

The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess

2

Kotei Kobayashi

Illustration by **riichu**

THE VEXATIONS OF A SHUT-IN VAMPIRE PRINCESS

– Hikicomari Kyuuketsuki no Monmon –

- VOLUME 2 -

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[YEN PRESS]

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The
Vexations
of a Shut-In
VAMPIRE
Princess



Villhaze

“Ugh....”

“Big Sis♪”

Sakuna Memoir

“I also
love
reading.”

Terakomari Gandesblood



Commander
of the
Seventh Unit

Terakomari
Gandesblood

Commander
of the
Sixth Unit

Sakuna
Memoir

Commander
of the
Fifth Unit

Odilon
Metal

Commander
of the
Fourth Unit

Delphyne

Commander
of the
Third Unit

Flöte
Mascarail

Commander
of the
Second Unit

Helldeus
Heaven

THE SEVEN CRIMSON LORDS

OF THE MULNITE EMPIRE



She was white. Overwhelmingly pale.
Komari's shining golden locks had
turned arctic, the color of fresh snow.

*“Apologize
to Sakuna.
Now.”*



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1.5

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Epilogue



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Kotei Kobayashi
Illustration by riichu



New York

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The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess 2
Kotei Kobayashi

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Cover art by riichu

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0 Prologue

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

It's morning, said the rays of light that were just starting to seep through the curtains. But I was already up. Yeah, you read that right. Usually, I'd be sleeping like a log right now, all the way through dusk, let alone dawn. But today I was already sitting at my desk; no slumbering, no snoozing, just staring at the paper in front of me.

"At long last... It's finally done!"

Joy like I'd never felt before filled my heart. And how could it not? It was finally complete! My latest novel!

It was pretty good, if I do say so myself. I'd been working morning 'til night every weekday, and the sicko maid pestered me when I got home, so I always had the urge to veg out by the time the weekend arrived... Nevertheless, I'd managed to set aside some time in my busy schedule to do a little bit of writing every day. One month had gone by since I'd started, and I'd just put the finishing touches on my story. My immense talent frightens even me sometimes.

Now all that was left was to send it to a publisher... But I did have something, or rather, *someone*, to watch out for—the aforementioned sicko maid. I couldn't have her finding out about my manuscript.

This new masterpiece went above and beyond *Strawberry Milk*, so I would certainly die and never come back if it ever found its way to the public without my permission. I had to take extreme care not to let h—

"Good morning, Lady Komari."

"WAAAAAH!"

I hid the manuscript like my life depended on it.

The girl had gotten behind me before I'd realized it. This was Villhaze, "Lady Komari's personal maid" in her words, and "sicko maid" in mine. She wore an indifferent expression as usual, but do not be fooled by outward appearances, dear readers. The sickest, most perverted thoughts were going through her mind at all times.

"How rare to see you up at this hour."

"R-right? I just thought it'd be nice to wake up early once in a while. No need for your waking services today, so go on, shoo."

"I'd be glad to see myself out, right after I read your latest masterpiece."

"I was doomed from the start!!"

I held the manuscript close to my chest as I retreated to the wall. *You're not getting your filthy hands on this one!*

"Stay back! I'll expose your shameful secrets if you take even one more step!"

"I have nothing to hide! I'll undress right away to prove it!"

"That sort of thing is exactly what you should feel ashamed about!"

Vill didn't seem to get it. She was a genuine degenerate.

Suddenly, she flashed a smile.

"I was joking. I learned recently that undressing out of nowhere is considered indecent."

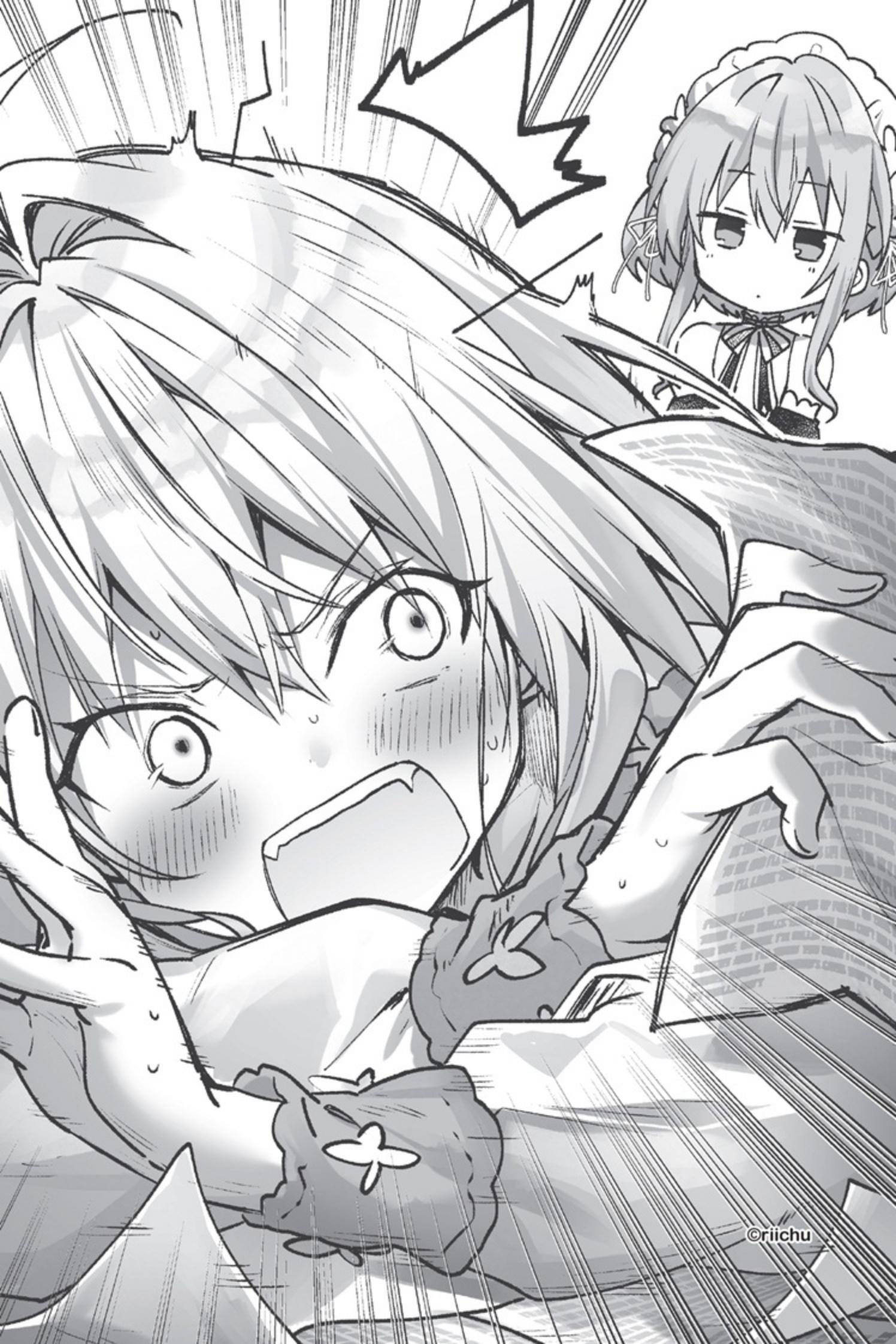
"Wait. Just recently? Seriously?"

"Plus, I don't want to force you to let me read your latest creation without good cause. I owe you my life... How could I bother you so?"

"Hmm..."

Her comment made me remember what had happened a month before.

This girl named Millicent had come crashing back into my life to try and ruin it. The events that followed were catastrophic and tragic, but they'd also been a turning point for me, allowing me to level up from a "total shut-in" to "half shut-in."



I'd tried to meet with Millicent many times since then, because I felt like we needed to talk things out again. But I hadn't accomplished that yet. The government had publicly announced that she was being held in the Empire prison, but I found no trace of her there when I visited the place myself. The guards also insisted they couldn't tell me about her. When I asked the Empress herself, she just tried to change the subject and ask me out on a date. Where had that girl gone?

Anyway, Vill had felt indebted to me ever since that whole ordeal. I didn't think that any of what happened was worth thanking me for, though.

"So please, don't be scared. I will not do anything you might dislike, Lady Komari."

"Will you indulge me in anything I ask, then?"

"Yes, I will pamper you as you wish. So let's give it our all out there today."

"I feel like your second statement contradicts the first."

"Not at all. It's Monday. A workday."

"What happened to you indulging me?"

"Oh, but I am. After all, I've set you up against that monkey today, the weakest of your opponents. You will be facing the Lapelico Kingdom. Commander Hades Molekikki is champing at the bit to fight you."

Vill then handed me a letter.

It was addressed to me from "Hades Molekikki, of the Four Holy Beasts of the Lapelico Kingdom."

I opened it up.

"You're dead meat."

"What's the point of this?!"

"Intimidation, I suppose. In the wild, once you let your guard down, it's over."

"We're not in the wild, though!"

"I agree, this message is pointless. There is no way the undefeated Crimson Lord, Supreme Commander Terakomari Gandesblood, would cower at the pathetic howls of that beast."

"Yes, I would! I am, in fact, cowering right now!"

"Don't worry. I'm here to protect you."

"That doesn't put me at ease! Forget it, I'm feigning sickness today! Tell them I'm suffering from a fever like you've never seen before and that I could drop dead any moment!"

"I think you ought to know that you might get a week off if you win this battle."

"...Huh?"

"This would mark your tenth consecutive victory. Her Majesty is extremely pleased with your accomplishments, and I heard that she will give you a vacation as a reward if you succeed today."

"..."

Vacation. A whole week off. Imagine how much I could do in that time! I could read so many books, take so many naps, even start writing a new story...

"I see you've made up your mind, so let's get you changed. I'll take off your clothes. Please stay still."

My heart was aflutter. I knew it was stupid to even consider choosing a vacation over my own life... but we're talking about a whole week here. An entire freaking week. I couldn't let the opportunity slip through my fingers.

"Oh my, you seem to be sweating a lot. Let me help you with that... *SLURP!*"

Whoa, whoa, slow down there, Komari. This is *war* we're talking about. There's nothing you and your rare scholarly intellect love more than peace and solitude. Isn't

heading to battle to earn a moment of calm putting the cart before the horse? You could die!

"Ahh! Your pale skin is so smooth and silky! My tongue slides right across it so delectably!"

No, no, no. Komari. You've fought that chimpanzee, like, three times now, and you've crushed him every single time. Surely your subordinates could get you just one more win, ri—

"...Wait."

I looked down at my body. Somehow, I was already in my military uniform.

"Huh? When did that happen?"

"I had a heavenly time changing your clothes while you were lost in thought."

"WHAAAT?!"

"Now, now, it's time for work! Let us massacre those beasts!"

"Wait, no... I'm not ready! And what do you mean by 'heavenly time'?!"

I couldn't fight back from her pulling me to go.



As you might already know, I'm weak.

I couldn't bring myself to drink blood while growing up, so I barely did any growing, both physically and in terms of mana. I'm also clumsy to no end, so I'm a shoddy mess of a vampire. My frail constitution meant my school days were filled with bullying, which ultimately made me shut myself up in my room for three whole years of vexations.

I felt like I'd gotten a little better ever since everything that had gone down a month before, but I was still very much an indoorsy, intellectual-type girl. Needless to say, this job wasn't a great fit for me. I was a peace-loving vampire of justice.

It is said that the average citizen of the Mulnite Empire has murdered 1.9 persons (far and away the highest statistic among the Six Nations), but I'd never slain a soul, and I had no plans on doing so any time soon. Now you might have gotten the impression that I'd killed quite a few of my subordinates, but those were all accidents, you see; fortuitous, unavoidable tragedies. Not my fault.

So allow me to reemphasize: I was not fit for this job.

...However, my meathead subordinates had the wrong idea.

"Lieutenant Hades Molekikki has been defeated! The Mulnite Empire takes the victory!"

"HAAIIILLL!!!"

An ear-piercing victory cry followed the announcement. *Please don't shout anywhere near me.*

We were in the Dark Core Zone, the bloody battlefield where the area of effect of the six Dark Cores overlapped.

Vill had taken me there before I could even complain about it, and next thing I knew, I was giving a violent speech to inspire my five hundred troops. I was then made to sit at the fancy chair in the Imperial General Headquarters, and like always, the gong of battle clanged before I could even take everything in.

But all my insecurities and anxiety be damned, we won.

As was custom at this point, the Lapelico army launched a full frontal assault, and Caostel used his Void spell, *Dimensional Hole*, to send them all to the fourth dimension. Their supreme commander didn't go down that easily, though. Lieutenant Hades Molekikki tore through the walls of the fourth dimension and returned to our world, then killed a hundred or so of my men on his way to my location. Yohann had sprung before me and said, "Guess I'll have to step up and protect your ass," before immediately getting his face smashed in, his blond hair flying every which way. In that same moment, Bellius had lopped the chimpanzee-man's head off with his ax.

I'd almost died back there.

That phrase had been crossing my mind an unhealthy amount of times recently.

“Wonderful job, Commander! Victory is ours once again!” one of my subordinates exclaimed reverentially, while I was still trying to get my heart back inside my chest. It was the stripped-tree man, Caostel Conto.

“Hopefully the beasts think seriously about challenging you the next time. They must be aghast at the unparalleled beauty and ferocity of Supreme Commander Terakomari Gandesblood!”

“A-as they should be! There is no vampire more beautiful or ferocious than I! No one can even compare to my pinky finger!”

“““HAAAAAAIIIIILLLLLL!!!!!””””

The guys yelled yet again. *Please stop it. It's scary.*

Caostel smiled like the kidnapper he was before speaking again.

“Commander, you must be tired of fooling around with the beast-folk. May I suggest we declare war on a more worthy opponent?”

“More worthy...?”

“The commanders we've defeated up to now have been, to put it bluntly, below average. The true aces of each nation have been doing nothing but observing. I propose we take the fight to them instead of waiting for them to challenge us.”

“Y-you think so?”

“Oh, good idea,” agreed Bellius Hund Cerbero, a beast-folk with a dog's head.

“With your power, Commander, we're sure to defeat any foreign hotshot with ease. As a target, I suggest... either Nelia Cunningham from the Gerra-Aruka Republic, Ayran Lynds from the Enchanted Lands, or perhaps Karla Amatsu from the Heavenly Paradise.”

“No, I...”

“Check it!” a gaudily decked-out rapper yelled out of nowhere; it was Mellaconcey, the

most dangerous and incomprehensible member of the Seventh Unit. “Commander Komari’s on the rise. Use my bombs and the enemy flies. The outlanders look strong. But they’ll see they were chumps all along. Just like Bellius, who’s all bark but good dog. Woof!”

Then he was sent flying backward, nose completely demolished.

Why did he always have to go and add something that would piss people off? Oh well, not that I cared.

Back on topic: Declare war on the strongest outside commanders? Awful joke. *I’m not risking my life like that!*... Is what I would’ve liked to say, but I couldn’t afford to plant the tiniest seed of suspicion, lest they find out I’m a wimp and do me in before I know it. This was the time for my scholarly intellect to shine.

“Hey, Vill. What do you think about this plan my lovely men have here?” I asked my maid beside me.

She had chosen an easy-to-defeat opponent this time and had promised to indulge me that very morning. Surely she would convince my subordinates not to do anything rash and stu...

“Sounds good. I will make the preparations to declare war on them as soon as we’re back at the Imperial Capital.”

...pid?

“Which country would you like to fight, Lady Komari?”

“Um, Vill? Remember that thing about spoiling me rotten?”

She flashed a broad smile.

This ain’t funny, you witch!

“Are you out of your mi—?”

I grumbled, but before I could finish, I noticed that all eyes were upon me. My subordinates were looking on with high expectations. My survival instinct kicked in, and my mouth went along with this nonsense against my wishes.

“...M-my, my, my. Yes, oh my. Out there in the, uh, the Enchanted Lands. Yup, let’s go with the Enchanted Lands!”

“The Enchanted Lands, it is. Their commander, Ayran Lynds, aka ‘Tridragon Star,’ is quite famous. They say his magic allows him to burst the hearts of his enemies with mere thought.”

“O-oh! Perfect enemy for our troops! I can use a similar spell, too! Yeah, a couple of hearts are nothing before my explosive might!”

“Oooh!” “Commander, I kneel!” “There’s no vampire like her!” “A worthy holder of the title of strongest Crimson Lord!” “I eagerly await the day she becomes Empress!”

Please. Stop. Seriously. No, don’t clap. C’mon. Don’t bring me even more attention. More eyes means more bullshit I have to make up. No, Komari, calm down. Don’t say any more. Stop digging this hole. Think, Terakomari Gandesblood, think!

“Lady Gandesblood! Is it true you will declare war on the Enchanted Lands?!”

“Oof.”

A girl was standing in front of me before I knew it. I recognized her face. How could I not? It was her damn fault that everyone around the world thought I’d turn them into omelet rice.

She was a Sapphire. In each of her hands she held a pen and a notebook, ready to spin her latest fabrication. Melka Tiano, journalist.

Just then, she brought her face right up to mine. *Stay away, you creepy slanderer!*

“Long time no see, Lady Gandesblood!”

“M-Melka. How’s it going?”

“Oh, my! You remembered my name! It is an honor!”

“I have a good memory... So why are you here?”

“For an interview! I have another long list of questions for you! May I?!”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Caostel nod. *You're saying I should accept? Fine! Damn it all!*

“Sure, but let's keep it brief.”

“Thank you so much!” The journalist's eyes lit up. “So first of all, was what you were talking about with Lady Villhaze true?! What is your motivation for challenging Mr. Ayran Lynds?! Is it because he's strong?! Who do you think is the strongest of all?! No, second strongest, after you, of course! Who are you most wary of?! A fellow Crimson Lord?! Or a commander from the other nations?! Perhaps your own mother?!”

Get me ouuuuuut!!

“First of all, keep your distance!”

“Eep!”

I kicked the journo back by reflex. Fire burning in my chest, I gave my answer.

“I told you last time! I only care about domination! On a global scale! Thinking of a reason to declare war on this nation or any other is pointless! I'll trample them all in the end anyway! Got that?! And as for who I consider strongest... I don't know, the Empress, I guess! Done, go away!”

I heaved a mental sigh as soon as I shut my mouth.

...I've gone and done it again.

I knew I was only shooting myself in the foot with all that nonsense, but I had to spout it, lest they shoot me in the head. Not fair. But... Well, I suppose my pretending to be strong was getting me surprisingly good results... so far. Or was it?

Man... I want to give in. I want to stay cooped up in my room. Is there anyone out there who feels the same? I think we could be friends...

Then I sighed aloud, surrounded by my subordinates who were dancing and leaping and howling like beasts.

※

The sun had already gone down by the time the Imperial Council meeting ended.

Armand Gandesblood was all stiff from sitting for such an extended period, so he did little stretches as he walked through the darkness of the Mulnite Imperial Palace. No one was there; it was always like this around that time of day.

“Those damn Elders...” He muttered with weariness in his voice, and for good reason.

The Elders held the reigning Empress in low regard because she’d ascended the throne solely through merit. Consequently, they dragged out meetings to no end by nitpicking all of her innovative ideas.

The topic of the discussion was “What to do to get rid of the terrorists.”

The incident involving a member of Inverse Moon infiltrating the center of the Mulnite Empire and going on a rampage was still fresh in memory. The more extremist factions were screaming at the top of their lungs for measures to destroy Inverse Moon and prevent them from “trampling the nation” any longer. Conservatives like the Elders (or the “Eldiots” as the Empress called them), however, had a more wait-and-see approach in mind—they thought they’d be better off letting the other nations take care of the terrorists.

Armand did not agree with them. Inverse Moon posed a great threat. They were researching and using Core Implosion, a mysterious technique outside the usual system of magic. If the Imperial Council didn’t do anything to stop them, the terrorists’ blades could soon reach the heart of the Mulnite Empire: The Dark Core.

They needed to be wiped out as soon as possible.

After all, Komari was in this country, and Armand’s goal was to furnish her and the rest of his family with a safe place to live. He didn’t care about anything else.

“I should have a private chat with Her Majesty...”

Armand and the reigning Empress knew each other from when they’d been students. He’d always found her bizarre, and her weirdness only amplified the moment she took the throne. She would always take executive action on the Empire’s most important matters without consulting him, the chancellor, and she even seemed to be plotting something during the meeting they’d just had. He needed to ask her what she was truly planning before she did something outrageous.

"Hmm?" Just then, he felt someone's presence.

Someone was standing in the shadows at the end of the hallway. Though he couldn't see them clearly due to the lack of light, they didn't seem to be very tall. They appeared to be wearing a Mulnite Empire military uniform. At first, he thought they were a soldier on patrol, but that didn't seem to be the case. Still, he didn't raise his guard. The figure didn't appear to be holding a weapon, nor did it seem like they would cast magic.

Armand put on his usual business smile and addressed them.

"To whom do I owe the pleasure? Could you please name your—?"

The silhouette disappeared. Armand looked around suspiciously. Was it a sort of specter? He broke out in a cold sweat, and suddenly felt a dull pain in his abdomen.

"Guh!" Blood spurted out his mouth.

He looked down. Someone had plunged their arm right through his stomach.

"Who... are...?"

It was the person wearing the military uniform. They had no weapon, used no magic, and didn't even show a shred of hostility. With their bare fist, they'd punched right through Armand's midsection as if it was nothing.

The attacker's right eye was shining red. The color that signified Core Implosion.

"It can't... be..."

He could think no more. Weakness spread from the pit of his stomach throughout his whole body, and before he knew it, he was on his knees. As his vision clouded over and his mind went into disarray, he realized that he needed to alert the Empress... Then Armand's heart stopped beating.



Murder was the most annoying thing.

The gorier it was, the stronger the victim's pain clung to your heart.

That's why it was best to conceal your presence and do it as silently as possible, without the target even noticing. That way, no unnecessary memories would stick.

The corpse of a man at her feet. Armand Gandesblood's body. Empire bigwig. Taking him out without him noticing turned out to be impossible, and she couldn't stop the tsunami of emotions from crashing in on her.

"Ugh..."

Felt like choking. Almost threw up. She could manipulate other people's minds, but she had no way of controlling her own. This secret Core Implosion technique wasn't so omnipotent after all.

She focused only on the memories relating to the Dark Core, trying hard to let the rest wash over her.

"Good."

The examination was over.

Now she had to make herself scarce. Otherwise, she would have to take care of any witnesses, too. Just as she turned to flee, however, she realized her uniform was drenched in blood.

She got flashbacks whenever she saw that viscous shade of red. The blood. That stench. Her dining room, dyed scarlet. The members of her family, each slain in a unique way—beheaded, limbs severed, guts strewn all over the carpet. Not one murder alike.

"..."

She felt the contents of her stomach rise in her throat, but she gulped it down.

There was nothing she could do to rid herself of this trauma. *What a useless power.*

Then she felt a mana reaction—she was getting a call on her Correspondence Crystal. She poured in some of her mana to answer, and the raspy voice of a man emanated from the stone.

"Any findings?"

She was silent for a second before responding.

“None. Armand Gandesblood knows nothing.”

“*Not even the chancellor? How diligent.*”

“What do we do now? Stop?”

“*No. Follow the plan.*”

His voice was overwhelming. She gulped down her fear and gave an indifferent answer.

“Roger. I will proceed with assassinating the Seven Crimson Lords.”

Vexations

Sakuna Memoir and the Seven Crimson Lords

The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess

"Her Majesty must be so proud! The Crimson Lord she herself appointed has come so far. It is only a matter of time before you become the next Empress," Caostel asserted, puffing his chest out as he walked beside me.

It was the day after our battle against the chimpanzee. We were in the Mulnite Imperial Palace, on our way to the Audience Hall. The floors of the corridor were bright and clear, the exact opposite of how I was feeling. "Y-yeah," I replied.

Villhaze, walking at my other side, turned to look at me and cleared her throat.

"Is something the matter, Lady Komari? You seem a bit under the weather."

"Of course, I... No, *pfft*, what're you saying? I'm always overflowing with energy and ambition!"

I promptly corrected myself. Probably wasn't in my best interests to speak frankly right then and there. Who knew who could be listening in the shadows? Plus, Caostel was *right there*.

Why was I even in the Imperial Palace, you ask? Because I was summoned by the Empress herself.

After achieving victory against the Lapelico Kingdom, I finally attained my precious week off, so I'd cozied up in bed with the intention to stay there until night. But that was when the creepy maid creped into my crib, as was her wont, and told me, "Her Majesty calls for you. She said she'll come here to smooch you herself if you don't. So let's go. Hurry!"

I'd found her impatience a bit strange, but I had no choice. Hopefully you understand why I was not in a great mood that day. I'd been sleeping like a baby! Why did I have to wake up to that?! *They better give me an extra day off or I'll cry! That's a threat!*

"Hmph... That darn Empress. She should show some common courtesy. Take some notes from me, an actual refined lady."

"Ohh! You refuse to hold your tongue even against the Thunderbolt Empress! That's my Commander!"

"R-right? So... Caostel, why are you here, again?"

"Oh, I just so happened to see you walking by, and I thought I should say hello."

"I see. Hello."

"Hello, Commander. I also have this for you."

Caostel stuffed his hand inside the bag he was holding. I froze up, expecting him to bring something obscene out of it, but my fears ended up being unfounded. Instead, he produced... folded clothing?

"I talked about making merchandise in your image before, and this is our first product: the Commander T-shirt. I realized I hadn't given you your complimentary sample."

"What?"

He gave me the shirt.

I unfolded it.

My (half-smiling) face was printed across its entire surface.

"...What?"

"Isn't it marvelous? It's selling like hot cakes! Right now, we're trying out alternate designs. We have flushed and pouting versions lined up already."

"WHAAAAAT?!"

The hell?! What are you thinking?! Don't make this without my permission! Much less sell it!! How am I supposed to live with the shame?! What kind of weirdo wears this crap, even?!

“Please, try it on, Commander.”

“I'm not putting it on! I don't want my own face on my chest!”

“But then you'd have double the cuteness...”

“Are you insane?! I wouldn't wear this if I fell into a river and it was the only dry piece of clothing on hand! Vill, please do something!”

“I already bought a hundred of them.”

“Stop wasting your wages like that!!”

“I heard Yohann also wears one under his uniform every day.”

“Has everyone lost their minds?!”

I clutched the hair at my temples. I was in utter disbelief at just how many weirdos there were in this world. What sort of enjoyment did they even get out of wearing this? Were they making fun of me? *Yohann—that creep!* No, I should be reserving my ire for Caostel. He was sleazebag number one.

“No. I won't accept this.”

“What... do you mean?”

“I-it's embarrassing. Recall all of them.”

“What are you saying, Commander?!” Caostel screamed like a veteran con artist. “This is one order I cannot follow. Can't you see how amazing this product is? Sales are also skyrocketing, so this will only elevate name recognition for our unit. If you insist on stopping us... I will have no choice but to challenge you to a duel.”

“.....”

These guys had a surprisingly hard time following my command. Though I guess I

should've expected that. They were a bunch of outlaws who tried to solve everything by force, after all... Damn it!

"...I see. I see. It should be obvious by now that I could strangle you to death in less than a second if we were to clash, but I suppose I should honor your request."

"Thank you so much, Commander!"

"But bear in mind. Always ask me for permission first, before doing anything like this again."

"I understand. I will do my best to produce something you will be proud of selling next time."

Not happening, dude.

"Lieutenant Conto, I have just the perfect picture..."

"You shut your mouth right now!"

Insane, each and every one of them. The worst part was they all (except for Vill, maybe) actually had the strength to murder me with their pinky fingers, so I couldn't be too harsh on them. What an unjust world I lived in. Why couldn't someone be nice to me?

I threw the T-shirt at Vill and continued on my way to further vexations.

I wanna go home... And never leave again...

After a short stretch of walking with that on my mind, I saw a uniformed group heading down the hallway toward us. At the lead was a woman with an imposing aura about her. The men following her had faces that practically screamed they were about to commit murder.

I reflexively moved to the side. Even bumping shoulders with them would surely bring about a fight.

"Commander, why do you cede them the way? They should be letting you pass, not us. Show them your greatness."

Shut up. Just. Seriously. Shut the hell up. I'm not looking for trouble.

I ignored Caostel and continued on my way. Then I looked the group over, particularly their leader. Her hair was lustrous like black wood ear mushrooms, and she had a gallant look in her eyes. She seemed to be around twenty. Her way of walking felt simultaneously brave and refined—it was clear she was of noble upbringing... *Wait. I think I've seen her in the papers or something.*

"My, oh my! If it isn't Commander Terakomari Gandesblood! Are you here for an audience with Her Majesty, too?" she asked with a slight curtsy as we were about to pass each other.

Oh no. Why does she know my name? Have we met before?

"Y-yeah. That's it."

"Hee-hee. To report your victory against Lapelico yesterday, I suppose? I heard it's your tenth consecutive win. The Seventh Unit just won't stop racking up the achievements, huh?"

"That's right! We won't stop until the world is in our hands!"

What am I even saying? Stop your delirious blabbering, Komari... I immediately regretted my statement. The woman's reaction was to burst into peals of laughter.

"...What's so funny?"

"I'm sorry. Your jesting is simply hilarious, Ms. Gandesblood."

"What?"

"I mean, the only thing you did was defeat that chimpanzee. And your leap from that is world domination? That has to be a joke, right?"

Her men also chuckled.

It was then that I realized she was the kind of person who scorned the achievements of others. Worst of all, she was totally right about mine, what with them being a fluke and all. By the same token, however, her snide remarks didn't affect me. I agreed with her, even. But I had appearances to keep up, so my only choice was to rebuke.

"Is it so bad to talk about my own ambitions? People work the hardest when they have

a big goal in mind.”

“The problem in this case is your ambitions are far too unwieldy. Do you even have a chance of realizing them? I mean... You’re really a weakling, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

My back turned into a cascade of cold sweat.

Hold the heck up. How much does she know...?

“You only go after small fry and spend all your time during battle safely hunkered down, giving orders. Have you ever even been in a fight yourself?”

“N-not many.”

“That implies you have been in at least one before... But have you, really?”



She snickered. I felt relieved, though. She didn't seem to *know* about my capabilities—she was just provoking me out of rivalry... Still, I was taken aback by how insolent she could be with someone she'd just met. Pesky nobles. Not a single decent soul among them.

"Oh, right, I heard you caught a terrorist about a month ago. But I wonder if that's evidence enough. I'm guessing you're taking a subordinate's feat as your own."

I heard veins pop beside me. *No, no, no, don't do it. You better not pick a fight, you hear me?!*

I had to settle things peacefully. Just then, I remembered reading somewhere that praising the other party could help defuse conflicts. Perhaps she'd let us off if I said something like "Oh, I understand! My feats are nothing compared to your achievements, of course!" But before I did...

"Vill, what's her name, again? I feel like I've seen her somewhere before, but I can't remember..."

"No idea. Why don't you ask her?"

"Right. That'd be best."

I turned back to the woman and cleared my throat.

"Sorry for not asking before, but who are you, again?"

Crap. I think I should've worded that more delicately. But by the time that thought crossed my mind, it was already too late.

Everyone present reacted differently. Vill chuckled. Caostel stroked his chin triumphantly. She... The woman in front of me turned beet red, and her voice trembled as she replied.

"Who...? You dare ask me who I am...?"

"Sorry. Too rude, right? Could you please give me your name, ma'am?"

"The problem wasn't in your phrasing!" She stamped her feet hard on the floor. "How impudent... How brazen! How dare you act cocky like that when faced with the

Great Crimson Lord, the Black Flash, Flöte Mascarail!"

"I'm not being cocky, I seriously didn't know... Wait, you're a Crimson Lord?!"

"You... insolent... little... bitch!"

"That's Lady Komari for you! She fears not the most famous of all Seven Crimson Lords! Flöte Mascarail, born in the Imperial Capital on June seventh, twenty years old. Hobby: Counting wads of notes. Special skill: Dark magic. Alias: 'The Black Flash.' That is who you picked a fight with. Well done!" said Vill.

"You knew that much about her, and you didn't tell me?!"

Why did you lie to me?! This is all your fault! It's your fault that Flöte woman is red like a tomato now!

"Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha... How low I've fallen... To have a little girl like her make a fool out of me."

"N-no, that wasn't my inten—"

"Indeed, Ms. Mascarail. My commander had no such intention. An insect like you isn't even in her sights!" shouted Vill.

Stop fanning the flaaaames!

I haven't the slightest desire to antagonize her! She's a Crimson Lord, remember? She's a super berserker leading an army of smaller berserkers! We gotta stay friends or she'll kill me!

"What do we do now, Vill?! This will ruin my relationship with her!" I whispered to my maid.

"Leave it to me."

"Okay, but let me ask first. What are you planning?"

"The only thing to do after an act of courtesy is show her your good faith. I think the best thing would be to give her an honest gift in apology."

“R-really? Okay, do it.”

“Immediately.”

Vill put on a serious expression and took a step toward Flöte.

“Lady Mascarail, we are deeply sorry for our insolence. Lady Terakomari was only recently appointed to the seat of the Seven Crimson Lords. She knows little of this environment and will do her best to improve in all regards, so please, I ask you to forgive us just this once.”

“Huh? Okay...”

“Please, accept this present in apology. It is a box of blood buns, an Imperial Capital delicacy. I read in a magazine interview that you enjoy them.”

Vill took a box of sweets out from... *somewhere?*... and handed it to Flöte. I was impressed. I was thinking for sure she'd say something ridiculous that would only prolong my suffering, but it appeared the sicko maid was capable of a few non-sicko moments every once in a while.

Flöte, dumbfounded, blinked a couple times before receiving the gift.

“W-wow, at least the maid is a decent person.”

“You flatter me. However... I must correct one of your misunderstandings, Lady Mascarail.”

No...

“Lady Komari is the strongest and the fairest in the whole world. And seeing how you acted like a total chimpanzee trying to provoke and insult her, I surmise you were not able to comprehend this fact.”

Nooo!! Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!

“That is alarming. We cannot let Lady Komari’s charm go improperly transmitted. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it would be a great loss to the world at large if people could not comprehend it. As a first step to remedying this, I would like you to have this as well, so you, too, can understand her greatness. Please, take it.”

Vill then handed the T-shirt to Flöte.

You absolute fool! What are you even hoping to accomplish?!

“What is this?” Flöte asked.

She unfolded the T-shirt.

My (half-smiling) face showed itself.

A vein bulged on her forehead.

“I understand very well now, Ms. Gandesblood... I see that we could never get along.”

“Th-that’s not true. We’re colleagues, we just need to take it nice and slow and get to know each other. Then we’ll be friends...”

“Not while you keep up that unpleasant attitude of yours. Don’t go around thinking you can have everything your way just because you’re Lady Karen’s favorite!”

“Lady Karen...? Who?”

“Enough with your buffoonery! I read about it in this morning’s paper! You are close with Her Majesty, aren’t you?”

Her Majesty? The Empress? Did she really have such a cute name? I was aghast.

Flöte then used Void Magic to bring forth the newspaper, and she spread it before my eyes.

I had a really bad feeling. Strong déjà vu vibes.

COMMANDER KOMARIN IN LOVE?!

Commander Terakomari Gandesblood, Crimson Lord of the Mulnite Empire (15), sent a passionate call of love to Her Majesty the Empress Karen Helvetius (38). She revealed her hidden yearning after a moment’s hesitation: ‘I think the Empress is the strongest of all!’ And of course, in the Mulnite Empire, strength marks the most attractive and sought-out trait for a partner. In response to Komari’s declaration of

love, Her Majesty Empress Helvetius said, ‘I’m ready to go whenever Komari gives the word.’ As you can see, the two are so close they call each other ‘Komari’ and ‘Empress.’ Will romance blossom between this couple with an age difference of twenty-three years?

...What the heck?

“How deplorable! Lady Karen has lost her mind! To love a vampire who has no merit save for lineage! She won’t even look *my* way!”

“Do I look like I care?! And why do you trust what this tabloid says in the first place?! It’s Six Nations News! They’re known for being eighty-percent lies and exaggeration!”
(At least to me!)

“Even if this article is fabricated, it’s true that Lady Karen loves you! Ahh, Lady Karen... why must you go after the little girls?! First Sakuna Memoir, now this! I can’t handle it!”

Flöte ground her teeth in angst as she glared at me. *Not my problem! Don’t drag me into your weird love polygon!*

“Anyway! I will not accept you. And if you don’t like it... Well, let’s follow the rules of meritocracy of our Mulnite Empire. Show me that you have the might worthy of a Crimson Lord!”

“I—I will... One day. Just not today.”

“Ha! Keep on delaying things like that and see how life goes for you.”

Ouch. That hurt. But why, I wonder.

One of Flöte’s men then whispered to her, “It’s time.” The “Great Crimson Lord” nodded, shot me one last scowl, and left.

“Have a nice day, Ms. Gandesblood. I hope to see your true power next time we meet!”



As I stood watching Flöte’s unit disappear down the hallway, Caostel said he had work

to do and departed. A part of me wanted to stop and interrogate him about what exactly he was up to. As much as I hated it, I had to supervise anything related to the merchandise they were producing... For now, however, I would need to set that aside. My first priority was thinking of how to make peace with Flöte... No, before that, I had to go meet the sicko Empress... No, wait, I just remembered I forgot to take my manuscript to the post office! Damn it, there's too much to take care of!

We reached the Audience Hall in the time I was mulling over my huge to-do list. As soon as we entered, a pretty blond with huge boobies, reclining on the throne with a popsicle in hand, yelled out to me like a crow.

"Good to have you here, Komari! Isn't it stifling today? Looks like your least-favorite season is soon to arrive. Here, have a treat to cool off."

"Agh!"

She thrust her unfinished popsicle into my mouth. *Cold! But sweet. Orange... So tasty! No, I mean, don't jam stuff into my jaws like that! What if I choked?!*

I grabbed the ice pop, but glared at her with the sternest expression I could muster.

"Empress. Say your piece already."

"Ah-ha-ha! Hasty, are we? Before we get to that, how's the taste of my forced indirect kiss?"

"Don't put it so disgustingly! It tastes like orange, nothing more!"

I handed the popsicle back to her.

Honestly, the Empress must've had some type of talent to come up with these unsolicited advances on the daily. Not a talent that I'd ever want, though. Just then, I remembered I had something to tell her myself.

"All right, I'll begin! Can you explain what this stupid newspaper article is about?!"

"What article? Oh... You mean that report on our passionate love?" she replied while holding the popsicle in her mouth. "I, too, find it outrageous. Making a spectacle out of our wanton, salacious romance is in very bad taste."

“Then why comment?”

“They asked me ‘What would you do if Commander Gandesblood declared war on you?’ and I responded to that. You know their MO. Six Nations News claims to be objective only for the liberty to enrage all sides. I accepted the interview, since they *verrry* rarely churn out some good pieces... But it was a mistake.”

I hadn’t been expecting that. The Empress had some common sense. Who would’ve thunk? I assumed she’d take the report at its word and make some more moves on me... My impression of her had improved slightly.

“We would usually send them an order to recall all papers and issue a formal apology, but I’m too busy now, so I’ll let it be.”

“Huh...?”

“Anyway, Komari, let’s cut to the chase.”

“Wait. You won’t make them recall the papers? Everyone will get the wrong idea if you let it slide!”

“I’m telling you, I’m too busy right now. I mean, your father did get murdered last night.”

“WHAAAT?! WHY didn’t you say so sooner?!”

“Look, his corpse is right over there.”

“HUH?!”

I could feel my eyes popping out of my head. Daddy’s body was lying by the wall like a discarded doll, and he really didn’t look like he was there for a light nap. I rushed up to him while frothing at the mouth. He didn’t seem to be of this world anymore.

“Daddy! Daddy! Wake up, please!”

“No need to worry. He’ll be right as rain today, thanks to the Core.”

Her words weren’t enough to put me at ease. My dad was dead! I couldn’t feel relieved just because he’d come back later. And why in the world was he just lying over here?!

"They pierced his midsection," Vill remarked after crouching beside me to take a closer look.

True enough, his clothes were ripped apart around his stomach, exposing his skin.

"We can't tell for sure since his injury is mostly healed, but it appears they used neither weapons nor magic. They pierced his abdomen with only their hand. The offender must be quite the powerhouse."

"That's insane..."

I got the creeps. Then, I remembered that Daddy hadn't come back home yesterday. My little sister, Lolocco, jokingly said, "Maybe he got a lover! Ah-ha-ha!" But that could never be. I'd felt like something of more concern had been going on, but the possibility of him getting murdered never crossed my mind.

"Your Majesty, could we please get an explanation?" Vill asked.

"What I know is that he got killed yesterday after our council meeting. And he's not the only one this has been happening to—over the last week, various high-ranking officials, Elders, and Crimson Lords have gotten assassinated. There are five victims so far. I'm considering this an act of terrorism. A terrorist must be behind it."

I was at a loss for words. It didn't feel real.

"Do you have any ideas as to who it could be?"

The Empress stroked her cheek in worry.

"Sadly, no. The thing is, none of the victims realized they were done in. Naturally, they don't remember the killer's face."

"So we have memory manipulation magic at work."

"It's possible. But mental interference is a type of greater magic, and there is no way I wouldn't detect such a spell being activated inside the palace. It's possible they used an advanced-level incantation such as *Lacquered Wings* to conceal their mana, but I don't think it was magic at all—I'm considering Core Implosion."

"Core Implosion... Now that would be terrible." Vill then blinked, as if remembering

something. "Excuse me, Your Majesty. Shouldn't there be a barrier prohibiting outsiders from entering the palace? Did someone use a portal again, like Millicent did?"

"There was no portal. Nor have I received a report of the barrier being broken. That leaves us with a single explanation: The terrorist is an insider."

"I see."

"The Elders are so scared it's funny. They ordered me to catch the offender ASAP just this morning, but they won't even consider any of the solutions I've put forward. Now I get why the country has been in slight decline over the last few years."

"In any case, we must take countermeasures immediately," proposed Vill.

"Oh, we are. That's why I called Komari over... Hey, Komari, I know you're worried, but staring at the corpse won't make it heal faster."

"I—I know! But... Why is he lying over here? Take him to the infirmary, at least."

"I left him there for you, though."

"Am I supposed to be happy about that?! Don't you feel sorry for him?!"

"So it's a moral problem for you how I treat the cadaver? I'll have you know, this man had me thrown into a cesspool this one time a stray bullet killed me. I think he deserves this and more."

What the heck, Daddy?!

"Besides, you'd get a better sense of how pressing this issue is if you saw the actual body, right? Brutal insurgents are trampling down our Empire, and guess whose job it is to take care of this sort of thing? The Seven Crimson Lords!"

I had a feeling so bad it could almost kill me. So I made the first move.

"Ask Flöte. She looks strong."

"She has war plans for the next few days."

“Do it yourself, then.”

“As I said, I’m very busy right now.”

“Me too. Good-bye.”

“Komari.”

“What?”

“I order you to suppress the terrori—”

“NOOOOOOO!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “No, no, no! I will not! I already have very strict plans to coop myself up in my room and gaze into the abyss of my deepest thoughts. *You’re* the one who said I’d get a week off if I won the latest battle, you liar! Fibbing is a gateway crime, you know!”

“I never said that.”

“Sorry, the liar was me all along. I did that to drag you out of your room, hee-hee,” Vill revealed.

“YOU CRIMINAAAAAAAL!!”

“Hee-hee” my ass! Don’t try and act all cutesy! Do you have any idea how long I’ve yearned for a vacation? I gave it my all at work just because I saw that light at the end of the tunnel... How dare... How dare you stomp on my dreams... with that smug look on your face!

“Bwuuuuuuuuuh...”

The shock was so strong I started to cry. My knees gave in and I crouched down on the red carpet, but I kept my emotions from exploding further. Gnashing my teeth as my whole body trembled, I shot a glare at my maid.

“...Villhaze, don’t bully Komari like that.”

“But she won’t take even one step outside if I don’t lie to her like that... Lady Komari, please, calm down.”

“Shaddup! I’m not talking to you until you say sorry!”

“I am sorry.”

“...”

Don’t be so quick to apologize... And with such a sincere expression and deep bow... Now I really want to forgive her.

“Next time, I’ll just drag you outside instead of manipulating you with words. Please, forgive me.”

“That’s not a better alternative!”

I couldn’t even be mad anymore. I was baffled. But she did seem to seriously regret deceiving me, so there was no use in grumbling anymore. Accepting the fact that I’d never had a vacation in the first place, I wiped off my tears and held back my scream of despair at this world’s cruelty.

“Okay, I’ll give you time off,” the Empress conceded.

“I-is this another trap?”

“I mean, I’ll do it if you do as I ask. I’m actually starting to feel bad for you, so I’ll grant you a week off if you manage to catch the terrorist.”

So I still have to do that.

“...But I think that’s beyond me. I’m not strong at all, remember?”

“Individual strength matters not. You have Villhaze and all those talented subordinates at your disposal, remember? Besides... you won’t be alone in this mission.”

Huh? Just as I was about to ask for an explanation, I heard steps behind me. I turned around and looked at the entrance of the Audience Hall. Behind one of the gaudy gold pillars was someone staring at us.

“Sakuna Memoir! No need to be afraid, come in!” The Empress yelled in a thunderous tone.

The girl she called out to jerked her shoulders up, then fidgeted around for a bit before finally making up her mind to fully reveal herself.

She was all white. Perhaps half-Sapphire. Her hair, silver like the snow, was trimmed at the shoulders. Her timid behavior didn't make her seem very reliable, which only made the gothic magic staff on her back stand out even more.

The girl approached me.

She was so very pale. Her face looked almost artificial, but the light reddish blush on her soft cheeks indicated that she was indeed alive. As if there was any doubt.

Our gazes met, but she was hesitant to let her blue eyes stay fixed on mine.

She was really... How should I put it...?

“...Pretty.”

That wasn't me. She'd said that. Her utterance felt as though she was speaking for me, but in fact, she'd aimed those words at me.

“Ah, I-I'm sorry... That just came out.”

“No need to apologize. After all... I am a once-in-a-billion-years knockout beauty.”

She flushed and cast her gaze down. Weird reaction.

The Empress cleared her throat.

“Getting back on topic, the Crimson Lords are also among the victims. I'm not so wicked as to let you go after them by yourself, Komari. Which is why you two will work together on this mission.”



Work together? With her?

I looked at her with suspicion. She immediately averted her eyes again. I felt like this was the first time I'd ever encountered someone more shy than me.

“...Empress, perhaps I’m not the best person to say this but... Do you think she’s fit for the job?”

“No need to worry. Not only is she powerful, but she also has burning determination. She’s set on getting revenge on the terrorist.”

“Revenge...?”

“Indeed. Sakuna... Introduce yourself to Komari.”

My head was full of question marks, but the Empress gave no heed. The silver vampire bowed her head.

“I’m Sakuna Memoir, a Crimson Lord... Though I’m one of the highest-ranking military officials in the Empire, I got killed by the terrorist. I must defeat them to clear my name.”

She’s a Crimson Lord?!?!?! I felt like screaming. Nothing about her seemed to suggest she was one of the seven strongest people in the Empire. Wait... That’s me, too.

I stared intently at her face, surprised that even a girl like her could become a Crimson Lord. Then she flushed. *You all right there, sis?*

“U-um...” she muttered.

“Hmm?”

“I’m not a very good talker, so... I wrote a letter.”

She took an envelope out of her pocket. First that chimpanzee, now her... Were letters in vogue lately or something?

“P-please read it later, by yourself. I’ll show myself out for now!”

“Huh? Wait... Ms. Sakuna?”

I didn't manage to stop her. She ran away like a bunny who'd just spotted a predator. Left behind, I glanced to the envelope in my hands. It was sealed with a star sticker. I was glad it wasn't a heart, but from the way she'd acted, I still couldn't help feeling like it was a love letter. Pretty sure most people who saw that would feel the same.

It really felt like trouble was coming.



To Lady Terakomari Gandesblood,

I hope you excuse the unsolicited letter, but I'm not confident in my oral skills, so I thought it better to write it down.

My name is Sakuna Memoir. Please, call me "Sakuna." I became a Crimson Lord about a week ago. I hope this comment won't aggravate you, but the truth is I am not very strong. I'm not worthy of the position. I just happened to kill the previous Crimson Lord in an accident, and people interpreted this as mutiny and handed me the title...

But as much as I want to, I can't resign. As you may be aware, a Crimson Lord makes a contract which states one would explode if they ever tried to quit. You may find this unbelievable for a member of the military, but I'm afraid of pain. I don't want to die. So I have no choice but to do this job. Though I don't believe I have what it takes to be a Supreme Commander... I must apply myself.

Despite that, a terrorist killed me a short while ago. I don't remember the circumstances surrounding my death, nor the killer's face. Still, I do recall how scary it was. Dying is a terrible experience. One I don't wish to go through ever again.

Yet now I'm closer than ever to my fated explosion. A Crimson Lord getting murdered by a terrorist is akin to throwing mud in the Empire's face. I must clear my name. Otherwise, I'll get dismissed and blown to smithereens. The former sounds great (apologies if you find the comment insolent) but not so much the latter. I have to catch the terrorist to avoid that horrible end.

That sums up my situation. Perhaps it's not something I should be revealing to someone as strong and prodigious as you, Ms. Terakomari, but for some reason, I felt like it was better to let you know... Additionally, I don't think hiding things from my

colleagues is right. So please excuse my whining.

I may not be the most competent or experienced, but I hope we can work well together. Let's catch that terrorist (though I doubt there will be anything I can really help out with on that front). I will give it my all, regardless.

Since I still have some space, I'll tell you a bit more about myself.

My name is Sakuna Memoir, and I was born in the Imperial Capital. My maternal grandmother hails from the Haku-Goku Commonwealth. I'm not good at fighting, but I use magic when I do. I'm a mage (those people with the big staffs). I like reading; my favorite book is The Andronos Chronicles. My favorite food is omelet rice, my favorite animal is the capybara, and I like summer, along with Delphinus, the constellation. I've enjoyed stargazing with my family since I was little. I hope we can get along.

Sakuna Memoir

※

“I cannot believe this...!”

An hour had passed since my audience with the Empress. The sicko maid didn't give me a second to breathe and took me to the training range. My hairs were standing on end thinking she was looking for me to get into a duel to the death, but she said she wanted me to supervise my subordinates' training.

Okay, so long as I'm not doing the fighting..., I'd thought, hopeful, and sat down on a bench in the shade of a tree. I was drinking watermelon juice (and my troops were yelling like animals as they killed each other) when I remembered Sakuna's letter.

I'd been in shock after reading it. Her situation resembled mine to a tee.

“...Vill, is Sakuna famous or something?”

“She is, very much so. She's the first vampire in a while to be appointed as Crimson Lord after mutiny. From what I've heard, she blew up her predecessor in public.”

“No way. The letter says it was an accident.”

“It matters not whether the mutiny was deliberate or accidental... A foot soldier

defeating one of the seven most powerful officers of the Empire will always grab the eyes and hearts of the masses. It's the dream."

"Hmmm. Yeah, and with those looks... No wonder she's popular."

"...Do you like her, Lady Komari?!"

"Do I? I guess, yeah."

"?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!"

She was much more relatable than those barbarians.

...Huh? What's up with Vill? She looks like a girl who just had the strawberry on her shortcake stolen right before her eyes. Maybe she's feeling ill? Well, whatever, it's not like her making weird faces out of nowhere is anything new for her.

In any case, I needed to forge an amicable relationship with Sakuna. I'd thought I was the only one who'd been forced into the role of Crimson Lord, so finding out about someone who could understand how I felt was fantastic. We even shared the same interests, if her note was anything to go by. Hee-hee-hee... I was starting to feel hope once again. *Finally, a friend!*

However, the letter had said nothing about when or where we'd meet again. Guess she'd forgotten about that after spending so much effort on her introduction. This, too, felt very relatable.

"All right! Let's go meet Sakuna. I don't even care about defeating the terrorist, I just wanna talk with her."

"No. You have to supervise the training."

"Why? My meeting with Sakuna should take priority."

"Your men are practicing as hard as they are because you're here watching. Look at Captain Mellaconcey's face. He's like a pig in the mud, so happy blowing up his colleagues."

"He's always like that! I want to meet Sakuna, now. I wanna talk about *The Andronos Chronicles* with her!"

"You should be talking about work if you're meeting... But you are not. Something is fishy about her. I'm sure she slinks about the palace every night killing people."

"The *terrorist*'s the one doing that! And it's *our job* to catch them! And for that, we need to go see her! Let me do my job!"

"I—I must be hallucinating... Lady Komari, saying she wants to work?! I'm moved to tears! As you wish. I will immediately ask Lieutenant Hades Molekikki for a rematch."

"Not *that* job!"

Why was Vill being so stubborn? Was she mad? Still angry about me not eating my bell peppers that morning?

"...Okay, sorry. I'll eat my peppers from now on."

"I do not know what you are talking about, but okay, I will cook you something with peppers next time."

"I didn't say that! I take it back! Forget I said anything!"

Damn it, I shouldn't have brought that up... I'll be more careful about eating them in the future.

Setting the pepper issue aside, I really, really wanted to meet Sakuna again. I needed to talk with her about our hobbies, maybe become friends and share our troubles. I also wanted to get away from my dangerous subordinates as soon as possible. I felt like a stray bullet could kill me any moment. In fact, there was already an ax sticking out of a nearby tree.

I turned to Vill with a determined look on my face, and the sicko maid finally gave in and sighed.

"Fine. I won't stop you anymore. But keep in mind, you have to talk about catching the terrorist."

"Ugh. I—I know. But really... Do you think there's anything I can do? We're talking about a brutal murderer—you do realize that?"

"You simply have to make good use of your troops. You have five hundred brutal killers

at your disposal.”

I glanced at the training grounds. The guys were on a rampage, bloodshot eyes dazzling. There was a sea of blood, and corpses were strewn about everywhere. A soldier was weeping tears of blood as he plucked the hairs off his head. *Wonder what happened to that guy?*

“So, give them the order.”

“What order? They seem to have their hands full right now.”

“Don’t worry. Call out to them and you’ll see.”

I felt like they were so enthusiastic they’d trample me to death the instant I tried addressing them... *But I suppose Vill will protect me. You will, right? I’m counting on you!*

I stood on the bench, took a deep breath, then raised my voice.

“Listen up, soldiers!”

They all stopped. It felt like pausing a movie. It was so out of this world I felt like time had stopped for me as well.

Vill cleared her throat.

“Please, look over here. Lady Terakomari is about to give your next orders.”

“Orders!” someone muttered, then it spread around. “Commander’s giving orders!” “Hey, she’s gonna order something!” “Everyone, clean your ears!” “Don’t let a single word escape you!” “Ask us anything, Commander!” “Who should we kill?” “Are we going against Her Majesty?!” “Is it the chimpanzee again?!”

My subordinates approached me like a school of hungry piranhas. The things they were saying were as gross and outrageous as ev— *Wait, that guy’s missing half his face!! No, calm down, time to give the or—*

“Commander! Could it be related to the serial murders everyone is talking about?”

I jumped at Caostel’s sudden question coming from right beside me. *When did you get*

here?!

"Y-yes. This order comes straight from the Empress herself. She wants us to catch the culprit."

"**OOOH!**" the vampires exclaimed in joy. I could not for the life of me understand how anything I'd said merited that reaction, but in any case, I had to keep in line with their expectations.

"So, I want you to take the lead in looking for the offender. I feel sorry to give you more work when you're all so busy, but we need to catch that terrorist."

"No apologies needed, Commander!" "I would throw myself in the gutter if you ordered me, Commander!" "Don't ask like it's a favor!" "Let's get that terrorist ASAP, brothers!"

"HAAIIILLL!!!"

Stop it. Can't you guys be quiet for one second? Look, all the maids from the Crimson Tower are staring at us through the windows... Gosh, this is so embarrassing. Unfortunately, they did not hear my silent plea.

Still, having them all in on doing the job wasn't a bad thing. Despite everything, they were strong. Sakuna and I probably would not get the chance to shine. *And for the love of all that's holy, do not give us that spotlight.*

"If I may, Commander, I have a suggestion."

"What is it, Caostel?"

Nothing he'd say could ever be good.

As he spoke, his expression was that of a prisoner who had just formulated a breakout plan.

"How about you give a reward to the person who captures the terrorist? I think everyone will put in a hundred times more effort if you just dangle a little carrot before them."

"Is there really any need to raise morale further at this point?"

“I believe it is indispensable for solving the case as quickly as possible.”

“Hmmm...”

There was no downside to catching the culprit even faster. It was also my duty as boss to properly compensate the efforts of my subordinates. Perhaps such a carrot really was for the best.

I turned to look at Vill. She was expressionless, intent on making me decide for myself.

...A reward, huh? The word only brought bad things to mind after that awful fashion show the stripped-tree bastard had made me put on... But wait. There would be no problem if I just defined the prize outright. I just had to avoid saying “I’ll do anything.” Cool, cool, we’ve got it.

“Fine. Soldiers! Listen up!” I switched to Commander Mode. “This job will be arduous. You need to find a terrorist whose identity is unknown. Thus, I will give you a fitting prize if you manage to complete the job.”

I heard someone gulp.

They were all waiting with bated breath for my next statement. *Good, good. Everything's going swimmingly...* Then, I gave them what they yearned for.

“Hold on to your hats, everybody! If you capture the terrorist... I will grant you three days off!”

Silence fell.

“.....”

...Huh?

I thought they’d lose their minds over this... What’s up?

“Commander,” Caostel whispered into my ear in a hurry. “I fear that is no reward at all.”

“Wait, why?” I tilted my head in disbelief.

"They love killing. Time off won't make them happy at all—in fact, they'll only feel displeased for not getting to riot in the battlefield. Look at their faces... They're all pale with disappointment."

A-are you serious?! I'd be jumping and dancing for joy! I can't keep up with such a massive difference in values... But I had to accept it and do something right away or they'd blow their lids. Mutiny was close! I was at death's door!

"B-but it's not just any regular time off! I will... um... Yeah! I'll give you tickets for the zoo!"

My desperate measures were pathetic.

Lolo had given me two tickets not long ago. She'd been bragging about going there with her boyfriend, until he turned her down right before their date. I tried to comfort her, but she'd lashed out and shouted, "How about you go instead! Not like you have anyone to take with you!" before throwing the tickets at me, tears in her eyes.

I didn't want them, though. Going outside was a pain as it was, and as she'd rightfully pointed out, I had no one to accompany me. That's why I was planning on giving them out to someone else anyway. I figured this was a decent use for them.

One of my men timidly raised his hand.

"Excuse me... Do you mean we could go with you?"

"Hmm? Uh, yeah, if you want..."

Wait a second. Why did I even think a bunch of slaughterers would be interested in going to the zoo? But just as I realized my mistake...

"I-it's a date..." "She's inviting us on a date." "A rendezvous!" "We get to go out with her!"

Huh? What's going on? Vill, do you have any idea?

"...Lady Komari, don't you think that's too much?"

"What do you mean?"

As soon as I tried to ask for an explanation, everything exploded.

“UOOOOOOOHHHH!” “AAAAAAHHH!” “HAAAIILLL!!!” “It’s a DATE! A DATE! A freaking DATE!!” “I can’t believe this is really happening.” “God exists.” “Beep-beep. It’s a message from the universe. Fate is asking me to kill the terrorist, kill the terrorist.” “You’re freaking DEAD maaaan!” “That date is MIIIINE!” “Oh, you’re not getting a leg up on this!” “Neither are you, man, back the hell up!” “The terrorist’s going for the politicians, right? I just gotta take them out first, myself!” “Oh, I get what you say! Hiding under a leaf? Just burn the entire forest!” “LET’S GOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

“.....”

“..”

“...These guys are the terrorists!” I screamed.

“It is unbelievable, but there is no going back now, Lady Komari.”

“Right? Do they really enjoy looking like animals that much?”

“Truly unbelievable, Lady Komari.”

“I heard you the first time! How about you help me out here, okay?!”

My subordinates kept on squealing even as they scattered away, and my mind went blank.

Oh, crap. I’ve let the beasts out of their cages...

“Commander, I will supervise this rowdy bunch and make sure they don’t cause any trouble,” said Bellius Hund Cerbero.

Only then did I realize where I had gone wrong: I’d been grumbling about my troops within their earshot. Oh well... I didn’t say anything big anyway... Right? Bellius and Caostel didn’t seem suspicious of me, in any case.

“Lady Komari, what will be your next course of action?”

“Meeting Sakuna.”

“You’ll do nothing about the men?”

“...Bellius, Caostel... Can I trust you with them?”

““Yes, Commander!””

They ran behind the rest of my unit like the wind. Finally free from their vigilant eyes and ears, I gave a sigh of relief, stretched my arms, spent a few seconds staring at the clouds, then said:

“Yeah. Everything will turn out fine.”



I pretended not to hear the cries of terror and explosions ringing out from a distance. I could feel the consequences of my actions slowly coming down on my shoulders, but that was a problem for future me. Meanwhile, present (Past? Aren’t they both?) me focused on enjoying the fun while it lasted. *What should I have for dinner? It’s been a long time since I’ve had demi-glace steak. Maybe that.*

“We’ve arrived, Lady Komari.”

Vill’s announcement brought me back to reality.

The doors to the elevator opened via enchantment. We arrived at the sixth floor of the Crimson Tower. My workplace had seven levels total: The first floor belonged to the First Unit, the second to the Second Unit, and so on.

The sixth story, as you might’ve deduced already, belonged to the Sixth Unit—which meant it was Sakuna’s office.

We walked straight through the hallway until we reached the entrance to her room. The sign on the door indicated that she was available.

I was... pretty nervous. Come to think of it, this might’ve been the first time I’d ever met someone of my own accord. This was only happening thanks to how open Sakuna had been... But I was still afraid of leaving a bad impression.

“...Hmm?”

Just then, I heard two voices from inside the room. One was Sakuna's. The other sounded like a man's? *Crap, I just heard them say "Terakomari." What could they be talking about?* As bad as it was to eavesdrop, my curiosity was winning out.

"Is someone visiting?" I asked Vill.

"Why don't you check?"

"How?"

"Like so."

She threw the door open with a bang.

The interior of the room was laid bare with ease. Sakuna stared at us in shock. Before her stood an old man wearing religious vestments, and he, too, was looking at me in disbelief. *I mean, yeah, who comes in like that? What are we, robbers? No, don't lump me in with this weirdo! It's her fault! At least knock first, you sicko! What if Sakuna doesn't want to be friends with me anymore?!*

"...Ms. Terakomari?"

Sakuna sounded confused. Obviously. I forced a smile before answering.

"H-hey, Sakuna. Sorry for the intrusion. I'm here to talk about our mission against the terrorist... Were you busy?"

I glanced at the religious man. It felt like they had been talking about serious matters, so maybe this wasn't the best moment to come here. But to my surprise, the guy shook his head with exaggeration.

"No, not at all! There is no problem, not at all, Lady Gandesblood! We were not talking about anything important! I shall leave now! See you later, Lady Memoir!"

"...Good-bye."

The man started walking toward me... or the door, rather. His every step and motion were full of vigor, like a well-trained soldier. I got out of the way in a panic, and he stopped beside me and smiled. His expression was eerie, like a bird grinning.

“It is an honor to meet you, Lady Gandesblood! I’ve heard the rumors. That you’re a jack-of-all-trades making a big name for herself in all respects! I am sure your power will be more than enough to conquer all six nations!”

“Y-yeah. World domination will be walk in the park.”

“Ha-ha-ha! And so sure of yourself, too! Speaking of which, are you a believer?”

“...Huh?”

What's he talking about?

“Do you believe in God?”

“I guess? As much as anyone else...”

“Oh! Ohhh! I can see the fervor in your faith! You are a devout, God-fearing vampire! I see, it all makes sense now. It’s thanks to the divine protection of the Lord that you’ve succeeded so. As you might know, God sees it all and makes sure to reward the good and punish the bad. You can witness the consequences of this throughout all of creation, and how swift and precise His judgment is...”

The old guy kept on babbling, beaming with delight. I was shaking in my boots.

I promptly came to a conclusion. He, too, was an oddball, a weirdo—perhaps even a sicko—like many people I’d been encountering lately.

I glanced over at Sakuna and she blushed, trembling anxiously. What sort of business did she have with this sicko priest?

“Oh, excuse me. I have a hard time stopping once I get going. Oh, how terrible! In any case, I am delighted to know you’re a fellow believer, Lady Gandesblood. I hope we get the chance to debate about the Creation and God’s miracles soon!”

“Y-yeah. Creation’s pretty crazy.”

“Indeed. It is amazing!”

He grabbed my hand and shook it intensely. Then he smiled, shouted, “I’m really leaving now! Amen!” And walked away.

Yeah... I don't wanna see that guy ever again.

Why was that weirdo here, anyway?

“...Sakuna, do you know him?”

Her small shoulders jerked up. Why so shocked? I should let her know I’m a lonely, peace-loving, and completely safe vampire, and not some loony murderer like the rest of the Crimson Lords. But maybe it was too soon still to tell her the truth.

Sakuna responded with great hesitation.

“...He’s... Heldeus Heaven. The Crimson Lord who recommended me for my position.”

“*That guy* is a Crimson Lord?”

Are all of them such weirdos?

“Yes... However, his true vocation is as priest. He manages the church and orphanage on the outskirts of the capital. Actually, I came from that orphanage.”

“I—I see.”

I could tell the whole situation was more complex than I’d expected. Prying more deeply into it would feel rude, so I figured it would be better to talk about work. Not that I wanted to do any.

At that moment, however, the heavy, enchanted toll of the Imperial Capital’s Clock Tower echoed throughout the area. It was noon. And I was hungry.

“Lady Komari, what will we be doing for lunch?”

“Um...”

Oh, this was the perfect chance! Telling her I’d be off to have lunch just as I arrived would be weird, too, so it was the most natural and obvious thing to do.

“Sakuna, if you’d like, h-how about we... eat together?”

I said it. There was no taking it back now. And I did it so well, too. As someone who

didn't have experience with this sort of thing, it was no exaggeration to say this invitation was my life's greatest achievement... But then it hit me. Should I be asking on such short notice? Wasn't arranging lunch meetings in advance the normal thing to do?

I started sweating in anxiety when Sakuna answered in the faintest of voices.

"...Yes, I would be pleased to join you, if I may."



We went to the restaurant inside the Imperial Palace: Fruits of the Land. It was a luxury place, full of nobles visiting the premises—the sort of venue I'd never go to by myself. This, however, was a special occasion.

...But maybe it was a mistake, nonetheless.

As soon as I entered the place, I heard a barrage of awful praise: "It's Commander Gandesblood!" "It's her!" "You can just feel the sharp wit oozing from her!" "That pure slaughterer aura!"

Sakuna winced and squirmed behind me.

"Should we go somewhere else?" I suggested, but she shook her head. Apparently, she didn't want to trouble me like that. It was no trouble at all, though; I was troubled myself being there, actually... But I decided to respect her decision.

We sat down, Sakuna in front of me, and Vill hovering behind me... *What are you doing there, you creep?*

"Just take a seat, please," I told Vill.

"I am unfit for eating at such a luxurious establishment. Plus, no maid would ever dare share a table with her mistress."

"Oh, but you have no qualms sharing a bed with me without my permission, do you?"

Then I heard an abrupt intake of breath. I turned to the source and found Sakuna beet red, her lips flapping like a fish... *What's up with her?*

"I see, you're right. You and I have already overcome the perils of death together. Our relationship goes beyond just that: We are life partners."

"Like, eighty percent of the perils I get myself into are your fault, though."

"You must be imagining things. Regardless, I see we've reached a mutual agreement. We're close enough to share a table, even a bed, and perhaps more. Thank you for reminding me of the fact."

Vill sat down beside me, then flashed a dirty smile at Sakuna, as if she'd just successfully completed a nasty, meticulous scheme. I did not understand why. And I gave it no further thought.

After we put in our orders, I made up my mind and cleared my throat.

"Let me properly introduce myself. I am Terakomari Gandesblood, fifteen years old. Seeing as we'll be on the same mission for a while, I... um... hope we work well together."

"Y-yes, it's my pleasure. I'm Sakuna Memoir... By the way, did you read my letter?"

"Yes, I did. I also love reading, by the way. I think we could get along."

"Yeaah...", she said as she cast her gaze down, her face red to the ears. She then continued talking, her voice as faint as a mosquito buzzing. "Thank you very much. I am... delighted. But... um, setting that... Setting my hobbies aside... how do you feel about the way I became a Crimson Lord? Do you think I'm pathetic?"

That thing about how she'd gotten her title by accident? No way I'd think that. The same had happened for me.

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you mutiny?"

"Explosion."

That was actually true?!

"...I'm really weak, so I wanted to change that... I was practicing magic when the Crimson Lord suddenly passed by, and my spell hit him. And he died..."

"O-oh. That's, uh... pretty bad luck, huh?"

"It is... I didn't think this would count for making me a Crimson Lord, but then Mr. Helldeus, the man from earlier, got all excited about it. He directly petitioned Her Majesty to make me one, and for whatever reason, she conceded."

"Yeah, that sicko Empress will welcome any girl, so long as she's cute."

"I-I'm... Cute?"

Sakuna blinked in surprise. Vill stared at me with dead-fish eyes for some reason.
Everything okay, ladies?

"Anyway! I understand your situation. Surely the hardest part must be having to hide your weakness from your subordinates, right? They might mutiny if you show the slightest sign of not being strong enough, right?"

"Hmm? No, I don't think so."

"Huh?"

"All my troops know I'm not that powerful, and they all support me so I can fulfill my duties despite my weakness. They're always comforting me, telling me not to worry, and insisting that everything will be all right. They're all such good people... Despite wanting to quit, I get the energy to keep on trying from them."

"..."

What the frick? I was turning green with envy.

Hmmm, should I tell my subordinates the truth, too?

No. No way. I'll die. They'd gut me, for sure.

"O-oh. I'm glad you're blessed with supportive people. But yeah, it's still unfair. I think everyone should be free to choose their line of work."

"On the other hand, you're so amazing compared to me. No, it would be rude to compare you to myself... You're so strong, such an accomplished Crimson Lord... It's like the job was made just for you."

I had to hold myself back from telling her that wasn't quite true. All the nobles around us were listening closely. I'd really messed up by choosing this restaurant.

Vill shot me an urgent stare as I continued to consider my answer.

"Lady Komari, I think we should be done with the small talk already and cut to the chase."

Why is she so grumpy?

"I-I'm sorry. Yes, we should be talking about the terrorist." Sakuna straightened up.

Oh, you don't need to be that polite before this degenerate.

That aside, I decided to follow Vill's lead and talk about work; maybe that would put her in a better mood. I didn't feel like we really needed to, though. My men had already been unleashed. It was only a matter of time before they found their prey.

"Okay, let's talk shop. So the terrorist killed you, right? You really don't remember their face?"

"I'm afraid not. I remember I left the Crimson Tower and was on my way back home... But my next memory is of me outside, dead."

"I see." Vill nodded. "According to Her Majesty, their Core Implosion allows them to manipulate memories. Are you aware of this ability, Lady Memoir?"

Sakuna's gaze wavered for a short moment; and I do mean a moment.

"...Yes, but I've only heard rumors."

"Core Implosion is a power distinct from magic. If the terrorist truly is capable of using it, we must be on high alert at all times."

"Um, as I've said, I'm very weak, though. Will we be fine?"

"No need to fret. Lady Komari will take care of everything."

Vill winked.

Sakuna looked at me with eyes full of admiration.

I reflexively cleared my throat.

“Yeah, don’t worry! I’ll protect you!”

“I’m really sorry. I only have enough strength to crush an apple with my hand...”

“...”

Hold up.

She’s not just like me?

“...I—I feel awful just admitting to that. I should be able to crush a watermelon at the very least, right?”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Don’t beat yourself over it. I can so easily crush pineapples now, but back when I was little, even apples gave me trouble. A watermelon will be no big deal if you keep it up.”

“Thank you, I will.”

“Oh, but don’t go wasting food for no reason, okay?”

“Of course. I will eat it all.”

“Good.”

Weird conversation, but okay.

“Lady Komari, we’re getting off track” Vill rebuked. “As I was saying, we must be fully prepared to confront this mysterious terrorist.”

“Indeed... Come think of it, what’s their objective? It can’t be just killing everyone, can it? I doubt they’re as insane as my men.”

“We know too little to draw any conclusions.”

Vill said no more, reasonably. There was no use hypothesizing about it. And it didn’t

matter anyway, since my subordinates would surely catch them very soon. I just had to sit back with Sakuna and talk about books and the stars and... *I guess that's a scumbag move as a boss, huh? I should show support to my troops. Give them some candy or something.*

As my mind wandered, Vill spoke up again.

"There is but one thing we must do. Consider that the terrorist has only been appearing at night on Imperial Palace grounds. What do we do, then? Patrol the palace at night."

"...Hah?"

My expression turned serious.

Patrol? At night?... Hah?

"You mean we can just take the day off? Go take a nap until night?"

"Lady Komari, please. You have duties during the day, so your nighttime obligations will have to be in addition to those. You should keep working from nine in the morning to... let's see... about eight in the evening, at the very least."

"HAAAAAHHHH?!"

I was almost breathing fire out my mouth. Slave away from nine to eight?! My head would explode from all that work!

"You've gotta be kidding me! I am NOT working that much!"

"Lady Komari."

"What?!"

"Everyone's staring at you."

"..."

Sakuna's jaw was on the floor. The nobles were whispering among one another with their eyes trained on me. "You hear that commander?" "Does she actually hate her

job?" "I cannot believe a Crimson Lord would ever say that." "Wait, maybe she didn't mean it." "Who says that sort of thing and not mean it?" "True..."

Well, shoot.

I tried calming down before looking at Vill again.

"You've gotta be kidding me! I am not ONLY working that much!"

The nobles did a double take. I cried internally while I kept on talking.

"That much is mere child's play! We are staying up even later looking for that sneaky scoundrel! The murders are happening outside our sights, you understand? Which means we must set eyes on the tiniest crannies of the entire palace! That's my job as a Crimson Lord!"

I pointed at Vill with sharp motion and grandiose pose. I nailed it.

Someone started clapping, and it spread until the entire restaurant was cheering.

Meanwhile, I was deep in the trenches of despair. And the sicko maid unleashed a follow-up blow to sink me further.



"I'm moved to tears! To think Lady Komari was so passionate about protecting the Mulnite Empire! I understand. We will be patrolling until at least 10 PM every night. Lady Memoir, is that fine with you?"

"Yes. I must follow Ms. Terakomari's example and work hard."

Stop it. Don't look at me like that. I'm no figure to look up to. I'm just a shut-in vampire...
Sadly, I couldn't bring myself to speak the truth.

I heaved a sigh as I sat back down.

Working until ten? That's gotta be illegal. Sakuna, you don't want this either, do you? Please just say you don't... She didn't seem to mind it in the slightest. Why?! Didn't you say you wanted to quit this gig?

"...I guess that concludes our meeting."

"Got it. We'll talk about it again after our patrol."

I already felt like crap, and things would only get harder later... Or maybe my men would catch the culprit within the day. Then I wouldn't have to patrol. It didn't feel like a reach, either. I felt I could actually pin my hopes on them this one time. Just don't kill anyone.

"Now that that's settled... Where's my omelet rice?"

"I suppose it's taking longer since the restaurant is full."

"Hmmm."

My stomach was already destroying itself. I'd been working since morning, meeting the Empress, then supervising the guys... I was desperate, spoon and fork in hand, when suddenly, I heard an explosion outside. And it was a big one—powerful enough to shake the entire establishment.

The nobles all screamed. I almost did myself.

"Wh-what is going on?! Is that the terrorist?!"

"It's quite possible. Let's go, Lady Komari!"

“W-wait, I don’t wanna go, I’m gonna diiiie! And I still haven’t had my fooooood!”

Vill grabbed me by the arm and yanked me out.

Oh, how I yearned for power. For strength enough to resist hers, at least.



The sight outside the palace garden felt like something out of a dream.

Corpses. Mountains of them, scattered about.

And I recognized all of them. My subordinates, my Seventh Unit men, had been massacred. Why? Had they killed each other in a brawl over who got the prey? I would’ve accepted that, but it didn’t seem like it was the case.

“Bellius! Caostel! Even you?! What happened?!”

Both leaders of the Seventh Unit were lying facedown on the grass. There was no way this was just the result of infighting.

“I’m sorry... Commander...,” Bellius spoke in between gasps. At least he wasn’t dead yet.

“What’s going on?”

“She... The Black Flash...”

Bellius threw up blood, then stopped moving. I felt my blood pressure drop. It didn’t matter that he’d revive later—seeing someone expire before my eyes messed me up inside.

“D-don’t worry. He’s not dead yet. Leave it to me.”

Sakuna took a step forward. I turned to her and found her holding that huge staff she’d had before. She pointed it at Bellius and chanted a spell.

“Core, Dark Core... Move all that is quiet. Mid-level healing spell: *Supply Stimulation*.”

A faint light emanated from the end of the staff, and it enveloped the dog-man’s body.

I simply stared in hope until Bellius finally started coughing. He came back to life... Or rather, he was simply healed.

“I can accelerate recovery this way, so long as it’s before they die.”

“You’re amazing, Sakuna!”

“N-not at all... The Sapphires can do even more impressive healing magic.”

“I don’t care, you’re still amazing. I can’t do this, that’s for sure.”

“I see... Hee-hee...”

I had never heard of this awesome spell.

Thinking back to the apple thing again... This girl sure had way more talent than me. Obviously, I guess. But I put off thinking about that for later.

“Bellius, are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes, I am...” Then he looked up at the sky, as if he had just remembered something. “I apologize, Commander! We were defeated by Flöte Mascarail.”

“Flöte...?”

Then I heard a second eardrum-piercing explosion. I looked up in fright and saw a battle playing out on the rooftop.

On one side stood a woman armed with a rapier. Her glossy black hair danced in the wind as she gracefully stepped forward to thrust. She was the Great Crimson Lord, the Black Flash—Flöte Mascarail.

On the other side stood a garishly dressed man. He dodged Flöte’s sword as he countered with his specialty—explosion magic. This was Mellaconcey, one of the leaders of the Seventh Unit. The building’s ornamentation blew off with every one of his attacks. I wondered who would be held responsible for the damage.

“Tch, crafty bastard... How about this!”

Flöte drew mana into her blade, and with her next swing, a black torrent of magical

power shot out of it. That looked like advanced-level dark magic. Mellaconcey reacted with an impressive jump, and the dark spell shot under his feet and destroyed a spire before dissipating. Now *that one's* gotta be Flöte's responsibility.

Next thing I knew, Mellaconcey had landed right beside me with a thud. His utter jumping power put my jaw on the floor, but I immediately pulled it back up.

"M-Mellaconcey! What in the world are you doing?!"

"Check it! Flöte's lost her mind, she's all prickly. Keep that expression, she's gonna end up wrinkly. The Black Flash is crazy. I'll drag her to hell if she slays me."

"Just speak like a normal person!"

"She attacked us, so we fought back."

"You actually can speak normally?!"

"Oh no, that's slander. I am merely doing my job," Flöte interjected as she descended to the ground.

She looked just as haughty as she did when I'd first met her that morning. Her glare made me take half a step back, but I couldn't run away after having so many of my men killed. I mustered all the courage I could to take a step forward.

"F-Flöte! What is the meaning of this? Answer carefully, or I might get seriously pissed! I may even stop talking to you for a whole wee—"

Then... she disappeared.

"Bwuh?"

The next instant, black lightning fell before me. I stood there, mouth agape, as a shrill thunder pierced my ears, followed by a powerful gust of wind. I took in what had happened with eyes opened wide.

Sakuna's back was in front of me. She had stopped Flöte's attack and was holding her staff horizontally. I had no idea what was going on.

"Oh my... It was Ms. Memoir who acted."

"U-um... I don't think attacking out of the blue like that is a nice thing to do."

"Heh, my hand just slipped."

Flöte snorted, then sheathed her blade. My brain finally started processing what had just transpired. The lunatic had launched a surprise attack on me. I obviously hadn't even realized that, and was fated to die there and then, but Sakuna saved me by intercepting her technique.

"Are you okay, Ms. Terakomari?"

"Uh, um, y-yeah..."

"I-I'm so sorry! I know you could've defended yourself against such a weak blow. I apologize if you found my action condescending."

"N-no, no, no! I mean, sure, I could have broken her blade with my pinky finger as naturally as I breathe, but I'm grateful you saved me! Thanks!"

"Hee-hee-hee... I'm glad to hear that."

I'm sorry, but?? She's so cute?? And capable?? Huh?? Is she an angel??

Meanwhile, Vill was holding a kunai, oozing hostility out of every pore. *What's up with her?*

"It should've been me who saved Komari... Not her..."

Vill's expression was scary, but, well... There was someone much scarier right in front of me. I turned my attention back to the latter and set a serious look on my face.

The murderous Crimson Lord, Flöte Mascarail, clicked her tongue in utter disgust.

"You're good at handling your underlings while hanging back and doing nothing."

"I don't do nothing! I'm just having one of those days! Anyway, why did you do this to my unit? Murder is a crime, you know!"

"The reason is quite simple. Your men were committing public indecency in the palace, so I took care of the issue."

"Public morals? Were they smoking inside or something?"

"Nothing of the sort!" She scowled at me with demonic eyes. "Do you even educate them properly? They were laying waste to everything and attempting murder! Acting like actual terrorists!"

"Wait a second, what do you mean?"

"All the men you see dead right here! They were all rampaging throughout the Imperial Palace without a care in the world! And I stopped them!!"

"..."

I looked at Bellius. His ears were drooping.

"I'm sorry. We couldn't contain them."

...What? So we're the bad guys here? You all deserved to get killed?

"Ms. Gandesblood, are you listening? Your lack of proper supervision has brought great losses to the palace! How exactly will you take responsibility for this?"

"I-I'll pay for the losses..."

"This can't be resolved with money!"

"I'll do anything you say..."

"You shouldn't promise that sort of thing without consideration!"

Then what do you want me to do? Have us all do community service? House arrest? Oh, I would love that one! Though I doubt Flöte would be happy with that.

I was completely lost. The Black Flash grinned.

"I've confirmed here and now that you, Ms. Gandesblood, are unfit for the title of Crimson Lord. Not only does your true strength remain unknown, but you also can't even seem to be able to keep your troops in line. Such a thing is unheard of among Crimson Lords."

I had no words.

She's completely right, Bellius, please don't look at her like that. Mellaconcey, stop chanting an incantation. And Vill, put away that damn kunai.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Not really.”

“Very well!” Flöte replied with an ecstatic expression. “Then I hereby propose a motion of no confidence against Terakomari Gandesblood. We will discuss this at the following Crimson Council. Wait, do you even know about that? As the name suggests, it is a special meeting all Seven Crimson Lords are obligated to attend. That includes you, of course. Heh-heh... I cannot wait to see what everyone thinks about this.”



“Hey, Vill, what happens if I get discharged at this Crimson Council?”

“The magic contract itself wouldn’t be erased beforehand, so you would explode to death.”

“There’s no escape!!”

I screamed my soul out into the darkness.

It was night at the Imperial Palace, and we were patrolling the area, per our agreement during lunch. The workday had ended at six in the evening, and we met up with Sakuna after dinner. We’d already been walking around for an hour or so, and we had yet to see any sign of the terrorist.

That’s when it hit me. We knew the culprit was attacking politicians, so was there any point in wandering about aimlessly? The question wasn’t taking up much of my mindspace, though. What was eating me up inside was something else. It wasn’t my annoyance at having to work overtime, either. It was something much simpler—my fear of death. Even though I knew I’d revive, just thinking of the pain made me squeamish.

“Ugh, I already have my hands full with this terrorist crap... Why me...?!”

“What are we to do? We knew sooner or later this would happen.”

“You knew?!”

“Anyone would realize. You are but a doll in a throne when it comes to war, Lady Komari. It should’ve been easy to imagine someone else would eventually get suspicious and come looking for a fight.”

She was right. I mean, Yohann had already done just that before.

“So... What’s the Crimson Council going to be like?”

“I couldn’t tell you. But considering what Flöte Mascarail said, they will probably just talk about whether you should be left alive or die. Perhaps they’ll hold a vote.”

“I’m not leaving this up to democracy! I have no hope! No one’s gonna side with—”

“D-don’t worry!” Sakuna interjected, gripping her staff tightly as she walked beside me. “I will vote in your favor, Ms. Terakomari. There is no one more deserving of the title of Crimson Lord...”

“S-Sakuna!!”

I was tearing up. Though I conveniently ignored the part about being deserving of the title, I was just so pleased to have a vampire on my side. NO ONE else would EVER do that. I was so happy that I ended up patting her white head unconsciously. (Sidenote: She was much taller than me)

“You’re such a good girl, Sakuna. Let’s go stargazing sometime, okay?”

“Y-yesh, thank you very mush...,” Sakuna mumbled. “Uh, um, your hand...”

“Oops. Sorry, I didn’t mean to... Are you mad?”

“Not at all. I’m glad, actually... It feels like I got an older sister.”

“A sister?”

“Ah! I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to...”

Sakuna's face tensed up in regret. But why?

"I'm really sorry. You don't like me getting all chummy, do you...?"

"I don't mind it. I would very much like to have a younger sister like you."

"R-really...? Hee-hee... Sister."

"Oh... I like how that sounds. Say it again."

"Big Sis Komari!"

"..."

I gave her another gentle head pat, and she smiled with her whole face. She'd be shaking her tail like crazy right now if she had one.

How is she so cute?? My real, good-for-nothing sister could learn a thing or two from her!

...Wait. Isn't she sixteen? She's older than me! How can I have an older baby sister? Oh well, who cares, it's just for fun.

"Lady Komari, this is not the time for flirting."

I turned to the source of that chilling voice. Vill was staring at me, her face devoid of emotion.

"Even with Lady Memoir's help, the chances of your survival are minimal. Might I remind you there are five other Crimson Lords? I'm willing to bet most of them oppose you."

"Y-you're right! What do I do now? Bribe them?"

"That's a crime."

"Who cares! My life depends on it!"

"It's unnecessary, too. Just leave it all to me, and everything will be all right... Lady Komari, look at my eyes."

“What...? Wh-what’s going on? They’re eerily bloodshot...”

Vill’s eyes shone red in the darkness. These were no regular tired eyes... And I’d soon learn I was right. She grinned.

“This is Core Implosion: *Pandora’s Poison*. They finally drank it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Right, I never gave you a proper explanation... My Core Implosion allows me to glimpse into the future. I can perceive someone’s near future if they consume my blood. The timespan I saw just now was shorter than usual, though, since my fluids weren’t fresh.”

Sakuna took a step back from Vill.

That superpower didn’t feel real to me yet... But it sounded awesome.

Vill stared into space and started mumbling.

“Crimson Council... Flöte Mascarail... Helldeus Heaven... Odilon Metal... I see.” Then she looked at me. “I got it. Everything.”

“What did you see?”

“That ‘council’ will just be an interrogation. I glimpsed what will happen there, three days from now. Flöte Mascarail will drive you into a corner with her oppressive and rational line of questioning, and then they will hold a vote to decide if you are fit to continue being a Crimson Lord.”

“...So what happens in the end?”

“You explode.”

“No way.”

“It’s true.”

“No way.”

“It’s true.”

“SAY IT’S NOT TRUE!”

“It’s not true.”

“It isn’t?!”

“We will make it not true. The future can be changed. Leave it all to me, and you will not blow up. I’m certain of it.”

Vill spoke with complete confidence.

That’s when I realized. It was the same as always. I just had to leave it in her hands, and she’d take care of it. I couldn’t exactly feel safe doing that, but I had no choice but to believe in her... I felt a faint hope bud within me. Then, Vill tipped the top of her head toward me... Why?

“I will give my all for you, Lady Komari.”

“C-cool. Thanks.”

“I’m a good girl, too.”

“...”

She was serious. I relented and gave her head a slight pat. She smelled like lavender.

I then noticed that Sakuna was staring at us.

“Um... Ms. Terakomari, you don’t like fighting?”

“Huh? Wh-wh-wh-wh-why do you ask?”

“I mean... Any other Crimson Lord would think of solving the matter using more violent means. They’d shut up their opponents with their own hands, literally.”

Oh, crap. She’s sharp.

“Of course that would be most effective! But I don’t like fighting useless fights! I

always favor talking things out to find a solution.”

“Wow...”

Sakuna smiled in relief.

I didn’t get why, but I guessed it was nothing to worry about.

The hellish Crimson Council was near.

We didn’t find the terrorist that day.

Vexations

1.5 A Hundred Komaris

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

“Don’t let anyone put you down. Stay strong,” her sister used to tell her.

Sakuna wasn’t really bullied, but since she stood out in the vampire country due to her Sapphire blood, she often found herself the target of thoughtless gossiping.

Her older sister always received her with a warm smile.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen again?”

Sakuna told her about how they had to make groups in class, and she was the only one left out. And they’d laughed at her for it.

“Oh. What a bunch of awful kids. I’ll go kill them.”

“Don’t. Please.” She grabbed her arm in a hurry.

Her hotheadedness was her sibling’s one flaw.

Sakuna looked up at her sister with concern.

“Why does this happen?”

“I think it’s a product of the way the world is built. The Dark Core encourages each of the nations to stick to themselves—people only care about their own race, and discriminate against others. It’s awful.”

“What should I do?”

"Hmm, the thing is you're too shy. You should try being more outgoing. Maybe they'll fight back if you get too assertive, but that's better than doing nothing. And I'll take care of everything if something happens. I'll kill anyone who dares do anything to you."

"Please don't kill anyone..."

"It's actually better to have this mentality. People with strong minds have a special sort of power, and you have what it takes, Sakuna. I can tell."

The gave Sakuna a bit of courage. Though she still felt like her sister's words were too vague.

"...But um, what should I do, exactly?"

"The next time you feel like crying will be your signal. You will feel bad, but you must not give in. Think about what made you unhappy, think very hard about it, and then act the way you want to get out of there. You'll see that you'll be happy then."

Her sister wasn't that much older than her, but she liked talking in this abstract, pedantic way. Sakuna liked that about her; she thought it made her sister seem out of this world. Like a pretty constellation.

"...I'm not sure I get it, but I'll try." Even if she didn't understand, Sakuna respected her sis a whole lot. "Thank you... Komari."

This happened many years ago.

Her kind sister was no longer with her.

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The patrol had ended with no results.

Sakuna had parted ways with Commander Komarin and her maid Villhaze and was now skipping her way home in the dark. Her cheery spirit was infusing her body with energy.

Working from nine in the morning to ten at night was hard, for sure, but Sakuna Memoir felt no weariness in that moment. Her heart was beating fast. She felt like a little girl who'd gotten to meet her idol.

And how could I not feel like this?! I got to meet Supreme Commander Terakomari Gandesblood! And she patted my head! So gently... So softly... I can still sense her hand on my head! Is there any vampire in all of Mulnite who wouldn't feel like skipping after this?!

“Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee...”

Sakuna couldn't help but grin. She knew she couldn't afford to be seen behaving like this, but her cheeks didn't care. Though she passed by a drunkard in a military uniform, she barely noticed.

Terakomari Gandesblood was Sakuna's idol. And the reason was quite simple: She had lots of things Sakuna didn't. Komari was cute, charming, strong, and charismatic. She was much more approachable than Sakuna had expected. She was so kind with this mess of a newbie. And despite being the strongest vampire ever, she didn't rely on violence to solve everything.

Sakuna felt like she had to be dreaming, getting to work alongside her like this. She'd thought becoming a Crimson Lord would only bring her misfortune, but strangely enough, it had ended up a blessing.

As all those thoughts rushed through her mind, she unlocked the door of her home—the Imperial Army's women's dormitory. It was a run-down building on the other side of the river, in the middle of the Imperial Palace grounds. The Crimson Lords had much better lodging, but Sakuna liked this old one-room place she had and wasn't planning on moving. She felt at peace there.

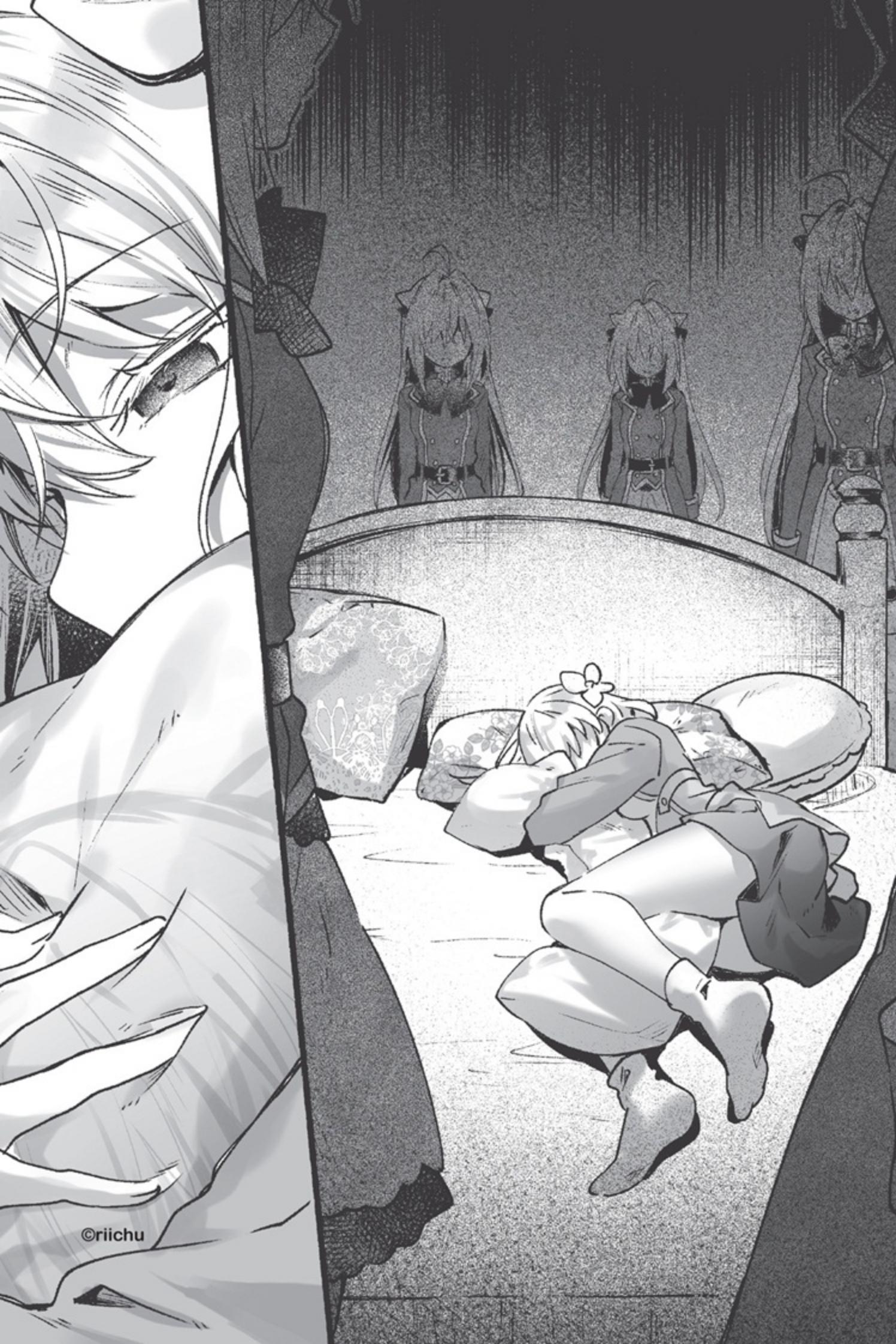
“I'm home!”

The door opened with a creak. It was dark inside, obviously. Sakuna forged a small amount of mana, then poured it into the magic lamp on the ceiling. The room lit up immediately.

Before her stood Komari. Not any regular Komari, no. Her handmade Komarin—a life-size doll she'd crafted with the mid-level molding spell *Mud Creation*. You could tell it was a doll just by squinting a little, but at a glance, you could mistake it for the commander herself. And this wasn't the only one there—there were fifteen of them throughout the room.

“I'm home, Komari.”

Sakuna greeted the Komarin doll with a broad smile. She couldn't leave it at that, however, or her other sisters would feel bad. She greeted them all one by one. "I'm home, Komari." "I'm home, Komari." "I'm home, Komari." Once she finished addressing all fifteen of them, she nodded in satisfaction and threw herself on the bed without even taking off her uniform. She hugged her life-size Commander Komarin pillow and squirmed around as she thought back on the events of that day.



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Ahh. Ahhhh... I finally got to chat with my precious Terakomari!

Her heart was overflowing with joy. And the best part was that this joy would continue for a while more. Just thinking of that made her chest throb harder and the grin on her face grow wider.

Sakuna stared up at the ceiling. Spread across it were the all the clandestine photos of Komari she'd bought at the black market. Having Komari filling her entire view as soon as she woke up every morning gave her the energy she needed to make it through the day.

“Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee.”

There were a total of one hundred Komari products.

There was no denying it: Sakuna was a huge Commander Komarin fan.

If the genuine article saw this room, she'd give a mighty shriek and pass out. Sakuna had no intention of showing it to her, though, so that was A-OK. And should it ever happen, she was prepared to graciously slice her belly open in recompense.

"Ahh... Big Sis Komari..."

Sakuna didn't want to work. She neither wanted to kill nor be killed. That being said... It was also thanks to this same job that she'd gotten to meet her idol.

"And we'll see each other again tomorrow..."

She wanted to talk more with her. To get closer to her. She wanted to know more about her. Everything about her, from A to Z, and once everything was ready, she'd invite her to a dark place and—

Just then, the Correspondence Crystal at her bedside started glowing.

Sakuna's face turned pale. All the joy she'd been feeling vanished in an instant.

It was happening again. All her terrible memories were about to be brought up once more. But she had to answer, or something even worse would happen.

The Crystal kept on glowing, as if to taunt her.

She took a deep breath and, with shaky hands, poured mana into it.

"What in the world are you doing, Sakuna Memoir?!"

She winced.

Violent insults echoed around.

"You goddamn fool! Stupid, cowardly wench! It's been three days already and you haven't killed a single Crimson Lord! Stop your dawdling or the Empress will catch on to us!"

"I-I'm sorry... But I'm not sure I'd be able to overcome them... Besides, the Crimson Lords are rarely alone."

"Then challenge them to a duel or something. They're no civil officials, you can kill them in public! Use your damn brain for once!"

"Th-there's this thing called the Imperial Military Law... According to article eleven, paragraph three, dueling between Crimson Lords for personal reasons is strictly prohibited."

The man went quiet for a moment. It was then that Sakuna realized she shouldn't have retorted like that.

The yelling came like a storm.

"And your job is to do something about that sort of crap!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"Shut the hell up! Enough of your whining! Fine, I get it, you're absolutely useless. I'll set the stage for you."

"The... stage?"

"Flöte Mascarail seems to be planning some interesting things, so we'll take advantage of them. Remember that you cannot fail this mission. You'll be a disgrace to Inverse Moon if you do, and there'll be punishment waiting for you. How many family members did you have, again?"

Sakuna could feel him sneering. Chills crept down her spine.

"Did you not hear me?! Answer!"

"Th-three! My father, my mother, and my sister..."

"I'll kill them all. I'll murder them with my Divine Instrument every time you fail. If you don't want to lose them, then kill all Seven Crimson Lords, Sakuna Memoir."

He cut the connection.

Sakuna remained frozen for a while. Her mind was blank, paralyzed, until the clock on her wall chimed at eleven.

She fell back to her bed.

She didn't want to be killed, and she didn't want to kill anyone. But she'd die if she didn't.

Life was unfair.

"Komari... Sis..."

Sakuna whispered the name of her idol as she hugged her pillow. She was crying before she knew it, her tears staining the bedsheets. If only she could be as strong and courageous as Komari, then perhaps she could've broken out of this horrible situation.

No... Remember what she said. Why was she in this miserable predicament? How should she act to get out of it? There was still something she could do.

“...Fifty-one. Fifty-two. Fifty-three. That’s all.”

She took a group of shining rocks out from her drawer. Magic Stones containing the power of teleportation—nothing particularly rare.

She didn’t know what would come from doing this, but she did know that she couldn’t stand taking it lying down any longer. This was her slight act of rebellion. Her little revenge against that heinous terrorist.

Sakuna took a deep breath, poured some mana into a Stone, and activated the *Teleportation* spell.

She disappeared from the room full of Komaris.

Vexations

2

A Round Table Full of
Weirdos

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

We patrolled every night after that but never found the terrorist. That being said, we didn't hear about any more victims, either, so it at least felt like that overtime wasn't for nothing. Or maybe the murderer had just gotten tired. It was also possible that they had already accomplished their goal... But whatever, I didn't care about any of it.

The day had finally come. You know which one. The day of the Crimson Council.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! I DON'T WANNA GO, I DON'T WANNA, I DON'T WANNAAA!!"

I screamed at the top of my lungs, dignity be damned.

It was morning. I was in bed, under my blanket. Just as I was steeling myself to feign sickness and refuse to budge, the sicko maid showed up out of the blue to inform me of my death.

"It's time for work, Lady Komari. Don't worry, I'll support you all the way. You won't die if everything goes well."

"What if everything goes wrong?!"

Vill sighed and shrugged.

"What happened to you? You were so trusting of me the other day, exclaiming 'Everything will be all right with Vill by my side!' and holding me tight."

I hadn't said or done any of that.

"...I mean, I do trust you a fair bit, but just think about it. We're up against the six

strongest people in the Empire. This ain't Yohann!"

"I see, so your fears amplified as you ruminated on things... Still, do not worry. There is no chance of you exploding now."

"Did you see to that with your Core Implosion?"

"No, the effects wore off, so I can't see that anymore."

"Oh."

I turned away and buried my face in my dolphin pillow.

Better not go out today. Yeah. I'll just go back to sleep and visit Candyland in my dreams. No one talk to me.

"Lady Komari, do you have any intention of going?"

"No."

"Shall I read your novel aloud again?"

"...Strawberry Milk? I don't care."

"No, your new one."

"H-how?! You said you wouldn't do that anymore! And I locked my drawer! How did you get it?!"

"No, I said I wouldn't do that *for no reason*. And I have a very good one right now. So yes, I broke the lock and took it for the purpose of blackmailing you."

"AAAAAARGH!"

I clutched the hair at my temples and writhed in agony on my bed.

But of course! I should've predicted she'd do it! You should know her better by now, Komari! That depraved maid loves your novels way too much! Okay, fine! If that's what you want... I don't care anymore!

“Hah! I planned on publishing that anyway! Go on, read as much as you want!”

“Okay, then. Take it away, Lady Sakuna Memoir.”

“Huh? U-um, okay... ‘*Orange Season Love...*’”

“HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOLD UP!”

I jumped out of my bed and immediately saw a silver-haired girl. Sakuna Memoir. The one and only. She had that characteristic fleeting aura about her, so there was no doubt.

I could tell from the way Vill was looking at me that she'd have Sakuna read it if I didn't get out of bed.

“Oh, Ms. Terakomari. Good morning. Let's do our best at the Crimson Council.”

“Y-yeah! Let's do that! Let's... What are you doing here, by the way?”

“I just thought it would be nice going there together...”

Don't you live in the dorms? Isn't that, like, really far away? Then I remembered she was a mage and could teleport anywhere.

“C-can we not?”

“No, no, we can! I would love to!” I glanced at her hands. “Um, about that manuscript...”

“This? What is this, anyway?” Sakuna asked Vill.

The maid smirked.

“This is the latest masterwork from the greatest author of our time. I heard you like books, so I thought I ought to share it with you. I believe you will find it to your liking.”

You nasty, evil wench!

“Is that so? Did you read it already, Ms. Terakomari?”

“Bweh?!... Y-yeah. I did.” *How could I not?*

“Is it good?”

“Y-yeah, I would say it’s great, actually!”

“Wow! I can’t wait to read it... Who’s the author, by the way?”

I froze up. I wasn’t lying when I’d said I planned on publishing it... But I didn’t want Sakuna to know I wrote novels *now*. My heart wasn’t ready for this. So I decided to hide it. I knew that would only cause problems down the line, but that was for future me to take care of.

“They’re um... a relative of mine, actually. They asked me to take a look at their work... Tell me what you think about it, I’ll let them know.”

“Of course, I will.”

Sakuna nodded contentedly.

...Wait. This is the best-case scenario, isn’t it? Who cares if anyone reads it if they don’t know I wrote it? This won’t work as blackmail! I don’t have to go outside!

Besides! Though I feel a bit bad about lying to Sakuna, I’m getting someone to read my work. That’s good, isn’t it? I can get her honest thoughts, no filter! Oh man, I’m getting nervous now.

“Lady Komari wrote it, actually.”

“Don’t tell her!!”

“Huh?... You wrote it? Really?”

“I-it’s not true, Sakuna! Don’t let that sicko maid deceive you! She has to lie at least six times a day to stay alive! And that is true! A relative wrote it, I promise!”

“I see... That’s too bad.”

Sakuna cast her gaze down to the manuscript in disappointment.

Oof. Can’t take my eyes off that sicko maid for even a second, huh?

Then said maid immediately grabbed me by the arm and smiled.

“Let’s go outside if you don’t want me to spill the beans for real, okay?”

“D-don’t touch me, you deviant! I have unchangeable plans to sleep today! And never again wake up!”

“So you want to die?”

“I’d rather hibernate forever than actually go out to meet my death! I’m not going!”

“You jest. Did you forget Lady Memoir is right here?”

“...”

I had, actually. Sakuna was staring at me with confusion. *Yikes.*

The whole novel thing was but a soft jab. This was the real reason Vill had let in the girl she (for whatever reason) hated so much.

“Ms. Terakomari, I know you must be exhausted after working so much... but we need to go. I’ll be there to support you. Come on.”

I had nowhere to run.

I was her senior, technically, and it was vampire nature to put on airs in front of one’s juniors.

So I stood up on my bed, struck the most imposing pose I could muster, and made a declaration.

“Very well! Let us meet those Crimson Lords! There is nothing to worry about! After all, no vampire comes close to me as the strongest in the Empire!”

I wanted to eat my words shortly after.



We were now at the Bloody Hall in the Mulnite Imperial Palace—the place where I’d first met my subordinates. The image of this room full of those uniformed vampires

was still fresh in my mind, which made the empty scene here feel weirder. Just a round table at the center, nothing more.

But *they* were sitting around it.

I was terrified. Scared shitless. Not a single one of them looked like a respectable vampire. No, I'm not exaggerating—they each had a body count of over a thousand. We're talking about the Seven Crimson Lords, Supreme Commanders of the Mulnite Empire!

"My oh my! Ms. Gandesblood! And Ms. Sakuna Memoir! After a long wait, our star of the night has arrived, everyone."

The Black Flash, Flöte Mascarail, shot me a combative stare as soon as I entered. Her mushroom-black hair was as lustrous as ever. I stared back at her as though she were death itself and snorted.

"H-hah! It's not past the appointed hour yet, so don't cry about it! How about you all take it easy, huh?"

"...Tch. You're asking for it."

Crap. I was sweating buckets. Why the hell did I say that?!

No, no, it was all part of the plan. I had no choice!

Vill had told me one thing only before we arrived.

"Put on airs at all times. Make them cower at the sight of you."

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"Act all cocky. Become Cockymari."

So just do the thing I always do, huh?

Honestly, I didn't believe that silly tactic would work against the strongest commanders in the Empire. But I gathered it was better to be cocky rather than mousy, so I bet on the cock... *I don't think it's working, though. Look at her! She's reaching for her sword! She's furious!*

“Lady Komari, please take a seat.”

“Y-yeah.”

I did as Vill asked and made my way to the round table, legs trembling. That’s when it hit me: There was a familiar face sitting in what should have been the First Unit’s commander’s seat (next to mine, that was)— that perverted, gorgeous, huge-boobed, blond drill-haired Empress.

“...Empress? Whatcha doing here?”

“Just watching. I’m curious as to how they’ll judge you.”

Wipe that grin off your damn face. You realize this meeting might actually, literally kill me? I scowled at her, but she only cackled in response.

“Don’t beg me for anything. Save that for when we’re all alone.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“What are you two saying?!”

My voice overlapped with Flöte’s. She glared at me with a spiteful frown.

“Just sit down already! You too, Ms. Sakuna Memoir!”

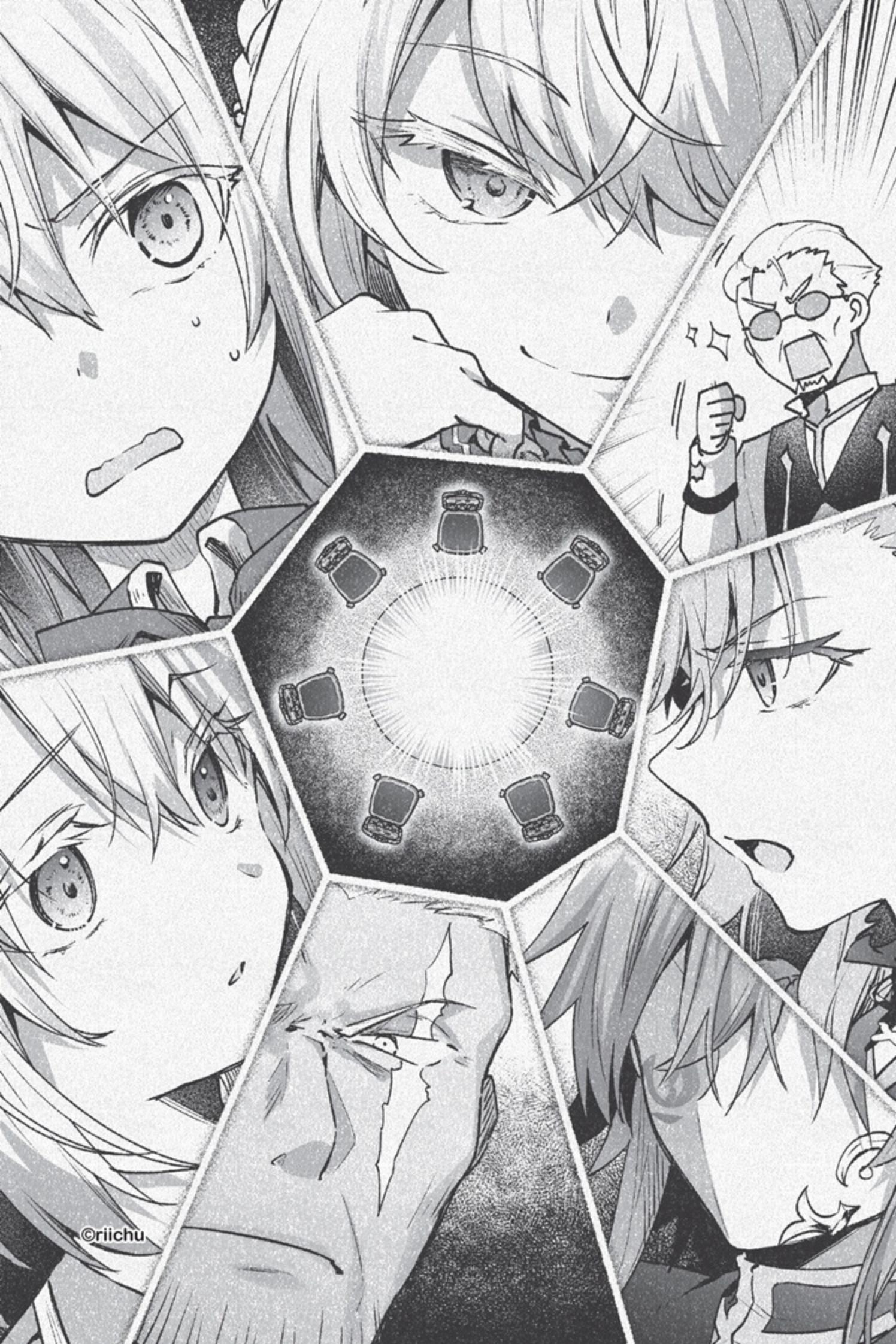
“Y-yes!” Sakuna anxiously took a seat. I did the same and sat down beside her.

Crap. Oh crap, oh crap. All the Crimson Lords are looking at me. I feel like their stares alone could kill me. But don’t get scared, Komari! They’ll think you’re a weakling! And then they’ll say you’re unfit for the title of Crimson Lord! No, no, act like you’re invincible, like they’re the small fry. Yes. Lord it over them. Crimson Lord it.

Beside me, Her Majesty the Empress took a sip of her tea. I wondered why she was taking up the First Unit commander’s seat, and why no one seemed to have any problem with it. Oh well, I figured this degenerate was slightly better than a berserker I’d never met.

Beside her was the Second Unit commander, Heldeus Heaven. The weirdo who worked as priest and managed an orphanage while keeping the title of Crimson Lord.

He was the only one not in military regalia; instead, he was wearing religious-y attire. He glanced at me, quickly drew a cross in the air, then held his hands together. *Please stop. I'm not dead yet.*



Beside him was the Third Unit commander, Flöte Mascarail. The vampire most strongly against me of everyone present. To make matters worse, I'd heard House Mascarail had a longstanding rivalry with House Gandesblood. I figured this factored into her resentment of me.

Beside her sat the Fourth Unit commander, Delphyne. She... Wait, he? That's a man's uniform... Wore a foreign-looking mask. He had his arms crossed as he leaned on the seat, oozing a mysterious aura of splendor. The fact he was wearing a mask meant he had to be an absolute weirdo, though.

Beside him was the Fifth Unit commander, Odilon Metal. You could tell he was a veteran warrior at first glance. He seemed to be around forty, I think? His body was muscular and his face wrinkly, with a well-groomed beard. His eyes were sharp and intimidating... Honestly, he might've been the scariest vampire in here.

Beside him sat the Sixth Unit commander, Sakuna Memoir. The sole source of comfort for me in this room. I am not kidding when I say she was the only reason my spirit wasn't already broken into pieces. Our gazes met, and she clenched both fists before her face. *Oh, yes, sister. I get you.*

Beside her was the Seventh Unit commander, Terakomari Gandesblood. Hey, that's me. I had to keep up appearances against the twisted Crimson Lords as they trained their eyes on me. Which wasn't easy. In fact, it was taking up all my energy. I was on death's door. I turned to look at Vill behind me. She, too, was putting on airs. *I don't know what you're planning, but it better work! You're my last hope!*

"Well then... Since Petrose Calamaria is out on expedition with the First Unit, everyone here is present and accounted for. The rules say at least six of the seven Crimson Lords must reunite to hold a council, and we meet the requirements. I would like to begin the Crimson Council. I take it there are no objections?"

Everyone nodded in response to Flöte. *So she's the moderator.*

The Crimson Lords were all more colorful than expected. I'd figured all uniforms were crimson since, y'know... But every unit had a different color. I would learn later that the name wasn't meant to describe the Lords as Crimson, but rather that the Lords would "dye the skies crimson." What a messed-up organization.

But anyway, that wasn't important now. Flöte took a deep breath.

"Let us cut to the chase. Today's topic is whether Terakomari Gandesblood is deserving of the title of Crimson Lord. She was appointed in May of this year and has won all her battles since, achieving ten consecutive victories against the Lapelico Kingdom. That is quite the remarkable feat for a newbie Crimson Lord, the likes of which have been unheard of in history."

"It's truly incredible!! Praised be God!!"

"Please shut your mouth, Lord Heaven. As I was saying, Terakomari Gandesblood's accomplishments are astonishing. One can easily understand how she amassed such popularity in and outside of the Empire... If you only look at the results, that is!"

She shot me a glare.

"Has anyone here ever seen her fight? No, I should think not. Terakomari Gandesblood stays in base, seated on her throne, and merely instructing her subordinates. They do all the work for her. I've never even heard of her defeating an enemy."

"That's true!" Fifth Unit commander Odilon Metal (the scary old guy) concurred in a thunderous tone. "A Crimson Lord is the incarnation of military force! One must train thoroughly, shape their muscle, and quash the enemy themselves! Don't you agree, Lady Gandesblood?"

"Of course, I..."

"Of course she does!!"

Helldeus Heaven (the weird old man) shouted in my stead. *Why?*

"You don't understand, Sir Metal. A truly strong warrior doesn't play with weaklings! Lady Gandesblood gets that, which is why she doesn't fight herself!"

"Then she should challenge stronger foes! Look at her matches: Four of them were against a chimpanzee from a country of barbarians! I would understand not wanting to face weaklings herself, but then why wage war against them alone?!"

"This is truly beyond you, isn't it?! You are the barbarian here, you heathen!"

I could actually hear the vein on Odilon's forehead pop. Helldeus didn't care in the slightest, though.

"Lady Gandesblood is as broad-minded and benevolent as God Himself. She won't turn down anyone... Because she knows well to follow God's teachings."

"Enough of your nonsense! Speak like a normal person!"

"Fine, I will explain it in simpler terms. Whenever an opposing country declares war to Lady Gandesblood, she, with a heart as wide as the sea itself, will unfailingly accept. She does not pick and choose. It's all a coincidence! Mere chance! Bad luck! Simple happenstance that she's only fought weak foes!"

"She's still fought the Chimpanzee way too many times!!"

"That man is but a beast. Little wonder he challenges her time and time again without consideration. But I believe you might understand how he feels, don't you? For you are as barbaric as he is, Sir Metal!"

Odilon's fist hit the table so hard Sakuna let out a short yelp. I, on the other hand, almost peed myself.

"Try saying that again, Helldeus!! I'll take those dirty vestments of yours, tear them to shreds, grill them over charcoal, and feed them to the pigs!"

"The sheer foolery! I cannot believe so many people still don't believe in God's splendor... But it's fine. It is an evangelist's duty to enlighten even the most unrefined barbarians. I will keep reaching out to you in case you ever seek salvation, you bearded brute!"

"I'll show you HELL, you shitty priest!!"

"Stop it, you two!"

Odilon had drawn his sword and Helldeus had risen to meet him. Just when I thought they would go for each other's throats, Flöte unleashed her dark magic between the two. The dark beam (?) grazed my cheek with the speed of a hurricane and struck the wall behind me, gouging its sturdy bricks before dissipating.

Flöte spoke in an icy tone.

"This is not the place for that kind of behavior. And may I remind you that battling between Crimson Lords for personal reasons is prohibited? Bear in mind that you are

in the presence of Lady Karen... Her Majesty.”

“Tch... You’re right. I hate that rule, but it is what it is.”

Odilon sheathed his blade. Helldeus nodded with a smile and sat back down, too.

My jaw was on the floor.

“Lady Komari, relax your cheeks.”

Vill pinched them and tried to close my mouth from behind, then molded my face back into that cocky sneer.

“Uh, Vill, am I gonna die?”

“You won’t.”

Yup. I’m a goner.

“Let’s get back on topic... So, we believe Terakomari Gandesblood’s strength is all a farce. How do you answer to this, Ms. Gandesblood?”

“F-false. I’m the strongest.”

“Is that supposed to be an argument?” Flöte coldly rebuked. “Come to think of it, you killed Millicent Bluenight, an assassin of Inverse Moon, a month ago, didn’t you? How did you manage that?”

I couldn’t answer. That’s what *I* wanted to know.

“Oh, you can’t even say what you did yourself? Or perhaps you’ve forgotten?”

Then Sakuna stood up with a thud.

“H-hold on! There’s no need to ask her that! We should simply have her show us how strong she is... Right? She could perform an advanced-level spell for us or something.”

Sakuna... I appreciate your bravery for speaking up against that, but I can’t even use low-level spells, let alone advanced ones! Are you trying to kill me?!

“I’m sure she isn’t capable. Or are you, Ms. Gandesblood?”

“O-o-of... Of course, I am!”

“Go ahead, then.”

“...But now’s not the time.”

“See? She can’t.”

Flöte sighed in disappointment. Sakuna’s stare was killing me. Her eyes were asking, “Why? You really can’t?” *I’m sorry, Sakuna...* As I made a mental apology, Helldeus stood up with a bang.

“Lady Mascarail! A true believer the likes of Lady Gandesblood would never lie!”

“If she was really telling the truth, she could use a flashy incantation whenever she wanted. Besides, Lord Heaven, I think you misunderstand. Terakomari Gandesblood is no woman of faith.”

“Huh...? N-no, there’s no way...”

“Go ahead and check the list of members of the Church. I doubt you’ll find her name among them. Additionally... House Gandesblood has always had a reputation for atheism bordering on blasphemy.”

“I-it can’t be...!”

Helldeus stared at me with eyes like a betrayed puppy’s. *No, don’t give me that look. You made up your mind on your own.*

“Well then, Ms. Gandesblood, can you answer us as to how you defeated the terrorist?”

I forced my trembling lips open.

“...I—I could never forget such a fierce battle... I’ll describe it in detail. You see, spells were flying all around, like ZAP! WOOSH! BAM-BAM! It was a sight to behold...”

Someone sighed. It was Odilon (the scary old guy).

I couldn't stop my whole body from trembling.

"What is detailed about that?" Flöte sighed as well. "I really don't understand you. There's no rhyme or reason to anything you say... Zap? Woosh? Bam-bam? Can't you use actual words for a second? I thought you were a Crimson Lord. I expect something better than a grade schooler's retelling of events."

"Oh no, don't get me wrong. I was about to get into the real meat of thi—"

"Not only is she weak, she has the vocabulary of a baby! You should read a bit more, you know? Oh, there's this series my sister wrote called *The Andronos Chronicles*. Now that is an exquisite work for the intellectual and tactical education of the youth. I could lend you a copy sometime. I think even your tiny brain might get a little something out of it if you get through it."

"I—I read books!"

"Silence. Let's get back to the point. As you see, she is undeserving of the title of Crimson Lord. I have physical evidence, too. Please, take a look at this. These are her grades from her time in the Imperial Academy. All Fs in both Magic and PE. You think this dunce deserves to be one of us?"

"What...? Where did you get that?!"

"A little investigation like this is no big deal for House Mascarail. Regardless, we've now proved you were an underachiever, and a dropout at that! Incidentally, what have you been doing these past three years? Were you cooped up at home? Surely not, right? A daughter of House Gandesblood, a shut-in?"

"Who cares... about that...?"

"Not me, that's true. I'm only concerned with why you are one of us Crimson Lords. Could it be... nepotism?"

"..."

"Sir Gandesblood is an aristocrat. He could easily get his weak, unaccomplished daughter appointed to this position. 'Please, Daddy! Make me one of them!' That's all you had to say to get right to the top. How despicable!"

“.....”

“Hah! You only did it for the fame, didn’t you? You just wanted everyone to fawn all over you. You’re even taking economic advantage by selling all that gross merchandising! The sheer gall!”

“.....”

I was starting to tear up. I felt like a defendant on trial. But I would get handed down a death sentence as soon as I started crying, so I clenched my fists on top of my knees and stared blankly at the table, hoping to let the insults wash over me. Yet I couldn’t. Flöte’s words were like blades chopping up my heart. She was right. On all accounts. Well, not all of them, but so long as I couldn’t argue back, they’d all seem true. My chest hurt. I could barely breathe. Why did this have to happen to me?

“Why are you looking down? Even if you are about to get fired, you are still a Supreme Commander and Crimson Lord in this moment. Have some dignity. This is why in school, you...”

“Stop it!”

A thunderous voice echoed throughout the hall. Everyone turned to the source—the pretty-faced, big-boobed, blond girl beside me. She rested her chin on her hand as she stared at Flöte, who was taken aback by the order.

“L-Lady Karen? Why...?”

“She’s only fifteen. Be the adult here and stop being so harsh.”

“But... Yes, Komari is fifteen, but she’s still a Crimson Lord. She... She shouldn’t be fazed by this much criticism. A-and besides... I’m only stating the truth! What’s wrong with that?! ”

“But are you, really? Did you check that everything you said is, indeed, true? Her grades, sure... But do you have evidence that Komari got the title through nepotism because she wanted the fame?”

“W-well... I have *circumstantial* evidence...”

“You can’t read minds. If you want to hold this council like it’s a trial, then be more

thorough with your investigation."

The Empress had pointed out the shortcomings in Flöte's argument. It felt like she was standing up for me. I was happy and relieved... But I also felt a bit sorry for myself.

I should have learned from what had happened a month ago. Should have internalized that if I didn't hold my ground against someone who maliciously opposed me, I'd lose important things forever. That was why I'd holed up for three years; because I'd let Millicent do whatever she wanted.

Though I was sincerely glad that the Empress was on my side, I couldn't keep having her protect me. I had to show resistance of my own accord.

"Lady Karen... What you say is correct. However, it's still true that Terakomari Gandesblood hasn't shown us she has the strength to deserve the title of Crimson Lord! And so long as she doesn't, it remains the truth that she has no real prowess in combat! This is backed up by her grades at the Academy! I see no way she could have been appointed, other than bribery or nepotism!"

"I'm telling you to stop the speculation. First of all, *I* am the one who decided to appoint her, and I'm telling you that..."

"Empress, that's enough," I muttered with all my courage.

The Empress stared at me, shock on her face.

I wiped away my tears with my handkerchief and turned back to Vill.

"I won't blow up, right?"

She, too, looked shocked, but a brash grin immediately came back to her face as she answered.

"Trust me."

I had nothing to worry about, then. No, in truth, I was almost falling apart over saying what I really felt, but oh well, I had to trust her. Nothing would change otherwise.

I took a deep breath and stared right at Flöte.

She looked back at me like, *What's with her?*

The Empress smiled, impressed.

All the other Crimson Lords turned to me as well.

Then, I crossed my arms arrogantly, brashly put both feet on the table, gave a haughty cackle, and said:

"Wail as much as you want, Flöte Mascarail. I couldn't care less what a nobody like you has to say."

Flöte froze up.

The Empress chuckled.

The other Crimson Lords stared at me in confusion.

Then I... I... got a slight kick out of it, but simultaneously plunged into deep and utter despair, as if the world was ending before my eyes.

I said it... I just went and SAID THAAAAAAAAT!

That took the world record for cockiest bitch ever! What a stunning provocation! Couldn't complain if it got me beaten to a pulp!

Flöte was making a face like she'd just been found poking a voodoo doll full of nails!

"...Hah... Ha-ha. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha... Ms. Gandesblood... Please, you've got to be joking."

"Joking? Oh, this is no jest. You don't understand my true power? Don't get so cocky just because you can do a little dark magic!"

CRACK! That was the sound of Flöte's fist punching a hole through the wooden table.

"You... You dare speak like that to the Great Crimson Lord, the Black Flash, Flöte Mascarail?! Take it back!"

"You first! Take back all that unfounded slander you were throwing at me just a second

ago! I won't be saying sorry until you do!"

"I'm not apologizing! I spoke only the truth! You're the one at fault for concealing it! Oh, but I understand. Who wouldn't want to hide such a shameful past?!"

"Sh-shameful... past...?" *No, don't falter, Komari. Don't cry. You can do it, just be Cockymari!* "I am not ashamed of it! In fact, it's you who should be ashamed!"

"WHAT?! That makes no sense! What grounds do you have to say that?! Now *that's* slander!"

"Shaddup! You're the slanderer here! You should feel disgusted at yourself! 'The Black Flash'? 'The Great Crimson Lord'? Don't you get embarrassed just saying that out loud?! I do! You make me CRINGE!"

"You... You insolent little...! You're the cringey one! I've heard you go around calling yourself a 'total knockout beauty' or some stupid drivel like that! What do you say to that?! Huh?!"

"I'm only telling the truth! Daddy calls me that every day, so it must be! Unlike you, who came up with that laughable title herself!"

"First time I've seen someone take what her parents say so seriously! I agree with you on one thing, though: We should not be comparing ourselves. The difference is as clear as night and day! I am a verifiably strong Crimson Lord! I'm proud of my power! And everyone around me agrees! Unlike you, stupid Crimson faker!"

"As clear as day?! I didn't even know you before you came looking for a fight! And I've never seen you battle as commander, either! Oh, is it that you're just that forgettable? I'm so sorry! But I suppose we have that in common. I know nothing about you, and you know nothing about me! Maybe we'd find out we're both awesome if we only talked it out a bit more, don't you think? Why was your first thought to hold this stupid sham of a trial?! You're insane! You should feel ashamed of how messed up your thought process is!"

"You say I'M INSANE?!"

Flöte drew her sword.

Welp. I'm dead.

"Since you're so sure of yourself, let's solve this in a duel! Then everything will come to light! Let's see if you really merit the title! And that attitude of yours!"

"J-j-ju-ju-ju-ju-ju-just what I wanted! Come at me, Flöte Mascarail! I'll turn you into an omelet with my super amazing magic! Or rather, I would love to, but first we should test whether you're worthy of facing me, and for that you will be going against my maid first! Go, Vill!"

"No," said Vill.

"As you've heard, we'll have to postpone the match until a later date..."

"ENOUGH OF THE CLOWNERY!"

"Don't, Flöte."

Just as the Crimson Lord was about to blast me with the dark vortex at the tip of her sword, the Empress stopped her. Flöte couldn't bring herself to oppose her—she stared at her beloved Lady Karen with heartrending, teary eyes.

"Lady Karen! What's come over you?! Why do you defend that girl so much?!"

"Isn't it obvious? Because she's cute."

"Th-that's... That's no reason! What about me? A-am I n-not c-c-c-cute? You said I was when I was little! Why not side with me for a bit...?"

"All citizens of the Mulnite Empire are my dear, cute children. You're not special."

"Wha...?"

"And I'll correct you on one thing: I'm not siding with Komari. I'm only reprimanding you for going too far in word and deed. Flöte... Do you realize where we are now? The Crimson Council."

Flöte then opened her eyes wide, as if just now coming to. She looked around and cleared her throat.

"I am sorry about that," she said, bowing.

The apology was very clearly aimed at the Empress and the other Crimson Lords—I could tell she wasn't the least bit remorseful about what she'd said to me.

"It was barbaric of me to start a fight in here. We don't even need to clash in the first place... After all, Ms. Gandesblood will get fired right here."

"F-fired?! You can't decide that yourself!"

"I know! And that's why I called for the Council. Now, then... Let us hold a vote to decide whether Ms. Gandesblood keeps her title. And of course, *you* don't get to say in this. We'll take care of that."

"Ugh..."

Should've known. It was all happening just as Vill had described... I whispered to that sicko maid behind me.

"*What do we do now? They're holding the vote.*"

"According to *Pandora's Poison*, you'll get fired three to two."

"I'm not asking for a deadpan report! I'm asking what to do now! I'm gonna..."

"You, there! What are you whispering about?!"

I turned to Flöte in a panic.

"Nothing! Whatever! Go ahead and hold your stupid vote!"

"Hah! We don't need your permission. Let's begin, then... We're only doing this to go through the proper procedures, but I doubt anyone here is foolish enough to think Terakomari Gandesblood deserves the title of Crimson Lord after witnessing what just happened, right?"

"W-wrong!" Sakuna raised her hand.

Thank you, Sakuna. Your kindness warms my heart...

I fearfully looked around the table, hoping anyone else would move me in the same way.

Someone? Anyone? Please...

“I also think she deserves it!!”

Heldeus Heaven. Surprisingly, the deviant priest sided with me.

“...Lord Heaven? Do I have to repeat myself? She’s no believer.”

“Lady Mascarail, do you criticize people on the basis of their faith? I find that a little bit barbaric.”

“No, *you* don’t get to tell me that.”

“Lady Gandesblood may not be a believer, but her actions do follow God’s teachings. Did you hear her when she said, ‘Maybe we’d find out we’re both awesome, if we only talked it out a bit more’? That’s exactly what the Church teaches us: To solve our problems not through swords, but through words. I cannot bring myself to abandon someone with such pure and noble ideals.”

“We’re only voting on whether or not she’s worthy of the title of Crimson Lord. This has nothing to do with ‘God’s teachings’ or whatever.”

“For sure, it doesn’t! But I don’t care! I like her!”

“Okay, okay, fine.” Flöte sighed in annoyance, then glanced at Sakuna. “What about you, Ms. Sakuna Memoir. Why?”

“B-because... I think she deserves it.”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. *Why?*”

“Eek! S-sorry... Well, that’s because Ms. Terakomari is... so very kind, so approachable, and she treats me like any normal person...”

“Hah! Ridiculous! Both of you only side with her because of personal feelings! I suppose Ms. Gandesblood has something that makes weirdos fond of her.”

She shot me a glance of contempt for a second before smirking.

“But it doesn’t matter. Her fate has been decided now. Only two supporters. You only

have two people on your side. You know what that means?"

Her tormenting tone gnawed at me.

Only two. Only two people had agreed to me being a Crimson Lord.

Crap. Shit, shit, shit... It's over! After cheating death on so many occasions, my time has finally come! Is there no changing things now? Do I have no hope? Vill, explain yourself! What now?! I'm a goner!

"Heh... Ms. Gandesblood, prepare yourself. You are no longer a Crimson Lord."

"Gwwuuuuuh...!"

"Oh, poor thing. It pains you that much to leave the Crimson Lords? Ah-ha-ha! Serves you well! Go get a more appropriate job downtown, you ninny!"

Oh, I wish. I wanna open a cake shop. I don't give a rat's ass about the position... I just don't want to burst into smithereens, you moron!

"I won't change my mind no matter how much you glare or look at me with pleading eyes! It's done! Now please, Lady Karen, give us your approval! Dismiss Terakomari Gandesblood from her Crimson Lord title!"

"I see. You've reached a decision."

I looked at the Empress in shock. I'd hoped at least she would stay on my side, but nope.

"After hearing what was said in this council, I've also come to realize that Komari hasn't been acting like a Crimson Lord in her engagements. This is a serious matter. Fine, I will follow the council's decision and dismiss Terakomari Gandesblood from..."

It's over. All hope is lost. I'm dead. Welp, now that we're here, I should think of my famous last words... Let's go with a nice haiku. How about, "A flower blooming / In the wide blue summer sky / Sweet dreams, Komari"? Ha-ha-ha. Not bad, huh? You see, the idea is that I'm "blooming" like fireworks in the sky... Just as I was trying to evade reality, a voice boomed from behind me.

"OBJECTION!"

It was Vill. She had an unusually serious expression on her face.

"I object, Your Majesty. The vote has not ended yet."

"What are you saying?! Shut your mouth, maid!"

"Sit down, Flöte. Villhaze... What do you mean?"

"There are two people who wish for Lady Komari to keep her title. That much I understood. But we still don't know how many people oppose her."

"That's obvious! Three! It's simple subtraction!" insisted Flöte.

"Hmmm... You're right, none of them have raised their hand to show that they truly agree with Flöte," mused the Empress.

"Lady Karen?! Please don't take what this dirty maid says seriously!"

"Social standing matters not for stating opinions. Besides, we're only making sure we've reached a consensus. We'd only be reconfirming that Komari will indeed be getting dismissed, wouldn't we?"

"Lady Karen... I understand, we will follow your wish." Flöte nodded in the end, though she was evidently still discontent. "Very well then, let us hold the vote once more. Everyone who thinks Terakomari Gandesblood should remain a Crimson Lord, raise your hand."

The same two hands as before shot up—Sakuna's and Helldeus's.

"Hah, the results haven't changed... Okay, now everyone who thinks she's unfit for the title, raise your hand."

As she said the last part, she thrust her right hand high to the heavens.

Yeah, yeah, no need for the theatrics, we get it. What matters is everyone but you, and the other two will also... Uh... Huh?

"As you can see, Your Majesty, the vote is two against two," Vill stated proudly.

She was right. The only ones raising their hand were Flöte and Odilon Metal. I was not

surprised in the slightest that the scary old guy wasn't fond of me... But the fact of the matter was that there were five Crimson Lords besides me here, so this result could only mean that someone wasn't voting for either side.

Everyone turned to look at the masked vampire who had stayed silent this entire time. The guy everyone had forgotten about despite his quirky manner of dress.

"...Del, raise your hand. You don't like Ms. Gandesblood either, do you?"

Hey, hey, hey, let's not assume.

"Del! Don't tell me you're nodding off!"

Delphyne showed no reaction.

"Del... please..."

"Wait, Lady Mascarail."

Odilon stood up. He walked over to Delphyne's seat, and said, "Pardon!" before grabbing his (her?) wrist. After about ten seconds, Odilon screamed.

"She's dead!"

"""WHAT?!""" Everyone yelled at the same time.

Dead...? Huh? She's dead?

"I didn't even need to check her pulse! She's hard and cold as a rock!"

"WHAAAT?!" Flöte screamed.

I wanted to shriek, too. Sakuna was already shouting as well, pale in the face. Odilon grimaced as he returned to his seat. The Empress, for whatever reason, was grinning. Helldeus stood up fast, pushing his chair to the floor, and yelled in vibrato.

"It's a DEMON! Oh my God! This is the work of a fiend! Lady Delphyne was completely fine up until the council started... I think... The only thing capable of such a feat is one of those infernal creatures!"

“Demons don’t exist! And is she really dead?! I don’t believe it!”

“You doubt me, Lady Mascarail?! Go check yourself, then!”

“I—I don’t want to touch her, in case she’s really deceased! Yuck! Ms. Sakuna Memoir, you go check for me!”

“Whaaa? Why me...?”

“You fools! I’m not lying! You can just check through the mana reaction, too! Let’s move on to what actually matters now—who killed her?!”

“A demon! It was a demon!”

“Shut your mouth for just one second! It’s obviously the terrorist!”

“I don’t think it was them...,” Sakuna said.

“And how do you know?! Anyway, we need to start an investigation! Who was the first to the room?”

The Crimson Lords started arguing in a commotion.

It started as simply stating it was the terrorist, or a demon, or a foreign assassin, but then the debate grew more detailed. When did the murder take place? What was the victim doing last night? Soon, everyone was lashing out, demanding alibis, and probing one another as to what kinds of magic they could use. Conjecture turned to animosity, until Flöte concluded that the culprit was among us.

What the...? What is going on?

“Vill... Did we end up inside a mystery novel?”

“It’s so funny. They don’t know I killed her,” she whispered back.

“Huh? What did you just say?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be making light of the Crimson Lords like that, I know.”

“I’m not talking about that! You said something way more important there!”

"Oh, that I killed Lady Delphyne?"

"Yes, that, tha... WHAAAAAT?!"

I screamed my lungs out. In reaction, the sicko maid placed a finger on my lips to shush me.

"Keep your voice down. You shouldn't let them know I killed her."

"Of course, I shouldn't! Why did you do that?! Why did you commit murder?! You're insane!"

"The reason is quite simple. Lady Delphyne was against you keeping your title. So I just took care of her before the vote, to change it from three to two. A draw."

"And you didn't have a more peaceful method of doing that?! How did you even kill her?! She's a Crimson Lord!"

"Poison." Vill winked. Now that's a demon. *"Method aside, I want to do a little explaining on what happened after her death. First, I killed her elsewhere, then brought her here to the Bloody Hall, since the council wouldn't be held if two Crimson Lords were missing."*

"And a corpse counts as being present?"

"No rule says it doesn't."

"Wait, but wouldn't it have been okay if the council was canceled? Then I wouldn't die..."

"You know Flöte Mascarail; she'd only postpone it for a later date. And if we waited longer, Petrose Calamaria from the First Unit would be back from expedition. She's even more of a meathead than Odilon Metal, so you'd be dismissed for sure. That's why I had to kill just one of your opponents to sway the vote in your favor, which meant I had to do it now, before we had Petrose Calamaria join the council. And would you look at that? It worked."

Vill had the smuggest of looks on her face. I was still recovering from the shock of everything that was going on, so I could barely keep up with what she'd just said, but I did get that she'd done all that to save me. Good job, sicko maid. Now you are very deserving of your title.

"Now then, Lady Komari, we overcame the first step, but it's not over yet. We need one final push."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"You're the strongest, but a kangaroo court like this won't give you the chance to show that. We need to set the stage for you to display your power."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your true might. Now, please... Activate this Magic Stone."

She handed me a small rock. I had no idea what it was, but I figured I might as well use it. Then, as soon as I activated it without a further thought, I heard a *BOOM!* that almost destroyed my eardrums.

It felt like I was dying, but thankfully, I didn't. It had only been noise from the low-level sound spell, *Boom*. The most clichéd explosion sound echoed through the Bloody Hall. For a couple seconds, I wondered what that was even supposed to accomplish, but then I understood—the noise had stopped all the arguing, and now the Crimson Lords were all staring at me like I was some freak of nature.

"...Ms. Gandesblood? Do you care to explain the meaning of this?" Flöte asked me.

"...Vill? Do you care to explain the meaning of this?" I asked her.

"...No idea." The sicko maid played dumb.

I turned Flöte in a panic. *Fine, goddamn it!*

"Th-this is, uh... I used this to grab your attention, since you were so engrossed in your silly argument!"

"Silly? Silly, you say?! A Crimson Lord was murdered!"

"Oh, no, I don't mean it like that... That's tragic indeed, but we're in the middle of the council! And the vote ended in a draw!"

"Wait a second, Lady Gandesblood! Lady Mascarail is in the right here; we must focus on catching the demon who killed Lady Delphyne first! The terrorist could be lurking

right around the corner!" Helldeus bemoaned. He was totally right.

"That's where you're wrong!" Odilon shouted. "The terrorist has been doing all their killing with their bare hands. Am I incorrect, Lady Sakuna Memoir?"

"Y-you're correct! I also... was murdered through that same method, I think..."

Sakuna was bizarrely flustered. Odilon nodded in satisfaction.

"And look at Lady Delphyne. No wound to speak of. She must've been taken out with poison or something. This is not the terrorist's doing..."

"Then whose fault is it?" Flöte asked.

"I think you know the answer to that question, Lady Gandesblood." The scary old guy grinned at me.

I was scared to death.

Vill... Seriously, what now?! Should I say I'm clueless? Or should I keep up the cocky act and insinuate I know something? Do you even think we can get out of this?

I was at a loss. Just then, Flöte covered her mouth with both hands, pale in the face.

"C-could it be... that *you* killed Del?!"

"...What?"

How did you reach that conclusion?

"You have more than enough motive to do her in! The only reason you're still a Crimson Lord is because Del didn't get to raise her hand against you!"

"Wait a second! Don't jump to conclusions!"

WHAM! Odilon Metal hit the table.

"You are the only person here with a motive to do her in! I'm sure Lady Delphyne would've been against you keeping your title... which is why you killed her! You took advantage of her silent nature and masked face to hold the council as if she was alive

and present!"

Oof, now that's some great detective work. It's over, Vill. Turns out the old guy wasn't just a meathead.

"He's right! You murdered Del! Even without any physical strength, you could've assassinated her with poison!"

"Sh-show me the evidence! You have no real grounds to accuse me! Right, Vill?!"

"I'm sorry, Lady Komari. The truth is, I left the bottle of poison I used to kill her in her room."

"Take care of the evidence, you idiot!"

"It's even labeled 'Komari.'"

"You're doing this on purpose?!"

"Stop your whispering already!" Flöte hit the table as she stood up. I was starting to feel sorry for the poor thing. She scowled at the Empress and shouted, "Lady Karen! As you see, Ms. Gandesblood is not worthy of the title of Crimson Lord! Such an outrageous move is unheard of!"

"We still don't know for sure that she's the perpetrator. Though, hmm... Let's say Komari *did* kill Delphyne. What do you plan on doing?"

"I'll do this!"

Flöte took off one of her gloves and threw it at me with full force.

"Bweh!"

It hit my face. *That hurt.* Too much for just a cloth accessory; she would've broken my nose had that been even a tiny rock. But it didn't compare to the world of pain that was waiting for me.

The glove fell to the table, and I stared at it in despair. I was trembling. This had happened once before.

“I was wrong to even think of holding a council! I shouldn’t have chosen such a tedious way of doing things! This is what you deserved from the very beginning, you insolent vampire!”

Now things had really gone to shit. I stood up in a flurry.

“N-no, Flöte! Fighting between Crimson Lords is prohibited! You said so yourself!”

“This is no personal duel. This is a proper declaration of war. Skirmishes between commanders of the same country are allowed. Am I wrong, Lady Karen?”

“You are not.”

“She’s not?!”

Fudge. I have no escape now. Save me, Vill!

“Fine, Lady Mascarail! Go ahead, Lady Komari! Beat that petty noble to a pulp!”

Then it dawned on me. The sicko maid was not on my side anymore.

Flöte flashed a graceful smile at me.

“You will quit the Seven Crimson Lords if I win. And if victory is yours... I’ll listen to one wish of yours.”

“...”

“Oh, my. Ms. Gandesblood. There is no way you would turn me down, is there? You accepted that chimpanzee’s requests so many times, so you couldn’t possibly refuse an engagement with the Great Crimson Lord, The Black Flash, Flöte Mascarail, right?”

I glanced around. Vill nodded expressionlessly. The Empress was drinking tea, as if she didn’t care about any of this. Sakuna was looking at me in anticipation. Heldeus was staring at me as if praying to God. Delphyne was deceased.

I see... I get it. I have nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

“O-o-of course! I am the strongest! It matters not who my opponent may be! I accept you—”

“Hold on, Lady Mascarail!”

Odilon Metal suddenly interjected. Everyone turned to the bearded, muscular man.

“You come to that conclusion after gathering us all here for a council?! A one-on-one duel?! You’re too soft, Flöte Mascarail! I lost precious work time to come here! I can’t let it end like this!”

“What do you mean to say, Lord Metal?” she asked.

“I don’t see your point either, Sir Metal. A duel between them would solve everything. Don’t interfere, you barbarian!” Helldeus added.

“Shut up!!” Odilon roared. “Let me finish. Almost all seven of the Crimson Lords are reunited here! We should take this opportunity to test Terakomari Gandesblood and Sakuna Memoir’s strength as newcomers! I propose we hold a Crimson Match!”

“What did you just...?” Flöte frowned.

Crimson Match? I’d never heard of that.

“Now that I can agree with!” Helldeus yelled, raising his hand. *You do?* “I didn’t expect the barbarian to have a good idea, but color me surprised. That’s much more refined than a simple duel! I also appreciate the thought of using this as an opportunity to test Lady Sakuna Memoir’s power, too! Marvelous!”

“Yes, yes, stop yapping, you zealot! Do we get your go-ahead, Helvetius?”

The Empress placed a finger on her chin in response to Odilon’s question.

“A Crimson Match... Yes, sounds fun.”

“L-Lady Karen...? Don’t you think this would be going a bit too far...?”

“That’s what makes it fun, Flöte. People have been questioning the idea of the Crimson Lords at the Imperial Council, what with your members changing at the drop of a hat from all the mutinies. I think this is an excellent opportunity to show them what you’re here for. Heh-heh... Sounds good. Marvelous. Nice thinking, Odilon Metal!”

The Empress cackled without any care for what the Crimson Lords thought.

The depraved, blond, well-endowed woman then spoke with the drama of a stage actor.

"Very well! We will hold a Crimson Match! As you may be aware, this is the peak of entertainment! A show put on by the Seven Crimson Lords! Flöte, you decide the rules."

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

The Empress smiled fiercely, a rare expression for her.

"Survival! Survival of the fittest is the law of the Mulnite Empire. And here, too, the weak will be kicked down the ladder. Why don't we say that whoever ends in last place will resign from their position as Crimson Lord? Oh, but don't worry. There's no cheating here. Only the truly frail will lose. This will also serve to accomplish what this council didn't: We'll get to blow up whoever is undeserving of the title of Crimson Lord. Do you agree... Komari?"

I didn't understand why she asked me that, but now I had to reply.

I didn't have even the slightest idea as to what was going on in the first place, so I could only nod briefly.

"Sure."

The Crimson Match... I still didn't know the details, but the Empress said it was a "show." "Entertainment."

I figured it'd be like a quiz bowl or a talent show. If that was the case, I wouldn't have to die. It sounded much more enlightened and peaceful than a one-on-one duel.

...Oh, how naive I was.

2.5 Suspicion Befalls the Sixth Unit

Vexations

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

Crimson Match Notification

The Eighth Crimson Match will be held under orders of Her Majesty the Empress.

Details:

- Date: July 1, from 9:00 AM to noon.
- Place: Dark Core Zone – Metrio Battlefield
- Participants:

Supreme Commander Petrose Calamaria

Supreme Commander Heldeus Heaven

Supreme Commander Flöte Mascarail

Supreme Commander Delphyne

Supreme Commander Odilon Metal

Supreme Commander Sakuna Memoir

Supreme Commander Terakomari Gandesblood

Rules:

- Every commander's army will consist of up to 100 soldiers.
- The main objective of the match is gaining control of the Ruby at the top of the old castle on the battlefield.
- The participant who holds the Ruby at timeout will be declared the winner.
- Placement of the other participants will be decided by number of points.
- Points will be granted as follows:

Kill a soldier from an enemy army: 1 point.

Kill a Crimson Lord: 50 points.

Additional Remarks:

- The Crimson Lord who places last will be dismissed from their post.
- The winner will receive a reward from Her Majesty the Empress.
- Any objections may be submitted to Flöte Mascarail.
- No objections are being accepted at this time.

※

The notification posted on the Crimson Tower's bulletin board naturally caused scandal in the Imperial Army. The last Crimson Match had been held seven years ago, when the previous generation's great hero, Yulinne Gandesblood, was a participant. And this new Crimson Match wasn't just for show—the loser would have to resign. It was no wonder the vampire soldiers were riled up about this, but even civilians were getting excited speculating over who would win (unofficial polls placed Petrose Calamaria and Terakomari Gandesblood at the top). Even foreign soldiers and politicians had their eyes on the event, mainly an opportunity to check the extent of Mulnite's military might. The competition was no longer nationwide news—it had global reach.

“We’re going up against the Crimson Lords, huh? Couldn’t ask for better opponents!”

It was the day after the Crimson Council. One week after his meaningless death in the battle against Lapelico, Yohann Holders’s head had finally regenerated. He had showed up for work in high spirits, and there he’d heard about the Crimson Match.

“I’ll burn them all! And that goes for Terakomari, too—”

“Hah! I don’t think the guy who bit the dust against that monkey can stand a chance against the Crimson Lords,” Bellius Hund Cerbero cynically rebuked.

They happened to meet at the Crimson Tower. Yohann was as annoyed as ever by the dog-man’s wisecracks, and he didn’t have the time to keep up with his drivel.

“Yeah, yeah. Say whatever you want. I’ll keep on doing what I do—kill the enemy commander.”

“Did they give you something weird to eat or what?”

Bellius gave him a strange glance.

Yohann had changed, in fact. He had realized his foolishness and helplessness after getting caught up in the whole Millicent Bluenight ordeal and was now a changed man. He couldn’t stay the way he was and simply let that cocky Terakomari rescue him all the time. As a result, he’d softened a bit. Yes, it was all Terakomari’s fault. All because she’d trampled on his dignity. He’d been furious when she burst in and said she was there to save him. She couldn’t even use magic! Or hold a weapon! And yet she’d mustered all her courage to show up. Luckily, she didn’t end up dead then, but things wouldn’t go over that easily next time. Yohann couldn’t bear to see her taking such risks. He needed to get stronger. He needed to burn away any enemy that dared attack her, so that she could stay safe and remain a Crimson Lord. He was determined. Resolute. *Brushing that defeat against the Chimpanzee under the rug.*

“Bellius, did Terakomari say anything about the Crimson Match?”

“No idea. I haven’t seen her today.”

“I’m sure she would say something like this: ‘I’ll kill every last one of them!’”

Then the stripped-tree dude appeared from out of the blue. Caostel Conto. Flöte

Mascarail had killed him the other day quite easily, but he'd recovered quickly since the cause of death was blood loss.

As per usual, he wore the expression of a criminal concocting a scheme.

"Our commander is the strongest in history. She'll take the competition with but one snap of her fingers. The Crimson Match might have you picturing a free-for-all battle royale, but the truth is that it will end up as a mere massacre at the hands of Commander Terakomari Gandesblood."

"All Mulnite commanders are just as superb on the battlefield. Our commander might be strong, but I don't think it will be that easy."

"Sacrilege! Did you not see it with your own eyes, Bellius?! Her great power as she slaughtered that terrorist? Do you think any of the other Crimson Lords are capable of that?"

"Yeah, it's true that was incredible. I don't know how to describe it, except... It stood my hairs on end. I don't think the others can do something like that, no, but..."

Yohann didn't understand what they were talking about. Caostel noticed his frown and cackled.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You didn't get to see her, did you? Since you were dead and all."

"Hah? Did you hallucinate or something? Terakomari's wea—"

All of a sudden, Yohann's brain did some good work for once.

These guys were insane—they would mutiny as soon as they heard their boss was a wimpy vampire. He didn't understand why they thought otherwise, but if he really had her safety in mind, he ought to play along. And so, he said something that would have never left his lips a month ago:

"Hah! I know. Of course, I know! Terakomari is the strongest!"

In the end, I'm the only one who truly understands her, he thought, full of himself, as he looked on with pity at his colleagues.

"...Why are you staring at us like that?"

“Oh, nothing. Ignorance is bliss. Yup, this is for Terakomari’s good.”

“I’ve had enough. Could you please stop referring to the commander by her first name? Just hearing it makes me sick. I’m afraid I’ll end up killing you for it one day.”

“Go ahead and try. I’m not the same guy I used to be.”

“Stop it, you two. We can’t have infighting right before the Crimson Match,” Bellius rebuked.

“I know, I know,” Caostel sighed. “In any case, it’s true that she is the strongest. None of the other six units have a shot at winning.”

“Still, we shouldn’t underestimate them.”

“I’m well aware; that’s why I’m gathering intel. From what I know, the biggest threat is the First Unit. Public opinion says Petrose Calamaria is the strongest Crimson Lord, so we should keep an eye on her.”

“I see... What about the others?”

“I would like to meet Flöte Mascarail, though not because she’s a threat to us. She must pay twice as hard...”

The two of them started discussing the other Crimson Lords. Yohann had no interest in that, so he turned to look at the training grounds. A troop was practicing loudly there, but it wasn’t Komari’s.

“Oh, that’s the Sixth Unit. They changed commanders just a few days ago.”

“They did? I didn’t hear about it.”

“You’re just uninformed. Their new Crimson Lord is Sakuna Memoir, a sixteen-year-old girl. She has skin pale as snow and a face like an abandoned puppy’s. She’s quite lovely, actually; so lovely that I wanted to go lick her bare feet as soon as I saw her. But then I remembered that the commander is a billion times lovelier and reproved myself for that dark moment of betrayal.”

“I don’t care about your impressions, other than how strong she might be. Looking at this unit here... They seem a bit weird.”

Something was unsettling about the Sixth Unit's training.

The men were screaming "LADY SAKUNA!" as they fought. Or was that supposed to be a battle cry? No, they were unmistakably shouting the name of their commander.

"FOR LADY SAKUNA!"

"PRAISED BE LADY SAKUNA!"

"YOU CALL YOURSELVES LADY SAKUNA'S SOLDIERS?!"

Their fondness of her was incredible. Not that the Seventh Unit had the right to say anything about them.

"Come to think of it, I heard the commander was searching for the terrorist alongside Sakuna Memoir."

"Oh, yes, that thing about the serial murders in the Crimson Tower. I haven't yet gotten word of the culprit being captured... The case seems to be fading from conversation. There haven't been any victims since the commander's father was assassinated, and then there was the Crimson Council, and now there's the Crimson Match. Those murders are getting left in the dust."

"But Sakuna Memoir's honor still hinges on them catching the terrorist, remember? She's the only Crimson Lord who got killed."

"That is true... Let's ask the commander about it later."

Just as the conversation drew to a close, someone approached them from behind.

"H-hey. Are you from the Seventh Unit?"

All three turned around; none of them were familiar with the vampire they found there, but they could tell from the uniform that he belonged to the Mulnite Imperial Army.

"Yes, why?" Caostel asked.

The man hesitated for a bit until finally saying, "I'm from the Sixth Unit... What do you think of them over there?"

“Their practice? They seem motivated, which is good.”

“That’s not right, damn it!”

The man’s abrupt outburst took Caostel off guard. He looked extremely tired and agitated.

“They’ve lost their minds. It’s like they’re entirely different people now with all the ‘Lady Sakuna’ this, ‘Lady Sakuna’ that.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you’re trying to get at. Isn’t that just because she’s popular?”

“That’s what’s wrong. That girl was at the bottom of the totem pole—just a foot soldier no one cared about. But now that she’s Crimson Lord, everyone loves her.”

“I suppose that sort of thing happens from time to time. Anyway, we’re busy, so—”

The man grabbed Caostel’s shoulders and locked him in place.

“Listen. I happened to be dead on the day she became commander. So I wasn’t there when it all went down. I don’t know what happened then, but I do know one thing: As soon as I revived and went back to my troop, everyone in the Sixth Unit had lost their goddamn minds.”

Yohann was fed up with the guy. He couldn’t believe the story.

“C’mon, man... Aren’t you the weird one here? Stop your grumbling and go train or something. Look at how hard your mates are working.”

“Too hard. It makes me sick. Please... You’ve gotta hear me out. Everyone else has gone insane. Just look! They’re shouting her name while killing each other, day and night! Don’t you think that’s strange?”

Caostel crossed his arms. Bellius also gave a suspicious glance to the Sixth Unit.

“...Could it be mind control magic?”

“That can’t be. Spells can only last so long. It’s been, what, two weeks since Sakuna Memoir was appointed? To keep them under the effects of that sort of incantation for

so long, she'd need to be one of the greatest mages in history."

The man clutched his hair and hunkered down.

"I'm not crazy. There're other people who know something's off. Their families. Please... I'm so scared of Sakuna Memoir. She's no regular Crimson Lord. There's something else to her. Something extremely dangerous... What can I do?"

No one could answer the man's question.

The Sixth Unit and Sakuna Memoir... What could they be hiding?

Yohann grimaced. Something bad was coming; he could feel it in his gut.

3 Web of Memories in a Sea of Stars

Vexations

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

Observing someone's memories felt like stargazing.

The smallest unit comprising the entirety of your memories was but a tiny speck. These tiny dots were bits of knowledge and experience etched in your brain, like a sea of stars across the universe, connecting through electric signals like constellations.

Peering into memories was akin to swimming in the galaxy.

Sakuna used to love stargazing with her family. Now, though? She didn't hate it, but the more time she spent peeping at people's memories, the more nauseated she got looking at real stars.

"But maybe if we all go together again, like back then, you'll see things differently," her father told her, worried.

Sakuna had gone back to her dorm in the evening after work, and soon after, her father came to visit. He would drop by every once in a while, offer to cook dinner, complete the meal without saying much, and head back home. This was nothing new. Her father had always been a better cook than her mother.

"I wonder when we'll get the opportunity to do that."

Sakuna hugged a Komari plushie as she watched her father in the kitchen.

"Well, that depends on how hard you work. I would love to help you out, but I'm sure you're aware your old man doesn't know much about that sort of thing."

"Yeah... I have to work hard..."

The rhythmic chopping of his knife calmed her down.

"You'll be fine," he said. "You're already doing your best. You're handling your troops well, and you're even working overtime trying to catch that terrorist."

"Oh, but we didn't patrol today. Ms. Villhaze said it was fine, since they haven't shown up in a while."

"Oh. Then take time to rest for today."

But she couldn't waste time like that. She had another job to do: Her duties as a member of Inverse Moon.

After a short while, her father brought her the food. Curry rice. His curry was the best. She'd always loved it, ever since she was little.

They both grabbed their spoons and took a bite. It was as delicious as she remembered.

She had a pleasant chat with her father. They talked about their favorite books, music, constellations, and about their family.

Time with her family was precious, especially when her job with Inverse Moon wore her down every day. She wished this moment could last forever; not only with her dad, but with her mom and her sister, too.

"Thank you for the meal."

Yet the more fun she was having, the faster those moments seemed to end. After they finished eating, her father stood up and said, "I'll come by again soon. See you," and left. She was back in the harsh world of reality. Dread filled her heart.

"Dad..."

She played back his presence in her mind.

His memories—his mental composition—most closely resembled the Aquila constellation. Everyone in her family had memories in the shape of beautiful star structures.

"I've got to hang in there... in order to protect them."

She stared at the Terakomari Gandesblood photos all over her ceiling and forced a smile.

Then, she remembered. She needed to read the novel she'd borrowed.



Screw me.

Of course the Crimson Match is a fight to the death. How in the world is that just "entertainment," Empress? I guess it's my fault for expecting the weirdest being in the universe to use normal words normally.

It was the day after the Crimson Council. I had been forced to show up for work like usual, and there I saw that sick, twisted joke. The notification on the bulletin board. It was then that I realized what Odilon Metal and Flöte Mascarail truly had in mind, and I wept as I fell to the depths of despair. With the modicum of will I had for work lost, I sat down on my fluffy chair in the office, staring at the ceiling like an empty shell as the sicko maid took the opportunity to illegally grope me all over. But I did nothing in response and couldn't manage to do anything until the bell announcing the end of my shift finally rang, after which I immediately headed home. This would've been time for me and Sakuna to patrol, but Vill said we should hold off for a while since it didn't seem to be accomplishing much, so I was thankfully saved from overtime. Perhaps she did that out of concern for me.

Once I was back home, I laid down on my bed and stared at the ceiling.

It's over. It's all over. I'm dead. I had no idea how many times I'd said "I'm dead" at this point, but this was on a whole new level. I was *dead*—dead now. For sure.

Waves from the sea of despair came crashing down on me, and they just wouldn't stop. I couldn't muster the energy to move a finger.

"Lady Komari, please get up. Dinner is ready."

"I feel nothing. I am no more."

"We're having demi-glace steak tonight."

"..."

I thought about it for a while, then got up sluggishly. As they say, you can't nap on an empty stomach. And I couldn't let Vill's cooking go to waste, either.

I sat at the table in my room and waited for Vill to bring me dinner.

The demi-glace steak smelled delicious. I thanked her before digging in, and as I brought the fork up to my mouth, the taste of happiness filled me inside. *You saved my life, steak...* Once again, I was reminded that Vill was the best cook in the entire world.

"How is it, Lady Komari?"

"Very tasty!"

"Enough to get you through the Crimson Match?"

"Yes!..... NO!!"

All that joy, gone in an instant. *Let me enjoy this before pulling myself back to reality!*

"What am I supposed to do?! I'm dead. I'm so, so dead!"

"Worry not. I will be by your side in your last moments."

"How's that reassuring?!"

"I will give my life to protect yours."

"I'm not asking you to go that far!"

What now? Do I feign sickness? No, has that ever worked, Komari? Vill's gonna drag you out of your room like always. What if I bribe them? No, Vill would put a stop to that, too. Damn it, she only gets in my way at every corner!

"Waaah... I can't take being a Crimson Lord anymore... There must be lots of other people who want to be one, I should just give them the title."

"Then you'll explode. Besides, there's no need for that. Lady Komari, do you remember what I've done ever since we met?"

"Sexually harass me?"

"No. That is just me showing you my love... But that's not what I mean. Think back; have I ever let you die?"

I had nothing to say in retort. It's true, she had saved my bacon on many occasions. She'd even technically staved off my death at the Crimson Council... But I didn't feel like that would happen this time.

"Haaah... Why do I have to wear myself out doing all this? I don't even want to be a Crimson Lord."

"If I may inquire, what kind of profession would you rather have?"

"None."

"Not even *that* kind of permanent employment?"

What kind...? Oh, you mean a housewife? Yeah, that doesn't sound too bad. I have no one to marry, though.

"I'm single," Vill added.

"Huh?"

"So if you're looking for permanent employment, I'm always available..."

"What are you talking about? You're a girl. We can't get married."

"..."

She looked sad, for whatever reason. I could never tell what she was thinking. I grabbed another piece of steak and once I swallowed it, I said:

"...Well, I do have a dream for the future. I'd like to be a novelist."

"Got it. Your renown as Crimson Lord will make sure your books sell like hotcakes, regardless of their quality."

"I do *not* want that. I'll be using a pen name, in the first place... I'm too embarrassed to publish them under my real name."

“What would your pen name be?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I’m writing everything using my real name for now...”

“I see. Even your latest, *Orange Season Love*? ”

“Yeah. I wrote it down on the reverse of the first page.”

“So that means Lady Sakuna Memoir knows.”

“Hmm?”

“She took the manuscript, right?”

“...a”

Wha? Wait a second. Wait a... Wait a sec...

“W-we...”

“We?”

“We have to stop her!!”

I held my temples with both hands and stood up. Just. *Screw me*. I couldn’t believe it... An absolute genius like me, making such a rookie mistake?! Why would I write my name on it if I intended on keeping it anonymous! I’m doxing myself! All the soul I’d poured into that... Into that masterpiece... was now in Sakuna’s hands... and she knew it was all me... *AAAAHHH!!!*

“L-let’s go to Sakuna’s house! Now!”

“Why? She probably already knows.”

“We don’t know that! Let’s go! All my dignity as her senior will be down the drain if she finds out!”

“Did you ever have that in the first pla... Wait, Lady Komari! You mustn’t walk alone at night!”

I ran outside without even bothering to change out of my loungewear. Didn't care what that maid had to say about it, either.

I had to get back my manuscript ASAP, strike out my name, and then give it back to Sakuna.

This was no time to stay cooped up in my room!



I ran out of energy after a minute. I should've known better than to try and sprint all the way there.

“...God... damn it... I have to... I have to stop... her...”

My feet hurt. My heart was jumping out of my chest. But still, I had to do it.

I looked like a defeated soldier barely making it back home. Though I could scarcely breathe, I didn't stop.

In that novel, I... I wrote some things that children shouldn't be reading. Not because I like them, no! They weren't there for titillating reasons—it was all part of how the plot organically developed. Still... The justifications behind them being there didn't matter; what mattered was how awkward it would be if Sakuna knew I'd written that. I finally had a friend who understood my struggles! I couldn't let that change!

I kept on running as if my life depended on it until I saw a bridge over the Whatchamacallit River (I forgot its name, okay?) that bolted through the Imperial Palace grounds. Sakuna's apartment was right on the other side in the Imperial Army's women's dorm.

“F-finally. Wait for me, Sakuna... AH!”

I tripped on the steps of the bridge.

I fell forward and nearly struck my face on the handrail, but I turned myself around in a hurry and... failed. I was too fatigued to properly move and ended up slipping onto the bank and rolling down to the lukewarm river.

Fear overtook me the next moment. I couldn't get up. I hadn't known the water was

that deep.

“S-someone... Help!”

I flailed around in an attempt to reach the shore, but my efforts were in vain. The only thing that accomplished was to spray water everywhere; meanwhile, my body didn't go anywhere but downward. Water flowed into my mouth and lungs.

It was over. I couldn't breathe. No one would save me. To think this would be how I went out. No need for the Crimson Match anymore! I should've practiced swimming more... Then I gave up on life.

“Are you okay?!”

I heard someone. They grabbed my arm. I didn't know what was going on, but soon I was being launched into the air toward the ground. I landed softly on my butt. *That must have been gravity magic.*

I didn't feel alive yet. I coughed and coughed violently until finally realizing I had been saved. But by who? Their voice didn't sound like Vill's... I looked up.

“That was close! I didn't know you couldn't swim, Lady Gandesblood!”

It was a man in religious clothing. The weirdo priest, Helldeus Heaven.

“Why are you here...?”

“Ha-ha-ha. I just had some business to take care of.”

The only thing on the other side of the bridge was the women's dorm. This reeked of crime, but since he saved my life, I decided not to pry any further. (Yup... I now owed this guy my life.)

I bowed in a hurry.

“Thank you, so much. You saved me.”

“Oh, no worries! I am honored to receive such gratitude from the great Commander Gandesblood! By the way... Are you fine now? Shall I take you home?”

"I-I'm all right. Don't worry about it. I'm in a hurry, sorry... I'll give you a proper thank-you later. Look forward to it."

"Oh, you don't have to concern yourself with that. It is only natural for a follower of God to help someone out when they're in need. By the by, you should probably change clothes. It may be summer, but it is still chilly out here."

"I'm fine. I gotta go..."

"Hmm. What could possibly have you in such a hurry, Lady Gandesblood?"

I froze up. But I had nothing to hide! I calmed myself down before replying.

"I'm going to Sakuna's for a bit."

Heldeus squinted. *Huh? Why'd his demeanor change?*

"Oh, you're to see Lady Memoir. Why?"

"We're just meeting up to hang. She invited me over for Twister."

"Oh, I would love to join you."

No. Just imagining it feels criminal.

"I'm joking! Don't glare at me like that, please... Anyhow, I'm glad Lady Memoir seems to have gotten herself a good friend. Very heartwarming. She spends too much time alone, always has since she was a kid. She has me worried all the time."

"Is that so...?"

I then recalled that Heldeus was the director at Sakuna's orphanage. Maybe this sicko priest was sort of like her father figure. I guess I shouldn't be calling him that. In any event, I really needed to get to Sakuna's house before it was too late.

"Well, thank you, Heldeus. I'm sorry I can't give you something in return right now, but I'm really in a hurry..."

"I understand. Go have fun with Lady Memoir—with Sakuna."

“Y-yeah. Leave her to me.”

I curtsied, then forced my poor, suffering muscles into motion. He seemed more decent than I'd taken him for initially, that Helldeus. But anyway, I had to get there quickly, quickly, quickly.

I was in too much of a rush to hear the priest's last whisper behind my back.

“*Good-bye, Lady Gandesblood... I hope you find happiness in God's Kingdom.*”



I got to the dorm, but I didn't know her room number. I despaired for a moment, but then I noticed the mailbox had everyone's name on their respective numbers. I could barely contain my anxiety as I hurried to her place. After a moment's hesitation, I rang the bell.

“Who'sh that?!”

I heard a scream from inside, followed by things knocking and whacking and smacking around, then something heavy falling. “*Ouch!*” she screamed again before she started sobbing; I guessed she'd hit a toe on the table or something. After a few more seconds, I heard a third scream from the other side of the thin door, “*NOOO!!*” Probably after looking through the peephole.

“Sakuna, I'm sorry for coming uninvited... Are you busy?”

“No! Not at all, no!”

She opened the door with the chain still on the latch. She seemed wary. I could tell even from the very slight opening that she was wearing her uniform. I was hoping to see her wearing plain clothes. Too bad.

“Um, Ms. Terakomari? Why are you here?”

“Oh, I'm just passing by... Hey, you know that novel you—”

“What happened to you?! You're soaking wet!”

“Oh, yes, I, uh, fell into the river.”

“What?! Y-you should change clothes right away, or you’ll catch a cold.”

“Don’t worry about that, okay? Just give me the no—”

She slammed the door shut. Then I heard her going through things in a frenzy again. I stood there with nothing to do, until she finally tilted the door slightly ajar.

“Um, um, I have some clothes... But they’re a bit weird.” Then she shook her head hard.
“No! Calling them that would be rude!”

“Weird? Like, they have a capybara print or something?”

“No, not exactly... I’m sorry, I really only have this.”

She passed me a normal-looking T-shirt through the gap.

I unfolded it.

My (half-smiling) face showed itself.

Yup. Strange.

“..Where did you get this?”

“They were selling it! At a store! A-and since I happened to know the person in the picture, I, y’know, bought it...”

So there really are stores out there willing to sell these laughable shirts... What a world.
It was truly lamentable; there was no way I would ever wea—

“Ah-choo!”

Now I was sneezing. Sakuna screamed, “Are you all right?!” like it was the end of the world.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” I forced a smile. “Anyway, back to the nove—”

“Y-you’re not fine! You need to take a shower! You can use mine... Ah, but my house is a mess, so I’d appreciate if you could not look at my living room... Seriously, *don’t* look at it... pretty please? C-come here, I’ll show you to the bathroom.”

I didn't get what she was going on about. Honestly, I didn't care about taking a shower. I had to get my hands on the novel! My honor was on the line! But she didn't seem to be willing to listen to anything I said unless I took that shower and wore the Commander T-shirt.

Oh, well. I decided to do as she said.

"Please, follow me. I'll leave you some underwear, as well."

"...Underwear? Yours?"

"No... I believe the ones I put on my dolls should fit you perfe... Forget it! I said nothing! Nothing!"

"O-okay... Fine, I'll go shower."

"Take your time!"

Sakuna left me alone in bathroom. I took my clothes off and immediately came to the realization... that I'd really be wearing a Commander T-shirt. *Awful. Terrible.*

I tried asking Sakuna if there was something else I could wear. No way this was the only thing she had, right?

After putting my outfit back on, I left the bathroom. I walked through the dark hallway and slowly opened the door that would likely lead to the living room.

"Sorry, Sakuna, do you really not have anything else? I don't want to wear something with my face on—"

At first, I thought I'd somehow ended up in a store. There were just so many *things* in there.

Then I grasped the true oddness of the situation.

That place was full of me.

Dolls in my likeness. Plushies in my image. Hug pillows with prints of my body. Photos of me. Posters of me. T-shirts of my face. Paintings of me. Terakomari Gandesblood was everywhere. Like a Komari museum.

I was speechless.

What is this...? Am I dreaming?

“...Ms... Terakomari...”

The platinum-haired girl in the middle of that bizarre place seemed on the verge of tears. As if I had just uncovered her deepest, most shameful secret. Because that's exactly what I'd done.

“N-no! This is all just a big misunderstanding...”

What exactly am I *misunderstanding* here? She didn't explain. She couldn't.

My jaw was on the floor.

Forget about my novel.

This girl had a way bigger skeleton in her closet. I almost felt stupid for getting so worked up over a mere book where I'd written three kiss scenes.

“M-Ms. Terakomari...”

She looked up at me as if asking for forgiveness.

I didn't know what to do. I was baffled. So, I simply said:

“I'm gonna take that shower.”



Twenty minutes later, I was out of the shower, facing Sakuna, in a room full of me. I hadn't gotten to ask for different clothes, by the way, so my face was currently on my belly. It was humiliating. This whole room felt like a monument to humiliating me. What was even going through Sakuna's mind when she'd gathered all this?

“...Sakuna.”

“Yesh?!”

Just calling her name practically had her jumping out of her skin as though she'd seen a cockroach. I tried my best to keep my voice soft.

"This room is amazing. It's full of me."

"Waaaaah... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

"Don't apologize! Don't cry! I'm not mad!"

"I'm sorry... I... I just... I just love you so much...!"

"..."

What a confession. Yeah, I can tell as much.

Sakuna spoke with hesitation.

"You're so strong, and pretty, and cool... I wanted to be just like you, so I started looking into you, bought some merch, and then made some myself, so my room ended up like this..."

"You made some yourself?"

"Yes. I think the fifteen life-size dolls are my magnum opus. I care for them every day, greet them, talk to them like they're the real you..."

I glanced around. The Komaris standing near the walls were all staring at me, expressionless. It felt like darkness was oozing out of Sakuna.

"I—I see. Well, I think people are free to enjoy their hobbies. Yeah. Not like I don't have secrets of my own."

"Like the fact that you write novels?"

She already knew!!

"...Yes. Were you aware?"

"Yes, Ms. Villhaze told me once before."

So it was all her fault!! I felt like telling the maid she'd pay for this, but honestly, I was starting to think it wasn't that bad that Sakuna knew. After uncovering this room, my kiss scenes were literally nothing.

"I'm sorry. You must be grossed out... Seeing all these weird things," Sakuna said, her voice fading away.

It didn't sit right with me for her to call them "weird" when they were all literally me. But setting that aside, it wasn't as if her collection had brought any real harm. I didn't have the slightest intention of criticizing her for it. Besides, I didn't want to endanger our relationship like that.

"I don't mind it. So long as you don't make any of this public, you can do as you please."

"Really...? So I can keep on making more?"

"Just... Not too many."

Sakuna beamed. *She's so cute.*

"You're so kind. Anyone else would've left right away and never spoken to me again."

"Ha-ha-ha. Well, I am the strongest Crimson Lord. I've seen much more shocking stuff. This makes me glad, actually! I didn't know you were so fond of me."

"R-really...? Hee-hee-hee."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

...

...Now what do we talk about? I couldn't think straight, what with all these *mes* looking at me. Despite my exaggerated boasting, to be quite honest, this was shocking enough to have long-lasting repercussions on future conversations with her. I was sure this room would show up in my nightmares soon.

Wait, I don't really have anything to say to her anymore, right? The novel thing's already solved, if you can call it that. Now the topic of conversation's really free... Oh, right, I wanted to talk about our pastimes. Yeah, I should bring that up now.

“Ms. Terakomari, what do you think of the Crimson Match?”

Unfortunately, she got to break the ice. With the worst topic possible.

She continued. “I am... worried. You all are so strong. I don’t think there’s a place for a weak vampire like me among you... I’ll probably get killed right away...”

Nah, that’s gonna be me.

“That’s not true, Sakuna. You can use such amazing magic.”

“It’s not that special. And even with the power of magic... Or even the power of Core Implosion... I-it’s no use if I can’t kill the target.”

“Huh? Kill...?”

Sakuna looked distressed. But hold on, did I hear that wrong? Was she really set on killing? I mean, sure, the objective in that Crimson Match was to take out your opponents, but I couldn’t believe Sakuna was actually floating around such violent action considering her timidity.

And, indeed, it seemed I wasn’t incorrect: “I-I’m sorry,” she responded. “I got that wrong. What I meant to say was, my efforts won’t mean much if I end up getting killed. I’m just a useless vampire... Even if I could use amazing spells, I’d get taken out before I got the chance to use them. And just the thought of that scares me...”

“Oh... Yes, everyone is afraid of dying.”

“And I don’t want to fight you, either.”

She was on the verge of tears as she stared at me.

The Crimson Match was a free-for-all battle royale. Playing it straight would mean she and I would have to kill each other... But I had a plan in mind.

“Let’s join forces.”

“Huh?”

“There’s no rule that says we can’t form an alliance. There’ll be one person less to face

off against if we do that, and we could even help each other out. What do you think?"

"Should we really? I might end up holding you back..."

"Not at all. I'm afraid I might be the one holding *you* back, actually."

"B-but..." She fidgeted. "Why are you treating me so nicely? I'm like... Your stalker, pretty much."

I honestly didn't care about that. Besides, she wasn't my only stalker.

Part of why I wanted to team up with her was that it would improve my chances of surviving. Pure self-interest. But I also couldn't bring myself to leave Sakuna on her own. Just looking at her tender face made me want to help her out at all costs. Although... I really didn't feel like I had the right to say that. I was a hundred times worse off than her. So honestly, the heart of the matter was much simpler.

"Because we're friends," I blurted out. "And friends help each other, right? That's why I'm asking you."

"Friends..."

"...Aw. Sorry. You don't like us being that way, huh...?"

"That's not it! I'm honored! Please, let's be friends!"

"R-really?! Great. The honor is mine."

We bowed our heads at each other. Internally, I heaved a sigh of relief. I was ready to hang myself right then and there if she had replied back with something like "Me? Your companion? You've gotta be kidding me."

We're friends... Hee-hee-hee. My first one... So this is what joy feels like!

"I accept your proposal. So that means the Seventh and Sixth Units will be forming an alliance?"

"Yes. I'll tell everyone on my side."

"Oh, right." Sakuna clapped once. "We should get Mr. Helldelus to help us. I think he

would understand.”

“Heldeus...? Are you sure?”

“He might be a bit weird, but he can be trusted.”

Sure enough, he *had* saved me from drowning. He’d even helped me out during the Crimson Council. My first impression was of him being a religious nerd with no interests outside of God, but considering the above and Sakuna’s impression of him, maybe he was a decent guy.

“Okay, let’s get him to help, too. Oh, now that you mention it... You said you were in his orphanage, right?”

“Yes, he took me in after my family was murdered.”

“...”

Oof. How am I supposed to respond to that?

“Ah, but don’t worry. I still have my family.”

“Because of the Dark Core? Then why were you in the orphanage?”

“Hee-hee.”

Sakuna flashed a mysterious smile. I got chills—I didn’t know she could make *this* kind of face. There was something supernatural about that look in her eyes. But in any case, it only lasted for a moment before she immediately went back to her usual, timid self.

“That’s them.” Sakuna pointed at a photo on the shelf.

The picture showed a happy family of four. Sakuna was still little, and an older girl—I’d say her sister—had her hand on Sakuna’s head and was smiling. On either side of them stood their parents, wearing kind expressions.

“That’s my sister. Her name was Komari.”

“Really? Always cool seeing more Komaris in the wild.”

“Yes. She had beautiful Delphinus-type memories.”

“...Wha...? What does that mean?”

“I can instinctively tell the shape of people’s minds.”

Sakuna suddenly grabbed my hand.

“Are you cold? Your hands sure are.”

“No. Sapphires have low internal temperatures. This steel-cold body is characteristic of us. We need it to survive the frigid climate of the Haku-Goku Commonwealth.”

“O-oh.”

“I’m sure my blood is cold, too. Want a sip?”

“No, thank you.”

“Good,” she giggled. “Mind going stargazing with me? I would like to be under some nice scenery for these final moments. And I’d rather not dirty my room.”

“Sakuna, what do you...?”

She pulled me by the arm and took me outside. I still didn’t understand what was happening. Bats flapped around us, and I let out a startled yelp. Sakuna didn’t seem to care, though; she kept on walking steadily until we reached a quiet backyard.

It was a garden like any other. I could hear owls hooting. Squinting to make out more details, I saw that it was full of hydrangea. It could’ve been a beautiful sight had we gone there in the daytime.

“Please look up, Ms. Terakomari.”

I did as she said and beheld the dazzling stars covering the sky above. It was a typical nighttime view, but perhaps because of that, I felt more attuned to the beauty of nature than I would be otherwise.

“That’s Delphinus. It takes the shape of the dolphin that is said to have crossed the oceans with God on its back. That one over there is Aquila. Next to that is Viridis, and

next to that..."

Sakuna pointed at the stars as she enthusiastically named each of them, but I couldn't for the life of me tell what she was gesturing at. All I could tell was that the glimmering stars were all very pretty... Perhaps I didn't quite have the intellect to understand.

"I always feel calm when gazing at the stars like this."

"Yeah, constellations are pretty." *Not that I'd know.*

"Your memories, too, are arranged like a constellation."

I glanced over at her profile in confusion. She was staring intently at the sky.

"Ms. Terakomari... Why do you think the terrorist is killing people?"

"Bwuh?" Now I really didn't know what was going on. "Well... Y'know, 'cause they like killing, I guess? There's lots of people like that around me."

"I don't think so. I think there's a reason why they *have* to kill."

"Sure, I suppose..."

"Ms. Terakomari... May I ask you two questions?"

"S-sure."

"Thank you. If, hypothetically speaking, a terrorist took your family hostage... and told you that you needed to commit murder if you didn't want them killing your family, what would you do? Would you obey? Or would you... leave them behind and run?"

What's with that question? Is this a psychological test or something?

Sakuna was earnest, though. Maybe too earnest. Giving a joke answer would be a mistake, so I responded with the honest solution that came to mind.

"I would take down the terrorist."

"Wha...?"

"It's all their fault, right? Just get rid of them, and it's all over."

I wouldn't want to take the lives of others, but I wouldn't want my family to wind up dead, either. So the obvious answer was to get rid of the cause of the predicament.

Of course, saying that was easy; actually doing it would be a whole different story. In the real world, it would be very likely that I would flee. Yet I couldn't leave my family to die like that... Hmm. Now I saw where the dilemma lay.

While I was going over this in my mind, despite having already answered so quickly, Sakuna sighed in admiration.

"Of course. But I don't have your determination..."

I got the slight feeling that her question wasn't just a psychology quiz. *Sounds crazy, but... What if... This is a real quandry she's in?... Naaah, no way.*

Sakuna then turned to look at me. Tears were welling up in her eyes.

"Just look up at the stars. It will be over soon."

"Hold on. You've been acting a little weird... And now you're crying? Does something hurt? Let's..."

She slowly reached out to me.

After my next blink, I couldn't move. I couldn't look away from her. I got the sense that something terrible would happen if I didn't get away from there, but I was lost in her eyes, like a frog being hypnotized by a snake.

It was then that I realized I was under the effects of magic.

Paralysis, an elementary binding spell.

Was Sakuna mad? Yeah. I was sure she was. She was upset that I'd seen her secret room. The flames of vengeance were burning in her heart, and she would soon send me to hell. She placed her fingertips on my belly.

"W-wait, Sakuna! I'm very ticklish! I'm pretty sure I would actually die of asphyxia if someone got my armpits! I'm sorry for uncovering your room, so please..."

“Lady Komari, it’s time to go home.”

Immediately, Sakuna jerked back, as though she had burned herself.

I turned around in surprise.

The sicko maid emerged from the shadows. *How long've you been there? Stop acting like a killer from a slasher film!*

“We have work to do tomorrow. We can’t have you staying up so late.”

“Work?! But tomorrow’s Saturday!”

“No weekend for you. The Crimson Match is near, so you need to train for it. Let’s go home. You didn’t even finish your dinner.”

“Oh.”

My tummy growled now that she’d reminded me. I really wanted to eat Vill’s steak. Sadly, it would’ve already gone cold.

“We will show ourselves out, Lady Memoir. Good-bye.”

“O-okay.”

Vill curtsied at Sakuna, who responded with fear and anxiety, but also seemed somehow relieved. Her expression was quite strange.

Something wasn’t sitting right with me, but I couldn’t figure out what, exactly.

“See you, Sakuna. Guess I gotta go. I’ll be counting on you in the Crimson Match.”

“Yes. Good night, Ms. Terakomari.”

“Yeah, g’night.”

Vill and I left the women’s dorm. I turned around on our way out and saw Sakuna staring at the night sky. I got worried and tried going back, but Vill grabbed my arm.

“H-hey? That hurts.”

“I’m sorry, but I believe Sakuna Memoir is rather dangerous.”

Dangerous? How? Let go of my arm already. Don’t try to grab my hand now! And don’t interlock our fingers! Damn it, she’s too strong to shake off!

“Why do you say that? The way I see it, you’re way more of a threat.”

“I felt her intent to kill... Though it was weak.”

“Well, she wasn’t quite murderous, but she was trying to figuratively tickle me to death... And why are you grabbing my hand?! I’m not a kid!”

“I wouldn’t want you getting lost, so it is of utmost importance that I get a touch of your smooth, silky little hands.”

“Stop it! This is embarrassing!”

“I believe you are already humiliating yourself enough with that T-shirt.”

“...”

She was right.

“In any case,” Vill spoke in a serious tone. “We must be wary of what Sakuna Memoir is doing. You should keep away from her as much as you can. Never risk going stargazing alone with her. Situations like these must be avoided at all costs. Instead, you should go stargazing with me. C’mon.”

Vill grasped my hand tight. *Stop! You’re gonna break it! I’m more fragile than you think!*

Heart full of trepidation, I walked my way home holding hands with her.

Something else was bothering me besides my current predicament.

That face Sakuna had worn; that sad, teary expression. *What could have been on her mind?*

Unfortunately, I couldn’t use magic to read it.



Confession: Sakuna Memoir could view the memories of anyone she killed with her Core Implosion. The terrorist organization Inverse Moon wanted to use her power in order to find the location of the Dark Core.

Dark Cores were special-grade Divine Instruments that provided infinite mana and vitality to the people. Though everyone knew about the existence and effects of their nation's core, most ordinary people never saw it. That was by design. Information on these devices was highly classified, and every country kept the location, shape, and other details about their respective cores under wraps. Incidentally, you had to earn the gift of infinite recovery through a ritual in which you bequeathed your blood to the Dark Core, but this wasn't performed before the actual device. Instead, you would pour your blood into one of the many Dark Springs, which would then automatically transport it to the Core. Consequently, not even officials who specialized in performing those rituals knew where the Dark Core was.

These were the circumstances behind Sakuna's deeds; the reason why she had been wandering about every night, assassinating government officials. Yet she'd gotten nothing to show for it.

Even Chancellor Armand Gandesblood hadn't been privy to the Dark Core's location. Killing the Empress would be the surest way of uncovering it, but Sakuna didn't have the power to take on the Thunderbolt. Which is why Inverse Moon's current instructions were to slay the Crimson Lords and gather intel.

All of Sakuna's targets up to then had been civil officials, easy to deal with. But now Inverse Moon was speculating that it was the military officials who actually had access to this information.

"Thank goodness... That was lucky... right?" Sakuna whispered, looking up at the stars.

She hadn't been able to bring herself to kill Terakomari Gandesblood. How could she ever murder someone nice enough to call her a friend?

Sakuna had felt immensely relieved once she lost the opportunity to carry out the dark deed when Villhaze appeared. At the very least, she could put that off for another day.

Still... She didn't feel she had the strength to take down Komari.

How powerful was she, really? Sakuna didn't doubt her like Flöte Mascarail did, but it was true that she knew little about the girl's prowess in combat. She should have

investigated Komari when she'd killed Armand Gandesblood, but it was already too late for regrets.

Sakuna sighed.

What was she even doing? Holding a title beyond her abilities, even killing against her convictions. What was the point of living like this? She chastised herself and then went back to her room.

The wind blew. Sakuna closed her eyes on reflex.

When next she opened them, she saw that a window was open, despite the fact that she had no memories of moving it. The curtain swayed, projecting an eerie shadow across the interior.

Why...? Something felt off. As soon as she stepped foot inside the Komari-filled room, the Correspondence Crystal on her desk lit up.

Her heart felt like it would give out. But she couldn't ignore the call.

She poured mana into the gem, and the same grumpy voice as always echoed back from it.

"That was stupid, Sakuna Memoir."

Sakuna scrunched up her shoulders.

"So, so very stupid. Why did you let go of such a perfect opportunity to slay your target? People who don't do their job don't deserve to stay alive."

"Wha...?"

Sakuna looked around, swiveling her head like a rusty machine.

He was watching. He'd eavesdropped on her entire conversation with Terakomari!

"I-I'm sorry! I tried to, but then Ms. Villhaze came, and..."

"Then just kill the maid, too. Do I have to remind you how your Core Implosion works?"

“I—I know, it makes people forget my face...”

“Then why didn’t you take them out? Never let an opportunity go to waste. That’s what we say here at Inverse Moon.”

That was the first time Sakuna had heard of this, but the man paid no heed to her confusion.

“We can’t mobilize if we don’t know where the Dark Core is. Your failures are grinding the entire machine to a halt. We won’t tolerate it for much longer.”

“...”

“...There’s still another chance. You just have to kill them all during the Crimson Match. But there, you cannot fail. I’ve been infiltrating the Imperial Army for seven years just for this moment. You know who to prioritize, right?”

“P-petro...”

“Petrose Calamaria. She’s the longest-serving Crimson Lord. Flöte Mascarail follows. The reigning Empress appointed her herself. It’s very likely she has intel on the Dark Core. After her, comes Terakomari Gandesblood. She’s the Empress’s favorite. The one you should’ve offed just moments ago.”

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry...”

“You don’t really need to take out the others. But it would still be wise to do so. Another one of our teachings is to always be doubly sure. Fail, and I’ll kill your family.”

“Hrk!”

She had heard that threat countless times before. It was what kept her hands tied. She’d shiver and flash back to that moment whenever he told her that. She didn’t want to lose them ever again. She didn’t want to be alone. So she had to do i...

It’s all their fault, right? Just get rid of them, and it’s over.

Komari’s words played back in her mind.

What a heroic statement. If only Sakuna could act like her. But she was scared. She

didn't want to get hurt. And any more disobedience would only get her into some serious pain... She had no choice but to follow all of the terrorist's outrageous demands.

"Why don't you answer? Do you understand your orders? Are you paying attention?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, her voice trembling in fear.

"As timid as always, huh? You won't ever make your way up in the organization like that. But whatever... I brought you a present today. Gaze at your beloved Terakomari Gandesblood dolls."

She had a terrible feeling.

Then, she saw that the Komari doll on her bed was holding a small bottle. Sakuna approached it cautiously. The liquid inside it seemed poisonous, but the bottle itself looked like any other.

"That's Cornelius's Elixir. You've heard of it, right?"

"Hah!"

Sakuna gasped. Lonne Cornelius was one of the Lunae, the top brass of Inverse Moon, and the elixir was a strength-enhancing drug they'd produced in secret. Taking it would give you far more mana than ordinary people, but the side effects were so devastating that you could end up losing control of your limbs, or even your mind, after it wore off. In the worst possible scenario, you would hack up blood and die as soon as you ingested it. One of Sakuna's colleagues had ended up in a coma after taking it, so Inverse Moon had decided against using it since.

"Sakuna Memoir, you're not so strong as to take on five Crimson Lords. Which is why I got you this. Savor the ecstasy as you murder our enemies."

"But... The side effects..."

"Side effects? True, there are some... But so what?"

"I could... die...?"

"And? Perhaps that's true... But death in service to your organization would be an honor."

Don't tell me you're afraid to die. Or do you have other complaints? Huh? Tell me."

She couldn't. And she didn't. Sakuna only trembled as the man clicked his tongue loudly.

"Don't worry," he added in a mocking tone. "You'll get a fair reward once we destroy Mulnite's Dark Core. We'll round up everyone back at the hideout and hold a ceremony to confer you with honors. If you survive, that is."

"Thank... you..."

"Oh, and one more thing," he threw in casually. "This just came to me after mentioning the hideout. I heard you've been visiting from time to time."

Sakuna froze up. It felt like even her blood had turned to ice. She looked away, doing her best to keep her hands from shaking.

By "hideout" the man obviously meant one belonging to Inverse Moon. But that wasn't the headquarters, where the Lunae were. She didn't know where that was. Rather, the man had been referring to the branch in a forest in the south of the Gerra-Aruka Republic, which Sakuna belonged to. He was the branch leader there.

"I'm not barring you from doing that, but be careful of what you do, or we'll take matters into our own hands."

"...I'll bear that in mind."

"Good. I'm looking forward to seeing results, Sakuna Memoir! Do not repeat Millicent Bluenight's mistakes. Otherwise, you'll end up getting killed and arrested like her."

"Yes, I understand."

"Good luck."

He then cut the connection.

Thank goodness... He didn't notice.

However, her relief was short-lived. Nothing was solved yet.

She stared absentmindedly at the bottle in the Komari doll's hands. It was a poisonous shade of purple. Lonne Cornelius had created this Divine Instrument with Core Implosion; if the side effects killed her, she would never draw breath again.

Before she knew it, Sakuna was crying.

This is too much... I can't...

“...”

Though the Dark Core infinitely healed any bodily pain, it couldn't erase the wounds in her heart. That was a defect in her eyes.

“It hurts...”

No one heard her cries in the darkness.

It hurts. I can't take it anymore. I want to die. But I don't want to, either. Is there anyone else in the world who knows my pain?

“Do not repeat Millicent Bluenight's mistakes.”

Sakuna reflected on her. What could that blue girl be doing now? She'd been excellent at her work and was a candidate for becoming the next Luna, but she'd lost everything after acting on her personal vendetta. Or perhaps... She'd succeeded in freeing herself.

“Millicent...”

She didn't know the girl very well. The two often got compared because they were both vampires, but besides the fact Millicent didn't have Core Implosion, she was far superior to Sakuna in every way. Back then, Sakuna hadn't given much thought to Millicent, beyond being impressed with her skills.

But now, she couldn't take her mind off her.

She wanted to meet her.



Millicent Bluenight had been officially incarcerated in the outskirts of the Empire.

Sakuna took a bath, changed into a Commander T-shirt, went to the dining hall for dinner, then dropped by the prison to see her, but the guard told her she wasn't there.

Had they executed her? She hadn't heard that.

"I guess there's no point in meeting her anyway."

Sakuna resigned herself and turned around.

Mulnite was the empire that never slept. Even after sunset, the streets were always full of vampires. As she walked through the streets, some people pointed to her and said, "Isn't that Lady Memoir, the Crimson Lord?" *What a drag being famous is*, she thought, as she hurried back home.

She'd given up on reaching out to Millicent. And besides, she didn't know what they would talk about even if they could.

Shrinking from the stares of the passersby, Sakuna kept on walking until a placard grabbed her eyes.

BLUENIGHT, it read.

Just then, she recalled that this was where most nobles of the Empire lived. It wouldn't be strange to find the Bluenight home here. Although it was odd that the house was still standing despite the family having been exiled.

Sakuna tried peeking through to the other side of the gate.

The yard, which must have been quite luxurious in the past, was now anything but. The weeds were overgrown, and there was no sign of vampiric life; stagnant mana choked the air. The abandoned building beyond the lawn had an eerie aura about it, like a haunted mansion.

"..."

Almost unconsciously, Sakuna took a step inside the abandoned grounds, egged on by

curiosity over Millicent and a slight sense of adventure.

She crossed the ruined front yard and stood before the door to the mansion. It wasn't locked. She pushed it open, and the subsequent creak gave her goose bumps.

It was dark inside. The only source of light was the moonlight shimmering through the broken windows. Dust caked the floor, and old cobwebs clung to every corner of the walls and ceiling. The spitting image of a haunted site.

Her brain was screaming that there was no point in exploring this place, but her feet wouldn't stop. Relying on the white magic glow she lit at her fingertip, Sakuna ascended the stairs and headed down the hallway.

Was Millicent happy to be out of Inverse Moon? Sakuna didn't know, but it was likely that girl hadn't felt any grievances relating to her membership, unlike her. Perhaps she regretted her mistakes.

The next instant, Sakuna felt someone move behind her. She turned around and found only a painting of a noble lady beyond the darkness. Nothing suspicious. Perhaps it was her imagination. She got chills but decided to press onward.

That was when she noticed a light coming from a room farther down the hall. Despite the fact no one should have been living here.

Sakuna approached cautiously. Maybe it was a burglar. If that was the case, she wouldn't want to get robbed... How unbecoming of a supreme commander and Crimson Lord. Still, curiosity won out, and she moved closer to the room.

The door was half-open. She took a peek inside.

Someone was clearly living in here. There was no dust. The room was furnished with shelves, a bed, a kitchen, pantry, and what looked like a bath in the back. Houseplants and flower arrangements adorned the walls, giving it a tidy appearance.

It was like a different world beyond the door.

Sakuna couldn't turn back now. She slowly, carefully slid into the chamber, then noticed the table at its center. On top of it was a knife that she recognized.

...Huh? That's Millicent's...

“What are you doing here, Sakuna Memoir?”

“AAAH!!”

She flew back in shock, hit her head on a corner of the table, and saw stars. She’d even bitten her tongue. Body aching all over, she squirmed on the floor.

When Sakuna felt someone standing right beside her, she looked up in fear. There, she found that blue-haired girl. Millicent Bluenight. *How? Why?*

“Wh-what are you...?”

“Did Inverse Moon send you to kill me? You’re being too clumsy for it, if that’s the case.”

“I-it’s not. I’m not here for that...”

“Figures. They aren’t stupid enough to appoint you as an assassin.”

Oh, they are. They very much are... Sakuna stopped herself from saying that out loud.

“Why are you here? Aren’t you supposed to be in prison?”

“I was. But not anymore. How about you stand up now?”

Millicent reached out to her. Sakuna stared at her slender hand, then at her face, then back at her hand, before grabbing it. It was warm—proof that she wasn’t a ghost.

The girl brought a hand to her chin for a second before she spoke again.

“Want some tea, Sakuna Memoir?”

“...You know me?”

“Obviously. Talented people always draw attention.” She smiled. “Sit down. You wanna talk, don’t you?”

And so, Sakuna ended up having tea with her disappeared colleague.

Millicent poured her black tea from a silver teapot. It smelled good. Her every

movement reminded Sakuna that she was true nobility.

As Sakuna silently sipped her tea, Millicent suddenly spoke up.

“How’s Inverse Moon? Have they said anything about me?”

Sakuna nearly dropped her teacup.

“N-no. Rather... I haven’t really seen anyone since...”

“Oh. Well, a few assassins have come for me already. I guess they’re trying to silence me before I leak something. I killed them all right back, though.”

That was the truly awful part about Inverse Moon—their first impulse had been to do away with their captured comrade instead of saving her.

That aside, Sakuna had something to ask her.

“...Why are you here?”

“A lot happened.”

“But...”

“I didn’t break out. I got permission to leave. And I’m staying here for a while.”

“Then you should try cleaning...”

“Oh? Yes, I plan on doing that.” She glared threateningly at Sakuna, like *you’re not the boss of me!*

Millicent sighed.

“I know, I know. It’s pathetic how I can’t move on. I hate it, too. They told me I could go anywhere in the capital... and yet here I am.”

“Um, would you mind telling me *why* they’re letting you do that?”

“Like I said, a lot happened.”

“What does *a lot* entail, exactly?”

“Wanna die?”

Sakuna reflexively straightened her back, chills going down her spine.

Still, she really wanted to know what had happened to Millicent. Maybe she'd actually broken out? Or bribed the guards? As she considered the possibilities, Millicent shot another frightening glare at her. Sakuna gave up. Not that it had much to do with her in the first place anyway.



Then, Millicent glanced at her and said:

“So I hear you’re a Crimson Lord now?”

“Yes... By mere chance, however.”

“Inverse Moon didn’t order you to do that?”

“No. I had different orders...”

Sakuna then told Millicent everything: That she was killing government officials to find Mulnite’s Dark Core, that she was ordered to kill the Crimson Lords... And that she’d have to fight Terakomari Gandesblood.

Millicent’s expression changed a little the moment she brought up Terakomari.

“So I need to find the Dark Core... Where do you think it might be?”

“Ask the Empress.”

“I don’t think she would tell me...”

“True.” Millicent recrossed her legs. “Everyone in Inverse Moon is searching for it like crazy, but they’ve got nothing to show for it. I don’t think you’d be able to find it, either. That said... I think it’ll end up being closer than you expect.”

“But if I don’t find it, then...”

“...You don’t like this job at all, though, do you?”

“How do you know?”

“It’s written all over your face. You want out, I can tell as much.”

Millicent grinned. Sakuna was surprised to see her smile for the first time.

“Let me guess... You’ve been searching for me since I got out of Inverse Moon, and you’re looking for clues on how to do the same.”

“Yes... You, um...”

Sakuna didn't know what to say. Initially, she'd thought they were both in similar circumstances, but now that she reflected on it, their positions couldn't be any more different. Sakuna couldn't leave Inverse Moon no matter how much she wanted to. Meanwhile, Millicent had once had a solid future ahead in the organization but was forced to leave after an unfortunate incident (though whether it truly was unfortunate or not remained to be seen).

Millicent clicked her tongue.

"Get to the point. I don't like dillydallying."

"Eep... I-I'm sorry... Okay, um... Ms. Millicent, how can I leave Inverse Moon?"

"Just do it."

"But... how?"

"Ah?"

Millicent glared at her. Sakuna was too scared to say anything back.

"Fine. There are many ways to go about it. You could fake your death, for example. Or you could make a catastrophic blunder to get yourself exiled, like me... Oh, but they have your family hostage, don't they?"

Sakuna nodded.

"Yeah..." Millicent grimaced. "My old mentor once told me, 'Love what you want to love, and kill what you want to kill.' Pretty wise words, I think, but you need great power if you want to live by that creed. Otherwise, nothing will go the way you want."

"I think so, too... And I'm weak."

"The weak thing about you is your spirit."

Sakuna lifted her head in shock.

"Though I don't have any right to call you out on that." Millicent sighed. "But you are lacking in courage."

“...I know.”

“I don’t mean the courage to stand up against adversity. I mean the courage to use any means at your disposal.”

Sakuna didn’t see what Millicent was getting at.

“There are lots of other ways you could solve this. Like, say... You’re friends with Terakomari, right? Why don’t you ask her for help?”

“N-no! I can’t drag her into this.”

“Stupid. She’s already at the dead center of this whole thing. It’s too late for you to be saying that.”

“But...”

“Besides, she has the power to destroy Inverse Moon with just her pinky finger... As much as it pains me to admit.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“Me neither, honestly.” Millicent’s tone was hateful. Her hand trembled as she clutched her teacup. “But the most unbelievable part of it all is that Terakomari isn’t aware of her power. She thinks she’s helpless. And yet, she stood up against me... I think those kinds of people, the people with a strong spirit, are the ones who get what they want.”

“...Um, do you... not dislike Ms. Terakomari?”

“I hate her so much, I want to kill her.”

Millicent glared at her, and Sakuna was *way* too scared to say anything back.

“I also loathe the guys who put her on a pedestal... And what’s with that stupid-as-shit T-shirt, Sakuna Memoir? Are you trying to make fun of me?”

Sakuna glanced down at herself. Commander Komarin’s half-smiling face covered her chest.

But even Sakuna the scaredy-cat wouldn’t take her dissing Komarin.

“I—I am not! This shirt is wonderful. I have ten of the same. Do you want one?”

“NO.” Millicent was serious. “For the love of... Has everyone in the Empire lost their minds? They only know Terakomari’s exterior. And that includes you, too.”

“Ms. Terakomari is a very kind person on the inside...”

“Hah. She’s not just kind, I tell you.”

Sakuna stared at her, surprised.

Millicent cleared her throat in a panic.

“My goal is to slay Terakomari and restore House Bluenight’s honor. My family was full of good-for-nothings... And I don’t know where they might be, or even if they’re still alive... But they’re still my family. I have to take her down to get back at the Gandesbloods.”

“You won’t go back to Inverse Moon?”

“...”

Millicent sipped at her tea, as if to trying to gloss over her slip of the tongue.

“Enough about me. As I said, if you want help, then get it. Talk it over with Terakomari, and you’ll see she’ll put that cheeky sense of justice in motion. I doubt you have any other options.”

“I... don’t think I have any in the first place.”

“I’ve been talking all about it this whole time! Why must you be so pessimistic? Are you just too dumb to be positive? And even if that were true, you’d just have to make yourself a new option. I’m telling you, the ones with the will to do so always win in the end.”

“Does it really work like that...?”

“Yes, it does.”

Millicent only ever talked in terms of the “never-give-up” grindset.

She really seemed to live in a different world from Sakuna. “Making your own options” was something only someone with great talent could suggest. That was Millicent, not Sakuna.

I have to find my own way to save my family.

They chatted for a while longer after that. Ultimately, Millicent didn’t tell her how she got to stay in the mansion, but she did say she would be hiding there for a while to prepare for her next move—killing Terakomari. She wasn’t specific on what exactly she’d be doing, save for “training.”

“I have other things to take care of, though, such as gathering intel. I’m reading all sorts of books.”

“O-okay... Why?”

“To improve myself. I’m getting knowledge from all over the world, all throughout history. Wisdom is strength.”

Sakuna glanced at the bookshelf and found an array of literary magazines for girls. Sakuna followed them, too. Millicent even had the latest release, which had just come out the day before. That meant she was going out downtown frequently. Could a prisoner really do that? And wait, how were literary magazines for girls supposed to build strength?

Oh well, she thought dismissively. Millicent was also a young woman. Then Sakuna noticed that Millicent had animal plushies on her bed—her interests were surprisingly girly. Sakuna decided to pretend she hadn’t noticed anything.

After attentively observing the room some more, she grasped why Millicent had been given this much freedom.

On the bed was an envelope. It looked luxurious and was sealed with the Empire’s coat of arms—it was a letter from the Empress.

But Sakuna didn’t give it any more thought. There was no need. The only thing on her mind was the fear of the pain and suffering that awaited her.

"Thank you for today," she told the other girl before getting up to leave.

Millicent said something strange as Sakuna departed.

"If worse comes to worst, get Terakomari to drink your blood. Then she'll protect you with her life."

Sakuna didn't get what she meant.

Millicent seemed softer around the edges than when Sakuna had last seen her. She looked calm—she looked as if she had found a decent way of living.

Still, she was completely different from Sakuna. Using her as a point of reference was meaningless.

If Sakuna wanted to be saved, she'd have to take matters into her own hands. Resigning herself to that fate, she left the Bluenight mansion.

Vexations

3.5 Before the Match

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

The Dark Core Zone—the location where the effects of all six Dark Cores overlapped.

One fourth of this area belonged to the Mulnite Empire, but what was special about it was that the zone provided all species with infinite mana and vitality while they were inside it. This allowed the culturally diverse cities within its border to flourish.

And on this day, July 1, the fervor around the fortress city of Faure, in the Metrio region, was extraordinary. The early summer wind blew through the Main Street, unusually full of people of all species.

It was the day of the Crimson Match.

The old battlefield at the outskirts of Faure was set to be the stage for the commanders' show. In the central plaza stood a giant "window" (really a farsight spell called *Clairvoyance Mirror*), prepared by the Imperial Army's PR department that displayed the battlefield in real time. Everyone was gathered there, waiting with bated breath for the spectacle to begin. Some were already drinking this early in the morning, some were placing bets on the winner, some were here from other armies to gauge Mulnite's power. It was a full-on festival.

Two girls were darting through the crowd. One was a Sapphire, with a gigantic camera hanging from her neck. The other had cat ears and was running as hard as she could to keep up with the former.

"W-wait for me, Ms. Melkaaa! Why are you in such a hurryyy?!" cried the cat-eared girl.

The silver-haired journalist, Melka Tiano, couldn't conceal her anger as she screamed in response.

“It’s all your fault for not getting up earlier! You don’t take your job at Six Nations News seriously enough! No journalist—*nay*, working adult—should have the gall to sleep in like that!”

“I-I’m sorry... I’ll go to bed earlier next time...”

“You have to *wake up* early! Who cares about the time you go to sleep at?! And you better have the place right!”

“I’m sure of it! I can smell it, that dense mana... Vampire mana! It’s over there!”

The cat-eared girl, Thio, wheezed as she kept on sprinting. She was a newbie at Six Nations News who’d just joined that spring. Though her magic that let her identify other people’s smells made her perfect for locating interviewees, she was terrible at everything else. Melka called her “the sniffing scaredy-cat.” The poor eighteen-year-old was already contemplating leaving the company due to all the psychological torment she’d endured.

Suddenly, Thio got the urge to use the bathroom. She had been roused out of bed in a hurry and hadn’t yet had the chance to go today.

“Ms. Melka... May I...”

“*Pfffft...* Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Just you wait, Terakomari Gandesblood! I’ll get that first interview and write things you couldn’t come up with in your wildest dreams!”

Is there a point to the interview, then? Thio thought.

They had been sent there to speak with *all* Seven Crimson Lords, by the way.

According to a journalist from Six Nations News appointed to the capital, the Imperial Army had undergone mass teleportation early that morning. Their destination was the Dark Core Zone, obviously, but the news team didn’t know exactly where. Hence why they’d brought Thio along, to locate the militia with her sniffing magic.

But the cat-eared girl didn’t care about that. She just wanted to relieve herself.

“The Mulnite Empire’s always surprising us! I was shocked when I found out about the Crimson Match! Look at the excitement all over this city, Thio! The masses love their bloodshed!”

"D-do they? Um... Anyway, may I go to the rest...?"

"And what they desire is a superstar with power to overwhelm any foe! A genius such as Terakomari Gandesblood! The world goes crazy when we talk her up! They go absolutely insane, I tell you! It's so, so sweet! My reports are shaping history! My pen will mold the world! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Take it down a notch, geez, Thio thought.

Melka might've been riding on the high of her all-nighter. She'd been on the watch for the Imperial Army's teleportation the entire night while Thio was sleeping soundly. The cat-eared girl would never.

Setting that aside, her bladder was at its limit, and all the running only made matters worse. *Crap, crap, crap...* Then, Thio had a great idea.

She just had to go!

"M-Ms. Melka!"

"What is it?!"

"It's not there! Over here!" Thio pointed in the direction of the nearest restroom.

A true failure of a journalist, through and through.

"Good work, Thio! Let's go!"

"Yes!"

Thio nodded, a serious expression on her face. The only thing on her mind was pee.

She ran like the wind, making her way through the crowds. "Where do we go now, Thio?!" Melka asked, irritated, but her partner did not respond. Instead, she charged right toward the bathroom.

Melka caught up to her and clicked her tongue.

"Hey! No way the Crimson Lords are here, c'mon!"

The place was surprisingly empty. What luck. Now Thio just had to answer the call of nature, then claim that her nose had been stuffy due to a slight cold or whatever afterward. She'd get chewed out, for sure, but that didn't matter in the face of relief.

As Thio ignored her boss and tried to enter a stall, she suddenly caught a whiff of someone. Someone who smelled of a mix between vampire and Sapphire. She immediately chose to ignore it—not like she cared—but then a girl came out of a stall farther in.

Thio recognized the girl. Melka had impressed upon the newbie journalist to “at least learn the names and faces of the Crimson Lords” and given her a list with their headshots on it. That’s where Thio knew the face from, but she couldn’t remember her name. It started with S...

“Commander Sakuna Memoir!” Melka screamed in joy from behind her.

Oh yeah. That was her name. Sakuna was two years younger than her, if Thio recalled correctly.

“What a coincidence! I’m Melka Tiano, from Six Nations News! What are you doing in here? Oh, not that I’m trying to pry into your private life or anything! Could you spare some time to chat? I would love to get an interview!”

Melka approached Sakuna Memoir assertively. The latter took a few steps behind in reaction.

“...You’re a journalist?”

“Yes, I am! If I may ask, what are your expectations for today?!”

“I, uh, I’ll do my best...”

“Your best! Nice! Very nice! Yeah, and you should, otherwise they’ll revoke your title as Crimson Lord! For my next question...”

Melka then glanced at Thio and flashed her a look that said, *Make sure Sakuna doesn’t have a way out*. Thio didn’t have the time for that, though. Ignoring her boss’s orders, she opened the stall. Just then, Melka shouted in surprise.

“Oh, my! What is that bottle?”

“Eek!”

“Hmm? Can I infer from your reaction that... you’re doping? Oh, no, no, no, don’t get me wrong, I’m not suspecting you or anything! Just that it grabbed my attention just a little teeny, tiny bi—”

Melka cut off abruptly.

Hand still on the door, Thio turned around nonchalantly. And she couldn’t believe what she saw.

“...Wha?”

Sakuna Memoir had plunged her right arm through her boss’s midsection.

Blood was dripping. Sakuna had pierced straight through Melka’s torso, and her slender fingertips were poking out from the woman’s back.

The Crimson Lord pulled her arm out with a squelch.

“Nasty memories.”

Thio had no idea what the girl meant by that. She only knew three things: that Melka had been killed and was now lying on the restroom’s dirty floor, that Sakuna Memoir’s eyes were flashing scarlet as she licked the blood on her fingers, and that she, too, would lose her life in the same way as her boss.

“Eek!”

Thio fell on her butt. Her legs had given out.

Sakuna Memoir trudged sluggishly, like a zombie, toward her.

“Did you see?”

No. I didn’t see anything... Thio tried to squeak out that answer, but her mouth refused to obey.

She then felt something warm. The fear and despair had caused a puddle to form around her. How utterly humiliating, pissing herself at eighteen years old.

Sakuna Memoir brought her red arm close.

Thio couldn't move. She couldn't say anything. She was overcome with fear. She regretted ever becoming a journalist.

Then, before death, she fainted.

In the end, both journalists drew their last breaths before getting to interview any Crimson Lords.

※

"I killed again..."

Sakuna sighed as she washed her red-dyed arm. She'd had no choice. It had to be done. Cornelius's Elixir was top secret. *Sakuna* would get killed if anyone else discovered it. Not only her, but her family, too.

She had tried to drink it in the restroom. But she hadn't been able to go through with it. It could kill her. Even with her family's lives on the line, she didn't have the courage to take a step off the cliff.

But she couldn't keep this up.

She had to win the Crimson Match, or Inverse Moon would kill her family. She wouldn't ever get them back if she didn't do it.

Her father was living in the Imperial Capital. He didn't know Sakuna was a terrorist. He didn't even know he was being held hostage. But they would take him out if she lost here.

Inverse Moon had imprisoned her mother. She hadn't seen her in a long while and could only hope she was fine.

As for her sister... They'd killed her with a Divine Instrument. All because Sakuna had whined a little while back. She didn't want a repetition of that.

"...I cannot lose."

Sakuna clenched her fist to try to encourage herself.

Then she felt a mana reaction on her Correspondence Crystal. She didn't even need to check who it was. The timing couldn't have been worse, but she had to answer.

"...Yes?"

"We have an unexpected situation. Petrose Calamaria isn't showing herself."

So what? Sakuna thought, but she couldn't say that out loud.

The man started ranting.

"That wench... The Crimson Match is going to waste! Our entire plan is going to pieces! Now we only have Flöte Mascarail and Terakomari Gandesblood! Kill them!"

"Yes, I understand."

"I've said this a thousand times, but remember that you cannot fail. Your family won't survive if you do! Also, it seems the Crimson Match will be broadcast to all six nations with farsight magic, so don't be too obvious about what we're up to. No one can know we're members of Inverse Moon! Got it?!"

He hung up abruptly.

Sakuna glanced down to the bottle of poison.

She couldn't keep on hesitating anymore. She had to drink it, no matter how scary it was. She couldn't have her family killed again.

Sakuna placed her hand on the cap... But couldn't bring herself to open it. Even now, she couldn't muster the courage to do it. Pathetic. She wanted to drop dead on the spot.

"What should I do...?"

Sakuna sat down, feeling lost in the middle of that bloody restroom.

The Crimson Match was about to begin.

I woke up in the Dark Core Zone.

At first, I thought it was a dream. But it wasn't. The sicko maid had teleported me there while I was sleeping. What was she thinking?! I screamed my lungs out at her, but she didn't care. She'd changed me into my military uniform while I'd been chewing her out, and now I was standing on the battlefield.

"At least let me prepare myself mentally!!" I cried from the bottom of my heart.

The Metrio Battlefield. This one wasn't the usual meadow where we clashed with the chimpanzee, but the ruins of some ancient kingdom's capital. At the center of it all was an old castle, classic in design. We members of the Seventh Unit set up our base at a fountain plaza to the south of the structure.

As you might have already guessed, I had no will to fight.

But this match between Crimson Lords was no regular war—it was a "show," "entertainment." (Yeah, sure. LMAO.) I had no idea what would happen. Flöte Mascarail was dead set on killing me, though, so I was sure she'd come running at me as soon as the gong rang.

I could hear death knocking at my door. A hundred times louder than during the Crimson Council, to boot.

They'd outfitted each of us with a metal wristband when we entered the battlefield. Apparently, this was a magical instrument that kept track of who we killed and who killed us. It felt like handcuffs. And this was my prison.

“I wanna go home, Vill.”

“You go home, you lose; you lose, you get fired; you get fired (literally), you die.”

“...”

I wanted to scream, but I was in front of my subordinates. Still... this was so not fair. I should've skipped town the night before. Not that I had anywhere to run, though!

“Haaah...” I sighed. Caostel did not let that go unnoticed.

“Oh my, Commander, are you feeling unwell? What’s the matter?”

“N-no, it’s nothing. I’m just bored. No one here’s got anything on me anyway!”

“Of course, Commander! I agree. And yet, the shameless woman hogging the supposed title of strongest Crimson Lord didn’t dare to show her face.”

“Really? She wasn’t at the Crimson Council, either, right?”

“That is true,” Vill answered. “I heard the Empress sent her to get rid of some terrorists. It appears she doesn’t have the time to participate in the Crimson Match.”

“Huh. Not that she’d be a worthy foe, anyhow!”

“Oooh!” Caostel exclaimed, impressed.

“Amazing!” “That’s our commander!” My subordinates started praising me like always. The normality just made me want to sigh harder... That’s when it hit me.

Wait, are these all of them? The rules say we can bring a hundred people, but there’s only like thirty guys here. And all of them are beat to hell.

“Hey, Vill, what’s with the rest of our dudes? They oversleeping?”

“They are not,” the sicko maid replied, her face expressionless. “The rules state only up to a hundred people can participate per unit, so we had to choose who would come. I gathered the entire Seventh Unit and told them, ‘Commander Gandesblood wants only the hundred strongest to participate. Come forward, you hundred.’”

"I don't remember saying that, but sure, makes sense. The most capable should be the ones to join in. So... What happened after that?"

"They all came forward."

"O-oh. Yeah, I can picture that happening..."

"Then they started killing each other."

"Why?!"

"They were trying to prove their strength in battle. And out of our 500 troops, 470 bit the dust."

"Could they be any dumber?!"

"The thirty survivors are here, though most of them are wounded."

"I guess they can!"

Why would they slit each other's throats before a battle?! And are there really only thirty dudes here?! Everyone else brought a hundred right?! We're dead meat!!

"Worry not, Lady Komari. All of them are here after overcoming that inferno, fighting among comrades. Look at their faces—they're men born anew."

"Who the hell cares!?"

It's over. I looked at all my subordinates. One of them was holding his wounded belly, crouching in pain. That's the face you're talking about? C'mon... Go rest. You don't have to go through all of this.

As far as the leaders went... Caostel, Bellius, and Mellaconcey all seemed fine, at least. *Wait... Where's Yohann? Did he die? Yeah, I guess that tracks.*

"Damn it. Damn it all... I'm so, so doomed..."

That's when it happened. The bell at the top of the castle gave a loud toll, signaling five minutes to the beginning of the match. I had only five minutes left to live.

I glanced up at the sky in despair.

“Commander, let’s go over the rules again,” Caostel said, his face like a criminal’s who had just received a suspended sentence. “As you may know, the objective of this competition is obtaining control of the Ruby. We cannot win by simply slaughtering our opponents. We must storm the castle.”

“Yeah, that huge one over there, right?”

“Yes, that one. According to the documentation, the Ruby is a crimson sphere the size of a soccer ball. We should be able to identify it at a glance.”

“Cool.”

“The other teams will probably charge to the castle right away, too. There will be just over five hundred enemies to rout on our way there.”

And you realize we’d be going up against them with just thirty guys?

“Wait. I already told you we’re joining hands with Sakuna... and Helldeus, right?”

“I beg your pardon, I forgot. Yes, you showed mercy to your junior... How generous! Still, this Crimson Match is a free-for-all. I believe we will have to fight Sakuna Memoir in the end.”

“Aw... Y-yeah, I know.”

“In any case, our main goal should be getting the Ruby, not killing. Commander, will we be employing the same strategy as always?”

“Yeah. Do that.” *No idea what that is.*

“As you wish!” Caostel then turned to my subordinates and shouted, “Commander Gandesblood will give us some words of encouragement! Clean your ears and listen up!”

The men gazed at me in anticipation. *You want me to give a speech like always, I know. I haven’t thought of anything, but whatever, I’ll just come up with something vaguely inspirational on the spot.* Then, just as I rose from my seat to begin...

"Hold on, Lady Komari."

...the sicko maid called out from behind me. "We have a comms request from Flöte Mascarail. I suggest you deal with that first."

She handed me a Correspondence Crystal. I doubted anything good would come out of this, but still I poured some mana into it (though I couldn't use magic, I did have enough for the minuscule amount this required). Her sassy voice echoed through immediately.

"Oh hello there, Ms. Terakomari Gandesblood! How are you doing on this fine day?"

Shit. It's on speaker mode. How do I turn this off, Vill? Everyone's listening.

"I will commend you for showing up, at least! Still, your life of lies ends today. History will remember Terakomari Gandesblood for the fraud she is!"

I heard shrill clinking. My subordinates were clutching their weapons tight, ready to rumble. Oh man, those faces. They looked like they'd just come back from hell.

"Oh my, my, my! Why are you not replying? Could it be that you're shaking in your boots? Too frightened to make a peep? Ah-ha-ha-ha! You could try rubbing your head on the ground and begging me for forgiveness; maybe then I'll consider giving you a peaceful death!"

I heard a bang. My troops had destroyed the fountain with their bare hands. Oh man, those faces. They were so red, they looked like they were about to explode.

"Can you not even manage that? Oh, right! Right! Weak, puny Ms. Gandesblood's ego is too big for that! Try and get me, then! Send your barbaric subordinates to me while you sit back on your throne! My elite unit will murder them all in the blink of an eye! Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

I hung up.

The echoes of her cackling lingered in the plaza. Fearfully, I turned to look at my troops. They were all quiet—the calm before the storm.

Then, the toll of the bell signaled the start of the match. Fireworks popped in the sky. Cries of war resounded all throughout the battlefield. The other teams seemed to be

in high spirits.

“Commander... Won’t we sortie?”

Caostel’s eyes were bloodshot. Everyone’s were, in fact.

Yup. This ain’t good. Still, I felt pressured to nod.

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

Then, uproar.

“““GET FLÖTE MASCARAIL’S HEAD!!”““”

They went berserk. All of them ran straight away from the castle—in the direction of Flöte’s Third Unit. *Yup, they forgot all about the Ruby.*

I was left behind in the fountain plaza. I didn’t even have the energy to get up from my chair.

“Don’t you think it’s a little weird they just launched a full-frontal assault and left their commander in the dust?”



“That cheeky gremlin hung up on me!!”

Flöte Mascarail hurled the Correspondence Crystal against the floor.

The Third Unit had set up camp in a destroyed section of the city, right on the opposite side of the castle from the Komari Unit. Each team’s placement was determined by chance, so at first she’d felt sorry about being so far away from Terakomari Gandesblood’s troop. Soon enough, however, she reconsidered, thinking it would be better to save the best for last. And so she had decided to give that saucy girl a call before the match instead.

And yet the girl had said nothing back. And then she’d just hung up all the sudden. Flöte was not about to tolerate such insolence.

Just then, the bell tolled to announce the start of the Crimson Match. The Imperial PR

Department's fireworks flew up to the sky and burst loudly.

"Lady Flöte, what will be our first move?" A vampire standing at her side asked. He was tall, with a jittery air about him. This was Bachelard, the Third Unit's subcommander and Flöte's confidant.

"There is only one thing to do! Slaughtering that cocky little bitch... is what I would take the most pleasure in, but let's keep calm and focus on the main objective. March toward the castle!"

Flöte pointed at the magnificent edifice in the distance.

The Crimson Match was traditionally all about Crimson Lords killing each other, but Flöte found that boring, lacking in charm. The duel shouldn't be a mere test of strength, but one of intellect and strategic sense as well. To make things more interesting, Flöte had decided that the main goal of this match would be keeping hold of the Ruby.

"I understand," Bachelard said. "But... What will we do about Terakomari Gandesblood, then?"

"I doubt she'll even care about the Ruby. The only thing on her mind's probably staying safe, nothing more."

"So you say she won't move from her camp?"

"In all likelihood. I don't think she'll sortie her troops, either. She would be in even more danger if she had no one to protect her."

"But then she would get no points and end up in last..."

"Indeed. She's cornered. She can't mobilize her unit to keep safe, but she can't win if she doesn't. And she'll be fired if she loses. Additionally... The entire match is being broadcast live. How will the public react if they see her refuse to engage? Oh, I can't wait to see the results."

"I see. So our focus will be..."

"On occupying the castle, to begin with. We'll repel any other Crimson Lords who draw near. Once we've obtained the Ruby, I will personally head to where Ms. Gandesblood

is holed up and make her beg for dear life. Finally, I will gracefully kill her as the whole world watches. A perfect plan, don't you think?"

"It could not be any better. Brilliant as always, Lady Flöte."

She smiled at Bachelard's praise.

Now with her subcommander's approval, it was time to mobilize her troops. She stood up to give them the order, when...

"Lady Mascarail! We have an urgent report!"

...a scout she'd sent out came back pale in the face.

Everyone in the Third Unit turned to him in surprise.

"What is it? Did Ms. Gandesblood desert the battle?"

"No, actually... There's only about thirty people in the Seventh Unit."

"What?"

"And they're heading straight for us! They don't even have the castle in their sights! They're coming at us like hungry demons!"

"...What?"



I heard explosions in the distance.

I didn't know whether that was another team, or if it was my unit going crazy.

Either way, I was doomed. I had no chance of winning.

"It's over... It's all over..."

"It's fine. Bucephalus and I will protect you."

Vill pointed at the white Mizuchi. My Bucephalus. My trusty steed... er, trusty dragon.

I usually didn't bring him to war, but this was a special occasion, and the more the merrier, right?

I stroked Bucephalus's jaw and he purred. *Yes, good boy.* I wanted to ride him all the way home... But Vill placed a hand on his white fur and said:

"Bucephalus, if you dare let Lady Komari die, I'll boil you for dinner, got it?"

"DON'T!"

How do you even come up with that! Is there not a shred of kindness in your heart?

"I'm kidding. But do take care not to let her die, okay?"

Vill then took a piece of paper from her pocket. I peered over to see what it was—a topographic map of the battlefield.

"We should reunite with the Sixth Unit first to avoid an early death."

"R-right! We gotta go meet up with Sakuna, fast!"

"Unfortunately, her unit and ours were set far apart. From here, we would have to go through Delphyne's army in the urban area to get to Lady Memoir's."

"Then let's meet up with Helldeu—"

"Hold on," Vill cut me off as she placed a hand on her right ear. After a while, she said, "Captain Mellaconcey just made a report on his recon. Helldeus's army was attacked by Odilon's on their way to the castle. You'd get dragged into the engagement and croak if you went that way."

"Then what should we do?"

"We have no choice but to meet up with the Sixth Unit. Thankfully, victory can only be achieved by obtaining the Ruby, not killing Crimson Lords. We should wait for Delphyne's army to move toward the castle and pass right behind the—"

Vill raised her head then, as if she had just noticed something. I didn't get to ask her what was wrong before she jumped up on a pillar and produced a pair of binoculars from who knows where.

“Vill! What happened?!”

“...Oh no.”

“What is it?!”

“Delphyne’s army is heading straight for us.”

“WHAT?!”

Why?! You should be going for the Ruby, not me!!

Vill put on a straight face.

“She wants to kill you. I can sense a thirst for revenge behind her mask.”

“Revenge? What did I do?”

“You don’t remember? They think you killed her.”

“Why?”

Those are false charges! I did nothing! It was you!

“We must take action, too.”

Vill landed back on the ground. For a second, I wondered how she’d managed to keep her skirt down, but who cared about that now?

“Let’s go, Lady Komari. You’ll die if we stay here.”

“Go where?! We have nowhere to run! How about we try and talk it out with Delphyne? We just have to tell her I didn’t poison her! She’ll understand!”

“I don’t think she will.”

Vill hopped onto Bucephalus in an arc that seemed to defy gravity. She grabbed the reins with her left hand and reached her right out to me, ordering me to get on with a stare.

There was no point in putting it off further. Resigning myself, I grabbed her hand to get up on Bucephalus.

She rode in the front. I sat behind her.

“Lady Komari, embrace me.”

“...”

“Hold me tight, is what I am saying.”

“...”

“Grab on or you will fall.”

As I hesitated to follow Vill’s obscene demands, I heard yells from behind.

“There she is! Terakomari Gandesblood!”

“Die!” “How dare you kill Lady Delphyne!” “You’re a disgrace to all Crimson Lords!”
“We won’t let you live any longer!” “Go to hell!”

A flame spell struck a nearby willow. The tree then burst into flames, and everything became crystal clear. This wasn’t the time to worry about obscenity. My life depended on it!

I carefully put my arms around Vill’s torso, and she trembled in response.

“L-Lady Komari... Not... There...”

“Stop it! Go on already, you raunchy maid!”

Bucephalus galloped, and I became one with the wind.



I have to win.

Sakuna Memoir was burning with determination. Not assertive determination to obtain glory at all costs. No, it was half-hearted, pessimistic determination, burning

from the fire Odilon Metal's threat had lit under her.

"Lady Sakuna, here's the report! The Heaven Unit and the Metal Unit are battling west of the castle. The Mascarail Unit and the Gandesblood Unit are also clashing north of the castle!"

"Ms. Terakomari is...?"

"No! Commander Gandesblood seems to be intent on facing the Delphyne Unit by herself, southeast of the castle! The troops fighting the Mascarail Unit are only her thirty subordinates!"

Sakuna gasped.

She would never dare do something as bold as separating from her troop to face off against two enemies at the same time. Terakomari Gandesblood really was no ordinary Crimson Lord.

What do I do now?

Sakuna's Sixth Unit was the only one unoccupied.

She wanted to go help Komari because they were allied... But she knew Inverse Moon wouldn't have it. Besides, she didn't believe she would be of much help to her.

After some hesitation, she decided to call the man. He picked up the Crystal right away. Sakuna asked for instructions, her voice trembling.

"Excuse me, what should I do?"

"Pipe down!"

His screaming made her wince. The man's voice was like a storm.

"I don't have the time for this! Think it through yourself! That sly bastard! What are you doing in there! This ain't the time to die! Stand up! Stand and chop his head off!"

He seemed busy. Sakuna hung up.

Her subordinates heard all that, and were confused with mouths agape.

"Excuse me... Who were you talking to? Heldeus Heaven? Or was that Odilon Metal? Aren't we supposed to be allied with Terakomari Gandesblood?"

"Yeah... But that's none of your business."

Sakuna's right eye shone scarlet, and all expression left her subordinates' faces immediately. They stood straight like wooden dolls and apologized in unison.

It was a bizarre sight. Everyone watching on the screens at Faure let out sounds of confusion in response.

Sakuna paid it no heed. The only thing on her mind was protecting her family.

Actually, there was one other thing...

She wanted to help Komari as much as she could manage.

"The one attacking Ms. Terakomari..."

...was Delphyne. But if she was facing her alone, she must've had some sort of plan, which meant Sakuna heading there would only get in her way.

So she decided to go for Flöte Mascarail.

She wasn't sure she'd be able to kill her. But she had to try.

Sakuna took a deep breath and ordered her blind soldiers:

"Your target is Flöte Mascarail. Capture her and bring her to me."



"Your target is Flöte Mascarail. Capture her and bring her to me."

At the Imperial Hall, in the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

A crystal ball was on the table in the center of the room, displaying the Dark Core Zone battle in real time on its surface.

The Mulnite Empress, Karen Helvetius, grinned as she bit into her madeleine.

"I knew it. There is a traitor in the Mulnite Imperial Army. Did you see, Armand? Sakuna Memoir just used Core Implosion."

"Yes, I saw that! We must capture her immediately!" Chancellor Armand Gandesblood yelled.

The Empress was having him watch the Crimson Match with her.

"Heh," the Empress snorted. "How, exactly? They're in the middle of combat."

"We simply have to suspend it. We can't let Sakuna Memoir do as she pleases anymore. She might hurt my Komari."

"No, not yet. We have to keep on watching for a while longer. We won't get ahold of the head honcho like this yet."

"Huh? What do you mean, Your Majesty?"

"Sakuna Memoir is but a pawn."

He didn't get it. Armand's head throbbed with a severe stress headache. He had been worked to death over the past few days. He'd started looking into the terrorist as soon as he revived, and then his beloved daughter got into a fight with Flöte Mascarail, which developed into a Crimson Council that had culminated in the present Crimson Match.

Sick with worry for his daughter's well-being and overwhelmed with finding the terrorist, Armand had been too mortified to sleep these past few days. But now one of these two problems had been solved—they'd just uncovered the terrorist's identity.

"That Core Implosion has some sort of mind-control effect. The Sixth Unit is being brainwashed. I doubt there's anyone else with a similar power—which means Sakuna Memoir is the one behind the serial murders!"

"Indeed."

Armand was befuddled at how easily the Empress accepted his assertion.

"Then why won't you act?!"

"We can't, not yet. And it's not my place to insert myself into this matter, anyway. Komari's there, after all."

"Do you... Plan on having her do something again?"

"I won't have her do anything. It's fate doing all the work."

Enough of the pedantries, you hag! Armand held back his words, for he knew he'd be beaten to a pulp if he articulated them.

"...Why did you appoint Sakuna Memoir as a Crimson Lord in the first place? I dug into her background, but she doesn't have any achievements to merit the title. She just so happened to kill her predecessor in an accident."

"I had six reasons."

"That many?"

"First: It was the first memorable mutiny in a while. Second: Helldeus endorsed her. Third: She's real pretty. Fourth: She seemed like she'd be good friends with Komari."

"What?"

"They have similar pastimes and personalities. They even have a similar history, so why wouldn't they get along? But sadly, Sakuna respects Komari so much, they ended up not quite having the equal standing one would expect between friends."

"B-but..."

"She needs peers her age. The same problem's there with Villhaze, too—the servant-master dynamic is too strong between them. I don't think there was a better candidate than Sakuna."

He couldn't argue with that. The Empress was right, and it was for Komari's sake. Still, he forced out an objection.

"Komari won't be friends with a terrorist."

"Oh, no, she will. And it's precisely because Sakuna is a terrorist. You see, my fifth reason is that the girl is a member of Inverse Moon. And for my sixth and last reason:

Because she has Core Implosion.”

“What?!”

He opened his eyes wide. The Empress explained it all nonchalantly.

“I conducted an investigation of my own. I knew she was from that terrorist organization and that she supposedly had Core Implosion. Then, the story about the Sixth Unit getting obsessed with her spread all throughout the palace. Regardless, it turned out Sakuna was behind the serial murders, just like you said. She also seemed to be snooping around for intel since before that.”

“Then why did you...?!”

“We’d obtain intel on Inverse Moon if we could get her on our side. Think about that.”

“I don’t think we could win over a member of Inverse Moon.”

“No. You see, Sakuna’s not working for them of her own volition. We have an opening.”

“Still, why appoint her as Crimson Lord?”

“I told you, it was for Komari’s sake. Were you even paying attention?” The Empress crossed her arms and stared at the ceiling. “We just have to get rid of a single obstacle to get Sakuna on our side. There’s no way an introverted girl like her would kill someone voluntarily... As I already said, there’s someone manipulating her behind the scenes. We need to find out who this is.”

His jaw was on the floor. The Empress acting without consulting anyone was Mulnite tradition at this point, but he really would appreciate it if she at least kept her chancellor in the loop.

“I don’t follow. Where could this ‘someone’ manipulating her be?”

“Right there on the battlefield.”

“Then... We have to let her be until the mastermind shows themselves?”

“Yes... Who do you think it might be?”

"The most suspicious would be Helldeus Heaven, wouldn't it? He runs the orphanage Sakuna Memoir stayed at, and he recommended her for Crimson Lord."

"Makes sense... Oh!" The Empress drew her face closer to the crystal ball, her eyes gleaming. "Look, Armand! Delphyne's attacking Komari!"

"What?!"

Armand peered into the crystal in a panic.

Villhaze and Komari were riding atop the Crimson Mizuchi, fleeing from Delphyne's army. Armand nearly fainted, but the Empress just grinned; she wasn't the slightest bit worried. He could not for the life of him understand what was so amusing about this.



Everyone in the Delphyne Unit was wearing creepy masks. An army of weirdos, and they were running like hungry predators toward us. A storm of arrows grazed my clothes before plunging into the ground. I could only shiver in fear as I clung to Vill for dear life.

"Vill... It's over... We're done for..."

"We're not. But it's true we won't be able to make our way through that army. Let's run to the opposite side and get dragged into the Helldeus and Odilon's battle. We'll lose Delphyne's forces there and go all the way to Flöte. The Seventh Unit's there, so surely Lady Memoir must be heading there, too."

Vill pulled the reins all of a sudden and changed course. The next moment, a huge explosion erupted right where Bucephalus had been standing. *This has to be a nightmare. Someone wake me up.*

"I can't anymore. I wanna go home. Let's just go to the castle for the Ruby! Then, we break it. That way no one can win, and the match will be over."

"Perhaps. But I believe we'd have to defeat other commanders on our way to the Ruby."

"Then let's run! Outside the battlefield!"

“Are you asking to get blown up?”

“DAMN IIIIT!!”

I wailed. I didn’t have the composure to keep up appearances. I’d forgotten all about the broadcast.

“I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna! Get me out of this job already! Why do I have to go through all this?! It’s not fair! I want to retire! Let’s run away and retire together, Vill!”

“That’s a fascinating proposition, but... Stop squirming around! Hey! Wait! Where are you touching me?!”

“How are you expecting me to stay still?!”

Just then, a mana reaction so huge even I could feel it loosed from behind us. I turned around reflexively and saw a vampire running at monstrous speed.

Face adorned with a foreign-looking mask. Uniform decorated with the full moon crest, symbolizing first rank.

Crimson Lord Delphyne.

She had to be stupid fast to catch up to Bucephalus on foot.

“Sh-she’s coming, Vill!”

“I know... But we can’t go any faster.”

We were nearing an urban area, and not a regular one, according to the map—the place was labeled a “labyrinthine city” on the map because of its streets. They’d constructed the area as complexly as possible for defensive purposes. That wasn’t exactly the best place for a mount to run at full speed.

“Let’s get off here. We’ll slip into the maze and flee,” Vill suggested.

“No way!” I shouted.

“I won’t let you!” Someone called out from behind us.

Delphyne's voice was much higher than I'd expected, but I had no time to lose to be shocked. I felt mana swelling up again, and then a giant wall appeared before Bucephalus. It was *Mud Wall*, a molding spell.

My steed screeched to a halt. The inertia threw me off his back like a ball, and Vill caught me right before I crashed into the barrier. She then landed softly.

I looked around. The wall covered all 180 degrees forward. We were cornered.

"We're in trouble."

A drop of sweat rolled down Vill's neck. She never looked anxious, which meant we truly were in deep shit.

Hesitantly, I glanced over to Delphyne. Her army of a hundred was approaching from behind her, and they were dead set on preventing us from moving forward. The woman herself was standing right before us, staring right straight at me (I think? She was wearing a mask, it was hard to tell).

"Gandesblood... Did you kill me?"

Seriously, her voice was way too high. But there was no time to dwell on that!

"I-it wasn't me! It was..." I stumbled. "It wasn't me! I think it was just intoxication or something! Maybe you ate a moldy potato!"

"I did not."

"Don't lie!"

"Right back at you."

"I'm not lying!" (That was a lie.)

"You reek of falsehood. And it's not just one or two fibs. Your entire life is a lie. I can see why Flöte hates you so much. Your history would make the century's greatest burglar flush. It's all lies. Lies. Lies, lies, lies, lies, lies, lies, lies, lies, lies, lies."

I thought she was supposed to be the taciturn type? She took a knife from her pocket and pointed it at me. I braced myself for an attack like Flöte's dark beam, but much to

my surprise, she stabbed her own left arm without hesitation.

“Let us begin paving the road to hell.”

I have enough forced labor as is!

Heedless of my wishes, Delphyne activated an incantation.

“Special-Grade Coagulation Spell: *Ultimate Deathstream*.”

The blood spurting from her arm rose up to the sky to form a rippling river of red above her head. The thick smell of blood filled the air, and I immediately felt sick in the stomach. I seriously could not believe how vampires drank this crap by choice.

“Lady Komari, we have to run.”

“Huh? Wai—”

Vill grabbed me by the arm and bolted. Next, the river above Delphyne shot something at high speed, and it stabbed the wall right behind me. A blood-clot knife.

I was speechless. That thing could've killed me instantly.

Delphyne did not hold back. After seeing her attack just barely miss, she unleashed a storm of daggers.

“Brace yourself!” Vill exclaimed.

“How exactly?! What do you what me to—AAAAAHH!!”

Vill pulled me along, and we narrowly escaped the speeding knives. They gouged the spot where I'd been a moment earlier and burst before morphing back into blood and returning above Delphyne's head. *How eco-friendly. She didn't waste a single drop. Good for her.*

“Ow!”

I felt a searing pain. Aghast, I looked down at my right hand. A dagger had grazed my wrist. I was bleeding.

Tears flowed out my eyes.

"It hurts... Vill!"

"That sick masked prick... How dare you blemish Lady Komari's soft, smooth skin!"

Vill took off and threw a kunai, but a blood knife repelled it to the ground before it could reach Delphyne. She then countered with a rush of more knives, coming in from every direction. We had nowhere to run.

"Get down, Lady Komari!"

Vill stood before me, a kunai in each hand. *Stop it, you'll die!* I tried yelling, but before I opened my mouth, the storm of daggers flew at her. She nimbly parried them all at first, but there were too many—soon, her maid clothing was torn apart, then her skin below it. As I was about to scream in desperation, a knife finally plunged into her side.

Vill fell to her knees, extreme pain on her face.

She was bleeding.

No! Vill's gonna die because of me!

"Lady Komari... Run."

"I can't leave you behind! C'mon, I'll help you get u—"

"Don't worry. I won't kill you. I'll only capture you." Delphyne slowly approached, a vortex of blood loudly spinning above her head.

I wished she could have used a more graceful spell, at least.

The masked girl came right up to us.

"I hate both of you, but killing you is up to Flöte. The humiliation she went through is much greater than my hatred."

"Then..." I gritted my teeth, then scowled as hard as I could as I yelled, "My wrath is a hundred times greater than any of that! How dare you wound Vill like that?! Only throwing crap at us from afar! You dirty bastard!"

"Lady Komari, I understand your ire, but I don't think provoking her is the best course of action..."

I could feel the pain in Vill's voice. She was totally right, but my fury remained. *Delphyne's the one attacking us without mercy, why would we have to hold back? I'm not getting out this alive anyway, so I better put up a fight until the end!*

Contrary to my boost of courage, Delphyne sighed.

"I won't fall for any provocation. But I am offended at being called 'dirty.' My blood is boiling like it's about to explode. I'll show you a world of pain, you cocky little bitch. Just enough not to kill you."

You totally fell for my provocation!

A tremendous amount of mana flowed from the masked woman.

"Lady Komari... Get out of here, now!" Vill's face was pale.

I didn't move. Delphyne kept on pouring an immense amount of mana into the river of blood, and the ground below us started creaking. The red pond felt right out of hell, bent on absorbing the entire world.

Then she moved a finger.

"Die."

Immediately, a globe of blood—it was seriously so huge it felt like a star falling from the sky—hurtled straight for us.

So this is how it ends.

Just as I had given up on life, I felt someone approaching like the wind from behind. Vill's face lit up as she saw salvation arrive, and yelled:

"Bucephalus!"

"Huh...? Gegh!" I croaked as I got grabbed by the collar.

Vill threw me up in the air. Before I knew it, I was already on top of Bucephalus. The

Crimson Mizuchi didn't care for my confusion and galloped away.

"You sensed your master was in danger and came to help... What a good boy!"

"W-we're saved!"

I was moved to tears. I couldn't ask for a better mount. I patted his butt in gratitude, and he cried in a (bizarrely) excited manner and sped up. *Way up. Hold on. Are we breaking the sound barrier?!*

"L-look out! We'll crash against the wall!"

"Hold on tight, Lady Komari!"

"I won't let you escape, Gandesblood!"

The crimson globe was gaining ground. Wall in front, Delphyne at the back. Was this it? Just as I was starting to despair again, Bucephalus jumped abruptly. I clung to Vill for dear life as we were momentarily freed from the shackles of gravity. *Are we... Are we really jumping over the wall?!*

We weren't.

Bucephalus crashed face-first into it.

We hadn't even come close to the top.

The impact nearly made me puke, but then something incredible happened—Bucephalus broke right through the mud wall. *What? You can do that?!* I was still dumbfounded when he gracefully landed, wagged his tail as if to mock Delphyne, and then he took off again.

The orb of blood crashed into the wall moments later. The barrier crumbled with a boom, and the sudden downpour of its remains kicked up a dust storm. Something told me most of Delphyne's Unit succumbed in the aftermath.

"...A-are you okay, Bucephalus?"

"He's fine. A Crimson Mizuchi's scales can repel even steel swords... Eep!"

I didn't have the time to laugh at Vill's unusually girly shriek. Bucephalus jumped again, all the way up to the chimney of a house, then jumped from rooftop to rooftop toward the castle.

No point in entering the labyrinth now, huh?

"G-good boy, Bucephalus!"

"Indeed! Boiling him would be a waste now!"

"You're not doing that! Ever!"

Just then, a red blade whizzed right past my face.

I turned around, deep in despair.

It was the masked psycho again. She was running across rooftops just like Bucephalus. I went pale in the face and shrieked.

"WHAT is she?!"

"Beast against beast, I see. Lady Komari, look ahead!"

The urban area was about to end, and beyond that was a wide-open space. That must've been part of the city in the past, too, but the war had turned it into a grassy field. Past it was the west gate to the castle, where two armies were clashing.

"That's Helldeus Heaven and Odilon Metal. We need to get through them and storm into the castle."

"How, exactly?! We're giga-dead if we so much as take one step into that supernatural battle of the geeze—GLUGH!"

Bucephalus landed to the ground. Tears flew from my eyes as I felt a sharp pain in my mouth.

"Owww! I bid ma dongue! I'll ged an ulder!"

"I'll lick it to heal you later, so just bear with it for now! Let's go, Bucephalus! It's the home stretch!"

My steed neighed shrilly and galloped. Everything looked blurry from his sheer speed. Delphyne yelled “Wait!” “Die!” “You dirty liar!” as she followed us, sending out blood knives that grazed my hair. *Please, I just wanna go home.*

“Ohh!! Isn’t that Lady Gandesblood?!?”

Helldeus noticed our arrival. He beamed at me as he used his bare hands to turn an enemy soldier’s face into an exploding tomato. Everyone in the Second Unit (all of them dressed in similar religious-y attire) hollered at the sight of me. *Yeah... I’m bringing a new enemy to them, of course they’d be mad!*

“Gandesblood?! Men, go get her!!” Odilon yelled as he used his bare hands to turn an enemy soldier’s face into a bursting pomegranate.

“Kill her!” “Fifty points to Metal!” “Seize victory!”

The Fifth Unit came charging at us with bloodshot eyes. We were surrounded.

“It’s over, Vill... Let’s surrender...”

“Don’t fear, Lady Komari! Leave it all to me!”

Vill took a sphere out of her pocket. It was purple and small. She held it tight and then tossed it at Metal’s goons. Immediately, the sphere blew up, and a disgusting smoke spread around. Purple covered my entire field of vision.

“A smoke bomb?!” “Cheap trick!” “You won’t get us with tha... *Cough! Cough!*” Someone started choking, and soon enough I could hear hacking all around. It didn’t take much longer for these to turn into death rattles.

It was then that I realized Vill had used her specialty—poison magic.

“Wh-what are you doing?! We’ll die, too!”

“No, this gas kills only men.”

“How’s that possible?!”

It didn’t work on mounts, either, so Bucephalus kept on running as quick as always, stomping on... things... on his way through the curtain of smoke.

Absentmindedly, I turned around, and saw the gas was already clearing up. There were at least fifty corpses there. And not all of them were from Odilon's unit—some were wearing religious garb.

You overdid it, idiot!

"You killed our allies!!"

"It was a necessary sacrifice. Anyhow, focus on our objective: Find the Ruby and destroy it. That should put an end to the Crimson Match!"

"But..."

"Stop right there, Gandesblood!" "You're not getting away with this!" "I'm gonna kill you! I'll kill you right now!" "Heavens, bring down divine punishment unto Gandesblood!"

I felt a torrent of hostile glares on my back. They all belonged to the survivors. Even Helldeus's men were my enemies now (and I had no idea where Helldeus himself was). Beyond them was the masked psycho, who'd morphed into a pure mass of blood. Now I was doomed. For sure.

"Lady Komari! We can't use a mount beyond this point. We'll have to walk."

"What? Whoa!"

Suddenly, Vill held me in bridal carry and jumped off Bucephalus. Immediately, the enemy's magic crashed down and exploded near the castle gate. Vill didn't care, though, and kept on sprinting toward it like the wind. She entered the structure and kept on running without rest, all while carrying me in her arms.

Then it hit me. Vill was panting. Her face was twisted in agony. It should've been obvious—Delphyne had gouged her side not long ago.

"Vill! You have to rest already! I'll go on by myself!"

"No. I have a duty to stay by your side until the end."

The vampires bustled in through the broken entrance. Vill went up the stairs, still holding me in her arms. Blood was dripping from her side onto the floor, leaving a trail behind.

“Take this! Special-Grade Coagulation Spell: *Infinite Dripping!*”

Delphyne’s blood spurted out of her arm and transformed into a whip that lashed at us. Vill perceived the danger and leaped to evade the attacks, but she was just a moment too late. The whip wrapped around her right arm, and she fell midway through her next step. I was tossed aside and just barely managed to stand up. I ran to Vill. The red lash was squeezing her thin leg tight, with enough power to almost snap it right off.

“Kill her!” “Now’s our chance!” The enemy soldiers shouted.

I grabbed a rock laying near me and used it to hit Delphyne’s whip, but it was no use. It didn’t even scratch the thing.

“Damn it, what should I do?!”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan. You run away.”

“Don’t be stupid! Save your need for self-sacrifice! C’mon, let’s go—”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

I felt a dense bloodlust.

I spun around. Delphyne hurled a large sword of blood my way. Clumsy me had no way to dodge that huge red bolt.

Yup, I’m dead, I thought once again, when...

“Advanced-Level Magic Stone: *Supernova*.”

Vill produced a shining stone from her pocket and threw it.

The rock clashed with the blade and triggered a huge explosion, erasing Delphyne’s incantation. Her coagulated blood turned back to liquid in the blink of an eye.

“Th-this can’t be...”

The liquid had lost magic influence, but not its inertia, so it kept hurtling toward me.

I couldn't even get to my feet.

Frozen in place, I stared up as the copious amounts of fluid rained down on me.

My whole world was painted red.

☆(Let's go back a bit)

Meanwhile, Flöte Mascarail was smoldering at the Seventh Unit's surprise attack, vigorously brandishing her sword.

She could not believe it. Terakomari Gandesblood's barbaric subordinates were ignoring the rules of the Crimson Match and going after her instead of looking for the Ruby. And to top it all off, there were only thirty of them. Had they lost their minds? Was she really being sold so short?

She had to kill them right away, but...

"For crying out loud! Begone already!"

...they were tough. Way too tough.

Flöte slashed off one of the barbarian's—Caostel Conto's—arm. But he didn't flinch for a second. Instead, he immediately regained his balance and unleashed an underhanded, chantless Void spell.

"Teleportation."

"—?!"

She sensed a glare behind her, then swept sideways without looking. However, her blow didn't land, and she lost her balance from slicing at nothing a moment later. She felt a glare behind her again.

"Guh!"

A backfist strong enough to break steel pierced her midsection. Intense pain followed. That could have killed Flöte on the spot had she not defended herself with magic at the last moment.

Flöte leaped away, recovered her posture, and scowled at the stripped-tree man.

"That's a cheap trick. Perfect reflection of its user."

"Isn't it? I only use the best of Void spells. I've been polishing my technique in order to take revenge. And I won't lose this time... How about you use your own dark magic, too? Now *that* is what I'd call a perfect reflection of its user."

Flöte had no intention of falling for his provocation. She glanced around cautiously. The Seventh Unit's men roared back into the fray again and again; it was like the Third Unit was clashing with zombies. As much as she hated to admit it, Bachelard and the rest of her troops were having a hard time against Komari's forces, too. Holding back out of pure ego wasn't an option here.

"Very well. I wasn't planning on using this against you, but this is not the time to stay my hand."

"Very wise. It appears our allies have arrived, too."

"What...?"

She didn't get what he meant by that. The next instant, however, she felt a torrent of mana radiating from many individual sources behind her. Next, a rain of shining arrows—the mid-level spell: *Light Arrow*.

"Reinforcements? No way—" Flöte repelled the downpour of shots with her rapier, but many of her subordinates were caught off guard and could do nothing in the face of the surprise attack. They fell one after the other, their hearts pierced.

The incantation ended, and Flöte glared at the source of the mana with boiling hatred.

From the hill ahead appeared an army of vampires, away from the castle. Leading it was a timid-looking girl holding a huge staff—Sakuna Memoir.

"I-I'm sorry! But we are in the middle of the Crimson Match! So I have to attack you... And I'll do it again!"

The Sixth Unit started chanting. Flöte clicked her tongue. There was no rule stipulating Crimson Lords couldn't help each other—she'd screwed up. The alliance between both weaklings, Terakomari Gandesblood and Sakuna Memoir, had her fuming.

"Heh... Heh-heh... Fine. I'll annihilate the Sixth Unit as well, while we're at it."

"Oh, but it's *us* who will be doing the annihilation. It's high time you pay for what you did a few days ago." Caostel Conto curled up the corners of his mouth.

Flöte aimed her sword at him. At his heart. It would take one strike to end his life. She started forging dark mana, when...

""—?!"

...chills went down her spine.

And not only hers. Caostel, too, the vampires in the Sixth Unit, and the insane berserkers in the Seventh—all of them froze up and widened their eyes.

"What... is this...?"

That aura. That horrific mana. A violent deluge of absolute magical energy that instilled fear in the hearts of any and all living beings. Flöte felt her entire body tremble as she turned to behold the source—she turned toward the castle.

"The commander... Our commander's finally getting serious!" the stripped-tree man yelled in deep emotion.

Next thing Flöte knew, everyone in the Seventh Unit was cheering like crazy.
"Commander!" "Commander!"

It was obvious who they meant by that.

But... that couldn't be.

Flöte stood helpless, forgetting to even hold her sword tight.



Delphyne was at a loss for words.

She'd known what would happen when the maid threw that Magic Stone with her last breath. She'd known that item was of too high quality to find in stores, and that it could easily dispel her magic.

What she didn't understand, was Terakomari Gandesblood.

Right after Delphyne had showered her in blood, a tremendous amount of mana had somehow whipped up around the girl as she stood back up.

Komari was expressionless. She regarded Delphyne with eerie scarlet eyes.

"You... What did you do?"

Her voice was trembling. That amount of mana was beyond imagination. Delphyne instantly realized Komari was too strong for her to handle.

Terakomari looked down at the maid at her feet, who was now powerless, naturally—Delphyne's knife had hit her vitals.

"Did you do this?"

There was no emotion in her voice.

All the other vampires had caught up to them, but they were paralyzed, unable to move in the face of that abnormal mana.

"Did. You. Do. This?"

Komari's voice was lower now. It took a while for Delphyne to realize the question was aimed at her. By *this* she probably meant the maid's wound. She replied without thinking.

"Yes... And what of it?"

"Okay."

Terakomari carried the maid in her arms, then started levitating in the air. This flying spell was nothing out of the ordinary. Still, the vampires around her stood with their mouths agape as they saw the girl covered in blood slowly ascend to the stained glass in the ceiling.



Then she raised her right hand.

A magic circle materialized, but not a regular one. The amount and quality of mana accumulating within seemed not of this world. The air rumbled, the walls and floor started cracking, and the vampires started foaming at the mouth and fainting, unable to endure the pressure.

That was no advanced-level magic. Not even special-grade magic.

It was Effulgent Magic. An ancient, thought-lost level of spellcraft—the highest possible.

“Wai—”

Delphyne called out, but it was no use.

The mana exploded.

A red flash shot out from the magic circle and burned not only the entire castle, but also the city all across the battlefield, down to the tiniest grain of sand.



“HA-HA-HA-HA! Did you see that?! That’s *Dawn of Hell*, an Effulgent light spell! I was not expecting to see that in my lifetime!”

The Empress was clapping.

Armand Gandesblood, on the other hand, was all doom and gloom. His daughter had used Core Implosion again.

“Look, the crystal broke. The mana residue in the castle must be so incredible that it even blocked my farsight incantation!”

“What now?! Komari’s gonna...”

“Don’t worry,” the Empress reassured him with full confidence. “She won’t start slaughtering indiscriminately. She’s not a shut-in anymore.”

“But she slaughtered people the last time.”

"She cut down whom she had to. No problem. I think... Komari acts according to her normal desires when using Core Implosion. She was mad at Delphyne for hurting Villhaze, so she killed her. That was all that happened."

"The fallout was too great just for that."

"Yeah, I guess Delphyne will be traumatized by that. I'll have to check up on her later."

"...What will Komari do now?"

The Empress showed a slight grin.

"Who knows. She already accomplished her objective of killing Delphyne, so it remains to be seen. Go check on her if you're so worried."

"I wouldn't be anxious in the first place if it were as simple as that."

"Oh, you would, knowing you. Hey, someone bring me a new crystal," she told her court ladies.

Armand could only grip his fist tightly and pray.



It felt like the end of the world. An earthquake of cataclysmic proportions had shaken the entire battlefield.

A scarlet light covered everything, forcing everyone's eyes shut—they could only stay in place, curled up, waiting for the disaster to pass. The skies cracked, the earth rumbled, and cries rang out as people felt the impact of the shockwaves.

After a period of thundering and booming, silence finally returned.

Flöte Mascarail opened her eyes in fear.

The castle had been turned to rubble. The outer wall had been completely erased from existence, leaving the inside wide open. And not only that—the city and fields surrounding the castle were now an extensive wasteland. Chills ran down her spine. Who could possibly have done all this? With what sort of magic?

“L-Lady Flöte!” Bachelard screamed, the blood drained from his face.

Fortunately, he was unharmed, but her relief lasted only for a second, as she, too, went pale in the face once she heard his report.

“We’ve just confirmed that the Delphyne’s Fourth Unit, Heaven’s Second Unit, and Metal’s Fifth Unit have all been wiped out! Even Memoir’s Sixth Unit... Look.”

Bachelard pointed at a field of corpses, chopped up and scattered everywhere. They had been within the radius of the blast. Although the crucial Sakuna Memoir herself appeared to be missing.

In any case...

“What about Ms. Gandesblood? What happened to Terakomari Gandesblood?!”

“Ma’am, she’s... According to our recon, she is the one who caused the explosion. We don’t know where she is at the moment.”

What? What did you say?

She tried asking to someone who would understand.

“Caostel Conto! What is the meaning of this?!”

But the stripped-tree man gave no answer.

He had already expired, his groin crushed by the rubble.

Useless to the very end!

“Lady Flöte, what should we do now?”

“Ugh...”

This was no longer the time to be continuing the Crimson Match.

What could she possibly...?

“Wait... Is that...?”

Then she saw her. Standing at the center of the castle atop the debris. Terakomari Gandesblood.

Flöte couldn't just stand around. Gritting her teeth, she ran toward the girl.

It couldn't be possible that she had unleashed that magic herself. There must have been a trick to it all. Perhaps it could've been a regular explosion, since she hadn't sensed mana within it.

At any rate, she had to go talk to that chick.



Sakuna Memoir was alive.

As soon as the scarlet light assaulted the Sixth Unit, her subcommander, whose name she didn't know, had given his life to protect her. Fortunately, Sakuna fell between walls, and managed to make it out with only a few scratches. Her subcommander and the rest of her unit, however, had all turned to ashes in the blink of an eye.

Poor guys, she thought.

The Sixth Unit's soldiers had been against her at the beginning, understandably so. She'd attained the title of Crimson Lord through sheer luck and nepotism, so why would they receive her with open arms? Fearing mutiny would take place sooner rather than later, it was with immense regret that she decided to take preventative measures.

Sakuna killed everyone in the Sixth Unit and rewrote their memories.

She changed them from rebels against her, to obedient soldiers who believed she was always in the right.

And this was the ultimate outcome. They had thrown away their lives for her—against their true will.

“...But they were happy until the end.”

She had to believe that so as not to lose her mind.

Sakuna had set their minds on protecting her. There was nothing to worry about at this point. They were already different people.

What she did need to worry about was Terakomari Gandesblood. That flash must have been her doing. Quite frankly, she wasn't expecting her to be on this level. This monstrous. How was she even supposed to kill her?

"..."

Well. There was one way. The elixir Odilon had given her. She needed only drink that to obtain divine power. But she would have to give up her life in exchange.

Sakuna took the bottle from her pocket with trembling hands. Its nasty color made her sick just looking at it.

Would she? Would she really drink it?

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Flöte Mascarail running desperately toward the castle. This was no time to hesitate.

"I have to stop her... Ms. Terakomari's in danger..."

In danger? Her? What am I thinking?

Sakuna shook her head. She wasn't thinking straight.

First of all, it was stupid of her to worry over those two. What was better for her than allowing them to destroy each other? It was in her best interest to just wait for the moment to land the coup de grâce.

And yet... Why was she concerned with Komari's well-being?

Sakuna didn't understand her feelings. Thanks to her power, she'd always been good at telling how other people felt, but her own emotions always seemed vague, uncertain.

Should she help Terakomari? Or kill her?

Though she didn't have an answer yet, she still decided to head for the castle.

Suddenly, her Correspondence Crystal reacted.

“...Yes, it’s Sakuna here.”

“It’s time. Go kill Terakomari Gandesblood.”

Sakuna gulped. She’d been expecting this order.

“Run as wild as you want. Farsight magic’s blocked, thankfully. It must be the strange mana that filled the entire battlefield after the explosion. Go! Teach her to fear Inverse Moon! And remember, your family will survive only if you manage to end her life.”

He hung up.

She gritted her teeth.

In the end, Sakuna Memoir was but a tool for Inverse Moon.



I was standing on a mound of debris once I came to.

“...Huh?”

There was a gap in my memories. What had I been doing up until now?

I think I was... In the Crimson Match, yeah. Delphyne attacked me, and Vill and I were on the run, and then... Shoot, I couldn’t remember.

I glanced down at myself. My whole body was red, as though I’d bathed in blood. And it actually was blood! What in the world?! Did someone kill me? No, that couldn’t be... I wasn’t hurting.

Then, I saw a maid dress out of the corner of my eye. A girl was lying on the rubble. The sight dragged me back to reality.

“Vill!”

I ran over to Villhaze in a panic.

Then it came back to me. She had sacrificed herself to protect me. From what little I recalled, Delphyne had gouged her side with a blood knife.

I felt my hairs standing on end as I checked her body. The wound was deep, but it was no longer bleeding. Her breathing... Was normal. She was alive. I sighed in relief. Dark Core be damned, I didn't want to go through a loss like this.

I took a teleportation Magic Stone out from my pocket. I'd brought it with me for the worst-case scenario, but it wasn't me who should be escaping now.

I poured mana into it, and Vill's body disappeared from my side. I sent her to the infirmary in the Imperial Capital. She would be safer there than here on the battlefield, at least.

Then I started wondering about my own situation. Was I actually still on the battlefield?

I looked around in suspicion. The place was shockingly barren. In the distance, I could see traces of what the Metrio Battlefield was supposed to look like, but everything within about a hundred meters in my vicinity was empty.

“Am I... dreaming?”

Then, I heard the shattering of glass.

I'd stepped on some shards. I backed away in a panic. There was red glass all over the ground, and a half-sphere lay nearby. I deduced that thing had broken, the missing half reduced to the shards all around it.

...*Hmm? Wait... Is this...*

“...the Ruby?”

Just as I realized the shocking truth, I heard footsteps coming up behind me.

Crap. It felt like something was clenching my heart. I was sure to die out here if it was an enemy. *Please be a friend, please be a friend...* I prayed to the heavens as if I were Helldeus.

“Ms. Gandesblood. Lovely weather today, hmm?”

The wood ear mushroom-haired woman was glaring at me.

Shoot. It's over. I'm done for.

The “Great Crimson Lord,” the Black Flash, Flöte Mascarail entered the stage, her face in a twisted smile as though she had just found her nemesis, eager for revenge.

“The blast was marvelous, I will admit. What did you do, exactly? Correct me if I’m wrong, but that wasn’t magic, was it? Was it a bomb? Such cheap, dirty trickery. You’re a disgrace to all Crimson Lords.”

What’s she going on about?

“...Flöte, what happened to everyone else? Are you here alone?”

“What...? Yes. I’m here alone. You slaughtered everyone else... Including Lord Heaven, Lord Metal, and Ms. Memoir... and Delphyne!”

“I—I don’t get it! That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Stop fooling around! No, I did not forbid you from attacking by means other than magic! But you’ve taken things to an extreme! You’re ruining the Crimson Ma—”

Flöte then glanced at my feet. She noticed the scarlet shards on the ground. Her face turned redder and redder.

“That’s... That’s the Ruby! Did you wreck it?! Was this your plan, forcing the Crimson Match to an end?!”

“No, well, yeah, I did plan on doing that, but I didn’t do it!”

“Enough!!”

Her mana popped in a black flash. A dark haze drifted around her. She was furious.

“Why do you always make light of everything?! I put my all into preparing the stage for this Crimson Match and you... You threw it all to waste just because you wanted to save yourself! Have you not the slightest shred of dignity as one of the seven most powerful officers in the Empire?!”

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t me! It was already broken when I came to!”

“It’s no use arguing with you!”

The air trembled. She drew her sword, and a massive pool of darkness started forming at its tip. Literally a black hole. The dust in the vicinity started getting pulled in by its gravity. I tried to plant myself in place, but it was futile. I couldn’t keep standing. It was hopeless. I was getting sucked into the darkness.

“You are a cancer cell to the Empire. I won’t let you get away with it any longer. This is as far as you go. This is overkill for a fraud such as you, but I hope you enjoy it.”

“Why?! I don’t wanna get killed!”

“Then fight! Like the warrior you supposedly are! Special-Grade Dark Spell: *Darkness Armageddon!*”

“Hng!”

I shut my eyes and scrunched up like a turtle.

All hope was lost. The only fate for me was death. I was so deep in the trenches of despair that I couldn’t think of my famous last words (second edition). Instead, I simply gritted my teeth as I curled into myself and trembled, the way you do the day after you take exercising back up.

Oh, what a short life I had... As I was already giving up...

“Huh?”

...I noticed Flöte wasn’t going through with her attack.

Was it all a prank? No chance, right?

I looked up in suspicion and saw something I couldn’t have seen in my wildest dreams.

A fist was coming out of Flöte’s belly. Vivid scarlet blood was spurting out from the opening, dripping onto the rubble. Her dark mana was dissipating.

Flöte glanced down at the red, creepy arm sticking out her midsection with utter confusion.

“What... In... The...?”

Then, the arm snapped back.

Flöte’s body fell helplessly to the ground, like a marionette abandoned by its puppeteer. However, she was still breathing. With the last ounce of her strength, she turned to look up and confirm her killer’s identity. But at that same moment, a giant rock crushed her face.

“Gwagh!”

Elementary-Level Stone Spell: *Falling Rocks*.

I heard her bones getting smashed. She struggled for a while below the rock, but her movements grew slower as time elapsed, until she finally stopped.

“.....Wha?”

I was at a loss for words.

The Great Crimson Lord had been killed so easily, and in such a brutal way I could have never come up with myself. But that wasn’t the only thing to be shocked about.

I immediately recognized the person standing beside Flöte’s corpse.

She had white hair, white skin, and a face like an abandoned puppy’s... This was no dream nor illusion.

“Ms. Terakomari! I’m glad you’re unharmed...”

It was Sakuna Memoir.

Her right arm was dyed red in Flöte’s blood, but despite her disturbing appearance, she wore the same innocent smile on her face as always. She ran up to me.

Then, I noticed—her right eye was also dyed red. Just as Vill’s was when she’d used Core Implosion.

“I’m so, so glad... We’re finally reunited.”

She really looked relieved, but still, I felt something was off, so I took half a step back.

"I-I'm glad to see you're okay, too... But anyway, um... Were you always that strong?" I asked, glancing at her blood-soaked arm.

"I'm not, not at all. Ms. Flöte just had her guard down, that's why I could defeat her. It was just luck."

"Still, aren't you a mage? And yet you pierced her torso with your bare hand... I didn't know you could do that."

"Anyone can do that. Any normal vampire."

"O-oh, yeah."

"So all the other Crimson Lords are dead."

Now things were getting really freaky. There was something weird about her tone of voice.

Sakuna slowly walked toward me, then past me, glanced down to where Vill's body had been behind me, and then took a deep breath.

"Do you remember?" She asked, still facing away from me. "That question I asked you when we went stargazing."

"Ah... Yeah, something about terrorists and hostages, right?"

"Yes. And then you said, 'I would take down the terrorist.' I was in awe... And I was even more impressed when I saw this castle. You didn't say that in vain, or just to show off. You really are capable of it..."

"Sorry, Sakuna, but I have no idea what you mean..."

"Still, I can't do it. I can't defeat Inverse Moon on my own. No matter how hard I try, even if I work until I vomit blood, even if I stay obedient to the organization, even if I beg for forgiveness, they'll just use different means and different weapons to keep on murdering the ones I love. I can't do anything. I don't have the power. I don't have the courage. I don't want to get killed myself. So there's only one choice I can make..."

Sakuna's rant caught me off guard. Not only because of the power of her words, either—dense mana was radiating out from her. I didn't have the slightest inkling of what was going on.

"Hey, Sakuna..."

"Past, present, and forevermore, I've only had a single choice. I have to keep on exerting myself as another cog in the Inverse Moon machine, making sure they don't see me as defective and get rid of me, just to barely scrape by. I have to keep on putting in that effort, that's all."

"Sakuna! What are you talking about?!"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Terakomari. I was the terrorist all along."

She turned around.

Her hair fluttered in the summer wind.

Her red right eye was back to blue.

"Sakuna... Are you crying? Are you hurting somewhere?"

"Not in my body," she replied, laughing as tears poured from her eyes. "...You're so kind. You still worry about me, even now... Were you even paying attention? I'm a terrorist. I work for Inverse Moon."

"Stop joking around! If you're so upset that you're crying, then let's go home! I wanna go back, too!"

"I couldn't do that, even if I wanted to. I'd like to reveal the truth to you. It would be far too tragic, for the both of us, to kill you without letting you know first..."

Sakuna slowly raised her blood-drenched right arm.

She placed her thin, white index finger on my forehead.

"Mental Spell: *Mind Refrain*."

Then, my consciousness disappeared into the void.

Vexations

5 The Wheels of Asterism

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

It felt like getting thrown into the night sky.

I was floating. Countless stars twinkled all around me. They felt entirely within reach, but I froze once I noticed videos playing on the other end of each of their lights. There I saw Sakuna, back when she was little. She was sitting at the table with her family, happy as could be. It was then that I realized I was viewing her memories.

Mind Refrain. This spell was used quite frequently in novels for flashback scenes. You could use it to show someone else your memories... And it seemed I had been dragged into Sakuna's consciousness.

As I stared in amazement at her magic talent once again, I felt someone approach.

“This is my night sky, my constellation of memories. Welcome, Ms. Terakomari.”

It was Sakuna. But not regular Sakuna. Naked Sakuna.

“...Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?”

“You can’t bring foreign substances into the mental world.”

“Oh... Wait, so I’m naked, too?!”

I tried hiding my bits in a panic, but there was nowhere to hide.

Oh well, it was only Sakuna here anyway. I gave in. Not like the sicko maid was around. Acting ashamed would only make things more embarrassing. I just needed to be confident and there would be nothing weird about it!

"All of these stars are recollections of mine. It's a planetarium of my memories."

"W-wow. It's really pretty."

"No, it's not. Look... There's my first memory."

Sakuna pointed at one where she was talking with her sister. I couldn't hear them, but from their dazzling smiles, I guessed it was a fun and happy moment.

"My sister, Komari Memoir, was a really kind person. She always cared for me and helped out with my clumsiness; she would give me half of her eclairs and read me all sorts of books... And she would also comfort me when I cried about being left out at school."

The Komari in her memories had silver hair, just like Sakuna's. The most distinct thing that separated her from her little sister was that will of steel in her eyes. You could see in her face how much she cared about Sakuna. They must have been very close.

"Those days were peaceful... I had a loving family. As I told you in my letter, we always went stargazing on the hills outside the capital. We'd put up tents and spend the whole night staring up at the sky. My father was a priest, so he was well versed in star mythology. In the summer, he'd teach me all about the constellations to the accompaniment of hooting owls and insect calls. That's why I love stars so much."

She talked about everything in past tense, which gave me a very bad feeling. I couldn't say anything back. Then she sighed as a sour smile came to her face.

"But... Thinking back on it now, perhaps this was all but a dream. Ms. Terakomari... Do you know of the Wicked God Slayers?"

"What's that?" I'd never heard the words.

"*God* here refers to the Dark Core, since that is how it's treated in the modern world. The God Slayers would be Inverse Moon."

That I knew. That was the terrorist organization Millicent belonged to.

"They will do anything to destroy the Dark Core. That includes using Divine Instruments to slaughter peaceful families in order to achieve their goals."

Sakuna grabbed one of the stars. It was far darker than any other—a sign of the tragic memory contained within.

“My family was killed without notice. I came back home from school and found everyone mutilated in our dining room.”

I fearfully peered into the memory.

Then, I gasped.

I immediately wanted to cover my eyes. The whole room was dyed red. I could almost sense the smell just looking at it. Sakuna’s family was torn apart, mangled, maimed, disfigured, thrown all over like they were garbage. I looked away. I couldn’t bear seeing that anymore.

“B-but this... The Dark Core can heal them, right?”

“No. They used a Divine Instrument to kill them. Weapons that can nullify the effects of the Dark Core.”

The Sakuna inside the memory stared dumbfounded at the remains of her family. I, too, could do nothing but stare in shock.

“Wh-why would they do that? Those monsters...”

“This is Inverse Moon we’re talking about. They did that to get me into their organization and use me as a pawn. They deemed me worthy of employing.”

“Why...?”

“Because of my Core Implosion, the Wheels of Asterism. It allows me to manipulate the memories of those I kill.”

My mouth was agape.

Sakuna kept on stating shocking revelations with total calm.

“Somehow, Inverse Moon found out about my parents and plotted this to get me in. And now, I’m another cog in their machine. When I stood there, in shock, before my dead family, a man appeared out of nowhere and said...”

"What a tragedy. But if you join Inverse Moon and work hard for us, I could tell you a way to bring your family back."

"I was too young. I couldn't refuse. So, I made a contract with Inverse Moon... This is proof of it. It has no magical meaning, but this pattern has me bound to them."

She pointed at her belly with both hands.

On it were two emblems. One was the Mulnite coat of arms—the magical mark that showed she was a Crimson Lord. The other was a symbol of an incomplete moon. It looked like one of those magical contracts that frequently appeared in novels and such, where secret organizations brand their members to strengthen camaraderie.

"That's how I was forced to become a terrorist. My task is simple: Kill our enemies and scour their memories for intel. Nothing more."

Floating stars started gathering around me. They were all cloudy, dark.

Inside the memories, Sakuna was fighting with full concentration. Sometimes she'd slay her targets from the shadows; sometimes she'd face them head on.

Then I saw a particularly shocking memory. Sakuna was piercing my dad's torso with her bare hand.

So she was behind the serial murders of the government officials...

"The job may be simple, but it's not easy. I was never the brightest vampire, so I had a lot of trouble carrying out assassinations at first. Oftentimes, I would end up dead instead of my target."

Memories of Sakuna getting killed drew near to my face, and I shuddered.

I couldn't bear seeing any of this.

"Every time I failed, I would get a beating. Inverse Moon has no mercy, even for its allies. They struck me again and again and again..."

"S-stop! You don't have to talk about that anymore!"

"No, I want you to know. That's why I'm telling you." Sakuna frowned in pain. "I thought

about running away on more than a few occasions. I've even tried it before. But... That only got my family killed."

A dark memory drew near me. I didn't want to see it, so I closed my eyes.

"I can't put into words the sadness I felt that time. And then, I understood... I can't oppose Inverse Moon... Still, despite the fact they're aware I swore from the bottom of my heart that I would never go against them, they still insist on chaining me like this. They're saying if I fail this mission, they'll murder my family... My precious family. Again, and again... That every time I falter, they'll kill them. Again and again."

What she was saying made no sense. Wasn't her family already dead?

Nervously, I opened my eyes. Sakuna was clenching her hair and shaking. Her life story went beyond my wildest imagination, and anything I could say in an attempt to comfort her would probably end up falling flat. I also didn't have the guts to explode in anger against Inverse Moon here.

So I tried asking something nobody cared about.

"What does *this mission* entail?"

"Investigating the Dark Core." Her answer was surprisingly clear. "Only high-ranking government officials could know what it is, so I had to kill them to find out. I am the only one capable of such a feat."

"N-no way..."

"I'm sorry for lying to you. This is the truth. I'm the terrorist."

"But you were also one of the terrorist's victims."

"That was part of my camouflage. They told me to pierce my own stomach to throw suspicion off me... But there wasn't much point in it," she said, chuckling in self-derision. "Anyhow, my task is to slay the Crimson Lords. Highest priorities are Petrose Calamaria, Flöte Mascarail, and Terakomari Gandesblood, in that order. I already did Ms. Flöte in, and she knew nothing."

"You don't... have to..."

“No, it’s time to end you, Ms. Terakomari.”

She was serious. I screamed in a panic.

“I know nothing about the Dark Core! There’s no point in killing me!”

“I didn’t want to fight you. You’re so... strong, and pretty, and kind; it’s like you’re the exact opposite of me. That’s why I like you so much. And that’s why... I didn’t want to hide anything from you. Why I mustered up all my courage to face you like this.”

Sakuna still seemed to be misunderstanding something. I should have been grateful for that, since it meant I could keep on concealing the truth about me, but that didn’t matter right now.

“Now, let us duel to the death.”

Sakuna swung her arm. The next moment, a tremendous amount of mana erupted out of her body. The lights of the stars died out, and that floating sensation disappeared in an instant. She’d deactivated *Mind Refrain*.

When I came to, we were facing each other again. Shards of the Ruby at my feet. Flöte’s crushed corpse. The warm summer wind.

We’d returned from her memories.

Tears still falling from her eyes, Sakuna smiled.

“I really don’t want to do this. I could never hold a candle to you... But I have to. Or they’ll murder my family...”

“H-hold on. I don’t get the thing about them killing your family. Aren’t they already dead?”

“No, they’re right here.” Sakuna pointed at me. “You will be my new sister.”

“Me...?”

“I’ve been making new families like this. I find people with pretty constellations and alter their memories. I erase all their old ones... And replace them with those of my dad, or my mom, or my sister. This is the method Inverse Moon taught me for bringing

them back. I've remade my family time and time again, but they've killed them on every occasion."

Chills ran down my spine.

She's been doing all that?

I went stiff with fear. Nevertheless, I had to buy time. I knew that would only delay my doom, but still.

"...But I look totally different, right? Your sister was all... White all over."

"What's important is how you look inside. For example, my dad... Helldeus Heaven looks nothing like my original father, but his constellation is a pretty Aquila. So that makes him my father."

"O-oh, I get it! That's why you were in his orphanage."

"Helldeus has nothing to do with it. He just took me in when I was alone, without a place to go. He's in no way related to Inverse Moon. Since Helldeus had a pretty simple mental makeup, I turned him into my dad. So he *is* my dad now, plain and simple."

"I—I see..."

"Oh, allow me to correct myself. Helldeus's case is actually a bit complicated. His base is too strong. For some reason, he resists my Core Implosion, so he only acts like my dad when we're alone. What do you think I should do about this, Ms. Terakomari?"

"..."

"You have no idea, of course. But I won't make the same mistake. I will alter all of your memories. Once I kill you and get the intel on the Dark Core out of you, they won't say anything about what I choose to do. Inverse Moon won't care. So... I will scrub every last thing from your mind. Your birthplace, your family, your friends, your parents, your brothers or sisters, all your life up to this point, everything that doesn't align with my real sister, Komari—I'll erase all that and turn you into her. The only thing in your mind will be me, and nothing else."

"....."

She was insane.

But she hadn't been born that way. Sakuna hadn't even developed the idea of murdering people to turn them into their family—that was all Inverse Moon's fault.

Normally, hostages lost all value once you killed them, but Sakuna just kept on creating more people that Inverse Moon could use against her. It was all for their benefit.

I couldn't look the other way. I couldn't let Inverse Moon keep getting away with it.

"Just hold on. I won't let it hurt."

She reached her pale fingers toward me.

I felt her mana. She was ready to blow my life away in the blink of an eye.

I had no way to resist, not with my strength.

And yet...

I held her.

"Huh—?"

I grabbed her index finger.

I had to.

"I'll be..."

Sakuna looked confused.

It dawned on me that my voice was trembling.

"I'll be your sister."

"...Truly?"

"However! You won't kill me! You don't have to do any of that memory manipulation crap! I'll just act like your sister as I am! Bear with it!"

Disappointment appeared in her eyes.

"...I can't. My only family is the one I kill to recreate. You can't be my sister while staying as you are."

"Well, duh! Of course I can't be your *real* sister. She's already dead. No magic will bring her back. The same goes for Helldeus... and anyone else you killed. None of them are your real family!"

"Wha...?" There was a look of betrayal on her face. "Th-that's not true! The Wheels of Asterism perfectly replicate their personality!"

"It's the truth!"

"It's not!"

"It is! And I am the strongest Crimson Lord! You can't slay me!"

"Y-you... You won't know that until I try!"

"Please, just think about it! You're gravely misunderstanding it! Listen, you had ONE sister, only one in the whole wide world. And she's... dead now. You can't use other people to try and replace her! That's disrespectful toward your real sister!"

"...!"

Even I thought I was being super preachy. But I had to say it. Sakuna's actions were wrong, and I was convinced of it. Refusing to hold back, I kept on talking.

"You don't have to use Core Implosion. I'll be your sister. But not your older one, I guess? Since I'm actually younger? But that's trivial! Let's go to the zoo together, okay? I have extra tickets."

"..."

Sakuna froze up. When I released my grip on her finger, her arms went limp, and she cast her gaze down. She didn't seem convinced. She stayed silent for a while... Until

she started crying.

"I know... I know I'm weird."

"Yup, very weird."

"But... Still, it was all so hard on me. Which is how I ended up like this..."

The root cause of her suffering was as plain as day—Inverse Moon. It was all their fault that her life had taken this bizarre direction. And they couldn't get away with it any longer... But what could I do?

For starters, I tried rubbing her back. I'd never tried soothing a crying child before, so I was pretty sure my motions were all awkward, but even then, Sakuna quivered in relief. Then, finally, she smiled.

"...Thank you. My real sister also used to do this to calm me down."

"What a good sister you had."

"You're good, too."

"I'm not. I'm just weak."

Sakuna looked confused. I guessed it was about time I fessed up about being the weakest vampire ever. She didn't seem like she'd understand, though.

"You really are too kind." She smiled and stared right at me. "Ms. Terakomari... May I call you Sis?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, do as you like."

"Hee-hee... Thanks, Sis."

Then she hugged me. I felt her soft warmth.

Sis, huh? Didn't think I'd get a new one out of nowhere...

Wait a second, this can't be real. A little sister being so kind to her older sibling? I can't even imagine my real one doing this, let alone calling me Sis so affectionately. If she ever

did, that would either mean hell froze over, or she was after my wallet.

“Sis... What should I do now?”

“About what?”

“I’ve changed the memories of so many people...”

“Well...” I thought about it for a bit. “...I don’t have the answer, really. But I think you should apologize. It’s the least and most you can do, I think.”

“*Yes... I have to apologize...*” she whispered, sadness in her voice.

Sakuna had been twisting other people’s lives just to make a family for herself; that wasn’t something so easy to forgive. Which was why she’d have to show wholehearted remorse.

I wasn’t that worried about it, to be honest. I thought she would be fine now.

She wasn’t evil. She had a pure heart.

And even if she ended up not okay, I’d help her out. That’s what sisters do.

But then...

“What are you doing, Sakuna Memoir?”

...I heard a loud, thick voice.

Sakuna shivered like a rabbit and broke away from me.

A large man was standing near a broken pillar. His uniform was purple, and on it was the full moon crest. From his waist hung a large sword. It was one of the Seven Crimson Lords—Supreme Commander Odilon Metal.

Of course, it should’ve been no surprise that a Crimson Lord would come attack us... But even as I stood there in shock, he showed no interest in me. Instead, he kept on

trudging forward, his eyes set on Sakuna.

“Did you forget your instructions? Why have you not killed Gandesblood?”

Hmm? Wait, what?

“I—I understand...”

“You understand? Do you, really?” He stared her down like a predator. “She looks unharmed to me. I saw you two smiling. Why are you not following your orders? You don’t seem to have taken Cornelius’s Elixir, either.”

“No, it’s just, I, we...”

“Quiet! You should be ashamed of yourself, you useless wench!”

Odilon delivered an explosive kick to her abdomen, and her small body flew away like a leaf. She puked blood on the ground.

I didn’t comprehend what was happening. Why was Odilon here? Why was he attacking Sakuna so violently? This didn’t look like part of the Crimson Match.

“What are you thinking?! Why didn’t you cut her down straight away?! Don’t tell me she stole your heart! Have you gone to her side?!?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

“Shut your trap! Enough of your apologies!”

Odilon grabbed Sakuna by the hair, lifted her up, and proceeded to spit abuse right in her face.

“You’re good for nothing save your Core Implosion, but you refuse to use it! What point is there for you to exist, then?!?”

“I’m sorry... But I killed Ms. Flöte. She didn’t know where the Dark Core is...”

“So you accomplished nothing!”

He punched the side of her face as if trying to demolish a rock.

And it didn't end there. Odilon inflicted all sorts of insults, jeers, humiliation, and pain on Sakuna as she groveled on the ground. That's when it clicked. Odilon Metal was a spy from Inverse Moon; he was the one who had thrown Sakuna into that living hell.

Anger boiled in the pit of my stomach.

That was the asshole who'd ruined Sakuna's life.

"Are you listening, Sakuna Memoir?! Stand! Get up and kill that girl already!"

"Stop it!" I shouted automatically.

My brain was screaming at me to stop, telling me that this would only get me killed. But I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stay silent while he treated Sakuna like a dirty rag. So I mustered all my courage and scowled at the bulky, bearded man.

Odilon turned around. His mere stare almost made me wince, but I held it in, then yelled:

"Stay away from her! She's no longer a member of Inverse Moon!"

"Hah!" He snorted. "Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! You are funny, Lady Gandesblood. Sakuna Memoir is out of Inverse Moon? No! She belongs to us until the day she dies! Behold the emblem on her stomach!"

He drew his sword and swung it so fast I couldn't see the blade. Then Sakuna's uniform—underwear and all—went to tatters, revealing the Inverse Moon mark on her pale skin.

Odilon grabbed her by the arm, lifting her up to show me her body, and cackled.

"This is proof of her allegiance to us!"

"I already saw that! There was no need to strip her naked, you pig!"

"Cram it, Terakomari Gandesblood!!" Odilon threw Sakuna away and yelled at me. "You sure bark a lot for a weak little girl! I'm not sure what you used to set off that explosion, maybe a Magic Stone or a bomb, but I do know it was a cheap trick! Or was it something expensive? You damn nobles are always finding new ways to waste your money! Oh, how I loathe people like you. How I wish I could strangle you all with my

bare hands... But now is not the time. Sakuna Memoir has to be the one to kill you. Are you listening?! Stop lying on the ground and go take her life already!"

"I'm telling you to STOP!!"

Once he lifted Sakuna by the hair again, I snapped. I couldn't think straight anymore. I just rushed at Odilon without a plan.

I couldn't let him be. The world only got worse the more idiots there were thinking they could use other people as tools. He wasn't going to keep getting away with it.

Raising my fist, I aimed for his ugly mug... Before I immediately realized I couldn't reach it and switched my trajectory to his ugly gut instead. Yet he stopped my blow with ease.

Odilon stared me down, a grin on his face.

"How sad. Is there anything more pathetic in this world than seeing someone struggle so powerlessly?"

"Stop... It... Let go... Let me go!"

His grip was tightening by the second. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt, it hurt so much. I desperately fought to break away. A moment later, the sound of bones cracking echoed in my brain.

He'd broken my arm. Pulverized it.

After a second's delay, intense pain rocked me to the core. My vision went red from the shock. I couldn't even scream. Tears came flooding out my eyes.

"Gw-AAAH!"

"You're so frail, Terakomari Gandesblood!!"

Odilon released my arm, and I fell helplessly to the ground.

The pain was out of this world. My mind was filled with nothing but agony.

"I don't even need Sakuna Memoir's power! Time for a good ol' torture session! I'll

make you spit out the location of the Dark Core!"

"Gwuh!"

He grabbed me by the collar, hauled me into a standing position, and got his demonic mug right in my face.

"Where is it?! I'll put an end to your suffering as soon as you tell me!"

"I don't... know... I don't know anything..."

"More pain, it is!"

I was seeing stars. Odilon struck my cheek with his left fist; it felt like my brain was being stirred. I tasted blood in my mouth.

"Spit it out! Where is the Dark Core?! What does it look like?!"

Never in my life had I felt this level of agony. But I had too much self-respect to give in to this guy, this disgrace to all vampires... This demon who had put Sakuna through an even greater hell. I couldn't let myself lose.

I forced my trembling lips to move.

"I have no idea! And even if I did, I would never tell you, you stupid asshole! Piss off!"

The next instant, he slammed me into the ground.

Air shot out of my lungs as my whole body weight crushed my pulverized arm. Though I almost passed out from the sheer pain, I had to stay awake. I couldn't black out. Odilon was right there.

"...What did you just say to me, you punk? You called me stupid?! Asshole?!"

I shot him a glare with whatever little power I had, and then flooded him with all the insults I could come up with.

"Yeah, you jackass! You can't even do anything on your own, you poor excuse for a vampire! You're letting Sakuna do all the work! You're worthless without her! And you treat her like that?! You're nothing more than a dirty coward! I'm sure you take it out

on her because they don't like you even in Inverse Moon! You pathetic little man!"

"LITTLE MAN?!?!"

Air came out of my mouth as he stomped on my belly. The blow was delivered with mana, to boot.

Now it was over. I couldn't even feel the pain anymore. My mind was fading away. My thoughts, vanishing.

Out of the corner of my clouding vision, I barely noticed Odilon brandishing his sword.

"It seems you really know nothing... Whatever, there's no point in letting you live any longer, you insolent bitch. I'll grant you an agonizing death with my Divine Instrument, Dapeng Blade."

He held his sword aloft.

I stared up at it absentmindedly, as though it wasn't real.



Ms. Terakomari truly is weak, thought Sakuna Memoir.

Flöte was right. The girl had no power. All of her accomplishments in wars up to that point had been exaggerated. Even that immense blast from before must have been, as Flöte and Odilon had said, the product of a bomb or a Magic Stone.

There was no doubt in her mind, now that she was seeing Odilon wipe the floor with her. The "strongest" Crimson Lord she had looked up to so much was ultimately nothing but a fraud.

And yet. Sakuna didn't feel disappointment. Quite the opposite—she was moved.

Komari wasn't running away, despite fully comprehending how much more powerful he was. She couldn't let him get away with what he'd done, so she'd stood up against him. Even after getting beaten to a pulp, Komari was showing no sign of her spirit breaking.

Sakuna was nothing at all like Terakomari Gandesblood. She could never rebel against

Inverse Moon.

"The weak thing about you is your spirit."

She finally understood what Millicent meant.

Could all of this have been avoided if I had a strong spirit? Regret tugged at her heart.

"It seems you really know nothing... Whatever, there's no point in letting you live any longer, you insolent bitch. I'll grant you an agonizing death with my Divine Instrument, Dapeng Blade."

"...!"

Odilon raised his Divine Instrument.

The girl who had given so much to defend Sakuna would soon be murdered in cold blood.

The fire in Sakuna's heart lit up once again.

No... It's not yet too late.

She still had a choice. It wasn't like she'd ever have an opportunity to meet a decent death anyway. Deciding her own fate was the least she could do to demonstrate her will to rebel.

She staggered up.

Slowly, gasping for breath, almost crawling, barely managing to keep her balance.

"...It."

The enemy didn't hear her. She put all her power into her next scream.

"Stop it!! Get away from her!!"

His blade halted.

He stared back at her with a face twisted in anger.

“Put away that sword! Stop hurting her!!”

“What are you saying, Sakuna Memoir?”

Odilon slowly approached her.

A shriek escaped her throat. But she couldn't give in now. She took out the bottle from her pocket and opened it.

“I won't... follow your orders anymore! I'm out... of Inverse Moon!”

“Ridiculous! You have nowhere to run! Drop the foolishness and accept that you will be my tool for all your life!”

“Now *that* is ridiculous! I'm not doing as you say anymore!”

“Hold on, are you—?”

Sakuna rushed at him in what was essentially a suicide attack. But she didn't mind dying, if it was to save Komari.

She didn't hesitate. She gulped down the entire bottle of poison.

As soon as the sticky substance went down her throat, she felt a flaming heat bubble up from deep within. It was pure magical energy. Silver mana emanated from her body, making her glow, with her life as the fuel.

A tremendous surge of mana boomed.

The ground cracked beneath her feet, the screaming earth unable to resist the swelling magic. What little remained of the castle's pillars cracked.

Maybe I can win now.

“Don't look at me like that. Don't you dare defy me!”

“Too late! I've already said good-bye to my old self.”

Sakuna kicked off the ground, and her silver form moved as fast as the wind. Her physical abilities had already been heightened.

Shock took over Odilon's expression.

"Wha...?"

Sakuna swung her staff with full power.

Odilon immediately blocked it with his sword. The impact echoed throughout the area. Sakuna's staff broke. She already knew her ordinary tool wouldn't stack up against the hardness of the Dapeng Blade, but what was important here was that she was now strong enough to destroy her own weapon.

Odilon delivered a kick, fully intent on killing her. She guarded with a *Barrier Wall*.

Her opponent clicked his tongue as he distanced himself. Sakuna took this opportunity to forge mana and unleash the advanced-level freezing spell, *Dust Tail Comet*. Icy stars shooting with unpredictable trajectories let out a dazzling mana glow as they assaulted her opponent.

"Useless tricks..."

Odilon knocked down one of the stars with the Dapeng Blade. But he couldn't do the same against the second comet. It pierced Odilon's purple uniform, and he faltered. With his guard broken, comet after comet landed on him in a massive explosion.

A sandstorm whipped up.

Odilon cut through the dust curtain to counter.

"You're just a tool! Know your place! And since I no longer have any use for you, it's into the trash you go!"

Odilon's sword towered over his head, then came down in a flash to murder Sakuna.

She jumped out of the way, thanks to her enhanced strength.

Odilon stepped forward and swept the blade sideways.

She desperately raised a *Barrier Wall*, but the next moment, she felt a blow to the side of her head. The obstruction hadn't been able to block the attack. Now she was stumbling, throwing up blood. But she didn't fall. She couldn't. *Not until he fell first*.

"You are so, so pathetic, Sakuna Memoir. You could've lived so much longer, had you only listened to me."

"Grr!"

The blood rushed to her head. Who was it who'd sent her time after time to her death? Who was it who'd forced her to drink that poison?

"But now that I think about it, you were always defective. Your accomplishments were not worth the amount of effort I've had to put in. Your family might've been a bunch of no-names, but do you have any idea how much work it took to conceal their deaths? And what do I get in exchange for it? A defective tool!"

"You... You..."

"What are you crying for? Do you still hold a grudge for your family's murder? Hah! You're mad at the wrong person. They lacked the power to survive against me. That's the law of nature! The weak get wrecked!"

"STOP TALKING!!"

She couldn't take it any longer.

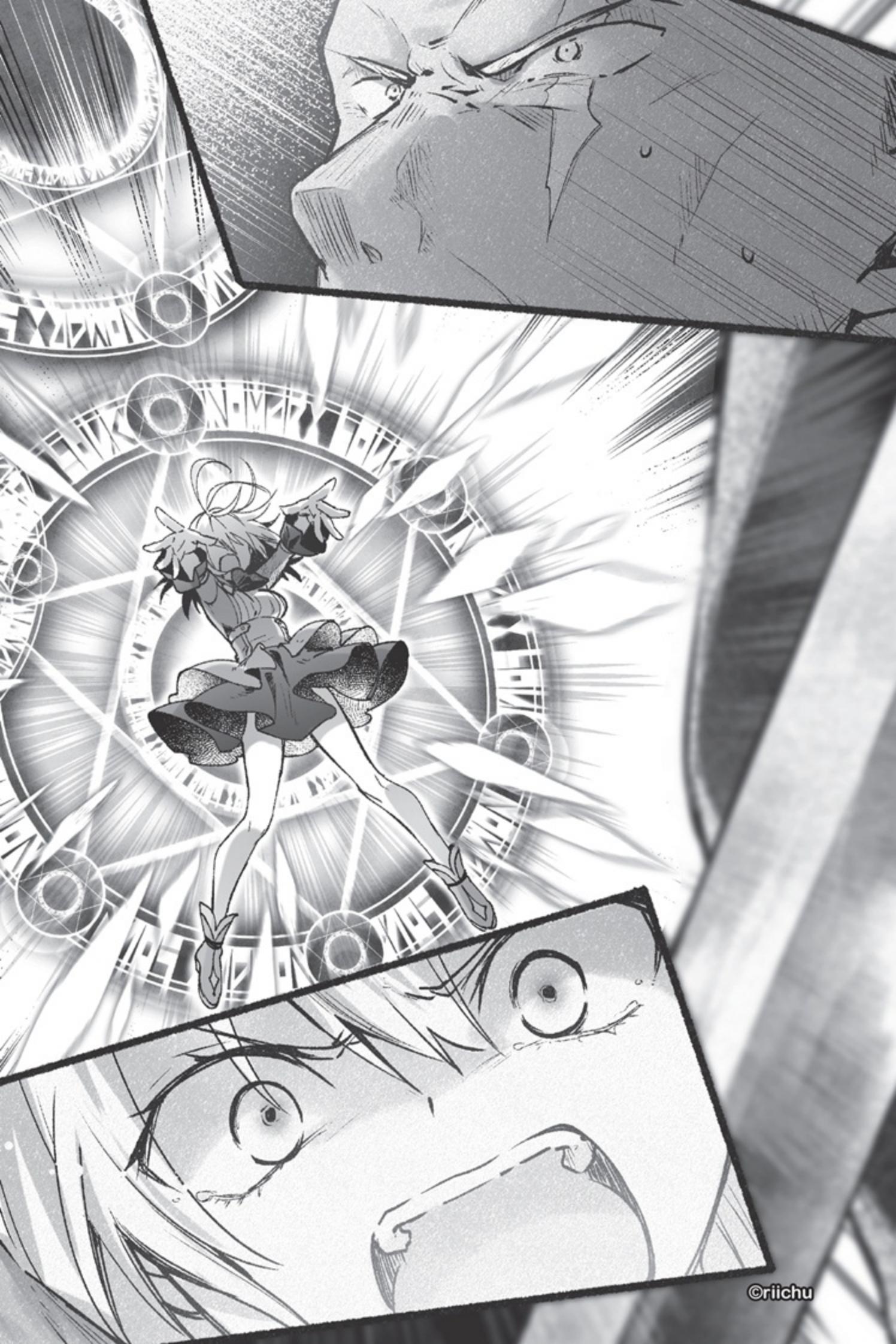
Sakuna made her mana explode as she charged at him.

Odilon gripped his sword tight. She unleashed *Dust Tail Comet* once more.

One. Two. Three. Odilon knocked down meteor after meteor. But Sakuna had an infinite stock of mana thanks to the elixir. The spell didn't let up. Finally, one of the stars struck his neck and blood splattered out.

"You harlot!"

The Dapeng Blade traced a curve toward her. Sakuna gathered all her power to call a *Barrier Wall*.



A shrill *clang*. Her shield was still standing strong.

The Dapeng Blade slipped from Odilon's hands, and the summer wind blew it away.

"Impossible!"

Sakuna took a dagger from her pocket and aimed for his neck.

One hit. I'll end this in one hit!

But...

"—What?"

...she froze.

Mana started leaving her body. Immense fatigue assailed her. Then her head started throbbing, and she was overcome with nausea. Everything hurt.

"Guh!" Blood poured from her mouth. She heard a noise; it was as though something had broken inside her.

Sakuna fell to her knees as her opponent stared in delight.

"The side effects finally came! How do you like that, BITCH?!"

He delivered a steel fist right in her face. Sakuna flew away like a doll and proceeded to tumble over the rubble, leaving behind a trail of blood.

She didn't feel any pain. Her senses were all off-kilter.

Her breathing was ragged, her vision cloudy.

The elixir was killing her.

"...I... won't... give up...!"

"Accept your defeat! You were always fated to meet this end!"

She tried standing back up, but all strength had left her muscles, leaving her helpless

on the ground.

Sakuna let out a sob. Terakomari had finally given her the courage to try and change herself... She'd finally fought back to prove she was more than a tool... And yet...

She cursed the heavens in her mind. Couldn't they let her live at least a little longer?

"Hah! Your date of expiry has come," Odilon said in disgust.

Expiry... I was a tool to the very end...

Sakuna let the tears flow as she shivered on the cold ground.

By chance, she looked to the side. There she saw her beloved Komari, lying on her back.

"Ms... Terakomari..."

Poor girl. She had gone through so much pain, all because Sakuna had gotten involved with her. Though the girl was still breathing, she was likely unconscious—she showed no sign of getting up.

Komari was strong. She had a strong spirit.

She wasn't like Sakuna, only able to rouse herself after taking some drug. Despite the fact Terakomari knew she was weak, she didn't run away. One could perhaps call that reckless, stupid, even, but that was why people followed her.

But it was all over now.

Odilon would show no mercy—he would murder Sakuna and Komari.

"If worse comes to worst, get Terakomari to drink your blood."

Just then, those words played back in her mind.

She didn't know what they meant. She'd only heard rumors about Komari's distaste

for blood.

But whatever. She had no other options and was grasping at straws at this point.

Sakuna used her last bit of power to reach out to Komari.

She stared at the girl with empty eyes, and then all power truly left her body. Her hand fell on the girl's face—her bloody fingers touched her lips.

I'm sorry, Ms. Terakomari. As endless guilt tormented Sakuna... She rose.

“...Huh?”

In shock, Sakuna beheld Komari's face. Her expression was blank. She didn't look conscious. What could possibly be happening to her?

Komari then crawled up to her. Light as a feather, she gently pushed Sakuna down. She was straddling her.

“Ms... Tera... komari...?”

Komari drew her face closer to Sakuna's.

Her eyes were devoid of life, and yet they were so alluring. Sakuna locked her gaze onto Komari's moist lips. Still on the brink of death, she felt flustered.

Is she...? Are we gonna...?

“Not enough blood,” Komari said.

The next instant, Sakuna felt a slight pain. Minuscule, compared to the agony Odilon had inflicted on her, but not only that—it was totally different from any other sensation she'd experienced. Enough to turn Sakuna's values on their head.

Komari had bitten into her neck.

Sakuna felt the blood escape from her body into the girl's mouth.

“Eek! N-no...”

Sucking the blood of another vampire was the greatest proof of love. Immeasurable pleasure jolted throughout her entire body with every lick at her wound. The sensation of pain had all but left her mind entirely. She had never expected having your loved one suck your blood to feel so... so... good...

Suddenly, the ecstasy came to a halt. The act ended while she'd briefly gazed up at the clouds for a moment, looking for distraction to contain what was gushing forth from within.

Komari moved away from Sakuna, blood dripping from the corner of her mouth. Just looking at her made Sakuna feel as if she'd been saved. There was someone out there willing to drink her—this filthy vampire's—blood.

That alone left her fulfilled. She had no regrets in life.

Sakuna slowly let go of her consciousness as countless emotions flooded her mind, and...

“...Ah.”

...then, she remembered.

There was still something left.

She couldn't let Inverse Moon off. She had to take revenge against Odilon.

Komari had already given herself up for her. It would be disrespectful to bow out now.

“Core Implosion: *Wheels of Asterism*.”

Her right eye shone scarlet as she burned her life to activate her power one last time.



Then the view of the old castle in the fortress city of Faure flickered back up on the screens. The farsight spell that had been blocked via the aftershock of the explosion was now restored. Unwilling to let the broadcast of the Crimson Match go to waste, the Imperial PR Department had spared no effort to get it back online.

The audience was shocked at what they saw.

Terakomari Gandesblood's spell had left the castle in ruins. But that wasn't the surprising part—it was that four Crimson Lords had congregated amidst the rubble.

Flöte Mascarail—she was dead; her head gruesomely crushed.

Sakuna Memoir—her clothes were torn up, and she was lying on the ground in a puddle of blood.

Odilon Metal—he was standing unwounded with a greatsword in his hands.

And Terakomari Gandesblood.

She was sitting on the wreckage, gaze cast down, wounds all over her body. It appeared as though the popular, youngest Crimson Lord was about to lose her life to one of the veterans.

Everyone in the plaza sighed in disappointment. The people who'd bet on Komari clutched their heads and screamed.

"That's unexpected. Odilon's the winner?" "So Terakomari wasn't a big deal after all." "No, but she used that spell, right? That was incredible." "But she's losing!" "I heard she used a Magic Stone for that." "Welp, hope she does better next time." "Damn it, that guy's gonna cost me a fortune!"

There were people of all species in the square, which is why the general opinion toward Terakomari was harsher than it was within the Mulnite Empire.

However... right as everyone was beginning to get ready to go home, their interest lost...

"Wait, look!" someone remarked.

People around turned back to the screen.

Terakomari was slowly rising. Her expression was empty. Her eyes glowed a bewitching scarlet. The aura about her was reminiscent of a monster of myth.

The entire crowd gulped as her hair turned white.

"She looks like a Sapphire," someone noted.

Next, an explosive amount of mana surged from the outskirts of the battlefield. Everyone turned to look in terror, screaming. The sky had been dyed white.

“T-Terakomari’s...!”

Odilon stared at her dazzling scarlet eyes, inexpressive.

Her thin lips began to move.

“I won’t let you go. Until you apologize.”

The screens turned white.

Her torrential volume of mana once again blocked the farsight spell, blurring the image on the screens. The PR guys screamed, “Pour more mana into it! Come on!” as they strengthened the incantation.

The moment the picture cleared up...

“““WHOOOOAAAAAAA??!!”““”

...the audience went wild. Absolutely bonkers.

Terakomari Gandesblood had finally gotten serious. This was no cheap trick. It was her pure, distilled power. An overwhelming bulk of magical energy, worthy of a Crimson Lord.

The crowds shouted her name in exhilaration.

Species didn’t matter—every single one of them was head over heels, screaming, “Komarin! Komarin! Komarin!” as had become custom in Mulnite.

But the insane spectators were far from her mind. She glared at her dreadful foe, Odilon Metal. Nothing more.



"I knew it. There is a higher stage to the *Blood Curse*."

"Wh-what is that?! Komari's all... white!"

The Empress's new crystal ball showed Komari unleashing her Core Implosion on the battlefield.

But there was something decidedly different from before: She was white. Overwhelmingly pale. Komari's shining golden locks had turned arctic, the color of fresh snow. On top of that, the mana emanating from her body wasn't scarlet, as it had seemed to be when she fought Millicent. Instead, it was shockingly white.

Just looking at her made you feel chilly.

"I've never heard of that. I didn't know Komari's Core Implosion had this power."

"I wasn't sure this would happen... But I did expect it. Her mother was the same, after all."

"I don't think that bears any relation."

"Core Implosion isn't hereditary, correct. But when two people have similar mental traits, the characteristic of their Core Implosions naturally end up resembling each other."

"Mental traits..."

Yulinne Gandesblood had been the strongest Crimson Lord. She'd fought for a peaceful world and had eventually met her end because of it.

"Then you mean the *Blood Curse*...?"

"Resembles Yulinne's. The nature of her power changes depending on the blood of the species she imbibes. Which means... Her Core Implosion truly has the power to raise all six nations."

Armand felt bitter to the core.

That Empress claimed to love Komari at every turn, but in reality, she was concocting all sorts of schemes. Was she trying to make Komari carry out the domination Yulinne

hadn't been able to accomplish? Did she wish for her to meet the same fate as her mother? In that case, she was evil beyond redemption.

"Setting that aside, we now know who the mastermind is."

"Ah, that's right! Commander Metal! Why?!"

"I assume he was on Inverse Moon's side from the very beginning. Ungrateful prick. After all the meals he took me out on when we were Crimson Lords... But anyhow, I also half-expected that."

"What do you mean? Were you aware of his true colors?"

"I expected it, nothing more. He's acted suspiciously since the very beginning. This Crimson Match was meant to confirm that... Though I suppose it was already confirmed from the moment Odilon himself suggested it."

"I'm not following."

"They wanted Sakuna to kill the Crimson Lords, so I gave them the perfect stage for it. The mastermind wouldn't have let a chance like that go to waste, and Odilon went for it hook, line, and sinker. And... as soon as he showed up, that was it—Komari would finish the job."

"..."

Armand kept his mouth shut.

Caught up in the moment, the Empress whispered, "*Show it to me again, Komari. I know you can turn this whole world on its head.*"



Odilon Metal was confused.

Terakomari Gandesblood, who'd been on the brink of death moments ago, had just stood up. One top of that, she was enveloped in a dreadful mana strong enough to freeze anyone who opposed her. She seemed like a totally different person.

Odilon held his Divine Instrument, the Dapeng Blade, tight.

That was the work of Core Implosion. Her eyes were glowing scarlet, so there was no doubt. Though he hadn't expected Terakomari Gandesblood to have this power, he wasn't fazed. She was weak to begin with—it couldn't be that big a deal.

"So... You had a secret weapon."

Terakomari didn't answer. She was just looking down at Sakuna Memoir, who was lying by her side.

The vampire princess's snow-white hair fluttered in the wind, her once-broken arm reaching out for Sakuna. Behind her back floated a magic circle, its capabilities unknown to Odilon.

The next instant, he heard something rip. Odilon could not believe his eyes. The mark on Sakuna's midriff, the shackle that tied her to Inverse Moon, had disappeared without a trace.

"She broke our contract?! How?!"

The magical contract in itself wasn't a big deal. It was, however, something the Lunae had applied themselves; it shouldn't have broken so easily. Yet that little girl had removed it without any incantation whatsoever, as though ripping off a sticker.

It seemed impossible. But something even more astounding happened next.

Sakuna Memoir's wounds started healing.

Odilon widened his eyes. Her bruises and scrapes healing was nothing to be amazed at, but her face was regaining its color, too. Komari was purging Sakuna of the side effects from Cornelius's Elixir, which had been created with a Divine Instrument. *How?*

"It can't be... Your mana doesn't rely on the Dark Core?"

It was nigh incomprehensible. He didn't think such a thing could exist.

After healing the white-haired girl, Terakomari turned placidly to face him.

"Apologize to Sakuna," she demanded, in a voice almost too soft to hear.

"...What?"

“Apologize. To Sakuna.”

An unspeakable outrage shot up from Odilon’s gut the instant he understood what she meant. He pointed his sword at Terakomari’s expressionless face and snapped.

“Why would I have to apologize to a tool?! Do you bow to your pencil every time you erase something?! Preposterous! That wench vowed to serve Inverse Moon!! And as her master, I decide what to do with he—”

Terakomari took a step forward.

That was enough to close the distance. She sent her feeble fist at his face. Though his rational mind saw it as weak, his instincts were screaming danger, so he blocked it with the Dapeng Blade.

The moment Komari’s fist landed, Odilon blew back like a piece of paper.

“Gah! GWOH?!”

He slammed through two pillars as he flew before finally lodging into a wall, but he didn’t get to sigh in relief at still being alive, for he realized Terakomari was no longer in eyeshot.

“Where did you go?! Terakomari Gandesblood!!”

“I’m here,” he heard a voice come from right beside him.

Chills went down his spine. She’d grabbed onto his arm, which was too bulky for her hand to properly enclose it; you could say she was merely touching him. And yet, an excruciating pain ran through his arm as she clamped down on it.

Odilon let out a throaty scream. Then he felt glacial cold, as though he was being chilled to the core. Ice was extending out from her thin fingers to freeze his entire arm.

He tried to force her off, but it was no use. He could no longer move his frozen limb.

Then, his arm broke. Not like a fracture. It snapped right off. The blood that spurted out instantly froze into a red icicle.

“Gw-AAAAAH! You GODDAMN bitch!”

Odilon erupted into fury as he held his Dapeng Blade aloft. She showed no intention to move, and so he, certain of his victory, lowered the sword right on her hea—

©riichu



Suddenly, he felt a metallic shock.

“What... in... the...?”

The Dapeng Blade had struck her head. No question about that. But it didn’t slice through. It couldn’t cut a single strand of hair. It was as though her head was made of steel.

Komari lay her fingers on the Dapeng Blade, then applied force to it.

And just like that, Odilon’s beloved Divine Instrument froze over and crumbled like a cookie.

That was when he realized she’d had the upper hand all along.

He sighed, white breath coming out his mouth. Their surroundings were already subzero.

This can’t be. It’s impossible! Outrageous! I am the next in line to become a Luna! I can’t fall to this, this gremlin!

Then Odilon sensed mana. He fought desperately to run like his life depended on it—because it did.

The next instant, ice bullets erupted from all around Terakomari.

It was the low-level freezing spell, *Icicle Spears*. But their quality, speed, and destructive capabilities were a far cry from “low-level.” The bullets gouged the wreckage at their feet, stabbed Odilon’s sides, and flew into a frenzy to destroy every last thing.

It was all he could manage to dodge the hellish hail. But then, Terakomari’s mana started converging. It gathered in the giant magic circle behind her. She was getting ready for the coup de grâce.

“YOU PIECE OF SHIT!”

Odilon fought back with his flame magic, but the fire snuffed out like a candle before it could reach her. His spells were of no use against the cold.

“Freeze over.”

Terakomari's magic circle was now complete.

A frigid bundle of light shot at him. He tried as he could to evade it... but the environment worked against him. His right foot had already frozen tight to the floor. There was no escape.

"Agh! I see. This is as far as I get now..."

Odilon understood it was his loss. No... This wasn't defeat. So long as he didn't die, he still had a chance. He took a Magic Stone out of the pocket of his uniform. It contained the *Teleportation* spell. He carried it on his person just in case.

"One day I'll kill you, Terakomari Gandesblood! But I'll take my leave for today!"

He activated the Stone without hesitation, and the bearded vampire disappeared without a trace.

Its target lost, Komari's spell broke through the castle wall and flew out to the horizon in the silver sky.



The southern edge of the world. A forest in the Gerra-Aruka Republic.

Odilon Metal, having just barely escaped with his life, entered a round building deep within the trees.

It was one of Inverse Moon's hideouts, its Gerra-Aruka branch.

He headed down the dark hallway, applying pressure to the gash where his limb had been. His subordinates took notice of their chief's return and gathered around him in a hurry.

"L-Lord Metal! What happened to your arm?!" "Someone heal him, quick!" "Shouldn't he go back to Mulnite and get the Dark Core to..."

"You imbecile! What sort of Inverse Moon member relies on the Dark Core?!"

Odilon punched the subordinate stupid enough to suggest that, then sat down on the nearest chair and yelled once more:

“Bring me a Crystal! Now!”

“Y-yes, sir!” His men ran. They came back a moment later, each one handing him a Correspondence Crystal.

“Take them, sir!”

“Just one is enough, you idiots!”

He bashed them all with his left arm. His subordinates cowered on the floor in fear and trembled as they stared at their boss.

Odilon felt like clicking his tongue.

Discounting Sakuna Memoir, he had fifty-three underlings here. All of them were mere tools to carry out his bidding; yet almost none of them were useful. Why was everyone around him so incompetent? Why? Why?!

As his annoyance grew inside him, he picked up one of the Correspondence Crystals from the floor and poured in what little mana he had left to make a call. However, the person on the other side didn’t pick up.

“Lord Odilon, what should we do about Terakomari Gandesblood?” One of his underlings asked in fear.

It was his subchief. The man was one of the sharper tools at Odilon’s disposal, yet here he was asking for instructions. In the end, he, too, was defective.

“What should we do?! Kill her, of course, you dunce!” Odilon shouted.

He kicked his useless tool, and it let out a muffled scream as it collapsed to the floor.

Odilon tapped his foot as he waited for a response from the Correspondence Crystal.

“Damn it... That stupid chick...!”

Terakomari Gandesblood had ruined everything for him. If he’d been able to uncover the Dark Core and destroy it, he’d already be a Luna by now. That girl needed to pay. *She will pay! She’ll taste a despair deeper than she ever thought possible!*

Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine.

Is it just my imagination? The moment he thought that, he finally got a response from the Crystal. He wasted no time and started yelling.

“Amatsu! The plan was ruined! All because of that Terakomari Gandesblood!”

“I know. Your fight was being broadcast around the world.”

“Good, then you know what happened! We need a new plan to kill he—”

“You’ve done well until now, Odilon Metal.”

The Crimson Lord was speaking to an old colleague who’d been promoted to Luna before him—the Peace Spirit, Kakumei Amatsu. His voice was full of disappointment.

“But now you’ve gone absolutely insane. Why did you bring up Inverse Moon? Was that supposed to be a publicity stunt?”

“Who cares about that! We have to plan our next move—”

“No. There’s no ‘we’ here. You failed. Sakuna Memoir’s Core Implosion is of great use to Inverse Moon, but you couldn’t get her to stay. You tied her down physically yet failed to win over her mentally. You should’ve been kinder to her.”

Odilon didn’t know how to respond. Amatsu didn’t relent.

“And worst of all, you made ample use of the Wheels of Asterism and have not a single lead to Mulnite’s Dark Core to show for it. Yeowch. Ha-ha-ha. You know Her Highness is furious, right?”

“Wha...?! B-but I will destroy it, next time! It’s no problem, c’mom!”

He could hear Amatsu chuckle on the other end of the line.

“Hah. I’m actually amazed you even think there’ll be a next time. I tip my hat to your guts. But let’s say you got on; what would you do now? You can’t resort to the same method once again. Your true identity has already been revealed to the entire world.”

“I’ll come up with something, let’s see...”

Odilon thought hard, grinding his teeth.

There was no doubt the Empress knew about the Dark Core, but killing her wouldn't be easy. What if he took a hostage, like he'd done with Sakuna Memoir? The Thunderbolt Empress seemed to be madly fond of Terakomari Gandesblood, so he could just kidnap her... Wait, but how? After witnessing her wild Core Implosion power...

"Lord Odilon," someone said to him.

But he had no time to answer. He immersed himself in thought once again.

Right. Her Core Implosion had to have some sort of condition for activation. So long as he found these out, he could kidnap her while rendering her unable to use it...

"Lord Odilon," they repeated.

He couldn't ignore it this time.

"What the hell do you want?! Go back to wor—"

A burning sensation ravaged his abdomen the moment he turned his head.

Odilon glanced down with a frown.

A knife was lodged in his side.

"Wha...?"

Holding on to it was his subchief, the man he'd just beaten.

Odilon was utterly confused. The pain intensified as his subchief continued to gouge his flesh. Odilon screamed, scowling at his tool.

"Y-you BASTARD! What are you attempting here?!"

"I am not your tool."

The man was expressionless. He only stared right at Odilon as he twisted the knife in apathy to stir his organs.

Odilon couldn't take anymore and swung his arm in reflex. His hard fist connected with the subchief's face, bowling the man away with ease and sending him crashing into the wall.

"You piece of..."

Odilon pulled out the knife and groaned. Blood dripped to the floor.

The subchief betrayed me? That useless tool? Ridiculous!

"What's going on, Odilon? Sounds like a lot of noise over there."

"N-nothing!"

Odilon put the Correspondence Crystal into his pocket and stood up.

What's up with this jackass? After all I've done for him! How dare he bite the hand that feeds him! I won't let him apologize. To the trash it goes.

"Ha-ha-ha. Take care. He's not the only one."

He felt a hostile aura.

Before he knew it, all his underlings had gathered around him. Every last one of them was staring expressionlessly at him, their eyes empty.

The sight sent chills down the Crimson Lord's spine.

"You bums! Have something to say? Then go ahead and spit it out!"

"I am not your tool."

One of them ran at him, dagger in hand, and that triggered an avalanche—they all charged at the same time. Some of them started chanting to strike with magic.

On a normal day, he could have sent them packing with a single swipe of his arm, but he wasn't exactly in the best shape at the moment.

Realizing he was at a disadvantage, Odilon immediately turned around to leave the room, but there were more underlings down the hallway waiting for him.

“I am not your tool.” “I am not your tool.” “I am not your tool.”

“You fools! You dare betray me?!”

He dodged a flame spell by a hair, then countered someone charging at him with a rapier with his bare fist.

However, he couldn’t defend against the knife coming from behind. Searing pain through his back, and he fell to the floor.

“What… is the meaning… of this…?!”

“I am not your tool.”

“Shut up already! You are!”

Odilon forged mana to activate the advanced-level flame spell, *Blaze Burst*.

Hot wind radiated from his body. It blew fiercely throughout the entire hideout, brushing away all the subordinates in his path like the tools they were.

They neither screamed nor shrieked. Enveloped in flames, they fell to the floor without even rolling around.

Something was off.

“Haaah, haaah… Damn it, I’m out of mana…”

“I am… not your… too—”

“Silence, worm!”

He stomped on his stubborn, noisy underling’s head.

He didn’t get it. Had they really betrayed him? That couldn’t be right. If that were the case, his underlings would have shown some sort of emotion, but they were all eerily expressionless, as though they were under the someone else’s contr—

It hit him. One of the corpses was clutching a piece of paper.

Wincing in pain, he crouched to open its hand and grab it.

There was sloppy handwriting on the paper.

Serves you right

His mind went blank for a second.

There was only one person capable of this. Her. It was all her!

Then, he heard a thunderous, deafening cackle.

Odilon leaped in surprise and turned around to the source. There, he found a woman. One of his subordinates. She was letting out a strange howl, like the cry of a beast, and blood was dripping from her fingers as she wrote something on the wall. A ghastly message penned in blood.

Odilon shivered in anger as he looked around.

That was a message from *her*.

“You killed my family”

“You won’t get away with it”

“No one trusts you”

“I won’t do as you say anymore”

“Inverse Moon will fall”

“The world is better off without you”

“All you cruel bastards will perish!!”

“SAKUNA MEMOIIIIIRRR!!”

More of his subordinates emerged in response to his scream.

There were fifty-three traitors in this hideout.

He dodged and parried the robotic attacks coming from all directions, sometimes unsuccessfully, sometimes managing to counter, all as he burned with unbearable humiliation.

That harlot... That harlot!

She'd pretended to be obedient and docile while planning this behind his back!

“You make me laugh, Odilon.”

“Amatsu! Did you know about this, you asshole?!” Odilon shouted as he punched an underling in the face.

“Of course, I knew. No way I wouldn’t notice... Sakuna Memoir was periodically coming to your hideout to brainwash your subordinates, one by one. Only the Warblades would revive inside the Gerra-Aruka branch, so everyone else she knocked out and took all the way to the Dark Core Zone to reformat.”

“If you were aware all along... Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“There’s no way you’d become a Luna if you couldn’t even realize your subordinates were rebelling against you.”

Odilon gritted his teeth.

He kicked away a blood-soaked man attempting to punch him from the side.

Amatsu continued speaking, his voice thick with amusement.

“You thought Sakuna Memoir was nothing but a timid girl. That was a fatal blunder. She holds the power of Core Implosion because she’s capable of all this.”

“What are you getting at?! What is the meaning of this cheap rebellion?! If I wasn’t wounded, a mere fifty people wouldn’t even scratch me!”

"She was halfway to giving up, after all. But... Even though she knew it would be no use, she kept on working toward this. And now, you're all but dead."

"Gah...! It's all Terakomari Gandesblood's fault..."

"That's an excuse. Sakuna Memoir was always against Inverse Moon. But you couldn't even change the mind of a little girl. That was your failure."

He didn't want to listen to him anymore.

Odilon swept away his old subordinates with fierce momentum.

The wounded Crimson Lord's movements were lacking vitality. Blood spurting from him with each attack the enemy landed on him. Yet he kept on fighting, fueled only by his hatred. Strong, burning hatred. He wanted to break Komari apart, tear her limb from limb.

A while later, Odilon was the only one left standing.

Corpses were piled up around him. That should've been all fifty-three of them.

"Damn it... Damn, damn, damn it all!" He spouted curses as he gasped for air.

Everything he had built up was now crumbling before his eyes.

No second chances would come to such a failure of a vampire.

Inverse Moon would surely send an assassin to take him out like a cockroach.

"Odilon! From today on, you are mine! Lend me your aid in killing God and bringing peace to the Six Nations!"

Odilon had reached out to the Wicked God Slayers back then.

He was born in a low-class district of the Imperial Capital and had lost his family to the whims of the foolish nobility. That was how he'd ended up on the brink of death in a wasteland within the Dark Core Zone. Only for that girl to save him.

He'd wanted to make her dream come true, no matter what it took.

But that was over now.

Her Highness was both as warm as the sun and as frigid as the moon.

Odilon thought hard, his body trembling.

Why had it come to this?

The answer was simple.

Sakuna Memoir and Terakomari Gandesblood.

It was all because of those two.

If it weren't for them...

Then, a pinch.

Someone stabbed his back.

Odilon turned around on pure reflex. The moment he did, he nearly screamed.

Standing before him was a white-haired girl, enveloped in silver mana.

Terakomari Gandesblood.

Just then, a freezing gale blew through the entire hideout, freezing over even Odilon's hot wind.

His mouth stayed shut in shock. Why? How? Before he could ask anything, she clamped her slender fingers around his throat.

“Gweh?! Y-you little... What are you...”

“Apologize.”

Terakomari squeezed hard enough to break his neck.

Odilon looked around. All of his underlings' corpses had frozen over.

"Apologize to Sakuna. Now."

"Gh—!"

Apologize? You've gotta be kidding. You should be dead right now, you cocky little bitch. I'm gonna beat you to... Damn, I can't get my arms to move. Then with a spell... Shit, I don't have any mana. This has to be a joke. A sick joke. This is ridiculous!

"Y... ou..." His blood was boiling. He snapped, then yelled, "Apologize?! Me?! That harlot should be grateful to get worn to death—AGH!"

She applied more force, finally putting an end to his breathing.

His eyes looked like they would bulge out of their sockets as he blacked out.

And so, the man's ambitions came to an underwhelming end.



Without any strength left to hold him up, his bulky body collapsed to the floor.

The blood flowing from his arm formed a red puddle that immediately froze over.

His bleeding stopped naturally.

"..."

Terakomari, having dispatched her foe with ease, stared emotionlessly at the man's body. Then, a voice came from the Correspondence Crystal on the floor. It still had Odilon's mana left in it.

"Hey, Miss Gandesblood. Are you there?"

Komari didn't answer, but he continued.

"You sure did a number on our Millicent a while back. After all the work it took to train

her..."

"..."

"By the by, how does your Core Implosion work, hmm? From the outside, it looks like you lose your sense of reason... But that's not quite the case. Her Highness is very curious about it."

Crack! She stomped the Crystal.

Silence fell, but only for a moment. She could hear members of Inverse Moon running toward her in a frenzy. Members from other branches had teleported to the Gerra-Aruka branch after learning of the commotion. Not that she cared one bit.

"There she is!" "Kill her!" "Let's see how your Core Implosion holds up!"

Komari floated up in the air as she noticed the enemy's presence.

Dense mana rotated behind her to form a gigantic magic circle.

The men shivered once they recognized their death was imminent, then stiffened in place.

Komari showed no mercy.

"Die."

A world-rending flash erupted, and the Inverse Moon hideout was annihilated.

Vexations

0 Epilogue

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

※

Results of the Eighth Crimson Match

* Since the Ruby was destroyed, the winner will be determined through points only.

Winner	Terakomari Gandesblood.....	Total Points: 511
Second Place	Sakuna Memoir.....	Total Points: 68
Third Place	Helldeus Heaven.....	Total Points: 32
Fourth Place	Flöte Mascarail.....	Total Points: 12
Fifth Place	Delphyne.....	Total Points: 0

Six Nations News, July 2nd

"CHAOS AT THE CRIMSON MATCH"

IMPERIAL CAPITAL – BY MELKA TIANO

On June 1st, the latest contest of strength between the Mulnite Empire's Crimson Lords, the Crimson Match, was held in the Metrio region of the Dark Core Zone. The results were as shown (see the accompanying table). The explosion spell Supreme Commander Terakomari Gandesblood unleashed near the opening of the match had the audience on the edge of their seats.

...
Near the end of the competition, Supreme Commander Odilon Metal admitted to being a member of Inverse Moon. Supreme Commander Gandesblood fought tooth and nail to arrest him.

...
Supreme Commander Metal realized his impending defeat and fled, but Supreme Commander Gandesblood followed at the speed of light, and found the Inverse Moon hideout in the Deristol region in the Gerra-Aruka Republic. She immediately used the Effulgent freezing spell, *Eternal Glacier*, to ice over the land in a half-mile radius. In response, Prime Minister Madhart of the Gerra-Aruka Republic stated: "Even if she did so to exterminate a terrorist group, we cannot overlook the fact she froze over part of our territory. We demand the Mulnite Empire take responsibility for her actions." Tensions have been rising between both nations in recent years, and the people are worried this event may cause irreparable damage to their relationship.

※

"I'll be going, Sis... I mean, Ms. Terakomari."

July 3.

Sakuna Memoir bade good-bye to her life-size Komari dolls and left home carrying a backpack. No, she wasn't heading on a journey. She was only going to visit Komari at the infirmary.

It was sunny outside. The river was gleaming in the sunlight. But Sakuna's heart was still cloudy.

During the fierce battle that day, Sakuna had been fated to die. And yet she'd awoken to find all her wounds healed, the side effects of the elixir gone, and even the contract spell with Inverse Moon removed.

At first, she'd thought a miracle had occurred, but soon she understood that wasn't the case. It had all been thanks to Terakomari Gandesblood. Sakuna heard about how she possessed the greatest Core Implosion power in history (while being ignorant of it herself), which Komari had used to break her curse.

Sakuna had vague memories of it. She remembered the white mana. A kind aura enveloping her. It had felt as though her sister was beside her then—but now she knew it was Ms. Terakomari.

She saved me again...

Sakuna sighed as she walked the streets of the capital.

She needed to dedicate the rest of her life to atonement. Not only for every bad thing she'd done as a member of Inverse Moon, but also for selfishly turning strangers into her own family. She had to do penance.

But would they forgive her? *Probably not*, she thought.

Her Majesty the Empress had no intention of denouncing Sakuna since she had "extenuating circumstances," but that didn't sit well with her. She'd hurt so many people. Particularly the Sixth Unit, who she had no way of apologizing to. Just the day before, she'd taken it upon herself to kill them all once again (a terrible and excruciating task) in order to give them their memories back. Shockingly, they'd told her not to beat herself up about brainwashing them; it was enough for them to know she'd been strong all along. But how could she not criticize herself? How was she supposed to face them now? She didn't even want to be a Crimson Lord anymore...

Sakuna kept trudging along, all gloom and doom, until she saw *that* black uniform.

It was Helldus Heaven. He was holding a bag of fruit as he approached her.

Then she remembered. She still hadn't fixed his memories.

"Oh, Sakuna! Going somewhere?"

Helldus smiled broadly at her. But she knew that was a mask, a façade she'd forced him to wear.

She felt all the weight of her actions bear down on her, so she wasn't able to reply right away.

"What a fine day it is. It would be a waste not to take advantage."

"...Yeah. What are you doing, Dad?"

It took all her emotional strength to call him that.

Helldeus's grin grew wider as he answered.

"I went grocery shopping. It is the sabbath today. What do you say, shall we go on a walk together?"

I should turn him back right now. Get him somewhere devoid of people and... pierce his heart like I did everyone's. Then I have to apologize. I don't know whether he'll forgive me, but I won't be able to move forward if I don't.

"Yeah. But first, could we go over to the other side of that shop, Dad?"

Sakuna grabbed his hand and started walking, but strangely, Helldeus refused to budge.

"There's no need for that!"

She turned around in surprise. The black-clad priest had removed his fatherly mask. He stared at her with the characteristic gaze of that crazy Crimson Lord.

"There'd be no point in killing me, Lady Memoir! I'm already Helldeus Heaven. I may be a Father, but I am not *your* father."

"Wha...?" Sakuna stiffened up in shock. Only her lips were trembling. "Since when...?"

"From the very beginning."

"My Core Implosion didn't work...?"

"Ha-ha-ha! I thought for sure I was done for when you killed me back at the church's storage room all those years ago, but don't forget that I am a Crimson Lord. Your imperfect Core Implosion wasn't enough to take control of my mind."

Sakuna was astonished. *So he was pretending all this time...?*

A vortex of question marks whirled around her head. Helldeus made an awkward smile in apology.

"When I realized the truth behind why you murdered me, I decided to be what you

wanted, to be your father. But I don't have the right. Not after all the pain I've caused you... This moronic priest couldn't be your father."

"Why...?"

"I thought about hiding this from you, but, well, I had been close friends with your real dad."

Sakuna's jaw dropped as she looked up at him.

"He was an odd fellow. We studied together at the Holy Church's institute. Oddballs such as myself are always ostracized, but he was stupid enough to deal with me. He taught me what it meant to love thy neighbor as yourself."

Yes. My dad was always so kind.

"You seem to have chosen members of your family based on their mental characteristics, but I surmise you selected me because I followed in God's teachings together with your real father."

Helldeus resembles my dad because of that kindness, like his night sky...

"...That's why, when I heard the Memoir family was massacred, I was ready to take revenge at any cost."

"Wait...!" Sakuna drew nearer, desperate. What was he thinking all this time whenever they'd talked? "I don't understand it. I really don't get it... You knew I was in Inverse Moon? You knew I murdered all those people? Why did you take me in?"

"I knew you were breaking the law under Odilon Metal's orders, yes. But I was also aware you suffered immensely while doing so."

"Then... Why did you let me go free? Why didn't you punish me?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have let you off, you're correct. I should've gone after Odilon Metal straight away to save you... But I couldn't. After all, you were always planning on taking revenge against Inverse Moon yourself."

Sakuna was shocked. She didn't think that was true... Or was it?

She'd always hated Inverse Moon, yes. And she did think they should pay for their crimes one day.

"God resides in the hearts of those opposing adversity. Since you wished to overcome your suffering of your own volition, it would have been pointless for me to butt in and kill Odilon Metal. Your revenge was yours to take. So I thought I should at least support you emotionally as your father... But I suppose that was conceited of me."

Sakuna clenched her fist.

From a certain angle, you could say he had been deceiving her all this time. And yet... She felt warm inside at the knowledge. Yet simultaneously, she felt a crushing sense of guilt.

I'd been making him worry that much for me, all this time?

"Why...?"

"Hmm?"

"Why are you smiling? I killed you... I was a terrorist... It doesn't make sense!"

"Probably not. They always told me nothing I did or said made sense."

"Punch me. I can't rest easy until you take it out on me," Sakuna pleaded, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"No way!" Helldeus smiled kindly. "The world is full of tragedies, and most people give in to them... But not you, Sakuna. You had the will to overcome them. How could I ever condemn someone as strong as you? And I won't let anyone else do it, either. No one has the right to cut off your future."

"Hah!"

"Truth be told, I'm the one who deserves a good fist to the face. I knew all you were going through and did nothing. Even if it was so that you could eventually overcome it yourself, that was an inhumane thing to do. So *you* should punch *me*. Do it! Now! Right here!"

Passersby turned around at us. "Yikes, those two are kinky." "Right here? In public?"

“It’s too early to be seeing this kind of thing...” Sakuna blushed.

“F-forget it! No punches!”

“I see. What a shame.” Helldeus truly looked disappointed. “Anyhow, you shouldn’t be wasting more time here with me. There’s somewhere you’ve got to be, right?”

“Huh?”

“You had the spirit to accomplish your revenge. But no matter how strong your will of steel is, if you continue living in suffering, it will shrivel again. And I, your fake father, can’t heal that... But you have that scarlet vampire princess to thank.”

“What do you mean...?”

“You cannot imagine the effort it took to have you accidentally blow up that Crimson Lord.”

Sakuna’s jaw was on the floor.

Thinking back to it, it was Helldeus who’d strongly advocated to promote Sakuna, and it was thanks to her new title that she gotten to meet that vampire princess.

Helldeus made a slightly lonely expression.

“You’ve made yourself a good friend. Now go on by yourself. You are no longer alone. And you’ve got more allies besides her, too. But if it ever gets hard again, tell me. I’ll become your dad once more whenever you want.”

“No, there won’t be a need for it. Thank you so much... Mr. Helldeus.”

She bowed to him.

Sakuna hurried to the infirmary, feeling the priest’s soft gaze on her back.

A strange warmth had built up inside her. She had thought this world was full of evil demons, but surprisingly, there had been someone who cared for her right here all along.

And she couldn’t be happier about it.



“Lady Komari, say *ah*.”

“N-no, I can eat by myself.”

“No. You are gravely injured. It is my duty as your maid to take care of you.”

“You’re also injured! I can’t have a wounded person nursing me!”

“Okay, then we’ll both say *ah*. We feed each other mouth-to-mouth.”

“You eat using your own hands! I’ll eat with mine!”

I snatched the fork from out of the sicko maid’s hand and ate the apple myself.

Two days had passed since the Crimson Match. We were in the infirmary.

Having been beaten to a pulp by Odilon, I was resting here until my wounds healed. One would usually spend only a day or two max in the infirmary to recover (from death, as the place was most commonly used as a morgue), but for whatever reason, I had lost all mana from my body, so I needed to be hospitalized for longer. The magic experts had said it would take me a week to be back in full form. Not that I had any problem with that!

I was finally shut in again, and for legitimate reasons. I couldn’t be happier about it... Or actually, I could. If only the sicko maid wasn’t here with me all damn day. I had books to read and thoughts to ponder, as intellectual scholars do. But she just wouldn’t let me be!

“By the way, Lady Komari, how are you feeling?”

“All right. I think I could get discharged any moment to rest in my own room.”

“That won’t do. You used Core Implosion, so we must have you recover here, where we can watch you for a while.”

“That again?”

According to Vill’s delusions, I’d used this so-called *Blood Curse* Core Implosion during

the Crimson Match. She claimed that I was the one who made Odilon retreat from the battlefield, and that I leveled the Inverse Moon hideout in the Gerra-Aruka Republic and turned it into a wasteland.

Pfft. Yeah, right. I'd seen the photos in the paper, and there was absolutely no way I'd created that barren field. It had to be a meteorite or something. Yeah. Those things are crazy, y'know.

I swallowed the last of my apple, and Vill glanced at me apologetically.

"It's my fault that you had to go that far, Lady Komari. I will never forgive myself for letting that masked lunatic do a number on me."

"Don't worry about it. Masked Psycho would've killed me if it wasn't for you, after all."

"I should've slain Odilon Metal myself, too."

Odilon Metal. Turned out that scary old guy was a member of Inverse Moon. I wasn't sure of the details, but apparently, he'd disappeared after that meteorite fell on the Gerra-Aruka Republic. It was all such a mystery. But well, at least nothing was holding Sakuna down now, so I figured I should be happy about it.

Right, Sakuna... I haven't seen her since. Wonder how she's doing.

"Hey, Vill, what happened to Sakuna?"

"Sakuna Memoir?" Vill's expression turned bitter. "I don't know. But considering she broke the law as a terrorist and misused her Core Implosion to manipulate the memories of all those people, I doubt she'll be let off without punishment."

"I see... Yeah, I guess."

"However, there are many points of sympathy in Lady Memoir's history, so I also doubt they'll just send her to the guillotine. In fact, many people have expressed their desire to protect her. Even Her Majesty wishes for a lenient measure."

"Where is she now?"

"Who knows. They didn't arrest her, so she's probably home." Then, she smiled. "Speaking of Her Majesty, Lady Komari, the Empress will be giving you a reward for

winning the Crimson Match.”

That also reminded me—why in the world was I the winner of the Crimson Match? For some reason, they gave me a bunch of points for everyone who died in the explosion. I think the wristband was broken.

“What will I get? A year’s supply of candy?”

“Two weeks off.”

“...What?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Was I hearing things?

“You got one week for catching the terrorist, and another week on top of it for your victory at the Crimson Match. You’ll be resting for a while.”

“Wh-WHAAAAATTT?!”

I stood up on the bed.

Two weeks... Two whole weeks off?! Am I really allowed such a precious treasure?! That's a hundred times better than getting a hundred million mells! Which means this prize is worth ten billion mells!

“Congratulations. You got your summer vacation.”

“Hell yeah! I’ll spend the entire time in my room!”

“Let’s not waste our summer like that. How about we go to the beach? To tell the truth, I already have over fifteen swimsuits ready for you. I tried them out on you while you were asleep, so no need to worry about the size.”

“I’ll think about it, but I’m definitely spending at least thirteen of those days home! And that’s final!”

I was jumping on the bed. What the hell? It felt like I was dreaming. So this was what happiness felt like...

Just then, I heard the door to the room open.

A silver-haired girl showed herself in.

Our gazes met. She looked ashamed.

"I-I'm sorry. There was no answer when I knocked, so... Am I interrupting?"

"Not at all! Welcome!"

I immediately sat on my heels, red in the face. What a blunder! I was supposed to look like the cool, wise senior in front of her. But it wasn't too late yet! I just had to act the part now.

She... Sakuna Memoir entered the room slowly, creeping up to me as if wading through a minefield.

Her expression lacked confidence. She looked nothing like she did back in the Crimson Match, when she'd been bursting with all sorts of emotions.

"Sakuna, are you okay?"

"Yes. All thanks to you, Ms. Terakomari."

She then took something out of her backpack. It was a plushie resembling me. She handed it over to me. *Why?*

"A get-well gift, if you don't mind..."

"O-okay."

Yeah, she was weird. Vill stared at us with jealousy burning across her face. Now *she* was strange. No, wait... Wouldn't majority rule say that I was the odd one out? I mean, sure, the way the doll managed to replicate my total knockout beauty, the likes of which are seen only once in a billion years, in a cartoony style was certainly exquisite.

I wasn't sure how to respond.

"Ms. Terakomari," Sakuna said, nervousness in her voice. "I've caused you so much trouble... And for that, I am sorry. I won't try to make you my sister anymore. I won't make any new family. I won't kill anybody. I won't do anything bad anymore... I'm really sorry."

“I see. I don’t mind it, though.”

Sakuna broke down. All the emotions she’d been holding back turned into tears.

“They all... Say that. You’re all so kind... But it bothers me. Please punish me, Ms. Terakomari.”

Oh, I see.

It always felt weird whenever you felt extremely guilty about something bad you did, but everyone went, “It’s fine.” “Don’t worry about it.” “Everyone makes mistakes.” I still thought the Empress would probably give her an appropriate penalty, but... Well, if she wanted me to punish her so badly, then punishment I would give her.

“Okay. Then go out with me.”

Wait. Oh, no, no, no. I didn’t mean it like that.

You could feel the tension in the air. Sakuna’s face was beet red, and she was flapping her mouth like a fish. Vill’s face looked like an ancient clay doll’s.

“What do you mean by that, Lady Komari? You don’t mean you—?”

“Hold on. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that... Sakuna, I’ll have two weeks off work. I plan on cooping myself up in my room, but maybe I’ll want to go out to hang with someone. So if I do end up inviting you, then come see me. Even if you have to skip work to do so, got that?”

Was that too haughty? I thought, but Sakuna was smiling, tears still welling out her eyes.

“Got it.” She nodded. “But that’s no punishment. You don’t have to tell me that; I will always come running if you call me.”

“O-oh, really? Ah, right! Then help me out with my novels! I still have lots of topics I want to write stories around... And it will be painful! Prepare yourself!”

“Yes. I will, Ms. Terakomari.”

Still, there was one little thing that was bothering me a bit. Her form of address was

too stiff.

"Stop calling me that. You and I, we're... You know, friends."

"Huh? Then what should I call you?"

"Just Komari. Everyone close to me calls me that."

I mustered up my courage and reached out my right hand. People shook hands as proof of reconciliation after a clash of emotions. At least, that's what books had taught me.

Sakuna hesitated a little, but then she reached out, too, and gripped my hand tight, with extreme care and a bit of fear. Then, she beamed brightly, and with a hoarse voice, she said:

"Thank you, Komari."

And so, I made a new friend.

There was little doubt that mountains of problems awaited us in the future, but rather than worry about it all alone, we could join hands and face them all together. And that was a hundred times better.

Now I had to think about what to do with Sakuna on my time off.

Going outside still didn't sound very pleasant, but perhaps we should go to the beach like Vill had suggested. Suddenly, I was starting to look forward to it. My heart raced thinking of what could come next as I gazed at Sakuna's smile.

Summer was approaching in Mulnite.

(END)

"The *Blood Curse* is no regular Core Implosion. The Crimson Match made that very clear," Lonne Cornelius asserted as she sipped on black tea.

The Warblade woman wore a crumpled white coat. She was one of the Lunae, the top brass of Inverse Moon, and served as the head of the tech division of the organization, which furnished it with all sorts of weapons and tools.

She was sitting on a fluffy sofa at the official residence of the prime minister of the Gerra-Aruka Republic.

Normally, she wouldn't go outside. She spent all day cooped up in her room, endlessly investigating all sorts of shady things. Her mindset wasn't so different from a certain vampire princess.

But this day was special. The second most important of the Lunae, Kakumei Amatsu, had forced her out, saying, "Come with me or I'll publish all your erotic novels under your real name."

How wicked he was. She had no choice.

Cornelius glanced beside her.

Amatsu was silent, his expression as blank as ever. She could never get a read on his true intentions. For example, Cornelius didn't want to do anything other than investigate whatever had piqued her interest, and that was the basis for all her actions. But him? He was only spreading misfortune throughout the world. She didn't see what the ideology behind all that was.

"What do you mean by that, Lady Cornelius?"

She returned her gaze to the front upon hearing her name.

Facing her was the prime minister of the Gerra-Aruka Republic, Madhart. He looked like any regular middle-aged man, but the ambition in his heart far exceeded any other ruler's.

He cared more about "war" and "supremacy" more than anyone else in the world.

"I mean what I said. You see... she sucked blood, right? Then she activated it, okay? But then she has different varieties of it. It's quite unusual."

"I'm asking what exactly is special about it."

“...Ugh. Well, more concretely, when she drinks a vampire’s blood, she turns out like she did against Millicent, and when she doesn’t, it’s like we saw now...”

“Can’t you make it easier to understand?”

Madhart sighed in disappointment.

Cornelius wanted to cry. Why did she have to talk to him? She wanted to go home. She just wanted to resume her experiments. She was on the verge of completing an invention that allowed shiitake to be cultivated at twice the regular speed... As she kept her gaze on the floor, lost in thought, she received a helping hand from the man at her side.

“Basically, Lady Cornelius means that Gandesblood obtains a different power depending on the species she drinks her blood from.”

“I see. More specifically?”

“She gains explosive mana and physical abilities when she drinks a vampire’s blood. When she drinks a Sapphire’s, she obtains powerful healing and freezing magic, plus a body hard as steel. In other words, she appears to obtain features that are characteristic to each species... Though this is still only conjecture. For further consideration, Sakuna Memoir is half-vampire half-Sapphire, which means her Core Implosion gave her traits of both species this time.”

“Y-yes, that! That’s what I meant! Good job, Amatsu!” Cornelius said.

“Try explaining yourself better next time.”

Aww...

“I see, now I understand. So we shouldn’t underestimate her. She did easily take out Odilon Metal, one Inverse Moon’s strongest warriors, after all.”

“No, actually, he still lives,” Amatsu said, unamused.

“...He lives? I thought Inverse Moon tolerates no mistakes.”

“I don’t. But Her Highness found out about it this time. She’s way too soft, so she forgave him. But anyway... He’s nothing more than a toothless tiger now.”

"Hmm... I understand. Yes, figureheads sure are annoying."

The man in the kimono frowned. Madhart didn't notice, however, and changed the topic.

"Now I understand Terakomari Gandesblood's ability. A Core Implosion that changes depending on the blood she drinks does sound like a troublesome power to go up against... What do you think would happen if she drank the blood of a Warblade?"

"No idea. Why do you ask?"

"Huh? I dunno..." Cornelius answered.

"You heard her. I'm sorry about how useless she is."

That hurt. Why did he have to be so aggressive?

Cornelius wiped her tears away and turned to look at Madhart again.

"A-anyhow, now you know. You should be careful if you plan on going against Mulnite. She's much more trouble than that Petrose Calamaria."

"Yeah... But it's not an issue. We have you on our side, after all."

No you don't? She thought, but...

"Leave it to us. We will deliver your country a hundred Divine Instruments."

...Amatsu eagerly responded.

"A hundred...? Do we have that many?"

"Not yet."

"So we'll have to make them?"

"*You'll* have to make them."

"What?"

Madhart smiled ear to ear.

"Excellent! I'm sure they'll be great, coming directly from *the* Lonne Cornelius! Our army will easily defeat those pesky vampires!"

"Wait, hold on. I just want to... Do my experiments..."

"Heh-heh. Inverse Moon will give you its full support. Halfway through, at least."

"I understand. Let's stay on good terms until Gerra-Aruka gathers and destroys all other Dark Cores. As for what happens next... We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Um... Could you please listen to what I..."

"Incidentally, do you have any idea where the Mulnite Dark Core might be?"

"We don't. That's why we'll go to war. And not the entertaining kind, but real, life-or-death conflict."

"I can't even make a hundred whole Divine Instruments..."

"Good. We'll pick up the bones after you, so go squander all that life."

"We will. Gerra-Aruka will change the history of the Six Nations. That's what the populace wants."

"My shiitake..."

Cornelius's cries fell on deaf ears.

The world was moving in a bloodier direction.

AFTERWORD

Nice to see you again. This is Kotei Kobayashi.

The thing I take most care about when writing *Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess* is making sure the main character leaves a strong impression. This volume saw Komari once again facing a fearsome foe against her wishes, but she didn't back down. I think it shows how kind and strong she is, being in a situation where only her own power may open a path up for her. Still, I would feel bad putting her in too strenuous a scenario, so I have to find a way to get things just right. Seeing as I'm still a newbie, I'm reminded every single day just how hard it really is to write a light novel. Anyhow, that's enough of that. Volume 2 of *Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess* once again is full of the cute&fluffy + brutal&gory atmosphere you've come to expect, so if you're the type to read the Afterword first, rest assured you will not be disappointed. I hope you enjoy it!

Now for some words of thanks.

A big thank you to riichu, for bringing Komari and her friends to life so beautifully. There were lots of new characters in this volume, too. Every time I got one of the cute and cool illustrations, I could only exclaim, "Amazing" "So cute!" "So cool!" like a broken record. Seriously, thank you.

Thank you as well to the book's cover designer, Ryo Hiiragi. I am very sorry for not conveying my gratitude to you in the Afterword of the first volume. I love the title logo; it's so colorful. Volume 2's band wrap is also very cute, with just the perfect *Vexations* feel. You have my gratitude.

To my supervising editor, Yoten Sugiura. There were lots more revisions in volume 2 compared to the first, and the story turned out better for it, so I am very grateful. I hope we continue working together for a long time.

And to you all, my readers. Thank you for following me up to this point. It is all thanks to you that I was able to publish this second volume. Your comments on Twitter encourage me to keep on working hard, so please look forward to what's next.

Vexations would have never been possible without all of your help. Once again, I

extend my sincere gratitude.

Thank you so much!!!

See you in the third volume.

Kotei Kobayashi

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