a nearby stall hollered, “Get your fried cockatrice, fresh!”

Veltol’s eyes twinkled when he heard that. “Heh... It seems a new challenger has appeared!”

“Oh, you’re going?” Takahashi asked.

“I’m coming, too!” Machina exclaimed.

The three of them hurried to the stall. Tratte watched them go with a smile.

“They better buy some for me, too...” Hizuki tried somewhat belatedly to follow, but Tratte stopped her.

“Hizuki, can you come with me? It’ll only take a second.”



Tratte and Hizuki headed to a magiroid shop, in front of the stairway near the food-court tables. This was no regular store; it catered to customers in search of special operations not intended by the manufacturer.

They turned their back to the garish pink aether neon sign, and Tratte looked around to make sure no one was listening before speaking.

“Sorry, Hizuki. It’s just that they probably shouldn’t be hearing this...” Her voice was tender and rife with concern.

Full-borgs lacked natural vocal cords and thus spoke through a synthetic voice processor, but Tratte’s perfectly captured her emotions.

“I didn’t mean to ruin the fun you were having with your new friends.”

“I told you, we’re not friends. Anyway, what’s this all about?”

“Have you considered my offer?”

“Uh...what offer?” Hizuki scratched her cheek awkwardly.

“Don’t play dumb... About me adopting you. I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Oh, that... Honestly, you shouldn’t, given your standing in the Three Great Houses. The other nobles will turn on you if you take me in.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll change their minds, you’ll see. I just want you to be happy.”

Hizuki knew full well that Tratte was doing this out of genuine concern for her, without any hidden intentions, and that was what pained her so much. She struggled to trust love from other people.

“I can’t get rid of my name... I have to protect House Reynard. That’s my duty... And I owe it to my parents, too...”

“Hizuki...” Tratte cut herself off, shaking her head. “I get it. But please remember I have always been on your side, ever since you were born. I was close friends with your mother, I can’t just abandon you.”

“Thank you for everything, Ms. Tratte, but I’ll be fine.”

Tratte smiled sadly. “I have to go, then. Have fun with the exchange students.”

“Yeah.”

“Friends will bring you strength.”

Tratte turned around and left.

“*I’m sorry.*”

She heard the voice.

“Wait, Ms. Tratte!” She got a bad feeling and called out to her.

“What is it?”

“U-um...nothing. See you tomorrow.”

“Very well. See you tomorrow.”

Hizuki convinced herself it was just her imagination and let Tratte go. However, the bad feeling inside her didn’t disappear.

Then her Familia notified her it was almost time to meet Korneah Seburd.



Veltol was at the top level of Electric Town, along with Hizuki. Their meeting time with Korneah Seburd was drawing near.

Akihabara Electric Town was divided into four levels: The bottom had all the factories; the second had various electronics, both old and new; and the third was relatively safe, although not as much as the top level, which was a medley of the corporate head offices.

Having clear level divides in this chaotic aggregation of structures was impossible, though. The distinction was merely something residents unofficially came up with.

The highest level had the largest buildings of all, and built atop their roofs were giant mansions. The Seburd Company's offices were also Korneah's home. His mansion had a big garden, and Veltol and Hizuki were standing in front of the large gate to it. They had decided there was no point in having the entire group visit, so Machina and Takahashi were elsewhere killing time.

"Thank you for waiting," a voice said as the gate opened. Three people greeted Veltol and Hizuki on the other side.

An elven man, bespectacled with an intellectual appearance, bowed his head. Behind him were two high-powered full-borg orcs clad in black suits and wearing sunglasses. Their borg bodies were naked, with the intention of appearing more imposing as guards, Veltol assumed.

"It's been a while, Lady Reynard."

"Long time no see, Mr. Meral."

"Hizuki, who is this man?"

Meral kept his smile despite Veltol's rude tone.

"Pardon me. I am Korneah's assistant. My name is Meral. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I'm Veltol. Very nice mansion you have here. Your master has exquisite taste."

"Thank you very much. Forgive the courtesy, but we'll be performing a pat down before your meeting with Korneah for security purposes."

Hizuki raised her arms, and Veltol did the same. The men in black felt them around in search for any weapons. Once they were clear, Meral held a white tray up to them.

"Apologies; this, too, is part of the rules."

"It's fine," said Hizuki. "I understand."

"Thank you. Please leave your Familias and other electronic devices here."

Hizuki took her metallic-pink device off her nape and placed it on the tray.

Veltol had no Familia, so he took his PDA out from his pocket.

“Please follow me.”

They walked through the garden, through a luxurious door, and entered the mansion. It was completely quiet inside and utterly magnificent.

Meral stopped before an automatic door at the end of the long hallway decorated with paintings. The door was made of black adamant, far too solemn to fit in the otherwise exquisite mansion. It stood out like a sore thumb.

Beyond the door was a white room, where they underwent further inspection inside a machine. The automatic door at the other side opened once they were finished, letting them into the drawing room.

“I will go fetch Korneah. Please take a seat and wait for us here,” Meral said after entering through a door connected to the inspection room, then went into a room farther within.

The drawing-room interior was very reminiscent of a hostess club. Pink aether neon dimly illuminated the room, and there were two black, fake dragon-leather sofas facing each other, with a low lanon-mythril crystal table in the middle. On the table was an ashtray, an ice pail, a bottle of whiskey, and cups.

The shelves were also lined up with a variety of drinks, and between all that was a single book, clearly standing out. Physical books were rare in this era. Veltol read the title out loud:

“*Joy and Hunger...*by Korneah Seburd.”

The sticker on the cover read *The first step to happiness: Fill your belly.* Veltol nodded repeatedly.

“Indeed. Anyway...rather strict security measures Korneah has here.” Veltol sat down on the sofa, letting himself sink into the cushion.

“You went through this sort of thing when you visited the principal’s office, didn’t you? It’s the same deal. The office won’t open unless it detects the principal’s mana. It also has the other two Great Houses leaders’ mana patterns registered. That way, the system can make sure it’s not an elaborate disguise.”

“Tratte is a full-borg, though. Couldn’t someone trick the system using the same type of borg body and engine?”

A full-borg’s heart—their mana engine—was also a machine, and mana patterns from these engines were standardized by type. It was not impossible to impersonate someone by copying their face and other parts.

“Hers is custom-made, so getting a replica is basically impossible. You might be able to replicate her appearance, but not her mana pattern.”

“How very cautious. At any rate, I wasn’t expecting Korneah to answer our

call so quickly. I can't imagine he has much free time on his hands.”

“Well, you can thank me for being the head of one of the Three Houses. The other two have always been fond of me.”

“Your intimacy with this city's rulers only makes your isolation at school even more surprising.”

“Y-you sure don't mince words... The younger generations who aren't very attached to the city wouldn't feel the same way, but the title still means a lot to the older generations.”

“I see. So the adults know their place.”

“Yep. The other two heads can't publicly support me due to their standing, but they're good to me in secret. Getting them to meet me for a chat is no big deal.”

Then came silence. They didn't talk anymore until the door opened.

“Hey, hey, sorry for making you wait.”

It was a small-framed man with cylindrical artificial eyes and amber lenses who spoke in a shrill voice. He was about one hundred centimeters tall; his skin was an ashen green, his nose hooked, and ears pointy. He was a goblin.

And this goblin was wearing a lot of gold. Golden earrings, a thick golden necklace, golden bracelets too big for his thin wrists, and countless golden rings. The buckle on his belt was also golden, and he wore white slacks and black dress shoes. On the top, he was wearing only a baggy red coat.

All his gold reflected the aether neon's pink light, dazzling the eyes in aggressive, almost toxic manner.

He was the head of one of Akihabara's Three Great Houses: Korneah Seburd. The head of the Seburd Company and de facto ruler of Electric Town.

Korneah sat down on the sofa with a *thud*. Meral stood behind him, and behind Veltol and Hizuki stood one of the full-borgs clad in black.

“Now, what a surprise.” Korneah grabbed the tongs from the pail and got some ice for his glass. He poured himself whiskey, gulped it down, then burped. “It's not every day you come visit, Hizuki.”

“Sorry for calling you on such short notice. Thanks for taking the time to meet me, Mr. Korneah.”

“Please, I've always got time for cute girls like you.” He grinned, showing his gold teeth. “So who's this fella?”

“He's an exchange student at my—”

“I’m Veltol Velvet Velsvalt.”

“Veltol... Hmm...”

“I was under the impression that the Three Great Houses were all elves. I did not expect you to be a goblin. Or to have such garish taste.”

“Hey! What’re you saying?!” Hizuki panicked.

It was fairly obvious that any talk of species could be quite delicate. Statements might come across as discriminatory, even if one didn’t intend to. Modern common sense said it was best to be discrete. Common sense was of no matter to Veltol, though. Even if he did possess it, he would still ask any question that came to mind. That was the kind of man he was; he made his own standards. As far as he was concerned, the whole world revolved around him.

“Wow, that’s quite the attitude to take with someone you just met.”

“Heh. I simply speak my mind, that’s all.”

“Y-you little... I’m sorry, Mr. Korneah... He’s kind of weird, as you can see.”

“I don’t mind. Lineage doesn’t mean a thing to me. I’m just a humble merchant, through and through. Started from the bottom, scrounging for scraps in the trash and drinking mud, but after a li’l blood, sweat, and tears, I turned out all right. Might not’ve had the best upbringing, but now I can eat my fill, so I’m happy.” He chuckled. “Took care of old man Seburd, who was childless and basically at rock bottom, rebuilt his house, and got ‘im to adopt me. I know there ain’t no Lu Xel royalty in my blood.”

“So an outsider inherited a noble’s name... I gather you pulled some mischief?”

“Ha! Nah, it was all legal. The mischief came later. Anyways, what’s an exchange student doing here? Not every day you bring someone along, Hizuki.”

“I am here to talk about the regalia.”

“Oh-ho, the regalia?” Korneah snapped his fingers. “You mean this?”

A golden crown appeared on his head with a flash.

“This is the Seburds’ regalia. The Crown.”

“A soul armament...?” Veltol whispered upon seeing the Crown appear without proclamation.

A soul armament was a type of tool or weapon forged from one’s soul, manifested using mana.

Korneah shook his head in response. “Similar deal, but that ain’t it. It’s not forged from my soul. The regalia were given form through a piece of the goddess Meldia’s divinity. You could say it’s a materialized fragment of her

soul, stored in its owner's soul."

Divinity was a power outside physical and magical law, a god's power beyond the reach of any technology.

"If you wanna classify it somehow, it'd be a type of armament of legend. It's newer than most, but still, a goddess created this, so that's mythic level regardless."

"So an external aether-type armament of legend?"

"Pretty much. Can't get rid of the thing unless I give up ownership myself, or if somebody forces me to forfeit it. I could keep it materialized at all times...but crowns ain't my thing. I usually keep it hidden away."

"So would we take that as, if you give up ownership, it would stay materialized until a new owner shows up? And by someone forcing you to forfeit ownership of that regalia stored in your soul...does that mean I can obtain it by killing you?"

Tension filled the air after Veltol's words.

"Y-you're not serious, are you...?" Hizuki was confused.

The full-borg behind him, and Meral, immediately braced themselves. They were ready to attack him at any moment.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Veltol cackled.

"I won't do that here. It was mere jest."

"Seriously... Stop it with the jokes already..."

"Bwa-ha-ha! Oh, I'm always serious."

"Seriously *insane*..."

All that tension flew out the window within moments. Then Korneah, the only one who had kept calm and collected besides Veltol, smiled with amusement.

"This guy's a riot."

"I didn't come here to kill anyone. I simply want to borrow it."

"Okay, I'll bite. What for?"

"There's a chance something I am looking for is inside the treasury, and I want to check."

"You don't seem to be after treasure, at least."

"Not at all. My objective is world domination."

That seemed to baffle Korneah, who laughed again.

"M-Mr. Korneah, I'm so sorry... I know he's really weird, but if you could please hear him out..."

"Ha! He's got at least three screws loose, this one. All right, I can tell you've got some sorta situation. Hizuki brought you here, so that's enough for me to trust you. I won't go digging into it." He took a natural cigarette out from his breast pocket. "May I?"

"Ah, yes, go ahead," said Hizuki.

"It's your mansion. Do as you please."

"Thanks."

He lit a match, then the cigarette, and let out a puff smoke. Natural tobacco was a high-class luxury item, and smoking it was a status symbol among the top earners.

"The city wouldn't be as messed up if there were more people like you. Akihabara's bound tight by ancient tradition, barely keeping order, but it's gonna get left in the dust soon. We gotta get rid of the status quo, dump the traditions, and let the city be born anew...but the Magic Town folks've got vested interest. They're too dense to understand."

Korneah's statement was the complete opposite of what Tratte had said at the food court, but they were both united in their concern for the city's future.

"Heh, guess the excitement of you bringing in a man's got my tongue loose. Anyways, about the regalia...doubt it's gonna do any good even if I lend it to you."

"Because we're missing the Orb?" said Veltol.

"Yeah. Should've expected you to know that already."

"Ms. Tratte told him."

"Makes sense." Korneah exhaled a plume of smoke. "We Three Houses want to open that treasury more than anything. Maybe you'd tell us to just play nice and share what's inside, but well, there's a reason it hasn't been opened yet." Korneah placed his cigarette on the ashtray before continuing, "I don't think getting 'em all in one place'll be enough. Pretty sure what we've gotta do is get one person to own all three regalia—to become the true king of this city."



“Reuniting all the goddess’s soul fragments in one body... So the ritual involves summoning her.”

“God summoning... That’s mediumship, right?” Hizuki asked.

“Got that right. See, the regalia are top-class magi-gadgets, but they don’t do much on their own. The Seburds’ Crown increases divinity, the Götels’ Blade allows for its use, and the Reynards’ Orb controls it. It’s only when you get all three together that their true power can be harnessed.” Korneah tapped the Crown on his head. “I don’t need this thing myself. Not worth giving a crap about noble blood or sovereignty that relies on some royal symbol. I’d rather everyone get on with the times.” He sounded fed up. “But truth is that this stupid tradition still has a tight grip on the city. This damn regalia continues to function as a true symbol of power. All because of the city’s special soil.”

“Soil?” Veltol asked.

“Akihabara is Shinjuku’s satellite city, but the influence of the Greatest Six—like MAGTEC and IHMI—which control the ITEM industry and information technology, is surprisingly low,” Hizuki replied. “They couldn’t reform anything by force; that’s why Electric Town still has all these independent small and medium-sized companies and mom-and-pop stores, and why Magic Town keeps its traditional townscape.”

“That’s got its perks, sure,” Korneah said. “Back when the previous Reynard head was still alive, we chose representatives from both sides to form a council... Sad to say, it’s now just a shadow of its former self.” He grabbed the Crown and twirled it around on his finger. “Makes me sick. It’s beyond ridiculous that this still holds power over Akihabara. Ain’t got no choice but to use it, though. I love Electric Town, so I wanna make it even bigger. The whole city’ll go under if we keep clinging to tradition. I wanna upgrade everything to stop that from happening, and gathering all the regalia would be the fastest way to do that. Bet Tratte thinks the same, too.”

“So you would get rid of powerful people on the other side in order to put yourself in better standing?”

“Those rumors? All bullshit, and I’m sure it goes the same for Tratte’s end. It’s other folks who are stoking the rivalry. No reason for us to take it further. I think it’s all some stupid extremist faction...or maybe a third party messing with us.”

“A third party...?”

“What I need now is the power to reform under proper procedure. That means becoming king of the city, which in turn means getting the three regalia.”

The cigarette on the ashtray had burned up almost to the filter. “It’s all a matter of our standing. She wants to keep the city’s traditions, and that’s why she wants the regalia. I want them ’cause I wanna change those traditions. Not really a matter of who’s correct in any case. We both are.”

“Why are you going into so much detail?” Veltol asked. “I thought you were concerned about a third party—or me, a potential Magic Town spy—usurping power.”

Korneah glanced at Hizuki. No emotion could be read from his artificial tube-shaped eyes, but somehow, it was clear he had no ill intentions.

“To put it bluntly...it’s just my hunch as a merchant.”

“A hunch?”

“I feel like you’re worth trusting. Guess you won’t take my word for it, though.” He looked at Hizuki again. “Sorry, but mind leavin’ me alone with this fella?”

“Huh? Veltol, is that okay?”

“Yes, no problem,” he replied, nodding.

Hizuki, Meral, and the full-borg bodyguard left the room. Korneah started talking once he confirmed he and Veltol were alone.

“I don’t want them...or rather, *her* to hear this. I still don’t know why exactly you want the regalia, Veltol...but would you let me in on it?”

“I want the regalia to verify the contents of the treasury, and you want them to change the city. I don’t see how our objectives might conflict...do you?”

Korneah’s smile deepened. “Not that I’m gonna get all chummy saying we should join hands, but I think we can both get something out of this. She—Hizuki—brought you here. I don’t need nothin’ else to trust you. That’s the whole reason why I’m telling you everything I know...and that’s good enough for me.”

“Hmmm...” Veltol thought about it.

He would certainly get close to achieving his goal by collaborating with a head of the Three Great Houses. Plus, he wouldn’t be cooperating with the Seburd Company, but with Korneah himself. Veltol could also feel from the way he spoke that Korneah truly wanted to improve this city, and that he really cared for Hizuki.

“I understand. My gut says I can trust you.”

Veltol judged Korneah was the kind of person who could put others before himself.

Korneah nodded in satisfaction. “Since you’re here, lemme let you in on a

little secret. Something I don't want her finding out."

"What is it?"

Korneah interlaced his many-ringed fingers.

"The Orb is nearby."

Veltol opened his eyes wide.

"What...?"

"I dunno its exact location, but I can feel it. The Crown stored in my soul tells me that the Orb is still in this city. Akihabara...or Lu Xel, rather, is sacred ground for the goddess Meldia, so I can feel the regalia's presence so long as it's here. Tratte can probably feel it, too. She hasn't made a fuss about its being lost 'cause she knows it's still nearby." Korneah lit another cigarette. "Try looking for it. I'll open the treasury for you if you can get me the other regalia."

He puffed smoke out his nostrils.

"Now, this is a plea from me personally, not the Seburd head. If you're even a little concerned about Hizuki, then I ask that you help her out."

"Hizuki?"

"She may act tough, but she's really vulnerable. I'd like to give her more comfort, if only it wasn't for my pesky Three Houses status. Wanting to liberate her from this city's chains is also one of my reasons for changing it. So yeah, I'd appreciate if you could get to know her better." He flashed a tender smile while putting out his cigarette. "And the key to finding the regalia...lies within her."

"Within her? She didn't seem aware of its whereabouts, though."

"Only a select few in Akihabara know this, but..."

The remnant smoke swayed upward.

"...according to the records, she inherited the Orb when she was still a child."



The third level of Akihabara Electric Town was where all the classic subcultures from the previous world flocked. It was the safest place in town, in a way...and the least safe in another.

The streets were full of faded posters of anime-style illustrations, along with

fighting game tournament brackets and odds tables for the gambling arcades. Shadowy otakus lurked in the narrow paths dealing counterfeit plastic model kits, showing off their magiroid daughters to one another, and exchanging casual banter about their sweethearts.

In one corner of this hellscape was Machina, holding a paper-substitute shopping bag while crouching in front of one of the many capsule-toy vending machines.

“Hrmmm...,” she muttered while staring at it.

Buying a capsule toy was quite simple: just scan the QR code, pay on the website, then rotate the vending machine’s handle once it unlocked. The way the machine worked, you got a random capsule and didn’t know what was inside until you opened it.

However, Machina didn’t want any of this machine’s products. She already had the tanuki from the Extinct Mystical Beasts series of figures in her hand.

“Ishimary trading figure... Ten variations plus a secret one.”

The vending machine’s screen read SOLD OUT on top of the pink, bunny-like round shape. A ton of opened capsules were piled up in the trash can beside it. The machine’s log said one person had pulled every single one of them.

“Who would even want this?”

Ishimary was the mascot of the giant corporation IHMI. They had all sorts of merchandise, but most people on the net didn’t like Ishimary.

“Maybe it’s popular in Akihabara?”

Waves of people came and went farther down the passageway, and she could hear the sweet voice of a maid trying to pull in customers.

Machina stood up and looked down the path, then gasped.

“...What?”

One person grabbed her attention. She was short, wearing black clerical clothing and a veil over her visor-clad eyes.

Machina started to follow her, but the figure soon disappeared into the crowd.

“Who was that...?”

It should’ve been the first time she saw her, yet she got a strong feeling of déjà vu.

Then someone came down the steep, narrow stairs of the building in front of her.

“Sorry, the haggling took me a while.”

It was Takahashi. Above the stairway, so tight of a fit that an adult ogre couldn’t go through it, was an antique card shop—something hard to come by in

the modern era.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t wait long. Besides, I’m an *expert* at waiting for people.”

“What’d you buy?”

“Oh, just some books—”

“Show me, show me! Whatcha got in there? Dirty books?”

“Wh-why are you getting so worked up?! And no, they’re not!”

Inside Machina’s bag were pristine secondhand paper-substitute *doujinshi*. The stories followed a demon lord, based on Veltol, penned by Duchess Crimson of the *doujin* circle Six Dork Peers.

Machina’s brain was firing on all cylinders.

These doujinshi I drew to distract me from my loneliness prior to Lord Veltol’s return are now real-person fiction! I have to get rid of them all before he finds out!

It took her 0.2 seconds to elaborate.

“Um, uh... I—I just got a few interesting used books.”

“Nice, lemme see ‘em later.”

“Ah-ha, ah-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha.”

They chatted until they reached a vending machine a slight distance from the card shop. Its entire lineup was *oden*. There were dozens of the same machines, all selling canned *oden*, which was why this path was nicknamed Oden Street. They had agreed to meet back with Veltol and Hizuki there.

“Takahashi, were you really okay coming here?”

“Where?”

“Akihabara, on the exchange program. You didn’t have to join us.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Don’t worry ’bout that now.”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t concern myself with this, but you have your own life—”

“Hey, you callin’ me a nuisance?”

“No, that’s not it at all...”

Takahashi pushed the vending machine’s button to buy a can of *oden*. Electric Town, just like Shinjuku, was a cashless society. Some places in Magic Town still used Lu Xel money, but they were few.

“Besides, I’m just staying in school to please my folks in the first place. Only thing that matters is that I get enough credits and graduate. I’ll give ‘em back the tuition fees with a little extra once I’m done. What’s with the big-sister act anyway, Machina?”

“Well, I am your elder, technically.”

“You’re, like, *everyone’s* elder, technically.”

Takahashi pulled the tab to open the *oden* can, then took out one piece of skewered synthetic *konnyaku* and gave it to Machina.

“And yet I’m a relative newbie among immortals...and among the Six Dark Peers, too.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Machina nodded while nibbling at the *konnyaku*. “The Six Dark Peers from oldest to youngest are: Sihlwald, the Black Dragon; Zenol, the Karmic Sword; Ralsheen, the Blue Storm; that asshole, Marcus; then me; and finally, May, the Mournful Firmament. Sihlwald is actually older than Lord Veltol while Zenol, Ralsheen, and Marc-hole are basically from the same generation. Then come May and me. Granted, May has a pretty complicated background for an immortal, so it may not be entirely correct to consider her a newbie.”

Machina grabbed an egg with her skewer, Takahashi grabbed a mernius, and they both stuffed their cheeks.

“Hmmm, so you were close with this May person?” Takahashi pouted.

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“Well, your voice is different when you talk about her. Like, it gets higher.”

“Oh... True, she was like a cute little sister to me.”

“Hmmmmmm...” Takahashi eyed Machina unamusedly while receiving her skewer back.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Nothiiing.”

Unable to understand why Takahashi was sulking, Machina gazed into the distance and whispered, “I just hope she’s alive and well...”

Takahashi tried her best to look away from Machina and gulped down the remaining *oden* soup. She put the skewers in the can, then tossed it into the trash receptacle beside the vending machine.

“Huh?”

“What’s the matter?”

Takahashi had seen someone familiar walk in their direction.

“Isn’t that the principal?”

It was Tratte Götel. Takahashi waved and called out to her.

Tratte looked surprised once she noticed. Her expression seemed slightly stiff, unlike when they met her a while before.

“We meet again, Principal. Whatcha up to?”

“Again...?” Tratte froze for a moment.

“Did you find Professor Mag?” Machina asked.

“Ah... No, I couldn’t, actually.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Yes, I’d been waiting for a while after I met with you two. Sorry, I have things to attend to, so if you’ll excuse me...”

Tratte immediately left in a hurry.

“Did she seem weird to you or what?” Takahashi asked.

“She did...”

“Like, did she change parts of her skincover or something? Her face looked super stiff.”

“You’re quite attentive to detail, Takahashi.”

“Can’t be a super genius hacker babe without a sharp eye.”

With the taste of suspicion still in their mouths, two more people appeared right away.

“Thanks for waiting, you guys.”

They were Veltol and Hizuki.

“Hizuki, welcome back!”

“I’m back, yeah.”

“How did it go, Lord Veltol?”

“I managed to get Korneah Seburd on our side.”

“Oh? So we already got two of ’em? Everything’s going swimmingly, huh?”

“It’s a bit early to say our goal is just within reach, but we did get some useful information, all thanks to Hizuki.”

“You did? Thank you so much, Hizuki,” Machina said.

“I—I didn’t do anything...” Hizuki scratched her cheek awkwardly.

“Hey, hey, hey, so what now?” Takahashi asked.

“I’d like to look for some more *dou*...used books.”

“I want to check out the arcade,” Veltol said.

Looking at them, Hizuki whispered so softly that no one could hear her, “This feels...pretty nice...”

Here she was, casually spending after-school time with classmates. Not even she understood how priceless this experience was to her.

“Nice, nice, let’s do a little more browsing before heading back to the dorm

—”

“.....” Hizuki looked sad for a brief moment, and Takahashi didn’t miss that.

“...Hey, how ’bout we crash at Hizuki’s place for the night?”

Hizuki opened her eyes wide at the suggestion. “Huh?!”

“If Lord Veltol is fine with it, I would certainly like to visit.”

“I have no objections.”

“Well, I do! Wh-why my house?”

“Because we wanna hang with you a li’l longer!” Takahashi exclaimed.

“Yes, I’d like to get to know you a little better myself,” Machina said.

“—” Hizuki couldn’t breathe.

Joy, hesitation, and anxiety swirled inside her chest. Her voice trembled.

“...Ha-ha-ha, what a bunch of weirdos,” she said softly while looking away, although trying desperately to contain a smile.

“Good... I hereby announce we will be staying at Hizuki’s house for the night! That is an order!”

The Demon Lord’s decree was loud.

“H-hey, you can’t just... Ugh, fine, let’s do it.”

Hizuki sounded exasperated, but she eventually couldn’t hide her smile.



How had it come to this?

No answer would come, no matter how many times she asked.

The fault probably lay in her.

She was unprepared for these unforeseen circumstances.

Why...?

Why am I in the bath with a man I just met today...?

Veltol was in the opposite corner of the bathtub, merrily humming.

Only Hizuki and him were there.

Problematic in every way imaginable.

This was the first she had seen a man naked since the last time she bathed with her father when she was a child, and her last memory of bathing with

anyone period was with her mother.

Hizuki shot a sidelong glance at Veltol.

He paid her no mind, simply soaking in the bath. Yet she found even the lack of attention humiliating. She didn't *want* him to look at her like that, but it felt as though he didn't find her the least bit attractive. Weirdest of all was how casual he was being about the whole thing.

Why and how had it come to this?

To find out, we must go back in time a few hours...



"Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great honor that I, Takahashi, lead the toast tonight. I want to thank everyone present for taking time out of their busy schedules to gather here in the Hizuki household."

"Enough rambling! Cheers to our meeting, friends!" Veltol exclaimed.

"Hey, that's too short, Velly!"

Everyone raised their glasses, none of their drinks alcoholic. All juice and tea.

After checking out all the sights they'd wanted to visit, the group had arrived at the Reynard residence to spend the night as planned.

The Reynard home was a mansion three stories high, divided into an east wing and a west wing from the entrance hall. They were currently in the dining room, in the east wing.

The dining room...or rather the mansion in general, wasn't as well maintained as the luxurious exterior would have you expect—there was few furniture in the first place. It lacked maintenance outside as well, giving it a look of abandonment. Hizuki lived in that huge house alone, after all. The dining room had only a table in the middle and a cupboard, fridge, and stove in a corner.

They had bought groceries on their way home and had ordered pizza via drone delivery. A colorful array of food Hizuki and Machina had prepared decorated the table. Veltol and Takahashi helped out elsewhere.

This group never stopped eating.

"I'm surprised you're such a good cook, Machina. I pictured you as this secluded rich girl who'd never held anything heavier than a pen."

"It's because I lived alone for so long. You get a basic grasp of cooking that way."

“Wooow, that’s a huge shock. How long did you live alone for?”

“Goodness, it’s been decades by now...”

“Huh?”

Hizuki and Machina chatted while helping themselves to slices of pizza topped with grilled mernius and *char siu*.

“Velly, you gonna play any fighting games when we get back to Shinjuku?”

“Yes, of course. I must get revenge on the people who defeated me at the arcade...”

“They sure had you *renco-ing* like crazy, huh...? Come to think of it, I wonder what the *co* part of *renco*’s for.”

Renco was the Japanese shorthand term for inserting coins nonstop to continue the game after being defeated: *ren* meaning “consecutive” and *co* standing for “coin.” Thing was, arcades in this era—an endangered species, by the way—didn’t use coins, but virtual currency. Enthusiasts continued to use the word *renco*, despite its semi-obsolete etymology. The same was true for many other words as well.

“It was a nice surprise finding retro fighting games with actual physical input here instead of the full-dive VR variety. Didn’t know they had those in Akiba.”

“It would seem that both Magic Town and Electric Town hold onto old cultural relics.”

Veltol and Takahashi distributed fried rice from a large plate.

“I wasn’t expecting Hijiki to be that good at fighting games...”

“Her hand-eye coordination was perfect. Lord Veltol couldn’t land one hit.”

“Heh-heh-heh. I mean, I won’t lose to someone who can’t even block high hits, overheads, or cross-ups.”

Time flies when you’re having fun.

“*I’m sorry.*”

She heard the voice.

Hizuki was walking through the halls alone after the party had ended. She was on her way to take a bath in the bathroom down the stairs on the west wing’s first floor.

Her steps were the only sound in the dark, cold corridor. She was wearing a lounge dress and her hair was down.

She took a glance out the window. The Reynard manor was on a small hill on the outskirts of Magic Town, and it was in desperate need of maintenance, so

neighborhood kids called it a haunted mansion. Out the window, she could clearly see Akihabara's townscape: the faint aether lights of Magic Town, the blinking taillights of brooms like shooting stars in the sky, and the mountain of light that was Electric Town beyond.

Back when she was little, the garden had flowers genetically engineered to be chill-resistant, and her parents employed many live-in servants. It was a lively place.

Now she was the only person living there, and the garden didn't have even a blade of grass. It was an empty, dusty, and lonely mansion.

But not that day. She had visitors: three classmates staying over that night.

Somehow, she didn't feel uncomfortable. They had even found out she had a part-time job, so there was no need for pretension, no need to put on airs in front of this group.

She had fun walking about Electric Town with them, playing at the arcade, buying food on their way home, throwing a small party, and even holding a gaming tournament.

All three had already taken a bath and were now sleeping in whichever open room they wanted. Hizuki was last to bathe.

She didn't have anyone to call a friend—just shooting the breeze with these three was an all-new experience to her.

Takahashi, Machina, and...

“...Veltol.”

She had felt something ever since she first saw him in the classroom. Not quite love, not really romance, but something else entirely. Something she felt would change her life.

Even the usually quiet, empty, and desolate mansion seemed to have gone back to better, happier times, just for the time being.

Hizuki opened the door to the changing room and touched the sensor on the wall, turning on the bathroom lights with her mana.

“Honestly...I should really stop.”

Every time she thought she wanted to get closer to them, a feeling telling her not to become involved grew stronger as well.

She didn't want anything grand. After all, the more important something was to her, the sadder she would feel when she lost it.

“Just like my parents... Besides—”

She took off all her clothes, including her underwear. The cold air made her shiver. The mansion was inside the cryotolerance zone, but she'd turned off the heating to save money. Thankfully, she had a hot bath ready—usually, she only took showers.

Hizuki grabbed a towel and stepped into the bathroom. There, she saw him.

“Huh?”

For a moment, her brain couldn't process what she witnessed.

The bathroom, with its floral melju-patterned tile floor, was wide enough to fit four or five adults, and the bathtub was equally as big.

Veltol stood at the center of the tub.

“Oh, if it isn't Hijiki.”

Nude.

“Wha—? Huh? Um? Ah? No, it's Hizuki,” she stammered while covering herself.

To her own surprise, she managed not to scream on reflex.

Steam came off Veltol's rock-solid torso. He held his hands to his waist, as though intentionally showing off his body, which was as beautiful as a work of art. He showed no shred of embarrassment, no intention of hiding anything.

Why was Veltol still there? Why was he making that pose? Why was he so calm in front of a girl who had mistakenly entered the bathroom? Hizuki had no answer to any of these questions.

“Why...are you...naked here?”

“Hmm? This is a bathroom. Who on Alnaeth enters a bath while clothed?”

“I—I mean, yeah, but...”

“My, my, I understand your desire to ogle my ravishing physique, and you are the master of the house, but I daresay peeping at someone bathing is a little impolite. *Sigh...* I will allow it this time.”

He brushed back his wet bangs with a seductive gesture, so charming, in fact, that her first thought wasn't to rebuke his nonsense.

“Huh? Wait, no, what? Why? The lights were off. And didn't you take a bath already?”

Hizuki's brain was having trouble processing any thought, and she could only open and close her mouth repeatedly while looking up and down.

“I'm accustomed to bathing twice—once after dinner and again before sleeping. And I bathe in darkness.”

“Why turn off the changing room lights, too, though?”

“I cherish the night. You might say absorbing myself in its darkness is as natural as a banshee’s wailing.”

“Okay, you’re a weirdo, got it... It’s my fault for not checking in here first, I guess. Tell me once you’re out.” Hizuki started retreating into the changing room.

“Heh, I suppose it’s only natural that a young girl like you would be frightened by my perfect body...”

“Wha—?! I-I-I-I’m not scared! What the hell are you even talking about?!”

“No matter. Having to bathe beside my peerless beauty would undoubtedly cause you to compare your own physique against mine. Yours is not bad at all, I will give you that...but I’m just better.”

He flaunted his pectorals, sturdy as shields, then slowly submerged himself back in the bath while showing off his trapezii, like a great dragon’s scales.

“I perfectly understand your wanting to run away. While getting the chance to bathe with me is a great honor, it is also a touch masochistic...”

“St-stop looking down on me! I have absolutely no problem bathing together!”

Hizuki’s competitive streak betrayed her, and she unconsciously fell for Veltol’s provocation. Outraged, she washed her hair, tied it up with a towel, washed her body, and got into the bath, in the opposite corner from Veltol.



So that happened.

The bathwater was tinted green from the Aldgard Cure-all Bath Salts she bought in Magic Town. The hashnova and mandrake herbs had a characteristic aroma that acted as a natural relaxant, plus the healing effects of the famous Aldgard hot springs that helped soothe nerve pain, rheumatism, stiff shoulders, and sensitivity to cold.

“Today’s party was fun,” Veltol said.

He was spreading his legs and still had plenty of space left in the roomy bathtub, despite his stature.

He wasn’t one to feel reserved, but even Hizuki thought he’d been the most relaxed that day.

“Yeah, I won’t deny that. I haven’t enjoyed myself that much in a long time.”

“I was astonished when Takahashi proposed the gaming tournament. I didn’t

expect her to have bought controllers in Electric Town.”

“That was hilarious. And you’re actually pretty bad at games for a game streamer...”

“I’d say I’ve gotten much better. The real surprise is how good you are.”

“Browsing the net and gaming are my only hobbies. What’s actually baffling is Machina’s skill, though. Like, she’s *really* good.”

“I agree. She looks sweet on the outside but she’s not afraid to use the dirtiest tricks in battle...”

“It got me really fired up.”

“Sounds like you truly enjoyed yourself.”

“Yeah, I did...really...”

Hizuki hugged her knees and clenched her teeth.

Was this friendship? Or something else? She didn’t understand interpersonal relationships, so she had no way to answer. She knew just one thing.

“Hey, Veltol.”

No, don’t ask him, she thought, but she couldn’t help herself.

It was like looking up what other people said about your favorite piece of media on the aethernet, knowing you wouldn’t be satisfied with what you’d find.

“What is it?”



His voice was soft, calming. She felt as though he was going to give the answer she was seeking.

“Why are you even bothering with me? Like, back at the cafeteria, and then again in Electric Town...”

Stop. You'll only get hurt.

“Is it...”

Don't ask that. You're better off not knowing the truth.

“Is it because I'm the head of the Reynards?”

And yet, she asked.

She felt as if a weight had been lifted off her chest. But not even a moment later, anxiety and regret—both just as heavy—filled it again.

She shuffled her feet, her heart was pounding, her hands trembled, and her tongue was about to tense up.

She wanted him to tell her there was no reason in particular why he'd intervened on her behalf. But she also wanted to be special. Her desires contradicted each other.

What she really wanted was unconditional love.

She glanced at him.

“Bother myself with you? You're quite self-conscious. I had you pinned as a gloomy girl, but you are more interesting than I thought.”

Veltol smiled.

“Wha...?!”

“I simply follow my heart. I merely disciplined that boy at the cafeteria because he got in the way of my udon. You were second to my udon.”

“...Oh.”

“But things have changed,” he continued. “We are now friends who have shared meals. If the same thing happened again, I would act in defense of my friend.”

Her heart was racing, and her face heated up. She convinced herself it was because of the hot bath.

“Oh...” Her expression softened, and she couldn't stop the corners of her mouth from drawing upward in a smile. She cast her head down so he wouldn't notice. “So if I asked you for help, you would help me?”

“Of course. I swear it on my name as Veltol Velvet Velsvalt.”

Oaths were beyond just words among nobles. And Veltol pledged without

hesitation.

Thanks, she mouthed.

It was neither flattery nor cold calculation—he meant what he said. In Veltol's eyes, his response was perfectly natural, nothing special. And that was all the more reason why Hizuki was so happy.

“Mmm!” Hizuki stretched her entire body.

She felt refreshed, that indescribable cloud of anxiety finally clear from her mind.

Then she approached Veltol's side ever so slightly.

“Hey, what did you talk about with Mr. Korneah?”

“He told me that as far as the records go, you received the regalia, as you are current head of the family.”

“Huh.”

“Would you mind telling me about how that happened?”

“Fine by me, though I don't remember much.”

“No matter. Perhaps we will find something out.”

Hizuki didn't like talking about herself. She thought she was boring, and she didn't have many chances to do it in the first place.

Whatever. I do want him to know.

The thought crossed her mind. She was going to tell her friend about herself. That had to be a very normal thing.

“Okay, okay. I'll tell you everything, if that's what you want. I'll tell you my secret.”

“The most interesting women always have secrets.”

“Ha-ha, I guess.”

Whenever she tried to remember the past, she heard that voice.

“I'm sorry.”

She heard it again but ignored it.

“My parents were murdered.”

“...” Veltol looked at her in silence.

Hizuki tucked her arms between her thighs.

“My father was from Electric Town, a top executive at the Seburd Company. A human. My mother was the only daughter of the Reynards, back when they still held power over Magic Town. She was an elf. Their interspecies marriage, on top of their difference in status, was apparently really problematic. Big fish

from both Electric and Magic Town vehemently opposed their relationship, but they were able to get together thanks to the support of Mr. Korneah and Ms. Tratte.”

Interspecies marriage, especially when an elf was involved, was still taboo in this day and age. There were various reasons why, such as differences in sentiment between species and the rise of neo-speciesism ideology, but the biggest one for elves was that a mixed child would live a shorter life than an elf, yet a longer one than the other species.

“I remember being told I had to become the bridge linking Electric and Magic Town, and that I should continue my parents’ legacy. That I should graduate from the School of Magic and get a job in magineering to contribute to society. I was just a kid when they put such heavy expectations on me, so I believed I would be able to do it without a doubt.”

Hizuki could barely remember her parents’ faces, but their words were still vivid in her mind.

“It was snowing that night, ten years ago, in the Month of the Leviathan.” Hizuki looked up at the ceiling as she reminisced. “It was my birthday, and we went to Electric Town to buy my present, then had dinner at Magic Town... I had such a great time.”

They were good parents. She had a comfortable lifestyle. It was the happiest time in Hizuki’s life.

“We were ambushed on our way home. By a male high-powered full-borg, illegally remodeled.”

She didn’t remember his face, only that he wore all-black clerical clothing. She’d never forget the emblem of a golden dragon entangled in a silver sword that decorated his clothes.

A drop of water fell from the ceiling to the bathtub.

“I was just a kid. I couldn’t do anything. I just watched my father get killed... right in front of me...”

His blood dyed the snow as he covered Hizuki. Her mother’s unintelligible screams.

The memory alone had her hyperventilating.

“Are you all right? You don’t have to force yourself.”

“...I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry.”

She heard the voice.

Static scrambled her head.

“That’s all I remember. When I came to, I was on a hospital bed, badly injured. The doctor told me my mother had brought me in, and that she died soon after.”

“...And who is this doctor? They might know something.”

Hizuki shook her head. “Murdered a few years ago. It even made the news. They caught the murderer, but the person didn’t even remember killing the doctor. Said it must’ve been the work of mediumship. I heard the killer died by suicide in jail.”

Hizuki suspected a connection between both cases, but there was only so much a kid could do to find out the truth.

“The records say my mother gave me the regalia when she took me to the hospital. She was the head of the Reynards back then, after all. But I don’t remember ever receiving a thing like that. I have no idea where it is.”

“I was told the regalia are magi-gadgets stored in one’s soul. Can’t you feel it?”

“I don’t know. They say you’re supposed to feel it, but I just have no idea. Except...”

She paused for a second.

“...ever since that day, I’ve been hearing a voice.”

Hizuki stared at the calm surface of the bathtub’s water.

“...A voice?”

“I can hear someone apologizing to someone else. The doctor said it’s a hallucination caused by the psychological trauma of my parents’ murder, but I don’t think so.”

“Are you hearing it right now?”

“No, I don’t even know when exactly I’ll hear it, but it tends to happen whenever I try to remember the past.” Hizuki put a hand to her chest and then clenched her fist. “A few years after the incident, the Reynard house fell from grace, and the people who didn’t like us from the get-go tried to get rid of me. I got ambushed by assassins multiple times. They were all sorts of people, from lonely vagabonds to trained mercenaries, but I have no idea who hired any of them. I don’t even know if they had anything to do with my parents’ murder.”

“Hmmm...”

“At the same time, something changed within me.”

“What do you mean?”

“The next thing I knew, the assassins were on the ground, defeated.”

Hizuki, naturally, hadn’t undergone combat training, and yet she had repelled every one of her attackers up to then.

“The Reynards are naturally predisposed to mediumship, but it doesn’t seem like I was under any sort of spell when these incidents happened.”

Each case shared one commonality: Hizuki lost consciousness when she felt danger, the attackers were down by the time she came to, and she was miraculously unharmed.

“I haven’t been attacked the last couple years thanks to Mr. Korneah’s and Ms. Tratte’s support, though.” The incidents had done a number on her mental health. She’d been scared to even set foot outside. “That was around the same time I met Ms. Mag, and she helped me out a lot before I enrolled in school... She’s supported me even more since, too. We even go out to eat together from time to time. It’s like, I honestly can’t tell if I’m blessed or cursed.”

In retrospect, even she was surprised she managed to recover. Korneah and Tratte couldn’t help her directly due to their agreement, but they supported her from behind the scenes, something Hizuki didn’t learn until years later.

“So I enrolled in the School of Magic. I’m no good at magic, but my mother really wanted me to go to this school, and with help from Ms. Tratte, I pulled it off. However, having lost the regalia, on top of the Reynards already being treated like trash after my parents’ marriage, I had no standing in school. But I still managed to make a friend.”

Back when she was in her first year, one classmate approached the isolated Hizuki. She was a human girl, very cheerful and lively, kind of like Takahashi.

“But not long after, she got hurt because of me. I think it was that mysterious power running amok again. I can’t really remember.”

She felt like throwing up whenever she talked about it. It wasn’t so much that she didn’t want to remember, but rather she just couldn’t.

“She stopped attending school. I don’t know where she is now. Ms. Tratte didn’t question me about it, but the students didn’t care about the truth. I went from being ignored by everyone to outright getting bullied. They’ve done some really nasty things to me.”

“...”

Veltol looked up at the tall ceiling in silence.

“That’s why I thought I didn’t need friends anymore. No one even comes

near me, and I don't want to get along with anyone. I end up hurting whoever gets close. They all just disappear. They all meet tragedy. So it'd be best not to get involved with anyone in the first place. If I can't be happy, then I won't try."

That's what she thought before meeting Veltol and his friends.

It was her defensive instinct. Measures to protect herself.

"I hate that person who took my parents and my life away from me. But at the same time, I'm scared...so scared of him coming back again."

Hizuki looked at Veltol. She couldn't tell whether he was sad, or angry, or anything else. His expression was hard to read.

"I'm still here because my parents wanted me to live in Akihabara like a noble. I can't leave the nest. If I could, I'd rather leave this city..."

She smiled faintly.

"That's it from me."

A drop of water ran down her face before falling from her chin and into the bath, making ripples.

She had never told anyone this secret. She was glad she could talk about it with someone who considered her a friend.

"It takes courage to tell someone about your own past, especially when you've experienced such hardships," Veltol said calmly. "It must have been hard to speak the truth without hiding anything. Thank you for that, my friend."

"...Yeah."

He stood up with a splash. "I should go now."

"How about you try hiding at least a little bit?!"



"Ugh, I can't believe I actually bathed with a man... I must've lost my mind..."

"Bwa-ha-ha! Cherish this moment for the rest of your life!"

"I will not, you lunatic!"

Hizuki shot Veltol a sideways glance, cheeks red. They had already left the changing room and were now walking through the hallway on their way to their rooms. Hizuki was wearing the same clothes from earlier, while Veltol was wearing his Demon Lord T-shirt and tracksuit.

"So where are you guys staying tomorrow?"

"This mansion is far more pleasant than the dormitories, but you certainly can't have three exchange students making themselves at home."

"I—I don't mind... I mean, if you want to..."

“Wait, Hijiki.”

Veltol interrupted her.

“There is much to think about here...” He turned around and glared at the end of the hallway, eyes like daggers. “But unfortunately, my bath time is already over.”

“Huh?” Hizuki turned around as well.

No one but the dim lighting was there.

“*Unsurprising coming from Demon Lord Veltol, I suppose,*” came a cheap synthetic voice.

Then a silhouette appeared from the shadows. Average build, fully black clothes with a uniform design, like clerical vestments. Their face was covered, so Hizuki couldn’t tell whether they were a man or a woman.

And on the clothing, she saw an emblem of a golden dragon entangled in a silver sword.

That person wasn’t truly there. It was an image projected into the air’s aether through a charm in the shape of a person—a hologram.

“Image projection through a low-level spirit...? You make some handy things with mediumship,” Veltol muttered.

Hizuki’s eyes were glued to the emblem.

“Th—that’s...”

It’s him. The full-borg who killed my parents.

She had no proof, and his build was quite different from what she remembered. She couldn’t even tell if they were a borg or a flesh-and-blood person in the first place. But she instinctively knew it was the same person from back then.

She couldn’t speak. She was just trembling.

Veltol took a step forward to shield her.

“It appears you know me very well... How about you introduce yourself, too? It’s only polite.”

“*Apologies, but I don’t have a personal name, nor a face or body to call my own. Please call me Faceless. As for our organization...let’s say I’m a Hero from the Guild.*”

The Guild—also known as the New World Church.

“Hero...?” Veltol’s shoulders jolted up. “So what is the supposed Hero of the Guild doing here so late at night?”

“*I’ve come to bargain, Demon Lord Veltol.*”

“Bargain?”

“Indeed.” Faceless respectfully bowed their head. “*Let’s get straight to the point. We want you to leave this city right now.*” Veltol remained silent. “*Your presence—and that of your friends—is an irregularity that could hinder the completion of our quest. Put simply, defeating Marcus designated you a clear and present threat.*”

“Marcus? You know about what happened in Shinjuku?”

“Yes. *Marcus, Duke of the Bloody Arts, was part of our organization as well. His standing wasn’t very high, but his achievements were quite impressive. It’s an unfortunate loss, truly.*”

Marcus, one of Veltol’s immortal vassals, was also the director of megacorporation IHMI. He opposed Veltol upon his return but was ultimately defeated at his hands.

“What do you mean his standing wasn’t very high?”

“*That is currently an internal matter. In any case, if you and your comrades leave this city right this moment, we promise not to cause you any harm. Your objective is the treasury in the school’s underground, correct? We can offer you some help if need be. What say you?*”

Presented with Faceless’s proposal, Veltol...

“Fat chance.”

...immediately refused.

“...What?”

Veltol’s answer surprised Faceless so much, their confusion could be felt even in their synthetic voice.

“You want to negotiate with me? Know your place. What makes you think you have the right to bargain? You ought to be prostrating yourself before me, begging, crying, and presenting me offerings so that I might consider hearing your plea. Yet here you are, sneaking around and hiding your face, a blight upon my eyes and ears. Where are your manners, scum? Were you born in a latrine? Outrageous.”

Negotiating was too high a grade of communication for two parties with such different status. Haughty and arrogant, insolent and bold. The king had no need to hear out someone who didn’t show their face, and the latter had no right to speak to the former.

“Most of all...” Veltol’s hostile aura instantly swelled.

“...!”

The tension in the air rose to an oppressive degree. Even Faceless was overwhelmed.

“...I can’t stand you calling yourself Hero. There is only one person in the world worthy of using that title in my presence. Anyone else who dares claim that title should be executed.”

“So our deal is over. Unfortunate, but what can we do? I shall excuse myself for tonight.”

“Ha! Don’t dirty my eyes with your presence anymore. Begone.”

“Oh, one last thing.”

Faceless spoke with an ominous tone.

“*Akihabara is going to change.*”

Then they disappeared.

The humanoid projection went up in blue flames.

“The spirit vanished as the technic finished... High-level mediumship,” Veltol muttered. He stepped forward to try to investigate the remnants, but Hizuki grabbed his sleeve.

“Veltol...”

She was shaking in fear like a baby.

CHAPTER THREE

Uproar in Akihabara

The following day...

Mag Rosanta—Magic Town resident, mediumship mentor, and principal's assistant—went missing.

Early that morning, an explosion took place in a mechanical-surgery clinic in Electric Town. The cause was unknown.

A full-borg body was found at the scene of the accident. The severity of their injuries rendered them unrecognizable, currently pending investigation.

Mag Rosanta, a full-borg, was confirmed to have visited the mechanical-surgery clinic in the third level of Akihabara Electric Town for periodic maintenance. Her relation to the case was also under investigation.

Magic Town called for a joint investigation, but Electric Town refused. Members of the Akihabara City Council representing Magic Town gathered signatures to present a complaint against the Electric Town faction.

News of the intensifying conflict spread throughout Akihabara like wildfire.



That day, at noon, in a classroom of the Akihabara School of Magic,

everyone was talking about Mag's disappearance and how their mentor could possibly be connected to the explosion. Rumors gave place to further rumors, and the students thirsting for entertainment consumed the news as such.

“Aine, did you hear that Ms. Mag disappeared?”

“Yes, I heard someone from Electric Town kidnapped her.”

“Of course it had to be them! Those chaotic maggots!”

“We should just go to war and conquer them already. Our magical air forces can win easily.”

Veltol looked and listened from the back of the classroom. Everyone was discussing the different rumors.

Machina and Takahashi, too, were chatting with a group of girls. Machina's dazzling looks made her the object of jealousy, but her aura kept other students away—it was Takahashi's easygoing attitude that acted as a bridge between them.

Veltol observed them getting along with their classmates and nodded in satisfaction.

Meanwhile, one girl was pretending to be asleep on her desk in the corner of the classroom.

"How was it, Hijiki?" Veltol asked her.

"Hizuki. And what do you mean?" She turned only her head to look at him.

"Were you able to sleep last night?"

"Not much. After all that happened and then hearing about Ms. Mag's disappearance...how could I?"

The person who had likely killed her parents appeared before her once again, and the teacher who had supported her throughout her hardships had disappeared. Expecting Hizuki to stay calm would be ridiculous.

"I understand. But I am here by your side. No need to fret."

She raised her head, an awkward smile on her face. "Thanks." Veltol's voice had the power to put her at ease. However... "For some reason, I just have a very bad feeling."

Anxiety didn't leave Hizuki's expression.



Meanwhile, Tratte Götel had arrived unexpectedly at Korneah Seburd's mansion.

They typically planned their meetings in advance, following the proper procedures out of consideration for the residents of each other's section of town. This was not like a visit from the Reynard girl, who held no power in Akihabara.

Akihabara was a powder keg. The scales wouldn't just tip but be flipped entirely over if something happened to either Korneah or Tratte.

The abnormal state of affairs had Meral worried sick. He sided with the extremist reformist faction and was part of the City Council as a representative for the Seburd Company. He had fearlessly fought for his current position among the vortex of trickery taking place in Akihabara. His thoughts on the current situation?

A war might really break out at any moment.

“Lady Tratte! Lady Tratte, please wait!”

Meral did his best to remain calm as he tried to stop her from entering the mansion’s main gate.

“...”

The full-borg elf didn’t even spare him a glance. She attempted to pass through the gate.

“Please wait, Lady Tratte! We need to perform a pat down for security purposes. I’m very sorry, but those are the rules—”

Right then, Meral received an aether call.

“It’s gotta be about today’s news. She’s a member of the Three Houses; let her in.”

“B-but...”

“Tratte’s not so stupid as to throw a fit here. It’s fine.”

“Understood...”

Meral reluctantly heeded Korneah’s instructions.

“Please, Lady Tratte, let us perform a pat down first, at the very least.”

“Haaah... Fine, hurry up,” she spat icily.

Meral felt something was off. Tratte’s voice was typically quite gentle for a full-borg, but today she sounded pushy—she felt cold, like a heartless doll.

A thought crossed his mind—perhaps someone was pretending to be her.

His bad feeling only worsened while a guard gave her a quick once-over.

“All clear.”

No weapons were found, so Meral had to let her through.

They went on to the inspection room inside the mansion. Meral stared intently at the screen in the monitoring room. Any weapons hidden inside her body through modding would be revealed there.

However, the results showed no issue. Her mana pattern also coincided with the registered one. Her mana engine was custom-made, not something one could replicate. The device was telling him she wasn’t an impostor.

Everything pointed to Meral’s fears being unfounded, and yet he couldn’t shake his doubts.

Tratte swung the door open. Korneah was already in the drawing room. She sat down on the sofa before he could greet her.

“What is it? We’ve got nothing to do with what happened to Mag Rosanta. There’s no point in resorting to such violent methods in the first place, and you know that.”

“Actually, that is not what I’m here to talk about.”

“So what is it? Just a little chitchat?”

“No.”

“Then spit it out already.”

Korneah did not expect her following words.

“I am here to take the Crown.”

Korneah was dumbfounded, his expression frozen in shock from Tratte’s matter-of-fact declaration.

“Eh? The hell are you even saying? If this is a joke, it ain’t funny.”

“This is no joke.”

“Tratte... C’mon. Despite our different positions, you and I both wanna make this city a better place, right? Even Hizuki—”

“Oh, enough with that nonsense.” Tratte sighed, genuinely annoyed.

The room grew tense.

“...And how exactly do you plan to take the Crown?”

Meral stood behind Korneah, ready to attack at any moment, as were the guards behind Tratte. Both Meral and the guards had enough combat training. Tratte had no chance against all three of them while unarmed, no matter how expert of a sorcerer she was.

There’s nothing to be worried about. No matter what she might be planning, we already checked her for any possible weapons. We’re safe.

Any possible weapons.

He was forgetting about something blatantly obvious: his assumption that *all* weapons were visible. He should have realized, but he failed to consider the possibility that she always had an invisible weapon on her person.

“How? Very simple. As you know, another person can force you to forfeit possession of the regalia in order to release it from the soul and materialize.”

Releasing it from the soul...

“I simply have to kill you, and it will be mine.”

“Wha—?”

Before Meral could reach a conclusion...

“I will be taking your Crown.”

...Tratte made a move.

“Tratte, are you—?”

Korneah’s head flew with a splatter before he could finish talking.

The next thing anyone knew, she was holding a golden sword. One of the goddess Meldia’s soul fragments, the city’s symbol of power, mythic armament of legend, the regalia: the Blade.

Blood was sent flying from the Blade and landed on Meral’s face.

The Crown materialized and fell to the floor with a clatter.

No one was able to react.

“Tratte! How dare you?!”

Meral extended his arm after finally making sense of the situation and initialized his magic. The men in black pulled out magi-guns from their suits and took aim.

“*Wind Cutter!*”

Meral activated a spell, but Tratte was faster in grabbing the arm of one of the men behind her, twisting it and placing herself behind him.

“Gweh!”

She pierced the man’s heart from behind and used his body as a shield. The magical blade of wind sliced the man’s metallic body in twain, and liquid aether and lubricant dripped from his abdomen. Tratte kicked it in Meral’s direction.

“Shit!”

“Guh!”

The full-borg’s two-hundred-kilogram body crashed into Meral, and at the same time, Tratte unsheathed her sword again and pierced the other guard’s core unit, ending his life.

“Die, Tratte!” Meral stretched out his arm to activate another spell.

“You’re too slow.”

His arm was chopped in half before he could attack.

“Gaaaargh!” He screamed as he fell to his knees. “Agh... Tratte... You imbecile...! Do you have any idea what you’ve done?! You just declared war against Electric Town!”

“Hmm? Oh, I guess I did. Uh-huh.”

Meral glared at her while holding his arm to try to stop the bleeding, but her face was totally calm.

“We’re almost out of time. The higher-ups are impatient. Middle management is hard work,” she mumbled to herself as she grabbed the Crown. “Anyway, war between Magic and Electric Town? Sounds nice. Very nice, in

fact. Let's do it! Lots of people will die! We can solve the population-density problem this way! Two birds with one stone!"

"Is this what Magic Town wants?! You will regret this, Tratte Götel! You'll wish you never defied Korneah's wishes! You want war? We'll give you war!"

"...Ha-ha-ha."

Tratte placed the Crown on her head and eyed Meral as if he were an insect.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha... AH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!"

She left the room, cackling like a madwoman.



One hour later, news of Tratte Götel murdering Korneah Seburd was broadcast through all speakers and public channels in Akihabara.

"Huh? No way... Mr. Korneah died?"

"That has to be fake news."

"But there's even an official statement."

"Those Magic Town pigs won't get away with this..."

"I've been saying we should've gone to war to annex Magic Town for ages!"

Confusion and chaos.

Meral became provisional leader of Electric Town and gathered its mercenaries and Municipal Army, deploying them at the eastern side of Hokoten Avenue.

Management of Magic Town's Municipal Army responded in kind without Tratte's direction, deploying at the western side of Hokoten Avenue.

It was all too sudden. Both sides were in disarray and unrest, and no one could stop the dread from being vocalized in either side.

Some were shivering in fear.

"Seriously...? I've never even been in a real battle!"

Some still didn't comprehend what was happening.

"Why are we fighting if we're from the same city...?"

Others were seething with anger.

"They'll pay for this."

The flame of war was about to be lit right before them, no matter their messy state of mind. Not a soul could take it all in.

The traditional and modern sides of town were about to clash.



Akihabara's state of emergency was already known throughout school.

Korneah's death was also a major event within Magic Town, but on this side of the city, Tratte's involvement was kept quiet. The information was intentionally hidden by Magic Town's top brass; news that one of their own had killed the head of Electric Town would cause a massive scandal, and they hadn't been able to confirm the truth with Tratte herself. Avoiding any further confusion was for the best.

None of that weighed on the minds of most of Magic Town's populace, however. Simple anxiety spread everywhere, including within Hizuki.

She was in the girls' restroom, staring at her face in the mirror.

"Mr. Korneah... Ms. Mag...", she whispered, voice trembling.

Loss and frustration filled her heart.

Mag was missing. Korneah was dead. And then there was what happened the previous night. She was losing people close to her, and that made old feelings come back to the surface.

"Akihabara is in a category II state of emergency. All students must take refuge in the practice hall as soon as possible. I repeat. Akihabara is in a category II state of emergency. All students must take refuge in the practice hall as soon as possible."

The notice played over again mechanically throughout the school.

I need to get out of here, Hizuki thought. She then left the bathroom.

"Ms. Reynard."

Someone stopped her right as she exited.

"Ms.... Principal Tratte?"

It was the black-haired full-borg elf.

"You heard about Korneah, right? There's something crucial we need to talk about, as fellow members of the Three Houses. Please follow me."

"B-but I have to go to the practice hall..."

"This is important."

"But..."

Hizuki didn't know what to do. She had a very bad feeling about this, and she sensed there was something wrong with Tratte. She couldn't quite put her finger

on it, but something was off.

“Please. You trust me, don’t you?”

“...All right.”

“Good. Let’s go to the principal’s office.”

Tratte led Hizuki down the hall. They passed by other students, all of them heading to the practice hall, visibly anxious. Tratte did not speak to any of them. Usually, she would have tried to put them at ease, but this time, she just walked quickly past.

They went through the inspection, then Tratte opened the door to the principal’s office—the door only she could open. They did not talk on their way there.

“So what is it?” Hizuki asked, unable to take the silence anymore.

Tratte did not take a seat. He stood before the desk and faced Hizuki.

“Ms. Reynard, please listen very carefully to what I’m about to tell you.”

There was no one in the spacious office besides the two of them.

“Ms. Reynard? Are you listening?”

There was no one there.

“...Who are you?”

Hizuki asked the full-borg a question.

“Who? What are you saying, Ms. Reynard? I—”

“You’re not her.” Hizuki denied it before she could finish. “You’re not Ms. Tratte. I’ve been having this weird feeling ever since I saw you before, and now I’m sure of it. You look like her, but you’re not her.”

“What feeling? Don’t you remember? Only my mana can open this room. This place is secured.”

Hizuki shook her head. “I don’t know how you got Ms. Tratte’s mana engine, but you’re definitely not her.”

“...”

The reason was simple.

“Ms. Tratte calls me Hizuki when we’re alone.”

Silence.

“Haaah...” The full-borg broke it with a sigh. “I see, I see. That was a pretty

stupid error on my part. Well, not like I could do a lot about it... I've been observing you for quite some time, sure, but not when you're alone..."

Tratte...rather, the impostor spoke with a totally different, lighter tone than before.

"Who are you?" Hizuki took a step back.

"Oh, no, no. Wait," the woman said while pressing a finger into her neck, rebooting the vocal processor. "Ehm, ehm. How's it now? Can you tell who it is? Do you even remember me? Maybe you forgot."

The synthetic voice had a thick elvish accent, one Hizuki recognized.

"Ms....Mag?"

"Yes. Of course you remember me. We've known each other for a long while. It is I, Mag Rosanta. That's not my real name, though."

"So you were okay...? Huh? But wait, why would you...? What?"

Mag Rosanta, mediumship mentor for Hizuki's class and the principal's aide. The woman who had reportedly gone missing the previous night.

"Why? Why are you in Ms. Tratte's body...?"

She couldn't comprehend it. Even though she knew the person before her was not Tratte, she still didn't understand how it was Mag instead.

"Wh-what is going on...?"

"You still don't get it?" Mag scratched her head in annoyance. "I'll break it down for you. First, my quest was gathering all three regalia. Being Tratte's aide, the hardest one to obtain was Korneah Seburd's. I had to kill him to complete my quest."

Out of the blue, a golden crown appeared on her head and a golden sword in her hand. Two of the mythic armaments of legend—the Crown and the Blade.

"Huh? So...it was you...?"

"Yes. I killed him. There was no other way to get this."

She spoke with a calm voice and matter-of-fact tone, the same way she normally did during lectures, as she confessed to murdering Korneah. It brought to mind Mag's usual attitude.

"He was a very cautious man. None of the Guild's tactics managed to get us close with much ease. But he had one opening: I could tell he lowered his guard around another member of the Three Houses."

The Crown and Blade vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

"..."

"So I thought, since Tratte Götel is a full-borg, I can get close to him by just mimicking her appearance. The problem was that I would need the same mana

pattern her made-to-order mana engine produced. But how?"

"*Stop talking,*" Hizuki pleaded, but Mag continued:

"Quite easy—just steal her body. I even get her appearance without any extra work. So I got close to her, patiently waiting for the right moment, which finally came. I invited Tratte Götel to the mechanical-surgery clinic, removed her brain and spinal units, and replaced them with my own."

Hizuki's heart was racing.

"I had her go through the surgery with her senses forced on, in order to not affect her made-to-order mana engine. I can't imagine how it must feel to have your head opened up and brain pulled out. She was crying out your name up until the end. She must've really thought of you as a daughter, ha-ha!"

Hizuki was having trouble breathing.

"S-so that's really..."

"Tratte Götel's body, the one and only! It's quite pleasant. You can tell how much money she put into it. My sole miscalculation was meeting those two exchange students before getting used to it."

"No! You're lying!"

Hizuki didn't want to accept it—she couldn't. She was sure that, at the very least, Tratte and Mag were the only ones on her side in Magic Town.

"It has to be a lie! Ms. Mag was so kind, and she and Ms. Tratte were so close... She'd never kill her...!"

"Appearances can be deceiving... That's why you get bullied. You've always disgusted me. I hate blonds. Also, Mag's body wasn't my original to begin with."

Hizuki couldn't understand what Mag was saying.

"Where's...her core unit...?"

"Who knows? Maybe it turned to dust in the explosion."

"Ah—ah—ah..."

Thoughts flashed through her mind at the speed of light.

"...See? I told you Akihabara was going to change."

Mag Rosanta's disappearance. Korneah Seburd's murder. Tratte Götel's transformation. The explosion at the mechanical-surgery clinic. The answer to that statement from the previous night. It was all connected.

"...Don't tell me that Faceless person last night...and the one who killed my parents ten years ago... That's...?"

The cruel truth.

“Looks like you’ve finally gotten it through your skull. How’s it feel knowing your parents’ murderer was right beside you all along?”

Hizuki was hyperventilating.

“...!”

Everything was blurring before her.

She somehow kept her spirit from breaking by clenching her teeth. She managed to prevent her knees from buckling and stop herself from giving in to grief and despair—instead turning those emotions into hatred for the person who had killed her parents and defiled her guardian’s body.

“I can’t have you wasting time being shocked. You’re going to help me out with my quest.”

“I’m not helping you with anything!”

She had to escape. That was her top priority. Hizuki had overcome difficult situations like this before—she convinced herself she’d be fine.

“No—you will.”

Mag opened a holodisplay in front of her, showing the students gathered at the practice hall.

“So these are your hostages...?”

“Good thing you got the hint. I’ll kill them all right now if you refuse to help me.”

Hizuki didn’t care about any of these people.

But then three faces came to mind. The three people she’d met just the day before, three people even less familiar to her than her other classmates. And yet, that was more than enough for Hizuki.

Mag exited the principal’s office, and Hizuki followed in silence.



All students and mentors in school were gathered at the practice hall. The atmosphere was rife with tension.

“I’m scared... What’s gonna happen now?”

“It’ll be fine; if push comes to shove, I’ll take care of it myself.”

“You there! Stop talking and stand in line!”

As soon as everyone gathered, one uninvited guest appeared in the practice hall.

She slipped into the crowd with total ease—no one suspected her for a moment.

She was of small stature. She wore all-black clerical clothing, a veil covering her eyes, further hidden by a visor atop her nose. Only her mouth was showing. The veil also covered the Familia on her nape.

A brunette student nearby noticed her and said, “You’re...not a first-year student, are you?”

The mysterious girl showed no reaction, only lifting her arm. Her Familia allowed her to omit construction, expansion, and incantation, and so she proclaimed the maginom:

“*Gallef.*”

Compressed aether formed one short spear of deep aquamarine.

“Wha—?”

The spear flew at the brunette. It was already right before her eyes by the time she noticed.

“Eek!”

The nearby silver-haired student pushed the paralyzed brunette aside, the spear piercing her head instead.

Blood flew as her corpse collapsed near the entrance.

“Noooooooooo!”

The brunette student’s scream echoed throughout the hall.

“*Apolfos.*”

Before the fear spread further, four swords of light, the same deep-aquamarine color, appeared around the mysterious girl. They pierced the nearby students, but their wounds did not bleed. Instead, the swords shattered, then another sword of light appeared on top of each of their heads, like a cursor above a video game character.

All emotion disappeared from the marked students’ faces. Their bodies were lifeless, but they didn’t collapse—they simply stood there like puppets.

"Nobody move." A voice echoed, as though spoken through a megaphone.

Unlike a megaphone, the voice didn't resonate through the air. Rather, it reached everyone's brains directly through the aether, similar to the effect of Whisper magic.

The voice didn't belong to the girl in black; it came from a student marked by a sword of light.

"What...? Is this an attack from Electric Town...?" someone asked.



The voice answered, "No. You shall not conflate our noble quest with that barbaric squabble."

"Per regulation code 2031129, we hereby warn you."

"You are all hostages."

"Your lives are in our hands now."

"Do not resist. We will instantly slaughter anyone who does not comply."

The marked students spoke in succession, not a shred of emotion in their voices. They announced their threats in the shortest, simplest manner.

Without a Familia attached, no one could resist this magic. The sheer power on display made that perfectly clear.

"Do as we say, and we promise not to hurt you."

"Surely you understand you have no way to overpower us."

"Resistance is futile. We urge you to comply."

"Even if you don't, with the city on the brink of war, you have nowhere to run."

Silence fell over the hall.

War breaking out between Electric and Magic Town was something everyone had thought about but also never believed would really happen. However, the current situation was dire—the enemy had a point.

"We're finished..." someone muttered.

The students had no way to resist, nor did they attempt to. They could do nothing but sink in despair at their powerlessness in the chaotic situation.

Many of them had, at one point, fantasized of terrorists attacking the school, and the students valiantly joining forces to stop them. But the reality was different; they couldn't defend themselves against one single person wearing a Familia. In the end, fantasy remained fantasy.

Several students had lost consciousness and were now being used like puppets. One girl was dead by the entrance. The enemy had the absolute advantage thanks to their Familia. The students were trapped, and the city was about to become a war zone.

It took less than a second for them to lose the will to fight.

Fear gripped the hearts of these young students, born after the war and without any experience in real battle.

People began sobbing.

By immediately killing one person and seizing the initiative, a single girl had taken control of the school in the blink of an eye.

...Or so she would have, had a certain man not been present.



Hizuki was led to the rooftop of the Akihabara School of Magic, which was usually off-limits. It was fully fenced in, with a few AC units and electrical transformers scattered here and there.

She stood at the middle of the FV port, a magic circle written with red melted-alesa ore under her feet, and a solemn cloudy sky overhead.

I need to run, she'd thought in the elevator on their way there. She wasn't physically constrained in any way—she could have fled. But she didn't. She couldn't. She couldn't leave her friends behind.

"Incredible that we still have to use such anachronistic means for mediumship. If only the Familia's computation support was a bit more helpful."

Mag poured mana into the magic circle, making it glow red.

Then Hizuki felt pain and numbness running through her body like lightning. She grimaced and reflexively tried to move, but...

"My body's...frozen...?!"

She could move only her eyes and mouth.

Mag twisted Tratte's face into an eerie smile.

"Well then, we still have some time before all processes are completed, so let's have a short lesson while we're at it. Mediumship is what we call all magic used to pull a spirit or higher incorporeal being into a physical body...but do you know what's needed for it to work?"

Hizuki ignored her.

"Oh? You don't? The answer is: a location, a medium, and an offering. And here I thought you had good grades in theoretical subjects. In any case, mediumship is quite the troublesome undertaking. There's actually more requirements, but those three are the biggest."

She explained things concisely, like a real teacher.

"Today's objective will be calling the goddess Meldia into your body."

She spoke with her exact same, usual tone.

Then Mag summoned the Crown and placed it on Hizuki's head.

"First, we need the location—that's Akihabara...or rather, Lu Xel, which is the territory Meldia granted the Hero Gram. That provides the connection to the goddess. One requirement down. Also, as known from the examples of the

mediums at the summit of Mount Revinia or the Railrod incident in order to pull a higher being into a lower one, we need a physically elevated location. Though in truth, what was most important here was using the previously prepared magic circle.”

Then she made Hizuki hold the Blade.

“After that, we need the medium—a direct descendant of the second king of Lu Xel and member of the Reynard house, naturally predisposed for the job for generations. Perfect. The medium is also better the less borg modification they’ve gone through.”

Tratte was a full-borg, and Korneah wasn’t part of the Lu Xel king’s bloodline. Naturally, Hizuki was the most fitting.

“As for the offering, that’s where the three regalia come in. I’m sure you know by now that gathering them all in one body also serves to facilitate a god summoning ritual.”

Something was missing from her statement; the Blade and Crown were present, but the Orb was still nowhere in sight.

But then Mag said, “Well, I suppose there was no need for such a long lecture after all. Not when Meldia is already in this world.”

“She’s...here?”

“Yes. We’re not summoning her, but rather, awakening her. This also counts as mediumship, for the record. How do I know she’s already here, you ask? Because she appeared briefly ten years ago, when I tried to kill the head of the Reynards... She’s slumbering within you. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed?”

Hizuki’s right eye started twitching, then burning.

“So that voice...”

She already knew something was inside her. That voice, constantly apologizing—it belonged to the goddess Meldia.

“Yes, you are already her medium. The rest of this is all speculation on my part. After the Fantasion, Meldia, being a higher incorporeal being, drastically weakened due to reduced faith. Just as she was about to vanish, Meldia instead downgraded her soul and transferred it to a mortal body. And that was you, when you were a baby, before you had a fully formed mind.”

Mag concluded Meldia resided inside Hizuki Reynard-Yamada’s own body.

“Meldia remained inactive, but whenever your body received grave-enough damage, it triggered her to momentarily awaken and rampage. I had no choice but to flee, and the Orb appeared to be lost. Shortly thereafter, I was entrusted with a new quest: fully manifesting the goddess Meldia and preserving her

existence. I looked for the Orb while I hired assassins to attack you in order to further stimulate Meldia—to awaken her.”

“Agh...” The burning sensation in Hizuki’s eye gradually turned to outright pain.

“However, although Meldia reacted in self-defense, she apparently never attempted to manifest. So I thought...considering the Orb’s power is to control divinity, perhaps this was regulating Meldia’s rampages and manifestation? This would also be the reason for your abnormally low mana reserve. It’s all going into controlling and sealing the goddess Meldia. Then where is the Orb?”

She spoke with ease, though her tone was bitter. It was as if she was finally spilling a decade’s worth of complaints.

“I looked up your medical log from ten years ago. After my attack on your parents, you apparently had to have your right eye extracted and replaced with a prosthesis. But that wasn’t just any prosthesis... Man, that doctor sure was tight-lipped. It took me so much work to find this out. I had to kill so many nobles and big shots; I hope you feel at least a little bit bad about that. I did it all because of you, and it ended up giving birth to conspiracy after conspiracy, raising tensions between the two towns...but whatever.”

“My...eye...”

Hizuki realized something. The voice she sometimes heard, the presence of the goddess Meldia, the twitch in her right eye.

“Your mother requested for a little something to be embedded in your new right eye.”

The once-thought lost Orb.

“And that was the third regalia... The Orb is right there.”

Mag poured mana into the circle, activating the spell to wake the goddess.

“Ah—aaaaaaaaah!”

Excruciating pain assaulted Hizuki’s right eye once she became able to move again.

“The previous Reynard head—your mother—was a brilliant woman. She hid the Orb *and* restrained the goddess’s power at the same time. It ended up hindering her daughter’s mana reserve, but that’s neither here nor there.”

Half of Hizuki’s vision turned red. Her knees buckled and she fell to the ground.

“What a long ten years. It’s been a hard journey...but it is what it is. What’s

important is completing my quest. I don't care about anything else." Mag smiled in a way Tratte would never have, then yelled, "Aren't you happy, too?! This disgusting city will finally meet its end!"

Hizuki could not hear her. No information could enter her brain besides the pain, an ache that felt as though a long, red-hot metal bar was piercing her skull through her eye.

"Eeeeh! Ah—ah—aaaaaaaaah!"

Her spine arched backward. A tremendous amount of blood was flowing from her right eye. She held it desperately, but the bleeding did not stop. The pain was so strong that it made her lose consciousness, but it was even stronger still that it brought her back right away.

"Ugwoeeeh...!"

The agony gripped her brain, and the contents of her stomach reflexively spilled out.

"You'll pay for this... You...!"

The pain turned to anger, then to hatred. She felt like ripping out her insides. Fear, hatred, sadness, indignation, despair, any and all negative emotion jumbled around in her soul, increasing with explosive speed.

"I was expecting the awakening to accelerate through mental disruption...and it seems I was right. This technic makes use of the Railrod effect, so of course it would."

Someone was inside Hizuki. She could feel it.

"Oh, one last thing," Mag whispered in her ear. "Remember that time you wounded a classmate—the reason everyone started shunning you? That little friend of yours was actually one of my assassins. Sheesh, I'm so glad you forgot about the specifics back then."

Her last sealed memory—buried deep within her subconscious—was wrenched open.

Her classmate was holding a knife. She had a cold smile on her face as she attacked Hizuki.

Meldia instinctively protect Hizuki.

"You seemed so sad about it the whole thing. You even talked to me about it, remember? I had to stifle my laughter the entire time. Your hilarious antics were the only fun part of this boring mission."

It's true—everyone who gets close to me sees tragedy...

She then lost consciousness, as though her brain had run out of battery.



Okay, time to move the pieces on the board.

Veltol started thinking at the same speed he did when playing turn-based strategy games. Looking at the board from above, he could see that most students were confused as to what was happening.

Confusion is only natural. Their curriculum might include combat, but they haven't had proper training, let alone military experience. I must take this into account for my next move.

The mentors, too, were in disarray, barely able to calm the students down.

There were five visible enemies at the moment—first, that girl, likely a flesh-and-blood person. Her attire was eerily similar to the Faceless visitor at Hizuki's manor the previous night.

Then there were the four students under her control. They did nothing but stand in front of their classmates. From the mana they exuded, Veltol could tell they were enchanted with buffs. They had no Familia, so the fear was them getting beaten to death or being forced to kill themselves.

The sole exit was behind that black-clad girl. She, too, was only standing there, doing nothing.

I've seen her somewhere...

He was hit with déjà vu, but he decided to leave that thought for later.

Beside the girl was a corpse.

That wrapped up his analysis of the situation.

Difficulty: normal...no, easy?

Objectively speaking, this was the worst-case scenario, but Veltol felt not a shred of danger. It felt like the climax of a video game. After all, from his point of view, the situation was not perilous in the slightest.

A Familia-clad enemy had broken into the school and killed one student, taking the rest plus the mentors as hostages. She hadn't stated any demands or reasons for her actions, but he could take a guess. Based on her clothing, she had to be connected to Faceless. And Hizuki was missing, separated from Veltol et al., which had to be among the enemy's aims.

Silly Hizuki... This all happened because she got away from me. She should have stayed by my side twenty-four seven... Now I have to go and save her. Ah well. It's a king's duty to lend his friends a helping hand.

His current objective was to escape without any further deaths and find Hizuki.

He had to wait for the right timing to do so, as he had painfully learned by playing strategy games.

Veltol made his next move. He looked over at Takahashi, who was a short distance away. She noticed his gaze and nodded. He then glanced at the girl in black and then once again to Takahashi before pointing at his eye. That brief exchange was enough to convey what he was thinking.

Now...I want one more as insurance.

Veltol then placed a hand on the shoulder of the student right in front of him.

"Albert."

It was the aristocratic student he defeated on his first day of school. He talked to him via Whisper magic, using as little mana as possible through direct touch. Veltol got this idea for the new kind of Whisper spell from the high-confidentiality aether-contact-communication function the Familia had.

"Wha—?!"

"Keep quiet, you doofus."

Albert's shoulders twitched, and he frantically covered his mouth with both hands. Thankfully, no one seemed to notice. He tried to turn around, but Veltol stopped him.

"Don't look at me, either. Act normal."

"O-kay. Wh-what do you want...?"

"Listen carefully. The mentors here don't stand a chance against the current enemy. Putting that many students under her control is no easy feat, even without Familias equipped."

"Yeah, I can tell as much. Dammit, what the hell is going on...?"

"Santa is missing, Korneah is dead, now this... Something big is spreading across Akihabara—it's no longer just a conflict between the two rival towns."

"I guess we're really at war..."

"It's likely. But I want to take action to avoid that. In mere moments, the enemy will be distracted; that is when we will strike. Therefore, Albert, I will grant you the honor to help me out just this once."

Veltol didn't look at him, nor did he give much explanation. He kept things short and sweet.

"...So you want me to help you take them out?"

"Glad you got that. See those light swords made of aether above the victims' heads? That's the core. A downward pointing sword with a winged hilt is a symbol called an Olfeng Cross. Using it to control people is downright blasphemous... In any case, all we need to do is break them, and the students will be released from the spell. Can you do it?"

"Yes...probably. Just answer this one question: Why me?"

Albert's voice wasn't full of confidence like it was the day before—it was weak, frail. No doubt, Veltol was the cause.

"You're the strongest pupil in your school, are you not?"

Albert's expression changed once he heard that.

"Got it. I'm a noble. I can do this."

Veltol smiled, then put a fist to Albert's chest.

"There's no plan; we will improvise. Show me what you're truly made of, Albert."

"..."

Veltol's words always resounded strongly within the listener's heart.

Albert nodded. His gaze had matured; he no longer looked like just a boy.



What happened next was done entirely on the fly.

Takahashi was the first to act.

Veltol did not give her any instruction; they merely made eye contact. But he trusted her abilities as an aether hacker. Takahashi perfectly knew what he would want, and what she had to do in that moment.

"Time to counterattack...!"

She did just as he expected. She equipped the Familia she had smuggled in and connected to the aethernet to hack into the enemy's Familia. She deciphered the logic barrier's technic algorithm and opened a hole in it, unnoticed by the target. Every act was fast and precise, worthy of Takahashi's status as a tech wizard. Next, she introduced all her aether-hacking programs through the hole in the logic barrier.

"...?!" The girl in black finally realized what was happening, but it was too late.

Bunny skulls began flooding her vision, and loud noise overwhelmed her ears. Takahashi had jammed her virtual retinal display, paralyzing her and

creating an opening.

“Velly!”

“Good job, Takahashi!” Veltol made his move then. “*Vestum!*”

He proclaimed without incantation, using the least possible mana to not be noticed, and activated a spell that strengthened his body. Empty-handed, he thrust an extended hand infused with mana in the direction of the sword above the closest student-turned-puppet.

“One down.”

The spear-like thrust pierced the blade, turning it to particles of light until it vanished. Then Veltol leaped over the students to attack the puppet on the opposite side.

“Two down.”

He’d turned around midair and unleashed a back kick that pulverized the second sword.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. The two puppets fell to the ground, their strings cut.

“Gaaaagh!” The orc puppet charged at Veltol as soon as he landed. His entire body was red, like he was boiling, and his muscles swelled up even further, popping off his uniform’s buttons. Residual mana came out his mouth like steam.

“Huh, she even set Berserker to go off automatically.”

Berserker was a spell that robbed the target of logical thought and sent them into a rampage. It greatly increased their strength, stamina, and pain resistance.

The orc was fast. He jumped at Veltol like a beast.

“Quite amusing...” Veltol easily stopped the puppet’s destructive fist with a hand. “But not enough for me.”

He then restrained the orc’s arm, bringing his body closer, and destroyed the sword of light with the heel of his palm.

“Three down. Wait...” The last puppet approached him from behind. Veltol didn’t take a single step. “...make that four.”

The incantation was already finished.

“*Aether Arrow!*” Albert proclaimed the maginom.

The aether arrow pierced the light sword of the last puppet, leaving them with one fewer threat.

The girl in black recovered her senses almost at the same time Aether Arrow was activated.

“...Threat acknowledged. Commencing elimination.” Finally aware of what

was happening, she raised an arm and pointed at the only person who had used destructive magic: Albert.

“Eeek!” He’d just used magic—he had no way to defend himself.

“*Gall*—” The girl proclaimed the maginom, but before she could finish...

“Do it, Machina.”

...someone else made a move.

A corpse jumped up.

The silver-haired student who collapsed by the entrance was Machina Soleige. She had not moved an inch since the spear struck her, perfectly passing as a dead body. The sudden movement surprised the black-clad girl, making her falter for a moment.

The Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze did not miss that opening. She closed the distance in an instant and placed a palm on the girl’s torso.

“*Pyro-spring! Bloom into flames!*” She proclaimed the spell’s maginom with the shortest chant she knew. “*Safflower!*”

Flames burst from her palm.

The girl’s body was blown away like a rubber ball, destroying the entrance door and flying far outside the hall.

“Temporarily retreating.”

Only Veltol and Machina realized the girl had used a spell of her own right before Machina’s to offset its force and leaped backward to reduce the impact.

“Lord Veltol! I will go after her!”

Machina took her Familia out from her skirt’s pocket and equipped it, then chased after the enemy.

“Leave Hizuki to me! You take care of her!” Veltol said to his trusty vassal as she left. Then before the students could celebrate, he exclaimed, “Do not let your guard down! Keep your sword even closer when you feel victorious!”

Veltol knew that relaxing after a win was, in fact, the most dangerous moment of a battle. Besides, there was nothing to relax about in Akihabara’s current situation. He made sure to stop everyone before they got carried away.

“Stay together in one spot. Mentors and those good at magic barriers shall secure defenses, and do not forget to parallelize your technics! You are still inside the dragon’s nest!”

The students and mentors moved as instructed with astonishing speed. Taking command with concise instructions and raising people’s spirits came

naturally to Veltol.

“V-Veltol, is Machina really okay?! That hit she took earlier...” The brunette student Machina had protected ran up to him, tears in her eyes.

“Not to worry, she’s fine. It was but a scratch.”

That was a lie. Machina was able to regenerate the wound in her head immediately, but she couldn’t get up right away, so she decided to play dead in order to analyze the situation. She trusted Veltol would make a move.

“Velly!” Veltol turned around at Takahashi’s voice. “I took a peek at the logs in that girl’s Familia. Looks like they’re really after Hizuki.”

“Well done, Takahashi. That much was clear. I’ll go look for her.”

“Gotcha. Also, one more thing.”

“What is it?”

“Apparently, the armies of both Electric and Magic Town are on Hokoten Avenue, about to start a war. The Electric side’s claiming that Tratte Götel killed Korneah Seburd.”

“That’s certainly an urgent matter, but we still have some time. Information is key in these situations. You stay put and gather intel on both armies. Keep an eye on things here.”

“Okey dokey. Go get ’em, Velly. Bring Hizuki back.”

Takahashi sat down, brought up multiple holodisplays around her, and dived into the net.

“Veltol, what should I do?” Albert asked.

His arms and legs were shaking, his forehead a sea of sweat, showing how stressed he was about his first real fight.

“You did well, Albert. You take command here. Help the mentors watch over the students. New enemies may appear at any moment, so don’t let anyone leave just yet.”

“Command? Me?” Albert was visibly anxious. It was only natural—he was only a student and had no real experience in combat. He wasn’t exactly qualified to take the lead. However, Veltol was not the kind of man to put an incapable person in charge. He trusted whomever he thought could do the job, and no one else.

“You will be fine, Albert. You can do it. Ganfall Heygrams was a coward... but not you. You did not run when faced with the enemy. I guarantee that you can take care of things.”

“...Got it.”

The statement might have sounded like cheap consolation or drivel to some,

but not to Albert. He nodded in reassurance. He no longer looked anxious.

“What are you going to do, Veltol?”

“I must go save the damsel in distress. Heh—it seems I’ve had to do this more frequently ever since my return.”

The Demon Lord flashed a bold smile.

“No need for concern. There is no quest, be it in a game or in real life, that I cannot complete.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Goddess Reincarnated

Veltol had left the practice hall and was running through the hallways. He didn't see Machina anywhere, but he had no choice but to trust in her.

"Now, where is Hizuki?"

Right as he reached the stairs, the mana in the air expanded so much that it made the aether rumble.

"What was that?!" Veltol felt the change, reflexively stopping as he recognized how highly inductive and alien the mana was. "It came from above...!"

He immediately decided to head over to the source of the strange, bloated mana.

He took the shortest route to the rooftop: not the stairs and hallways, but the walls of the school building.

Veltol donned his black mana armor and kicked the window open, then leaped from the short protrusion of the windows, one to the other.

"Rampage in the black skies! *Vernal!*"

Veltol summoned the soul armament forged from his own soul and the Dark Sword, Vernal, as he climbed the walls.

He reached the top of the roughly hundred-meter-tall building in a single breath, landing on the rooftop from his last, higher jump. At the center was a glowing magic circle, a girl unconscious atop it. Before her stood a black-haired woman.

"Hizuki!"

She did not respond to his call, but she was alive. He sensed strange mana emerging from within her.

"*As clouds to the moon and winds to the blossoms.*" The full-borg woman in front of Hizuki turned around. "Have you ever heard this Japanese saying? I've always found it quite graceful, but now I see how apt it is for this situation.

Every rose has its thorn.”

“That voice... Santa—so it really was you?” Right away, Veltol realized why Mag’s voice was coming out of Tratte’s body.

“It’s *Rosanta*. How many times do I have to tell you? Can you be any ruder? Whatever, I don’t care. I guess you figured out what’s going on.”

“I wasn’t sure, but I had my doubts when I witnessed the mediumship at the manor last night. Rather, your bizarre name had me suspicious from the very beginning. So should I keep calling you Santa, or should I say Faceless?”

“Hmmm, you knew just from my magic? Erm, I guess I should’ve expected that. It doesn’t matter what you call me. Names are pointless as far as I’m concerned.”

Veltol started thinking.

The current situation in Akihabara; Mag taking over Tratte’s body; Korneah’s murder.

Then he rid his mind of such thoughts. There was only one thing worth thinking about: saving Hizuki.

However, the enemy was near her—he couldn’t so easily approach. He decided to observe first. He figured out the magic circle’s technic with just one glance.

“So this, too, is mediumship...”

“You have a good eye, Demon Lord. What do you think?”

“What is your objective?”

“The goddess Meldia.”

“Meldia...?”

“More specifically, we want to acquire and preserve her divinity. We initially only looked for the regalia, a piece of her divinity, but then I received a new quest: to manifest that mass of divinity we call a goddess and secure it.” Mag sounded disappointed as she continued, “But I suppose I’ve already failed from the moment you arrived here before I could finish... I’m super bummed out, really. That heretical hag is so useless.”

“Ha, I couldn’t care less about your supposed quest. I will be taking Hizuki back.”

“Seriously, how could I have ever possibly accounted for you? I was shocked to know you came here right on the day I’d be carrying out my plans. I couldn’t believe it. The higher-ups were in such a hurry, too, that I couldn’t change course. I know you can’t expect things to always go according to plan, but this is ridiculous. What terrible luck I have. A ten-year plot, ruined in an instant. I lost.”

“Quite the sore loser, I see. You can keep up that attitude if you defeat me, you know.”

“You might be ancient, but it’s a fact that you defeated Marcus, Demon Lord. I have no intention of fighting you; I’m not that conceited. I lost...but I didn’t say you won. The magic’s still ongoing, unknown to you.”

A magic circle appeared at Mag’s feet.

“What...?” Veltol stopped for a moment. He did not know of the technic Mag had just expanded.

Veltol didn’t try to approach her. He was wary of it being some sort of magi-gadget, since no maginom had been proclaimed. Instead, he took a few steps back to analyze it and decide his next actions.

“The fuse has been lit. Nothing’s stopping the flames of war from erupting in this city. I’ll come here to get hold of Meldia after it’s over, if she’s still alive.”

Then Mag vanished.

“Teleportation...?!”

He didn’t stay shocked at the unknown technic and magic for long before something changed in Hizuki. She slowly began floating upward.

The mana leaking from her body made the surrounding aether glow gold.

A bright golden light indicative of brilliant divinity.

A cog of light appeared behind her, reminiscent of a halo in religious works of art.

The Crown decorated her head; the Orb in her right eye shone golden, and her left eye turned the same color from its original scarlet. She held the Blade in her hand as her school uniform transformed into a pure-white ceremonial dress, the goddess’s soul armament.

She was suspended standing a few centimeters above the floor.

Veltol stared at Hizuki as she was enveloped in this golden light.

“Hizuki,” he whispered.

“You are wrong,” she replied.

Her voice sounded just like Hizuki’s, and yet at the same time, it was different.

“My name is Meldia.”

Hizuki—no, Meldia—met Veltol’s gaze.

“I am the goddess of joy and misfortune, one of the Six Great Gods, Meldia. Your head is held far too high, insolent heathen.”

“Meldia has...manifested...?!”

Every single strand of her hair was brimming with mana, shining bright.

“I believe this is the first time we’ve met in person, Demon Lord Veltol.”

The goddess cast Veltol a salacious sidelong glance.

Her presence was less impactful after having manifested in the material world and relying on her vessel’s mana. Nonetheless, it was perfectly clear that she was a higher being, given her transcendental bearing as well as the mere sight of her.

“I didn’t expect you to still be alive in this day and age, Goddess Meldia.”

“I can say the same for you. Though, it appears you’ve taken quite a tumble from your former self, back when you instilled fear throughout the world.”

“Not nearly as great a tumble as you. You’ve taken a human vessel. How the mighty have fallen. Have you lost your godly pride?”

“...I really don’t like you after all, Veltol. Truth be told, I dislike any man with black hair. Men should all be blond.”

“Oh, looks like we agree on something, Meldia. I don’t like you, either—especially that haughty tone you take before me.”

“Says the man who treats a literal goddess with such impudence.”

Veltol thought about his next move while they chatted.

His objectives were gathering all three regalia, breaking the underground treasury’s seal, and verifying whether the Dark Peers Records were truly there. The easiest way to achieve that would be to kill Meldia and get the regalia...but killing a friend—Hizuki—was not an option.

Nor was giving in. So he reached the same conclusion he told the Hero Gram that day. The Demon Lord always had only one choice: not to choose, but to get it all. That was it.

Meldia opened and closed her hand, checking her new body.

She was full of openings. Now was the time to strike.

As soon as he thought so, Meldia was right in front of him.

“—?!”

They were within reach of each other’s sword. Meldia had moved with speed far beyond Veltol’s expectations.

She held her sword high, and he responded in kind.

The Demon Lord’s dark sword and the Goddess’s golden sword clashed, bursting the aether.

And the Demon Lord was blown far away.

Veltol, though shocked, thought things over as he was blasted backward at high speed.

Now we're talking!

In his thousands of years of life, he had seen the power of the gods from afar, but this was the first time he could witness it for himself in the material world. His lips curved into a smile from the exhilaration.

Her mana and the medium's strength put Meldia just at the same or not too far above the Six Dark Peers' power, which shouldn't have been enough to send Veltol flying like this. However, he could not deny the reality.

This is not magic! It's her divinity! Could this power be something imbued into the sword itself, or...?

Veltol's Sage Eyes did not have any effect on divinity, since this ability was outside the concept of magic.

The element of the unknown was what Veltol enjoyed most in battle, and this duel against a goddess, the first of his life, was certainly enough to entertain him.

He crashed into the rooftop fence before he could finish his thoughts. It didn't slow his momentum, however—he broke right through, flying out of the building.

“You’re far too haughty, Demon Lord!” Meldia closed the distance in an instant and swung her sword. “I’ll cut you down to size!”

Veltol defended himself from a direct hit by connecting swords, but being in midair, he had no way of pressing against her. The Divine Sword pushed him with no trouble, and he fell to the ground in a flash.

“Heh, never thought I would be killed by Meldia. What an honor.”

Despite wearing his armor, defending himself with the Dark Sword, and strengthening his body with mana, the impact crushed his skull. A torrent of blood gushed from his head, his neck bent in an impossible manner, his organs were crushed, and he coughed up blood. He died instantaneously.

He was the Demon Lord, however—the lord of the immortals. He could recover right away from such a simple death by physical damage.

“My regenerative powers are in tip-top shape. I must thank my three million followers for their faith.”

He twisted his neck back into its natural position with a hand.

“You’re puny, Veltol.”

The goddess descended silently. Her feet didn’t touch the ground as she glared at Veltol.

“You dare insult me, Goddess?”

“Don’t look at me without my permission, Demon Lord.”

The two beings of legend faced each other.

“You are slow, weak, puny. You disappoint me, Veltol. This is the Demon Lord who turned on all gods of Alnaeth, who fought to death against him... against the Hero Gram? I can scarcely believe the man who tortured him is now groveling like an insect.”

“Sad to say, groveling is hardly an embarrassment to me anymore. I was beaten to the point of vomiting and thrown to the trash as soon as I came back to this world. This is nothing, really.” Veltol used the Dark Sword as a cane to help himself to his feet. “But what about you? You appear to have a rather loose definition of goddess.”

“I am still but a pupa before eclosion. I know not what that woman with the mechanical body pretended to do with me, but it is fortunate I managed to manifest here. Now I only have to fulfill my wish.”

“Your wish...?”

Meldia was implying she had a reason for wanting to manifest in this world. Veltol did not know what it could be, but he was certain of one thing.

Whatever this goddess wants so badly that she would take on a material form...it can't be good!

“But first, I must remove this nasty rat from my sight.” She disappeared. “I have to eliminate his—Gram’s—enemy!”

“—!” Meldia appeared before Veltol once more. “Again...?!”

Veltol felt something was off—this could not be explained by mere speed. There was no sound, no gust of wind. She was neither stopping nor delaying time, nor teleporting, either. He couldn’t feel any tremors of aether or mana.

“Haaah!” Meldia swung her sword downward.

Veltol didn’t try to block it this time; he dodged. The Divine Sword cut through air and stuck into the ground.

That should have bored a deeper hole if she used the same force as when she hit me before. That means she's not using any direct means of boosting her physical strength. There must be a gimmick to this.

The attack could have also been a bluff, but Meldia’s swordsmanship was amateurish in Veltol’s opinion. He didn’t think she was using a trick. It might be too hasty, but he had to make such judgments so long as he had no surefire way to counter.

Getting too close would be poor strategy. That is the Divine Sword she's wielding; she could nullify my immortality. But I can't keep my distance so long

as she keeps moving like that.

Meldia pulled the sword out, scraping the ground. Veltol jumped backward.

In that case...I have to keep my distance and attack the moment she approaches!

He chose a midrange style. He initialized a spell and skipped the incantation, then proclaimed the maginom to activate it:

“Dell Ray!”

Veltol shot a black flash from the magic circle that materialized from his hand. Meldia appeared and disappeared several times before he fired, just as he expected. He activated the spell in sync with her movement.

Meldia’s speed had become her demise—the attack would hit directly, without fail. Veltol was sure of it.

And yet the black light missed the target. The Dell Ray flew right past her as if Veltol had not aimed correctly.

“I missed?! No...she dodged!” He discarded the first thought for one reason: “I couldn’t possibly miss a target!”

His self-confidence, self-esteem, his pride, conceit, narcissism, and egomania made him certain.

Her combat ability defied the magical and physical rules of the world. She was the goddess of joy and misfortune. Her divinity made him certain, as well.

Yet at the same time, the shock of missing the shot had him wide-open.

“Die for my love, Demon Lord!”

The Divine Sword left a golden trail behind as it swung upward, slicing Veltol’s arm in half.

His armor served no purpose in defending against the attack.

“Guh...!”

Meldia was vulnerable after the strike, so he launched a kick to her torso. It felt like kicking a stone wall. He forwent trying to send her flying that way and retreated on reflex.

Veltol grimaced out of burning pain. Ancient mediumship wisdom said that the purpose of pain was to signal danger to the body. The further an immortal was from a material death, the less pain they felt.

Veltol, with his current regained faith, should not have felt pain from his arm merely being chopped off. It should have regenerated right away. Yet even this was slow. This meant that Meldia’s Blade had damaged his soul, too, inhibiting his immortality.

“So the faith of three million followers kneels to the power of the

weaponized goddess soul fragments. It appears your soul armament really is on the level of the Hero's Holy Sword. But now I know the true face of your power."

"What...?"

"Meldia, the goddess of joy and misfortune. You manipulate these two elements between us—you control the power of fate to make your own attacks critical hits and mine fumble. Am I wrong? I suppose I have not figured it out entirely, since this does not cover your movement itself."

If this were a dice game, the goddess would have multiple dice in hand, all showing the exact pips she wanted, while Veltol had nothing but ones.

Veltol realized he was fighting on the goddess of misfortune's own field. It was impossible to win.

Even with decreased divinity, in a mortal's body, she could still control such an invisible concept.

Now...how do I counter? I still haven't deciphered the nature of her divinity in its entirety. That thing is a power beyond the rules of this world...a game cheat, through and through. But no, rather than thinking about how to defeat her...

He had to think about saving Hizuki.

Enclosing two active souls in one body made them clash. The one who managed to devour the other got control of the vessel.

In which case, there is already no hope of saving Hizuki...

Rescuing her would be impossible if Meldia had already completely devoured her soul. In that case, his only choice would be to destroy Meldia's vessel—Hizuki's body.

Meldia was able to stay sealed within Hizuki's body for a long time because her soul hadn't been completely active, on top of the Orb's control.

There was no way to verify whether Hizuki's soul was still safe.

"I tip my hat to your divinity, Great Goddess. To be able to freely manipulate fate as so. Now I see why divinity is regarded as a tremendous power beyond human comprehension. So you used this power in its peak to change that man's fate as a reward."

"Change...his fate...?"

"You rid him of his ability to age."

Meldia's shoulders jolted up slightly as she realized what he meant.

"What...?"

"Surely you did not forget, Meldia."

The goddess gulped.

“I am talking about the Hero Gram, *whose life you greatly altered.*”

Something changed within Meldia after hearing that.

“...ry.”

“...?”

“Aaah, aaah, aaaaaaaaaah! No! I’m sorry... I didn’t... I’m sorry, Gram, I’m so sorry... It wasn’t... I just wanted to make you happy... No, I—I... That wasn’t my intention... Gram!”

“Oh...” Veltol realized whose voice Hizuki had been hearing.

The goddess Meldia regretted giving the Hero Gram the gift of immortality.

“—” The goddess hung her head, and her light darkened.

She looked like a scolded child.

She stopped apologizing.

Then she raised her head.

“Help me, Veltol.”

Meldia was still in her ceremonial dress. For a single instant, her left eye turned back to scarlet.

It was that girl, crying out for help.

Hizuki resurfaced momentarily. Her soul hasn’t been fully eclipsed yet. Considering the technic is making use of the Railrod effect, I should have expected that Meldia’s takeover would weaken through mental instability. Perhaps...

He saw a glimmer of hope.

“Of course I will.” Veltol fiercely nodded in response.

Then he remembered his oath to her.

“So if I asked you for help, you would help me?”

He swore on his name as Demon Lord Veltol that he would help her.

There was nothing else to consider. What he had to do was simple: save the girl asking for his help. Nothing more.

It would take some time for his arm to regenerate, what with his immortality

inhibited by the Blade's slice. He couldn't use magic that needed both arms. And his opponent was too great to take on with a single one. His situation was not ideal. But that didn't matter.

"Hang on a bit longer, Hizuki. I will save you."

"Hizuki? No, that's not who I am." The goddess rose again. "My name...is Meldia."



Machina finally caught up to the girl clad in black, and they were now facing each other in a hallway on the School of Magic's third floor.

Machina initialized her mana and waved her arms to summon her black armor: her soul armament. The mana flowing through her long, silver hair caused it to burst into flames.

This mana, this sensation... I also felt this when she attacked me before. Could it be...? No, there's no way...

She felt something like nostalgia...and tenderness.

However, the mana was too distorted to make a proper judgment.

Machina was certain this was the same girl she had seen for a second in Electric Town the day before. But the problem was she felt like she had known her for much, much longer.

She couldn't read any expression from her face, since it was covered by both a visor and a veil.

"Scan complete. Opponent's immortal factor has been measured. Threat level over twenty. Execution-armament-use restrictions lifted per assault regulations. Summoning MPM-LoL."

Her voice sounded digital, like it'd been put through a voice changer. But even that felt familiar to Machina.

The summoned armament—the Massively Produced Model Lance of Legend—appeared as a staff about two and a half meters long, with a wing-shaped ornament at the tip. The girl wielded it, extending its wings to reveal a giant blade of aether at the tip, turning the staff into a lance. She pointed it down and dropped her hips, leaning forward.

Machina could easily stay on the offensive if this was just a regular spear, letting her immortality regenerate any wound. This was the strongest battle tactic an immortal could take. However, she had to keep her guard up so long as she didn't know what sort of effect the weapon could have.

From what she just said, she has some way to determine I'm immortal... So it's very likely that weapon has anti-immortal capabilities.

Machina had naturally come to stay alert against anti-immortal means after experiencing the Immortal Hunt firsthand. But more than that, there was something else she wanted to know.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“...?”

The girl finally expressed a sort of emotion in reaction; she tilted her head. She showed an opening for the first time, but Machina didn't take advantage. “Have we ever met before?”

This wasn't a trick to make her lower her guard—it was a genuine question. Machina wanted to check if this pang of nostalgia meant anything—this feeling that she had met her in the past, long before she saw her in Electric Town.

“...” The girl shook her head.

That was expected; besides, nothing would've changed, even if they had met before. They were still enemies. And now they were going to fight to the death; that was their sole connection.

“My name... My code is Ange. What is your name?” the girl whispered.

“Huh?” Machina opened her eyes wide at Ange's sudden self-introduction.

“We haven't met before, so I'm introducing myself. I'm Ange.”

“Oh. My name is Machina. Machina Soleige. Nice to meet you.”

“Machina...” Ange repeated her name multiple times. Then she shook her head. “No... I really don't know that name.”

The way she talks... It's similar to her. But...

That same moment, Ange leaped off the ground.

She's attacking!

Machina brushed aside any further thoughts.

She was empty-handed, at a clear disadvantage in close combat. So...

“I just have to keep my distance!”

Machina grabbed her wrist and raised her arm, then slightly bent at the knee to lower her stance. She activated a spell before her opponent could get in reach.

“*Shooting Lotus!*”

An explosion engulfed the long hallway in front of Machina with a thunderous *boom*. The blast was strong enough to push Machina's own arm up in recoil and blow her a dozen or so centimeters backward.

The destructive flames looked for an escape, shattering the glass windows, blowing through the classrooms, and even destroying one of the walls.

All that remained was the charred hallway, some embers, and traces of devastation. Ange was nowhere to be found.

She'd be doing me a huge favor if that turned her into ash...

But Machina then felt a presence, and she turned to look outside.

There was Ange, flying in midair. Blue aetheric wings glittered on her back. The sight reminded Machina of an old friend.

“*Mastis.*”

Ange activated a spell. Light extended from the aetheric wings and turned into a dozen azure bullets that shot right at Machina through the broken windows.

Machina stared at them while jumping backward into a classroom. The bullets changed direction like hounds hunting her.

“Tracking bullets...!”

Then even more light bullets destroyed the walls at her sides in pursuit of her.

“*Flame Shield Blossom!*” Machina chose defense over dodging, raised her arms, and deployed a shield.

The flame petals stopped the bullets. However, they also obstructed Machina’s vision.

“Wha—?!”

Ange was pushing against her, breaking the classroom wall and slicing her flame shield.

“Attack.”

The lance aimed for her heart. Machina twisted her body to evade, but the tip bore into her shoulder.

“Argh!”

The pain told her that the weapon damaged her soul as well.

The wings of light pushed forward with greater force. Ange kept on charging until the two of them hit the wall on the other side of the classroom, destroying it. The desks in the next classroom over flew away as she pushed to the next wall, and then the next, and the next.

“Stop...!” Machina managed to push the lance away and kick Ange back.

The blade left Machina’s shoulder and flicked blood onto Ange’s visor.

She knows her theory...

Aiming at a joint to diminish mobility was one of the oldest rules of anti-immortal combat.

Machina’s regeneration was slowed down for sure, despite the anti-immortal effects of Ange’s lance not being too high. She couldn’t raise her arm.

“Confirmed decline in opponent’s combat abilities.”

Ange swung her lance around and stood ready again.

Machina would not be able to take a second hit.

...But I’m already winning.

She smiled, certain of her victory.

“Did you know? An immortal’s blood dissolves in the aether and disappears after some time away from their body—unless they don’t want it to.”

Machina’s shoulder wound had already closed.

“And my blood is still on your visor... Do you understand what that means?”

The groundwork was laid.

“I didn’t want to use that asshole’s magic, but when push comes to shove...!”

She used a certain man’s signature move, which activated when his blood touched the aether.

Its name?

“*Blood Bomb!*”

Machina detonated her blood just as the Duke of the Bloody Arts, Marcus, used to.

The blood on Ange’s visor suddenly combusted and exploded. Her head was blown off, and pieces of her Familia and visor fell to the ground. Her knees buckled, then her body collapsed.

Unlike Marcus, Machina didn’t have the magical aptitude to use others’ blood as a medium for the blast, but she had greater aptitude for magic relating to flames and explosions than him.

She imitated Marcus’s technic through her Familia, allowing her to use her own blood, albeit with restrictions.

“Phew...” She let out a sigh of relief and released her soul armament, changing back into her school uniform.

One enemy down. She turned to look at the headless corpse. It was drowning in the huge amount of blood flowing out from the wound.

“...”

Machina faced the other direction and started thinking about what to do next.

First, she considered joining Veltol to provide backup. Then, she considered returning to the practice hall to protect the students.

But she felt a presence before she could make her choice. She turned around.

“?!”

She saw the headless body move.

No one survived without a head—that was how things worked. But she already knew of an existence that went against such rules.

“She’s an immortal...!”

The blood surrounding the girl started evaporating into the aether.

Then something shone. Ange’s body was lit up like it was under a spotlight.

Wings of light poured down on her, then slowly lifted her body upward like a puppet.

Under the divine glow, her shattered skull began regenerating.

Machina had seen that light before, in the distant past.

“I did wonder...that maybe it was you.”

She was undergoing resurrection, and Machina knew that exact method.

Immortals had different ways of resurrecting depending on their immortal factor. For example, Machina, with a phoenix factor, would regenerate in flames when her head was blown off.

An immortal with a vampire factor would knit its body again with blood.

Ange was different. She was like a messenger of the heavens descending upon the earth.

Her head came back together, now free from the visor and veil.

“It...really was you.”

Machina knew that face. Her bluish-silver hair; her jade-color eyes, deeply clear like the Yuke Sea; her face still looking so young and innocent.

Machina knew her name.

“May!”

She had a vague idea. A hunch. She considered the possibility.

This girl really was one of the Six Dark Peers. May, the Duchess of the Mournful Firmament. The one Machina was closest to—the one she thought of as her own sister.

Relief, joy, confusion—all sorts of emotions swirled within Machina.

“I...don’t...know you,” May muttered.

Her face, her eyes, her hair. It all made Machina’s chest ache with fondness. But she received only rejection in return.

“May...did something happen to your memories?”

She might have been brainwashed or had her memories tampered with. Maybe she’d been subjected to sensory alteration, hypnosis, mental pollution, or

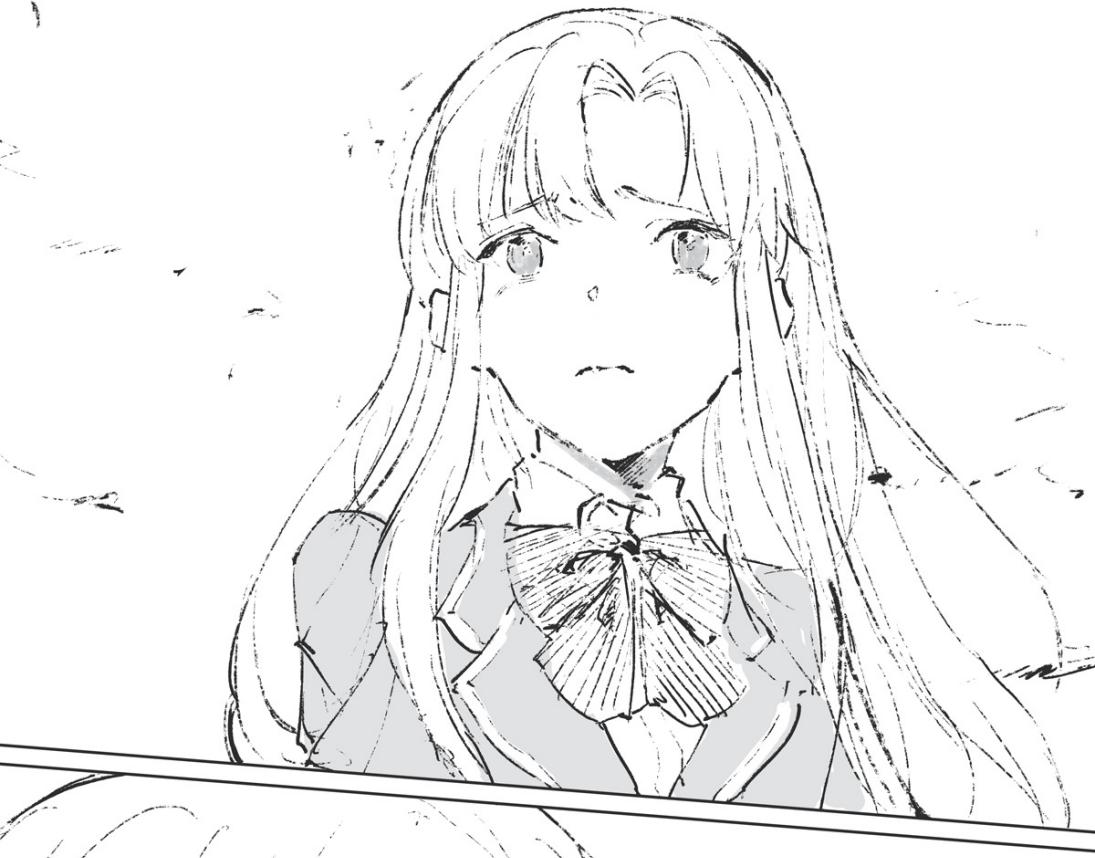
perhaps even a new, unfamiliar technic. Machina considered every possibility.

She put her emotions before anything else, even completely forgetting why they were fighting.

“No, don’t...”

Machina tried to come closer, but she stopped when she saw something change within May.

“No, the shackles... Arrrgh!”



May grimaced in pain, hyperventilating, then put a hand on her chest and arched her back. The aether around her glowed blue, and a giant ring of light appeared above her head. Sinister aetheric wings materialized at her back.

The light ring started rotating at high speeds like a machine, and the aetheric wings emitted a bigger and more twisted light than when she was flying just before. Mana gathered in her jade eyes and hair and glittered.

“No... Nooooooooooooooo!”

Mana erupted from her body as she screamed.

Machina finally understood what was off: a different mana was mixed in with May’s.

Mana overflowed and the aether raged like a storm, making Machina take a step back.

“This mana...!”

All sounds halted. The air and aether stopped vibrating.

The mana converged before May’s eyes in complete silence. It pooled and clustered into a giant sphere, compressed as far as it could go before it spread and burst like lightning.

It was the same kind of simple mana release as the type Veltol had used in his duel against that aristocratic student. But its destructive power was on a different level.

“—”

She turned to look at Machina.

Machina immediately realized defending against it would be impossible.

“Sleep.”

So she spoke that word, and May lost consciousness, collapsing to the floor.

The compressed ball of mana scattered in the air after losing control, then vanished.

Suddenly, a full-borg woman appeared and lifted the fallen girl in her arms.

“Principal Tratte?!”

“Machina, the Dazzling Blaze—I didn’t expect you to make it this far. I see I shouldn’t have underestimated one of the Six Dark Peers.”

She recognized that characteristic tone and voice.

“Wait—Ms. Mag?! But that body... What’s going on...?”

“Crap, I didn’t change my voice. Oh well.” Mag scratched her head awkwardly.

Machina then understood what was happening in Akihabara.

“I didn’t expect this useless scrap heap...Ange, I mean, to get driven to the wall like that. Glad I got to her in time.”

“Her name isn’t Ange. Give May back.”

“I can’t do that, and I don’t want to fight you here. Having Ange taken from me on top of failing my quest would not only get me fired, but hanged. I think she’s an obsolete piece of junk, but the higher-ups like this prototype.”

A magic circle appeared under Mag’s feet.

May’s veil turned over, revealing the emblem of a golden dragon and silver sword drawn on the back of her clothes.

“You’re an obsolete piece of junk yourself; you’ve never seen this before, have you?”

Mag and May disappeared. They teleported without proclamation, just like when Mag ran away from Veltol.

“What?! Teleportation?!”

Teleportation was an extremely high-level magic. It wasn’t something a single caster could use easily. If this had somehow become possible, it would have already been applied to daily life, bringing tremendous prosperity.

Considering the lack of proclamation, Machina surmised she had used some sort of magi-gadget or artifact. This went far beyond what modern technology was capable of.

But that all was relatively meaningless to her.

“May...”

Her old friend was alive, but captive. All sorts of emotions flooded Machina, but she kept any further thoughts at bay and looked ahead.

“First things first...”

She tried her best not to dwell on May. She wouldn’t be able to think straight otherwise.

What she had to do now was reunite with Takahashi and keep the students safe. She didn’t need to go help Veltol—he had told her he would take care of things, and she trusted him. He’d already saved her twice, and she had total confidence in him. And confidence was true loyalty.

He had never betrayed anything he had ever told her, after all.



Magic Town descended into fear and chaos.

Some people shut themselves at home, some were taking refuge in an underground shelter built during the City Wars, and some were at Hokoten Avenue, filming both sides' armies and streaming it live on the aethernet.

The uproar occasionally got louder until the explosions and swords clashing could be heard from the School of Magic.

City War II had ended several decades earlier, and many still remembered the tragedy.

No one was able to grasp the current situation.

Meanwhile, the district where many of the nobles of Magic Town lived was quiet. The news had circulated faster than anywhere within wealthy circles, all of whom had already evacuated to a shelter.

A man and a woman walked leisurely through the deserted district.

"Please, you should start deciding on a destination beforehand. Think about all the rescheduling I have to do," the woman chided.

The blond man smiled awkwardly. "I never asked you to follow me, though..."

"Nonetheless, I can't believe they'd wage civil war in this day and age. Won't somebody please think of the economy?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Sending people to war is a waste of human and nonhuman resources. Just leave all that to drones. They were the stars around the end of the Second City War."

"You're not listening to me, are you?"

"...You won't try to stop them?"

"Huh? Me? Stop what?"

"The war."

"Mm, that's not really my forte. Let someone smarter take care of it. I would've been gung ho about stopping a war back when I was younger, I guess."

"Oh, that's surprising. I thought you were the type to stick your nose into this sort of thing. Who was it who helped the stupid Aethernet Overlord out in his dumb little adventure and forced a certain knockout of a secretary to leave her elite job at a megacorporation again? Wasn't that the Hero?"

"Uhhh... Ha-ha-ha. Personal quarrels are one thing. I just don't like war."

"Does anyone like war besides arms dealers and psychopaths?"

"I've been through all sorts of conflicts, but I'd say the First City War near its end was the most draining... Roughest one was the Immortal War, though." He spoke with disgust on his face, as though he didn't even want to remember it.

“They say even a troll reconsiders after erring once, yet here we are, fighting war over and over again. We’ve got no right to make fun of trolls.”

He then turned to look at the School of Magic, faraway in the distance.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing, it’s just... I feel like I’d get swept up into something really annoying if I went that way... We should leave already.”

They kept on walking, not once looking back.



“Is that all the Demon Lord who spread fear throughout Alnaeth is capable of?!”

The battle between goddess and Demon Lord kept going with the former dominating. No surprise there. Veltol had no way to break through her divinity —no way to win.

She could use her divinity to control fate and nullify any attack, while her own Divine Sword could pierce his immortality.

Even if he managed to overcome her inviolable divinity, there was no point if he couldn’t save Hizuki.

Having lost an arm, Veltol didn’t defend against the blows; he averted them.

“You do nothing but run away. How pathetic, Veltol. How low the Demon Lord who once opposed the gods has fallen.”

Meldia’s state of mind was stable again, with control of Hizuki’s body firmly in the goddess’s hands.

“How can you say that when you’re the one who’s hidden yourself inside a young girl? Don’t you know that even a troll reconsiders after erring once? You are putting the bright mind of that body’s owner to waste. I suppose it matters not how high-grade the memory and CPU might be when you install an obsolete, buggy OS on it.”

Veltol’s tongue was sharper than ever, despite his disadvantage. He was hyped up from the fresh experience of battling a goddess.

“Enough of your mockery, manservant!” the goddess howled as she unleashed her following attack.

A question then popped into Veltol’s head regarding Meldia’s defense and evasion.

I call it evasion for convenience’s sake...but in truth, she is making my attacks miss. She’s not attempting to avoid a hit, but rather forcing me to miss the mark.

Veltol dodged the sideways sweep aiming for his neck by bending his knees, then used that force like a spring to thrust his Dark Sword into Meldia's heart. But the blade did not pierce her flesh. It stuck her like a knife against an iron sheet.

He left an opening, and she immediately assumed a stance to counter, but this was all according to his plan.

“Verbull!”

A bullet of black, compressed aether shot from the tip of the Dark Sword.

Even though it was making close contact to Meldia, the bullet didn't strike her; it went flying off to nowhere, as if he had missed on purpose.

The heavy thrust of the sword hit the target, but it didn't pierce her. The weak shot completely missed the mark to begin with.

This difference between his attacks being blocked and evaded was what made him suspicious.

The goddess didn't take advantage of the new opening, and so Veltol proclaimed the following maginom, looking for an answer.

“Van Solegia!”

A fist-sized ball of crimson fire appeared in the palm of his hand. He gripped it tight, wound up his arm, and took his distance while throwing it overhand.

The ball flew at high speed, hit the goddess, burst, and engulfed her in a vortex of crimson flames.

She then emerged from the fire, unharmed.

“I finally got it—the true nature of your divinity’s manipulation of fate.”

He had validated his suspicions and was now certain.

“Attacks that follow the rules of physics, such as sword cuts or flames with a low percentage of aether, get nullified. Meanwhile, magical attacks with high aether rates get diverted.” He paused. *“And the clear difference falls on one being automatic, the other manual. You automatically nullify physical hits, but you need to manually evade any aether attacks. That is why you countered right away after my sword thrust but didn’t after I shot Verbull.”*

“...”

“Putting it in video game terms...your divinity grants you a passive skill to nullify physical damage and an active skill to evade magical damage. That is the inner workings of it, correct? I think I’ve got it figured out.”

“Shut your mouth, you know-it-all.” She shrugged. *“So what? Even if my powers worked the way you said, do you think you can win? Your attacks won’t reach me. Ever.”*

“So what, you say? I just proved that I could harm you if you do not manage to evade in time. You would have no need to dodge in the first place if all my attacks were truly useless. Your advantage is over.”

“No need to put on a strong facade, Demon Lord. You lost before the dice were thrown.”

The goddess was right. Figuring out the logic behind it did not mean he could now overcome it.

He couldn’t use his second form like he did when he fought Marcus at the Immortal Furnace, either. He lacked faith still, and there was not enough concentration of aether in the air. He had to win without using his ace in the hole, and his opponent was a goddess with the power to avoid any touch.

Perhaps that could be my trump card in this situation...but the problem is timing.

Using it at the wrong time would mean defeat. He had to patiently wait for the perfect moment.

“Do not think you will be forgiven for the sin of defying the gods. I will make sure you never show that arrogant face of yours again by extinguishing your soul. And with my enemy finally gone, I will once again encounter the Hero.”

“The Hero...? Why did you come to this world in the first place?”

“...I want to know how he feels...about what I’ve done... I need to ask him what he thinks...and apologize...”

Veltol was puzzled. *What is she talking about?*

He wasn’t confused about what she meant. Rather, it was because he knew too well—because he knew the Hero Gram.

And so, without realizing, he asked the question that granted him victory.

“Do you really not know how Gram feels?”

This kind of question wasn’t appropriate for the battlefield. It was nonsense. Drivel. It served no bargaining purpose.

It was trivial love talk, the kind of chat only teenagers took part in. These two, meanwhile, were goddess and Demon Lord, far beyond the mentality of humankind.

That frivolous question spontaneously left Veltol’s mouth. And yet.

“Huh...?”

This was the goddess Meldia—the most romantically obsessed entity in history.

She opened her eyes wide and blinked again and again, looking entirely like a teenager in love.

“Wh-what... What would the likes of you know about Gram...?!”

“Quite a lot. This is the Hero Gram we are talking about.”

“What...do you mean...?”

Veltol was drastically destabilizing Meldia’s mind without realizing.

“What an ignorant fool. I take it you found out what happened to the Hero after you gave him eternal youth, then regretted it and have been dragging your feet over what to do ever since. Seriously, gods are more mortal-like than mortals themselves. What you feel for the Hero is not affection, but romantic love. You can trust my judgment—I’ve been playing tons of dating sims lately.”

“Love...?”

“Don’t tell me you weren’t even aware? Ludicrous.” Veltol sighed before continuing in an annoyed tone, “You’re utterly obsessed with the man, yet you know absolutely nothing about him.”

“Do you... Do you know? Do you know what he...thinks of me?”

“I met him again not long ago; we even had udon together. Of course I know. And I’d still know even if he and I hadn’t met. It’s obvious how he feels about what you did.”

“_____”

Meldia’s mood changed. Her eyes were shifting anxiously. She was clearly frazzled.

I did not expect her to be mortal-y to such a degree. Heh, I suppose Gram has helped me out once again... Funny how fate works.

Meldia’s mental instability laid the groundwork for Hizuki’s mind to come to the surface. Veltol had unconsciously done the same thing Faceless—Mag—did.

Still, he remained at a disadvantage. Only Meldia’s attacks were landing, and he was missing an arm.

Veltol twisted his body so that he covered his cut-off arm, and he held the single-edge sword with its hilt to his shoulder.

Meldia hung her head and bit her lip. “...I don’t even need to ask... He hates me...”

“Huh. That’s the extent of your knowledge about Gram? ...Ah well. That’s

hardly a surprise.”

“What do you...?”

“You’ve never battled him to death, Meldia. It is laughable that you would ever believe you understand how he feels. You talk about this man without knowing the first thing about him. It’s downright absurd.”

“Then tell me! How does he feel?! What does he think of me?!”

“Oh, I will tell you. After you give Hizuki her body back, that is. Were you thinking about meeting him like that in the first place? Don’t you realize that a goddess appearing in another girl’s body is what he would hate the most?!”

The goddess stopped.

“...ry.”

Her voice was low, like a fairy’s whisper.

“I’m sorry.”

A tear escaped her right eye. Her sobbing gradually got louder.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Gram! Gram! Oh, my beloved Hero!”

The Demon Lord quietly listened to the goddess’s cries.

“That’s enough, Meldia. I will take that sentiment in his stead. Just know... this battle isn’t solely between the two of us.”

The Demon Lord was not the only one battling the goddess. The girl inside her, too, was fighting.

Her left eye—the one without the Orb—started flickering between gold and scarlet.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Father! Mother! Silence! Don’t get in the way of my love! I don’t care! Leave me alone!”

She held her head and bent over, screaming desperately.

“Let me out! Let me out! Just get me out of here!”

She struggled with all her might and cried out her true feelings.

“I want to get out of this place!”

Then her left eye turned back to scarlet.

“Help me...Veltol!”

He heard her voice.

“...I can hear you loud and clear, Hizuki.”

She pleaded for help from the Demon Lord. She put her faith in him.

Meldia's feet touched the ground, and she ran, against her plea for help, holding the golden sword high.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The time to use his trump card.

The goddess approached. Recklessly. Fervently. Blood flowing from her right eye.

The Demon Lord proudly raised his sword.

A black storm raged.

For some strange reason, Meldia thought she saw a glimpse of her beloved Hero within the Demon Lord.

She faltered for a single moment.

“Exult in the silver skies.”

The ceremonial sword to condemn and execute an immortal. Dark Sword Vernal's second form.

The least he could do was give the regretful goddess a parting gift.

Its name...

“*Vernal Diel!*”

The black Dark Sword transformed, now shining in blinding silver.

The silver glow swung downward.

The blade of light passed through the goddess's body.

She felt no pain.

The silver shine extended before her.

“Ah...”

The goddess Meldia was captivated, unable to see anything but the light.



The goddess Meldia was captivated, unable to see anything but the light.

Beyond the golden hair covering her beautiful profile, her eyes glimmered with strong determination.

Her eyes, her heart, was glued to his alluring, silver-shining soul.

What gods could see was different from what residents of the mundane world could.

The Demon Lord's soul shone dusky, somber, but the Hero's soul was pure

and beautiful.

She hadn't noticed before, but she fell in love the moment she set eyes upon him.

She wanted him to keep that shine forever and ever, and so she stopped him from aging.

She determined the physical process of growing old with every passing moment as misfortune, then overwrote it with something more fortuitous: a lack of aging.

She thought she was only doing what was right.

That his shine would remain forever if he never aged.

That eternal youth would be the best for that mortal.

That the Hero would no doubt be happier that way.

She truly believed it all.

She never realized that this act in itself would dim his shine.

That was the one and only mistake this goddess, so enamored with love to the point of not knowing romance, made.

Souls shone bright and beautiful because there was a limit to their life.

What gods could see was different from what residents of the mundane world could.

The Hero's soul was losing its shine by the day.

Before long, she could no longer see him.

She began to wonder: Did her own actions bring him misfortune?



The goddess couldn't disappear, not until she apologized.

She wished to meet him just once more before the people forgot her, before her existence vanished.

Whenever she reminisced over past events, the following words escaped her mouth.

“I’m sorry...”



“I’m sorry...”

A silver afterglow followed the slash's trajectory, then scattered.

The Demon Lord held in his hand the Dark Sword, Vernal, in its new form: the sword of condemnation, the blade to execute immortals.

The Dark Sword was reconstructed with pure aether, creating a new blade of light.

This blade could kill an immortal with a soul close to a higher incorporeal being's, and so it could slice the soul of one such being incarnated. And in its pursuit of a function to kill immortals, the soul armament attained a shine similar to that of the Hero's Holy Sword, Ixasorde.

Such was the Dark Sword in its second form—Vernal Diel.

Veltol used the goddess's defense against her, cutting in before she could activate her evasive powers.

He didn't harm Hizuki's body or soul. He slashed Meldia's soul only.

“I’m sorry.”

Meldia's existence drastically weakened, the damage to her soul unrepairable.

She apologized in tears, “Gram, I...I was...”

“What do have to you apologize for?” Veltol held Meldia up before she fell to the ground. “He never held a grudge against you. Nor did he ever hate you.”

“—” Her tears stopped.

“Goddess Meldia, you are a wellspring of love...but you chose the right target for your plentiful affections. The man you so adore couldn't possibly hate you. And that is because—”

—he is the Hero.

“He...” Her gaze cast down, she asked timidly, “Gram...wasn’t miserable...?”

No shred of godly glory showed in her—she was more like a child who had just been caught making mischief. Perhaps this was her true face.

Veltol did not laugh. Quite the opposite—seeing her emotions laid bare made him find her beautiful for the first time.

“Of course not,” he reassured her.

He did not trample on her pure, unblemished feelings.

“Who would feel miserable being blessed by the goddess of joy? Moreover, do you think that man would ever resent another person’s good intentions?”

“...!”

No one knew whether that was the truth. Demon Lord Veltol was not the Hero Gram; he had no way to know his true feelings. Still, Veltol genuinely believed what he’d just said, and those words were the goddess’s salvation.

“Now go to sleep, Meldia. You beautiful, loving, beloved goddess.”

“...Thank you, Veltol.” She smiled in gratitude. A stunning smile.

“I’m sorry, Hizuki.”

She then apologized to her medium for the first and last time. The pure-white ceremonial dress turned to light particles, leaving behind only the girl in her school uniform and the regalia.

She slowly opened her scarlet and golden eyes. The golden Orb in her right socket remained with a faint light of the goddess.

“Good morning, Hijiki.”

“It’s Hizuki, you dummy...,” she retorted with a smile.

Her expression was clear, liberated, as she had literally just been.

“Huh, it’s actually not that bad waking up in a man’s arms. It’s better than my mansion’s freezing bed, that’s for sure.”

“Heh, good to hear.”

“Um...thanks, Veltol.” Her eyes welled with tears. Her cheeks were red, her body tensed.

Resolute, Hizuki shut her eyes.

“__”

Right then, Veltol heard a voice in his head—a Whisper.

“Velly! How’re you doing?! ”

“Takahashi. I just saved Hizuki; how are things over there?”

"Oh, thank goodness— Wait, no! I poked a hole in the armies' aether communication, and they're just seconds away from fighting! We're gonna get dragged into this whole mess! What do we do?! Run?! Machina's here with me, by the way!"

"You two come here. I..."

He glanced at Hizuki.

"I will go stop the war."

That was all he said.

"Okay, gotcha. See ya later!"

Takahashi asked no further questions before hanging up. She trusted the Demon Lord to do as he said.

Veltol looked back at Hizuki. She squinted, then groaned.

"Ugh..."

"What is it?"

"Nothing! Whatever!"

Veltol simply assumed she got up on the wrong side of the bed.

"Sorry to leave you after you've just woken up. I still have things left to do."

Hizuki nodded in response.

"I get it... It's fine." She left his arms and stood up on her own feet. "I'll do my part."



Tensions between the soldiers glaring at each other across Hokoten Avenue were at their limit.

"I'll do it... I'm gonna do it...", one of them muttered.

Electric Town's troop consisted of vanguard full-borgs, along with MT26 Tristans, fourth-generation heavyweight magi-gear stocked with Failnaught guided missiles.

Magic Town's military had air sorcerers armed with shellpiercer spears, backed by Ashed Dawns, fourth-generation middleweight magi-gear equipped with high-powered swordwands.

There was something almost artistic about seeing all those tools of murder and destruction lined up.

"Do not let those Electric Towners get away with tarnishing our traditions!"

“We’ll rid Magic Town of its obsolete junk!”

They were already within range of each other. No one could stop war from breaking out.

Except for a certain person.

“*All troops take aim—*”

Right before Meral could finish his command to the Electric Town soldiers...

“Everyone, stand down!”

...the voice of that man came through the codified comms of both armies.

“This is an order from the new king of Akihabara! I repeat! This is an order from the new king of Akihabara! Stand down and listen!”

Two people stepped forward from the Magic Town side. A blond girl and black-haired man, both wearing the same school uniforms, stood at the center of Hokoten Avenue.

The girl’s right eye glittered gold. She had a crown on her head and a sword in her hand.

“I am Hizuki Reynard-Yamada. Head of the Reynard house, one of the Three Great Houses of Akihabara.” Her voice reverberated throughout the street, magically amplified.

Her words were being transmitted through the public channels of both Electric and Magic Town, carried via the aether to speakers throughout the entirety of Akihabara.

People who had stayed cooped up inside came out to Hokoten Avenue to see what was going on.

The girl held the golden sword aloft.

“All three regalia are now in my hands. As stipulated by the city, these are symbols of legitimate regal power. That is to say, I, Hizuki Reynard-Yamada, now hold the title of king of Akihabara.”

Confusion ran through the troops, and not only them. No one in Magic Town, or Electric Town, or the school could accept what she had just said.

“The news of Tratte Götel, head of Magic Town, assassinating Korneah Seburd, leader of Electric Town, is simultaneously accurate and misinformed.”

She lowered the sword, stabbed it into the ground, and placed both hands on top of the hilt.

“Tratte was murdered, and her body was stolen. The culprit is Korneah’s true murderer. Their aim was obtaining the three regalia. I was also targeted, as I had

the Orb concealed within me. I took all the regalia back from the offender.”

The soldiers and onlookers were astir.

“What the hell?! How can we accept a new king out of nowhere?!”

“I bet it was all your doing! You did it all in an attempt to restore the Reynard name to its former glory!”

“What do you mean it was concealed within you?! Stop with your nonsense, you disgrace of a noble!”

“She’s just a filthy traitor! Stay out of this, woman!”

Jeers rained on her.

Perhaps there weren’t as many people in the entire city who thought the same as them, but such voices were constant and loud, and it hurt her.

Faced with such hostility, the girl averted her gaze.

“I...really can’t...”

The black-haired man placed a hand on her back in a gesture of support.

“Do not hang your head.”

He wasn’t looking at her. He only faced forward.

“A king may look down on her subjects, but she must never hang her head in their presence. You are now king, the ruler of this city. Hold your head high and look forward. These are your subjects now.”

This was advice from a former king to a new king.

She nodded, then raised her head. She stood tall and looked down her nose at the people.

That was when she showed her true colors—her inborn nature.

“I understand your confusion,” the golden king stated with majesty. “However, you can see the truth for yourselves. The regalia are all here. Akihabara is now mine to rule. But I am not capable enough.”

The king smiled. A perfect smile, one she’d practiced at her job at the maid café.

“So I, Hizuki Reynard-Yamada...”

She returned the crown and sword to her soul, and her right eye stopped glowing.

She took a breath, then spat out the words she’d been dying to say.

“...hereby announce that I abolish any and all royal authority the regalia have

over Akihabara!"

The uproar quieted. Everyone was aghast.

Her smile got even broader, amused by the reaction.

"A king's words are always absolute. So I am no longer king of Akihabara. I leave all management of the city to the Akihabara Council. The end!"

I'm sorry, Father, Mother, Ms. Tratte, Mr. Korneah. Sorry for being such a bad girl.

“Do whatever the fuck you want now, you buncha cloooooooooowns!”

Hizuki flipped the bird high to the sky.



“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Stop laughing already, Velly.”

“How can I not laugh?! This is hilarious! You sure know what entertainment is all about, Hijiki!”

"I'm tired of arguing, so I'll just start ignoring you..." Hizuki said.

“What a great speech! I could count speeches of mine that only come close on one hand!”

“Everyone was so befuddled. Things will likely be chaotic for a while,” Machina said.

"Ha! They deserve it. That's what they get for being so mean to me. Go ahead, suffer! There's nothing tying me to this city now that Ms. Tratte and Mr. Korneah are gone."

The four of them were walking through the underground passageways of the Akihabara School of Magic. They had taken advantage of the confusion in Akihabara and fled Hokoten Avenue for the school.

They were there to fulfill Veltol's original objective: search the underground treasury to uncover the Dark Peers Records.

The underground was not connected to the elevators, so they had to take the stairs on the first floor. The passageway was serviced but not fully maintained.

“I still can’t believe you’re literally the Demon Lord Veltol and Machina, the Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze,” said Hizuki. “And your arm just grew back out of nowhere, too. Takahashi’s still Takahashi, though.”

“Whaaaat?! Hey, I did my part, I’ll have you know!” Takahashi retorted.

They’d revealed their true identity and their entire objective to Hizuki on their way there.

Hizuki was still conscious when the goddess Meldia manifested, so she remembered everything that had happened, though the details were a tad fuzzy. Thanks to this, she had no trouble accepting the seemingly nonsensical story they told her.

Hizuki meekly looked up at Veltol.

“Are you disappointed, as a fellow king? About me abandoning my royal duties, that is.”

“Of course not. This is your own noble path. You did what you had to do; be proud.”

“Thanks.” She beamed.

Hizuki’s smile was dozens of times more charming with the goddess gone.

“Lord Veltol, what about you? Couldn’t you have used this opportunity to claim the throne?”

“The endgame is still to have the entire world in my hands. There’s no harm done. I think it is part of my duty as king to respect my friend’s decision.”

“Crazy logic,” Takahashi said.

“I guess that’s the Demon Lord for you...,” Hizuki added.

They then reached a wider area with a giant door, as tall as a five-story building, at the end. They stood before it.

“So this is the entrance to the underground treasury,” Veltol whispered.

Everyone gulped.

“What will we do if it’s empty?” Hizuki asked.

“I think there should at least be some sort of treasure, but it remains a possibility that the Dark Peers Records aren’t here...,” Machina said.

“Hizuki, do it,” Veltol said.

“Sure thing.”

Hizuki’s right eye shone golden; a crown appeared on her head and a sword in her hand. Despite abandoning her title as king, she still possessed the regalia. The goddess was gone, but her soul fragments remained.

Hizuki approached the door and touched it. Then it began opening with a *roar*.

“Whoa.”

The treasury’s contents saw the light of day for the first time in five hundred years. The spacious interior was filled with dazzling golden and silver treasure.

“Whoa!”

That treasure came in many forms: coins, swords, chalices, necklaces, gems...and not only conventional treasure, but ancient magi-gadgets, as well. It was brimming with objects of both monetary and academic value.

“We’re riiiiich!” Takahashi ran inside.

“Hey, don’t touch anything!” Hizuki snapped. “We’re gonna keep the door open and leave this stuff here as a parting gift for Akihabara.”

“Won’t that cause further conflict?” Machina asked nervously.

“That’s a concern for another time. I don’t give a damn what happens.” Hizuki smirked.

“This place is seriously massive. How’re we even gonna look for the Dark Peers Records? I mean, it’ll take an eternity,” Takahashi said while sitting down on a hill of coins, a tiara on her head.

“I should let you know that tiara is cursed,” Veltol said.

“Eek!” She fell over in panic, demolishing the mountain of coins.

“That was a joke. And we will find it soon. Machina, it’s here, right?”

“Yes, I can feel it. Over there.” Machina pointed at the center of the treasury.

There was a pedestal with a small treasure chest on top. The four of them approached.

“It’s faint, but the mana here feels a touch familiar,” Machina said.

“Indeed, it feels foul, yet tender...but mostly foul.” Veltol touched the chest.

“Are you sure about this, Veltol? What if it’s a mimic?” Hizuki asked.

“Mimics live a hundred years at most. Not to worry.”

The chest wasn’t locked, so it opened easily. Inside it was a book bound with black dragon leather.

Veltol grabbed it, then whispered the name of whom that Dark Peers Record belonged to.

“Sihlwald, the Black Dragon.”

EPILOGUE

The Scarlet Moon Won't Grace the Night Sky

The city of Shinjuku.

Veltol was alone, walking through Waseda Street to go buy a new game pad. He was wearing a black coat over a black tracksuit, under which was his classic Demon Lord T-shirt. Waseda Street, home to many educational institutions, was full of students.

Three days had passed since the events in Akihabara. The state of affairs there had greatly changed, so all exchange students were immediately sent back to their own cities, including Veltol et al.

Fortunately, thanks to Takahashi's skills, their forged records never came to light. It was a short-lived school experience, but Veltol had enjoyed it quite a bit. It gave him a new friend, after all.

He looked up. The sky over Waseda Street was much wider than what was visible from Kabukicho Street.

“A king’s duty...eh?”

Shinjuku’s sky put him in a pensive mood.

Sihlwald, the Black Dragon. May, the Mournful Firmament.

Machina had told him the girl with the visor was May. He, too, had felt someone else’s mana within her—a foreign agent, just like Meldia’s mana within Hizuki.

Though he had hoped and prayed that May and Sihlwald were alive and well, deep down, he had given up, almost certain he would never see them again. But they really had survived. Veltol was pleased, of course, but confusion still plagued his mind.

The Dark Peers Record belonging to Sihlwald, the Black Dragon, was under a strong seal. It would take some time to unlock it, but Veltol felt Sihlwald’s mana within. He was still alive, for certain, and that was something to be glad about.

But why was May part of the Guild? What was this “New World Church” in the first place?

Even Marcus had been connected to this organization. What was their goal? Why did that member call themself “Hero”? Where could Sihlwald possibly be?

There was much to think about.

“Heh...this world sure seems hellbent on entertaining me at every corner.”

Veltol smiled, unbeknownst to anyone.

“Well then, time for a drink.”

He studied a nearby vending machine. There was *oshiruko* soup, sister salt, mecha cola, and miso-soup soda.

“Hmm?”

As he pondered his beverage of choice, Veltol saw a girl out of the corner of his eye, leaning tiredly against the fence. She had her blond hair up in pigtails and heterochromatic eyes, one scarlet and one golden.

Hizuki Reynard-Yamada was wearing a school uniform, but not that of Akihabara School of Magic—it was Shinjuku First High’s.

The same day she resigned as king, she turned in her withdrawal form. She followed Veltol and friends back to Shinjuku, empty-handed.

This had been her first day at school with Takahashi.

Veltol bought two mecha colas and called out to her. For some reason, Hizuki was reading the news on a holodisplay instead of her virtual retinal display.

“Hey, Hijiki.”

“Sheesh, you scared me... And it’s Hizuki.”

“How was school?” he asked while handing her the can of mecha cola.

“It was fine, ‘Dad.’” She laughed and grabbed the can. “Why do you ask? Were you so worried that you had to come see me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I was just passing by.”

“Yeah, yeah. School’s not bad, I guess. Takahashi’s there, so at least, it’s... more fun than it was in Akihabara. But I’m kinda famous since my speech went viral. Or more like *infamous*. Look at how they’re bashing me in this article. It’s actually pretty funny.”

“The response is comparatively good on the forums I frequent.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, they’re all talking about how attractive you are and how huge your chest is.”

“Ugh, gross... By the way, you’re getting attention, too, since you were right beside me then.”

“Indeed, and I must thank you for the influx of new subscribers. In any case,

I'm just glad you're doing well."

Veltol pulled the tab and took a sip of his mecha cola. The carbonated, artificially flavored drink quenched his thirst.

"I literally owe everything to Takahashi," said Hizuki. "She transferred my funds, sold the mansion, forged all the immigration paperwork, and even got me a job here. Machina, too—she's so, so kind to me. They both are. And...well, you too." She bashfully fiddled with her bangs. "I thought I only had the regalia left now, but I've got you three—my friends. And two of you are immortal to boot, so I guess that cancels out the jinx about me bringing tragedy to everyone I know."

Veltol smiled jokingly. He knew Hizuki was only putting a strong front, but he respected it. He was not the kind of man to make fun of a girl doing her best to seem tough.

"Any more regrets?"

"Not a one. Ms. Tratte and Mr. Korneah tried to change that city for my sake, but I can't keep that going. I don't belong there. Although, my real reason is..." She took in a breath. "I want to avenge my parents," she muttered vacantly.

"Vengeance?"

"I dunno, I never once thought about it seriously until now...but I guess this is what it feels like to want revenge? She destroyed my life, she killed my parents, she killed Ms. Tratte and Mr. Korneah. I want to...with my own hands..." She skipped the big part.

"...I see."

"Would you say revenge is absurd, Demon Lord? That no one should ever want vengeance?"

"Not at all. You shall do as you wish. No one has the right to stop you." The Demon Lord glanced at the small, frail girl. "Hey, Hizuki. Remember how you said you could never be happy?"

"...Yeah."

Veltol smiled to cheer her up. To try to get her to gain some self-esteem.

"I don't know a single person who has ended up happy after swearing revenge. I am the Demon Lord, you see. I got rid of any would-be avengers. So prove it to me; prove that you can be happy even after getting your revenge. Let us take an oath. Swear that you will be happy."

"...Yeah... I hereby swear on my name as Hizuki Reynard-Yamada that I will be happy."

Veltol nodded in satisfaction.

“Though, well...I think the fastest way to be happy would be to get a certain someone to teach me how,” Hizuki said timidly, playing with her hair.

“The first step to happiness!!!”

Hizuki’s shoulders twitched in surprise at Veltol’s sudden yell. “Gah, what the heck?!”

“Fill your belly!”

“What? Is that a quote from somewhere?”

“Yes, from *Joy and Hunger* by Korneah Seburd. I found that book in his drawing room and got the digital release after. It’s pretty good. That quote is apparently an old goblin saying.”

“Huh...”

“In any case, since you’ll be living here in Shinjuku, I’m going to take you out for some good udon. My treat.”

“Veltol, you kind of suck at asking girls out to dinner.”

“There is not a single woman in the world who wouldn’t be thrilled to have dinner with me.”

“What’re you on?”

“Heh. You’re already thrilled, I see. That’s a smile on your face.”

“Wha—?! Tsk! No, it’s not! Okay, this better be good!”

“No worries, you have my guarantee. Let’s be off, Hijiki.”

“Hizuki!”

She smiled, already accustomed to this exchange.

“Veltol.”

“What is it?”

“Thank you for saving us.”

She walked three steps behind him, feeling secretly guilty.

She still hadn’t told him that a piece of the goddess’s soul remained deep within her body; Hizuki herself had kept this fragment before Meldia’s soul completely disappeared. She didn’t do it out of pity. She just thought Meldia, too, was part of her. She felt sad letting all of her go.

But she was fine with keeping a secret. The most interesting women always have secrets. She also convinced herself that she needed at least a few secrets to

live her new life after abandoning her past.

Vengeance was her new driving force. Perhaps some would ridicule her for such a gloomy raison d'être; perhaps others would pity such a sad way of life. But the Demon Lord smiled at her, and that was enough hope to keep on living.

So Hizuki, too, smiled. She smiled to prove she was happy.

She swore to one day become worthy of standing side by side with the Demon Lord.

And she was sure she would hear that voice again.

The Demon Lord walked ahead of the girl, not bothering to match her pace. He was traveling his own noble path, and a king always took the front.

The udon shop came into view, along with two people standing in front of it.

“Oh! Machina, look! Velly and Hizuki are on a date!”

“Hee-hee-hee. I'll allow it just this one more time, Hizuki.”

They were Takahashi and Machina.

“It's not like that!” A red-faced Hizuki denied Takahashi's claim from behind Veltol.

“Bwa-ha-ha! Our journey has led us one step closer to world domination... but first—we must eat!”

The encounters they had in Akihabara were now the foundation for a peaceful day-to-day.

And Veltol's noble path was built upon it.

“After all, the first step to happiness is filling your belly!”

AFTERWORD

Long time no see. Daigo Murasaki, the guy who sprains his ankle on nothing, here.

I guess no one cares about that, huh?

I am extremely grateful for getting to publish a second volume, and I'm so glad to have you back again.

The afterword last time was quite short, and it was my debut volume, so it was all pretty proper and formal. But this time, I got more pages for it, so I'm gonna write some more.

I had all sorts of ideas and quirky lines to write in my afterword before making my debut, but once you actually get to it...you end up with something like what I wrote for the first volume. I wonder if other authors also have this much trouble coming up with stuff for the afterword. I only know one other writer, so I really have no idea.

I thought this second volume would end up with fewer pages than the first, but it turned out just about the same.

I wrote the entire thing craving meat. I really wanted to go for some *yakiniku* once I finished. I swore I would. Perhaps this might be spoilers? So if you start reading from the afterword, I'm sorry.

You see that scene were someone's eating offal at the beginning? That was me immortalizing my deepest desires.

I considered writing more about the story here, but I felt it would be uncouth to talk about it outside the work itself, so I'll just share something sad that happened to me recently.

This happened a few hours prior to proofreading (my own check, after it's already been through a proofreader) before I headed to a certain building in Chiyoda.

To an author, their computer is their manuscript paper, and their keyboard is

their pen. (It just came to me... Are there still people who handwrite their stories?) What I mean is, their work depends on these tools.

I say this as I use a super-cheap keyboard for work, while spending more on the one I use for gaming.

Anyway, I use an external keyboard on a laptop to write, since my laptop's keyboard broke. And, you know how you gotta clean the keyboard regularly, right? It gets dirty. So I was cleaning mine to also take a break from work. I felt like an assassin cleaning his favorite gun. Remember this is just a few hours before proofreading.

I took all the keys off and made it shine like new. I even used a vacuum cleaner to get out all the crud stuck inside. Then I put it back together, threw it in my bag along with my laptop, and left to do the much-anticipated proofreading.

But once I tried to start work, I noticed something. The external keyboard didn't work anymore. I broke it in my attempt to clean it. I lost my mind.

Fortunately, proofreading can be done without a computer, so it all worked out in the end. Anyway, that's a sad anecdote behind the production of this book.

Time for some words of thanks.

To my illustrator, Kureta: Thank you so much for your marvelous work. Hizuki ended up looking so, so cute. I love her. Especially that drawing of her in a maid outfit... Thank you so much...

To my editor: I'm sorry for the trouble. We were on a tight deadline, and I was down for a couple days with a cold.

And lastly, to you, for reading my book.

Whether you've been following the story since the first volume or just grabbed the second volume, I thank you equally. Truly.

I'm able to continue writing thanks to your support. I hope I can keep developing this world even further, and I would be glad to have you follow me on this journey.

I'm looking forward to our next meeting.

Daigo Murasaki

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DEMON LORD 2099

2. CYBERMAGIC CITY AKIHABARA

DAIGO MURASAKI

Translation by Sergio Avila

Cover art by Kureta

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