

The Vexations of a Shut-In VAMPIRE Princess

4

Kotei Kobayashi

Illustration by riichu

THE VEXATIONS OF A SHUT-IN VAMPIRE PRINCESS

– Hikicomari Kyuuketsuki no Monmon –

- VOLUME 4 -

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The Vexations of a Shut-In **VAMPIRE** **Princess**

4





“KARLA...”

“MS. GANDESLOOD.
SHALL WE?”

THE HEAVENLY BALL TO STARTS

DECIDE THE NEXT GODDESS NOW!!

Karin Reigetsu
Imperial Saber of the
Heavenly Paradise

Fuyao
Karin's Retainer

**Prohellya
Butchersky**
Arctic Master of
the Haku-Goku
Commonwealth

**Terakomari
Gandesblood**
Crimson Lord of the
Mulnite Empire

Karla Amatsu
Imperial Saber of the
Heavenly Paradise

CORE IMPLOSION:
BLOOD CURSE

"KARLA...LET'S TAKE BACK
YOUR DREAM."

CORE IMPLOSION:
WAVING MOMENT



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Epilogue

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Epilogue - Backstage



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of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

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Kotei Kobayashi

Illustration by riichu



New York

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Kotei Kobayashi

Translation by Sergio Avila
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Vexations

0 Prologue

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

Autumn. The season for reading, for art, for chowing down.

Some say it is the time for sports, but I couldn't disagree more. Fall was for hunkering down at home, nice and cozy. This summer had been jam-packed with all sorts of events, so I would need to take back some of my shut-in time during fall.

"Windows: check. Doors: check. Everything's locked."

No one was going to disturb my peace.

I had turned my room into a fortress while the sicko maid was in the bathroom. I had also posted a note that read *Not working today. Go play outside, 'kay?* on the door for good measure.

My peace and quiet now completely secure, I grabbed the latest volume of *The Andronos Chronicles* from my bookshelf and hurled myself onto the bed. The long-awaited sequel had just been published. The series was supposedly written by Crimson Lord Flöte Mascarail's older sister, by the way. Maybe I could ask her to get me an autograph. Or not. She'd likely murder me on the spot. Yeah, I shouldn't do that.

"All right! Vill's out and there's no work today, so it's time to have some fun!"

"I regret to inform you that I am here, you have work, and there is no time for fun."

"Whaaa?!"

I fell off my bed after hearing a strange voice. Was I hallucinating? My weary mind must've been playing tricks on me, or so I thought as I frightfully looked up at the bed...

and found the sicko maid pushing away my stuffed dolphin (Mk. II) as she lay atop my mattress.

“Wh-what are you doing here?! Didn’t you see the note?!”

“I pretended not to see it.”

“So you did!”

“Either way, I have no obligation to obey it.”

“...”

The worst part was that I immediately felt like giving up on trying to convince this shameless maid to leave me be. Did she really deserve her title? This girl was no maid—she was a stalker.

Vill maintained a composed expression even as I glared at her. I picked up my book from the floor.

“Let’s say I forgive you for sneaking into my room. Deep down, I already knew you’d show up anyways. But *how* did you do it? You didn’t smash the door, did you? Daddy scolded *me* when you did that last time, just so you know.”

“Don’t worry about that. I simply opened a hole in the ceiling of the lower floor.”

“STOP DOING THAT!!”

Indeed, there was a big hole in the ground. I could see the room below. And a ladder leading to it. Goddamn it.

“This is even worse! Daddy’s gonna kill me! And you can’t leave this hazard open—do something!”

“Relax. I’ll place a mat over it.”

“You’re making it a pit trap!”

I heaved a sigh. This was a threat. Vill was showing me that she would spare no effort to sneak in if I tried to shut myself away for so much as a second. She had been even

more persistent about making me go outside as of late.

I placed some books around the hole to construct an off-limits area, then scowled at Vill.

“Why do you insist on doing this all the time? I just want some alone time.”

“Life is short, so you’ll be wasting it if you don’t try to go outside.”

“I’ve got more than enough time. Besides, staying inside and reading books is a perfectly worthwhile pursuit in my eyes.”

“It would be more worth your while to work for the people. That’s why I brought some work for you.”

“No! Work can just blow up into smithereens for all I care!”

“Please, it’s nothing huge. Look at this.”

Vill handed me a letter. I already knew it had to be a declaration of war from that chimpanzee, so I opened it without a shred of hope in my heart, but my expectations were betrayed.

Party Notice

“I get nothing but bad vibes from this.”

“There will be no danger this time around. This is a gathering to promote harmonious relations and peace. The Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise will be hosting it.”

“Don’t let them trick you. You know something annoying’s gonna happen if we go.”

“It won’t. You remember the Six Nations War from last month, don’t you, Lady Komari? Every nation is beginning to implement all sorts of peace initiatives to prevent something like that from ever happening again. Think of this as the first step toward building an alliance between the nations of the world.”

“Hmm... It does sound like a reasonable event when you put it like that...”

The turbulent month of August had gone by in a flash, and it was now mid-October.

The war had left a scar on the world, and the most affected of the parties involved was the instigator, the Gerra-Aruka Republic. Following President Madhart's disappearance, the country rebranded as simply the Aruka Republic. According to the papers, they had celebrated their nation's new start for multiple days. The presidential election was held just last week, and Nelia Cunningham had seized the title. Her inauguration would be held in November, and I was invited, and planned on actually going.

I wondered how Nelia was doing. She was strong, for sure. Much more powerful and even charismatic than I was—but she was still a girl my own age. It sounded insane to me that a fifteen-year-old was to be the leader of a nation. I couldn't help but worry. Was she even eating properly?

I felt this strange affinity for her, perhaps because she'd been my mother's protégée. And because of that whole adventure we went through together in the Dark Core Zone. We'd even exchanged sips of blood. Also, she forgave me right at the very end of our battle the month before and settled for a draw. The audience had booed us hard, but whatever.

"If you're worried about Lady Cunningham, you should go to the party," Vill said as she buried her face into my pillow and sniffed it.

I immediately snatched it away from her. Gosh, I couldn't take my eyes off her for one second.

"Nelia's going, too?"

"Yes. All the bigwigs of each nation will be in attendance, as will the Six Valkyries."

"The who?"

"The six girls who have been drawing the most attention as of late. They consist of: Nelia Cunningham from the Aruka Republic, Karla Amatsu from the Heavenly Paradise, Lingzi Ailan from the Enchanted Lands, Leona Flatt from the Lapelico Kingdom, Prohellya Butchersky from the Haku-Goku Commonwealth, and of course, Terakomari Gandesblood from the Mulnite Empire."

"Don't just lump me in with that brutish-sounding group."

“It would be the perfect opportunity to pick a fight with them.”

“Why would I do that?!”

I puzzled over the situation as I gave my retort. It really didn’t sound like anything but trouble... but if their aim truly was to bring about peace, there was no way they’d suggest battling. Besides, I could also use my attendance as an excuse to turn down declarations of war from other commanders. Plus, I just wanted to see Nelia.

“Oh, fine. If you insist. I suppose it doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Very well. Let’s go get you a dress, then.”

“Why?”

“You’re allowed to attend in uniform, but that would be a waste of your once-in-a-lifetime knockout beauty. Let’s go buy you a new outfit.”

“Hmm. Y-yeah. Charm like mine only comes around once in a lifetime.”

“Indeed. We’ll get you a dress that is sure to get all eyes in the venue on you. We could also have one custom-made. Let’s level up your status to once-in-two-lifetimes beauty.”

“Hold on, there’s no need to go that far.”

“But the people already say that the Heavenly Paradise’s Karla Amatsu is a once-in-ten-thousand-lifetimes knockout beauty. You must show her who’s the real—”

“What would that get me? That’s just embarrassing, geez.”

“What is there to be embarrassed about at this point? Besides, you seemed very happy to compete over your fake power levels last time. Like a couple of children.”

I only did that because my life had been in danger.

Either way, I was also curious about Karla. She was one of my people—someone working toward world peace. I hadn’t seen her ever since the day we parted ways at that prison in the Dark Core Zone, so the party venue would be a good place to chat.

“Let’s go, then. We’ll settle for a once-in-a-lifetime outfit.”

“Yeah.”

The maid grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away.

I had no way of knowing then about what awaited me for the next five hours. Five long hours of her undressing me, measuring my whole body with her bare hands, and making me her dress-up doll.

※

“What am I, a doll?! Is this what Imperial Sabers are to them?!”

Karla Amatsu grumbled furiously as she walked down a long hallway of a giant mansion at the heart of the Eastern Capital of the Heavenly Paradise. The Amatsu Manor.

She’d been hoping to spend this Sunday on something worth her while, but the head of the family had summoned her. Karla was never the type to make a stand, so there was no way she could turn this down. She’d also been told she would get killed if she didn’t show up, so she had to give up on her nap and hurry over there.

Complaints poured from her mouth in an endless loop. How she detested the Amatsu family for being so unfair to her.

“Don’t they understand? Imperial Sabers are entrusted with the important duty of protecting the nation. They should be chosen based on their sheer aptitude and merit alone! To allow people like me to take up that space for nothing is to make a joke out of our nation!”

“I agree. You are a joke, Lady Karla,” said the ninja girl following behind her. Her name was Koharu, and she led the Kidoshu, the ninja squad that had served House Amatsu for generations. She was Karla’s right hand and was always around to protect her. “This is no job for your useless butt.”

Her right hand also happened to be quite irreverent.

“Yes, I know that! Gosh, what are My Goddess and my grandmother thinking? What’s the point of having a pretty doll just sitting there? They should know the answer: none.

There's no point."

"Do you know why they called for you?"

"No. But I'm sure they'll tell me to go to war again."

"That, too, but I think this could be about the sweets shop."

"Oh..."

Karla had recently started an Eastern-style confectionary shop called the Fuuzen out in the capital. No one knew the commander was running it, of course, but it was decently popular. A magazine had even put out an article about them. Karla's dream of becoming the capital's top pâtissier was slowly coming to fruition.

"They found out about the Fuuzen? I suppose they'll tell me to close up shop."

"Shall we close up before they say so?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves!" Karla turned to Koharu and clenched her fist. "It's finally the time to tell them, then. I've learned a lot seeing Nelia and Terakomari. One must be firm and clear in their wishes! God smiles upon those who do!"

"Go get 'em, Lady Karla."

"I will!"

"Let's practice. Repeat after me: *I don't want to be a commander!*"

"Huh? B-but..."

"You're too faint of heart to do this without practice. I can already see you bowing like a bobblehead the moment you face your grandmother. So repeat after me: *I don't want to be a commander!*"

"I-I don't want to be a commander!"

"Louder. *I want to be a pâtissier!*"

"I want to be a pâtissier!"

“Good, good. I won’t do as you say anymore!”

“I won’t do as you say anymore!”

“Eat shit, Grandma!”

“Eat shit, Grandma!! Aaahh... Yeah, I think I can do it now. If I ask as valiantly as I did just now, I’m sure Grandma will...”

“Eat shit?” came the voice of a reaper.

Karla turned around, her head squeaking like an old door.

Her grandmother was standing right behind her.

The woman’s eyes shone as sharply as a blade beneath her wrinkled brows. The head of the Amatsu family was going on seventy, yet she hadn’t lost any of the power that had been at her disposal back when she was feared as “Hell’s Windmill” during her time as a commander. A servant had spilled her miso soup recently, so she’d decided to spill their brains as punishment, bursting their forehead open with her bare hands. She had also been the Heavenly Paradise’s Goddess ten years prior, apropos.



Karla winced as her grandmother stared at her. She never failed to start trembling and lose all ability to speak whenever she faced the woman. Her face turning paler and paler, Karla looked at her ninja.

“Koharu?! Why didn’t you tell me she was right there?!”

“Hmm.” Koharu thought for a second before facing Karla’s grandmother. “Did you hear that, ma’am? Lady Karla says you are so forgettable she didn’t even notice you were here.”

“Koharu please shut up I’ll give you some candies later so please.”

“Sorry I don’t make much of an impression, then. You were taking so much time, I decided to go look for you. And now this? Speaking behind my back? Are you taking your position as commander seriously?”

Her elder’s pointed words gouged into Karla’s chest. She turned to face her grandmother and bowed meekly.

“...I’m sorry.”

“You carry the fate of our nation on your shoulders. As a daughter of the Amatsu, you have a duty to better the Heavenly Paradise. And you say you don’t want to be a commander? Ridiculous. You really don’t understand the responsibilities you bear, do you?”

“...”

“We can’t have this. The Heavenly Paradise has to lead the rest of the Six Nations, and that won’t be possible with your cowardice. Grow a spine already.”

Karla cursed the shackles of her family now more than ever.

Her grandmother had always wanted Karla to become a leader for the next generation.

But she couldn’t give up now. She could lead an easy life, but if she wanted to make her dreams come true, then she had to stand her ground.

“Grandmother.” Karla looked at her with unwavering determination. “Won’t you accept my wish to become a pâtissier?”

“Our family has protected the nation for generations. This is your mission as well.”

“Please, try this.”

Karla took a wrapper out of her pocket. The only thing that she thought could convince her grandmother was a show of her abilities. Her grandmother stared at her creation with suspicion as she opened it up.

“I made this fruit *youkan*. I bet you’ll enjoy the springy texture mixed with the crunchy freshness of the peach and apple slices inside. It is my greatest masterpiece, or so they say. Please, give it a try. And if you recognize my abilities in this field, then give me permission to quit as commander.”

Karla’s grandmother struck Karla’s hand, and her painstakingly crafted gelatin treat flew out of her palm. A heavy thunder struck once the sweet hit the cobblestones of the courtyard.

“Quit as commander?! You seriously dare suggest that?!”

The sheer look on her face almost made Karla well up, but she clenched her fists and glared back at her.

“Y-you’re so terrible! How could you waste food like that?!”

“Use your Core Implosion if you’re so upset about it. You can easily put it back together.”

“What are you talking about?! Only special people like Nelia and Terakomari are capable of that! You vastly overestimate me! Stop forcing me to do this! Have you ever thought about giving your granddaughter a break?!”

“I have to be strict like this because you’re such a coward! I even heard you’ve been selling sweets at the capital! Who gave you permission to do that?!”

“You have no right to complain about my shop! The Court gave me a business license! Right, Koharu?!”

“I’m sorry, Lady Karla. I forgot to get that.”

“So we’re doing business illegally?!”

“I’ll make sure not to forget to report us.”

“You’re putting effort into all the wrong places! You dummy!”

“You’re the dope here!!”

“Agh!”

Her grandmother grabbed Karla by the collar. Unbelievable as it was to think someone would do this to her own granddaughter, Karla wasn’t surprised by it—her grandmother had beaten her up multiple times since she was little. She’d transformed into an insanely aggressive woman after she stepped down as Goddess for health reasons.

Yup, I’m getting killed.

“How many times have I told you? The Amatsu are warriors who work for our country.”

“I-I know that. I know, but...”

“If you really want to quit being a commander, then fine.”

“Huh? Huhh??”

“You have a message from the Goddess.” She shoved Karla away and pushed a piece of paper to her chest. Her eyes gleamed like a demon’s as she said, “You’re aware of the party the Heavenly Paradise is holding, right? All six nations are invited.”

“Y-yes.” Karla nodded as she grabbed the paper.

“The Goddess said she’s taking the opportunity to hold the Heavenly Ball. The details are right there. Read them. I’ve had enough talking to you for today. It’s about time you steeled yourself,” she said as she left.

Karla couldn’t understand what was going on, but Koharu was furious, puffing up her cheeks.

“After *she* summoned you? Rude.”

“Well... you know how she is.”

“She didn’t even serve us a snack.”

“That’s what you take issue with?”

“Oh well, I guess I’ll settle for your sweets.”

Koharu reached for the jelly on the ground. Karla grabbed her hand.

“Don’t do that. You’ll get sick.”

“But you put so much work into making it...” Koharu immediately shut her mouth in regret.

Karla smiled.

“I’ll give you as many as you want once we’re back home.”

“No, I just wanted to eat this so as not to waste food. I don’t really want to eat *your* food.”

“Is that so? Still, don’t eat that.”

“Okay... Anyways, shouldn’t you read that letter?”

Koharu’s blunt tone got a wry smile out of Karla. *Just accept you like my sweets*, she thought, opening the letter. She read through its contents and...

“...What?”

...felt her heart stop.

Koharu peered over from her side to read it.

“Let’s see. *The Heavenly Ball will be held with Karla Amatsu and Karin Reigetsu as candidates*. Oh... Hey, so you can quit being a commander. Good for you, Lady Karla.”

“...uh.”

“Uh?”

“Uhh! Ugggh! UUUGGGHHH!”

Karla threw the letter away.

The Heavenly Ball was a huge event that only came around once in a generation. It decided the future of the Heavenly Paradise. She never thought she would have to participate in it. How could the world be so unfair?

“Why...? Why the Heavenly Ball...?”

“It says they want to reform the country. Oh, and also that it’s to fight off terrorism.”

“Where are these ‘terrorists’?! There’s nothing but peace in the Heavenly Paradise!”

Karla’s groans dissolved in the air of the Eastern Capital, blown away by the autumnal wind.

She was an Imperial Saber, so she had no right to oppose the Goddess’s decision. Otherwise, she’d meet an explosive end. And she obviously didn’t want that.

Come to think of it, she had lived her whole life at the behest of someone else.

Will the day I’m free to follow my dreams ever come? Karla thought, gazing at what was left of the *youkan* on the ground.

※

The terrorist was right around the corner.

A waning moon shone gold in the night sky.

The City of Flowers. The Eastern Capital of the Heavenly Paradise’s elegant townscape was already quiet under the shroud of darkness. Its citizens were deep in their dreams, oblivious to the threat to their country.

“Complacent idiots.”

A figure stood atop the roof of the Osui Palace—the Cherry Jade Palace—where the

Goddess resided.

It was a small-framed girl, carrying a blade on her hip. She looked down upon the Eastern Capital as she produced a Correspondence Crystal from her pocket. Her pesky boss always called late at night to check on her status.

“How are you doing? Any problems?” came the calm voice of a man.

Annoyed, she answered, “We would be done for if we were having issues at this stage. Terakomari Gandesblood isn’t even here yet.”

“Take care. We’re going up against some real monsters this time. They’re capable of using Core Implosion.”

“Don’t worry. Core Implosion or not, I’ll take care of it.”

She heard a sigh from the other end of the line.

“Don’t forget that our objective is obtaining the Heavenly Paradise’s Dark Core, not starting a massacre. Her Highness will be very pleased if you can manage just that.”

“Her Highness, eh?”

The Wicked God Slayer’s motto was: “Life is meant to be in the shadow of death.”

Which was why Inverse Moon schemed to destroy the Dark Cores that granted the people eternal life. *They sure have their work cut out for them*, she thought, before remembering that she, too, had the Inverse Moon emblem engraved on her chest through contract magic. An eerie emblem crafted in the shape of a crescent. The moon was the Mulnite Empire’s trademark, which was why Inverse Moon’s symbol was upside down, as the name suggested.

“Also, make sure that Kakumei Amatsu doesn’t find out about you. It would only cause problems.”

“Is this about tension between factions? I can’t believe you have the energy to compete internally. Please leave me out of that nastiness.”

The girl crossed her arms as she made the Correspondence Crystal levitate in midair with magic.

It was fall in the Eastern Capital, and the nights were chilly, but this level of cold was just enough to quell the fires of bloodthirst burning inside her chest.

“I’ll do as I please, got it?”

“*No, you will do as I say. We have to stick to the plan.*”

“Let me tell you, this ‘plan’ of yours is full of holes. We shouldn’t leave anything off the table if we really want to kill who we’re after. Keep worrying about the rules, and everything will go down the drain.”

“*Says the girl whose pride dictates everything she does?*”

“Hah. Yeah, yeah. I’ll do it my way.”

“*Don’t do anything unreasona—*”

She smashed the Crystal on the roof.

The girl saw no point in constant reporting. She needed only complete her objective. The top brass wouldn’t be able to complain about her methods once she showed them results.

A cool breeze stroked her hair.

The rustling of the leaves of an eight-hundred-year-old cherry tree echoed throughout the Eastern Capital. It was still in full bloom, despite it being fall. The tree itself was an object of worship at the Celestial Shrine connected to the Osui Palace—a magic cherry tree that stayed in full bloom all year round. What a joke.

“...So cold.” The girl trembled.

Fall. The season for reading, for sports, for chowing down... Many motifs were popularly attributed to this season, but she didn’t think any of them fit. What best suited fall was art. Revolution that would paint the world in blood and screams.

“The pursuit of strength is an art in itself. You know what I mean, don’t you, Terakomari Gandesblood?”

Vexations

1 The Six Valkyries

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

The Heavenly Paradise was holding a party in the Dark Core Zone.

Vill warped me who knows where with her teleportation magic and dragged me by the arm all the way to a huge palace. VIPs from the whole world over were gathering there, every one of them dressed in luxurious finery. Some of them were glancing at me and murmuring to one another. Why?

“You’re as popular as ever, Komari! I’ll keep you safe. Can’t let anyone get their filthy paws on you. Gimme your hand. And your arm. Let’s chat by that tree over there.”

“Get your grubby mitts off me!”

I shoved away the blond woman as I looked around. There were about thirty people from the Mulnite Empire there. The ones I recognized were the Empress, Vill, Sakuna, some high-ranking officials I didn’t know really well, and the Empress’s escorts.

“The other Crimson Lords weren’t invited? It’s just Sakuna and me?”

“Petrose is here, too. Though I suppose she’s already stuffing her cheeks at the venue.”

“The commander of the First Unit, huh... Now that you mention it, I’ve never actually met her”

“You have, actually. Regardless, you were the only Crimson Lord they specifically invited, yes. I chose everyone else. I figured you’d have more fun with Sakuna around.”

I had no idea the Empress could be so considerate. I turned around and saw the silver girl. Sakuna Memoir smiled and waved at me. So cute. But anyhow.

“What do you mean they only invited me specifically? What makes me so special?”

“The Heavenly Paradise bigwigs wanted you here. You’re a hugely popular Crimson Lord, so it should be no surprise.”

“They should’ve invited Flöte or Heldeus instead...”

“Flöte did want to come, but we couldn’t take so many Crimson Lords off duty at once. I asked her to watch over the country in your place.”

You what? Oh, that’s definitely getting me killed once I’m back. Guess the Empress is inconsiderate after all. Vill noticed me quivering in fear and smiled.

“Don’t worry. I made sure to stop by to meet her before we left.”

“Did you provoke her in any way?”

“I told her, ‘Serves you right.’”

“WHY?! ”

This maid only ever did what I *didn’t* want her to do. I could already see a skewering in my future.

Speaking of Flöte, she’d been acting strangely ever since the whole Gerra-Aruka ordeal. She didn’t quite look down on me like she had before; I mean, she still totally looked down on me, but there was also this air of caution about her. It was so weird and scary that I’d sworn to stay as far away from her as I could.

I stepped into the palace and felt all eyes fall on me.

Inside the splendid hall was a sort of reception area where you needed to write down your name. As I awkwardly held the brush and did my best to spell out *Komari*, the Empress suddenly started massaging my shoulders and rubbing her cheeks against me.

“Sorry to leave you, but I gotta go elsewhere. I have some work to do.”

“Work? Now? And get off me, I can’t write.”

"An acquaintance asked me to do some recon. I'm sure you'll be sad without me, but you'll have to tough it out."

"I won't be sad."

"She will not, Your Majesty. She has me," Vill said.

"Don't hug me! Agh! You made me write *Komarin*!"

I screamed while trying to get the sicko maid and Empress off me. These clowns never understood how to discern what was and wasn't appropriate. Just then, Sakuna grabbed the hem of my clothes and said, "I-I'm here with you, too!" *Please don't. I don't want you becoming a sicko as well.*

"Anyhow. I'll see you later. You all enjoy the party. Make sure the Heavenly Paradise fellows give you a warm reception."

"By the way, where are you going, Your Majesty?"

"Don't worry, Villhaze. There won't be a problem if nothing happens. Later!"

She walked away while cackling. *She sure has a lot of work for someone who doesn't look it*, I thought, when suddenly I noticed someone staring at me from the other side of the reception table. It was a girl in a kimono. A Peace Spirit with striking rainbow-colored hair ornaments... *Hmm? Hold on. Do I know her from somewhere?*

"You are Lady Terakomari Gandesblood, correct?"

I nearly dropped the brush.

"Y-yes. And who is asking?"

"Excuse me. I am Karin Reigetsu. One of the Heavenly Paradise's Five Imperial Sabers."

The graceful tone of her voice was sharp as a blade. Like the looong blade she was carrying, in fact. I knew that being a *warrior* in the Heavenly Paradise came with a lot of social sway, so maybe she was one of those.

Karin Reigetsu, huh? I felt like I'd heard the name somewhere, but I couldn't place it. I had to be careful of what I said next. If I went with "Nice to meet you!" and then she

replied with “We’ve met before, though?” I would have to snatch her blade and cut open my belly on the spot. Think. Who was she? Who?

As I racked my brains in search of an answer, Karin Reigetsu smiled in disappointment and said, “I was on the defense team during the siege of Faure. I did not achieve much, so it is no surprise you have forgotten...”

“A-ah! Right!” I finally remembered. That was when my maid had transported me, bed and all, over there. Karin had been among the commanders who had surrounded me. I think. “Sorry. It’s rude of me not to remember a comrade in arms.”

“No, please don’t worry about it. Compared to your bravery and accomplishments, I am but a cloud in the wind. In any case, I’m pleased to welcome you here. The purpose of this party is for all six nations to come together in our wish for peace. Let’s forget about the fighting and have a pleasant time.”

“R-right! Yes, let’s forget about the fighting.”

“Indeed.” She smiled nobly.

Funny of her to say that while she was armed, but okay. Commanders were violent like that by default, and I was already used to it.

“But I was truly impressed by your display, Lady Gandesblood.”

“Huh? Whatcha mean?”

“The Core Implosion that turned Aruka’s Daydream Unit into gold.”

That again?

The misinformation going around had everyone thinking I’d cloaked myself in some golden mana or whatever and gone on a rampage. At first, I thought it had just been Vill going crazy (I mean, I still thought she was), but then a lot of other people told me how amazing I was and how much they respected me and stuff, and it couldn’t have been eerier. Still, I had to make use of that unnerving misinformation to survive.

“Yeah. I was awesome. And it was only one sixth of my true power.”

“Hee-hee. I am green with envy. How bright the talented shine. I cannot help but feel

small when I consider how many prodigies surround me. Right, Fuyao?" Karin Reigetsu turned to look at her side.

Then, for the first time, I noticed there was someone else there.

I couldn't believe my eyes for a moment. She had a big golden tail coming out of her butt. So fuzzy. So fluffy. The furry thing swung quietly from left to right. I wanted to touch it so bad. I needed it in my hands.

"Say hello to our guests, Fuyao," Karin Reigetsu said with a rough tone.

The fox-eared girl sluggishly reached out her right hand, as though she had just woken up from a nap. But then, *click*. A switch flipped.

"Hello there! I'm Fuyao Meteorite! I'm Imperial Saber Karin Reigetsu's retainer! Nice to meet you!"

"Huh? U-uh, yeah." I was taken aback. "I'm Terakomari. Nice to meet you, too."

"Very nice! It really is an honor to be in your presence, Lady Terakomari!"

She held out her left hand, so I responded in kind.

Her palm was hard. Maybe swinging a sword all day made your hands feel like that.

Fuyao beamed broadly. Her smile was so pure it got me all flustered.

Come to think of it, this might have been my first time properly interacting with a beast-folk. Though I had experienced chimpanzees and giraffes trying to kill me. No, wait, I was forgetting about Bellius. Hmm, was he a wolf? Or a dog? I snapped back to reality once she pulled my arm, and I noticed I was still gripping her hand.

Fuyao's shapely face was right in front of my eyes. I felt her sweet breath on my cheeks.

"Lady Terakomari! Beware!" Her fox ears twitched. I wanted to touch them so bad.
"Lady Karin Reigetsu is not as nice as she seems!"

"Huh?"

"I'm just saying nothing good will come out of getting involved with the Heavenly

Paradise! The Goddess seems to be plotting something! You better be prepared to die before you stick your neck into it!"

"What are you murmuring about, Fuyao?"



“Nothing! Nothing, Lady Karin!”

Then Fuyao let go of me. I didn’t understand a word she’d said. Why, you ask? Well, because I hadn’t heard any of it. I was directing all my attention to her swaying golden tail. *Maybe I’ll ask if I can touch it later.*

I was still holding in that urge when Karin Reigetsu smiled at me and said:

“Excuse my little fox. Anyhow, please enjoy the party. We have plenty of fun in store.”



The venue was exceedingly luxurious.

Every single person there was overflowing with grace and elegance. The tables were chock-full of sumptuous food. Someone at the piano in the back was playing what I believe was classical music that was all the rage in the Haku-Goku Commonwealth as of late. It was a noble banquet in every respect.

This kind of crowded place wasn’t my sort of thing, though. Plus, everyone in my vicinity was still looking at me and whispering at each other, so I really wanted to go home right away. However, Vill grabbed my hand to prevent my escape.

“Let me go.”

“We can’t have you getting lost.”

“What am I, a kid?! No, I’m not running away at this point. I decided I’d come here by myself. I’ll enjoy the party for once.”

“Let’s dance, then. I will lead.”

“Gosh no, how embarrassing.”

“Then how about we eat some dumplings, Ms. Komari?” Sakuna asked.

“Sounds good.”

“Say ah,” she said as she held out a skewered dumpling covered in sweet soy sauce.

I took a bite and savored the sweet, springy treat. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say I had come here for the food.

I returned the favor by holding out skewered red bean dumplings to Sakuna. Just as she shyly opened her mouth to accept it, Vill suddenly got ahead of her.

"Nooo! That's not fair, Ms. Villhaze!"

The maid chewed it up and gulped it down before replying, "Let it be known you are the only thief here, Lady Memoir. I was about to trick... *convince* Komari into dancing when you got in the way."

"She said she didn't want to. You can't force her to do it."

"You really don't get it. Persuading her is as easy as telling her she would get a day off if she agreed."

"I would never fall for such an obvious trap," I said.

"Of course she wouldn't. She's a scholar and a genius," Sakuna added.

"That much is true. By the way, Lady Komari... I forgot to tell you that Her Majesty the Empress will concede you one week of vacation."

"Huh? Why...?"

"Labor reforms have been taking place, and after careful examination of your work hours, it's been found you have been working a bit too excessively."

"Don't think you need careful examination to realize how exploitative the conditions are, but okay."

"So you have to take a week off—otherwise, they would be breaking the law."

"Are you for real?!"

"You get to rest now. Isn't that great?"

"Yeah!"

“Don’t you wanna dance with joy?”

“Yeah!!”

“Very well, then allow me to lead you in this dance.”

“Yeah!!!”

“It’s a trap, Miss Komari! I haven’t heard of any labor reforms, and you actually work the least out of all the Crimson Lords! She’s lying!”

“Tch... I was so close...”

“You filthy LIAAAR!!”

I hit Vill with the full force of my feeble arms.

Stupid maid. Always raining on my parade!

And just as I was fuming inside...

“Komari! Long time no see.”

...I heard my name and turned to find the source of the voice.

It was girl whose pink hair was pulled into pigtails. Nelia Cunningham, the president of the Aruka Republic. Behind her was Gertrude Rainsworth, looking at us with an uneasy expression.

“Nelia! Long ti—” I raised my right hand to wave at her, when the smiling Moonpeach Princess just hugged me out of the blue. She caught me totally off guard. Vill and Sakuna and Gertrude shrieked like birds.

“How are you? I’m doing great, by the way,” she said.

“C-cool. That’s nice. Could you let me go now?”

“I will if you’re willing to become my maid. Then I’ll never let you go.”

“You’re still going on about that? I told you, I can’t be a maid.”

"That's right, Lady Nelia! Terakomari is too clumsy to be one! She'll break five plates a day!" Gertrude exclaimed.

Hey! I can do the dishes just fine. Not that I've ever tried.

"I'm kidding," Nelia whispered into my ear before letting me go.

Vill and Sakuna glared at her as they stood beside me.

"Oh my. Don't give me that look. Remember, Komari and I are close friends. Close enough to exchange blood."

"Enough of your jesting, Lady Cunningham. I can't deny the fact that Lady Komari drank your blood, but there's no proof you drank hers. First of all, you Warblades can't even ingest other peoples' blood."

"Oh, but it's true. And we did it to deepen our bond."

Vill shrugged and sighed. "Preposterous. Don't let her off scot-free, Lady Komari. Have you ever heard of this scam where a stranger sends in a marriage registration form and has you married off without your consent? It's that sort of thing. She's up to no good."

"But it's true," I said.

"?!?!?"

Thunder struck. I had no idea why the mood had shifted, but I added:

"It happened beneath the Daydream Paradise. Nelia said she wasn't sure of herself... and stuff happened, so we exchanged blood. Either way, we were like sisters from the very beginning. I don't mean that we're related, but she was my mom's protégée."

"Fine, then drink my blood right now as well, or I'll lose my mind on the spot and stick my head into your skirt."

"Wh-what's the logic here?!"

Vill started moving suspiciously, while Sakuna stood in despair behind her, muttering, "She really did it..."

"Ah-ha-ha!" Nelia laughed, then grabbed my hand. "Looks like you're in high demand. But you should think seriously about how people around you feel."

"Huh?"

"Maybe I'm not the best person to say this, but your self-assessment being off the mark can sometimes bring about conflict. You're better than you think you are."

"Considering I am a once-in-a-lifetime knockout beauty, that might be the case, yeah."

"Now that's way off the mark."

"Wha... I'm not??"

"That's not what I mean. Wait, don't start crying! I was just kidding! You are cute! You are a once-in-a-lifetime knockout beauty! There, there." Nelia started patting my head for some reason.

What's she even saying? No way I would start crying after getting told I wasn't actually a once-in-a-lifetime knockout beauty. Don't treat me like a child. I was just shocked a little, is all.

"Anyways." She changed the subject. "Setting aside that knockout stuff, let's enjoy the party. I see they have pudding over there. It's your favorite, right? Go get some to cheer you up."

"I'm not sad or anything, though. But I will gladly accept the pudding."

Nelia pulled my arm into the crowd. I let her take me with her. I'd come all the way to this party; why not enjoy it?

"So how are things going as president?" I casually asked while savoring the matcha pudding.

"Well," Nelia answered, pausing between bites of custard. "It's tough. Aruka's government is in shambles right now, so the first order of business is to reorganize everything. We're just extremely understaffed. I'll have to use Madhart's guys."

“Will that be okay? They did all sorts of awful things, didn’t they?”

“I’ll get the least dangerous ones. I can just beat up whoever tries to rebel anyways, so it’ll be all right.”

“You sure are confident, huh.”

“Well, my approval rating is through the roof. Whoever goes against me goes against the will of the people. They already know what trying to launch a coup would get them, so even if they’re plotting something, they can’t lift a finger.”

Nelia seemed to have matured since the last time I saw her. Or perhaps I should say she’d gotten more refined. Guess that’s what becoming president did to you. *I wonder if the Aruka Republic will become the Nelia-Aruka Republic. That would be funny.*

“She’ll be fine!” Gertrude said with a smile. “I’ll take care of anyone who dares oppose her!”

“Hee-hee. I’m counting on you, as one of the Eight Illustrious Generals spearheading our newly born Aruka Republic.”

“Yes... Though it’s only me right now, not eight.”

“I guess I could get Abercrombie. Or how about Komari? Imagine that—the first Crimson Lord cum Illustrious General.”

“That doesn’t sound nice in the slightest! I have more than enough on my plate being a Crimson Lord.”

“Too bad.” Nelia grinned.

I couldn’t wait to stop being a Crimson Lord. The only jobs I was actually fit for were novelist or philosopher.

“Anyways, that’s how it’s been for me. Madhart didn’t leave anything of use after he just up and vanished, so we’re swamped with work. Can’t even fit in the time for a tea party.”

“Wow. Sounds rough.”

"Take note while you can, Lady Komari," Vill said after finishing her udon. "You are to become the Mulnite Empire's next Empress. Take Lady Cunningham's hardships as reference for what's to come."

"Don't listen to her, Nelia. This maid is a pro at spouting nonsense."

"I don't think what Villhaze is saying is nonsense." She grinned. I had a very bad feeling about this. "Komari, have you heard of the nickname the 'Six Valkyries'?"

"Yeah... Vill told me about it."

"I think some paper coined it. In short, it's a moniker for six girls who have made remarkable achievements as of late. In other words, they're the candidates for the next head of state for each of their countries. And you're in that group."

"That doesn't mean I'm becoming the next Empress."

"Sure enough... By the way, did you know that the Six Valkyries are here tonight? I think it would be worthwhile to go analyze them."

"I think observing people is rude..."

"Oh, come on." Nelia looked like she was having a blast.

Come to think of it, I may have seen a Six Nations News headline that went "President Cunningham's Pastime: Observing People." Supposedly, she was walking around the city looking for capable people to hire. It also said she had six times more maids working at the Executive Office now compared to Madhart's administration. Kinda scary. But considering my source was Six Nations News, it was likely all made up.

"Look at those guys from the Lapelico Kingdom over there. That's Leona Flatt, one of the Four Holy Beasts and one of the Six Valkyries." Nelia pointed with her eyes at a group of beast-folk.

At the center stood a girl with a cheerful smile. Cat ears sprouting from her head. Cat tail growing from her butt. Her fur was a pretty brown color.

"I've got a question," I said.

"What is it?"

"So there's beast-folk that look entirely like animals, like the chimpanzees and the giraffes, but then there's also girls like her who just have animal ears and tails. Why is that?"

"It's one of the universe's greatest mysteries."

It really was. I decided not to question it further.

Nelia grabbed a bite of her custard pudding before getting back on topic.

"The Lapelico Kingdom's citizens are like beasts—they just act out of instinct. But not Leona. She's quite the reasonable person and is working hard to make Lapelico more intellectual on the whole. They call her the Jungle's Only Straight Man."

"What's up with that name?"

"Weird, right? Anyways, getting close to her should prove productive. She's also strong on top of being reasonable. They say she's a shoo-in for Lapelico's next queen."

I tried stealing a glance at her.

She was squinting in joy as she munched on some beef stroganoff.

Out of nowhere, three capybara men ran up to her with a pale expression.

"Lady Leona, we've got trouble."

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"There are no bananas."

"Bananas? How about you go without them for once? Here, have some meat."

"It is unbelievable that they would invite guests from the Lapelico Kingdom and not have bananas. That's basically declaring war against us."

"He's right!" "Give us the bananas!" "The Heavenly Paradise won't get away with this!"

"S-settle down! The aim of this party is to promote peace!"

“They’re the ones who’ve disturbed the peace. We have a just cause.”

“You don’t!! Look, there’s grapes and apples, too. Just eat something else if you want a snack that bad.”

“Bananas are not snacks!! They’re the main dish!!”

“What are you, a kid?! Hey, stop chanting magic!!”

“We’ll go take over the kitchen. Wait here for us, Lady Leona.”

“Hold ooon!! This is why everyone calls us the Clown Kingdom!!”

.....

.....

...I find this relatable, actually. Gives me a strong sense of déjà vu.

And so began a game of tag between catgirl and capybaras.

“Lapelico’s at it again.” “They sure never get tired of it.” Everyone around looked on with slight discomfort.

“Gee,” Vill said as she shrugged. “So they’re naught but beasts in the end. Always so quick to resort to violence.”

“You think that doesn’t apply to us?” I countered.

In any case, I felt like I could get along with Leona, so I decided to go talk to her later.

“They’re as funny as ever. And I think Lapelico will only get more interesting if that catgirl becomes queen. They would also become more prominent in the international community,” Nelia said.

“It’d be better than the chimpanzee becoming king, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, look, Komari, there’s the Immortals.”

“Immortals...? Ah.”

In the opposite direction was a group of people dressed in Eastern garments. I hadn't yet had much to do with the people of the utopia at the south, the Enchanted Lands. The one who stood out the most was the girl wearing a frilly peacock-like outfit.

Our eyes met.

I couldn't discern her expression as her eyes pierced into mine. I felt awkward and waved at her with a friendly smile. She waved back, albeit inexpressively.

"Is that girl also one of the Six Valkyries?"

"She is. Lingzi Ailan, one of the Three Draconic Meteors and the next Tianzi of the Enchanted Lands. They say she's so powerful she can burst the heart of whoever she locks eyes with."

"Ha-ha-ha. I'm going to the restroom."

"Relax, Lingzi's also known to be a true pacifist. She won't attack you."

"Really...?"

"Really. By the way, the Enchanted Lands is a hereditary monarchy, so her title is guaranteed. We should make her acquaintance while we can. Maybe I'll gift her a maid outfit."

"I don't think anyone would want an acquaintance who does that."

I turned to look at Lingzi Ailan as I rebuked Nelia.

An unknown man was talking to her... and he wasn't an Immortal. He was tall, and he sported pure-white clothes and a pure-white beard—a Sapphire. *Hmm. Who was he, again? I think I've seen him in the papers...*

"Those guys are from the Haku-Goku Commonwealth. The one speaking with Lingzi Ailan is the secretary general."

"The secretary general?"

"Haku-Goku's head of state. Their equivalent to your Empress, or me, the President."

I stared at him in shock.

Sure enough, he had the poise of a leader. Though he didn't seem as imposing as the Mulnite Empress. Perhaps it was his soft smile that gave that impression... Then, Sakuna, standing right beside me like a loyal dog, whispered into my ear:

"Be careful, Ms. Komari. That guy joined hands with the Gerra-Aruka Republic to try and destroy Mulnite."

"Huh? He did?"

"Lady Memoir is correct." Vill started whispering into my other ear. "The Haku-Goku Commonwealth's secretary general is a known bellicist. And he has no qualms about resorting to even dirtier tricks than Madhart. Just looking at him will pollute your eyes, so stay away."

"I can't think like that when I don't even know the guy..." Feeling bad for the man, I glanced at him again.

Then he noticed me. He said goodbye to Lingzi Ailan and walked up to us with a smile on his face.

"Oh my. If it isn't Commander Terakomari Gandesblood. I am so lucky I get to meet the crimson vampire princess everyone's been talking about."

"Huh? Uh, n-nice to meet you."

"An honor to hear those words from your mouth. I'm the secretary general of the Communist Party of the Haku-Goku Commonwealth. It's a privilege to meet you, Commander Gandesblood."

He smiled and reached out his right hand.

I got nervous. Not so much because a young man was doing it, but because he was the ruler of a whole country. Any show of courtesy could lead to war. I had to think of a compliment to make everything go by peacefully. *Yo, that outfit is sick!!* Yeah, sounds good.

"The honor is mine, Secretary Ge—"

"Could you please get your filthy hands away from Lady Komari, Secretary General?"

And *slap*. Vill smacked his hand away.

My eyes turned into dots, as did his. A second of silence passed, until Nelia broke it by chuckling, and I finally recovered my sense of reason.

"Y-you IDIOT! What are you thinking?!"

"This man also has a reputation for being a womanizer. I can't let him touch you."

"That's not the issue here! He's the big cheese of a big country! What if this turned to war?! I-I'm sorry, Secretary General. I'll tickle this maid to death later on, so please forgive us."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! The Mulnite Empire sure has a sense of humor!" He held his sides as he laughed.

Meanwhile, Vill had a kunai in hand and a scary expression on her face. *Please stop it. Don't make it even worse. Even you, Sakuna? Put down that staff. Why are you all so wary? Is he really that bad?*

"My, my. It seems I'm not liked here. I understand how you feel, though. Here, let's make some small talk to relax tensions."

"Yeah. Should we talk about pudding?"

"Pudding! Sounds great. One of my subordinates is a big pudding fan, actually. Her name's Prohellya. Are you acquainted?"

A question mark popped above my head, so Nelia spoke instead:

"Commander Butchersky, one of the Six Arctic Masters. I know about her. They say she destroyed Mulnite's fortress city in the war."

"I should have known that President Cunningham would be knowledgeable. Yes, Commander Butchersky butchered Faure during that affair. And she loves pudding. I'm sure she would be good friends with you, Commander Gandesblood."

"O-oh. And is this Prohellya here now?"

"Yes, she's gracing us with the background music."

Right then, I heard an off-key clang, like lightning had just struck. Everyone turned to look at the stage in shock. Standing before the piano was a pure-white girl, dressed in winter clothes as if she was about to march in the snow. It was she who had struck the keys like that.

"I'm sick of this! Why must I play the piano for these people?! I can't enjoy the party like this! I want pudding!"

"Calm down, Commander Butchersky. The secretary general wanted to hear you perform..."

"So *he* gave us this awful sheet?! This is what he likes?! You call this *Moonlit Lake*? No! The pitch is all messed up and there's this nonsensical phrase tacked on. And this fill? Why does it raise the tempo out of nowhere? This arrangement leaves no trace of the original piece! This is an example of everything that's wrong with the Haku-Goku Commonwealth and their obsession with destroying all tradition! I feel bad for the original piece playing this crude arrangement. That bastard..."

"Commander, the secretary general is right there, and he can hear you..."

Prohellya looked at us. She openly glared at her ruler.

"Secretary General! When can I be relieved? I'll get tendonitis if I keep going like this. Forced labor is inhumane."

"Sorry about that, Prohellya! However, the guests are enthralled by the beautiful timbre of your playing. A great show of Haku-Goku's art. And I want to keep listening to your wonderful performance."

"I don't want to perform for you."

"Then do it for everyone else. You are a representative of the people."

"...Fine. I suppose I can keep going if you insist. But I'll do it my way."

"So you're playing the original piece? It lacks flair."

"I won't say the original arrangement is the only way to make a piece shine. I'm not so

hardheaded. But I just don't like *your* arrangement. It ruins everything that's good about the piece. Art should be about creation rather than destruction. So I'll give a cute twist of my own to *Moonlit Lake*."

Prohellya took a bite out of the pudding her subordinate had brought her before sitting back down at the piano.

Soon, graceful yet powerful classical music echoed throughout the hall. Despite my lack of musical knowledge, I immediately recognized her abilities. Her barrage of sixteenth notes shook me to the bone. I didn't quite get it, but it was amazing.

"What do you think? She's our pride and joy," the secretary general said.

"Well, she's... incredible, in many ways," I answered.

"Indeed she is. I don't think Prohellya would lose to you, Commander Gandesblood."

Vill and Sakuna raised their guard for some reason. Nelia grinned. Meanwhile, Gertrude (don't forget about her) was drifting off while standing. *Hey!*

The secretary general smiled and crossed his arms.

"By the way, have you met Commander Karla Amatsu or Commander Karin Reigetsu yet?"

"Huh? Well... I haven't seen Karla yet today, but I did meet Ms. Karin Reigetsu."

"I see, I see. Then you must have noticed already."

No, I haven't. Noticed what?

"This party is but an overture to the carnival that awaits. Let's see who gets the upper hand. The Mulnite Empire... or the Haku-Goku Commonwealth."

What is he saying? Why do all the bigshots like speaking in riddles? Whatever, just put away that kunai, Vill. There's no reason to glare at him like that, right?

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!" He gave a hearty chuckle. "Please don't scowl at me that way. I'm kidding. Just playing around."

The secretary general then turned and waved at us as he walked away. He headed to a group of people from the Lapelico Kingdom. Quite the sociable man.

Nelia twirled her pasta around as she said, “He’s got to be plotting something. Be careful.”

“I will. I’ll throw a pizza at the back of his head,” Vill said.

“Stop it! Don’t waste food!” I said.

“He’s not the only person you should be wary of here, by the way. The aim of this party may be to achieve peace, but who knows how many people here earnestly believe in that goal. You should learn everyone’s names and faces, Komari. Look, over there is Lapelico’s...”

“No. I mean, I would love to, but I think trying to memorize so many new characters would make my head go boom.”

It hadn’t been long since I got there, and I’d already met so many new people. Samurai girl Karin Reigetsu and her subordinate Fuyao Meteorite. Catgirl commander Leona Flatt. Lingzi Ailan from the Enchanted Lands. The Haku-Goku Commonwealth’s secretary general and Prohellya Butchersky. I may have possessed a rare scholarly intellect, but there was a limit to how many people I could remember at once.

I got tired of talking, so I decided to get some pasta, too.

But when I looked across the table, I saw a face I did recognize. Her pretty black hair resembled the damp wings of a crow, and she was dressed in a kimono. Karla Amatsu.

She seemed different from when I’d first met her, though. She was ranting at her ninja, face red as they stood at a corner of the venue. Karla was on edge. Desperate. Something was off. Was there anything troubling her?

I walked up to Karla, plate of pasta in hand. It wasn’t trying to be nosy, I just thought I should say hi. But then...

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming here.”

...a graceful voice echoed through the venue.

Everyone hushed, even the piano. A woman in a kimono had already taken the stage, using loudspeaker magic to make an announcement.

"I am the Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise. Long have I waited for the day when we all could finally join together in this feast. Tonight, we wish for peace between nations. Please, enjoy yourselves."

That woman had an aura that screamed "ruler." Her kimono was of fine quality. In her lustrous black hair was a sun ornament hairpin. Her quiet voice and gentle poise soothed everyone who laid eyes on her. But there was one thing about her that threw me off (if you'll excuse my impudence)—the entirety of her face was covered by a paper charm.

What's that? Fashion? I think there's a specter or something from the Enchanted Lands that looks just like this... What was it again? Jiang... Jiang-something. Yeah.

All the Peace Spirits in the venue started clapping and cheering.

"Long live our Goddess!" "Long live our Goddess!"

The Goddess quieted them with a smile.



"As you are all aware, the Six Nations have been in danger as of late. The Six Nations War that transpired recently was but the tip of the iceberg. Espionage is on the rise, as is violence and crime. Terrorist forces have been expanding. We must join hands to confront these issues."

Then she went on about some complicated stuff. I listened while eating my pasta, but I couldn't understand a word of it. Which is why I went to look for more snacks once I cleaned my plate. I looked around and saw a table with Eastern-style confections. This was a party hosted by the Heavenly Paradise, after all. How could I not give them a try?

Just as I reached out for some *youkan*, someone grabbed my arm out of nowhere.

A ninja girl was standing right beside me. Staring at me.

"Uh, you're... with Karla, right?"

"Yes. I'm Koharu Minenaga, leader of the Kidoshu of the Heavenly Paradise's Fifth Unit."

"I'm Terakomari. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

She shook my hand. Weird girl.

"Terakomari. Come over here. Lady Karla is in trouble."

"Hmm? Okay, but can I eat this *youkan* first?"

"Yes. Eat." She held out a piece of *youkan* on a toothpick.

I chomped it and then followed her... or rather, she pulled me along with her. Why was she in such a hurry?

Karla was panicking by the wall.

"Ah!" she exclaimed once she saw me, suddenly becoming all calm and collected.

Huh? Was I seeing things or something?

"Oh my, Ms. Gandesblood. It's been a while."

"It has. You doing okay?"

"Yes, I am doing more than okay. By the way, if I may ask... you do love massacres, correct?"

I didn't know what to say. That came out of nowhere.

The next moment, however, I turned on my commander switch.

"Of course I do! There's no one out there who loves bloodshed more than I do!"

"R-right! Though I wouldn't lose against you. And, um, can I ask another question?"

"What is it?"

"Will you have some time to spare in the next few days?"

"What?" *What's this all about?*

Then I heard the Goddess's strong voice again:

"The Heavenly Paradise has been working hard to solve these issues. However, our organization is too stiff to move as needed. It is a harsh thing to say as its ruler, but our country has always been constricted by tradition—we are a nation in decline. We need a breath of fresh air. And for this purpose, I've decided to leave the future of the Heavenly Paradise in the hands of our next leader."

"...Next leader? What's she talking about, Karla?"

"P-please just answer me! Do you have the time?! Like about a week?!"

"What?! I wish I did, you know, but my maid will find new ways to get me busy..."

"In short, I will be stepping down as Goddess soon. For that to go smoothly, it is time to choose who will follow in my steps. In other words, I hereby announce that we're kicking off the Heavenly Ball tonight!"

Commotion and cheers all over.

Hmm? Did she just say she's retiring? Why? As I stood there, bewildered, Karla grabbed my hand tight.

"That's what she's talking about! The festival to decide the next Goddess is about to begin! That's why... that's why I need you to help me. Please, Ms. Gandesblood!"

"Wait, I don't see the thread of what you're saying. And hold on. You're a candidate?"

"The candidates have already been decided. Imperial Saber Karin Reigetsu and Imperial Saber Karla Amatsu. They already represent our country as commanders. Both of you, please come up onstage."

An armed samurai girl did as she ordered and rose to the stage. It was the Peace Spirit I'd met at the reception—Karin Reigetsu.

She glanced across the venue with full confidence and, loudspeaker in hand, announced:

"I am Karin Reigetsu! I will do my best as Goddess candidate! I will work for the good of the Heavenly Paradise and for peace between the Six Nations!"

"Wooooo! Long live Lady Karin!" they cheered, to which Karin responded with a wave and a smile.

"As you all know, the Heavenly Ball is not only a sacred ritual to choose the next Goddess, but also a show involving the entire nation. A battle to the death between the two candidates will take place on the last day of the festival. I hope all six nations enjoy it. Ms. Karin, your statement, please."

"I will take down Lady Karla Amatsu with a single slash!"

"Wooooo! Long live Lady Karin!" they cheered again.

"You're not going?" I asked Karla.

"I'm not going," she replied.

"But you have to," Koharu said.

"NOOO!! Please, Koharu!! I'll be participating for sure if I go over!! And then Karin's

gonna kill me!! I'm gonna..."

"Wait, but aren't you the strongest ever?" I asked.

"I'm gonna cut Ms. Karin Reigetsu up in a million pieces and turn her into flour! Let's go, Koharu! Ms. Gandesblood!"

"Wait, why me? Hey!" Karla dragged me along.

I couldn't for the life of me understand what was going on. *Am I getting dragged into some vexing stuff once again?* Alarms were blaring in my head. But I couldn't fight back against Karla's strength.

And then we were up onstage.

Karin Reigetsu was looking at us all like, *So you're finally here.*

I didn't see Fuyao anywhere, though. Not that it mattered.

"Karla. The time has come to settle the score."

"R-right! And it will be me becoming Goddess!"

Her instigation had everyone cheering even louder. Not just people from the Heavenly Paradise—everyone watching on with excitement.

Vill's not even looking my way! She's eating sushi rolls! That good-for-nothing!

"It appears Karla is all fired up as well. Things are looking interesting."

I sensed the Goddess's smile under the charm covering her face.

Calm down, Terakomari. Let's sum things up.

So I get that the Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise wants to choose her successor. And I get that they're holding this "Heavenly Ball" in order to do that. I also get that this so-called ball is just another uncivilized event that will end in murder.

The question is: What in the world am I doing here right now? Isn't this just Karla and Karin's problem?

"It's good to have both candidates here now, but let's not forget that the Heavenly Ball is also meant to be entertaining. It wouldn't be very fun to let all of you go without getting a taste, don't you think?"

I have a very bad feeling about this. I glanced at Karla, and she glanced back at me, a cramped smile on her face.

"In light of our goal to foster harmony between the Six Nations, people from all over the world will be able to participate in the Heavenly Ball this time around. I've notified your nations' leaders that we will have each country submit one of their commanders to join either Karla Amatsu or Karin Reigetsu in their struggle for the title."

Yup, my gut never misses.

I looked down from the stage at Vill. She shot me a thumbs-up, a blank look on her face. *Oh, you knew about this, didn't you? Goddamn it, I wanna go home.*

"Will the two commanders joining Karin Reigetsu's side please step up?"

The next moment, a thunderous glissando echoed throughout the venue. Widening my eyes in shock, I looked around and witnessed a girl jumping over the grand piano to land gracefully on the stage. Her white mana turned cold as it emanated out of her.

It was a Sapphire clad in military uniform—Prohellya Butchersky.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! The strongest of all Six Arctic Masters of the Haku-Goku Commonwealth, Prohellya Butchersky, joins the fray! War with the purpose of creating value?! That's art, folks! This Heavenly Paradise that will carve a path to a new era—so let's usher it in and dance to its joyful melody! I'm not against taking up arms for the sake of the people!"

What the heck is she talking about?

"Lady Prohellyaaa!" The Sapphires in the venue were beyond delighted, though.

I'm gonna wind up dead if I stay here. Gotta bounce... Just as that thought crossed my mind, however, something whizzed past me, almost making me fall on my butt.

The shadow skidded to a halt beside Prohellya.

“I’m Leona Flatt of the Lapelico Kingdom! I’ll show you all what beast-folk are really capable of! You’re in for a rude awakening if you think we only care about bananas. I’ll personally take out anyone who truly believes that!”

The catgirl struck a cool pose as she threatened slaughter. The beast-folk started howling in response, the capybaras going crazy all across the venue.

The enemy faction’s gathering... No. Wait. Enemy? What am I thinking? I’m not gonna battle Karin, so they’re not my opponents. Not my allies, either. They’re of absolutely no concern to me. What’s really of concern, on the other hand, is getting a nice plate of omelet rice. Time to go on a journey to find the best version of the dish out there.

“Wait, Terakomari.” The ninja Koharu stopped me in my tracks. “Karla needs help.”

“Sorry, but I already swore my fealty to omelet rice...”

“Please,” she begged, glancing up at me.

Don’t do that. Don’t look at me like that. I just recently realized I can’t turn down people who look at me like that, and this is a serious life-or-death matter. Avert your eyes, Komari! Ignore that girl, no matter how cruel it may be! I tried to dash my way out of there, when...

“Wait, Lady Komari.”

...my maid stopped me in my tracks.

...Huh? What’s your problem?

“Lady Karla needs help.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Please.”

“I don’t care how damp or low your eyes are, no is no! Don’t hug me! Why didn’t you tell me about this from the beginning?! You knew all about this Ball, didn’t you?!”

“I knew you wouldn’t want to come if I told you.”

“And you were right! But you would’ve dragged me here anyways!”

Wait. That means I never had any chance of avoiding this, doesn’t it?

“*Karin Reigetsu’s team is complete. As for Karla Amatsu’s... Karla, where is your squad? You did send letters to the Enchanted Lands and the Mulnite Empire, correct?*”

“Yes, I did send them, but it seems Miss Lingzi Ailan cannot join us, and the other Draconic Meteors are busy as well.”

I tried my hardest to free myself from Vill’s grip, when the smell of apricot tickled my nose. Lingzi Ailan was standing right beside us before I knew it.

She bowed in regret.

“I have to make arrangements for my wedding, so...”

Wedding? This girl’s getting married?

“You heard her, My Goddess. The Enchanted Lands won’t be able to participate.”

“*I see. Nothing we can do about that, then. Also... the Aruka Republic won’t be participating either, correct, President Nelia Cunningham?*”

“No, we are too tied up with our internal affairs. Unfortunately, we’ll have to pass on the opportunity,” Nelia answered, gracefully swaying her glass of wine.

Curses. I should’ve accepted Nelia’s offer to become an Illustrious General. And wait, she also knew about this? Why didn’t anybody tell me?

“Very well. Now then, what about the Mulnite Empire?”

Everyone in the venue turned to look at me.

Karla walked up to me with a huge smile on her face. She then placed a hand on my shoulder. I heard the sound of her bell next to my ear.

And so the kimono commander threw me to the wolves.

“I spoke with her just now! Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood will be joining my

team!"

The next moment...

"HAIILLL!!!" The crowd went wild. *Please, the only thing going wild in the world should be animals... Though I guess some of you are.* Hmm. Obviously, I'd never accepted her invitation to join. She hadn't even told me about this thing.

People had all sorts of reactions to the announcement.

"I see..." Karin Reigetsu narrowed her eyes.

"I'm sorry." Lingzi Ailan apologized for some reason.

"Finally, a worthy opponent!" Prohellya looked confident.

"We'll win!" Leona looked excited.

As for me?

"H-hold up! I'm busy, actually."

"*Oh, you are? Busy with what?*"

"I uh... I... I have a, uh... w-wedding!"

Silence fell. I realized I messed up but there was no turning back now. *Don't think about the consequences or you'll die! You can't stop now!*

"Yeah, just like Ms. Lingzi Ailan, I'm having a wedding, so I can't join you, sadly."

"What in the world are you talking about, Lady Komari? Who are you marrying, even?"

"Well, um... you know! You! I'm marrying you, Vill!"

"Excuse me? I have absolutely no intention of getting married."

"WHAAAT?!"

But you always say you want to marry me and stuff like that! And NOW you decide to

take the path of treason?! You impudent little... I'm shocked, really! Now I really am NEVER marrying you! Not that I was ever going to!

"So Commander Gandesblood will be joining Karla Amatsu's team, then. There's a slight disparity in numbers, but there should be no problem as far as actual power goes."

"Huh? What do you mean by that, Goddess?"

"Apologies, Commander Butchersky. In order to eliminate the handicap, I will allow Commander Gandesblood to call for support. Is that okay with you, Commander Gandesblood?"

None of this was okay, but oh well.

I escaped from Vill's grasp and pulled Karla away to the wall, pinning her against it. She started babbling in confusion.

"Karla! Could you explain what's going on?!"

"I'm sorry please don't kill me please I don't want to turn into ketchup!"

"What are you talking about?! I'm asking about why I need to participate in this thing!"

"W-well... that's because I needed your power." She looked extremely frail and feeble for some reason. "I mean! Not that I couldn't defeat them by myself. I am strong enough. But you know, Karin gets two people on her side, so going all there by myself..."

"The poor girl has no friends."

"Koharu! Don't say that! Gosh! I have no one left to turn to. Nelia is busy, and Ms. Lingzi Ailan turned me down, too... You're the only one I have, Ms. Gandesblood."

I never thought I would see her like this. Now I wanted to help her out! But it was my life on the line we were talking about, so I couldn't just say ye—

"I'm not asking you to do it for free." She looked me straight in the eye. "Once we survive the Heavenly Ball, I will grant you one wish."

"What am I supposed to wish for?"

“How about... helping you publish *Twilight Triangle*? ”

“?!” It felt like I’d been struck by lightning.

Twilight Triangle was the title of my novel, the one that sicko maid had shown Karla without permission.

“My family also runs a publisher. I could talk to their director and easily get you a publishing deal... but that’s only something I came up with on the spot. You could ask me for anything else.”

“Hold on. You really... could get it published?”

“Yes, of course. Considering the story at hand, perhaps they’ll even agree to it with great enthusiasm.”

“...”

This was truly out of left field. Perhaps the biggest choice I would get to make in my life.

I could land my authorial debut. But I could also wind up dying in the Heavenly Ball. And I didn’t want to give up the ghost, obviously. But... could I let this chance slip?

“Don’t think on it any further, Lady Komari.”

“Wah?!”

Vill was standing by my side before I knew it. *Please don’t do that.*

“Supreme Commander Karla Amatsu has the power to destroy the universe. She only wants you to join her because she doesn’t want to be alone.”

“So what? That doesn’t change the fact I’d have to participate in a battle to the death.”

“True, but please understand she’s not expecting you to do anything.”

“...Huh? What do you mean?”

“I’m saying that you’ll be safe and sound so long as you let Lady Amatsu take care of

everything.”

“...”

Oh, I see. I see, I see. Yes, that makes total sense. I don't have to fight in that silly ball. Karla can use her universe-destroying power to get rid of the opposition in one fell swoop. Yeah, so there's no chance of me dying. That leaves us with only one choice!

“Got it! I'll help you out, and you'll get my novel published!”

“R-really?! Thank you so much!”

I pulled Karla by the arm back to the stage.

The commanders looked at us with puzzled expressions, but I had nothing to fear. I had the strongest commander in the universe on my side.

“Kept you waiting, huh?” I turned my Commander Mode knob all the way up. “I, Terakomari Gandesblood, will join Karla Amatsu's side for the Heavenly Ball! Karla's victory has been assured from the very moment it was announced! Now, tremble in fear, Karin Reigetsu and her supporting commanders! With but a slight wave of my pinky finger, I'll mash you up into filling for the greatest omelet rice the world has ever known! Kneel here and now if you value your lives!”

There was one moment of silence before...

“HAIIIILLLLL!!!!”

...the crowd went wild again. I didn't mind their rowdiness this time around. After all, our victory was assured! Karla would defeat our enemies by just swaying her pinky finger!

...Or so I thought back then. Unaware of the fact that the Heavenly Ball wasn't any simple war. That villains were scheming their evil deeds behind the scenes.



“Haaah. So I am participating after all...”

Karla Amatsu sighed as she sat in a chair in a palace courtyard gazebo.

The party continued even after the announcement of the Heavenly Ball. Everyone at the venue was dancing while she worried about her chances of survival.

“There was no changing it. You can’t run away from your grandmother,” said Koharu indifferently, eating the sweets she swiped from the venue. How could she act like that while her master was up against the wall?

Karla heaved another sigh.

“My Goddess is also out of her mind. There’s no way I could take after her.”

“You will, no matter what, if you defeat Karin Reigetsu.”

“That’s terrible! Why do they choose a successor by having us kill each other?! Since when did the Heavenly Paradise become as barbaric as the Mulnite Empire?!”

“I thought it was always like this.”

“They’re sick! I heard my grandmother’s abdication was peaceful!”

“That was because she had no opposition.”

“Huh? Is that true?”

“The current Goddess didn’t have to go through a Heavenly Ball.”

“That’s not fair. Then why does Karin have to oppose me?”

“Don’t worry, Lady Karla. Terakomari is on your side now.”

“...I suppose. Yeah.”

Their teams had been decided one week earlier, when the rules for the Heavenly Ball were announced. Karla and Karin had drawn lots to determine who would get to ask which country for help.

Karla had received the right to ask the Aruka Republic, the Enchanted Lands, and the Mulnite Empire. However, Aruka turned her down for the wholly justified reason of them being busy, as did the Enchanted Lands, which were busy with Lingzi Ailan’s wedding. Mulnite just gave a vague response, saying they would “ask Lady Komari.”

Meanwhile, Karin had gotten nothing but positive responses.

Karla panicked. She felt like dying. She managed to (forcefully) get Terakomari on her side, but if she had turned her down, too... how could she have hoped to go up against those monsters? From that angle, Terakomari really was her savior.

That Vampire Princess had turned Aruka into ice and the Dark Core Zone into gold. Karin Reigetsu was no match against her full might. There was a fair chance Terakomari really could defeat her using her pinky finger alone. She wasn't the strongest commander in the universe for nothing.

"...Yeah, I'm starting to feel at ease."

"It's gonna be a piece of cake."

"Yeah. Terakomari will get us that win!"

Karla clenched her fist with hope.

But she was unaware that Terakomari was relying on her just as much.

The next moment, Karla's Correspondence Crystal started glowing inside her kimono. It was her direct line with the Goddess. Wondering why she didn't just go see her in person, she poured mana into it and answered:

"Karla speaking. Is something the matter?"

"My job here is done, so I was thinking of saying good-bye."

"You mean the announcement? I'm not very grateful about it, but okay."

"That too, yes, but I just had some contact with a terrorist in the venue."

"A terrorist...?" Karla opened her eyes wide. "Are you okay?"

"No need to worry. The Mulnite Empress lent me her aid, so everything went according to plan. They attacked me out of nowhere and I almost died, though."

"You were attacked?! Are you really doing okay?!"

"My wounds have already healed, so it's fine."

"..."

What could she even say to that? And what were the guards even doing?

Well, if the Goddess said she was fine, then she was. Karla didn't want to be told to go take out the terrorist, either, so she decided to pretend she hadn't heard this.

"By the way..." The Goddess changed the subject. *"Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Heavenly Ball."*

"I mean... it's not like I had any choice."

She could clearly picture her grandmother's nasty smile. It was nothing short of irritating to think everything was playing out according to her desires.

"I know you'll be fine. Although Karin is quite strong herself. I wouldn't be surprised either way. Take care."

"Whose side are you on?"

"I'm on the side of the Heavenly Paradise and whoever can make its future brighter. Also, I have a favor to ask, Karla."

"What is it? I'm not doing anything barbaric."

"It's quite simple. I'll be occupied during the Heavenly Ball and won't have much time for you. Keep this in mind."

"Okay?"

"And if you happen to see me around, don't talk to me without precaution. Your life could be at risk"

"...What?"

"She's finally lost it. She's starting to sound like an edgy teenager."

"Don't say that, Koharu!"

"Just keep that in mind and you'll be fine. Get along with Ms. Terakomari Gandesblood and good luck. I know you can do it."

"I don't think I can."

"Despite what you think, the people around you have high hopes for you. Stay strong even when I'm not around. Good-bye."

The Goddess hung up.

It didn't make a lick of sense to Karla, but she did understand some of the things her superior had been getting at. Basically, she couldn't expect any help from the Goddess this time. She'd gotten some advice through her "eyes" during the Six Nations War, but now she would have to manage on her own.

"I guess I'll be fine. I have Terakomari on my side."

"I think you should try putting her in a good mood. You could give her all your sweets, for example."

"Yeah, maybe I should... Koharu! You've been having too many snacks."

How was she supposed to have a proper dinner now?

Karla snatched the *dorayaki* from her hands, and the ninja puffed her cheeks.

"...They're all just so much tastier than yours."

"Really? Actually, I happened to provide some food for this event as pâtissier. All those pastries you see on the tables? I made them."

"..." Koharu got up and turned away from Karla. She was red all the way up to her ears.

Karla held back a laugh.

"Anyways, we need to make a plan to survive the Heavenly Ball."

"You know that I'm a contrarian."

"We've got to think about how to surrender. Perhaps if I grovel before they attack..."

"When I say something is *tasty*, I actually mean it isn't. So if I say it's bad, it means it's good."

"So when you say my sweets are bad all the time, you actually mean they're good. Got it."

"..."

"I was already moving on from that. Why did you have to go and dig your own grave?"

"Shut up!" Koharu shouted as she ran away to the palace.

Karla let out a heavy sigh as she watched her go.

The thing to truly fret over was the battle that awaited her.

Even with Terakomari on her side, she couldn't banish all of her anxiety. Karin Reigetsu had seen her as a rival ever since they were little. That was how Karla knew she wouldn't shy away from resorting to the pettiest of methods to come out on top, despite her honorable, samurai-like facade.

"My main objective is to avoid death." Dying would hurt.

With that unambitious goal in mind, Karla stretched her arms and looked up at the sky.

She could hear the approaching steps of autumn in that tall, boundless view.

The Cherry-Tinted City Under the Clear Moon

Vexations

[The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess]

The boundaries of a Dark Core's area of effect were shockingly unclear.

For instance, the Mulnite Empire's Dark Core covered its whole territory + the entire Dark Core Zone. But it also covered part of the neighboring Lapelico Kingdom and Haku-Goku Commonwealth. Basically, the effects of the Dark Cores didn't cancel out each other, so some overlap between the zones across each nation's borders was unavoidable.

However, there was no putting hope in these overlapping zones this time.

Nations usually placed their capitals in the heart of their territory.

The Mulnite Empire's Imperial Capital was vampire territory. The Lapelico Kingdom's Royal Capital was beast-folk territory. The Haku-Goku Commonwealth's Federal District was Sapphire territory. The Aruka Republic's Metropolis was Warblade territory. The Enchanted Lands' Jingshi was Immortal territory.

And the Heavenly Paradise's Eastern Capital, the ancient eastern municipality also called the City of Flowers, was naturally a city for Peace Spirits, by Peace Spirits.

Why do we need to go over this now, you ask?

"...Hey, Vill."

"What's the matter?"

"I fell asleep in my own bed. So why am I waking up on a futon on a tatami floor? Don't you find this weird? Am I dreaming?"

"This is no dream. I moved you all the way to the Heavenly Paradise's Eastern Capital while you were asleep."

"I knew it!!"

"Rest assured that I didn't bring your bed this time."

"That's not the problem!! GOD!!"

It was October 16. Three days after the party.

If you asked me to explain what had happened as quickly as possible, I'd answer, "I woke up in another world." I mean, this floor, those doors, those decorations... it all seemed from a different realm entirely. I couldn't process it.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to move me around while I'm asleep?! You know what they call this? Kidnapping! I'm reporting you to the police!"

"I would easily run away."

"And now you're getting charged with evading arrest, too! You're going to prison!"

Vill seemed unfazed, however. She knew I wasn't *actually* going to call the police. *I have no choice. I'll have to bolster my defenses. I'll get an electric steel fence to put around my bed... No, wait. That could hurt me, too. And how am I supposed to sleep like that?*

"Forget about that and enjoy the Heavenly Paradise. It's your first long-term stay outside the country, isn't it?"

"Agh! Y-you're right! What now?! We're in danger here! Mulnite's Dark Core can't revive us! We're gonna die for real!!"

"I'll protect you. Anyway, we have to get you changed. Take off your clothes, please."

"Don't just start taking them off on your own!"

I put some distance between us. But it was too late. I was already wearing a *yukata* (I think that was its name?). *What are these weird pajamas? Did that sicko maid put this on me?*

Oh well. First, I had to fully comprehend the situation I was in.

I calmed myself down and glared at Vill.

“...There’s too many things I wanna say, but there’s no use in saying them, so fine. Please just explain what’s going on to me. Is this really the Heavenly Paradise?”

“It is. More precisely, we’re in a room of the Amatsu Manor in the center of the Eastern Capital.”

“The Amatsu Manor? What’s that?”

“Lady Karla Amatsu’s home. We will stay here for the week. Here you are.” She handed me a change of clothes.

The deviant was still staring at me, but there was no point in worrying about it at this point. I took off the *yukata* at light speed, just as quickly as I put on my usual military uniform.

“Why did you bring me here in the first place? I didn’t hear anything about this.”

“Because the Heavenly Ball is starting soon. You did hear about this.”

“Ah...”

Right, that festival to determine the next leader of the Heavenly Paradise. I was supposed to participate, too, on Karla’s team. I then felt it was unfair of me to complain about it all to Vill. I had technically accepted to help her of my own accord.

“...So what are we supposed to do, exactly? I still have no idea what this thing is supposed to be about.”

“She’ll tell you all about it.”

“She? Who are you...?”

I followed Vill’s line of sight and... I felt like my heart was about to explode.

There was another futon right beside the one I was sleeping on. On it was a girl I immediately recognized.

Supreme Commander and Imperial Saber Karla Amatsu was mumbling in her sleep.

...Huh? Why? Isn't this supposed to be my guest room?

"Lady Karla Amatsu. She seemed to be still asleep, so I brought her here."

"Please, Vill, I'm begging you to stop abducting people!!"

"Please wake up, Lady Amatsu. It's morning already."

"Fweeeh? Koharuuu? Hold on... just five more minutessss..."

"Vill, stop pinching her cheeks! She's gonna kill you!... Ah!"

Karla suddenly opened her eyes.

Our gazes met. She still seemed out of it for a while, like she was dreaming, but everything clicked as she stared at me, and she jumped off the futon.

"T-T-T-Terakomari?! What are you doing in my room?!"

"This is Lady Komari's room. She told me to kidnap you, so I did."

"Quit your lying!"

"Kidnap?! Are you trying to kill me?! Are you going to turn me into soup for breakfast?!"

"Of course not! No, wait, I apologize! Don't run away! I just wanna be friends!"

I desperately tried to make her understand as she escaped into the closet.

Karla immediately recovered her cool. She struck that graceful pose of hers and cleared her throat.

"I was having a nightmare and it seems I was confused when I woke up. Make no mistake: I wasn't scared of you, Ms. Gandesblood. Why would I be? I'm the strongest of all."

"Y-yeah."

"I'll go change out of my nightwear. We can talk later," Karla said before leaving the room.

I felt really bad.

"Huh." Vill put a hand to her chin. "So she doesn't take it off while sleeping."

"What?"

"That bell she has on her wrist. It's a Divine Instrument. I couldn't take it off no matter how hard I pulled. Curious."

What's she going on about?

Regardless, I needed to prepare to give Karla my deepest apologies.

Karla came back after a while. She was wearing a kimono, like usual.

"Breakfast is ready. Let's talk over there," she said, so we moved over to the reception room (I guess?) to eat.

There were three plates ready. Vill and I sat next to each other, and Karla sat down across from us.

"Wait, that ninja girl isn't eating with us?"

"Koharu? Tradition dictates that our ninja can't share a table with us. It's especially forbidden here in the main house... My grandmother will give us a terrible scolding if she sees us like that."

What a ridiculous rule. But okay.

We were having traditional Heavenly Paradise food. White rice and miso soup with seaweed, along with grilled fish and *ohitashi* salad and other pickled vegetables. "Thank you for the food," we said before grabbing the chopsticks and digging in.

It was warm and tasty.

...No, don't let the flavor trick you! Don't forget you're in a foreign place outside the Dark Core's area of effect! You can't just enjoy the food all carefree! And why do I feel like I'm getting used to being kidnapped? Stupid me.

"Now then. First, I must thank you again for accepting my request to collaborate with me on the Heavenly Ball. I can rest assured knowing you will fight by my side," Karla said as she straightened her posture.

Too bad the grain of rice on her cheek was ruining the mood. Why did this refined lady always miss all the important details? Though that didn't change how amazing she was... And it did make her a bit more relatable.

"Could you please elaborate on what the Heavenly Ball entails, Lady Amatsu? I made Lady Komari participate since it seemed funny, but to tell you the truth, I know nothing about it."

"Because it seemed funny?" Could you please elaborate, Vill?"

"Right... To put it shortly, the Heavenly Ball is an election."

Neither of them listened to me.

"An election? It's not war?" Vill asked.

"The battle is only one of the events involved. Throughout the duration of the Heavenly Ball—over the course of a week, that is—the candidates must hold speeches and debates to make an appeal to the citizens. Then on the last day, we battle to the death... The results will be factored into the final vote."

"I see. So the battle isn't that important."

"No, it is. The Heavenly Paradise may be peaceful compared to other nations, but it still holds deeply rooted beliefs in military power. In prior Heavenly Balls, the victor of the last day's battle often went on to become the Goddess."

"But you'll be fine, right, Karla? You're the strongest," I said.

"..."

Huh? Why aren't you saying anything?

“..This is the schedule I received from the management committee. Please take a look.”

She handed me a piece of Eastern-style paper.

Sure enough, it said something about debates and speeches. And on the last day was a heading that read *Mortal Combat*. The wording alone made it clear what the whole point of this festival was.

But frankly, the combat wouldn’t be so mortal with Karla on my side. She would surely blow away the enemy with a super-duper beam or something as soon as the battle began.

“Hmm? Wait, uh... is this battle to the death supposed to take place here in the Eastern Capital?”

“No. Because we have participants from foreign nations, I’ve been told the last battle will be held in the Dark Core Zone.”

“Yeah. Makes sense.”

“I’m counting on you, Ms. Gandesblood. Though I could take them on just on my own, of course.”

“And I’m counting on you, Karla. Although I could just bend my pinky finger and defeat them all immediately, of course.”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

“Hee-hee-hee!”

We laughed.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Vill murmured.

Please don’t scare me like that. You actually have the power to see the future, so that’s not a nice thing to hear.

“But... what should I do outside of the fight? Give campaign speeches?” I asked.

“You only need to give me a hand here and there, nothing huge. So long as you use your

full power in combat, and I survive..."

"Hmm? I couldn't hear that last part."

"Oh, it's nothing. Anyways, you'll have to stay in the Heavenly Paradise this week. And don't think I've forgotten about that publishing deal. All I ask is that you please, please... *please* don't go back to the Mulnite Empire halfway through!"

"I-I'm not doing that! We made a deal."

Getting published was my greatest wish. As long as I didn't get into serious peril, I had no intention of going back on my word. But just as my chest was filling with excitement...

"Oh my, if it isn't that Gandesblood girl. So you came."

...the mood turned uneasy.

I turned around. An old lady was standing by the open door.

Who is that? I wondered as she walked inside and looked down on us. Her gaze had this blade-like quality.

"I'm surprised you agreed to go along with the Goddess's plans. Take care of Karla, won't you?"

"S-sure... Um... Karla, who is this?" I whispered to her. She whispered back.

"My grandmother. She's the head of the main branch of the Amatsu family."

"I see. Then I gotta say hi."

"I've heard about her. She was the Goddess ten years ago, correct?" Vill asked.

"Yes, she's the former Goddess."

"Crap, then she's super important."

"I've also heard she was an Imperial Saber before that. Apparently, she could chop heads off with just a tilt of her blade," Vill said.

"You're well-informed... She used to be called Hell's Windmill. She'll beat you up—and I'm not kidding or saying this figuratively—if you show her the slightest disrespect. She's done that to me since I was a kid. Be careful," Karla warned.

"Are you serious?! Then I gotta make sure to show some respect..."

"We should try to get on her good side. Please, Lady Amatsu, tell us what she likes. Maybe we could just compliment her tea. Seniors are always glad to hear that sort of thing," Vill said.

"You sure you're not making fun of her?" I asked.

"I am not. I've gotten a fair share of allowance from my grandfather just by praising him for whatever reason," Vill insisted.

"So you are making fun of her. C'mon, be more respectful of your family."

"I am. Besides, I spend all my allowance on you, so I'm not wasting it. The funds for your swimsuit and dress came from my grandpa."

"Don't do that!! I'll return them!!"

What an unexpectedly terrible flow of cash. Vill, unbothered, turned to look at Karla and said:

"In any case, Lady Amatsu, what does your grandmother like?"

"Let's see... she also likes traditional poetry and tea ceremonies, but lately she's really been getting into collecting antiques. There's pottery and porcelain she's bought all over this house. For example..." Karla pointed at a section of the room. "That vase from famous artist Hoshigakiemon, from the Sengoku period. It cost ten billion yen."

"Wow." I stared at the vase in question.

Just then, I got a terribly bad feeling, but I wanted to believe it was all my imagination.

"What are you all whispering about?"

"Nothing, Grandmother!"

Karla straightened up with a jolt. Her grandmother scoffed.

"Are you actually ready for the Heavenly Ball? You'll know true pain if you lose to that Reigetsu punk. I won't let you set foot in this house ever again."

"I-I can win! I have Ms. Gandesblood on my side."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

Karla's grandmother shot her a scowl, and she flinched.

"Uh, I mean, I'm not alone, so, like, Karin won't get ahead of me so easily..."

"Don't you leave everything up to others!!"

Karla's shoulders trembled—as did mine, and even Vill's. Her grandmother was that imposing. It happened so fast I could barely process it.

"You will be our leader. You must bear the weight of the entire nation on your back. You have to get that in that head of yours and start acting like it."

"I... I'm so..." Then Karla glanced at me for some reason. Her pitiful eyes turned resolute, and she stared her grandmother in the eye and said, "I am not sorry! This Heavenly Ball is a team battle, and Ms. Gandesblood is my partner! What could ever be wrong about counting on your comra—"

I couldn't believe what I saw next.

A *naginata* flew across the room and plunged into the guardrail behind Karla's back.

Everyone was at a loss for words. Vill even spilled her miso soup on the tatami floor.

"What?" Karla whispered with a short breath and turned around. She soon processed what had happened and immediately turned back again, pale in the face, to look at her grandmother. "Wh-what were you thinking?! That could've killed me!"

"And you would've come back to life anyways! Enough of your cheeky speeches! Better spend your time preparing for the Heavenly Ball!"

"..."

Karla's grandmother was incensed. I had to say something, so I stood up.

"M-ma'am! There was no need to do that! Karla is—"

"Hah? Want a fist in your face?"

I sat back down.

Karla bit her lip, her eyes welling up. Of course. Even I wanted to cry.

"G-G-Grandmother! Did you enjoy destroying your own house with that *naginata*!?"

"Of course I didn't." She sighed. At least she seemed to have cooled off. "Karla, you must be aware of your power. You have to be the one to become the next Goddess. Please, just grow up already. Give up your dreams and accept reality."

"Oh, I'm being quite realistic! I will realistically become a pâtissier!"

"That won't cut it for me. You were born an Amatsu, a warrior... You can't escape the curse of the Heavenly Paradise. Just shut your mouth and work for the good of your country."

Now that was awful. I looked at Karla and saw she was trembling, clenching her fists to hold her feelings in... but then she teared up and glared at her grandmother.

"Ugh! Grandmother, you're such a STUPID MORON!!"

She left the room, her tears gleaming in the air as she ran away, still yelling.

Her cries grew fainter and fainter. I didn't know what to do; it had all happened so abruptly. Vill and I were left alone with Karla's grandmother. It was so awkward that none of us even thought about cleaning up the miso soup mess.

"...I'm sorry about all of this." She bowed her head.

I stood up, flustered.

"N-no worries. Though... I don't mean to intrude in family matters... but wouldn't it be fair to at least hear Karla out? Also, I don't think it's nice to throw polearms at her."

"I understand I am too old-fashioned, but it's just that she just won't listen. I thought I should frighten her to make her take it seriously."

"I understand there are some circumstances behind all this. She talked about becoming a pâtissier...?" Vill asked, producing a cloth out of thin air to start wiping the tatami.

I'm not an expert, but I don't think that's how you clean those things. That's gonna leave a stain, isn't it?

Karla's grandmother sighed and sat down in place.

"...She's too self-centered. She says she wants to quit being a commander to become a confectioner. You can ask her the details later"

"Now that you mention it..."

"I don't think everyone has the job they have because they want to."

The thing Karla said when I first met her came to mind.

I took it she didn't want to be commander *or* Goddess. She must have only stated she would fight for the latter because she feared her grandmother. I was beginning to get the picture.

Now then, what should I do? Support Karla in following her dreams? Follow the original plan and help her win the election? As I was thinking about this, I noticed her grandmother was staring at me with a solemn expression.

"Gandesblood. I have a request."

"Wh-what is it?"

"Help Karla win." I gulped; she was serious. "She might be a good-for-nothing, but she's got what it takes to be a ruler. She wouldn't lose to the greatest Goddess in history. The Reigetsu girl can't lead our nation. It has to be Karla."

"What am I to say...?"

"Karla has a pure heart, but she's very unreliable. I want you to help her out. I'll give

you anything you want in exchange."

"Then forgive me for ruining your tatami in exchange for making Lady Amatsu the Goddess."

"Vill, shut up."

"Deal. I'm counting on you."

"No! Don't take any of what this maid says seriously! No deal! First, I have to speak with Karla. I don't want to go against her wishes."

"Her wishes are important, but world peace takes priority. The globe will be plunged into chaos if she doesn't become the Goddess. Give her support in the fight, please. Take care of her, if only just for a little while."

"..."

The look in her eyes was so earnest that I couldn't turn her down. It might sound weird, but sincere pleas worked better on me than threats.

So I gave in.

"...Fine. But I'm still going to speak with her first."

She smiled. "Good. Oh, and if you refuse me after speaking with Karla, I'll tell the whole world your secret."

"Huh? Whatcha say?"

"I'll tell the whole world you're actually a weakling."

"....."

I froze.

Then: "AAAH!!" A scream approached.

Someone came in running. The ninja, Koharu, holding Karla in her arms, for whatever reason.

“Koharu! Put me down!”

“We’ve got trouble, ma’am!”

“Yes, I’m in trouble! What am I, a bag of rice?!”

“Down you go, then.”

“Gweh!” Karla fell face-first onto the floor.

Koharu ignored her master and kneeled before her grandmother.

“I have a report to make. Karin Reigetsu has already begun giving speeches on the streets.”

“I see. Let her do as she pleases.”

“But that’s not all. She’s disparaging the Amatsu clan. I haven’t heard the details, but apparently she’s saying the Heavenly Paradise will fall if they leave power in your family’s hands.”

“What...?”

The old woman’s expression turned grave. She quickly walked over to Karla, still lying on the floor, and pulled her up by the head.

“Karla! Go put her in her place right this moment! Do not allow Reigetsu to make light of us! Make her pay!”

“No! Karin’s face is so scary! Wait! Let me go! Don’t carry me again, Koharu! I’m not a doll!”

“Perhaps a puppet instead of a doll. Let’s go.”

“If you know I’m a puppet, then what do you expect me to do?! I’m gonna get KILLED!!”

“You heard her, Lady Komari. Let’s tag along.”

“We’re going?! But wait, we haven’t finished talking about that threat! Does Karla’s grandmother know about my true power?! Hey! Listen!”

I, too, was helplessly dragged out from there.

The City of Flowers truly looked like something from another world to me.

The huge main road was paved, but the buildings on either side of it were made of wood in an Eastern architectural style.

Across the road from the Amatsu residence was a big castle. I had seen pictures of it in the papers. I believe it was called the Osui Palace, the abode of the Goddess. I could see that famous cherry tree they said was over eight hundred years old even from all the way out here. Despite the season, it was still blooming a gorgeous pink.

Vill pulled me by the hand as we ran through the lively streets.

Strips of paper hanging from the trees on the roadside. Crowds of people going to and fro, all of them in kimonos. Lines of stalls packed tightly. There were so many things you never saw in Mulnite. The stall selling cotton candy particularly caught my eye; I had to go get some later on.

"Over there. There's Karin Reigetsu holding a loudspeaker." Koharu pointed at her.

Standing in the center of a crowd in the plaza was a samurai girl. Foxgirl Fuyao Meteorite was right beside her, throwing confetti to make Karin stand out even more.

"—. —. —I will lead the Heavenly Paradise to greatness! Do not leave the future up to Karla Amatsu. People like her, who take peace for granted, will only bring our nation to its doom!"

The speech gradually became clearer.

She seemed to be putting Karla down. I thought election campaigns were supposed to be about selling *yourself*. Speaking ill of your opponent wasn't very nice.

"Uh, Karla. Are you gonna let her do as she pleases?"

"N-no, I won't! Hey! Karin! Stop talking behind people's backs! Don't do to others what you don't want done to you!"

"Oh my! Look, everyone. Karla Amatsu has arrived."

Everyone turned to look at us.

Karin threw away the loudspeaker and approached us with utter composure. Absolute confidence was plastered across her face. Like she was totally looking down on Karla.

"You're finally here. Took you a while."

"What are you doing?! Saying I'll bring the nation to its doom? That's slander!"

"That's just politics for you. I will stop at nothing to win."

"Someone that petty can't possibly become the Goddess! I'll stop you!"

"Hah!" Karin sneered. "Like you're one to talk."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"The fact that everyone puts you on a pedestal despite how weak you are is getting to your head. Must be nice."

Karla froze for a moment.

"Wh-what are you saying? That's not..."

"I'm jealous, even. No, actually, this isn't envy I'm feeling. It's fury. You have no achievements to speak of, and yet the Goddess trusts you so much... It's revolting. You lack the warrior's resolve needed to bear this country on your shoulders. The Heavenly Paradise will fall the day a scatterbrain like you gets the title of Goddess."

"..."

"And I won't let that happen. I am going to beat you in this Heavenly Ball. No matter what it takes."

Karin Reigetsu looked serious. She really hated Karla. And she truly cared for the Heavenly Paradise.

I was starting to get a handle on her true colors. She had the same vibes as that blue

terrorist.

"So you're not going to do anything about it, Karla Amatsu? I'm serious about killing you."

"W-wait a second, I..."

"For your future! For everyone's future! Please vote for Karin Reigetsu! She'll make the Heavenly Paradise the greatest nation in the world!" Fuyao the foxgirl exclaimed.

That's when I realized. It wasn't confetti she was throwing. It was money.

Karla's jaw dropped as she noticed this, then stared at Karin.

"Wh-what are you thinking?! Buying votes is illegal!"

"Oh no, it's not!" Fuyao approached us, a full smile on her face.

She held a piece of paper. I couldn't read the fine print, but it said *Permit*.

"We got a formal sanction from our Goddess! Karin Reigetsu's team has official permission to buy votes!"

"How is that possible?! What is she thinking?!"

"She must believe I'm the better choice to succeed her. But either way, with or without her support, I'm not stopping at anything to defeat you!!"

Then came a blinding flash, followed by a strong gust of wind.

I never had any hope of processing what happened in time. The moment I realized it, Karin was already sheathing her sword. Karla, too, was already sitting on the floor.

"Wha...?"

A red strand was running down Karla's cheek. It took until the blood dropped all the way to the ground for me to process it. Karin had cut her cheek.

"Wh-what are you...?"

“You’re dead, Karin.”

The ninja girl ran toward her in anger, sharp kunai in hand. Just as she raised the weapon at an imperceptible speed toward Karin’s neck, a loud metallic sound echoed. The kunai fell from her hand.

Koharu froze in shock as the back of a blade hit her chest instead.

“Huh? Bwugh!”

“I will not let any insolence against Lady Karin slide!”

Fuyao had gotten between them. Koharu was blown back by the sheer force of impact, and Vill barely managed to catch her in the air.

I couldn’t get my jaw up from the ground.

The real insolence here was obviously that Karin had attacked out of nowhere.

“You couldn’t even block that? I really can’t afford to leave the country in the Amatsus’ hands.”

“Wh-why did you do that all of a sudden?! Apologize to Koharu, now!”

“Please, Lady Karla! That ninja struck Lady Karin first. And I have to agree with her—how weak. Not only Kidoshu, but you as well. No one has ever seen your true power—they only fear it. But you couldn’t lift a finger against Lady Karin just now. Looks like the fox is out of the bag!” declared Fuyao.

“No... I just...”

Everyone looked at Karla with puzzled expressions.

“Why didn’t Lady Karla defend herself?” “Does she actually not have the power to do so?” “Can this weak girl really be the next Goddess?” “She won’t even say anything back to her.”

I found it strange, however. There was something fake about this malice.

“She bought the crowd,” Vill whispered as she tended to Koharu. “They’ll blow it out

of proportion and spread rumors about Lady Amatsu being powerless before Karin Reigetsu. She's making them do that."

I turned to stare at Karin in surprise.

She was looking down on Karla, a wicked smile on her face.

"I look forward to the day of our duel. I will take your head. Let's go, Fuyao."

"Aye-aye, Lady Karin!"

The struggle for power was grim in any country. The purpose of such a battle was to put someone else down. The Heavenly Paradise was no exception—it wasn't incomprehensible why Karin would try to knock Karla off more than was needed.

Still, I didn't like that samurai girl's MO.

"Hmm? Why, if it isn't Lady Gandesblood."

Karin was already right in my face by the time I noticed. She bowed with a friendly smile, the complete opposite of what she had shown Karla.

"Must be hard on you, too. Having to protect this useless puppet. Wouldn't you like to join my team instead? I would gladly recei—"

"Sorry, but no thanks."

Karin's shoulders jolted up.

"Why?"

"I think Karla is more deserving of the title of Goddess."

"..." Karin took a step back, as though afraid of something.

I didn't really understand what I was saying... I'd only verbalized what I truly felt deep down.

"Ha-ha-ha." She laughed as though to gloss over it. "I didn't think you would be so blind, Lady Gandesblood. We will see who truly deserves to be the Goddess once the

results of the Heavenly Ball are in. Support Karla all you like in the meanwhile. Farewell."



"Could this get any worse?! What's she mean, 'I'll take your head'?! Oh, I know! Everyone in this country is insane! Psychopaths obsessed with severed heads, all of them!"

"Calm down, Lady Karla," Koharu urged.

"How am I supposed to calm down?! You got hurt, too! I'm gonna get killed for all eternity if that lunatic keeps doing as she pleases! Next time I see her..."

"May I remind you Terakomari is here?"

"Next time I see her, I'm gonna blow her brains out with my Effulgent Magic!" she asserted violently while looking at me.

Karla looked away and cleared her throat right after that.

We were in the outskirts of the Eastern Capital, at a sweets café called the Fuuzen.

We'd gone there both to plan our next move and to just take a breath after parting ways with Karin. Plus, I'd been shoved outside without having eaten a proper breakfast, so I was starving.

I was munching on *youkan*. Yup. Eating confections for breakfast. Truly depraved.

"What should we do now, Lady Amatsu?" Vill asked while looking around the café.

"Isn't it obvious?" Karla answered fervently. "We must stand against Karin. First up is tomorrow's debate. I need only state how I'm the perfect choice for Goddess to gain the people's trust and..."

"You're lying."

I popped another *youkan* in my mouth. It was delicious. Very yummy, but... I knew that flavor from somewhere. I felt like I had tasted it somewhere else recently.

“What do you mean I’m lying?”

“Your grandmother told us that you want to quit being an Imperial Saber and become a confectioner. Are you truly interested in winning this Heavenly Ball?”

Then it hit me. This *youkan* was just the one I’d had at that party. Karla got up just as that realization flashed in my mind.

“Th-that’s not true! I want to make the Heavenly Paradise a better...”

“So you’re saying your grandmother lied to us?”

“W-well, she is quite old already. Perhaps she got the wrong impression. I’ve never once said I wanted to become a pâtissier”

“So she says, but to be honest, she’s the one running the Fuuzen,” Koharu said.

“Why are you telling them?!”

I raised my head. *Huh? Karla’s running this place?*

The ninja girl sighed and looked at Karla.

“Lady Karla, I know you were thinking about telling them.”

“Th-that’s not...”

“Then why bring them here?”

“...”

Karla scrunched up her face for a while, but then she sat back down in resignation. She glanced at me, her cheeks red, and with the smallest voice ever, said:

“...It’s true. I want to be a pâtissier.”

“Y-you do? So this café really is yours?” I said.

“Yes, I opened it recently. Though we’re doing business illegally.”

“You are?!”

“Heh-heh,” she chuckled weakly.

I decided not to pry further.

In any case, I wasn’t expecting Karla to have such a secret. That effort she put toward making her dream come true was something I could learn from. Maybe not the illegal part of it, though.

“A long time ago... my grandmother taught me how to make *ohagi*, and my brother was delighted with it. I then started making more kinds of sweets, until I started dreaming about doing it professionally.”

“You have a brother?”

“He’s actually my cousin,” she muttered. “Anyways, I’ve wanted to be a pâtissier ever since I was little, but family tradition prevents it, as you might’ve gathered if you heard from my grandmother.”

“Yeah, pretty much...”

“We Amatsus are a warrior family. We’ve produced many Imperial Sabers and Goddesses throughout history.”

So like the Gandesbloeds, basically.

The people in Karla’s life had pushed her title onto her without paying one iota of attention to her wishes. I couldn’t help but feel sympathy for her. And she had it even worse than I did, going far beyond just the title of commander—now her scary granny was forcing her to duke it out for the position of ruler.

I was intimately familiar with how not being allowed to do what you wanted felt. Now I really wanted to support Karla.

“Still, you’re inspiring. You’ve got your own café!”

“Although I might be forced to close it down now that Grandmother has found out about it.”

"No need for her to act—the law will take care of that," Koharu said.

"You go get that permit later on! Though, I can't keep it running as long as I'm still a commander. I'm in the red since I only open on weekends."

"By the way, Lady Karla made that *youkan* herself."

"Wow," I said, throwing back another block of gelatin. The sweetness spread through my mouth. So good. "It's got a very gentle flavor. Might be the chef's nature coming through."

"Huh...?" Karla opened her eyes wide.

Thinking about it, not even I understood what had just come out of my mouth, but hey, that's just how it felt.

"Sorry, I mean it's very good."

"Th-thank you... So you like sweets, Ms. Gandesblood?"

"Course I do. Both eating them and making them."

"Wait, you can bake?" Her eyes were sparkling.

I desperately shook my head.

"Just a little bit. I can make cookies and pudding, but nothing as good as you. These taste like a pro's. And speaking of which, did you also make those snacks for the party the other day? They tasted similar."

"Y-yes, I did! I made them in secret. I'm surprised you noticed."

"I remember them well since they were so good. It's a shame you don't get to make more because of your job as commander. You've got what it takes."

Karla suddenly stood up.

I raised my head in shock and found tears in her eyes. She was shivering. Had I said something bad? Then she ran into the back of the store at top speed, flipping her chair in the process. She immediately came back carrying a box.

"Th-the *youkan* are nothing! I have lots more."

"Lady Karla, those are the store's..."

"And she's our guest! We have to show her some hospitality! Please, Ms. Gandesblood. This is my masterwork. If you would..."

"Really? Thanks... Wow! They look great!"

"It's my heptacolor *dango*. Koharu said it was bad, but I'm sure you'll get it. I used the best ingredients to make this ultimate piece. Please, have a taste. Here, say ahh."

"Ahh... Gweh?!"

"Bwuh?!"

My chair tipped back all of a sudden. I turned around in shock and found Vill behind me, puffing her cheeks. *What's wrong with you? You could've made me fall.*

"You shouldn't get closer than necessary to a foreign commander."

"What's wrong with it? We're comrades."

"Okay, I'll admit it—I just can't stand seeing someone else feeding you. It makes me want to go home right now and make you the best omelet rice ever."

"Huh? So we can go home?"

"I got that wrong. It makes me want to lock you up and feed you omelet rice."

"You're sick!!"

That's a crime!

I glanced back at Karla and noticed she was having her own problems.

"Koharu! Don't get in the way! She's the only one who understands my sweets! Let go! Ah-ha-ha-ha! Don't tickle me!"

"She'll get sick if she eats too many of your snacks. I'm putting them away."

“Ah! Wait! Koharuuu!”

Koharu snatched away the box and ran to the back of the store. What a scrupulous ninja. She really didn’t want to hand out their products for free. Unfortunate for me, but I had to suck it up for the good of the Fuuzen.

“Let’s get back on track,” Vill said with a severe tone. “I understand your circumstances, Lady Amatsu. So you don’t want to participate in the Heavenly Ball, either.”

“You got that right. I’d rather pull out of the race. I know I can’t, though... Oh, and please keep this a secret from my grandmother and the Goddess.”

“Got it. But pulling out wouldn’t be easy. I don’t think Karin Reigetsu would allow it, let alone your grandmother.”

I thought back to that samurai girl’s face. She really seemed to detest Karla from the bottom of her heart.

“Do you two not get along? Did you have an argument or something?”

“Nothing like that. Her family... the Reigetsu family is another distinguished house who opposes the Amatsus. The Goddess has historically always come from either of our families.”

“And the previous Goddess was your grandmother. Is the current one a Reigetsu?”

“No, she’s from the Amatsu branch family. I don’t know the details, though...”

An awkward silence followed.

“Anyways,” Karla said, going back on topic. “The Amatsus and the Reigetsus have clashed for hundreds of years for the control of the Heavenly Paradise. It goes without saying that children of the same generation of each house oppose each other. I don’t care about Karin in the slightest, though. I would give her the title if I could.”

“But she seems to be jealous of you, Lady Amatsu. Or perhaps I should say she feels inferior. After all, you are one of the Six Valkyries, and the strongest commander... It’s no surprise she feels that way.”

“What even is there to envy about me?”

"Jealousy is a terrible thing. That samurai girl won't accept if you try to cede the title."

"I suppose. It feels like she's lived her whole life for the purpose of crushing me. And I've heard you need your opponent's permission to withdraw from the Heavenly Ball."

"Forget about permission, she'd probably kill you in response..." I said.

Or I guess not. Karla is far more powerful than Karin Reigetsu, I thought as I glanced back and found her grabbing her ninja's shoulders and muttering, "It's all over, Koharuuu!" I had a hard time comprehending this girl.

"What will be your next move, Lady Amatsu?" Vill asked.

"Um... I'm not sure what else I can say besides that I'll do my best..."

"Of course. There's nothing to do but your best."

A question mark popped up over Karla's and Koharu's heads. I got chills. I was the only one here who knew that you'd soon feel like dying whenever she started talking.

"You have to beat people like that to a pulp or they'll never understand. You must win the Heavenly Ball, Lady Karla."

"But what about my shop?"

"You just have to quit."

"Excuse me?"

"You become the Goddess, then you quit. Then there's no problem."

"...Y-you're right!" Karla stood up, as though she'd finally seen the light.

Huh? That's okay with you? That's your plan?

"I heard the current Goddess got her position after the previous one yielded it and quit. Which means the title can be given over without the need for a Heavenly Ball."

"That's right. It says so in the Goddess Outlines—the laws pertaining to our ruler—that the title can be ceded. Though you need to select your successor..."

Karla turned and stared conspicuously at Koharu, who shook her head desperately.

“Remember the tradition about the Goddess being either an Amatsu or Reigetsu.”

“Koharu, I’ve been hiding this from you the whole time, but the truth is, you’re my little sister.”

“No, thanks.”

“In any case, we can think about that later. Our plan is the same as it was from the beginning. Our Komari Unit will give you full support so you can win, Lady Amatsu.”

“Y-you will?! Not that I couldn’t take them on by myself, but thank you!”

“Hold it right there, Vill!!” I pulled the sicko maid over to the wall.

She was making that *What’s the problem?* face again, the cheeky bastard.

“What are you plotting now? I don’t mind supporting Karla, but this doesn’t sound like something you would do. You’re not trying to make *me* her successor or something, are you?”

“I’m offended. I always act in your best interests, Lady Komari. Getting Karla to win would also make your dream come true, which is why I’m thinking of ways to make it happen.”

“My dream...? You mean...”

“Your dream of becoming a novelist. Did you forget? Lady Amatsu knows about *Twilight Triangle* because I showed it to her. This has been my plan all along. I’ve only ever thought of your wishes right from the very beginning. I did it all for you!”

“Vill!!”

Who would’ve thought? It was all a misunderstanding. I’d been under the impression this maid only wanted to make me work this whole time, but she was far from evil—she was doing this to fulfill my dreams! I’m sorry I ever doubted you, Vill!

“I-I can’t believe you care for me that much.”

"I can't deny I have other motives, though. It would be great for there to be another ruler who's allied with Mulnite besides Lady Cunningham. Especially for the day you become Empress..."

"What? What did you say?"

"Nothing. Anyway, I plan on placing the stepping stones that will lead us to victory. Lady Amatsu may be the strongest, but we have to make sure. We have to be careful nothing bad happens to you."

"Very wise, Vill. I can already taste the moment of my ambitions coming true."

"Give me something as a reward later, okay? Oh, and look, our assistants have just arrived."

"Huh? Assistants?"

"You never cease to amaze me, Commander!!"

I couldn't believe my ears. I thought I was hallucinating. Oh, how I wished I was hallucinating.

I fearfully turned around. There I saw a nightmare scenario. Someone had forced open the sliding door of the shop—a group of four that I regrettably recognized in an instant.

"I am in awe. First the leader of the Gerra-Aruka Republic, and now you also take the Heavenly Paradise's ruler under your wing. The Heavenly Paradise becomes a puppet nation of the Seventh Unit as soon as we win."

At the lead was a vampire with the complexion of a stripped tree. Caostel Conto. He resembled the head adviser for a criminal organization, as usual. And he was suggesting things like one, to boot. *Or did I mishear him? Yeah, that must be it.*

"U-um, who are you? We're closed today." Karla approached the criminals in a hurry.

Impressive. I would never talk to these guys if I were in her place.

"Don't worry. We only came here to kill Karin Reigetsu."

A man with a dog's head stood before her. Bellius Hund Cerbero.

Stop it. Don't look at Karla like that. She's scared. And now Koharu's ready for combat, too.

A gaudy-looking man wearing sunglasses stepped up.

"Hey! Stop your glaring, dog guy. You're sending her fear levels sky-high. Nobody taught you respect? Are all beasts inept? Hrk!"

Bellius punched Mellaconcey, and the pyromaniac crashed into chairs and tables until finally slamming into the wall with a loud thud.

Are you aware we're outside the Dark Core's influence?! Don't do that!

"Ayeee!" Karla screamed like a little girl, which brought me back from my frivolous worries.

Oh, this is gonna be trouble. They look like some mobsters showing up to a struggling shop to ask for loan payments.

"Who are these guys?" Koharu asked, scowling at me.

"Um. They're, uh... Vill!! You didn't say they were coming!"

"This is stepping stone number one," the maid said.

"More like we just stepped on a landmine! You're going for broke from the very beginning?!"

"You may not remember this, Lady Komari, but we're at a disadvantage. Karin Reigetsu has supporters from both the Haku-Goku Commonwealth and the Lapelico Kingdom on her side. Karla Amatsu only has the Mulnite Empire. We needed to call your underlings to close the gap."

"Now that you mention it, I do remember that, but why didn't you call more sensible people instead, then?!"

"Like who?"

“...”

Yeah, I don't have a single reasonable subordinate. Maybe I should try recruiting some. They might join if I say I'll give them all the omelet rice they want in exchange, or maybe even say they could work from home. But I can't guarantee that, and lying's not okay. Dang.

Caostel curled up the edges of his lips in a nasty smile.

“Don't be like that, Commander. You didn't tell Commander Karla Amatsu about us?”

“U-uh-huh. You know, I, um, wanted it to be a surprise.”

After saying that, I realized I was more surprised about this development than anyone else.

Anyhow, I couldn't pretend I didn't know my troops any longer. A calm smile on my face, I turned to look at Karla and Koharu and said:

“These are the leaders of the Mulnite Empire's Seventh Unit. My unit, that is. They're a bit rough around the edges, but they're good people at their core. Don't worry.”

“Oh my, Commander. You appear to be lacking vigor today.”

“Behold, Karla! These are the elites of the Mulnite Imperial Army! They will seize victory for our team!” I repeated.

Karla's mouth stayed agape for a good while, until Koharu poked her back.

“Oh! H-how promising! Yes, with your unit and my power, we will blow away Karin Reigetsu's team as easily as the soy flour dust on a *kinako mochi*.”

“You got that right! The title of Goddess is practically already in your hands!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha!”

Yeah, no, I know shit's gonna go down terribly. It already kinda is, actually.

You got this whole thing planned out, don'tcha, Vill? You do know everything's going down the drain if we lose control of them, right? I'm gonna run away if it turns out to be a real war like last time with Nelia, mkay?

"Worry not, Lady Komari. The Eastern Capital is a danger zone for vampires. They're not stupid enough to go berserk knowing they could die for real."

"Right. Yeah, even ruthless assassins should value their own lives."

"Terakomari! We just have to burn that Karin Reigetsu girl to a crisp, right?" asked blond youth Yohann Holders.

He always dies. Not this time, please.

"...Pretty much. We have to defeat her in combat on the last day to make sure Karla will become Goddess."

"Nah, the early bird gets the worm. I set her house on fire just now."

"What???" Karla and I exclaimed in unison.

What's he saying? Set her house on fire? Is he admitting to arson? Did I just hear wrong?

Just then, I heard commotion outside the café. "It's a fire!" "The Reigetsu residence is burning down!" "Call the firefighters!" "Was it Team Karla Amatsu?!" "Ruthless savages!"

"....."

"All right, I was wrong. Who would've thought Lieutenant Holders was that dumb," Vill said.

I pulled at my hair but held in my scream.

I could feel war approaching.

Vexations

3 Amatsu versus Reigetsu

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

The Heavenly Ball took place over the course of a week.

The Heavenly Paradise's Eastern Capital was overflowing with hype during that time. All sorts of stalls lined the streets. Floats were brought out in a parade once the sun set, and they were followed by fireworks that lit up the night. The excitement had reached fever pitch, since it had been thirty years since the last Ball (when Karla Amatsu's grandmother was appointed) and there were many tourists visiting from outside the country.

"Hey, Prohellya. Did Karin tell you something? The debate is taking place soon, so shouldn't we help out somehow?"

"But we are. We put our opponents in check by merely walking around the city. This, too, is part of the election."

"This...? But we're just eating soba."

"I was hungry, okay?"

The two girls were sitting across from each other at a soba restaurant.

Haku-Goku Commonwealth Arctic Master and Team Karin Reigetsu member Prohellya Butchersky was having trouble grabbing the slippery noodles with her spoon.

Opposite of her was catgirl Leona Flatt, a Holy Beast of the Lapelico Kingdom who was also on Team Karin Reigetsu.

"That being said, I *will* be participating in the debate. Karin Reigetsu asked me to,"

Prohellya said.

"Whaaa?? Why didn't you tell me?! And why didn't she ask me?!"

"Debating is different from battling. She has high expectations for my brilliant mind."

"Hey, I'm good at math!"

"Good for you... How do you even eat this thing? I can't get it in my mouth."

"Want to trade it for my curry? Hey! You're getting the table all wet!"

"Hah! You're a fool, Leona Flatt. Who comes into a soba restaurant and asks for curry? How boorish. Meanwhile, I will triumph over this bowl of soba and achieve greater heights."

Leona felt like sighing.

She'd come to the Heavenly Paradise all by herself the previous day. She'd been fired up to elevate the Lapelico Kingdom's name with her achievements, but her hopes were dashed once she met Karin Reigetsu, who just told her to go sightseeing until the final battle.

So basically, Karin had no hopes for Leona outside of combat.

But the truth was, she'd have no idea what to do for a speech or debate. On that front, she was envious of Prohellya's diverse talents.

"Prohellya... why did you accept Karin's request?"

"The secretary general told me to. The Haku-Goku Commonwealth wants Karin Reigetsu to become the next Goddess, not Karla Amatsu."

"So you're saying Karin's better for the job?"

"No... surely it's the opposite. That secretary general is always up to something. He's rotten to the core."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Oops, I said too much. That was confidential, so don't tell anyone."

"???" Leona didn't get it.

Completely giving up on using the spoon, Prohellya drew her mouth up to the bowl and started slurping the noodles.

Leona ate her curry as she stared vacantly beyond the other girl—at the scenery outside the window. The Eastern Capital was much more crowded than Lapelico's Royal Capital.

"...It's my first time in a foreign capital, so I'm surprised at how big this one is. I always thought Lapelico's was the greatest."

"Oh, but Lapelico's Royal Capital is very nice, too. It has that countryside feel to it."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"But if you analyzed which country has the liveliest capital city on average, then it would definitely be the Haku-Goku Commonwealth, followed by Mulnite, then Aruka, then the Heavenly Paradise, and finally the Enchanted Lands. The Eastern Capital is only this active now thanks to the Heavenly Ball."

"It sure is an important event for the Peace Spirits."

"I don't understand why they would invite foreign commanders to such an important event. There must be something behind all this... Or perhaps that's just the kind of people they are."

"Hmm. What kind of folks are the Peace Spirits, anyway? I've fought Karla Amatsu before, but a ninja caught me off guard and I lost."

Prohellya looked at Leona as she chewed her soba. Soup was spilling out of her mouth.

"Fhe Fish Shfifish aff..."

"Stop! You're making a mess!"

She swallowed.

"Frankly, the Peace Spirits have nothing going for them. They don't have tough bodies like us Sapphires. They don't have animal traits like you beast-folk. They don't suck blood like vampires or freely manipulate blades like Warblades. They don't live long lives like the Immortals. Some say they have an acute sense of time, but who knows."

"But they're strong, right? Look at Karin and Karla."

"Their species doesn't have any unique abilities. Karin Reigetsu is just good at swordsmanship and magic. There are many mind-blowing rumors about Karla Amatsu, but most people haven't seen her true power. There's gotta be a secret behind that."

"Hmm..."

Leona was intrigued about Karla Amatsu.

She had lost against that Peace Spirit commander in sports-war before, but in an abrupt way. A ninja had infiltrated her troops and killed her in a surprise attack. Leona yearned for a chance to have a rematch with her and reclaim her honor, but... Karla had that vampire on her side this time.

Terakomari Gandesblood. The hero who'd saved the world during the Six Nations War.

What did Prohellya think of her?

"Hey, mind if I give a subordinate a call?"

"Oh? Sure, go ahead."

"Thanks. Also, my Correspondence Crystal is bugged or something. I can't take it off speaker mode. I'll be talking about confidential stuff, so pretend you didn't hear anything."

"Why not buy a new one?"

"They won't give me the budget."

So Prohellya poured mana into it. The person on the other end of the line picked up right away.

"Shelepina speaking. Is something the matter, Lady Prohellya?"

"Yes, actually. Have you heard of suspicious activity in the Eastern Capital?"

"In fact..."

Eavesdropping wasn't nice. Leona covered her ears and looked away from her.

Though... Leona thought. Though really, just how many monstrously powerful people are there in this world? Karla Amatsu and Terakomari Gandesblood don't seem like normal people. Something about them smells fishy. I can tell because my sniffing magic is top-notch. I don't think I could defeat either of them... But I have to try.

The Lapelico Kingdom didn't have much of an international presence. Most of their government officials were actual beasts, and they didn't have much of a voice, which was why Leona had decided to participate in the Heavenly Ball: She wanted to improve the status of her homeland. But was she up to the task?

"Hmm?" She suddenly felt something was off.

Outside the window, a young blond man was walking down the crowded streets. He was clearly a vampire, judging from his physical appearance. And she had seen him before... He was one of Terakomari Gandesblood's subordinates.

But there was something off about his scent. It didn't feel like a vampire's.

"...Oh, whatever."

Leona decided not to think too much about it and kept on eating her curry.

We should go sightseeing after our meal. We've come all the way here, after all. Why not?



Karin Reigetsu's goal was to defeat Karla Amatsu, then get appointed as Goddess and reform the Heavenly Paradise. And she would resort to any means necessary to achieve that. No matter how wicked or unscrupulous.

"Who are you?! A terrorist?! One of Karin Reigetsu's underlings?!"

“You don’t know my face?”

“Why would I?! Untie me!”

Karin sighed.

They were in an Eastern Capital back alley. A dank place void of people.

At her feet was a blond vampire, tied up in fireproof ropes, squirming desperately. Yohann Holders. Soldier of the Mulnite Imperial Army and one of Terakomari Gandesblood’s subordinates. They called him the Hellfire Slaughterer because of his atrocious flame powers.

His motions were sluggish, perhaps due to the fact he’d been hit on the head when captured. He had blood coming out of his forehead.

The Eastern Capital was a danger zone for everyone but Peace Spirits. No wounds would heal there, nor would outsiders come back from the dead. From Karin’s point of view, Yohann was like an insect trapped in a spiderweb.

“You are in Terakomari Gandesblood’s unit, correct?”

“You bitch! What d’you want with her?! I won’t let you... Agh!!” Yohann let out a muffled scream. Karin had delivered a kick to the pit of his stomach.

“Shut up. Don’t speak if you aren’t answering my questions. What is Terakomari Gandesblood’s weak point? What is the nature of her Core Implosion? Does she have any other powers besides ice and gold?”

“What... are you talking about?! ”

“Answer!”

She kicked him in the face. He flew backward, yet his eyes were still filled with determination. Blood poured from his nose as he glared at her.

“I get it... You’re one of Karin Reigetsu’s underlings. You’re scared of Terakomari, aren’t you? So that’s why you captured me. But you’re not getting what you want, underling!”

“I am Karin Reigetsu!!” she shouted in Yohann’s face, lifting him up by the hairs on his

head.

Anger was piling up inside her. Karin, too, was one of the Heavenly Paradise's Five Imperial Sabers. Perhaps she wasn't as popular as Karla Amatsu, but she still frequently appeared in the papers, and she'd played an active role in defending Faure during the Six Nations War. So why?

Karin swallowed her ire and scowled at Yohann.

“...Tell me everything you know about her, or I'll kill you.”

“You sure you should be doing this? I'm not well aware, but this has to be against the rules of the Heavenly Ball.”

“I can bend any rule at my will. I have the authority.”

“Seriously? Then I'll tell you... Terakomari's actually really weak. You can beat her easily, no need for any special tricks. She's no match for Imperial Saber Karin Reigetsu.”

“Are you making fun of me?!”

Karin slammed Yohann's face on the ground, then stepped on his blond head. The vampire twisted his face in pain, but she did not care. She had to get something out of him, or this kidnapping would've been for nothing.

“Hey! Stop that! You've gotta be kidding me! The Mulnite Dark Core doesn't reach all the way here!”

“I'm well aware. And I won't hold back, so speak. Tell the truth, or I'll turn you into coating for my katana.”

She showed the collar of the blade, its glitter making Yohann go pale. The fireproof ropes and Magic Seal prevented his escape. His life was in Karin's hands.

The vampire finally realized she was serious.

“D-don't do it... I'm gonna...”

“I'm gonna die!” came a voice from behind her.

Karin turned around, keeping a cool expression. There she found a young man wearing a Mulnite army uniform. His blond hair was spiked up like flames, and he had a general aura of delinquency about him. He looked exactly like the vampire at her feet.

“Wha...? Me? How...?”

“How indeed. Lady Karin, my work here is done!” The second Yohann smiled innocently, like he never would.

The one on the ground was at a loss for words.

“You’re late, Fuyao.”

“Apologies! But now I have a good grasp of our enemy’s forces.”

“Wh-who are you?! What’s going on?! ”

The second Yohann grinned.

It must have been a nightmare scenario for him. Karin used the nightmarish power of this girl to take care of all her enemies.

“Core Implosion: Inari-Avatar Reflection.”

Smoke covered the surroundings the next instant.

The second Yohann was gone. The wind blew away the smoke to reveal a beast-folk with fox ears and a tail. It was Karin Reigetsu’s right hand: Fuyao Meteorite.

Fuyao slowly approached Yohann. She had an unsheathed sword in hand. He lost all color in his face and screamed at the sight of the blade.

“Wh-what was that?! I didn’t feel a speck of mana! This can’t be...”

“Oh my. He’s really surprised. Looks like he doesn’t even know about Core Implosion.”

“That’s ridiculous. This man is in Terakomari Gandesblood’s unit.”

“Perhaps she only shows her closest retainers! I thought the same when I was

observing her from up close. My best next move might be to turn into that blue-haired maid. Either way, we're done with Yohann Holders. I already did everything I could as him."

The streets suddenly broke out into chaos.

Alarms were going off. People were shouting "Fire!" as they ran westward, in the direction of the higher ward, where the nobility resided...

Karin stared at Fuyao with suspicion. The latter smiled broadly and said:

"I set it on fire."

"What...?"

"We needed to get some rumors going. Once news spreads about how Team Karla Amatsu set fire to her opponent's residence, the tables will turn."

"What?! Fuyao! What were you thinking?!"

"Don't worry! I burned a warehouse the Reigetsu family's not using. And there's no way to track it back to me! After all... I did it while borrowing Yohann Holders's appearance."

Karin clicked her tongue mentally.

No matter how hard she tried to train this fox, she couldn't get rid of her tendency to act out of her own accord.

Still, thinking about it, the plan was effective. She'd have more freedom of action once Karla Amatsu's team got the blame for this. She could act like the victim and denounce her. She had the perfect excuse to look for revenge. The risk of the truth coming to light was there... but she trusted Fuyao to have taken proper precautions.

"Are you ready, Mr. Yohann Holders?" Fuyao asked as she caressed her blade.

Yohann screamed, pale in the face.

"R-ready for what?!"

“For your death.”

She slowly lifted the katana... Her stance was beautiful as always. This foxgirl had been a top-notch warrior from the moment she met her. Karin wasn't even sure she could defeat her in an all-out duel.

The foxgirl repeated her question in a bloodcurdling tone. An impersonal inquiry with no meaning attached.

“Answer me. Are you ready to die?”

“Wait! Hold on! That would kill me for real! Please don’t! Please!”

“I see. What a shame.”

The blade fell at an incredible speed as a shriek echoed through the back alley.

※

“But anyways, Lady Karin,” Fuyao spoke to her master after letting out a breath. “Why do you antagonize Karla Amatsu so much? The way I see it, you far exceed her.”

She sheathed her sword, confirming the vampire at her feet was no longer moving.

Karin clicked her tongue before answering.

“I hate people who don’t know their place. Karla isn’t worthy of being the Goddess. She isn’t worthy of being a commander in the first place. She has no combat skills to speak of.”

“Yes, it’s quite suspicious.”

“And yet... and yet! Everyone idolizes her for no reason! They don’t even care about her true skill or achievements... They just like that she’s easy on the eyes...”

“Don’t stamp your feet, you’ll dirty your clothes. So what do you want to do with her? I feel like just killing her in the final battle wouldn’t be enough for you.”

“I’ll show the entire world just how incompetent Karla Amatsu is, so no one will ever think good of her again. From there, I’ll win the Heavenly Ball.”

“And what happens to her next?”

“Exile, of course.”

“Do you really need to do all that?”

“Yes. Do you know about Kakumei Amatsu?”

“...” Fuyao thought for a while before answering, “He was an Imperial Saber a while back, wasn’t he? I heard he disappeared.”

“He did, and they now say he’s working for a terrorist group. Though that’s only rumors, so I can’t say much more. But there’s one thing I’m certain of: I don’t antagonize Karla just because I have a grudge against her.”

“Oh.” Fuyao narrowed her eyes. “I see, I see. Then we’ve got to win. I, Fuyao Meteorite, will see you to the seat of Goddess, Lady Karin!”

“I’m leaving it in your hands.”

“I’ll take care of it. The Heavenly Paradise will be yours.”

Fuyao smiled internally.

Nothing would go wrong as long as she worked for Karin. For the Heavenly Paradise.



The next day.

The news of Team Karla Amatsu setting the Reigetsu residence on fire was all anyone in the Eastern Capital could talk about. “I’ve got to be dreaming, right?” I told Vill, but then she held the newspaper to my face, and I was pulled back to reality.

Fire in the Reigetsu Residence! A Premeditated Crime by Commander Gandesblood?!

It was a nightmare. And it wasn't Six Nations News reporting this. No, the article was actually from a reliable source, the Eastern Capital Times. I couldn't just pretend it was a fabrication.

"That's trouble. Now they have more mud to sling at us in the debate," Vill said.

"The debate is secondary here! This is a crime we're talking about! We messed shit up again!!" I yelled, a chopstick in each hand.

We were having breakfast. Fried eggs. Rolled. Nice and fluffy. A tasty variation on the omelet concept... *But what am I doing here licking my lips like nothing happened?!*

"Ms. Gandesblood, what is the meaning of this?" Karla calmly questioned me from the other side of the table.

Crap. She's furious. Gotta mentally prepare myself for groveling.

"Rest assured, Lady Amatsu. This is all part of the plan."

"What plan?! What's the strategy behind burning down our opponent's house?!"

"We're still working on that... Anyways, do you mind if I borrow your teacup just for a bit, Lady Amatsu?"

"Wh-what? It's full, though?"

"Excuse me."

Vill grabbed Karla's teacup and immediately hid it behind her back like some sort of magic trick. Three seconds later, she gave it back. What in the world?

Karla was still enraged.

"What do you mean you're 'working on that'? Thank goodness nobody died, but some people did end up hurt. How are we going to take responsibility for that? The Heavenly Ball might be a brutal event, but we should try to keep conflict to a minimum."

"S-sorry..."

A subordinate's mistake was the boss's responsibility, so I had to take her scolding.

Despite resigning myself to being chewed out, my maid wouldn't stand for it. *Shut up already!*

"But there's something I'm curious about. Was it really Karin Reigetsu's residence that was set aflame?"

"Of course. There's no mistake in that." She sipped some tea.

"But we didn't even know where it was. Lieutenant Holders had just arrived at the Eastern Capital, so how was he supposed to know?"

Hmm? I tilted my head.

Yeah, that was strange. But that mystery had to have a simple answer. Yohann could've just asked someone or looked it up beforehand. Nah, not the latter. No one in the Seventh Unit would ever actually plan something in advance.

"Either way, we need to interrogate him."

"And where is Yohann? I haven't seen him since yesterday..."

"He up and disappeared." Caostel appeared in the doorway before I knew it.

Bellius was beside him. They entered the room without permission and looked down at me right from the side.

"Huh? You guys are staying here, too?"

"Yes. Koharu the ninja gave us a room."

Bellius pointed to the courtyard. To a doghouse.

What? You guys slept in a doghouse? I turned to look at Karla in confusion, and she suddenly stood up.

"I-I'm so sorry! That insolent Koharu! I'll get you proper rooms; please forgive her!"

"Oh, don't worry about it, Lady Amatsu. It's no problem. Let's focus on Yohann instead. After we left the sweets shop yesterday, he left the premises under the pretext of using the restroom. We haven't seen him since."

"Koharuuu! Koharuuu! Don't make our guests stay in the doghouse, pleeease!" Karla left the room pale in the face.

I crossed my arms. Where could Yohann have gone? Was he exploring the Eastern Capital on his own? But would he really act of his own accord without telling me? Yeah. Yeah, he would. I couldn't trust him.

"...Commander, I think we need to investigate," Bellius said, staring at me with his arms crossed. "He couldn't have been in the restroom for over a day, could he?"

He was being earnest. I guessed Bellius wasn't as smart as I'd taken him for.

"Yeah, I'm worried about him... But anyways, why don't you sit down? Have you had breakfast yet? You can't fight on an empty stomach."

"There's no more cushions. I'll get some chairs," Vill said before carrying over a vase that was sitting in the corner of the room.

"Oh, thank you," Caostel said as he turned it around and sat down.

...Wait. Isn't that the ten-billion-yen vase? Should we be using that as a chair?

"As for Lieutenant Cerberus..."

"I'm fine. Let's get back to talking about Yohann. We should operate under the assumption he fell into some sort of trap. He might be a criminal, but I don't think he would set buildings on fire in a foreign country for no reason. Perhaps Karin Reigetsu and her team are more cunning than we believe."

"Wait, no, that vase..."

"Yes, this has to be some sort of plot. Perhaps Lieutenant Holders was attacked," Vill mused.

"What?! They won't get away with this!"

"Caostel, be careful! The vase's gonna faaaAAAAAH!!"

"Bellius! Let's go investigate!"

“We have to look for Yohann first. He might know something.”

“Then let’s split up. Commander! I’ll uncover Karin Reigetsu’s misdeeds! You can peacefully have breakfast here and wait for the good news! Later!”

Caostel and Bellius left in a hurry.

As they took off, they kicked over the ten-billion-yen vase. I clung desperately to it, screaming my lungs out as it rolled across the floor, out to the hallway, then down the veranda, until it fell on the courtyard cobblestones.

Dread filling my entire body, I checked it over... and saw a crack.

“NOOOOOOOO!!”

“Lady Komari, we’re in trouble.”

“I know that! This costs ten billion yen! Even my organs aren’t worth that much cash! I should’ve known something like this would happen the second the vase was mentioned—why couldn’t I stop this from happening?! Stupid Komari!”

“That’s not the issue. Look at my eyes.”

“What do you mean it’s not the issue?! There’s something even worse?! Whoa! What’s up with your eyes?!”

They were bloodshot, but not because she was irritated. Vill was invoking her power to see the future.

“Core Implosion: Pandora’s Poison. I put my blood in Lady Amatsu’s teacup. I thought I should check, just in case, and this is big.”

“No duh! I’m sure her grandma kills me!”

“No. I can’t see anything.”

“What?”

“This is the first time this has happened. Perhaps there’s something wrong with the space-time continuum.”

"Okay, that's just too weird for me. Back to crying over the vase... It's over..."

"We can simply place a fake vase in its place. What's going on with Karla is way more concerning. My Core Implosion is working correctly, yet the future I should have seen isn't settled. It's all dark from here."

Yeah. My future sure is dark.

Yet Vill was somehow grimacing harder than I.

"Does the future not exist? Is time itself twisted? That can't be..."

"Uh, Vill, would you mind directing your brainpower into finding a way to fix the vase instead, please?"

"This is much bigger than that vase. And either way, we have the debate coming up today. We should have a plan. Let's bring up Lieutenant Holders there."

"Where do you think he went?"

"No idea. I just hope it doesn't cause problems... Anyways, let's eat. The eggs are scrumptious. Here, say ahhh."

I gobbled it up. Let the taste of egg fill my mouth as my mind wandered in the spiral of despair.

I was also worried about Yohann, but even more freaked out about the vase. I had to find a way to fix it. But it didn't seem possible. Glue wasn't going to cut it.

If only there was someone with the power to go back in time.



Time, however, didn't go back. It kept on trudging forward.

I spent the whole day thinking about how to apologize to Karla's grandma, until the sun began to dip behind the mountains. I couldn't take it anymore; there was nothing to do but bring it up to her directly... after a nice bath. *Yeah, I gotta catch my breath before that.*

While Vill was powdering her nose, I headed straight for the bath. It was one of those rare cypress baths, something you never saw in Mulnite. I got all excited, quickly taking off my clothes and washing my body before soaking all the way up to my shoulders in the hot water.

“Haaaah...” I let out a breath of bliss.

All my weariness vanished.

I chose to put the vase out of my mind for a moment.

After getting into this bath for two days in a row, I can confirm that wooden baths do have a relaxing effect... I want one for my house. I think I'll save up for one, I thought, playing with the rubber duck floating in the water.

It felt really nice there, but I couldn't stay for long. The sicko maid would storm in the moment she found out I was there. I had to get this over with soon for my own safety... but... well... it was just so nice. *I'll stay a little while longer. Just a little while. I mean, I did leave a note back in my room saying I was going to get some fresh air outside.*

So I chose to just relax. Maybe sing a little ditty.

“La-lala-lalaaa ♪ You can’t trick your heart ♪ Mine’s always thinking of you ♪ Even when we’re apart ♪ Like a dream come true ♪ Our love is a pink meteorite ♪ La-lala-lalaaa ♫”

“Excellent singing. That’s our Lady Komari, diva of Mulnite.”

“Huh? Really? You flatter me.”

“It’s the truth. I would love to hear more, so please, go on.”

“Okay, then... WAAIIIT!!” I yelled as I jumped up.

Vill was already standing behind me. Naked.

How'd she get here so fast?!

“Didn’t you see my note?! I said I was getting some fresh air!”

"And I went to look for you outside, but then I heard your cute voice coming from the bath, so I ran inside and got undressed as quickly as I could."

"AAAAAHHHHH!!"

I wanted to pluck out my hair. The window was open. *So everyone outside could hear me?! Damn it all! Why did I have to go and sing like an idiot?!*

"No! Stay away! I want this cypress bath all to myself!"

"I don't care. I'm joining you."

"Hey!"

Then the sicko maid leaped into the water.

This girl's got a lot to learn about bathing etiquette! I'll have to teach her a thing or two! Wait, no, that's not the problem!

"Don't cling to me! Gross!"

"There's nothing gross about this. We came for a trip all the way here, and it is Heavenly Paradise tradition to bond au naturel. Come! Let's bond in the buff!"

"I don't think you're getting that right!"

Vill had no intention of staying back, though. Granted, she did seem to have learned some restraint. At least she wasn't groping me out of nowhere now. She kept at a distance, so only our shoulders were touching.

...Fine. She is right about enjoying this trip.



But just as I thought that, I noticed she was staring at me obscenely.

“I see your breasts have grown, Lady Komari.”

“What?! D-d-d-don’t look! Enough of your sexual harassment! I won’t tolerate any more!”

“I’m sorry. I was joking.”

“You were?!”

“Anyhow, this bath sure is nice. I can feel my weariness melting away.”

“.....”

You and your stupid jokes. Not that I care! You’re always lying anyways. Whatever, Komari, just forget about her and enjoy the bath. The nice cypress bath. Just sing inside your head instead. La-lala-lalaa ♪ Who cares about size? ♪

The warmth banished all worldly grief.

The next moment, the sicko maid opened her damn mouth again, though her tone was serious this time.

“Remember how I said I couldn’t see the future?”

I looked at her. She was playing with the rubber ducky.

“Ah... Your Panthera’s Possum thing, right? You can’t use it or something.”

“Pandora’s Poison. It’s the first time this has ever happened. I can only guess as to what’s going on... but maybe someone will use a power that affects time in the near future.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying.”

“I don’t, either. But I have heard that Peace Spirits are particularly sharp about time. I can’t help but think there’s a connection.”

“No, seriously, what are you talking about?”

"I'm saying we shouldn't rely on my power. No matter what happens in the Eastern Capital... or for the duration of the Heavenly Ball, at least, we'll have to carve our own path into the future."

"..." I kept my mouth shut. She was dead serious.

It must have been a big deal for Vill to be unable to see the future, but that was just normal for everyone else—no one knows what the future holds. It's all darkness out there. No point in thinking too much about it.

That's why I emptied my head and enjoyed the hot water.

The sicko maid, too, narrowed her eyes in relaxation in an unusually un-sicko manner. She totally had her head in the clouds. And somehow, I felt restless about it. She had already poisoned my brain. I reached out for her, trying to use this opportunity to take revenge for everything she did to me on a daily basis, but then she leaned on me out of nowhere.

Vill had drifted off. *She must be so tired. I should let her rest.* But her body was weighing on me. I scrambled to try and hold her up, but I couldn't take her full weight. Then she got her arms behind my back. She was holding me tight. Giving me no escape. *Was this your plan all along, sicko?!*

"Mmm... I can eat no more..."

"I know you're awake!"

How do I get her off me?!

As soon as I put all the strength in my arms to push Vill away, the door to the bath shot open.

"Terakomari! It's time for the debate!... Huh?"

Koharu broke in, panicked.

Right. The debate's today. I forgot to even prepare for it since they never told me what time it would be happening.

Koharu was in shock, as if she had just uncovered the dirtiest of secrets.

Vampire master and servant holding each other tight in the bath.

Yeah. Dirty.

The ninja took a step back, her face turning red.

“S-sorry for intruding...”

“Wait!” I stood up in a hurry, and Vill fell headfirst into the water. “You’re not! We’re not doing anything! Don’t leave with the wrong impression! Vill, stop doing that! I know you’re awake!”

“Tsk... Why couldn’t we stay like that just a little bit longer?”

I knew it! I’m gonna give you a chewing-out later...

And so we followed Koharu outside. The debate would be starting in ten minutes.

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?!”

Vill replied, “Actually, I was going to call you for that, but then I saw you were taking a bath and decided to join you instead.”

What a useless maid!

We sprinted at full speed all the way to the venue.



I wished I could’ve enjoyed the bath a little longer, but oh well.

Vill pulled me by the hand the whole way to the outdoor stage at the heart of the Eastern Capital.

It was time for another big event of the Heavenly Ball: the debate.

I restlessly looked around.

There was a great hustle and bustle everywhere, and waves of Peace Spirits were surrounding the stage. People held *ikayaki* and *takoyaki* as they eagerly waited for the

candidates to appear. Seeing them gave me a hankering for some snacks, too.

I was in a tent set up beside the stage. They told us we should wait there until it was time.

“...Lady Karla, your knees are shaking.”

“What? No, no, it may look that way to you, Koharu, but I’m just doing very fast warm-up exercises.”

“We can’t have you like this just for the debate. At this rate, you’ll explode once the last day arrives.”

“Wh-what do you want me to do?” Karla clung onto Koharu with tears in her eyes. “Karin might cut me up without notice! How do you know she won’t attack me because it’s ‘just a debate’?! She’s going to take advantage of the Dark Core, I know it! She thinks that can excuse anything! I don’t wanna goooo!!”

“Life is all about overcoming adversity.”

“I’d rather take the ‘turn around and look for another way’ approach! It’s not too late yet! Let’s run!”

“Run? You didn’t just say that, did you?” A low voice echoed out of the blue.

Karla’s grandmother stepped inside the tent. Karla opened her eyes so wide they nearly popped out, but she immediately put on a fake smile.

“Oh, Grandmother, thank you so much for coming all the way here. But I don’t think you will find this very entertaining. I heard they’re putting on a story-time show west of here—you should go there instead.”

“There’s no way I can miss your big moment.” She drew closer to her granddaughter. “Go beat up that Reigetsu girl. I can tell she’s plotting something. A scoundrel like her won’t learn unless you nail them right in the face.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha... Okay, but I don’t think I should *actually* be punching her in the face.”

“I just mean you need that sort of energy going up against her. And I will actually punch *you* in the face if you try to run.”

“I’ll do my best to avoid that outcome.”

“Good. As for you, Gandesblood...”

I straightened my back as her grandmother glared at me.

It was obvious what popped into my mind then. The vase. She approached me with a vigorous step, then whispered into my ear:

“I heard about it.”

“The vase?! Are you talking about the vase?!?”

“Huh? What? I mean the fire.”

Oh, that. Oof. Yeah, that was big, too. I cause nothing but trouble, huh?

“That’s a sly trick to try and twist the Heavenly Ball. You don’t want your comrades disgraced like that, do you? Go put that Reigetsu punk in her place.”

“Huh...? S-so you know what really happened?”

“Who knows. Also, what was that about a vase?”

I felt like a hole had opened in my stomach.

By the way, I’d put the vase back in its place, cracked side against the wall.

But I couldn’t take it any longer. I rallied myself to apologize, but then Karla’s grandmother spoke first.

“Whatever. I’m putting Karla in your hands. She’s pretty similar to you. Everyone says she’s the strongest commander in the universe, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. Her strength is not so easily recognizable.”

What did she mean by that? There was no doubt the kimono girl was in fact the strongest in the universe.

“I’m counting on you. I’ll forgive you for the vase if you make her win the Ball.”

“What?! Wait!”

“It seems she already knew. Good for you, though, Lady Komari. She’ll forgive you if we win. If we lose, however, something tells me it won’t stop at just selling off your organs.”

“In what kind of world is a vase worth more than someone’s life?!”

No, relax. It’s gonna be okay. There’s no way Team Karla Amatsu could lose the Heavenly Ball. She’s not the strongest in the universe for nothing.

I turned to look at Karla, placing my palms together as though beholding a god.

Our eyes met, but she looked away immediately.

Huh? Is she okay? As soon as apprehension arose inside me, everyone at the venue started clapping and cheering. A voice I recognized right away followed.

The time has finally come! I’m your moderator, Fuyao Meteorite! And worry not! I’ll be completely impartial! We got proper permission from our Goddess!”

“...Why is Karin’s subordinate taking the lead?” I asked.

“No idea, but let’s keep our cool regardless. We’re not dying onstage,” Vill answered.

“True. Though we should still keep our guard up, just in case. What if we put some steel plates inside my uniform? That could protect me against any attack.”

“Shall I go swipe some from that *yakisoba* stall? They must be nice and cozy.”

“You want to cook me?!”

“I’m joking. There’s no need for protection.” Vill smiled.

I guess using steel plates would be too much, yeah. It is just a debate. No way we could die out there.



“Welcome Team Karla Amatsu to the stage! Accompanying her is Crimson Lord

Terakomari Gandesblood!" Fuyao shouted.

I took the stage behind Karla. The audience was cheering like crazy. I supposed the ovations following a commander's appearance were the same no matter the country.

I saw Caostel and Bellius in the front row. *Please just don't make any trouble. I'm getting heat for everything you do!*

"Lady Komari, can you hear me?"

I nearly did a backflip upon hearing the voice of my maid. Then I remembered she had given me a Correspondence Crystal moments before. Only Karla and I could participate in the debate, so Vill had to stay behind.

"I can. What's up?"

"Does something need to be up for me to call you?"

"I don't mind it, just not now. You're distracting me."

"I see," she said in regretful tone. "Just take care, please. If Karin starts attacking, just run for your life. And Arctic Master Prohellya Butchersky will be participating as well. Watch out for her, too."

"Too many things to watch out for..."

My shoulders drooped as I came up to a long U-shaped table. Karla and I were on the east side. Karin and Prohellya on the west side. At the north side stood the moderator, foxgirl Fuyao.

"Oooh!" Prohellya exclaimed out of nowhere. "If it isn't Commander Terakomari Gandesblood! Now that I see you upfront, you look frailer than I imagined! It's a shame we didn't get to duke it out during the Six Nations War. I look forward to exchanging blows this time around. Let us compose a melody to the tune of bloodshed."

"S-sure. I think my solo performance will overshadow you, though."

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! And you have a sense of humor, too! I can't wait for the day, Terakomari."

Prohellya smiled from the bottom of her heart, then took a sip of tea. Karin, sitting with impeccable posture at her side, called out to her.

“...Commander Butchersky, I would appreciate if you could refrain from speaking of unrelated matters.”

“Sorry about that. I just can’t help myself when I see a worthy opponent. Okay, then, moderator! Let’s start the debate! Though I won’t be doing more than watching.”

Prohellya crossed her legs on top of the table in a bold display of impudence.

I think I saw Karin pop a vein on her forehead, but ultimately, she said nothing about it. The moment passed, and Fuyao spoke again.

“Well, then! Time for the debate! Our question for today will be: How will you develop the Heavenly Paradise? Let’s hear what our candidates have to say!”

“YEAAAAHHH!!” The audience went even wilder.

“Karin!” “Karin!” “Karla!” “Karla!” People started chanting. That had to be embarrassing looking on from outside. And indeed, Karla was red up to her ears. On the other hand, Karin seemed proud of the attention.

“Everyone ready?! Let’s begin with Team Karin Reigetsu!”

“Roger.” Karin slowly stood up, then scowled like a warrior at Karla. “I’ll cut to the chase. Karla Amatsu is unworthy of being Goddess. Why? Because despite holding the title of Imperial Saber, she has no combat ability whatsoever.”



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The audience roared. Karla's shoulders trembled.

Wait, what? You're attacking her straight out of the gate? Aren't you supposed to talk about your own policies and stuff?

Paying no heed to the confusion she had provoked, Karin continued, her tone triumphant.

"It is undeniable that Karla Amatsu has never once displayed her strength as commander in public. Everyone here should know that. Has anyone actually seen her defeat an opponent? No. This should be more than enough evidence to prove that she is feigning her power."

"So she says, Lady Amatsu! Any rebuttals?"

"I object, of course!" Karla stood up in a hurry. "It is certainly true that I haven't yet unleashed my full power onto an opponent. However, that's just because I'm taking care not to reveal my strength. As our people say, a skilled hawk hides its talons."

"Why would a commander have the need to hide their so-called talons? Imperial Sabers are warriors, commanded by the Goddess to destroy our enemies and make our nation prosper. A commander who hides their blade is worthless."

"And it was my Goddess who gave me the title! If you don't like that, then take it up with her!"

"I have, many times. Yet she wouldn't listen to me. Which is why I am now trying to bring your dishonesty to light in this Heavenly Ball. How about some evidence?"

So their squabbling began.

The scene was giving me some serious *déjà vu*. It was just like that time Flöte had called a Crimson Council to interrogate me. The difference here was that Karla actually had more than enough power to defend herself. She wouldn't turn into a confused mess like me, for sure. Or so I thought.

"Let's do this. Show us your swordsmanship, here and now. I will recognize your strength if you do."

"What?! Why would I have to do that?!"

"It's a simple way to clear yourself of suspicion, no?"

"...I-I mean, sure... but..."

"But that couldn't be further from the truth. Her strength is not so easily recognizable."
Karla's grandmother's words came to mind.

No, no. Don't doubt her. Karla's just being evasive because of some extenuating circumstances. She just doesn't need to showcase her swordsmanship here, that's all. It's not because she's actually weak or anything.

"You have no skills or guts to speak of. You're an incompetent coward who got her title through lineage alone. You've always made someone else fight for you. There's nothing you fear more than death."

"I-I'm not afraid of anything! I'm the strongest there is!"

"Then why don't you pick stronger opponents to face? Like, say, another one of the so-called Six Valkyries. A strange group in and of itself, but have you ever fought any of the other five?"

"I have! Ms. Leona Flatt!"

"And it was your ninja who assassinated her. The beast-folk easily fall for such tricks. A perfect opponent for a coward like you."

"You're being rude to Ms. Leona!"

"Your way of fighting is what's insolent here! So, have you fought any of the other four? Like say, Lady Butchersky, or Lady Ailan Lingzi?"

"I haven't... B-but I will, in time."

"Hah! You've always been this way. 'I'll do it later.' 'I'm busy now.' 'Next time, for sure.' This is why the Heavenly Paradise is in decline. You're not worthy of being one of the Five Imperial Sabers. You're a sham of a warrior. A disgrace to your grandmother's nickname."

"H-hold on! I don't think it's right for you to just start attacking your opponent like that!" Unable to bear it any longer, I got up out of my seat.

Fuyao narrowed her eyes as she stared at me, but I paid her no attention.

“M-Ms. Gandesblood...”

“Don’t worry, Karla. Karin! She’s fed up with this. You’ll see her true power on the last day, anyways. What’s the point in pressuring her right now? We’re doing a debate here, so let’s discuss something more constructive, okay?”

“Terakomari is absolutely right, Karin Reigetsu! Putting down others like that only brings discord, and I won’t bear to hear it if that’s the only thing you’re going to talk about. You’re aiming to become the head of your nation, so talk about what you’ll do to manage it instead. What kind of country do you want to build?” Prohellya supported me.

I’d thought of her as nothing but a weirdo, but it appeared she had a rational side as well.

“Right.” Karin thought for a bit. “I want to build a proper country, one that would never appoint someone like Karla Amatsu as commander.”

“Karin Reigetsu... We’re not getting anywhere like this.”

“No, Commander Butchersky. You can just listen to my speeches or read what I’ve told the papers to know my policies. There are better things to do here, with the eyes of the public on us. And that is exposing how despicable Karla Amatsu is. Or should I not, moderator?”

“Oh, go ahead!”

You sure you’re being impartial?

“I shall. Karla Amatsu has been using dirty tricks to protect herself. Just yesterday, there was a small fire in the Reigetsu residence’s warehouse. You all have heard about that by this point. That must have been the work of Team Karla Amatsu.”

Here we go.

Usually, I would have started apologizing immediately, but the circumstances weren’t quite clear.

"Lady Komari, it's time to stand your ground. I talked about it with Lady Amatsu already, and we're pushing back against the claims."

I heard Vill's voice in my head. However, I had no idea how we were supposed to do that. Still, I had to trust and avoid admitting to the crime at all costs.

"Circumstantial evidence suggests Lieutenant Holders is innocent. According to Lieutenant Cerberus and Lieutenant Conto, he didn't even know Karin Reigetsu was Team Karla Amatsu's opponent. I never told him, so I'm sure of this."

"So he had no reason to start that fire... Then what happened?"

"I don't know. If they used some sort of special magic or power, then we won't be able to expose their trick. We don't even know where Lieutenant Holders is now. Let's put off giving an explanation and just state that we're innocent. This is mere conjecture, but I believe Team Karin Reigetsu has committed serious misconduct."

I looked at Karin and Fuyao again. Now that Vill said it, they had this wicked aura about them. Or maybe it was just my imagination. I couldn't be sure.

"That's not true! Where's your proof?!" Karla yelled.

The argument began while I was speaking with Vill.

"Oh, I have proof. I found this behind the warehouse you burned," Karin said as she took a small badge out from her pocket.

My jaw dropped. That was...

"I hear this is a Mulnite Imperial Army insignia. It has a half-moon design. My investigation says it symbolizes the rank of lieutenant. Am I incorrect, Lady Gandesblood?"

"No... I think. Where did you get that?"

"I just said I found it lying by the warehouse. This is irrefutable proof that a Mulnite Empire soldier set the Reigetsu residence on fire."

"You could've gotten that anywhere! Don't you find it too convenient that such a piece of evidence was just lying there? It's obvious the real culprit left it there to frame us!"

"You suspect us, Lady Gandesblood? What a shame. A real shame, since this is not our only evidence. We have a more crucial piece." Karin put on a spiteful smile as she searched her pocket again.

She took out a picture. It depicted a familiar young blond man throwing flames from his hands. *Oh, it's over.* I desperately talked to the Correspondence Crystal:

"What the hell, Vill! We can't deny this evidence!"

"You say the pictures on Six Nations News are doctored but won't doubt this one?"

Right... It could be doctored. But whether I believed it or not made no difference in convincing everyone else.

"This is Lieutenant Yohann Holders, of the Mulnite Imperial Army's Seventh Unit. There are many witnesses. You ordered him to do this, didn't you, Lady Gandesblood? Or should I say, Karla Amatsu instructed you to give such an order?"

"Wha—?! N-no! I did nothing! What do I even gain by burning that warehouse?! There's nothing in it for me!"

"I had my weapons stored in there. And they're all useless now. Now I will have to use a katana I'm not used to for our battle on the final day. This was your aim all along, was it not?"

"Oh my! That's terrible! Lady Amatsu, your rebuttal, please!"

"Guh... I-I... I didn't do it...!"

"Then show proof that you didn't do it!"

"How can I prove something I didn't do?!"

"Of course you would say that. What do you all think, everyone? It has now come to light that Karla Amatsu won't stop at using dirty tricks to win! Should a cheater be leading the Heavenly Paradise?! Our nation would be over! I will personally ensure that does not happen!"

"YEAAAH!!" The crowd went wild.

I heard people shout all sorts of things. Cheering in support of Karin Reigetsu. Voices branding Karla Amatsu as a cheater. Others protesting that Karla would never do that or telling Karin to stop spouting lies.

Still, it felt like most of them were in support of Karin. They started loudly chanting her name.

"It seems we have a majority of Karin Reigetsu supporters in the audience."

"What do you mean to say?"

"Lieutenant Conto reported that a ticket is needed to enter the venue, and that the Heavenly Ball Management Committee had a screening process for its sales."

"What? I don't get it..."

"It means that Karin's team has influence over the Committee. What is the Goddess even doing? This is unfair to Lady Amatsu."

What? She can do that?

I stared at Karin in disbelief.

She responded with an icy smile. It was then that I knew.

This girl... was the complete opposite of Karla the sweetheart.

Voces criticizing Karla filled the venue. She stood at a loss, pale in the face.

"You okay?" I asked her.

"I'm fine," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, Karla. It's all my fault. If only I had supervised Yohann better..."

"It's fine. I never thought I could win. I don't care how loud the criticisms are. Even if they're all false, I'll just ignore it," she said, choking up.

I get it. No one likes being criticized.

And still Karla sucked it up for her dream. So that she could avoid becoming the Goddess and be the pâtissier she wanted to be.

But then, Karin hit her where it hurt.

“...I also heard you’ve opened up a sweets shop.”

Karla’s shoulders jolted up.

Karin continued without mercy.

“When is it enough humiliation for you? You’re a commander and a Goddess candidate, and yet you waste your time on games. You make light of our country.”

“Oh! Indeed, Lady Karla Amatsu manages a shop called the Fuuzen! I’ve visited in secret, in fact,” Fuyao added.

“My. Please, tell me your thoughts on it.”

“Well... what can I say. It wasn’t very good. You can find dozens of better confectioners in the Eastern Capital. First of all, the mere thought of a commander making sweets is a little nauseating. I don’t think she’s fit for the job.”

“You heard her, Karla. You better close shop already. There is no value in a member of the Reigetsu or Amatsu families who doesn’t choose the way of the warrior. No warrior should be taking up such wishy-washy endeavors. You’ll disgrace my family, too. A confectioner? Don’t make me laugh. If that’s what you want, go marry into some other family already, you weakli—”

“Stop it.” I interrupted her.

Karin must have had her reasons. No one would belittle someone else to this extent without a cause. But... I couldn’t bear to see the tears welling up in Karla’s eyes. To hell with her justifications for her actions. I had to push back.

“Karla’s sweets are good. I love them.”

Both Karla and Karin jumped up in surprise. *Why though?*

“So what? Different people have different tastes. The fact of the matter is that Karla

Amatsu is wasting her time on a silly job befitting neither a commander nor the Goddess."

"What's wrong with you...?"

"Heh... Too bad, Karla. We did our homework, and now the cat is out of the bag. This will raise suspicions toward you and..."

"Enough of your stupid bullshit!"



"Enough of your stupid bullshit!"

The debate was being broadcast through farsight magic at a pub in the Eastern Capital's downtown.

It was dinner time, so most seats were taken. Everyone was restless due to the Heavenly Ball, cheering every time Karin Reigetsu or Karla Amatsu shouted on the screen placed at the center.

Yeah, I get the excitement, thought Inverse Moon top brass Lonne Cornelius.

On screen was Terakomari Gandesblood, shouting with an impressively stern expression.

"I'm not talking about your damn election! What even is the point in disparaging like this?! Karla's always wanted to be a pâtissier, and she's working hard toward that goal! She overcame so much to finally start her shop! And you... you have the gall to criticize her for it?! You try to put her down for it?! That's not fair!"

"Wh-what's with you all of a sudden, Lady Gandesblood? We're only discussing as we should for the debate, I..."

"And it's not just about the Fuuzen! The only thing you've been doing this whole time is trying to put Karla down! If you really want to be the Goddess, then talk about yourself, not your opponent! Try saying something worthwhile for once instead of wasting our time, asshole!"

Karin was in a daze. Some people in the pub, likely Karla supporters, whistled and

cheered for Terakomari. Cornelius watched on in silence as she snacked on her miso konjak.

"They sure seem excited about this. Though I suppose it's only natural, considering how long it's been since the last Heavenly Ball."

"Yeah."

"I'm curious to see who will prevail. My bet is on Terakomari's side. What about you, Amatsu?"

"God only knows," was the only thing the unfriendly Peace Spirit sitting across from her said.

Cornelius puffed her cheeks. Amatsu had been acting strangely ever since they'd arrived at the Heavenly Paradise. He'd been cold. Like his attention was elsewhere.

Her Highness, the leader of Inverse Moon, had given him a direct order the other day: "Go back home and put your family at ease." Cornelius had felt excitement in her chest the moment she heard that. Amatsu never wanted to go visit his family. She was sure something fun would come out of this, so she'd followed him against his wishes the whole way there. And yet...

"Look, it's fine if you don't care about the debate, but when are you going to see your family?"

"It's not the time yet."

The crowd cheered again as Terakomari and Karin kept arguing. No one was paying them any attention—the perfect space for a couple of terrorists to have dinner incognito.

Cornelius let out an alcohol-stink breath and shrugged.

"It's already been three days since we got here. We've been doing nothing but lazing around at the inn. I want you to go get yelled at already so I can make fun of you, please."

"Don't get your hopes up. I'm not going to the main residence for a good while."

"Then take me sightseeing at least. I heard there's this famous shrine here. What was it called, again? The Celestial Shrine or something. They say it gives you good luck in marriage."

"Go by yourself."

Boring. Cornelius clicked her tongue and grabbed another piece of miso konjak with her chopsticks.

"Well, it's also fun just seeing you so hesitant... Hey, that's mine! Don't grab it! Why do you always steal my food?!"

"You misunderstand something." Amatsu glared at her as he munched on the konjak, and she was rightfully spooked. "I didn't come here to see my family. Just think about it. You think the boss of a terrorist organization would tell one of their top brass to 'go visit your family to put them at ease'? Her orders have a hidden meaning."

"I think you're just overthinking things to fit your narrative."

"Don't take any of what she says at face value, or you'll regret it. You won't make it in Inverse Moon if you don't overthink things once in a while."

"Okay then, let me ask. What is the hidden meaning of her orders?"

"She wants me to interfere with the Heavenly Ball to benefit Inverse Moon."

Ugh...

It did make sense, though. Her Highness had sent Amatsu back home at the exact same time an important event was taking place in his homeland. It wouldn't be weird if she had an ulterior motive.

And yet.

"Ahh! But that's so boring!" Cornelius shouted as she raised her hands. "That means Her Highness wants us to stay hidden and see how the Heavenly Ball unfolds, doesn't she?! We came all the way here, and we don't get to enjoy the trip?!"

"We're not here on vacation."

“I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! Take me sightseeing!!”

She flailed her arms and legs like a child throwing a tantrum. Then her arm hit a sake cup on the table and knocked it away.

“Ah!” they both exclaimed in unison.

The cup hit the leg of a man who was just passing by the hallway, spilling over his shoes. What bad luck. He scowled back at her.

“What the hell, lady?!” The man’s voice was more threatening than Cornelius imagined it would be, and she froze. “I’ve had enough of your racket, you stupid Warblade.”

“U-uh, I, um... No...”

“What? You can’t even say sorry? You could’ve broken my leg, y’know?!”

“I-I’m so...”

“Ah?! I can’t hear you!!”

“We’re sorry,” Amatsu said, standing up.

Everyone flinched, and he took the opportunity to put a roll of bills in the man’s hand.

“She’s drunk, so let her off, okay?”

“Ah? Who do you think you... Wait, I think I’ve seen you somewhere...”

“It doesn’t matter if you have. Take the money and go.”

... The man couldn’t stand up to Amatsu’s presence. “Fine.” He clicked his tongue and left the pub.

Cornelius finally relaxed once she saw he was gone. A huge feeling of relief filled her chest.

“A-Amatsuuu!! I thought I was dead!!”

“Be more careful... And keep off me.”

"I didn't know the Eastern Capital was this dangerous! What was up with that thug?! Who raises his hand against a lady?! Stupid asshole!"

"That guy was from the Reigetsu family; he had their rainbow family crest on his kimono. He must've been irritated after seeing Karin get slammed in the debate."

"Huh? Are the Reigetsus yakuza or something?"

"Not just the Reigetsus—the Amatsus are pretty much the same thing."

"..."

I better stay away from them.

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

"It would have been terrible if a murder happened here. Anyways, it looks like we have quite the interesting Heavenly Ball on our hands this time around. Not that I know what the past one was like."

He chuckled with a capricious expression before pushing away Cornelius and sitting back down.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I'm just thinking about what's to come. It seems Karla's a bit serious now."

Imperial Saber Karla Amatsu. Kakumei Amatsu's cousin and Goddess candidate. She didn't look anything like Kakumei, physically or mentally. But they *were* only cousins. In any case, there was another thing that caught Cornelius's attention. She knew that bell on her wrist from somewhere.

"That Divine Instrument... that's the Rewind Bell you asked me to make."

"It is."

"That thing seals Core Implosions. Does that mean Karla has one? That wasn't on Inverse Moon's Implosion Exegesis."

Amatsu sipped his soup in silence.

"Oh well," Cornelius said as she grabbed her chopsticks.

Gotta order something else. We're splitting the bill, so I'll end up losing if I don't ask for more.

Cornelius stared at Amatsu as she chomped into a boiled egg.

"Let me confirm one thing. Who do you think Inverse Moon could stand to benefit more from winning? Karla Amatsu? Or Karin Reigetsu?"

"I can't say for sure. It's not like we're a monolith, either."

"Heh. What a pain."

What a drag.

The enthusiasm for the Heavenly Ball was only growing stronger.

Just then, it got noisy outside. They could hear screams.

"He's dead!" "A fight or something?" "No, not at all." "His body just burst out of nowhere!" "Some sort of magic?" "Who did it?" "Look, he's a Reigetsu."

The wad of cash Amatsu had given the man was actually a bomb.

Regardless, matters such as these were of no concern to Lonne Cornelius. What moved her was something quite simple: the desire to see how much her research could change the world. Nothing more.



"This isn't the place to criticize your opponent! State your policies first! What do you want to make of the Heavenly Paradise?!"

"I want to build a strong nation that won't give in against terrorism! And for that we need to get people like Karla Amatsu out of the government!"

"Are you even listening?! Don't use Karla as the lynchpin of your argument! Just listen to her policies, and you might understand. Koharu told me that if Karla ever became the Goddess—and this is just a hypothetical—she would reform the tax system, revise

employment conditions, reconsider disaster control measures, and make improvements to infrastructure. Need I go on? She's hell-bent on implementing all sorts of improvements! And obviously, she won't cut corners on national defense!"

"The only important thing for the Heavenly Paradise at this moment is national defense! It would be a waste to try and direct resources everywhere! Where would you even get the money?!"

"That can be solved! There's gold buried somewhere in the country!"

"What?! No, there is not!"

"There is!"

"There is not!"

"I'm telling you there is! And not just that! Karla plans on taking all sorts of actions to bring joy and prosperity to the citizens. Koharu says they'd give out free all-you-can-eat snacks tickets..."

"You all are out of your minds! That's why I can't leave it in her hands!"

The heated debate unfolded at the venue below.

Where do they get the energy for all that? Thio thought.

I really want to quit already, was another thought of hers.

It had been half a year since she'd joined Six Nations News. The thought had crossed her mind many, many times, across those long months, but she'd never been as serious as she was now.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Look, Thio! Terakomari Gandesblood is taking the lead in this debate! Karin Reigetsu is no match for her!"

"Ms. Melka... let's get off already..."

"We will not! They'll get us if we go now!"

In the heart of the Eastern Capital was a stupidly enormous clock tower—it was famous for its noontime bell. And atop it were two girls.

Sapphire journalist Melka Tiano smiled broadly, binoculars in hand. Clinging to her waist was crying catgirl Thio. But who wouldn't be weeping in this situation?

Why was she in the Heavenly Paradise when she belonged to the Mulnite branch? Why was her boss cackling at such dizzying heights? Didn't she get that a fall would leave them splattered across the ground? Had she even seen the sign in front of the tower explicitly warning people not to climb it? Had she missed the part about it being strictly illegal?

“Please look, Ms. Melka! The police are gathering at the base of the tower!”

“Shut it! What were we supposed to do?! We couldn't buy tickets for the debate! Oh look, Karla Amatsu is finally about to make her move.”

She twisted Thio's head toward the venue.

The two candidates were still arguing. The audience was going wild. Thio didn't understand any of it. She couldn't fathom why someone would try to become ruler by speaking ill of others. Karin Reigetsu shouted:

“I'm just saying that Karla Amatsu isn't worthy as a warrior when she runs a covert sweets shop! She's a disgrace of an Imperial Saber! Close that place right now!”

“What's your problem?! You don't even understand how hard Karla has worked for...”

“It's fine, Ms. Komari.” Karla Amatsu tapped Terakomari's shoulder as she took a step forward.

The tears were gone from her face. Now she looked resolute.

Thio imagined Terakomari's words had given her the courage.

“You have no right to tell me that. I will continue running the Fuuzen.”

“What?! Do you not comprehend your position as an Amatsu?!”

“What's wrong with wanting to be a pâtissier?!” Karla yelled so loudly the crowd went

silent. "I've always wanted to be one! I never wanted to be a commander! I don't even want to participate in the Heavenly Ball! I want to make sweets in my shop and see the smiles my food brings to people's faces... I'm happy with just that!"

"What... are you saying? You..."

"I!! Don't!! Want to be the Goddess!! But... but I can't let you be it, either! You've been too dishonest up to this point. And above all else... you've spoken ill of my wish to run a confectionery! Do you really think someone who stomps people's dreams could actually get anyone to empathize with them?! Do you think people would follow that kind of leader?!"

Melka sneered.

Everyone at the venue was listening to Karla Amatsu's speech in silence.

"If you won't reconsider, then I will defeat you! I'll become the next Goddess and resign immediately! I'll do whatever I want! I don't care about the Amatsu or the Reigetsu lineage—I just want to live my own life! And I... I won't let you become the Goddess! This will be my final duty as a warrior. I will fight you... for the Heavenly Paradise and each and every Peace Spirit! Bring it on, Karin Reigetsu! Ms. Gandesblood and I will beat you down!"

.....

...

"...Do you think Karla Amatsu doesn't want to be the Goddess?"

"She just said so. Are those ears of yours for show? Just toys for me to play with?"

Thio thought on the situation as Melka groped her ears. She felt a bit of empathy for Karla Amatsu. She was also doing a job she didn't want. Could things change if Leona, like her, mustered the courage to quit?

Soon, the crowd erupted in cheers and applause. No one was able to disparage Karla. They were just overwhelmed at the way she carried herself. The poise of the one who ought to lead them.

But in any case, now that Thio had gotten a smidge of courage from Karla, she was

raring to fight back. It was time to defend herself against her boss's torment.

"Ms. Melka! We shouldn't be here! It's dangerous! You always put me in harm's way like this! Try showing me some consideration, or I'll sue!"

"I'll kill you before that happens."

"I'm sorry."

Her bravery was for nothing.

"Anyways, back to the scoop!" Melka grinned. "Victory upon those Terakomari Gandesblood sides with. Or could it be Terakomari *is* the Goddess of Victory herself? Heh-heh-heh. Now this is good! I never get tired of that vampire princess!"

"This isn't good. Why are we even here when it's outside our jurisdiction?"

"The Heavenly Paradise branch are like a bunch of sloths! We gotta pick up the slack! Six Nations News might be world-famous, but they don't hold much sway in here. That damn Eastern Capital Times is running the show! We're here to help our branch get rid of them!"

This is unbearable, Thio thought.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever, let's just go get some nice food and then go home already. My research tells me this sweets shop called the Fuuzen is very popular right now..."

"You're not even paying attention, are you?! They just revealed that the Fuuzen is Karla Amatsu's shop! Of course we're going! Also, it's getting stuffy in here already! Get away from me!"

"Nononono, don't move! I'm gonna fall! I'm falling!"

What kind of boss drags her subordinate all the way up a tower and then pushes her off? This lady! I need to quit ASAP.

"Ms. Melka... seriously, let's get down already. The wind's getting stronger."

"The view is spectacular, though. The festival spreads all throughout the city."

“Are you listening?”

“You have good ears, don’t you? You should be able to hear it—the birth cries of a new age.”

No way. What I can hear is the police yelling at us to come down. I think I’ll just lay my ears down and pretend I didn’t notice.

“We have much to do. So many people to interview. Karla Amatsu, Terakomari Gandesblood, Prohellya Butchersky, Leona Flatt...”

“Um... couldn’t we skip Leona...?”

Melka glared at her. Thio squawked.

“What? We can’t let the chance to interview one of the Six Valkyries go.”

“But... we could see her any time. She’s my little sister.”

“What?”

“My twin sister, actually. She’s always so rude to me despite the fact I was born first. That cheeky brat has always been good at academics and sports, and now she’s a commander. It’s like she sucked up all of my talent. I can’t stand the sight of her. She’s out there, while I’m stuck with this stupid job...”

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?!”

“Bweh?! Hey! Don’t hit me! I’m gonna fall to death!”

“Leona Flatt is the crown jewel of Lapelico! I don’t get how in the world you’re related to her, but whatever—you should’ve told me sooner!”

“I don’t like her! And does anybody even really care about her? I think people would be way more interested in an interview with Terakomari or Karla Amatsu.”

“Hmm... You have a point.”

Well, that was easy.

Sure enough, Leona Flatt lacked the pizzazz of the other commanders. And Thio wasn't about to give her even more attention. *No interviews for you, sis!*

"Back on topic!" Melka said. "We must report on the developments of the Heavenly Ball! And defeat the Eastern Capital Times! Oh, look. It seems the debate just ended."

Thio glanced at the venue to confirm this.

"Lady Karla! Lady Karla!" people cried out in support. It was clear who had won.

"We gotta write the article quick. We don't have much time. Let's go!"

"And how do we get down from here? We'll walk straight into the police if we take down the ladder"

"No worries. A journalist always comes prepared," Melka said as she produced a Magic Stone.

"Oh, you're using teleportation, huh? Very smart!" Thio praised her boss dispassionately as she clung to her waist.

Melka immediately poured mana into the stone. It emitted a bright glow, and the spell activated.

The two women were at the base of the tower in the blink of an eye.

Right in front of the police.

"“Wha—?””

"They're down! Get 'em!"

"What were you thinking, Ms. Melka?!"

"Crap. I placed the portal in the wrong spot!"

"AAAGGGHHH!!!"

They were caught red-handed and arrested for trespassing.

Vexations

4 Endless Night at the Fall Festival

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

The debate drew to a close with Karla making a declaration that shook the entire nation.

"I have no desire to be the Goddess, but my opponent can't be trusted, so I'll win anyway." In a sense, there was no greater expression of concern a warrior could make for their homeland. Six Nations News praised Karla's proclamation in their report on the debate the following day. According to the Committee's surveys, Karla had the lead by a wide margin, but it was suspicious they would say that when it was entirely possible Karin had bought them off.

We were now in the second half of the Heavenly Ball.

Karla hadn't done anything of note since the debate.

The only thing that had changed was that her sweets shop had exploded in popularity. Hordes of customers were visiting day after day, and Karla's hands were so full that she had no choice but to neglect the election.

That meant I didn't have anything to do, either. I seized the opportunity to hole up in the Amatsu residence and snack on *kinako mochi* while reading, but then...

"You cannot shut yourself in while we're on a trip. There's a festival outside, so let's go on a date instead. We should lock arms and walk around where people can see us."

"Noooo! You're making me drop it all! Noooo!"

Vill clung to me like she was putting me in a sleeper chokehold, and my *kinako* fell all over the tatami. I forced myself out of the psycho maid's grip and took my distance.

That's when she started eating my snacks (that Karla had given me). *You bitch...!*

"What's your problem?! If what you want is snacks, then go to the Fuuzen."

"Actually, I have a report to make. The Seventh Unit leaders are looking for Lieutenant Holders... They still haven't found him."

That's when I remembered. I had more important things to do than snacking.

Yohann was still missing. There was no way that Team Karin had killed him, but still, I was worried. Death had a real affinity for that vampire.

"I'll go look for him, too. Follow me, Vill."

"No need for that. The search is over."

"Why...?"

"Looking for Yohann without a lead would be a waste of time. Time better spent picking at Team Karin Reigetsu. We simply have to beat her to a pulp in our battle in two days and make her spill the beans. Worry not, Lady Komari. There's a high chance Lieutenant Holders is fine."

"Mmm... Well, if you say so..."

"Shall I assassinate Ms. Karin Reigetsu and look into her memories?"

I heard a familiar voice. A silver vampire was standing by the sliding door.

Did I just hear the word 'assassinate'? Oh, whatever.

"Sakuna?! What are you doing here?!"

"I wanted to see you, Ms. Komari. I couldn't satisfy myself with just dolls... Oh, but I'm here on paid leave, so don't worry. I didn't just ditch work."

'Paid leave'...? What does she mean by that? And more importantly, what does she mean by dolls 'not satisfying her'?

Sakuna walked up to me and smiled as I sat there in confusion.

“But I’ll work for you. Do you... need my power?”

“What are you saying, Lady Memoir? Assassinating Karin would only bring trouble, so stay out of this. Just go back to Mulnite already. We two have plans to go enjoy the festival.”

“You do? I’ll go with you, then.”

The entire city was host to a festival during the Heavenly Ball. Stalls from all over the world crowded the streets.

I wasn’t planning on going out, though. It wasn’t that I had no interest in the activities, but rather that I feared for my life. I was outside the influence of Mulnite’s Dark Core, so I had to be careful about where I went.

“I’m not going. I just need some grub,” I said.

“No dinner for you, Lady Komari.”

“Why?!”

Sure, I ate lots of snacks! But that doesn’t count!

“I told the kitchen you didn’t need food because we’re eating out. Let’s go get some *takoyaki* or *kushiyaki*.”

“Ugh... So that’s your plan... But...”

“I also got you some Eastern clothing for the occasion.”

Vill took out the traditional outfit of the Heavenly Paradise: a kimono.

Oh no. I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.

“A *yukata* would be too cold for this weather, so I got you an underrobe and cotton kimono. This red would look gorgeous on you. Let’s get you changed. Take off that uniform.”

“No! Stay away from me! Don’t just stand there, Sakuna! Stop her!”

“R-right! Ms. Villhaze, she doesn’t want to!”

“That’s just what she says, but... Don’t you want to see her, too, Lady Memoir? Lady Komari: Eastern edition?”

“...”

“Huh? Sakuna? Why did you stop?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Komari. I want to see it. Excuse me.”

“No! Get away! NOOOOOO!!”

Screaming was no use. Sakuna restrained me while Vill undressed me.

As an aside, I had this personal danger evaluation system. I ranked people from 1 to 5 by how much harm they might bring me. Vill, as you might have guessed, was a level 5. In fact, everyone in the Seventh Unit was. Karla, being a pacifist, was level 1. Nelia was a level 3 since she had a penchant for concocting schemes to make me her maid. The Empress was a pervert beyond assessment, but I didn’t interact with her too often, so she was a 4. My little sister was a 5. Sakuna I’d pegged for a 1, since she was a kind and pretty girl... but now it was time I bumped her up to level 2.

“...This is hard to move around in. How do the Heavenly Paradise people go everywhere like this?”

“It looks great on you, though. You’re so cute,” Sakuna said in admiration.

“W-well, yes. You only find beauty like this once in a lifetime.”

“I’ll kidnap you myself before anyone else gets to,” Vill announced.

“Get away, criminal!” I pushed away the sicko maid and leaped back.

Stone lanterns lined up along the main street illuminated the city. I could hear drums from who knows where. The crowds were dizzyingly large. There were food stalls everywhere, and each and every one of them smelled delicious. The place sure was bustling. Didn’t the residents get sick of this noise every day?

“So what do you want to eat, Lady Komari?”

“Let’s see... Oh, that. I wanna try that.”

I saw a girl passing by us nibbling a sort of round pastry. It smelled really nice.

“That’s called *oban-yaki*. They’re selling it over there. I’ll go buy some.”

“No, I have my own money.”

I approached the stall, wallet in hand. My duty as Crimson Lord was, in fact, a job. Daddy controlled most of my wages, but I got to have a bit of it as allowance.

“Do you two want some, too? It’s on me.”

“No, please, we’ll pay for our own... right, Ms. Villhaze?”

“I’m taking you up on it. I want one with custard and one with *anko*.”

“Huhh?!”

“Gotcha! I tend to forget this, but I am Vill’s boss and your senior, Sakuna. Let me act like it for once. Excuse me! May I have four *oban-yakis*? ”

“Sure. That’ll be eight hundred yen total.”

I opened my wallet to take out the money and... my jaw dropped.

Yen...? Not mells? Now that I think about it, Karla said that vase was ten billion yen. Do they... use a different currency? So my money is useless here?

The guy running the stall stared at me with a frown. He was getting impatient.

I turned to look at Vill with tears in my eyes. She sighed and shook her head as she produced a couple of coins from her wallet. It was my first time seeing foreign money.

“H-hey! Where did you get that?!”

“From a drawer in the Amatsu residence.”

“Thieeef!!”

She swapped the coins for the *oban-yaki*.

“I’m kidding.” Vill smiled as she handed me the food. “I was snooping through their drawers when Lady Amatsu’s grandmother caught me. She guessed what I wanted and gave me a bunch of money to enjoy the festival.”

“...”

There was *a lot* wrong with that, but I stayed silent. Making a mental note to pay back the money later, I bit into the *oban-yaki*. It was hot, sweet, and tasty. It felt more like a snack than dinner.

“Look, Ms. Komari, they have *castella* over there.”

“Seriously?! But I can’t eat only sweets... I’ll put on weight.”

“Don’t worry. I have careful control over your body.”

“Uh? Ms. Villhaze, what might that mean?” Sakuna asked.

“I adjust the calories of Ms. Komari’s every meal to keep her body weight in check. She’ll only gain or lose weight as I desire. So go ahead, eat whatever you want today.”

“Yay!!”

“Ms. Komari... That doesn’t sound sane...”

I didn’t quite get it, but I had Vill’s permission, and that was what mattered. *Time to enjoy the festival!*

Vill gave me some Heavenly Paradise money and we went from stall to stall. I had *takoyaki*, *ikayaki*, grilled corn on the cob... But there wasn’t just food there; we had fun scooping goldfish, playing games, and looking at all kinds of weird stuff like colored chicks.

“This is pretty different from Mulnite. Feels like there’s more of a variety of fun things to do.”

"I agree... And look at the fun they're having over there." Vill pointed at a crowd.

I stretched my neck to try and see. It was a shooting game. You shot at prizes and won whatever you managed to take down. Normally, there would be lots of different things on the shelves... but now they were empty. Only a *ramune* bottle remained.

"Wah-ha-ha! This is child's play! Put the next round of prizes on, boss!"

"Please just let me off the hook already! I'll go broke if you take everything!"

"What? This thing was rigged from the start! Look at this bullet. Like cotton candy. You think this can take down anything?! Well, it can! In my hands! Wah-ha-ha!"

"Praise be Lady Prohellya!" exclaimed the people around her.

The commander in thick clothing puffed out her chest in pride, while the catgirl beside her heaved a looong sigh.

"What are you going to do with all these prizes? Do you even want them?"

"I'll give my haul to the poor. Redistribution of wealth is our duty. Here, unenlightened children! Have this wonderful present from Commander Prohellya Butchersky! Take it all! No, wait. Not the polar bear plushie—this one's mine."

All the kids rushed to her.

The strongest Arctic Master kept an unwavering smile on her face even as they jumped at her, even as they pulled her hair, even as they punched her face. Her heart was as broad as the blue sea.

"...We'll have to fight those two in the end, huh?" I said.

"Likely. Let's observe them while we have the chance. Catgirl Leona Flatt may not be so dangerous, but we need to watch out for Prohellya Butchersky. Not only is she strong, she's got brains, too. She's like if you drained Her Majesty the Empress of all her degeneracy."

"I think she would be a husk of a woman if you did that, actually."

"Ohh! If it isn't Terakomari Gandesblood!" Prohellya noticed me as soon as she finished

her giveaway.

Holding the polar bear plushie in her arms, she approached with dignified steps. *Wait, are those tears in her eyes? Did the kids hit her nose?*

“Enjoying the festival? Make sure to save some excitement for the main course—mortal combat two days from now. Team Karin Reigetsu versus Team Karla Amatsu.”

“Of course! I was just so bored waiting for the battle to begin!”

“I gathered as much. Karin won’t give us the time of day, so we’ve also got too much time on our hands. Isn’t that right, Leona?”

The catgirl beside Prohellya seemed anxious.

The sight of her getting pushed around by those uncontrollable capybaras at the party a few days before came to mind. Leona Flatt softly stretched her right hand out to me and said:

“Nice meeting you, Terakomari. We won’t lose.”

Straight to the point, huh? I turned on Commander Mode.

“It’s my pleasure. Let’s give it our all.”

“Did you know Lady Komari’s favorite dish is whole-roasted cat?”

Leona’s hairs stood on end.

Stop making things up, Vill. You never know when those Six Nations News idiots could be listening.

Leona glared at me, deeply disturbed.

“I-I’ve always wanted to try grilled vampire!”

“Speaking of which, Lady Komari, remember you said you wanted a pet cat?” Vill asked.

“Huh? Did I?”

"You did. Well, here's a feral cat. How about we catch it and keep it?"

"What?! Having a cat as a pet?! Are you insane?!" Leona yelled.

"Is that weird...?"

"Huh?! O-kay then! I've always wanted to keep a vampire as a pet, actually. How about it? Whoever loses the battle will become the other's pet."

"No, thank you."

"Sounds great! I'll get to ordering the collar. The kind that shocks the pet when they don't obey their master," Vill said.

"Hold on. Listen."

"I won't lose! You'll see! You'll be crying about this! I'm going to rip your organs out with my claws! I'll keep you as cat food! See how you like THAT!!" Leona yelled as she disappeared into the crowd.

The sicko was a maid of many talents, but if I had to choose what she was best at, it would be picking fights with people upon their first meeting. Now that's a skill I would never want. Why would you do that??

"Wah-ha-ha!" Prohellya gave a hearty laugh. "I didn't know you and Leona were friends."

"This was the first time we ever talked. And now she hates me."

"Well, that's better than indifference. I think you have a talent for getting people to open up to you... But it doesn't matter how hard you may try to be our friend. We're still fated to kill each other in the end," she said as she squeezed the polar bear plushie. "The Haku-Goku Commonwealth wants Karin Reigetsu to be the Goddess. This was decided through party congress, and we won't back out. A full-on clash can't be avoided so long as you support Karla Amatsu."

Party congress...? I guess that means her country's leaders decided this? But Her Majesty hasn't told me anything. Mulnite's really sloppy, huh? Not that that's news.

"By the way, Lady Butchersky," Vill said, taking a step forward. "Are you on Karin

Reigetsu's side?"

"Obviously."

"So you really think she's the best option for Goddess?"

Prohellya blinked a couple times.

"...I don't know what you're thinking, maid. We are not friends. You think I would tell you something so important when I barely know you?"

"We are acquainted, if only a little. Isn't that right, Lady Komari?"

"Uh-huh. Tell me, then, Komari. What kind of person am I?"

"Huh? L-let's see... A girl who's good at the piano and likes plushies?"

For a moment, all expression vanished from Prohellya's face, before she turned red and started stamping her feet.

"You fooool! It's not that I wanted this! I only took it because the winner is supposed to take a prize! I don't even want it! Here, take it!"

She pushed the polar bear on me.

Maybe I shouldn't have said that. I panicked and tried giving it back.

"I-I don't want it, either! You take it home!"

"Now I want it even less! Only a child would be happy to get this thing! No, don't take that out of context. I do not look down upon children."

"Ugh..."

It was no use telling people like this that you knew they actually wanted it. I gave up and accepted the polar bear. I gave Prohellya my grilled corn in exchange.

"Okay, fine. Take this as compensation. Now it's a fair trade."

"A fair trade! I like the sound of that."

Prohellya grabbed the corn and immediately started nibbling it, but her eyes were glued to the plushie. I had to find an excuse to give it back to her later.

I observed her once more. She looked even paler than Sakuna, perhaps because she was pure Sapphire. That being said, I couldn't really see much of her skin on account of her thick winter clothes. Also... she didn't really have a nasty aura about her like Karin did.

"So, Terakomari, are you aware of Karla Amatsu's true power?"

I had so much stuff in my hands the polar bear was almost falling down. Fortunately, Sakuna managed to save it before that happened. I thanked her, then turned back to Prohellya before answering.

"I am. She can destroy the universe."

"Okay, then let's cut to the chase. I think the secretary general wants her power."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I've taken a liking to you, so I'll divulge this to you. The secretary general claims that 'we can right the course of the Haku-Goku Commonwealth's history with Karla Amatsu's power... But don't ask me what he means by that. I don't get what he's saying, either. That man likes speaking in riddles to keep me in the dark."

"Do you two not get along?"

"We do not." Prohellya grimaced. "But that doesn't matter. Hey, we're in the middle of a festival. Let's forget about that annoying stuff and have some fun." The next instant, she remembered something. "Oh, right, have you been to the Celestial Shrine already? It's a famous tourist spot—you should go take a look. There's an eight-hundred-year-old cherry tree that towers over the whole city on the grounds, and they say it gives you good luck in marriage."

Vill and Sakuna reacted in a way that would merit a thunder sound effect.

I had nothing but bad feelings about this. "Have fun," the root of all evil said as she walked away. I wished she'd stayed with us. That way, I could've tried really getting along with her to get her to go easy on me in the battle. Instead, the two girls with me each grabbed one of my arms, and I lost my balance. *Don't do that! You're making me*

drop my takoyaki!

“Ms. Komari, why don’t we go to this Celestial Shrine?”

“Y-yeah, Prohellya did say it was a popular attraction.”

“Yes, Lady Komari, let’s go and put ten billion yen in the offertory box.”

“Buy another vase instead if you have that kind of money!”

And they dragged me all the way there.



The Celestial Shrine was located in a section of the Osui Palace, where the Goddess resided.

And in a section of its wide grounds was a stall from the Fuuzen. Koharu had suggested setting one up to try and capitalize on the festival. Karla went along with it, and the plan ended up working like crazy.

“We sold it all...”

“We did. We made a killing,” Koharu nodded in satisfaction.

The Fuuzen had found great success after the debate. This stall, too, had run out of food to sell by the time the sun set. They were already closing up shop and the festival hadn’t even reached its peak (right before the fireworks).

“Good luck!” “You’ll be our next Goddess!” “I hope you win!” Everyone who passed by the stall showed their support. Karla was glad to hear these comments, but it was another kind of compliment that really brightened her day:

“This is so good!” “I’ll drop by the Fuuzen next time!” “You gave me the courage to follow my dreams!”

People were finally starting to recognize her determination.

“You’re so popular, Lady Karla.”

“That I am... Wait, what’s that?!”

Koharu was wearing a mask molded in Karla’s image. It was so detailed, Karla had actually thought she was talking to herself for a second.

“This, too, is proof of your popularity. People have started selling them.”

“Get those off the market! Gosh, how embarrassing. Who made these? I never gave them permission.”

“You can find it at any Kidoshu stall.”

“Stop iiit! Why didn’t you ask me about it?!”

Karla hit Koharu on the shoulders.

The Kidoshu were a group of capable ninjas, but sometimes their capabilities took a twisted turn. Maybe that came down to their leader’s—Koharu’s—mind being twisted to begin with.

Karla huffed and sat down on the stool behind the stall.

“Keep that up and I won’t make you any more snacks. I’ll only let it slide this time since I’m in a good mood.”

“Because of all the support, eh? Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“...Yeah.”

Karla played with her hair, lost in thought. It made her feel awkward, somehow.

She felt liberated after so many years of repressing herself. And she owed this sense of relief entirely to the crimson vampire who’d encouraged her during the debate.

Terakomari had defended Karla against all of Karin’s one-sided attacks, roiling in sincere anger at their opponent as she praised Karla’s sweets. It was only because of that that Karla was able to reveal her true feelings.

“...I have to thank Terakomari for this.”

“You haven’t yet?”

“I’ve been so busy that I haven’t had the chance to sit down with her.”

“Huh. Oh, one more thing. Couldn’t you ask her to resolve that issue with your grandmother?” Koharu said while taking down the stall.

Karla faltered.

Karla had revealed her true intentions to the citizens of the Heavenly Paradise, but... she hadn’t once spoken with her grandmother since. She’d been ignoring her whenever their paths crossed at home. The old woman must have been more furious than ever.

Just as Karla thought she ought to speak with her grandmother... a vampire appeared in the crowd. Terakomari Gandesblood, wearing a kimono. She was accompanied by Villhaze and Sakuna Memoir and seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Go with her,” Koharu said.

“What? But...”

“I’ll take care of things here.”

The Kidoshu had already nearly finished dismantling the stall.

Koharu pushed her back and glanced at Terakomari. Karla knew she had to thank her, but there was something else on her mind.

Terakomari probably wasn’t the “slaughter champion” everyone said she was. That’s not to say she didn’t have tremendous power, but deep down, she was one kind vampire.

“...Koharu, take care of the stall. I’ll go talk to her.”

Terakomari had supported her in following her dreams. Perhaps she would be the one to truly understand her.



The Celestial Shrine was connected to the huge palace where the Goddess resided.

Beyond the front hall towered the eight-hundred-year-old cherry tree that guarded the city. According to a sign on site, that tree was in fact the shrine's object of worship.

I threw a coin in the offertory box and pressed my hands together. I wasn't one to believe in God, but I figured it was the respectful thing to do, so I prayed in earnest for once.

"Please don't let me die, please don't let me die, please don't let me die..."

"Ms. Komari, you aren't supposed to say your prayer out loud." Sakuna stood beside me, smiling awkwardly.

I know that. But I'm afraid God won't hear me unless I do.

"What did you pray for?" I asked.

"Bwuh?! I, uh... prayed for world peace."

"You're such a good girl, Sakuna."

"Hee-hee..."

"Sheesh. You two just don't get it, do you?" Vill sighed and shrugged. "World peace? Did you forget what sort of fortune the Celestial Shrine brings, exactly? Eight hundred years ago, the First Goddess planted this cherry tree after being separated from her husband to serve as a landmark for their eventual reunion. 'I will always be waiting here for you,' she said, giving birth to this noble shrine. As such, it is tradition to make a wish for a good hand in marriage to honor their history."

"Wow, you sure know a lot, don't you, Vill?"

"She just read what the sign over there says," Sakuna pointed out.

"And so I, too, followed tradition and prayed for Lady Komari and me to be together forever. I also donated all my savings so God would grant priority to my wish."

"God wouldn't do that!! And are you for real?! OH MY GOD, you are serious!!"

Vill's wallet was completely empty.

There were still so many stalls I wanted to hit up! Why did you even need to wish for that?! You'd never let me go either way! As I opened my mouth to give Vill a piece of my mind, I heard a chime.

"Ms. Gandesblood. Would you give me a moment of your time?"

I turned around. There was the kimono girl, anxious.

"Hmm? You're visiting the shrine, too, Karla?"

"No, I need to speak with you. If it's not too much trouble, would you mind? I want to talk about our plans."

"It is too much trouble, Lady Amatsu. We're in the middle of a date, so please..." Vill said.

"It's something important, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes." Karla's expression was grim, and I had no reason to say no.

I gave Sakuna a glance, and she immediately understood. She locked the sicko maid's arms in a full nelson and smiled at me to say go. *Perhaps Sakuna is still okay at level 1.*

"Wait, Lady Komari! You can't do this on our date! You should be with me, not her! Did I not give God enough money?!"

"Take it easy, Ms. Villhaze! This isn't about the money!"

"Um... is she gonna be okay?" Karla asked

"She's always like that, don't worry about it. Let's go."

I took Karla by the arm and walked away.

We were at the bank of the river that ran through the center of the Eastern Capital (I forgot the name). Karla and I were sitting on the grass, gazing at the stars reflected in

the water.

The river was far from the main street, so there was practically no one around. I could still hear the festival music, though, which made for some pleasant background noise. A chilly autumn wind blew by.

“Want some?” Karla asked, offering me *manju* buns.

“May I?”

“Food is meant to be eaten.”

I accepted. The sweet taste of the bun spread throughout my mouth at first bite. It was a simple, orthodox *manju*, and it was that simplicity that made it blissful on the tongue.

“You really have a knack for making sweets. This is so good.”

“Thank you. And thank you for what you did at the debate.”

“What did I do?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to speak my mind onstage if it weren’t for you. I would have gone with the flow, become the Goddess, and given up on my dreams.”

Then I remembered how much I’d yelled after getting pissed off at Karin’s comments.

But I hadn’t done anything worth being thanked for. If anything, Karin’s criticisms were the source of everything. It was her slander that had pushed Karla to come clean. And yet here she was, wearing a pure smile on her face and assuring me it was all thanks to me.

“How could I possibly thank you for it, Ms. Gandesblood?”

“Seriously, it’s nothing... Also, don’t call me that.”

“Huh?”

“My last name is too long, you know. Just call me by my first name.”

“...” Karla thought for a bit before smiling. “Okay then, Komari.”

"Good."

I sighed in relief. I would've actually cried if she insisted on calling me Gandesblood. Now it felt like we were beginning to understand each other.

I took another bite out of the *manju* as I basked in the sentimentality.

Then Karla spoke up with hesitation.

"...You know, I haven't spoken to my grandmother yet."

"I see. Yeah, you've been busy."

"I have. So... would you mind coming with me?" She stared straight at me, determination on her face. "Grandmother must be in the worst mood ever. She couldn't be happy after how strongly I spoke at the debate. I can't imagine anyone has ever stated they would quit as soon as they're appointed Goddess. Even I have to wonder what I was thinking when I said that."

"Still, you can't let Karin win, can you?"

"I can't. I have a bad feeling about her. I sense danger."

Vill had said something along those lines. Sure, Karin was a bit extreme in both word and deed... but was she really *dangerous*? I mean, she'd used her sword on Karla the other day, but it was nothing big, was it? *No, it most certainly was big. Crap, I'm getting used to violence. That's messed up.*

"So." Karla turned to me. "I know I shouldn't bother you with this, but could you please come with me to convince my grandmother? I'm afraid she might kill me if I'm alone."

"Now I feel like she might do me in, too..."

"But you're the strongest commander there is, aren't you?"

"Hey, aren't you the strongest in the universe?"

Karla froze up. She got red in the face and started fidgeting.

"I... actually, I was also considering telling you about this, too. Since I think I can trust

you. So I'll fill you in."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"I, uh... The truth is..."

"Is...?"

"The truth is..... N-never mind! I can't!"

Karla looked away. My jaw was on the floor.

"Wh-why not?! We've already come this far! Say it! Now it's bothering me!"

"I'm still not ready! This is even more serious than telling everyone I want to be a pâtissier."

"I won't be surprised, no matter what you say."

"But... you might be disappointed..."

Karla hugged her knees.

Well, if she doesn't want to say it, I guess I shouldn't pry further. I'm super curious about it now, though! Either way, we should focus on talking with her grandma.

Just then, a sudden autumnal gale shook the grass on the riverbed. I felt someone standing behind us.

"Karla, you must take the plunge."

It was a kimono-clad woman. The Goddess.

I still couldn't make out her face—she had that huge paper charm over it. No one in the world who hid their identity like this was ever a decent person... yet somehow, I didn't feel a hint of apprehension about her. Wonder why.

"M-My Goddess?! What are you doing here?!"

"I'm out for a stroll. It's not every day you see the Eastern Capital as lively as this."

She smiled as she approached us, a paper bag with the Fuuzen's logo on it in hand. Had she bought something at Karla's shop?

"U-um, didn't you tell me not to talk to you without precaution or something? Should I...?"

"That's right. But it's fine now. I am the Goddess you always speak with."

"???"

I didn't get it. Karla looked like she didn't, either.

The Goddess stared her straight in the face and said:

"Karla. You should say what you have to say when you need to say it. It's no use crying over spilt milk, as they say, and you never know what the future might hold."

"B-but... but but! Not this secret!"

"Not just that secret. You shouldn't hesitate to speak with your grandmother, either. Don't hold back. This is about what you want to do. Hold your head up."

I looked at her in surprise. Did the Goddess not think the same as Karla's grandmother? Then, our eyes met... or at least, I think they did. I couldn't actually see her eyes, after all.

"Commander Gandesblood, I leave Karla in your care."

"I'll do whatever I can."

"Good to know. I am glad to have this generation's hero on our side."

"Yup. That's me... Huh?"

Then the Goddess fell down on me... Or rather, she hugged me, but it took me a second to realize it. I could hear her heartbeat. Silence fell for a moment, save for the cries of insects, until Karla yelled.

The Goddess whispered into my ear.

“Ensure that you, too, value the time you have. Time is like a river. Don’t let it flow by until you finally appreciate its past purity down the line.”

“O-okay...”

I got a weird sense of déjà vu. Had I spoken with her before?

Question marks were still filling my head when she suddenly let me go.

The Goddess’s serene smile shined faintly against the darkness. She looked... ethereal.

“I’m telling this to myself, in a way. When I was little, I became an Imperial Saber just as my father commanded. I lost sight of what I truly wanted to do for myself... and worked hard in my new role... until I found myself here.”

Karla and I stood there in shock. There was a heavy dose of reality and relatability in what she’d said.



"I'm sorry. I know this conversation is a lot. I just wanted to tell you... please don't end up like me. That's all."

"My Goddess... what should I do?"

"Be brave."

She turned around.

I was so transfixed by her I forgot all about the *manju*.

"Your grandmother will understand. She won't just kill you first thing. Take care." She waved as she walked away.

The Goddess felt somehow otherworldly. And just like the Empress and the secretary general, she sure liked speaking in riddles. I couldn't wrap my head around what exactly she wanted to say. Did she mean the water in a river was tastier upstream?

But I did understand one thing: She supported Karla in following her dreams.

"Good for you, eh, Karla?"

"Yes..."

We just stood there for a while. The ruckus of the festival vanished as the Goddess disappeared into the darkness. Karla turned around abruptly.

"...My Goddess supports me. I must live up to her expectations."

"Yeah... so, where are we going?"

"There's only one answer!" She pointed at the night sky. "To the Amatsu residence, to speak with my grandmother! I'll tell her my true intentions! Let's go, Ms. Gan... Komari! It's time to let her have it!"



"I'm going to kill the shit out of you."

The Goddess was totally wrong.

Karla had taken me with great enthusiasm to the Amatsu residence and flew to her grandmother so she could talk to her, only to be greeted with that response. The old woman was furious.

We were in the ten-billion-yen-vase room, sitting on our feet before Hell's Windmill.

Her sharp gaze had dashed Karla's spirits, but it wasn't enough to empty all the energy the Goddess had given her.

"Th-there's something I want to tell you!"

Her grandma was sitting in silence, polishing her naked sword. She was holding a, like, white pom-pom or something, and was pom-pomming away at the blade. *Do you really need to pom-pom it right now? Don't you see your granddaughter's trying to tell you something super important? I've got a very bad feeling about this.*

"I thought I should speak directly with you... You might have already heard what happened at the debate. As I said back there, I plan on resigning as soon as I am appointed Goddess."

Grandma said nothing.

"As I've always said, I want to be a pâtissier. I'm already on my way to becoming one, actually, since I now run the Fuuzen. I want to keep working toward that goal."

Grandma said nothing.

My belly was starting to hurt. The air around us felt thick and heavy.

"I don't have what it takes to carry the Heavenly Paradise on my shoulders. I'm not as brilliant as Komari or Nelia. You... understand this, don't you?"

"Karla. What do you think of that Reigetsu punk?"

I quivered. Grandma put the pom-pom aside and grabbed the hilt of her sword. I was sure it was all over.

Karla flinched a little, but she kept up her poker face and looked her grandmother straight in the eye.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about Karin.”

“Yes. The Heavenly Paradise will fall to its doom if it ends up in her hands.”

“That’s why... I’m going to defeat her. I’ll win, then quit.”

“I’ve had enough of your naïveté!”

A gust of wind blew.

I felt something fly right past my cheek. It was so sudden that I couldn’t move an inch. I turned around in terror and saw... the katana stabbing the forehead of the tiger painted on the sliding door.

Another thunderous yell hit my ears before my brain could reboot.

“Everything you say is nonsense!! All of it!! You still don’t understand the Heavenly Ball!! Whoever wins is worthy of being the Goddess, no exceptions. It is proof that the heavens have recognized you as the greater candidate! And you say you’ll resign because you want to be a pâtissier?! That’s not something you do half-heartedly!!”

“I-it’s your fault I’m half-hearted in the first place! I always said I didn’t want to be the Goddess! I didn’t even want to be an Imperial Saber!”

“That’s your duty as an Amatsu warrior! You don’t get to throw that away at this point!!”

“Then why did you teach me how to bake?!”

Her grandma paused.

“You taught me how to do it! You told me my baking was good! And that’s why I wanted to be a pâtissier! Now you tell me about being an Imperial Saber?! The Goddess?! It was YOU who gave me this dream!! You reap what you—OW!!”

Karla flew back. She crashed through a wall and tumbled to the next room over. Shaking, I turned to look back at her grandma.

She was holding her hand out front, a ghastly expression on her face.

Then it finally hit me. She had whacked Karla clean in the face with the palm of her hand.

I shivered as I forced my mouth open.

“E-excuse me, don’t you think that was a bit much...?”

“You blockhead!!” She totally ignored me and walked up to Karla, then pulled her up by the collar. “Do you understand the situation the Heavenly Paradise is in?! I’m sure you don’t! Let me tell you... it’s doomed! Fated to be destroyed by Inverse Moon!”

“L-let me go! I don’t condone violence!”

“Listen, Karla. Karin Reigetsu isn’t worthy of being a ruler. The terrorists will do as they please if she becomes the Goddess. We’d be letting in the Wicked God Slayer!”

“That’s...” Karla glared back at her. “That’s the first I’ve heard of it, but that’s no problem! I’ll defeat Karin and become Goddess myself! And then I’ll cede the title to Komari!”

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on.

“Imbecile! You think a vampire can be the leader of the Peace Spirits?! I’ve never heard of a Goddess quitting before even getting the title. That’s blasphemy!”

“Then why don’t we keep the current Goddess?! How old is she?! Like thirty or something, right?! She can keep on leading us against the terrorists or whatever for another fifty years or so!”

“She doesn’t have time left! Nor do I... which is why you have to become the next Goddess and battle the terrorists! You must destroy the Wicked God Slayer!”

“That’s not my problem! I’m going to resign and quit and work at the Fuuzen, and that’s it! I’m not doing what you say, you stupid old lady!”

Then I heard a loud thud.

Karla’s body went flying through the air like a ball.

Her grandma had thrown her overhead like they do in judo with godlike speed. Karla

shrieked as she was blown away and smashed the door to the dry garden. She fell face-first into the ground.

“Gweh!” I heard her yelp. The next moment, I felt a dense amount of mana.

It was coming from her grandma. I was at a loss for words. Now I knew why they called her Hell’s Windmill.

“If you won’t understand with words, then I have no choice but to kill you.”

Karla staggered to her feet.

Her nose was bleeding. I tried to rush up to her, but she held me back with a glance, and I stopped in my tracks. She hadn’t yet lost her spirit.

Then I heard an explosion overhead.

I looked up in shock and saw flames of every color blooming in the night sky. I was bewitched. *Those are... those “fireworks” everyone in the Heavenly Paradise loves so much, right?*

“Grandmother,” Karla said as she wiped away the blood. “If that’s how you want it, then I’ll show you I’m serious. No matter how many times you hit me, how many times you kill me, I won’t give up. I will do as I please.”

“I’ll beat you into submission. Hope you’re ready to die.”

“I’ve been ready for a long time now! I learned something during the Six Nations War—I learned to not give up in the face of adversity! Komari and Nelia taught me that!”

“...”

I heard Karla’s grandma gasp, only to shoot a glare back at her granddaughter the next instant.

“...I see. Then die.”

Mana raged. Grandma was holding a katana all of a sudden. Green mana whirled around her like a windmill, lifting the gravel in the garden. Karla couldn’t even stay on

her feet—she fell on her butt.

I could only watch with my mouth agape.

Karla was going to bite the dust. I couldn't let that happen. Her grandma must've had her reasons, but it wasn't right for family to kill each other.

"I-I don't want to die! But I'm ready for it! I will not become Goddess!"

"Do you have any idea how much I've done to prepare you? You were sent here by the heavens to change the fate of the Heavenly Paradise. And if you don't understand that... then I'll have to beat you up until you do. Savor death, Karlaaa!!"

Grandma took a step forward, sword firmly in hand.

Karla clenched her teeth in anticipation. She did not run away. She stood her ground, not budging an inch. Her resolute gaze was set firmly on Hell's Windmill.

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I felt like her grandma's moves slowed down for a bit. Either way, she didn't stop. The murderous blade slowly fell on her head... and I couldn't take it anymore. I ran up to them.

"W-wait! Why do you need to do all this?!"

"?! Let go!"

I was clinging to her grandma's waist. I'd unconsciously leaped into action. Hadn't even think about how she could kill *me* instead. My body just moved on its own after I thought that I needed to stop their fight.

"Let go! I can't drag you into this!"

"I won't let go! Please... just think about Karla's feelings!!"

Fireworks went off over our heads.

I kept on shouting frantically.

"Just look at how against it she is! What's the point in forcing her to become Goddess?! She wants to be a pâtissier! I can understand how you might feel, but please, think

about Karla!"

"What?! You know nothing, brat!! How could you—"

"I can take care of Inverse Moon!! I'll do something about it!!"

What am I saying?

I knew I was only shooting myself in the foot, but I couldn't stop my mouth. I just wanted to do something for Karla.

"I'm the strongest commander in the whole world! I can kill them all with a flick of my pinky finger! I don't remember any of it... but I already beat Millicent from Inverse Moon! And Odilon Metal, too! I can just do it all over again next time!"

"...That's an entirely different issue. Karla is most suited for being the Goddess. Everyone in the Heavenly Paradise has their hearts set on her. It would be a waste for her to become a pâtissier."

"Karla's fit for being a pâtissier! It would be a waste for her to be the Goddess, in fact! You heard me! There's no point in giving a title to someone who doesn't want it. You need desire, a yearning from the bottom of your heart, telling you that you want to be the Goddess, in order to be it!"

"...!"

She eased off... or at least I felt like she did.

I took the chance to press forward and continued speaking.

"Why force someone to do something they don't want to? I'm not thrilled about being a Crimson Lord, you know. What I really want to do is shut myself in my room and write novels. I'm having a really hard time with this job. I'm managing to keep up appearances thanks to my subordinates, but it's all for show. You don't want Karla to become a ruler like that, do you?"

Karla was looking at me like, *What in the world are you talking about?* But there was no need to put on airs anymore. Karla Amatsu and I were in the same situation, after all.

Her grandma was taken aback. *Just a little more.*

“Have you eaten her sweets?”

“...No point in even trying them. The Reigetsu fox is right about that.”

“You can’t say you don’t like them without even having a taste! My maid’s always saying that!”

“So what? I refuse to eat her sweets. An Amatsu should only concern herself with battling and politics, no—”

“Shut up and eat!”

“Ah? M-gwm!”

I shoved the unfinished *manju* I had in my pocket into her mouth.

“Wh-wh-wha-wha-what are you doing, Komari?!” Karla yelled.

Grandma resisted for a bit, but eventually, she started chewing the bun.

Her mana started fading away.

She was speechless. I slowly regained my composure. What had I been thinking? Shoving a half-eaten snack into her mouth? Gosh.

“This is... similar to the kudzu *manju* I used to make back in the day.”

“?! Y-yes! You taught me how to make it when I was little. It’s one of the most popular items at the Fuuzen, and also one of the sweets I’m most proud of... even if the one you ate was just leftovers.”

I softly stepped away from Grandma. She wore a quiet, conflicted look on her face.

Then I heard cheering. The explosions in the sky were still going. Sparkling fireworks lit up Karla’s face. The festival was approaching its climax.

Just then, her grandmother brought up her katana. My first thought was that I was about to die... but that didn’t happen. Hell’s Windmill sheathed her blade in an elegant

motion.

“...I always knew how much you hated being an Imperial Saber.”

Karla stared at her grandma in confusion.

“Th-then you will accept my wishes?”

“...Hah. Strength surges when one strongly wishes to accomplish something. And your will is turned toward sweets instead of our nation. Your sweet-addled brain would be of no use to our country... I’ll have to speak with the Goddess.”

“She already showed me her support for my dreams.”

“She did...?!” Grandma widened her eyes, then put on a smile of resignation right away. “I see. If she says so, then she must have some sort of plan. I suppose the idea that an Amatsu must always strive to be Goddess is... already out of date.”

The leader of the Amatsus stared at the fireworks lighting up the night sky with nostalgia. I couldn’t hide my joy at the sight. She had finally accepted Karla. Now there was nothing to tie her down. She could be free to pursue her own dreams.

“So, Grandmother, I don’t have to be the Goddess anymore, do I?”

“I didn’t say that!!”

I choked.

Her grandma glared at her with a dreadful scowl.

“The Heavenly Paradise is over if the Reigetsu girl becomes Goddess in your place! You must win the Heavenly Ball and get appointed as Goddess!”

“I thought the *manju* had brainwashed you! Nothing’s changed!”

“Exactly. You still have to do the same. You must defeat Karin Reigetsu, claim the title of Goddess... and then you can do whatever you want.”

“Huh...?”

Grandma turned around and walked back into the house.

"W-wait!" Karla shouted at her back. "So you agree...? That I can quit being Goddess...?"

"How many times must I say it? I'm gonna kill you."

"S-sorry... And one more thing, please."

"What?"

"What's... so wrong about Karin? I kind of get that she's up to no good... but I think saying the Heavenly Paradise is doomed because of her is a bit of an exaggeration."

"That mysterious power will kill you if you find out."

What??

Grandma didn't care to elaborate, though. She walked away, leaving Karla shocked in her wake. Considering how unreal this turn of events had been, she probably couldn't process it yet.

But then her grandmother said one final thing. I couldn't believe my ears.

"You're best being a pâtissier. You've improved a lot, Karla."

That look on Karla's face. It was as though she had just seen a ghost.

The fireworks continued to erupt in the air, but the only thing that reached my ears were her grandma's words. I was speechless. Karla had gained her freedom... I was as envious for her as I was glad.

So anyone could achieve their dreams so long as they tried.

Maybe I should try putting in some effort myself, I pondered, lingering by her side in the middle of the night.

We weren't quite in the mood to go enjoy the festival. Karla and I sat on the veranda

and watched the fireworks.

Flames of all colors bloomed brightly like flowers in the sky. I'd heard that they weren't made out of magic, but black powder. I was deeply impressed by the mystical powers of technology.

"I thought..." Karla muttered. The Dark Core had already stopped her bleeding. "I thought my grandmother didn't care about my feelings at all. She would always force me through brutal training, telling me time and time again that I had to be a warrior to carry the country, that I had to give up my dreams. She molded me into an Imperial Saber and made me participate in this Heavenly Ball..."

"But in the end, she was reasonable."

"Yes. I never thought she would support me like that. Though, well... can we really call her a good person now? This could be one of those situations where a super-violent person does something good for once in their life and comes off looking like a saint..."

"Don't worry too much about it. What's important is that she's accepted you now."

"Right. And it's all thanks to you." Karla smiled.

I felt ticklish. It was the debate all over again. I hadn't done anything. I was just... there.

Also... I just noticed something. My weak-ass self wouldn't have stood a chance against Hell's Windmill. Karla's grandma probably recognized her granddaughter's dreams from the moment she showed her determination. She'd only went at Karla with enough strength to let herself be stopped, anticipating I would do it. So, in truth, I had done nothing.

But then Karla shook her head.

"It's all thanks to the courage you gave me. I couldn't have faced my grandmother alone."

"...I see. I think you could've made her understand by force, though. You're the strongest commander in the universe, remember?"

"..." She went quiet for some reason.

I stared at her profile with suspicion. She sure was pretty enough to be called a once-in-three-lifetimes beauty. The sight of her illuminated by the fireworks had my heart skipping a beat.

"Um... I know now that I can trust you. I will tell you what I didn't before... P-please don't get mad, okay?"

"Don't worry. I only get mad at my maid when she does some raunchy crap."

"I'll tell you, then. The truth is..." Karla took a deep breath before continuing, "I'm actually very weak."

I didn't understand what she was getting at. *Weak how??*

"I'm not saying this figuratively or anything. I'm weak. All that stuff about me being the strongest commander out there is a big fat lie. I... I can't even kill a bug. I'm useless. And I mean that. A bug could actually defeat me."

"Sorry, Karla, but I don't get what you're trying to tell me."

"I'll put it as concisely as possible: I have no combat ability whatsoever."

It didn't sound like she was joking. I couldn't imagine her joking in this moment to begin with. There was fear in Karla's eyes... but she looked straight at me with determination.

"I'm a poor excuse of a Peace Spirit. I suck at sports. I'm no good at magic. Everything I've said about my power was a lie."

"B-but you're undefeated as an Imperial Saber!"

"My subordinates do all the work. Have you ever seen me *actually* use my power to destroy the universe? No, you haven't."

"I mean, sure, but..."

"Komari, could it be you're a bit dense?"

What?! Dense?! Me?!

"Hold on! But you won the National Murder Championship, didn't you?!"

"That was all bogus."

"Bogus?!"

"Shrewder types have already noticed this, like Karin. About eighty percent of what she said at the debate was true. I think Nelia has her suspicions, too. I fabricated everything to uphold the honor of the Amatsus. Still, that's no excuse for deceiving you. I understand if you're disappointed... I'm sorry for lying to you this whole time."

She bowed her head deeply.

I wasn't disappointed, just surprised. But thinking back on it now, I realized that there had indeed been plenty of inconsistencies. Not to mention the many times I'd felt kinship with the clumsiness she showed from time to time. And that was without taking the fact she hadn't actually showcased her powers into account.

Yup... kinship.

We were the same, in every sense of the word.

"M-me too."

Perhaps that's why I was able to drum up some courage as well.

It was the first time I'd owned up to this.

"I'm... also weak, actually."

"Weak? You? What do you mean?"

"I'm just the same as you. Everyone thinks I'm some amazing Crimson Lord, but I can't do sports or magic at all. I'm a failure of a vampire. My only saving grace is my intellect and looks."

"I don't get it. Am I supposed to laugh?"

"Laugh as much as you'd like. I've also been lying this whole time. It's true... I don't want to be a commander, just like you. I wanna be a novelist."

Karla looked confused.

"But what about that Core Implosion?"

"I can't use Core Implosion. The papers made that up."

"Huh?? No, that can't be right. I saw you myself, as did everyone around the world, when you wielded that golden sword against Gerra-Aruka's army... Unless... No, that can't be..."

Karla realized something and stared at me in disbelief, eyes wide open. *Yup. You might not believe it, but it's true. I'm wimpier than a flea. And I only felt like telling you the truth because of how honest you've been yourself. Because I think we share these same worries.*

"...I see. They say Core Implosion represents the strength of one's spirit. You must actually be really strong."

"No, I'm telling you, I'm a pushover."

"Perhaps. Then we're comrades hiding the same secret. Let's get through this together."

She reached out to me.

I grabbed her hand and shivered with deep emotion. We were closer after revealing each other's secrets. Now this was YOUTH. I could consider her my friend now, and a very close one at that. Someone who shared my lot in life and even my pacifist philosophy.

"Let's make your dream come true." Karla beamed.

"Oh... Right, so you'll help me get published?"

"Yes. I must thank you for the support somehow."

"N-nice. But, well, first we gotta win this Heavenly Ball, as promised. I think both you and your grandma want you to become the Goddess, for starters."

An alarm went off inside my head.

...Hmm? Hold on.

So now I knew that Karla wasn't the strongest commander in the universe. Cool.

But... how were we supposed to win the mortal combat now? I had been planning to leave everything to her. Could it be that she'd thought the same? And she'd asked me for help because she thought I was a slaughter champion? *Oh no. We've got trouble.*

"Karla! I just realized something terrible!"

However, as soon as I spoke, we heard a noise coming from inside the house.

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Karla Amatsu needed to become Goddess.

Perhaps she didn't have magic skills, but she had other talents. She had charisma. Incredibly good memory. A knack for arts of all sorts. The baking skills she'd displayed moments before.

But more than anything, she had a mind of steel. A will that wouldn't bend to give up on her dreams even in the face of death. Her grandmother thought it would be a waste to just let all that go out on the streets.

However, mental energy was vital for living. And with Karla's directed at confections, it was no use trying to make her pour it into politics. Her grandmother didn't feel like she had erred in her upbringing. Perhaps Karla had simply been born that way.

Or perhaps Terakomari Gandesblood had influenced her. In any case, her grandmother had given in to her passion and accepted her plan to quit the title of Goddess. She was surprised about it herself. But more shocking than anything was the determination the typically shy girl had shown. That was something worth being glad about.

"...I've lost my touch."

Karla's grandmother looked down at the remaining piece of the kudzu *manju* Terakomari Gandesblood had made her eat.

Above all else, that sweet dumpling proved Karla was right to follow her own path. Much as it irked her grandmother to accept it, her granddaughter had undoubtedly

improved. That girl would do well as a confectioner. The Heavenly Paradise's politics were still a problem, though... It seemed she would have to call on her other runaway grandchild.

As she mulled over the incoming difficulty, she heard a voice from the other side of the door.

"Grandmother"

She put her katana on the tatami floor and replied.

"What is it? Do you have more to say?"

"Grandmother"

The room was dark. Sluggishly, she rose to her feet and walked up to the door.

Oh, I've got more to say, in fact. Your sweets may be good, but there's still room for improvement. It's still not enough to be the greatest confectioner in the city. I guess I'll give her some advice.

"Grandmother"

"I heard you already. Why don't you come in?" she said as she put her hand on the door.

The fireworks had already ceased. She couldn't hear any noise from the festival. Only the sound of the insects crying in the darkness.

She slowly slid open the door... and then *click*. A switch flipped.

A blade projected itself toward her.

Her guard was down. The voice she heard had clearly been her granddaughter's, and she knew she was in the garden on the other side, so why would she be wary?

The blade plunged through her chest. A red stain extended over her clothes, dripping all the way to the tatami floor.

"Wha... Who..."

"This is a Divine Instrument. You won't just bounce back from these wounds."

The door opened completely, and a silhouette showed itself from the darkness. It was a girl holding the blade. Not Karla Amatsu. She could've noticed had she been paying more attention.

Karla's grandmother fell to her knees.

The intruder spoke threateningly.

"You're the former Goddess, aren't you? Where is the Heavenly Paradise's Dark Core?"

"I would never... tell you..."

"Just what I expected. I could take you with me for interrogation, but I can't let my main objective out of sight. So what's it going to be? Are you ready to die here and now?"

"Go to hell... Who sent you? You won't get away with this..."

"Answer my question. If you're not ready to die, then..."

The intruder's words cut off. She vanished like the mist. A moment later, Karla's grandmother heard footsteps rushing toward her, but she couldn't move anymore.

She fell down on the tatami floor. She was awfully lightheaded. The bleeding wouldn't stop.

"Yeah... I've lost my touch..."

"Grandmother?!"

That sounded like her real granddaughter.

"Grandmother! Grandmother, stay with me, please!" she screamed in the darkness.

She could see Karla's face scrunched up in tears, albeit hazily. Behind her was Terakomari Gandesblood, pale in the face.

"Grandmother. Grandmother, why...?"

I don't know. But at least I'm glad I managed to respect your feelings in my last moments.

As Karla's grandmother felt her life fading away, she summoned her last remaining strength to feebly move her lips.

"Live how you see fit."

She didn't get to say any more. Karla's wailing form turned hazier and hazier. All sound disappeared. *Take care of my granddaughter...* Hell's Windmill sent her last wishes to the vampire princess staring at her, mouth agape. A short while later, her heart gave its last.

The Eastern Capital Times, October 20th Morning Edition

Hell's Windmill Assassinated by Her Own Granddaughter, Karla Amatsu

On the night of the 19th, Kaya Amatsu (68) aka Hell's Windmill was found unconscious in critical condition at the Amatsu residence, located in the higher ward of the Eastern Capital. The Heavenly Paradise police have put Imperial Saber Karla Amatsu (15), the victim's granddaughter, on the wanted list under suspicion of attempted murder. According to a relative of the Amatsus, Commander Amatsu had been in disagreement with her grandmother over her confectioner work for many years. It is believed her statement of intention to resign as Goddess during the recent debate created an irreparable rift between the two. According to on-site inspection, Amatsu appears to have pierced her grandmother's heart using an illegal Divine Instrument.

...

...Traces of Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood at the scene of the crime were also found. It is suspected they might have collaborated on the attempt...

“Fuyao! What is the meaning of this?!” Imperial Saber Karin Reigetsu pressed Fuyao Meteorite in a raised voice.

“Easy, Lady Karin,” the foxgirl said with a playful smile. “You should take this as good fortune. Karla Amatsu’s reputation is going to plummet, and once you beat her in the final battle... you’ll be everyone’s savior! The commander who triumphed over a grandma killer! Your popularity will soar to outer space!”

“But... it’s obvious this was your...”

“Indeed, it was my doing. The Eastern Capital Times controls the flow of information in the Heavenly Paradise, so I had a little talk with them. They wouldn’t report on something to our disadvantage. Au contraire, you’ll see that they’ll help you become the Goddess.”

Fuyao vividly shook her tail, a heartless grin on her face.

They were in a room in the Reigetsu residence, in the higher ward of the Eastern Capital.

Karin had woken up to the bizarre news that Karla Amatsu had ostensibly killed her grandmother. She found it preposterous. A coward who lied about her true power could never do such a thing.

That left one other obvious culprit.

Sure, throwing Karla in the gutter would be a boon for Team Reigetsu, but...

“Fuyao. You acted on your own. Again.”

“I do it all for you, Lady Karin.”

“Still, Hell’s Windmill worked hard for the good of the Heavenly Paradise during her time as Goddess. You can’t just kill her, even if she is an Amatsu...”

“What’s the problem?” Fuyao stared at her with big, round eyes.

Karin faltered for a moment. She felt something wicked coming from Fuyao Meteorite. She thought she’d been keeping Fuyao on a tight leash, but now she couldn’t help but wonder if *she* was in the palm of the foxgirl’s hand.

“This was a necessary evil. Throughout the course of history, every ruler has had to get rid of their opponents to seize the throne, no matter how good and pure they are. Sometimes you have to dirty your hands a little.”

“Still...”

“Don’t you want to be the Goddess? Don’t you want to protect this country from those

nasty terrorists? I believe that it should be *you* ruling the Heavenly Paradise. Let me ask you again. Do you want to defeat Karla Amatsu?"

Karin came to her senses. Indeed. She had to defeat Karla Amatsu. That girl would run the Heavenly Paradise to the ground as Goddess. She had to stop her, costs be damned. Karin needed to be the one on that throne. No matter what she had to do to get herself there.

"...Right. I have to fight for the good of the Heavenly Paradise. So we can go on like this?"

Fuyao put on a broad smile.

"Yes! I have plenty of other plans in mind!"

Her expression was as innocent as a child talking about her plans for summer vacation. Karin shuddered upon noticing... but it was too late to go back.

She would crush Karla Amatsu and become Goddess. That was her only objective.



Before dawn, in an infirmary (also known as a morgue) on the outskirts of the Eastern Capital...

Karla, Vill, Koharu, Sakuna, and I were visiting Karla's grandmother. Hell's Windmill lay on the bed, as still as a corpse. She wasn't fully gone, though. Her incredible physical and mental strength had kept her just barely alive. She wasn't a former Imperial Saber and Goddess for nothing.

Someone had attacked her that night.

Karla and I had sprinted to her as soon as we heard the noise, but the room was already a sea of blood by the time we got there. I couldn't do anything. Karla immediately called Kidoshu, and they healed her in the nick of time, but she could have died had they arrived even a moment later... died forever. No coming back.

The assailant had wielded a Divine Instrument against her. An unbelievable weapon that could nullify the effects of the Dark Core. Karla's grandmother was still unconscious because she wasn't receiving healing mana from the Dark Core.

"It's no use. Healing magic won't work." Sakuna, forging mana right by the woman's bedside, shook her head regrettably. "I'm so sorry..."

"Thank you for your help, Lady Memoir. So we should assume that... no mana from the Dark Core is reaching her wounds?"

"Yes. Healing magic is, in essence, about accelerating the supply of mana from the Dark Core. It doesn't work on wounds inflicted by Divine Instruments. We have to wait for her to heal naturally..."

Then I heard the sound of metal being crushed.

I turned around in shock to find that Koharu had squashed the bed rail with her bare hand.

"...They won't get away with it. I'm going to kill whoever did this."

"The culprit's likely someone from Team Reigetsu, or maybe even Karin Reigetsu herself. That much is obvious just from looking at this morning's issue of the Eastern Capital Times."

Vill walked up to the wall and crossed her arms. Her expression was as calm and collected as ever, but I could tell she was unusually angry. She handed me that Eastern Capital Times paper. I spread it open, and Sakuna stood beside me to peer at the news.

"Um... it says Ms. Karla is wanted by the police," Sakuna remarked.

"That's bullshit. Karin made it up," I said.

"It's no lie that she's on the wanted list. I got a report from Captain Mellaconcey a moment ago. The Heavenly Paradise police are on the move. We can hide here for a while since the Amatsus run this infirmary, but it's only a matter of time before they track us down," Vill said.

"Ms. Komari, they're treating you as an accomplice, too. Unbelievable. I'll have to kill Ms. Karin Reigetsu to look into her..."

"Don't be rash. Things will take a turn for the worse if they kill you first." Vill stopped Sakuna before she could stand up.

I kept on reading the newspaper with a lump in my throat.

This article was a whole different level of nasty from the dreck Six Nations News published. It reported on Karla attacking her grandma and me helping her out as if everything was fact. This was way over the line if Karin was really behind it.

Why did she want to hurt Karla so badly?

"Still, I can't wrap my head around it. Team Karin Reigetsu has too much power. First they legalized bribery, and now they're controlling the news. Do the Reigetsus really hold that much sway?"

"The Reigetsus and the Amatsus should be equals. I don't get it. Lady Karla..."

Everyone turned to look at her.

She was staring at her grandmother's face in silence. I could see tears welling up in her eyes. And of course they were. Who wouldn't want to cry after seeing family in this state... and then getting framed for doing the deed?

"Karla..."

"Everything is my fault. I wasn't good enough. I put my grandmother through this."

"That's not true. The only person at fault here is whoever attacked her."

"I know that!" She wiped her tears and stood up. "I was foolish for letting down my guard, but whoever attacked her is the biggest fool of all! I'll go see Karin now."

Vill barred her way.

"It might be a trap. Let's try my Pandora's Poison once more."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but we don't have the time for that! We'll leave my grandmother in the infirmary staff's care. I can't put her in any further danger. I have to go talk to Karin as soon as..."

"Lady Karla! Bad news!"

The door burst open all of a sudden. A girl in ninja clothes like Koharu's jumped into

the room. Likely one of Karla's subordinates. She ran toward her, looking as though the world had ended.

"The Fuuzen is on fire..."



We ran through the streets of the Eastern Capital as fast as we could.

The sun was starting to rise above the horizon. It was early morning... but the noise level was a far cry from the typical quiet of this hour. A crowd of onlookers had gathered around the Fuuzen, watching the commotion.

We couldn't believe our eyes.

A fire raged.

The establishment where I'd once eaten snacks with Karla and Vill was now engulfed in bright-red flames. Firefighters were already on the scene, trying to quell the blaze with water magic. But from the looks of the building inside the sea of flames, it was clearly done for, even if they did manage to extinguish it.

"H-how...?"

"The origin is obvious. This must have been deliberate."

"You mean it was arson?! Who would do such a thing?!"

"That's also obvious—Karin Reigetsu."

Then we heard a scream. The last pillar holding up the building finally collapsed. A mountain of rubble formed in the wake of the thunderous breakdown. People fled from flying sparks.

Karla watched with despair as the Fuuzen crumbled.

I didn't know what to say.

Her shop was the crystallization of all her efforts. Her hope for keeping on her path to becoming a pâtissier. Who could have predicted it would all come crashing down this

way?

Then I heard talking. The onlookers were murmuring, looking at Karla.

“It’s divine retribution.” “She’s a liar.” “Who kills her own grandmother?” “Did you hear that vampire helped her out?” “I should’ve never bought any of her sweets.”

“No! Lady Karla did nothing!”

Koharu jumped at the passersby, but Vill just barely pinned her down in time. They each took off shrieking in different directions. Koharu flailed her arms and legs, still holding a kunai in hand.

“Let me go! They won’t get away with saying those things about Karla!”

“Attacking civilians can only be used against us. Don’t give them more ammo to work with.”

“Then what should we do?! Should we really talk with Ka...”

“Commander!! You’re okay!!” I heard a familiar voice.

The stripped-tree man was standing behind me before I knew it. He’d probably gotten there with Void Magic. And it wasn’t just Caostel—Bellius and Mellaconcey were there, too. And they were all helping their comrade stand up.

“Yohann?! Where were you?!”

“Check it! We found him surrounded by concrete! Caostel asks that you let him lick your feet!”

“We found him imprisoned on the outskirts of the Eastern Capital. He had no obvious wounds on him, but he’s all worn out.”

“I had no wounds?! That vixen knocked me out with a hit from the back of her sword!” Yohann roared. Sure enough, he had a huge lump on his head. “Terakomari! Karin Reigetsu attacked me, no question about it. She... she wanted to frame the Seventh Unit.”

“Calm down, Lieutenant Holders. Explain what happened,” Vill said.

"Karin Reigetsu jumped me. I tried to beat her instead, but she used some cheating magic on me. And you know her foxgirl underling? She turned into me!"

"Wha...?"

I was in shock. So it really had been Karin's doing.

Just how far was she willing to go...? That aside, I didn't get what Yohann meant by "she turned into him." I tried to ask for further explanation, but then...

"There you are, Karla Amatsu and Terakomari Gandesblood! Don't move!"

...a yell from behind stopped me in my tracks.

Uniformed Peace Spirits were scowling at us. The Heavenly Paradise police. So we really were on the wanted list.

Koharu took a step forward, covering Karla behind her.

"Arson. Go catch the culprit."

"There is no culprit. We got a report it was spontaneous."

"Wha...?!"

Everyone was at a loss for words. It was obvious the police weren't doing their jobs. One could only imagine they were being pressured from somewhere—someone else. A cop glared at me and haughtily said:

"We have an arrest warrant from the Osui Palace. Karla Amatsu, Terakomari Gandesblood, you're under arrest on suspicion of attempted murder and plotting a coup."

"We haven't done anything! That's bullshit!"

"Yeah, right! This is a decree from our Goddess!"

Shock. A decree from the Goddess. The kind person who supported Karla in following her dreams was now trying to get us arrested without proper investigation.

No. That can't be right. Something's up.

The Fuuzen fire was extinguished in the meantime. The only thing left were the charred remains of the building. The first step on Karla's path to her dreams had literally been turned to ashes.

I turned to look at her.

She was crying. She was frozen in place as tears ran down her face.

This is ridiculous. None of this is right.

Ire boiled up within me as I turned back to the cops and... noticed my subordinates were already standing before me, scowling at them.

"Commander, we can't hold back our fury, not this time," Caostel said, a smile on his face. The look on his eyes was far removed from smiling, though.

"Hey, what're you all gonna do?"

"What Team Karin Reigetsu has done is egregious. Framing you and Karla Amatsu for murdering her grandmother? Preposterous. We would never resort to foul play like that."

"Caostel is right. And the treatment Lady Amatsu is receiving is outrageous. Let's show these people our power firsthand."

"Yeah! The commander's enemy is my enemy. We'll let them know... with intensity!"

"You're finished... This is what you get for making a fool of me, PIGS!!"

A pillar of fire exploded from Yohann's body. The bystanders screamed and ran for their lives. The police unsheathed their katanas in a panic. *No, wait! You can't fight here! You'll get hurt!* I wanted to shout, but Mellaconcey used his magic before I could.

The next moment, an explosion too huge for me to express in writing because it would sound even sillier than usual went off. Caostel, Bellius, and Yohann took this as a signal to rush at the blast. I started hearing the combat noises from beyond the smoke right away.

"Wh-what are they DOING?!"

"How reckless of them to do this in a place beyond the influence of our Dark Core. Still, we're saved. We have time now that they're distracting the police," Vill said.

That made me realize something. Why did Karin Reigetsu have so much power? Why was the Goddess doing nothing after openly supporting Karla? The answer lay at the end of the main street. That plain-looking place with the powerful aura: the Osui Palace.

I walked up to the kimono girl, who was standing there in stupefaction.

"Let's go, Karla."

"...Where? My dream is over. The shop is gone... My grandmother is gone... What else do you want me to do?"

"You don't have to do anything!" I grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her around; she looked at me with eyes wide open. "You just have to follow me! I... I won't let them get away with this. This sick joke. They can't keep taking away everything you love. I... I will..."

"U-um, Komari...?"

There were tears in my eyes, too, for some reason. I wiped them away with my sleeves, but they just wouldn't stop. Infinite anger and courage boiled within me just from looking at Karla's pitiful expression.

"What I mean is! We have to talk to the Goddess first. Let's ask her to stop Karin."

"But... she ordered that arrest warrant..."

"That's gotta be wrong! So let's go to the palace and..."

"Ms. Komari, look out!" Sakuna repelled a blade that came flying at me with her staff.

I heard shouts from the opposite direction. Police reinforcements? No... that wasn't the police.

"The Heavenly Paradise Army's Fourth Unit. We're definitely getting caught if we go

against them. We should hurry to the Osui Palace.”

“You heard her, Karla. Let’s go!”

“Huh? Eep!”

I grabbed her by the hand and booked it.

I could hear them yelling behind me. “Stop, Gandesblood!” That was probably an Imperial Saber. The next moment, I heard gusts of wind as magic arrows came flying right beside me. I felt chills, but I had to suck it up.

“Why...? Why do you do all this?” Karla asked.

Vill struck down arrows of light coming in at high speeds with her kunai. Koharu countered by throwing a huge amount of needles at them with her mysterious ninjutsu.

“Why do you go to these lengths? Aren’t you a pacifist? Why would you put yourself in such danger because of Heavenly Paradise politics?” Karla asked again.

“Because you’re my friend!” I yelled.

She gasped.

Sakuna used her magic. Cold crept through the ground, freezing the road, but the enemy army easily jumped over the ice thanks to their physical enhancement magic or something. I nearly tripped then, but Vill pulled me up. I mustered all my strength to shout:

“I admire you because you’re in the same position as I am... You’re the same, yet you worked hard to make your dream a reality. I... I can’t bear to see it all demolished like this.”

“But...!”

“No buts! The only relevant butt here is Karin’s, because we’re gonna kick the crap out of it! What she’s doing is wrong! She needs a good slapping to make her realize that!”

“But Komari... You believe you’re weak, don’t you?”

"Course I do! I'm the greatest weakest commander ever! Maybe Karin will kill me in retaliation... but that's nothing compared to what you went through!"

Obviously, it was something.

I was scared to face Karin. But I felt like something even worse would happen if I let her be. Her grandma was right—Karin Reigetsu had to be kept away from the throne.

I looked back and saw Karla wiping her eyes.

"Komari, you are... such a dummy."

"I know... Now let's go see the Goddess."

"Yes."

It was then that I felt an enormous volume of mana.

Karla tripped and took me down with her. By the time I came to, it was already too late. Vill and Sakuna were desperately chanting a spell. Koharu was throwing kunais at incredible speed.

The enemy commander yelled:

"Advanced-level blade spell: Godspeed Arrow."

I whipped around to try and stand up, but then I saw a giant arrow of light speeding toward me. Impossible to dodge. I closed my eyes and braced myself for the incoming pain, but then... I heard a gunshot so loud it could tear my eardrums.

I opened my eyes wide in shock and found the light arrow vanishing. Did Vill or Sakuna help me? No...

"Wah-ha-ha! That's not enough to beat my bullets, you lowly Peace Spirits!"

I heard a cackle.

Surprised, I looked up to find a silver girl standing on the rooftop of a public bathhouse. She was armed with a long gun, magic smoke coming out of its muzzle. She must have repelled the spell with that. But why?

“Prohellya?! What are you doing?!”

“I do only what I please. Did you read the paper? That’s all Karin Reigetsu’s fabrication. And I don’t like her methods. A ruler must be just and noble. I wouldn’t like it if you all were arrested before the truth came to light.”

Arctic Master Prohellya Butchersky aimed her gun at the enemy commander.

I let out a sigh of admiration as Vill helped me to my feet. That girl was on Karin Reigetsu’s team... and she’d gone against the Haku-Goku Commonwealth’s wishes just to help me.

“Well then, unidentified commander. If you want to stop them, then you’ll have to face me first.”

“Prohellya’s right!”

I heard another voice. That instant, a girl came spinning down from the sky. She landed with grace and then took on a bizarre fighting pose. Leona Flatt. She forged mana as she shot a sideways glance at us and said:

“Leave it to us! I don’t like cat owners, but I do want to support you all. Something’s fishy about this country. Go meet the Goddess and clear up everything!”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! Let the engagement begin! Die!!”

Prohellya shot a magic bullet once again. The gunshot echoed as an explosion went off in the middle of the Heavenly Paradise army.

Taking that as a signal, Leona rushed against the enemy. Their clash was much more impactful than that of the Seventh Unit against the police. Explosions and corpses burst forth at the roar of each gunshot. Leona pierced her enemies’ hearts with her fist, sending blood flying every which way. The surrounding buildings collapsed one by one, and the cries and shrieks of the civilians rang out everywhere.



That's too... You know what? No. Serves them right.

We had no time to lose, and it was our opponent who had been excessive in the first place.

“Let’s go, Lady Komari!”

We ran at Vill’s cue once again.

“What’s going on?!” “A riot?!” “That’s Commander Amatsu!” “The vampire princess is with her!” We were showered with cheers as we ran toward the Osui Palace.

We finally saw the gates of the Goddess’s residence. The huge cherry tree in the Celestial Shrine tipped me off.

“What do you want?! Stop right—BUGH!”

A guard stood at the ready with his lance before he was blown away like a piece of paper. Koharu had kicked him at an imperceptible speed. We burst through the gates into the Osui Palace.

It wasn’t as extravagant as the Mulnite Palace. Its modest hallways seemed to go on forever, but there was a sense of solemnity about this peaceful fortress. I’d been expecting guards on patrol to attack us, but that didn’t happen. The place was surprisingly quiet.

“Over there!” Koharu pointed at a big, wooden sliding door.

Sakuna and Vill helped her open it. On the other side was a massive hall.

Its aura alone told me that this was the equivalent of the Audience Room in the Mulnite Palace.

A bamboo blind partitioned the room. The Goddess had to be on the other side. Just then, a figure showed itself from beyond.

A hairpin with a sun ornament. Majestic kimono. And that huge paper charm covering her face.

It was the Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise.

"Oh my. What are you all doing here?"

"My Goddess!" Karla ran up to her in disarray. "What is happening?! Why are the police and army pursuing us?! Why are they saying I killed my grandmother?!"

"Do you have any proof that you didn't do it?"

"Proo..." Karla was at a loss for words for a second. "I have no proof! But why would I do that?! You know I wouldn't!"

"I do not. I don't think I do, no."

"Wh-why?"

"Well, simple as... I'm not the Goddess!"

Everyone was taken aback.

Smoke came billowing out of her body out of nowhere. Vill pulled me in by the arm and held me tight. I had no idea what was going on. I felt no mana reaction. But before I knew it, the Goddess was gone. In her place was... a golden, fluffy tail. Twitching fox ears. And a derisive smirk on her face.

"You fell for it! I was the Goddess! Fuyao Meteorite! Lady Karin Reigetsu's retainer!"

My jaw was on the floor.

Koharu took a hesitant step toward Fuyao.

"What is the meaning of this?! Why are you here?!"

"All according to plan! Lady Karin always calls me the Insurrectionist Vixen, so this time around I did something worthy of the title!" She cackled.

Why had Fuyao taken the form of the Goddess? How had she even done that? Where was the real Goddess? Did Karin know about this? Since when had Fuyao been pretending to be the Goddess? How the heck did the Heavenly Paradise government work in the first place?

I had so many questions, I felt like my head was going to explode. And it appeared

Karla felt the same. She just barely managed to get a few words out between gasps.

“Where... is my Goddess...?”

“I got rid of her.”

Everyone turned to the source of that voice. Someone appeared from the shadow of a pillar. A samurai girl with a rainbow hairpin. Karin Reigetsu. She wore a cynical smile on her face as she approached us.

“She’s partial to you. I only did what was best for the Heavenly Paradise, even if I had to take some extreme measures.”

“What do you mean you got rid of her?! Where is she?!”

“Lady Karin, Lady Karin! We promised not to say that! The tables will turn if they find out I was the Goddess!”

“No problem. They have no proof.”

“We do! You’re right here! That’s proof! I’m calling someone! Koharu, keep an eye on them!”

“It’s no use. We already vacated the Osui Palace. Besides, just getting someone to come here won’t work as proof.”

“What do you mean it won’t?! That fox used transformation magic, didn’t she?! We just need an expert to check, and they’ll be able to tell right away!”

“It’s no magic. Fuyao, show them once more.”

“Roger! Core Implosion: Inari-Avatar Reflection!”

Smoke filled the room again. I couldn’t believe my eyes. The foxgirl had disappeared, and in her place... was a girl who looked just like Karla. And I wasn’t being figurative. It was a mirror image of her.

“Grandmother. Grandmother.” Fuyao smiled in Karla’s skin; even her voice was identical. “Grandmother... That was all I had to say to do it. Oh, the years haven’t been kind to Hell’s Windmill. Or perhaps I should say she was too kind to her granddaughter.”

“Y-you... you did that to her!”

“What does it matter? Anyways, this isn’t magic. It’s a different kind of power, one that reflects your strength of spirit—Core Implosion. Trying to look into my mana would be of no use. As Lady Karin said, you have no proof to wield against us.”

“Why did you do that to my grandmother?! She’s... she’s... All because of you!”

“To win the elections! You are unworthy of the throne. Karin Reigetsu must be the next Goddess. What are a few sacrifices compared to sending our country down the right path? Though in the end, I didn’t even get to kill her.” Fuyao grinned.

Everything clicked. The reason why the Eastern Capital Times had framed Karla, the reason why the Goddess had ordered our arrest, why Karin was allowed to bribe the voters. It all came back to this foxgirl using the Goddess’s authority to her advantage.

Karla shed bitter tears.

Koharu was so shocked she couldn’t even move.

It was unfathomable. I couldn’t believe someone so evil could exist in this world. What could I even do? Should I call the Seventh Unit here? But just as these unusually violent thoughts started running through my head...

“Why did you want to meet us?” Vill asked, holding back the anger in her voice. “The fact that you waited here means that you want an audience with us. Did you know we would come here?”

“Right,” Karin said, as though she was only now remembering something. “I don’t plan on having you actually arrested and judged. That was only a demonstration for the people, to ingrain the idea of Karla Amatsu being evil in their minds.”

“Now *that’s* twisted. I don’t think someone who would do that should be a ruler,” Vill replied.

“Karla... I can’t stand you.” Karin ignored Vill and approached her rival. Her eyes were full of pure, unadulterated hatred. “You say you’ll be appointed and immediately quit to be a pâtissier? Ludicrous. I’m not letting you do that. If it’s truly victory you want, then you ought to show a desire to be Goddess.”

“What she’s trying to say!” Fuyao shouted, back in foxgirl form. “Is that she wants you to get serious about aiming to become the ruler! There’s no point in competing if you don’t care about it. It wouldn’t feel good to defeat you like that!”

“Wh-what?! What do you care?! I...”

“Shut up!!” Karin’s roar echoed throughout the whole room. Karla’s shoulders jounced. “Do you have any idea how I’ve felt my whole life? I won’t be stopped until I rid the world of every last ignoramus with my own two hands, starting with you. That’s what’s best for the Heavenly Paradise. The country would be over if an absolute buffoon like you got to the top.”

It was then that I felt like I understood something. Karin was envious of Karla. She wanted to go head-to-head against her to settle things once and for all. There must have been some sort of connection between them that I just couldn’t understand.

But even still. No matter the reason, there was no excuse for what she did.

I took a step forward and got between the two.

“...I don’t know your circumstances, but Karla won’t lose.”

“Bark as you please, Gandesblood. I will stand at the top of this country. And I will stop at nothing to get there.”

“No! Do stop!” I shouted without thinking. I felt like I had to. “There’s no way someone who does this could be the Goddess! Between you and Karla, she’s way more worthy of ruling the country! She’ll win!”

Click. A switch flipped. I had no hope of reacting to that. Fuyao’s sword glinted as she closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye. The sharp blade was right in front of my face by the time I realized.

“Ms. Komari!”

An explosion of white mana went off as soon as I heard Sakuna’s voice. An ice wall rose between Fuyao and me. A clang echoed. I saw Fuyao’s eyes shine with hostility beyond the transparent ice. I had no time to sigh in relief.

She thrust her blade into the wall, tearing it down.

“Are you ready, Terakomari Gandesblood?”

“R-ready for what?”

“Lady Komari! Stand back!”

A kunai flew from the side to ward off Fuyao’s katana. Vill jumped in to protect me and... the foxgirl kicked her hard in the stomach.

The back of Vill’s head hit my nose. I could see stars. My maid fell on me, and we both rolled on the floor. *What’s going on? Why’s Fuyao attacking out of nowhere?* An endless barrage of questions ran through my head, and I found no answer to them as we slid on the floor. By the time I came to, Vill was on her knee, holding me up.

“Vill! Are you okay?”

“My tummy hurts, that’s all. It’s nothing...” She seemed to be in pain, though.

I looked at Fuyao in stupefaction. The golden foxgirl was standing right in front of us, looking down on us with a different kind of smile from before.

“I can’t wait until the final battle. Say, Terakomari, how about we kill each other right now?”

“Wh-what?”

Her blade flashed again.

I felt something was wrong with my shoulder. The next moment, burning pain ran through my whole body.

Blood gushed out of my shoulder. Only then did it dawn on me that I’d been slashed.

“Guh... That hurts...”

“Lady Komari?! Fuyao Meteorite! You won’t get away with—”

The next kick struck Vill straight in the face. The maid flew back. Sakuna and Koharu attacked from either side, and just when their kunai and staff were about to hit Fuyao, she disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Huh...? Wh-where is she?!”

“Here.”

A dull strike echoed. She'd nailed Sakuna and Koharu on the back of their heads with the butt of her sword. That must've been illusory magic. The two girls fell unconscious right away.

I pressed my shoulder while my jaw dropped.

Vill, Sakuna, and Koharu had all been defeated in the blink of an eye. Karla was too scared to even move. What was up with that girl? Was she really trying to settle things here and now? I looked up in terror.

Click.

“Weak! Utterly pathetic. This hardly even counts as recreation.”

Fuyao placed her slender fingers on her chin. Her scornful smile was right in my face.

“Does it hurt? Feeling frustrated? Mad about your friends ending up like that? Well, that's what you get for going up against Lady Karin Reigetsu! I'll have you coat my katana now!”

“Wh-why do you do this?! I don't get it! Apologize to them!”

“What's the point in saying sorry? You're going to die now anyways!”

Fuyao licked my blood that had gotten on her finger. She slowly brought her sword aloft. I was paralyzed. How did it come to this? I curled up in dismay, when...

“Stop it, Fuyao!!”

...Karin's yell echoed throughout the hall. Her retainer stopped in her tracks and turned around.

“Stop? Why?”

“I've had enough of you acting without permission! The Heavenly Ball will be ruined if you kill them now! Besides, Terakomari Gandesblood is dangerous. We'll be in big

trouble if you keep being reckless."

"Hmm." Fuyao pondered her order for a moment. "Just kidding! I just thought they might get serious for the final battle if I did this. Forgive me, Lady Terakomari! I went too far!"

Fuyao turned around.

I was at a loss for words. What in the world were they thinking?

"K-Karin! You think you can get away with this?!"

"Hold it, Lady Karla! Are you angry? Then, good. Focus that fury against Lady Karin! That's what she wants!"

"You heard her, Karla." Karin glanced at her rival with a daring grin. Then she took something out of her pocket. A Magic Stone. "The final battle of the Heavenly Ball is tomorrow morning... I'm glad you're serious about it now. Really makes all we've done so far worth it. I look forward to beating you to a pulp."

Then I felt mana. Karin activated the Magic Stone. I braced myself for an attack, but no spell came flying.

Suddenly, they were gone. It was a teleportation stone.

I was frozen to the spot. Only a sense of helplessness remained.

But... we had to win. No matter what.

My gut told me that the Heavenly Paradise would be plunged into chaos if we let Karin do as she pleased.

I glanced at Karla. She was battered and despondent. *I need to give my all for her.* So I thought as I clenched my fist.

Fortunately, none of us three were seriously injured. Perhaps Fuyao had gone easy on us.



The Fourth Unit of the Heavenly Paradise Army was retreating.

The cops, too, were starting to leave the premises.

"Hah. Did they get orders to retreat or something? They sure are good at running away, if nothing else," Prohellya Butchersky grumbled, gun in hand.

She had killed sixteen and was unharmed herself. The strongest Arctic Master wasn't about to get wounded against low-level goons. Leona Flatt down on the ground, though, was all banged up. And outside her Dark Core area, too, the poor girl.

"Sheesh! They escaped! I wanted to kill them all!"

"Calm down," Prohellya said as she jumped off the public bath rooftop. "Our objective was to let Terakomari and Karla Amatsu escape. Let's ask them how that went later on."

"But... we're on Karin's side, aren't we? Shouldn't we ask her?"

"Stupid cat."

"What did you say?!"

"Karin Reigetsu is the root of all this evil. There's something real wicked going on in this city... Karin's at the center. Can you hear all that? I wish I couldn't."

Prohellya listened to the voices of the people chatting far away.

"Lady Karla really killed her?" "Lady Karin was right about her." "I don't want a girl like her becoming Goddess." "They say she poisoned the snacks she was selling." "Now that I think about it, Team Amatsu has done nothing but use dirty tricks since the Heavenly Ball started..."

Leona could also hear them on account of her beastlike ears. The Eastern Capital was full of malice. Resentment that had been intentionally stoked.

"But..." Leona tilted her head. "I don't only hear people criticizing Karla. The citizens aren't puppets. There are plenty of people who've drawn their own conclusions."

"Right. Which is why I find it despicable. Karin Reigetsu thinks the people can be so easily manipulated. I don't like making light of the citizenry like that."

"Yeah, I agree. What I dislike the most is how she framed Karla and then set her shop on fire."

"It's infuriating!! I've never met someone so awful! She won't get away with this!" Prohellya yelled as she stamped her feet.

She had joined Karin Reigetsu's team under the secretary general's instructions, but Karin Reigetsu was unfit to be a ruler. She didn't deserve the great Commander Prohellya Butchersky's help, secretary general's orders be damned.

She would surely get reprimanded for going against him, but she didn't care. Better act on her own accord here and now.

Then she felt a mana reaction on her Correspondence Crystal. Speak of the devil. Prohellya clicked her tongue and poured mana into the crystal, connecting to her northern homeland.

"Prohellya speaking. I would appreciate being notified in anticipation of when you want to talk."

"I am notifying you right now that I want to talk. Now. Prohellya, I've been watching."

Leona looked at her with curiosity. Prohellya shooed her away; couldn't have her hearing top-secret information.

"Seems like we have to change our plans."

"Wasn't our plan to make Karin Reigetsu the Goddess?"

"Yes. Karin Reigetsu is unworthy of the title. Which is why the Heavenly Paradise would dramatically lose power if she took the throne. Then we could swoop in and make it a puppet state of the Haku-Goku Commonwealth."

Shameless bastard, Prohellya thought.

"And if Karin Reigetsu wins, we avoid Karla Amatsu becoming the Goddess. That would be of great benefit to our nation since we could make use of Karla Amatsu's powers. Our

chances of coming into contact with her would drastically decrease if she became Goddess.”

“That part I don’t get. What kind of power does Karla Amatsu have?”

“You will understand in the upcoming battle... Regardless, we can’t go on with our original plan of making Karin Reigetsu the Goddess. The outcome of that can only be bad. Forget about making it a puppet state—the Heavenly Paradise would collapse if she rose to power.”

The secretary general let out an overly dramatic sigh. She didn’t understand how serious he was about that.

“*Plus, you dislike her methods, don’t you, Prohellya?*”

“If I may speak frankly for a second—no, I do not.”

“*Then do as you please. I give you permission.*”

Prohellya widened her eyes. She didn’t get what had changed his mind, but whatever happened, it was better than having to do a job she didn’t want to do.

“*But...*” the secretary general added. “*Beware of the fox.*”

“Fox? You mean Fuyao Meteorite?”

“*Yes. She’s plotting something and using Karin Reigetsu to carry it out. Don’t let her get away with it. You can’t let Karin Reigetsu win.*”

“What do you mean?”

The secretary general chuckled.

“*She’s a monster in human clothing. I can tell.*”



Karla Amatsu had been ready to become the leader of the next generation. And though she didn’t want to, she had no choice but to do as she was told. That’s how she’d ended up becoming an Imperial Saber, getting involved in a war she hated, and ultimately

participating in the Heavenly Ball as a Goddess candidate.

But everything changed when she met Terakomari Gandesblood.

She'd given Karla the courage to live true to herself and follow her dreams. She was moved when she saw her argue sharply for her. She'd helped her and her grandmother understand each other. Karla couldn't thank Komari enough for it.

A free life had finally been within her grasp... But then...

What was this feeling?

Being framed... Karin attacking her grandmother... The Fuuzen being set on fire... In the wake of Karin's misdeeds, Karla felt something budding in her heart. Something telling her, *Are you really okay with this?*

Her grandmother's fears were becoming reality. The Heavenly Paradise would be in serious trouble in Karin Reigetsu's hands.

If by mere chance Karla won... what would happen if she quit being the Goddess to become a pâtissier? The Eastern Capital would be plunged into chaos. Twisted scoundrels like Karin and Fuyao would stir once again.

"*Live how you see fit,*" her grandmother had told her.

But no one lived as they pleased. Nobody in the whole world only ever did what they wanted to do.

"You're going to pay, Karin...." Koharu muttered, clenching her fist.

Team Karla Amatsu had reunited in the garden of the Amatsu residence. Karla, Koharu, Komari, her maid Villhaze, and Sakuna Memoir.

The girls Fuyao had knocked out regained consciousness soon after. That foxgirl's attack was probably only meant to knock them out temporarily in the first place. Komari was the only one to have sustained injuries, and she'd returned to Mulnite for a short while with a teleportation Magic Stone to recover.

Komari's four rowdy subordinates were there as well. They told the others that the police were no longer looking for them. Fuyao-turned-Goddess must have commanded

them to stand down. But... that was nothing to be glad about. The situation hadn't changed in the slightest.

"Don't worry," Villhaze said calmly. "The final battle is tomorrow. Let's just beat them to a pulp there. Throw the foolish bastards who dared injure Lady Komari straight to hell. Then everything will sort itself out."

"Will it really? Ms. Karla's grandmother is still in serious condition." Sakuna frowned.

"Commander! We won't tolerate slander about the Seventh Unit. We must show them our strength and shut them down. I believe we should attack the Reigetsu residence straight away."

"Um... Mr. Caostel, you shouldn't be so reckless..."

"Huh?! E-excuse me, Commander Memoir!"

"Gah-ha-ha-ha! Serves you right, Caostel! You always call *me* reckless! How's it feel, huh?!"

"Check it! Yohann's a reckless bomb! Caostel's a Peeping Tom—GWAH!"

"What're you talking about?!"

"Yohann, calm down. We need to focus on our plan..."

They were already discussing what to do, but Karla couldn't concentrate. The only thing on her mind was Karin's words: "*I can't stand you.*" Sure, maybe her way of life looked ridiculous to someone like her rival, but...

"You okay, Karla?"

She raised her head at the sound of that voice.

Komari was gazing at her, worry in her eyes.

"...I'm okay. Thank you for your concern."

"You don't have to worry about anything. I may be weak, but the Seventh Unit guys are super strong. And we're also smuggling Sakuna in there. We won't lose to Karin."

Komari's kind words pricked at her chest.

She knew this girl was just as anxious.

Then Karla's mind was cleared. She couldn't keep relying on other people. She was a candidate in the Heavenly Ball. She couldn't spend all day feeling sorry for herself.

This was no game. It was war.

Her grandmother had already had a brush with death.

Karla had to face reality. Now was no time to cling to her dreams.

"Let's think about our strategy, okay? I think just following Vill's orders will be enough, but..."

"I'll fight, too." Karla wiped her tears and stood up. She looked at everyone and slowly opened her mouth again. "I don't want to lose to Karin." They all looked at her, and she took a deep breath before continuing. "I had worked hard only for the purpose of *not* becoming the Goddess up until now... but things have changed. There's no point in thinking otherwise. I will defeat Karin and become the Goddess."

"Karla...? But I thought you didn't want to be it..."

"I can't leave it up to anyone else."

"But what about your dream of becoming a pâtissier?!"

"Nothing says I can't do both!" she yelled.

Karla understood she was being reckless, but she had made her choice. She would listen to her grandmother's wishes *and* make her dream come true. The phrase "jack of all trades, master of none" was nowhere to be found in Karla's dictionary.

"I can't leave it in Karin's hands. I don't think I can leave it in anyone's hands. I, Karla Amatsu, will be the one to protect this country... so..."

Komari was staring at her with her mouth agape, as was everyone else. Everyone was in disbelief that the girl who'd so insisted she didn't want to become Goddess during the debate would turn back on her word. Which was why Karla urged them so

seriously. She took another deep breath and rallied her courage to ask:

“So, please... won’t you all lend me a hand?”

“Well said!!”

Everyone turned around. Atop the rocks of the dry garden was a girl. One of the Six Arctic Masters of the Haku-Goku Commonwealth—Prohellya Butchersky. Beside her stood one of the Four Holy Beasts of the Lapelico Kingdom—Leona Flatt.

Komari’s subordinates readied themselves for battle.

“No need to get worked up,” Prohellya said, holding up her hand and slowly walking up to them. “I apologize for trespassing, but I wanted to give you the good news.”

“Good... news?”

“Liona Flatt and I will be joining Team Karla Amatsu in the battle against Karin Reigetsu.”

Shock. “You’re lying!” “You won’t trick us!” Komari’s subordinates said, but Prohellya smiled, unconcerned. Leona let out a heavy sigh.

“Prohellya is fed up with Karin. I guess we’re ruining the Heavenly Ball? Anyways, my King also gave me permission, so I’m joining her. I don’t like Karin’s methods, either.”

“You heard her. Hope you welcome us, Karla Amatsu.” Prohellya reached out to her.

Karla stared at her hand dumbfounded, only to be moved the next moment. Whatever the two girls’ motives were, she had no reason to turn down help. She shook Prohellya’s hand, then Leona’s. The Reigetsu side being two people down was a boon to Team Amatsu, but more than pros and cons, Karla was glad about having people who wanted to follow her.

“...Thank you so much. Of course you’re welcome to join.”

“No need to thank us. Also, about the Eastern Capital Times...” Prohellya took a newspaper out from her coat, the one with the article speaking ill of Karla and Komari. “I heard of someone upset about it.”

“Huh...?”

“Indeed! I have too many criticisms to list!”

A white-haired girl appeared from behind Prohellya. The Sapphire was wearing formal attire similar to a suit. Behind her was a shy catgirl.

“Ugh,” Komari said as she took a step back. Leona did the exact same thing.

“...Sis? What’re you doing here?” Leona asked.

“I don’t even know! Ask this bully of a boss! Please take my place, Leona! Get me OUT!!”

“Do you even know how few people can get hired by Six Nations News fresh out of school? I don’t get what you’re upset about.”

“Everything! She always gets mad at the tini—EGH!”

The Sapphire put the catgirl in a headlock.

Everyone else stood there in confusion before the Sapphire briskly approached them.

“My name is Melka Tiano! I work for Six Nations News! I am very, very sorry for the slander that hoax of a rag has put you through! We must make the Eastern Capital Times pay! They are making a mockery of journalism! They think they can just make up whatever they want! And they cannot keep getting away with this! Don’t you agree, Thio?”

“Are we really in a position to criticize them? And please let me go already. I’ll sue.”

“In any case! We support Team Karla Amatsu. Six Nations News will responsibly report on the commander’s innocence. We’ve held a street survey today and found out that ninety percent of people believe you to be innocent! Look at this! Don’t let those barbaric pseudo-journo terrorists defeat you, Commander Amatsu!”

Melka Tiano drew closer and closer and closer.

Karla didn’t quite get it, but she understood this girl was on her side.

She had many people on her team. She would have to live up to their expectations,

then.

"Thank you," Karla said, pushing Melka away and turning to look at Komari. She looked suspicious. "Komari... would you help me out? Perhaps it would be a lie to say I'm ready, but... I want to become the Goddess and know more about the Heavenly Paradise that way. So, please, fight alongside me."

Komari flinched for a few seconds, but then she understood Karla's feelings. She nodded firmly with a serious look on her face.

"...Got it. If you're gonna be doing your best, then I have to as well."

And so they were ready for the battle.

Karla wasn't prepared to become the Goddess, but she didn't have the time to stop. She couldn't be passive like she had been up to this point. She had to live up to everyone's expectations. The mere thought of that gave her the true will to fight.

I don't know how much I can do, but I'll do whatever I can.

Vexations

6 Waving Moment

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

Karin Reigetsu had been ready to become the leader of the next generation. And she'd always done as she was told. As a member of a family of warriors, she had to be strong. She put her entire soul into that principle.

Karin had no standout talent. She was only slightly better than average when it came to combat, which was why she needed to put in the effort. She put her body and mind to the test in training every single day, and never did she give in. Karin was a Reigetsu. She had to become the Goddess. She had to persevere.

What pushed her the most were these words from her grandfather and mentor:

“Do not lose to Karla Amatsu. Show her the power of the Reigetsu bloodline.”

The Reigetsu clan was equally as esteemed as the Amatsu in the Heavenly Paradise, and so their only daughter became Karin's rival. Though in reality, their relationship wasn't quite along those lines. Karla had always seemed to have her head in the clouds. Despite the expectations put on her, she never took interest in her warrior duties. Not once had Karla wielded a blade of her own initiative.

Karin found this unthinkable for a warrior of the Heavenly Paradise, so when she'd encountered Karla at a banquet this one time, she knowingly stepped across the line and posed a stern question to the girl.

“Karla, do you have the resolve to carry this country on your back? Whenever I see what you do... I feel no passion.”

“I have passion,” Karla said with a smile. “It's just that the proper time for me to wield my power has yet to arrive. I could easily destroy the entire universe if I ever

unleashed my full power. You'll see—I'll make the Heavenly Paradise the strongest nation in the world!"

This was five years back, when both of them had still been very young. Still, Karla's frivolous talk had wounded Karin's pride.

She wasn't taking things seriously. Karin was working hard day in and day out, giving her whole life to training. Listening to her rival only gave rise to negative emotions. Karla was hugely popular; people were always gathering all around her, starting with her ninja underlings. In the end, she'd gotten appointed Imperial Saber first and was now included among the Six Valkyries.

Karin couldn't stand this. Still, she never neglected her training.

The nation would surely fall if that nincompoop ever became Goddess. The thought of that drove Karin to train more, until she finally earned the title of Imperial Saber, too.

She felt like she had finally caught up to Karla. Now it was the time to fulfill her duty as warrior.

But then, tragedy struck.

It happened before the Six Nations War, back in July. Her strict mentor and grandfather had passed away. It was a natural death. Not even the Dark Core could stop the passage of time. Not even the greatest of heroes, like former Goddess Hell's Windmill, could escape death forever.

In his final moments, he'd called for Karin and left her with his last words.

"You cannot let Amatsu become Goddess."

It was the same thing she had heard since she was little. He was always cursing the Amatsus, even to his last breath... But then Karin's tears paused as he went in a different direction from the usual.

"I have proof. This arrived at the Reigetsu main residence the other day. You know this face, don't you?"

He handed her a picture of a man. She knew him, indeed. That was...

“...That Amatsu punk. Kakumei. He left the Heavenly Paradise long ago and was considered missing, but it seems he’s been working as a terrorist all along.”

“Why do you say that?”

“This place in the picture. It’s the Inverse Moon base that Mulnite girl destroyed recently.”

Karin was at a loss for words. Kakumei Amatsu was a fine warrior who had worked as Imperial Saber a generation past. He’d disappeared eight years earlier. Why would a person like him be doing this? Her grandfather had then given her a warning.

“Do you see how dangerous the Amatsus are for our country?”

That steeled her resolve.

She couldn’t let a family with ties to terrorists do as they pleased. She had to drive out the dark side of the Heavenly Paradise, no matter what it took. Then her grandfather smiled.

“I know you can do it, Karin.”

“Yes... I will become the Goddess.”

Her grandfather had drawn his last breath after hearing her answer.

He looked at peace, an expression unthinkable compared to the scowl he’d always worn in life.

Karin’s mind was set by the time the funeral had drawn to a close. Her resolve to win the Heavenly Ball and become the Goddess was stronger than ever. This is what she had trained her whole life for.

And yet, she didn’t feel capable of defeating Karla yet. That girl may have lacked determination, but she had unparalleled popularity within the Eastern Capital. Karin needed a plan to tank her reputation.

“You seem troubled, Lady Karin Reigetsu!”

She had appeared, an innocent smile on her face, at just the right moment. That girl

with fox ears and tail. Fuyao Meteorite.

※

The final battle of the Heavenly Ball took place in the Dark Core Zone.

I was sleeping peacefully when I was pulled out of bed and made to gulp down breakfast and get changed before I was teleported to the battlefield. The usual, in other words. Not that being used to it made it any better!

“Why won’t you at least let me brace myself mentally first?!”

“You should have done that yesterday. And it shouldn’t be you getting mad here, but me scolding you for not getting up early.”

“You may be right! But still!!”

I didn’t complain any further. I couldn’t afford to grumble too much—I had an image to keep as the strongest Crimson Lord. There were people watching.

We were in a grassy field at the eastern end of the Dark Core Zone—the place closest to the Heavenly Paradise territory. This is where the final battle was to take place. Somewhere without any cover.

Karin’s troops were assuming formation in front of us. Not even a thousand feet away. Their numbers were close to ours, but their formation seemed a bit lacking after they’d lost their foreign commander support.

In contrast, our troops were in high spirits. On top of the five hundred soldiers from Karla’s fifth unit, there was me, Vill, Caostel, Bellius, Mellaconcey, Yohann (not dead this time!!), last-minute entrant Sakuna, and even Prohellya & Leona, who had deserted Team Karin.

The cream of the crop. Which meant I probably wouldn’t have to do anything.

No matter how strong Karin was, she couldn’t bring four out of six Valkyries down easily. These were the strongest commanders in the world we were talking about. (Though Karla and I were basically deadweight!)

“Commander Karla Amatsu! The mortal combat portion of the Heavenly Ball has

finally begun! According to our interview yesterday, you said you were taking back what you said during the debate! Which means you'll win and become Goddess! And run the Fuuzen sweets shop at the same time! Life is sure to be hectic wearing those two hats! Could you please tell us how you feel right now?!"

Melka came out of nowhere, mic in hand, to get an interview out of Karla. Behind her was a catgirl of similar looks to Leona holding a camera, recording it all.

I'd heard of that. It was a Divine Instrument, the electrovideo box. It broadcast what it filmed in real time to the whole world. A truly dangerous machine. I had to be careful not to let my guard down, lest I be broadcast yelling, "I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die!" across the globe.

Vill came up next to me all of a sudden.

"We'll win this. There's a huge gap in power between both camps; Team Amatsu can't lose."

"Don't get too cocky. One can never be too cautious. As they say, knock even on stone bridges before crossing one," I replied.

"We're going in with enough power to break the bridge ourselves. We must personally make Fuyao Meteorite pay. It's fox stew for dinner tonight."

"She's super strong, though. And we still don't know just how powerful Karin is... Will we really be all right?"

"Yes. Public opinion has Lady Amatsu pegged for an eighty-percent chance of winning. The Komari Unit and Lady Memoir will fight with their all. And above all else, we have the strongest commander in the universe on our side."

"Uh, about that..." I hesitated whether to tell Vill about it.

"Komari!" Karla approached us just then.

She'd fled from her interview. Koharu was holding down the phony journalist. *I should do that, too. Man, if only I had the strength.*

Karla frowned in regret and bowed her head.

“I’m sorry for dragging you into all this...”

“It’s fine. I wanna do it this time, for once. And also... you’ll make my dream come true if you win, right?”

Karla looked surprised, but then she smiled right away.

“Right. It’s the least I could do in return. Let’s get that novel published.”

“Yup. It’s a deal. Let’s do this!”

“Yes.”

We needed no further words. We only had to fight for it now. Not that I could do that... but my subordinates could. *I’ll give it my all as commander.*

I looked over the plain. It was mind-bogglingly broad, but the battlefield was clearly defined. The rules said we couldn’t go beyond the limits. The audience was sitting outside this zone. People from across the world gathered to cheer, “Lady Karlaaa!” “Lady Kariin!”

The purpose of the battle was to showcase each candidate’s talent as the prospective Goddess.

So many people were watching live, and those Six Nations News journos had sneaked inside the battlefield to broadcast it all on top of that. Surely Karin couldn’t get up to any dirty tricks now.

Was I underestimating her?

Right then, a gunshot went off to signal the start of the battle.

The audience cheered with fervor. Karla’s Peace Spirit troops let out a battle cry in unison. It was finally time. I had to make sure not to die somehow. *First things first: I’ll keep behind Vill’s back.*

“...Lady Komari, may I make a report?” the maid asked.

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“The truth is, I was thinking about planting some land mines.”

“What?! You really love them, huh?!”

Karla’s subordinates marched forward, while Karin’s army stayed put. I had a bad feeling about this. Vill grimaced.

“However, I wasn’t able to, since they only announced where the battle would take place this morning. But now that I think about it... it would obviously be the Heavenly Ball Management Committee making that decision. The same committee Karin Reigetsu has at her fingertips. There may be some such trickery already in place.”

“You saying there’s land mines in here? That can’t be...” My words were cut short.

It could be.

An explosion shook the earth out of nowhere. It felt more like an earthquake, in fact. My eardrums seemed on the verge of bursting.

“Everyone down!”

I was already on the ground with Vill on top of me by the time Prohellya yelled that. The tremendous windblast cut out all other noise.

It felt like the earth was turning inside out. The air around us shook violently.

I opened my eyes a moment later, still on the ground with Vill.

“Whu...?”

My hearing came back gradually.

Amid the sound of the wind, I could make out groans. I sat up in disbelief. The view was beyond shocking.

The bodies of Karla’s troops were all over the grassland, torn asunder. Not even half of them had survived, and those who did were heavily wounded. I was astounded. Karin really...

“She used land mines.”

“Vill?! Are you okay?!”

“Yes, I’m fine. I just grazed my knees a little.”

I sighed in relief... but the situation was far from deserving of it.

I looked back in panic at the guys on standby in the rear. Prohellya was clicking her tongue and holding up her gun. Melka and the catgirl journo were on their butts behind her. Leona was rubbing the back of her head. Sakuna was running up to us asking if we were fine. Caostel, Bellius, and Mellaconcey didn’t seem harmed. There was a branch piercing Yohann’s torso. He was dead. As for Karla... She looked like she had seen a ghost.

The tables had been turned in the blink of an eye. Absolutely outrageous.

Karin Reigetsu’s troops let out a war cry and charged against us. They trampled the survivors on their way here. The audience was booing them.

“Lady Karla, we’re in trouble.”

“I-I can see that! What could we do...?”



“The surprise attack was a success! Our victory is assured!” Fuyao cackled as she shook her tail.

Karin was dumbfounded. After a moment’s paralysis, anger boiled inside her.

“Fuyao! What are you doing?! Defeating our enemies with foul play won’t get us support from the people! I could have defeated them all myself—”

“Could you, actually? We lost our supporting commanders already.”

Karin could say nothing to that.

Perhaps she could defeat Karla Amatsu, but she couldn’t take down everyone else. Fuyao kept on cackling.

“Your maliciousness really is a problem. Lady Karla has much more charm than you,

after all.”

“Sh-shut your mouth!”

“I’m only stating the truth. You may have the skill a Goddess needs, but you lack the charisma. That much is obvious from looking at who the audience cheers for. So many are criticizing you.”

“That’s because *you* used this dirty trick!”

“Easy, easy. The battle has already begun—look.”

Karin turned around. Her troops had already started marching on their own against the enemy. It must have been under Fuyao’s orders again. How undisciplined for them to follow the subcommander instead of her.

Karin wanted to pull her hair out.

Think about it. Should you have left Fuyao in charge? Yes, she managed to score a hit on Karla, but the house of cards could easily fall if your dishonesty was exposed.

Come to think of it, I don’t even know anything about Fuyao Meteorite. What was she doing before I met her? Why did she want to help me? Was letting her in just because I wanted a skilled comrade a mistake?

“...Don’t do anything I didn’t ask you to do, Fuyao. I won’t give you any authority even if I do end up Goddess.”

“Oh, that’s not good. I’ll work myself to the bone for you, Lady Karin. Worry not. The Heavenly Paradise will be yours. I will make it so.”

“Yes, I have to be the Goddess. I must rise to power and take back the Dark Core. And I need you to do your job right to achieve that. Especially now that Butchersky and Flatt are our ene—”

“What did you just say?”

All expression vanished from Fuyao's face for a second, but her innocent smile returned in an instant. Perhaps Karin was just seeing things.

"Excuse me. Did you say you have to take back the Dark Core? What do you mean by that?"

"I said too much. Forget it."

Fuyao's expression turned serious. Definitely not Karin's imagination this time.

"Is the Dark Core in the Eastern Capital?"

"I don't know. Only my Goddess knows."

"Yes, that's usually the case. But your grandfather was the God two generations ago, wasn't he? I hear he did great... but he was criticized at the time for nepotism. Supposedly, Hell's Windmill took his place due to this lack of professionalism and the leak of top-secret information."

"So what? I barely spoke to the man."

"That's a lie."

Shivers went down Karin's spine.

Click. A switch flipped.

Fuyao stared closely at her.

"According to Kakumei Amatsu, the Celestial Shrine cherry tree tells the winner of the Heavenly Ball about the Dark Core. You believe in this as 'a voice from heaven.' Which is why I couldn't take over as the Goddess just by transforming into her without going through the Ball."

"What are you talking about, Fuyao?"

"Do you know where the Dark Core is?"

Karin was startled. She couldn't believe the creature before her was the same foxgirl as before. That's when it dawned on her. This was no ordinary beast-folk. She was a

monster hiding a wicked secret.

"You looked away. You're short of breath. Your heart rate is going up. You know what I want. You do. I guess it was only natural. It's not unthinkable to assume the former God would tell his granddaughter about it. So I guess it was all for naught. I did all that to try to get you to win for nothing. Hilarious."

"You can't be..."

"Advanced-level molding spell: Mud Wall."

Mana was scattered. A rock wall crept up from the ground to surround them both. It all happened so fast, Karin couldn't get away. It was already too late by the time she noticed this wasn't to capture her, but to keep away prying eyes.

"Fuyao! What is the meaning of thi—" Blood came out her mouth.

Fuyao's sword was inside her belly. It didn't seem real.

Karin fell to her knees, and the people outside the walls were none the wiser. The audience probably thought they were holding a strategy meeting.

I can't let her get away with this, Karin thought.

"You... You're a terrorist...? You're one of that group attacking our country...?"

The blade left her body, leaving her in a sea of pain. Her arms and legs wouldn't do as she said.

Fuyao grinned and looked down at her.

"Let's talk, Lady Karin! I'll get right to the chase—I don't want to lose time. Tell me everything and I won't kill you."

And then Karin understood it all. The fox had been using her all along.



It was blood for blood.

Karin's troops had mowed down Karla's survivors and weren't showing any signs of slowing down as they charged against us. An atrocious brawl had broken out.

"Look, people of the world! Karin Reigetsu's cowardly troops launched a surprise attack with land mines! The Amatsu unit has been driven into a corner! Only Commander Amatsu herself and her foreign supports remain! They're greatly outnumbered! Could the great Commander Amatsu be defeated?! Hopefully not! Hopefully she prevails! This is Melka Tiano from Six Nations News speaking directly to you!"

"We have to cut the broadcast! Stray bullets are coming our way! We'll die! Let's go hooome!" the catgirl with her cried out.

I get it. I totally get you, sister. I'll go with you. Let's run away.

"I WANNA GO HOME!! I thought this would be an easy win!! Now we're what?! Eight against five hundred?!" I exclaimed.

"They really got us with those mines! Excuse me."

"Gweh!"

Vill grabbed me by the collar and hugged me tight.

Just then, a flaming bullet exploded right where we'd been standing. The smell of burnt grass and blood hit my nose, and I shed tears in an instant. I was so scared. But I'd chosen to fight this battle for once. I couldn't run. But I was so scared. Vill beat away a man who attacked us with her kunai, then said:

"Lady Komari, everyone on our side is far stronger than these common soldiers, but there are just too many."

"I know that! You're telling me to fight, aren't you?! All right, I'm gonna warm up now, so give me some time!"

"Watch out, Ms. Komari!"

I looked up at the sound of Sakuna's voice.

A javelin was right in front of my face. *Yup, I'm dead*, I thought, but then a bullet came flying from the side at an incredible speed and hit it. The weapon spun around until it

stabbed the top of an enemy's head, sending blood splattering everywhere. *I'm not dead!* I turned around. Prohellya was glaring at me, gun in hand.

"What are you doing, Terakomari?! Get serious already!"

"Th-thanks! But why are you so far away?!"

"I'm a sniper, I work better from a distance! I'll back you up!"

"Hey, Vill, can I be a sniper, too?"

"No."

Yeah, I'm gonna look up how to use guns later. I can't use magic, but surely I could use firearms, right? As I was escaping reality by looking to change my path in life, I saw a cat running berserk as she meowed her lungs out.

It was Leona. She was knocking down enemies left and right with her bare fists.

Okay, now I'm feeling bad. I'm sorry I'm so useless, everyone.

"Commander! We have too many enemies on our hands. We need to do something."

"Y-yeah. Looks like I'm gonna have to get serious for once. So... what now, Vill?! All of us are gonna die at this rate! I don't wanna die!"

"I heard the battle ends if you defeat the enemy commander. We just have to knock out Karin Reigetsu, and it's over."

"But she's holed up all the way over there! Look at that wall! She's got her defenses up! She's copying my style!"

"That she is. Lieutenant Conto, may I ask a question?"

"Yes, what's the matter?!" Caostel exclaimed as he killed enemies with his invisible blade.

"Would it be possible to send someone over there with Karin Reigetsu using Transfer, the Void spell?"

"It's possible so long as it's within sight, but it would take time. And only three people can be Transferred at a time."

"Got it. I'll back you up, so please prepare the incantation."

"Wait, what're you planning?" I asked.

"We've got no choice but to charge in. No need to worry, though. I'm sure Lady Amatsu's great power is enough to easily break that wall. Right, Lady Amatsu?"

"Bwuh?!"

Vill pulled her arm. Karla was bathed in blood. I'd seen her quivering in fear as Koharu protected her just a while ago... which meant she really didn't have the power to destroy the universe after all.

"D-do you need me for something, Ms. Villhaze?!"

"We're charging into Karin Reigetsu's camp. Will you join us? I want you to use your universe-shattering power to demolish everything if Lady Komari finds herself in a bind."

"No, wait! Karla's..."

"We're in!" Koharu yelled while wielding her trusty kunai. "Lady Karla, go with her. Take care of her, Terakomari."

"Hold on! Komari is..."

The misunderstandings had reached despairing levels.

Enemy soldiers hollered as they rushed at us, and Vill and Koharu dodged them with fluid movements. At the same time, Vill grabbed Karla and me by the arms and shouted:

"Lieutenant Conto! Is the Transfer ready?!"

"Yes. So I'll send you three to the Reigetsu camp?"

"Please."

“Hold on!” I yelled.

“Got it. You’ll be defenseless while the spell activates. I’ll take care of your surroundings.”

Caostel killed enemies with his right hand while he activated the spell with his left.

“STOP! NO!” Karla and I screamed in unison, but we were ignored.

Mana clouded my vision as the spell booted... but then an enemy spear pierced Caostel’s arm.

“Guh! This is nothing!!”

Blood gushed all over. I screamed and tried to run up to him, but the Transfer light Caostel had shot changed trajectory ever so slightly toward me.

“Lady Komari! Wai—!”

“Huh?”

Vill’s voice faded away.

Immediately, an intense floating sensation took hold of my body.



Thinking back on it now, she’d always been suspicious.

Everything Fuyao Meteorite said lacked kindness. She never hesitated to use any method to achieve her aims, no matter how inhumane. The ruthlessness of her heart reflected itself in every aspect of her demeanor. How could someone so oblivious to that ever become Goddess?

“I hate how roundabout this whole Heavenly Ball thing is. It would’ve been way easier to threaten the person who knew about it from the start. Foolish Lunae.”

“What... are you talking about?”

Click. A switch flipped.

"Oh, nothing! I'm just talking to myself. Anyways, Lady Karin, it seems you know the Dark Core's true form. Won't you reveal it to me, please?"

"So you're a terrorist. You tricked me!"

Legs quivering, Karin just barely staggered to her feet. A tremendous amount of blood was gushing out of her midsection, but she couldn't let herself lose to the pain. She had to stop Fuyao. She unsheathed her sword and took a stance. Fuyao sneered.

"How foolish. You can barely stand with that wound of yours. You couldn't even touch me to begin with."

"Silence!"

Karin didn't have the energy to imbue her blade with mana. She rushed headlong at Fuyao, but her field of vision turned on its head before her sword could reach her shoulder.

"Bwugh!" she squawked as she slammed into the ground. By the time she noticed her opponent had swept at her feet, it was already too late.

Fuyao's keen blade fell down on Karin's shoulder.

"Gwah!"

Sharp pain rippled throughout her body. She lost the strength to grip her sword. As she writhed, screaming, the foxgirl stomped her abdomen to make her stop. She grinned from above.

"Tell me. Where is the Dark Core?"

"Why would I ever... let you know that?"

"Why? For your country? Aren't you doing this for the Heavenly Paradise? It's too late! You've been used by a terrorist all along. Do you have the right to say that?"

Karin's brain froze. Fuyao's words dug into her heart.

"You made the Heavenly Ball into a mess by trying to use me! Only Karla Amatsu was ever supposed to be the Goddess to begin with!"

The pain wouldn't stop. Her wounds showed no sign of healing. Fuyao's katana had to be a Divine Instrument.

"You've got it all oh so wrong. No matter how hard you trained, you could never hope to be an equal to Karla Amatsu. No common person could ever reach her level. And that's what you are. A commoner."

"No! I... I am..."

"Too bad! You have no talent! That much is obvious from the outside. You're pathetic, getting so envious of someone you could never hope to reach. That's why barely anyone supports you. And everybody who did only took your side because you bribed them or fed them fake news. The people of the Heavenly Paradise want no one but Karla Amatsu on the throne."

"That's... not..."

"No amount of effort could have changed that! And please, think of how I felt through all this. Oh, how vexing it is to serve an incompetent master! I didn't even have time to sleep!!"

"...!"

Karin tuned out Fuyao's cackles.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

What had she been doing this whole time? She'd joined hands with Fuyao to concoct all sorts of plans to try and defeat Karla. But would a true warrior have stooped to that? The question had crossed her mind on many occasions, and every time she'd convinced herself that a ruler had to make tough calls like those.

It was all to defeat Karla.

All to show the world that she was worthy of being the Goddess.

Who could have guessed it would end up like this?

In the end, Karin Reigetsu had no talent. She had no charisma, no speaking skills to get the people on her side during the debate, no combat skills to defeat this foxgirl,

nothing.

Click. A switch flipped.

Fuyao spoke in that militant tone she sometimes used.

"This is why you're worthless. Your spirit's broken just because you found out I manipulated you. What about all that effort? You must have had some sort of talent, right? But what breaks it is your weak spirit. Your lack of resolve. You talked big about doing this for the Heavenly Paradise, but you really only wanted recognition. That's why you ended up like this. And now it's time."

Karin didn't quite get it, but it felt like getting stabbed in the heart.

Click. Fuyao kept on speaking ill of her, a smile on her face, as she kicked Karin again and again. Karin didn't even feel the pain anymore. Her heart was on the verge of death in the abyss of despair.

Everyone had their own place. It just so happened the throne wasn't hers.

She had it wrong all along.

No... Wait. Then she remembered. *Remember what grandfather said. Karla Amatsu might have ties to terrorists. Wasn't that why you wanted to defeat her? For the Heavenly Paradise? You can't give up, no matter what.*

"It is over, Karin."

She looked up in shock. That voice filled her with nostalgia. Was she hearing things? No, that wasn't it. He was standing right there. Her late grandfather.

"I cannot bear to see you harmed like this. It is time to give up."

"N-no! I can't do that! I've worked hard to become the Goddess..."

"Do not worry about Karla Amatsu. I will take care of her."

"Huh...?" All strength left her body. What was he saying?

"I worry more about you. The foxgirl is saying she will spare you if you tell her about

the Dark Core, isn't she? Make the smart choice. Live. I know you are not ready to die, are you?"

"B-but if I do that..."

"Rest assured. I will take care of everything." He showed her a kind, understanding smile.

Karin was moved. Had her grandfather ever smiled at her like that? Had he ever worried about her that much?

Then she thought no more. If that's what Grandfather said, then there was no problem.



I was far away from the battle by the time I came to. At the opposite side of the Amatsu camp—at the Reigetsu base. An empty base, however, since all enemy troops had left already.

The fierce battle over there was still raging. Prohellya's gunshots echoed intermittently. Explosions went off from time to time. Mellaconcey's magic? They all were strong, but just seven to eight people defeating five hundred seemed impossible.

Which is why we had to turn the tables, but...

"Where's Vill!?"

We'd been warped from the middle of the battle to the distant Karin Reigetsu camp, but only Karla and I were there. Vill was supposed to be with us, but she was nowhere to be found. It didn't seem like she was hiding somewhere, either. Never before had I felt so anxious about that sicko maid not being by my side.

"This is bad," Karla said, grimacing. "There must've been an error in the spell. They did hit Mr. Caostel Conto's arm right before it launched..."

"Y-you're right! I hope Caostel's okay. And still alive..."

"I agree, but we have bigger things to worry about."

It was then that I realized. We both knew about each other. We were both aware that

we were the weakest ever, in the middle of the enemy base. If only Vill were here with us.

"Oh my. I can't stop shivering."

"Don't worry. I'm shaking in my boots, too."

"Hee-hee... shaky pals." Karla smiled weakly, pale in the face.

Definitely not the kind of pals I wished we were.

Going back was impossible now. We'd only be a burden. There was nothing we could do but stare at the mysterious wall before us.

It was like a stone hut. Karin and Fuyao must've been holding a strategy meeting inside. It was weird they didn't come out even though we were right there, though.

"...What should we do? Run for it?" Karla said.

"No, everyone's looking."

We had the audience's eyes on us. *C'mon, there's a crazy battle full of action over there. Look at that instead.*

We had to do something.

Maybe try talking with Karin. Like telling her using land mines was cheating and we should restart the battle all over, or something.

"U-um, want me to go?"

"No... You hide behind me, Karla."

She couldn't even move. Poor girl. But who could blame her? Anyone would be scared stiff in this situation. I had to cheer her up somehow. I mustered all my courage and took a step toward the wall.

"Karin! Can you hear me?! I wanna talk!"

Just then, the wall started collapsing. I gulped at the sight of the magic getting

deactivated and waited for Karin to appear.

And a silhouette appeared indeed.

“Huh?” I muttered.

It wasn’t Karin. It was the foxgirl. Fuyao Meteorite.

“Hey! If it isn’t Lady Terakomari and Lady Karla!”

She was dragging something on the ground. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was an arm. An arm connected to a bloody corpse—Karin Reigetsu’s.

“I’m surprised you managed to get away from that army! Still, the Heavenly Ball is as good as finished. Lady Karin Reigetsu has been defeated!”

She let the arm go. Karin remained motionless. What was going on? Then the wall finished vanishing. The audience went silent at the sight.

Karla turned pale and gasped.

“Wh-what’s... going on in here?”

“Explaining everything would be such a pain. But hey, I’ll do it out of respect for my opponent. To put it bluntly: I’m looking for strength.”

“Wh-what does that mean?! Did you do that?!”

“Of course.”

Click. A switch flipped.

I was hit with a sharp sense of déjà vu. I’d felt this before. It was back at that party, when I’d first met Fuyao. Also when she’d beaten us up at the Osui Palace.

Before I knew it, the foxgirl was right in front of my face.

I was paralyzed as her huge eyes filled with bloodlust peered into mine.

“The pursuit of strength is like an art. Absolute power can sometimes shake a person

to their core, don't you think?"

"What are you...?"

"I'm Fuyao Meteorite, member of Inverse Moon. I will obtain the Dark Core and surpass the Blood Curse. Are you ready to die, Terakomari Gandesblood?"

My jaw hit the ground. Inverse Moon. No one would say that as a joke.

Fuyao took a step toward me.

"I'm asking you a question."

"Of course I'm..."

Then I remembered the eyes on us. Crap. I didn't understand what Fuyao was getting at, but since we were in public—in an official match no less—I just had to do the same as always and bluff. I shouted.

"Of course I am! Always have been! I am the strongest Crimson Lord! I carry both the Mulnite Empire and Karla's dreams on my shoulders! But if you think you can slay me, then think again!"

Fuyao's katana came down on me sluggishly.

Karla screamed my name. I couldn't move. I was paralyzed by the sheer amount of hostility emanating from my opponent.

The blade gently caressed my body.

I stared at the blood fountain gushing out as if removed from my body.

Huh? What? How did this...?

All energy left me. I was racked with unimaginable agony a couple seconds later.

I fell to the grass and screamed my lungs out as I writhed and convulsed. My mind was muddy. My vision dark. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt. It was only then I realized her blade had slashed my chest open.

I saw my organs fall out of my torso.

“Wh... wh-wha...”

“Komari!!”



“Komari!!”

Karla ran up to the fallen vampire.

She had been slashed shoulder to chest and was scrunching her face in pain, shaking. The blood wouldn't stop. And that wasn't the only thing coming out of her. Karla could only stare dumbfounded at her friend, wails of agony destroying her mind.

“...Hmm? Why's she not using Core Implosion? I know this isn't the extent of your power.”

Fuyao was looking down at them, katana in hand.

Karla glared at the terrorist, driven by fear and anger.

“You!! What have you done?! Why did you do this?!”

“To kill her, duh. This is a Divine Instrument, by the way. The Null Night Blade. I thought it would be impossible to kill Terakomari without it but... what's the meaning of this?”

“D-Divine Instrument...?”

Karla felt as though she'd been pushed into the trenches of despair.

That meant Terakomari's wound wouldn't heal. Just like her grandmother's. But Komari's injury was on another level.

She looked down at her, pale-faced.

How? How was she supposed to heal from that without the Dark Core's power?

"She showed no sign of dodging. She was defenseless, in fact. As if she had never fought before. Is this really Terakomari Gandesblood? Are you trying to trick me?"

"I-I don't get it... What do you want...?"

"I told you. I'm from Inverse Moon. I only played my part as Karin Reigetsu's ally to make her into the Goddess and get intel on the Dark Core out of her."

"...!"

Fuyao rolled down her kimono and showed her skin. On her chest was that emblem. The one that marked a member of the terrorist group wreaking havoc all over the world.

Then Karla understood everything.

The foxgirl had been after the Heavenly Paradise's Dark Core all along. She'd gotten in contact with Karin to uncover its location. Perhaps she planned on ruling over the country with her as a puppet? No, that couldn't be it, seeing as she had killed Karin and ruined the Heavenly Ball. She also said she would hold the Dark Core *and surpass the Blood Curse*. What was that? Was she trying to get something out of Komari? But what?

"I yearn for might. Terakomari Gandesblood's Core Implosion is one of, if not the, most powerful Core Implosion in all the Six Nations. If I defeated it, I would be recognized as the strongest in the world."

"A-and you tried to kill her because of that!?"

"I was only warming up. Defeating the Blood Curse in my usual state would be difficult. Which is why I needed the Dark Core. It gives its holder unlimited power. My boss wants it for some research, but I hate that roundabout way of doing things. I'll make better use of it."

Komari looked up at Karla with empty eyes. The latter was nearly losing her mind from sheer despair. Everything was her fault. It was all because she'd invited Komari to the Heavenly Ball.

"Hah. Core Implosion won't activate without conviction. I suppose you still don't have a goal to strive for. Let's fulfill our initial objective, then."

Fuyao looked around.

Yes. I should ask for help. Karla glanced behind her. The battle over on her side was still raging. Why was nobody coming after them with the same Void spell? Had Caostel Conto died? *Someone! Please! Help!*

“Oh my.” Fuyao noticed the journalists looking on from afar.

Sapphire Melka Tiano and that catgirl. They had run away from the battle, now closer to them than there.

Click. A switch flipped again.

“Oh my, oh my! If it isn’t the hardest-working journalists who reported on the Six Nations War! Is that the famous electrovideo box?”

“U-uh... Yes! I’m Melka Tiano, from Six Nations News! You are Ms. Fuyao Meteorite, correct? What is, um...?”

“You, catgirl! Point the electrovideo box at me, will you?!”

“Ayeee!” The catgirl fell on her butt.

“Sheesh.” Fuyao shrugged and pulled up the camera. “Can you hear me?! People of the Heavenly Paradise!! People of the world!!”

Her devilish statement was transmitted across the entire globe.



Her voice echoed throughout every city in the Six Nations.

The sizzling excitement over the Heavenly Ball had cooled over in a second, particularly in the Eastern Capital, where every face paled as they set eyes upon what was happening on screen.

“Hello, everyone! It’s me, Fuyao Meteorite! Member of Inverse Moon!”

They all watched that innocent smile, astounded. This included Lonne Cornelius, who was having lunch at a soba place. How couldn’t she be, after hearing Fuyao’s self-

introduction? To top it all off, she had killed Terakomari Gandesblood. Questions naturally popped into her head.

“Amatsu! What’s going on?! You didn’t tell me about this!”

“Nobody informed me about this, either.”

Cornelius gulped. Amatsu seemed agitated himself. *He’s not behind this?*

“Then did Her Highness send her?”

“No, she wouldn’t do that. This is Tryphon’s doing.”

Tryphon. A Luna just like Amatsu and Cornelius.

The main street was cacophonous. Unrest was spreading like wildfire. “Inverse Moon?” “Isn’t she that Reigetsu retainer?” “Why is Lady Karin soaked in blood?” “And what about Commander Komarin?” “What’s going on?”

Fuyao then dropped another bomb:

“I am going to steal the Heavenly Paradise’s Dark Core!!”

Everyone gasped. Fuyao cackled.

“Oh, I hear you. You think I don’t know where it is, don’t you? Worry not, though! Lady Karin Reigetsu just told me all about it! It’s in the Eastern Capital!”

The Peace Spirits blanched. Anyone would have after hearing that and seeing that girl’s master, Karin Reigetsu, lying on the ground in a terrible state in a corner of the frame.

“So I’m going for it right now! Oh, and don’t ask your Goddess for help! I already killed her at the party days ago! It’s been me acting as her this whole time! Sad, right?”

The unrest turned to fear.

“I offer each and every one of you my condolences. No one will get to come back to life after the Dark Core is gone... but hey, that’s how it’s supposed to be! So don’t worry!! As we say, life is meant to be in the shadow of death! So!”

Click. A switch flipped.

"Your time is over, Peace Spirits."

The broadcast cut off. Something must have happened to the electrovideo box. But that didn't matter.

The Eastern Capital was in unprecedeted turmoil.

Some shivered in fear. Some insisted it was all a lie. Some rose up to defend the Dark Core. Some ran straight for the Osui Palace. Everyone was going their own way in reaction to the sudden tragedy.

Fuyao Meteorite. Who was this mysterious terrorist who had killed Karin Reigetsu and Terakomari Gandesblood?

"Wait, Amatsu. I've never heard of a Fuyao Meteorite. Is she really with us? She new or something?"

"She's been with us for a while, but... this is unexpected."

"What the...? What should we do now, then?"

Deeply troubled, Cornelius turned to look at Amatsu, but he was already gone. Only his half-eaten soba remained.

Guess he's doing something about it.

That gave her a bit of relief. He could take care of things. He should be fine... Yet Cornelius couldn't help but feel uneasy.

This was just her gut feeling, but that foxgirl had the same strange vibes as the Wicked God Slayer. She'd only seen her for a few seconds, though, so maybe it was just her imagination.



Fuyao Meteorite teleported out of the battlefield, but the danger was far from gone.

Komari was down. The blood wouldn't stop. It didn't seem like Karla could ever hope

to heal her, since she felt no sign of the Dark Core's effect on the Divine Instrument-inflicted wound.

"Komari... Komari..." Karla could do nothing but call her name.

Her body was turning colder by the second. Death was right around the corner. *Why must time flow so fast and unforgiving? If only I could stop it...*

Then she felt the audience's eyes.

"Lady Karla!" "Lady Karla!" they called to her. "Lady Karla! Please save the Heavenly Paradise!" "Only you can do it!" "Defeat that terrorist!" Desperate pleas that spread wider and wider until they echoed throughout the whole battlefield. "Lady Karla!" "Lady Karla!" "Lady Karla!"

"Stop... Stop it..."

They felt like curses to her. So heavy and oppressive. She plugged her ears.

I have no power. I should have never become a commander. If I was going to go through this, I was better off running away like my brother...

"Komari... what should I...?"

My whole life has been full of tragedy. Forced to be commander, getting close to dying so many times, having my dreams shattered, made to participate in the Heavenly Ball... After meeting Komari, I finally found the courage to do what I wanted. I was even able to make peace with my grandmother, and I made a friend who could finally understand me... And now she's dying. It's not fair...

"...Karla." Komari's lips moved, her voice hoarse, weak. "Karla. Don't force yourself."

"Same for you... You don't have to speak..."

"I'll do something about it. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"...!!" She felt defeated.

The tears wouldn't stop.

Komari was worrying about her even in her final moments. She'd do something about it. *What can you do? Look at you. You're barely alive...* The thing was, Komari didn't care about herself. She just wanted to support Karla and her dreams to her last breath. Had anyone ever been that earnest with her before?

That gave her a little bit of courage.

What's even my basis for saying I'm weak?

I want to meet Komari's feelings in kind. Fuyao can't get away with this. Not after doing this to her. Not after saying she would destroy the Heavenly Paradise. Not after what she did to my grandmother.

The Amatsus are a clan of warriors.

I've got to fight. It doesn't matter if I don't have the talent.

I can't keep on lying to myself.

And the bell chimed.

The bell she always wore around her right wrist, the Rewind Bell her cousin had gifted her, was now on the ground. The string tied to her wrist had snapped.

She thought back to what her dear brother had told her.

"You have true power. This bell will fall off once you grasp what your mission is. It also comes off if you just pull it normally, though."

But Karla hadn't pulled it off. Which signified she understood what her mission was now.

She still didn't get what he'd meant. But she grasped what it entailed. This world wasn't right. This rotten world where people dear to her heart were mercilessly put down, one after the other, could no longer exist. She needed to purify it. That was her mission.

“My bell...”

I have to pick it up. I have to. Pick it up. Without it, I...

In that moment, something changed within her.

Karla's eyes hurt. They were burning. She had felt something like this before. That bizarre ache that assaulted her whenever she lost her bell. Her consciousness started fading away. It was unbearable.

But she couldn't fall now, not when Komari was in even greater pain. She held on.

A scorching sensation boiled within her chest. The feeling of power slumbering inside her heart. A power that had been sealed deep within her spirit since birth. Raging like a storm and vast like the ocean. A power she couldn't control.

And then she understood. That bell had contained her Core Implosion. Her brother Kakumei had been well aware of everything when he gave her that Divine Instrument.

Core Implosion—the manifestation of your spirit. A power one cannot control without enough passion for something, or so her grandmother had told her.

With this... With this I can...

“Lady Komari!!”

Someone was running toward them.

Her allies, no longer fighting afar. Karin's troops had been annihilated. Koharu, Villhaze, and Sakuna Memoir were badly injured. Prohellya and Leona didn't seem particularly wounded. The Komari Unit men weren't with them. Had they succumbed in the battle?

“Komari! Hang in there!”

Sakuna activated her healing magic in a panic, but it was to no avail. Komari remained motionless, and her wounds remained open.

“Wh-why...?”

“...They hit her with a Divine Instrument.”

Everyone opened their eyes wide.

"No..." Villhaze muttered in despair. "Lady Komari... Lady Komari..." she whispered next to her ear, tears running down her cheeks.

Komari showed no reaction. The wound would be fatal. She was unconscious.

Villhaze's face turned pale.

"I... I should've run after her. Then this wouldn't have happened... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm a failure of a maid... I thought you would be fine, so I didn't..."

"Don't worry, Villhaze." Karla placed a hand on her shoulder.

Komari was in critical condition. It was only a matter of time until her life faded away. But Karla possessed a special power. One that could change the world.

Her eyes were burning. She imagined they were shining bright red.

Everyone looked on as she held her right hand out to Komari, then activated her ability.

"Core Implosion: Waving Moment."

Translucent mana softly enveloped her body.

She heard the people around her gasp. Komari's wounds, thought to be unhealable a second before, started to close. As though time were being wound back.

That was the power of Waving Moment.

A skill meant for altruism—to share one's time with her target.

An earth-shattering miracle born from Karla's longing to do anything for her grandmother, her country, her friend.

And then... Komari opened her eyes.

"Lady Komari!!"

Villhaze and Sakuna Memoir were overcome with emotion and jumped into Komari's arms. The latter didn't seem to understand what was happening. How could she? She

had just come back from the brink of death.

“H-huh? Am I... alive?”

“Yes. You’re fine now.”

Karla grabbed her arm and helped her get up.

Her wound was gone, as if it had never been there. Even her uniform was patched back up. Her memories hadn’t been rewound, however. She still remembered how Fuyao had nearly killed her.

“Thank goodness, Lady Komari! Thank goodness you’re okay! I’m never going to let you go ever again.” Villhaze wept into Komari’s chest.

Karla closed and opened her hand repeatedly, still trying to wrap her head around her own power.

Perhaps she could use it against that terrorist.

“Hey, how about you help that other girl over there?” Prohellya asked in a grumpy tone.

Karla followed the direction of her gaze to find her opponent, lying broken on the ground. Karin Reigetsu.

She slowly walked up to her. Karin was still alive. Conscious, even.

“Karla... I...”

She couldn’t bear to look at her.

Karin spoke through tears. “I... I couldn’t do anything. I was so envious of you... that I didn’t even care to look at Fuyao... and now this all happened...”

“Don’t move. I will heal you.”

Karla activated Waving Moment, and Karin’s wound gradually vanished.

“Thank you... I’m sorry...,” she cried, repeating that last line again and again.

Once fully healed, she stared Karla straight in the eye.

“...You are strong. Maybe not combat strong, but your spirit sure is. Unlike mine.”

“You’re strong, too. Much more than I am.”

“Heh.” Karin chuckled at herself. “...I finally get it. You and Lady Gandesblood have strong spirits. Fuyao, too, though her ambitions point in a wicked direction. No matter how much talent one may have, how much effort one might put in, you can’t change the world without the will to accomplish something. I wonder... why my mind and spirit couldn’t have been as strong as yours.”

“You did your best, Karin. You worked hard for the sake of the Heavenly Paradise.”

“I did it for myself. I was desperate to protect my own standing.”

“I don’t get what’s so different between you and me.”

“I do. I’m unworthy of being Goddess. It’s your rightful place.”

“Karin...”

“I cannot stop Fuyao. So please—save the Heavenly Paradise.”

Something streamed down her eyes.

To think Karin could make such a genuine expression.

Then the audience burst into cheers. Everyone shouted in support of Karla. They asked her to defeat the terrorist, to protect the Dark Core, to save the Heavenly Paradise. They all wished for a hero. It was as though the battlefield had turned into her stage.

Karla didn’t want to be an Imperial Saber. She didn’t want to be the Goddess. Everything she had said up to now had been her honest thoughts. But deep down, she knew... there was no one else but she who could do it. It was her destiny to rule and lead the nation.

And it was because of this mysterious power. Her grandmother had seen through her. It was why she’d so insisted that Karla become the Goddess.

She'd never had the confidence for it, until now. Aware of her dream, and with the support of so many people, she finally had the courage to stand up now. She hated the thought of getting hurt, of fighting. But she wanted to try. At least for today. For the good of everyone.

"Komari..." Karla called her name, determined.

Komari glanced at her from beneath Vill and Sakuna Memoir. She smiled, then walked up to her.

"You're amazing, Karla. I heard you healed me, too."

"It's all thanks to you. I was able to realize because of you."

"Realize?? Anyways, I'm shocked you have that power. Looks like you did have more talent than I do, huh... Sorry, I suppose you don't want me comparing myself to you."

"Don't say that. You do have a talent. In fact, your strong spirit is your talent."

"Huh...?"

Komari wasn't aware of her true power. She was the strongest, yet thought she was the weakest. And yet still she acted like she was the strongest... Funny how that worked. That was part of Terakomari Gandesblood's charm, but Karla thought it was time for her to know the truth.

"Komari, will you fight by my side?"

"Of course. But I don't have the power..."

"Drink my blood. You did the same with Nelia, remember?"

Karla held up her arm to her. Question marks popped up above Prohellya's and Leona's heads as they watched from afar. Villhaze seemed to understand, however.

"Wait. We must be careful about having Lady Komari activate her Core Implosion. And if we're doing it anyways, then she'll be sucking *my* blood, so shoo, Lady Amatsu."

"Stop! Rather than having her take a pure vampire's blood, she should drink mine. My Sapphire blood makes the Blood Curse look more majestic, so please, Ms. Komari,"

Sakuna said.

"What are you all talking about?"

"About your powers. Haven't you found it strange this whole time? Why people hold you in such high regard? Why everyone calls Terakomari Gandesblood the slaughter champion? Where there's smoke, there's fire. You have an amazingly powerful spirit. Honestly, you really are just like me."

Karla slowly approached her.

Villhaze and Sakuna Memoir started screaming, but Prohellya and Leona were considerate enough to know to hold them back. Melka the journalist finally came to her senses and started yelling, "Stop pissing your pants already, Thio!! Turn on that camera!" Komari was still confused.

"I'm not strong enough by myself. I want you to help me out."

"What's me drinking your blood gonna change? I mean... I did feel strange when I drank Nelia's, but..."

"Trust me. Your heart is clearer than anyone else in the world's. And that purity of spirit has the power to pierce the earth and move stars."

"I really don't get what you're getting at..."

"Okay, how about this? I'll get your novel published if you drink my blood."

"?!" Komari's eyes lit up. She nodded aggressively right away.

The audience gulped as they watched the situation develop. Everyone watching the international electrovideo box broadcast was champing at the bit for Terakomari Gandesblood to show her full power.

"...Okay, I'll do it." Komari looked her straight in the eye.

They stared at each other for a while.

What beautiful eyes, Karla thought.

Komari then closed her eyes, realizing something.

"I'm not doing it for the novel. I'm doing it because I trust you." She smiled.

"Thank you."

"I mean, it's just drinking your blood. I don't like the taste, to be honest, but oh well. Should I do it now?"

"Yes, please... Bwuh?"

Komari approached her... and hugged her out of the blue.

Why? She felt her warmth. She heard the beating of her heart. "Bwu-wu-wu-wuh, Komari, what?!" Karla was taken aback, red in the face. Villhaze and Sakuna Memoir were screeching. Yet Komari paid none of them any mind as she slowly opened her mouth and stood on the tips of her toes.

She bit into Karla's neck.

Her brain froze. She felt a prickling pain, then Komari's tongue sliding across her skin to lap up her blood. It tickled. Did vampires always do this? Honestly, it was quite...

"U-um... Komari..." she exclaimed, unable to hold it any longer.

The change came out of nowhere.

Bundles of mana covered her entire field of vision... Then time accelerated.





The Eastern Capital was in disarray.

A terrorist had appeared out of nowhere and was trying to turn the country on its head.

No one knew where the Dark Core was, save for the terrorist Fuyao Meteorite, who had made Karin Reigetsu spill the beans.

The people of the Heavenly Paradise searched desperately for the Dark Core. Yet it was useless trying to protect an object they didn't know about.

Meanwhile, the person who should have known about the Dark Core, the Goddess, had vanished from the Osui Palace.

To top it all off, former Goddess Kaya Amatsu was unconscious thanks to the very same terrorist. Her predecessor had passed away in July. Government officials asked other Amatsu and Reigetsu people about it, but none of them knew.

No one had a clue what the Dark Core was.

"There's not much we can do but deploy our troops to cover as much space as possible and wait for the terrorist to act."

The remaining Imperial Sabers took that decision to protect the city, but they weren't aware of what sort of power the enemy held. Their efforts were virtually useless. The enemy knew their every weakness, yet they didn't know any of hers.

The people despaired at the thought of the Peace Spirits dying out.

But then, the screens turned back on. Six Nations News's camera was back online. And there, the people saw Terakomari Gandesblood sucking Karla Amatsu's blood.

Why?

Is now really the time for this? some people thought, indignant.

The change that followed was dramatic.

"Look, everyone! It's just like what happened during the Six Nations War! Commander Terakomari Gandesblood has finally decided to fight back!"

The journalist's voice echoed throughout the Eastern Capital.

Just then, a green mana explosion rocked the Dark Core Zone.

A powerful wind blew through the battlefield.

An out-of-season flurry of cherry blossoms danced in the air. The plant life grew at vertiginous speeds, flowers blooming all around. The weapons lying on the ground rusted over, then crumbled away.

No one could believe their eyes.

A girl stood in the middle of the jade-green mana storm. Terakomari Gandesblood.

Her expression was empty as ever, but her eyes were shining a bright scarlet.

"Komari? What is...?"

Karla stood before her friend, mouth agape.

The air was radiating from her sheer bloodlust.

Komari had gained no visible Peace Spirit qualities, but people said the residents of the Heavenly Paradise had an acute sense of time. They were a people who saw grace in going along with the whims of natures, rather than trying to control them. Perhaps this was how those characteristics manifested in her.

The vampire shook her hand ever so slightly, and a tremendous blast of mana raged. Time accelerated. The grassland morphed into a field of flowers as the people got down on their knees and shouted.

It didn't seem real.

They all stared in admiration at the beautiful garden that surrounded them.

“W-wow...! This is amazing, Commander Gandesblood!”

The journalist jumped up in joy as she always did.

The ultimate Core Implosion that was said to appear once in a millennium—the Blood Curse. When its wielder embedded Peace Spirit blood, it manifested the miraculous power to accelerate the time of all creation.

Petals whirled around Komari as she slowly approached Karla, softly grabbing the flustered Peace Spirit’s hand. The Cherry Jade Vampire Princess beamed as sweet as a blooming flower.

“Karla... let’s take back your dream.”



The pursuit of strength was like an art.

Yulinne Gandesblood’s overwhelming strength had taken everything from Fuyao Meteorite. She had burned her homeland to the ground.

This wasn’t unusual. The strong overrunning the weak was a universal truth.

Which meant Fuyao had to pursue strength.

She needed to be respected. Feared. Cursed to be isolated. It was the only way she could earn peace of mind.

“Here it is.”

Fuyao headed straight for the Amatsu residence after sneaking back into the Eastern Capital.

She had heard that the Goddess or God traditionally guarded the Dark Core in their own home, which meant it had to be either in the Amatsu or Reigetsu residences. And it was an Amatsu who was the current Goddess. The Dark Core had to be somewhere in there.

Fuyao audaciously opened the sliding door and entered the building. She knew the place, having attacked Karla Amatsu’s grandmother before. The people were making

a fuss outside, getting ready for the terrorist attacks, the poor ignoramus. She walked down the hallway with a sneer on her face.

She ran into someone as she rounded a corner. A woman in a traditional apron. Likely an Amatsu retainer.

The woman apologized and bowed her head reflexively before she instantly recognized Fuyao's face and promptly fell to the floor screaming.

"Ayeee! The terrorist!"

"That's me. Fuyao Meteorite."

The woman couldn't move anything but her lips as she gasped in fear. Fuyao softly unsheathed her katana, intent on getting rid of any witnesses.

"Curse your bad luck. Ready to meet your maker?"

"P-please let me go. I-I-I don't want to die."

"..."

The woman's plea came from the heart. Honest words. She showed no sign of striking back at her assailant—she really just wanted to live.

"You don't want to die?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry..." She became an apologizing machine.

That's that, I guess.

Fuyao sheathed her sword in silence. The floor squeaked as she walked past the woman. She felt her confused stare on her back.

Show some joy. I let you live.

Too many people did not understand the weight of a life.

Killing someone who was not ready to die would be an affront to her own life. It would have brought Fuyao to the same level as those savages who'd attacked her homeland.

That was why she always posed the same question to her victims. That was why she hadn't killed Yohann Holders, or finished off Karla Amatsu's grandmother. It was a matter of self-respect.

"It's here."

Fuyao passed by many rooms until she reached the one she was searching for. She surveyed its interior. According to her boss, Dark Cores displayed no mana reaction whatsoever despite being a mana source themselves. They were camouflaged to prevent people like Inverse Moon from finding it. She couldn't overlook anything, not even the most useless-seeming object.

And then she found it. It lay in a corner of this reception room.

One of Hoshigakiemon's legendary pieces—a vase valued at ten billion yen. But even that price was preposterously low for its true value. It looked like there was a crack on it, but that must have been some sort of decoration.

"Nourish me, Heavenly Paradise Dark Core."

With this in her possession, becoming the strongest in the world would be child's play. Fuyao reached out to the vase with slight anticipation in her chest, when...

"What are you doing?"

"Huh?!" She immediately turned around as she sensed a sinister presence.

A man in Eastern clothing was standing by the door. She knew him. Her boss had told her to watch out for him. He was a Luna, one of Inverse Moon's top brass.

"Did your parents never teach you that breaking and entering is illegal?"

Click. A switch flipped.

"Oh me, oh my! If it isn't Lord Kakumei Amatsu! The Dark Core is right here. You know it's our job as Inverse Moon to get our hands on these!"

"Yes. Inverse Moon has to obtain the Dark Cores. So... is it that vase that you found?"

"Indeed. We should report this to the Wicked God Slayer, eh?"

Fuyao forged mana quietly. The man had clearly been lying in wait. He must've been at the ready since that Six Nations News broadcast. But that was fine. The bigger the obstacle, the greater the excitement when you overcame it. That was why she'd told everyone she was going to the Eastern Capital.

"Heh. Rest at ease," he said.

"Excuse me? I'm just being friendly."

"Of course. We are coworkers, after all. We should be friendly to each other... but everyone always has different opinions. And sometimes, these opinions can never mix."

Kakumei Amatsu observed her closely, but something was off. He showed no sign of attacking. Could it be he had already activated some sort of spell? Fuyao put a hand on the hilt of her katana, and then Kakumei Amatsu looked up, as though just noticing something. He was staring at the ceiling.

"It seems I have nothing to do here."

"...You weren't here to stop me?"

"No, no. I just came to get a front-row seat."

"For what...?"

"I was also curious about Tryphon's pet. I suppose I was ready to stop you if the need arose, but it seems that's not happening. You're no match for those two Core Implosions."

He turned around.

"Wait, please!" Fuyao shouted, irritated. "What do you mean? Why are you even here?"

"To see where this timeline leads."

"What's that supposed to mean?! Are you right in the head?!"

"Perhaps not." He chuckled.

Just before he attempted to leave, he remembered something and stopped.

"By the way, I see Karin showed some mettle in her final moments."

"...What are you trying to say?"

"That you should be more diligent when you torture people. Karin tricked you... There's no way that tacky vase is the Heavenly Paradise's Dark Core."

"?!"

A shock rocked Fuyao's brain. Then intense mana.

Scarlet petals softly descended. The beauty of the spectacle robbed her of her concentration for a moment. She unconsciously reached out for that charming color and, the next instant, an ear-piercing rumble sounded as the ceiling collapsed on her.

Fuyao opened her eyes wide in shock and tried to dodge. She was too late. The gravity pulled the entire building down on her, as though struck by a comet. But it wasn't that—it was a giant tree.



Two girls floated above the Amatsu residence.

One was enveloped in jade-green mana—Vampire Princess Terakomari Gandesblood. The other was clinging to her with eyes wide open—Kimono Commander Karla Amatsu.

"M-my HOUSE?!?!"

"Don't worry. You can build another."

"I can what?!" Karla replied to her as she surveyed the scene below.

Komari had thrown a giant tree onto the Amatsu residence. Roof and columns, destroyed in an instant. She'd claimed the enemy was in there, but did she really have to go this far?

Jade mana and a flurry of cherry blossoms whirled through the air, like a scene from

another world.

The people of the Eastern Capital chanted in excitement, “Komarin!” “Komarin!”

“Look at this! Commander Gandesblood smashed that terrorist with a tree! How powerful! How creative! Will she save the Heavenly Paradise?! Don’t take your eyes off the battle to come!!”

Melka continued her enthusiastic coverage of the event from the ground. The people cried out in excitement. It was an extension of the festival. One that outstripped their enthusiasm for the Heavenly Ball, actually.

Komari is right, though... Karla thought. I could just rebuild it later. What matters right now is defeating this terrorist and protecting the Heavenly Paradise.

She looked down at the mountain of rubble that was once her house. No normal human could survive such a hit.

But then, out from under a fallen tree, a foxgirl appeared. And she flew up like a shooting star.



It was Fuyao's philosophy that two powers existed in this world.

One was pure physical strength. This you could obtain through talent or effort. It was this pretense of power that the majority of people in the world strived for.

The other was force of spirit. The power that was born through the impregnable will to achieve something. It manifested through Core Implosion. People with that power had minds of steel—they never gave up, no matter the adversity they faced.

The latter was more important than the former.

The strength of your spirit was reflected in the strength of your Core Implosion, and your Core Implosion could only be as strong as your spirit.

The Blood Curse was touted as the most powerful Core Implosion in the world. It reflected kindness, the mental fortitude required to care about others even when you were on the brink of death.

Komari was the mightiest vampire of all. A match for the Wicked God Slayer.

Which meant that Fuyao would become the strongest in the world once she defeated Terakomari Gandesblood.

“Die, Terakomari.”

The people screamed. Fear spread throughout the land at the sight of Fuyao standing up from the rubble. But she had no time to spare on that weak bunch.

She activated levitation magic to fly at Terakomari with incredible speed.

The scenery had taken on an otherworldly quality.

Inverse Moon’s Implosion Exegesis had no details on the Blood Curse. The only thing they knew was that its powers changed depending on the race of the blood Terakomari ingested.

A vampire’s gave her explosive mana.

A Sapphire’s gave her a body hard as ice.

A Warblade’s gave her the power to manipulate swords.

She had sucked Karla Amatsu’s blood this time. But what did the petals dancing in the air mean? There was only one way to find out.

“En garde!”

Fuyao put the entirety of her stamina and mana into her katana. Terakomari was floating right in front of her, an unconcerned expression on her face. Fuyao swept her blade horizontally, pushing away the cherry blossoms adorning the sky.

“?! ”

But then, her sword stopped.

A vine of some sort had stretched out from behind Terakomari and bound Fuyao’s katana. Had she gained the power to manipulate plants? While Fuyao was lost in thought analyzing the situation, Terakomari buried her fist deep into her chest. Fuyao

plummeted down faster than gravity.

“Gw-AAAGH?!”

What was happening? The area where she'd been hit burned with colossal pain. The impact was beyond her imagination. Or was it? No, she already expected the Blood Curse to be on this level.

She crashed into a mask stall.

The bystanders shrieked as they ran away, save for the few who'd died on impact.

But none of that mattered. Fuyao glared at the crimson petals falling down as she cautiously rose to her feet. She hadn't been planning on getting into this fight before obtaining the Dark Core, but that was no reason for her to lose.

Terakomari floated serenely in the air.

Fuyao curved up her lips. This was her first real battle in a long time.

She was too strong. No one measured up to Fuyao Meteorite. When was the last time she'd felt pain of this kind?

“HA! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well done, Terakomari!”

“I'm gonna kill you.”

The vampire radiated dreadful bloodlust.

Fuyao immediately tried to close the distance but tripped. A stalk had shot up from between the cobblestones to wrap around her leg.

Chills.

Fuyao swung her blade and cut the plant, but it kept growing back faster than she could manage. She tried blasting it with fire magic, which did the trick. However, she only managed to take a few steps before she saw a barrage of sharp branches coming her way.

“What in the world?!”

She wielded her katana as fast as she could to cut down every last one of them, thinking all the while. Terakomari's Core Implosion reflected the characteristics of the species whose blood she imbibed. She'd manifested the Peace Spirits' blood this time... but they didn't have qualities like this, did they? Peace Spirits... Peace... Nature... Time...

"Guh?!"

A branch grazed her side, drawing blood.

It hurt. But this pain only fueled her bloodlust.

Terakomari and Karla Amatsu were standing up ahead, completely calm.

The vampire threw a rock. It flew at the speed of sound and pierced Fuyao's shoulder.

Intense pain. She was blown backward before she could process what had happened.

There was a giant tree in that direction, too tall to see to the top. The ginkgo tree withered in the blink of an eye and started creaking as it collapsed under its own weight.

That was when Fuyao realized. It was time. Terakomari was accelerating time.

Her astonishing power could manipulate time locally. That was also why that girl's small fist had sent her flying—she'd *accelerated* the punch. The same went for the rock she'd thrown at her.

How was Fuyao even supposed to deal with that?

Terakomari gave her no time to think. The giant ginkgo tree collapsed on Fuyao with acceleration surpassing that of gravity. She couldn't fully evade it. It was too big. The enormous tree destroyed multiple buildings as it fell on the main street.

"Guh... AAAGHHH!! You...!!"

It crushed her tail. Violent pain struck her behind. She couldn't move. She had no avenue of escape. The bystanders screamed in disarray and fled... but her tail was trapped beneath the tree. *Escape? What am I thinking? I'm supposed to surpass the Blood Curse. I can't let something as tiny as this break my...*

“Fuyao... Apologize to Karla.” Death spoke.

Terakomari was standing in the middle of a flurry of crimson petals. Jade mana and an aura of thick bloodlust enveloped the surroundings. Her presence alone was enough to dash Fuyao’s spirit.

The entirety of the Eastern Capital had turned into a green field in the blink of an eye. Grass and flowers sprouted up in abundance. Trees were growing from between the rubble of the destroyed buildings. A white butterfly flew past Fuyao’s nose.

“What you did was wrong.”

“Me? Wrong?”

Thorny vegetation grew all around Fuyao, their tips trained on her. She was cornered... and yet she did not back down.

“Don’t make me laugh. What did I do?”

“You mocked Karla’s dream.”

What was she talking about?

There was no way everyone in the world could achieve their dreams.

Behind every fortune was misfortune. Even a kid could understand that someone achieving their dreams meant someone else had to abandon them.

Fuyao grit her teeth and yelled.

“Do you resent me for framing you?! For burning the Fuuzen?! For trying to kill the former Goddess?! So what?!!” She gripped her katana, keeping her mind cool but her words fiery. “I don’t care about your dream or anyone else’s! I only care about accomplishing my goals! And I will! I’ll be stronger than anyone else! I’ll show you! I’ll change this rotten world! I will... I will exact my revenge on Yulinne Gandesblood for destroying my homeland!”

Then Terakomari stopped.

©riichu



Fuyao seized the opportunity.

She grabbed her katana in a reverse grip and stabbed her own tail. Blood gushed out as fierce agony racked her brain. She clenched her teeth to get over the amputation and pursued her target.

Terakomari was completely taken aback. The concept of speed bore no meaning to her, but she could not accelerate her own mind. She was wide open.

Fuyao activated an elementary-level light spell: Magic Bullet.

It was just to keep her in check, but Terakomari dodged too late. The mana bullet grazed her cheek, drawing blood.

Fuyao sneered internally. She could smell her foe's distress.

She followed up with an advanced-level acceleration spell: Lightning Bolt. She turned all her mana into speed, betting her whole life on her next strike. She sprinted through the field of green, the wind buffeting her body. Terakomari's dopey mug was right in front of her.

This slash will be your last. She raised her katana and...

The entire scene turned on its head.

“...Huh...?”

All of a sudden, Fuyao was trapped under the ginkgo tree.

Her mind drew a blank. What just happened? Her tail was back in place. As though time had gone back a few seconds.

“I turned back time.”

Fuyao looked up in shock at the source of that voice.

Karla Amatsu was standing there, both her eyes shining scarlet. Core Implosion.

Right. She also had the spirit of a hero.

Fuyao immediately swung her katana at Karla Amatsu, but a tree branch came flying from the side and smashed into it. She lost her grip.

“You...!”

She desperately reached out for the blade, only to be assailed by violent pain.

Terakomari had stomped on her hand.

She looked down at Fuyao, pity in her scarlet eyes.

Fuyao felt something break within her.

“Why... why are you so powerful? I’ve put in so much effort... trained so hard to become the strongest in the world... And you—you trample my dreams like it’s nothing? You crush them like an ant?”

“Right back at you.”

“...”

Crimson petals fluttered in the air. Fuyao watched the scene for a moment, captivated.

Then Karla crouched down to match her gaze. She, too, gazed at her with pity. It was maddening.

“I’m sure you have your reasons, but I cannot forgive what you’ve done to the Heavenly Paradise.”

“...”

“I hope you’re ready for your punishment.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Terakomari said, gently shoving Karla away.

Her dreadful bloodlust snapped Fuyao’s mind back to reality. She couldn’t die here.

She had to survive, no matter what. She still had a way to go on the path to becoming the strongest. And in fact, she had something up her sleeve.

Fuyao activated Core Implosion.

It was never an ability meant for combat, but it worked wonderfully under the right circumstances.

A puff of smoke appeared, and suddenly, she transformed into a blue-haired maid. That vampire Terakomari held dear—Villhaze.

Fuyao tried to capture Villhaze's mannerisms in hopes that Terakomari would hesitate to raise a hand against her, speaking in the most ingratiating voice she could muster.

"Lady Komari, please reconsider. You can't kill me..."

"You're not Vill."

Obviously.

Her plan was foiled.

The jade mana spread all over and time accelerated.

Giant cherry trees covered the Eastern Capital in the blink of an eye. Their buds bloomed, then withered away.

The little bundles of death rained down softly from the heavens.

Fuyao was paralyzed. She could only watch as the cherry blossom storm bore down on her.

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Six Nations News, October 22nd Morning Edition

Chaos at the Eastern Capital! Karla Amatsu Wins the Heavenly Ball

Eastern Capital—By Melka Tiano and Thio Flatt

The election to decide the next Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise, the Heavenly Ball, drew to a de facto close on the 21st. Imperial Saber Karin Reigetsu announced her withdrawal, ceding victory to Imperial Saber Karla Amatsu.

...

The Heavenly Ball came to a shocking conclusion as Commander Reigetsu's right hand, Fuyao Meteorite, revealed herself as a member of terrorist organization Inverse Moon. After extracting information on the Dark Core from Commander Reigetsu, the terrorist launched an attack on the Eastern Capital. But Commander Amatsu and Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood took decisive action to defeat Fuyao Meteorite, turning part of the Eastern Capital into a sea of trees in the process.

...

As an added note, the nasty rumors about Commander Amatsu are nothing more than a bunch of lies. Their only source, the Eastern Capital Times, is a group of shameless phonies who published false information on behalf of a terrorist. Dear readers, please don't let yourselves be fooled by scoundrels dirtying journalism's good name.

Time had advanced in the Eastern Capital thanks to Komari's Core Implosion.

Plants grew all over the place, giving a new meaning to the nickname the "City of Flowers."

An Immortal poet described the situation thus: "Land outlasts kings." Yes, there was a tinge of desolation in this panorama of nature, but the people went on with their lives without much grieving.

After all, the terrorist was gone. A new Goddess had been appointed, and the villain putting the Heavenly Paradise in danger had been dealt with.

Perhaps Karla's Core Implosion could have brought the Eastern Capital back to its previous state, but she wasn't keen on using her power indiscriminately. There was much she yet did not understand about Waving Moment. Its use could come at a price, so she thought it best not to use it on such a large scale.

But she wouldn't hesitate to wield it if need be. No cost was too high to save her loved ones.

"Grandmother... you're awake."

Karla's eyes welled up as she smiled at her grandmother. The latter opened her eyes wide in shock. She looked down at herself, then at her surroundings, and finally at Karla. She understood everything and sighed.

They were at an infirmary in the Eastern Capital. Her grandmother had yet to awaken, so Karla used Waving Moment, returning her to the state right before she was

attacked. Back to that night when she saw the fireworks with Komari. Her condition visibly improved as she went back in time, until she finally opened her eyes as though nothing had happened.

“Did you use Core Implosion?”

“Yes. You were showing no sign of recovery, so I was worried...”

“I would’ve healed eventually. Hell’s Windmill won’t go down that easy.”

“Of course... but I am glad to see you well now.”

Karla was almost—no, *already* crying. The doctors had said her grandmother would have never recover from that state. Thank goodness she could bring her back.

Karla sighed in relief as she sat down before her grandmother, who shot her a sidelong glance with the same sharp glare as ever.

“...I get the gist of what’s going on. You’re aware of your duties now, aren’t you?”

“No, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that. But I am thinking of doing my best in what I can. Anyway... are you really okay? Does anything hurt?”

Karla started tapping her grandma all over to confirm she was fine. Her grandmother was annoyed, but she allowed her granddaughter to do as she pleased... until she got fed up. “Enough already!” she yelled at her, and Karla pulled away. This conversely put her more at ease—her grandmother was clearly back to her usual self.

Karla explained what happened, since her grandmother was curious about it. She told her about Fuyao Meteorite being a member of Inverse Moon, about her fighting alongside Terakomari Gandesblood, about how they used Core Implosion to defeat her. Her grandmother listened to it all in silence, only occasionally humming in comprehension.

After the explanation ended, she grabbed Karla’s arm all of a sudden.

“...You’re a bit sturdier now.”

“S-sturdier? Is that a compliment...?”

“I wonder. Your arms and legs are thicker, too. Have you been eating too many snacks?”

“Whaaa?! Stop groping me!”

She jumped back on reflex.

“I’m kidding.” Her grandmother grinned.

Her grandmother could tell jokes? Incredible. The childhood trauma had her thinking the lady was about to rip her arm off.

“G-geez. And here I am worrying so much about you.”

“Sorry. But it’s true that you’ve gotten stronger.”

Karla looked at her, dumbfounded. Her expression was surprisingly peaceful.

“U-um, so, you seem to be doing fine physically, but, um, are you all right in the head? Oh, I don’t mean that in a bad way! I’m just wondering if rewinding time has some sort of adverse effect on the mind...”

“Enough about me. I’m fine. I’m more surprised about you being able to use Core Implosion. Or, I guess I shouldn’t be. The Goddess always said this would happen.”

“Wha...?”

“Core Implosion reflects the strength of your spirit. Take pride in the fact you can use it now. It means that you’ve found your resolve.” Her grandmother looked away from her as she spoke.

Karla clenched her fist, mustering up her courage. She had found her resolve, yes. After getting backup from Komari, competing in the Heavenly Ball, and fighting the terrorist alongside the vampire girl, she knew what she had to do.

She looked at her grandmother’s profile and said:

“I... will become a pâtissier.”

“I see.”

“But...” She stood up. She looked down at her grandmother, determination brimming in her eyes. “I will also do my part as the Goddess. Karin also wished for me to protect the country from the terrorists. Perhaps the job will be too much for me. Maybe I will give up partway through. But for now, I want to do my best. I want to live up to everyone’s expectations.”

Her grandmother sighed.

“If you’ve already made up your mind, then I’ve got nothing to say. Just don’t overdo it.”

“That’s so unlike you. I thought you would insist I give up on being a pâtissier and focus on one thing...”

“I won’t force you. I’ve always thought you should just be a pâtissier if you so wanted to.”

“What?”

Thunder struck. What did she just say?

“The thing is, you lacked resolve. You worried for your country despite insisting you wanted to run a sweets shop. I knew you would live to regret it if you went down that path. I only told you to become the Goddess so you wouldn’t feel remorse about it, but I suppose that counts as me forcing you from your point of view.”

“Huh? But you said the country would collapse if I didn’t...”

“I was ready to take it on myself if you never decided to do it.”

Karla’s jaw hit the floor.

Her grandmother had been testing her the whole time. She’d said so herself—insisted that Karla not do things halfheartedly. That day, when her grandmother had faced her granddaughter alongside Komari, she only accepted Karla because she had shown her the determination to achieve her dreams no matter what.

What a roundabout way of doing things. No wonder everyone misunderstood her.

Still, Karla grasped her concern. She’d been looking out for her in her own way.

“...Thank you, Grandmother.”

“Hah. Do your worst.”

“I’ll work hard, both as the Goddess and at the Fuuzen. Though I’m not sure how well it will go...”

“There’s still plenty of people going after our country. It wasn’t just that Fuyao Meteorite punk. Are you ready to fight them all?”

“When you put it like that, I don’t think I am...”

“Just say yes even if it’s a lie!!”

“Yes, I am! Just stop yelling, please!”

She was still utterly terrified of her.

“...You might not be very reliable, but the people love you. You’ll be fine. There’s plenty of folks out there to help you, like Kidoshu.”

“Would you help me, too?”

“If worst comes to worst.”

“Thank you.” Then Karla remembered something. “...I should speak with my Goddess, too. There must be lots to do for me to take over her job... So, um, do you know where she might be? I haven’t seen her in a while.”

Her grandmother grimaced for an instant, but it was so fast she might’ve just imagined it. No way Hell’s Windmill would put on such a sad face, Karla thought.

“...Her work here is done.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ll tell you about it one day. I’m sure you’ll meet again... That aside, becoming the Goddess means you’ll be taking care of the Dark Core. I should hand it over to you right now.”

“Excuse me??”

What??

Karla's eyes turned into tiny dots, but her grandmother paid her no heed and got out of bed. She reached out for a drawer by the wall, opened the third one down, and took something out from it.

A bell. Just like the one Karla's cousin had gifted her. She still had hers tied to her right hand; it was uncanny seeing two of them that looked exactly the same.

“Huh? Is that...? You mean...?”

“Let me tell you about yours first.” She pointed at the bell on her right wrist. “You showed a glimpse of Core Implosion when you were little, but you couldn't control it. Your will was still too weak. We couldn't have you just turning back time at every turn, so we used that to seal it.”

“Um... but my dear brother gave this to me...”

“Kakumei knew about it. But... it seems it doesn't have the sealing power anymore. I suppose it broke after being exposed to so much mana.”

Karla shook her hand, and a clear chime echoed through the Eastern-style room.

She could have never imagined her bell had housed that secret. She only saw it as a precious gift from her brother... Above all else, she was shocked to learn that she'd had Core Implosion since childhood and didn't realize it. She really was just like that vampire princess.

Her grandmother handed her the other bell before the confusion settled down.

“And this is the Dark Core.”

“Excuse me?”

“The Heavenly Paradise's Dark Core. Its official name is the Rewind Bell. Which is also the name of yours. Basically, your bell was also meant to be a fake copy of the Dark Core.”

"Wha-wha-wha-WHAT?! You must be kidding! Is this really the Dark Core?!"

"Yup. That's the life source of the Heavenly Paradise right there."

"....."

Her grandmother never told jokes. Well, she'd told one just now, but anyways. True to her word, Karla felt a mysterious power radiating from it.

Becoming the Goddess meant taking care of the Dark Core.

I can't take this!! She wanted to scream her lungs out, but refusing the bell would mean betraying so many people. She had to take responsibility. Protect it.

So Karla tied the Dark Core, the Rewind Bell, to her left hand.

A gentle chime reached her ears.

Taking it did not make her happy in the slightest. But she had to make sure not to express it.

The duties of the Goddess were beyond her imagination. But hey, if she just thought of it as a side gig to her profession as pâtissier, it would be cool. One of Karla's virtues was her ability to casually disperse any pressure on her.

"...I'm glad you're serious about it now. It took so long to convince you."

"You didn't convince me to do this. I chose my own path. But who knows, maybe I'll drop it halfway through."

"I'll persuade you once again if that happens. And if I can't, then I'll just kill you."

"How about you try taking a few more steps before reaching that conclusion?!"

"Just kidding." She laughed.

That was no joke. Karla forced a smile, then looked down at the bell on her right hand.

In any case, the Heavenly Ball was over. Things were quite different from the original plan, but she had made peace with her grandmother, become the Goddess, and

obtained the courage to continue running her sweets shop.

And it was all thanks to the strongest vampire princess in the whole universe.

I should go thank her.



“Lady Komari, you will accept the truth this time around, won’t you?”

“...”

“Look at the papers. Here’s a photo of you going wild with a cherry blossom storm as a backdrop.”

“.....”

“I know you remember it. At least up to the point where you sucked Lady Amatsu’s blood. By the way, I could feel my insides boiling, threatening to blow up my entire body right when I saw your shapely teeth come in contact with her filthy neck. But that aside, you cannot deny that you sucking her blood is what caused all this. You have to admit that, at the very least.”

“.....”

Infirmary. On the bed. I was getting attacked by my maid.

This happened every single time. I woke up and glimpsed an unfamiliar ceiling. I’d already seen that coming, but it seemed that, in fact, I had lost consciousness after sucking Karla’s blood. Just like when I’d sucked Nelia’s at the Daydream Paradise.

But... something was different this time around.

I mean, no, I still couldn’t believe that somehow it was me who’d turned the Eastern Capital into Nature Land, but I was certain that something had happened to me.

A specific scene was burned into my mind.

A flurry of cherry blossoms and whirling jade mana.

It felt like I'd dreamed of that after sucking Karla's blood.

"...Since you're not eagerly denying everything, I'm guessing you remember something."

"No, I don't. I just had a dream."

"Could it be your consciousness becomes clearer every time you use Core Implosion? Or perhaps it was due to the different nature of it this time? Or maybe you've just grown up? Has your spirit grown stronger?" Vill muttered in deep thought.

Thinking on it carefully, it was absolutely stupid that a vampire would black out the moment she sucked someone's blood. I mean, sure, I didn't like the stuff, but who fainted from that? Was I just that frail? Maybe I did need to look into this.

"Vill, would you mind if I sucked your blood?"

"You will not."

"Wh-why?! You let Sakuna!"

"You simply will not do that. And you should take this reaction as stronger proof than anything else, because I know that having you suck my blood would activate your Core Implosion and make you go berserk."

"That's why I'm asking! I wanna make sure! C'mon, just a little slurp!"

"I said no! H-hey! Stop it!"

I grabbed her arm to try and bite into it, but she pushed her hand against my forehead, and I could do nothing but lick. *I was so close!*

Despite my frustration, I cooled off quickly.

What am I doing? It's like I'm some sort of sicko.

"Oh my, I've got your saliva on me now. Whatever shall I do?"

"W-wipe it! No, don't lick it! That's nasty!"

“Fine...” Vill begrudgingly wiped her arm.

I was red up to my ears. I mean, I only did it to confirm what would happen if I sucked blood... but there was something more important to take care of at present.

I’d been stuck in the infirmary ever since the day Fuyao invaded the Heavenly Paradise. It was that same “all my mana’s gone” thing like always (which I was beginning to suspect was related to me sucking blood as well). Anyhow, I couldn’t go outside. So I hadn’t been able to see Karla. I had gotten letters from Prohellya and Leona, though. *Nice Core Implosion!* and *I won’t lose the next war!* respectively.

I wondered where that kimono girl was. The papers said she had won the Heavenly Ball and become the Goddess... but this was Six Nations News we were talking about. I couldn’t trust them.

“Vill, is Karla doing okay?”

“She said she would become the Goddess and work the Fuuzen at the same time. Wonder which one she sees as the side gig.”

“That’s what I want to know. It would be pretty funny if Goddess was the side gig.”

“Yes. And she’s right here, so why don’t you ask her?”

“Huh?”

Right then, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Vill said without my permission.

The door opened before I could say anything, and in walked the kimono girl.

Karla Amatsu. The only person out there who understood me.

“Komari, it’s been three days. How have you been?”

“Karla! How have *you* been?”

“Oh, I’m doing fine.” She put on a soft smile and walked up to us. “Here are some get-well gifts.” She handed me a bag from the Fuuzen.

“...Wait. Didn’t the shop burn down?”

“Yes, but I can make these in any kitchen.”

Now that was the mark of a pro. I opened it right away to find wrapped kudzu *manju*. The same as the one I shoved in her grandma’s mouth. I could practically taste their sweetness on my tongue.

“Can I?”

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks!”

I unwrapped them and bit into a bun. It was so good. Karla’s confections were the best in the whole world. While I was lost in flavorful bliss, Vill crossed her arms and asked:

“Lady Amatsu, is your grandmother doing okay? I believe Waving Moment should take care of things.”

“It did. I returned her back to before she was wounded. She looks like nothing ever happened. And that’s not all good, since she’s yelling at me every day now.”

“Really?! Oh, thank goodness...” I said, still munching on my bun.

Hats off to her power to turn back time. Karla had saved me after Fuyao slashed my chest, too. Quite a difference from this failure of a vampire.

“I should go see her later.”

“Oh, speaking of which, you cracked her vase, didn’t you?”

I froze.

I considered feigning ignorance for a second... which was bad enough, to be honest.

I bowed, bun still in hand.

“S-sorry! I didn’t mean to! I mean, if we’re being specific, it was Vill’s fault that it broke, but a subordinate’s fault is the boss’s responsibility! I’m so sorry... I’ll do anything you

ask, please forgive me..."

"N-no, it's nothing that serious... Koharu."

"Yes."

The black-shrouded ninja appeared out of nowhere, like a shadow.

The way Karla's right hand appeared was shocking enough, but then I had a second tiny heart attack once I saw what she was holding. The vase I'd supposedly broken.

"Here," Koharu said, handing it over.

The crack was gone. It was as good as new.

"Did you..."

"It just repaired itself when I was rebuilding the Amatsu residence. My grandmother says you can have it as a souvenir. I don't think you would like it, but... I hope you accept it, as a symbol of reconciliation."

"V-VASEEY!!"

I was touched. I didn't care about getting the pottery, but I was just so glad about her grandma forgiving me. Now the guilt wouldn't eat away at me. I would no longer have nightmares about that vase crushing me to death. Though I still had to apologize directly to her.

"Glad to hear it, eh, Lady Komari? Here, let me use it as a chair," Vill said.

"No, you're not! We're putting this in my room! As decoration! Good vasey! ♪"

I rubbed my cheek against it. It felt like I was opening my eyes to the virtues of pottery. *Hoshigakiemon was a true artist. Now this is beauty worth ten billion yen... Hrm? Hold on. Ten billion yen? Should I be taking this vase worth ten billion yen?* I felt chills go down my spine.

Karla bowed to her deeply.

"Komari, thank you so much for everything."

“Huh? For what?”

“With your help, I was able to achieve my dream. I wasn’t planning on becoming the Goddess... but I am free from my family circumstances now and can continue running the Fuuzen. It’s all thanks to your support.”

“...”

No, I really didn’t do anything. It was your mind of steel that did all this. But I was not convincing her of that, no matter what. She was too humble.

“I am not sure if I will be able to do a good job as Goddess. I mean, it is just my side gig. I can’t neglect my main profession as pâtissier.”

“So that’s how it is. You’re a behemoth in the sweets space now, huh?”

“Yes, which is why... I may run into many obstacles. I may trouble many people. And in those times, I might want to ask for your help. Maybe a Goddess shouldn’t be asking this sort of thing, but... will I be able to count on you going forward, Komari? Will you stay by my side, even now?” Karla asked bashfully.

She had no confidence, but it was only natural. She’d never wanted to be the Goddess.

I didn’t think I would be able to help with much, but... so long as she wished for it, I would be there to lend a hand.

She was my friend. The only person who truly understood me.

And joining hands was the best path to happiness.

“Of course.” I shook her hand with a smile. “I’ll do anything I can. Just call me if you ever need help. And even if you don’t need help. I’ll come to hang out anytime.”

“Thank you....!” Tears welled up in her eyes.

We stared into each other’s eyes in silence for a while, until Karla cleared her throat and straightened her back. I stared at her in confusion.

“We can’t have only my dream be achieved.”

“Huh?”

“I won the Heavenly Ball. Thanks to you, no less. So just as we agreed, I want to help you achieve your dream.”

“Huh??”

“Let’s publish your novel. I’m sure plenty of people around the world will be moved by your story.” She beamed even stronger.

The autumnal wind blowing in from the window swayed her hair.

I heard a chime.

And so, we’d both made our dreams come true. Something we likely wouldn’t have achieved on our own. It was thanks to Karla... and for her, thanks to me... and thanks to so many other of our friends, that this miracle materialized.

I didn’t know what the future had in store for the Heavenly Paradise, but now was the time to savor this happiness. Rejoice in the realization of our dreams. My novel was getting published! It would be turned into a real book sold at bookstores!! I had to revise the text. I had to make it all proper, use all the right words, now that it was really going to be a book. Excitement filled my chest as I stared into Karla’s smiling face.

“Lady Komari! Don’t jump on the bed!”

“I can’t help it!! HELL YEAAAH!! I’m a novelist now!!”

“There’s no guarantee it will sell, though.”

“Who cares!!”

There was no hiding my joy.

We moved deeper into fall. Winter was right around the corner.

(The End)

Vexations

Epilogue - Backstage

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

“Be careful, Lady Nelia! That vampire is even more dangerous than Terakomari!”

“It’ll be fine. Aruka and Mulnite are allies now.”

“Still, you shouldn’t let your guard down. I’m pretty sure she sees us Warblades as even more worthless than fried shrimp tails. She’s gonna gobble you right up!”

“Yeah, yeah...” She patted her worrisome maid’s head before leaving the waiting room.

They were in a certain city in the Dark Core Zone. In an old castle that was commonly used for secret meetings between VIPs. The president of the Aruka Republic, Nelia Cunningham, followed the vampire guide across a long hallway.

A letter from the Mulnite Empress had arrived at the Executive Office a couple days back.

She’d written that she “had something fun to show her.”

The invitation could not have been any fishier, but she couldn’t ignore a call from the reigning Empress, a title her own mentor formerly held. Nelia dumped her piled-up work on her underlings and went for it. The vice president would surely complain later on, but it was no big deal.

“Her Majesty awaits you here.” The guide bowed, then left.

It was the castle courtyard.

In the middle of the lively vegetation sat a fancy table and chairs. There she was,

Mulnite Empress Karen Helvetius, elegantly taking a sip of tea under the morning sunlight.

"Oh!" She smiled once she noticed Nelia was there. "Glad to have you here, Nelia. Thank you for your time. Please, grab a cup of tea and relax. Come here."

Nelia was a bit taken aback by her friendliness. She put on a business smile and greeted her in kind.

"Thank you for your invitation. I am glad to get an opportunity to talk, Your Majesty Helvetius. Let us discuss the future of the Six Nations."

"Chill out. C'mon, I've known you since you were thiis little. Look at how much you've grown. You've turned into such a pretty young woman. And all that power you showed alongside Komari back in the Six Nations War. I was moved. To think Yulinne's protégée would turn out to be such an admirable lady."

"Mm-hmm." Nelia didn't think about anything anymore.

There was no need for courteousness with this woman, clearly. No need for overly formal diplomacy between these two rulers. This wouldn't have happened with the chiefs of the Enchanted Lands or the Haku-Goku Commonwealth, however.

Then Nelia glanced at the person sitting on the other side of the table.

A noble wearing the characteristic garment of the East: a kimono. What stood out most about her was the large paper charm covering her face. The Heavenly Paradise's Goddess sat there gracefully wearing an elegant smile, looking just the same as she had back at the party a few days before.

"Good afternoon," she said.

Nelia straightened her back on reflex.

"G-good afternoon."

"Good afternoon indeed. Please, take a seat. I am sorry if I sound too hasty, but we don't have much time."

Nelia did as instructed.

Empress on the right. Goddess on the left. What was going on? The letter did mention the ruler of the Heavenly Paradise would be there, but what could those two possibly want to talk about? An alliance between the three nations? Coming up with a strategy against the terrorists? As Nelia thought the hardest she could, the Empress put down her teacup and finally got the ball rolling.

"Since Nelia's here now, let's cut to the chase. Relax, we're not talking about coming up with a plan or anything like that. The Goddess just wanted to say something regarding the Heavenly Paradise and the Heavenly Ball."

"Something about the Heavenly Paradise? But why to me when I'm from Aruka?"

"You are one of the leaders of the next generation, so I'm pretty sure it's about that. Though I haven't heard the details yet myself. So please, Goddess, explain."

Nelia looked at the Goddess. She could feel her gaze from beyond the paper charm.

"Yes. Nelia, I called for this meeting. There is something I must report to you."

"Report?"

"As you might know, the Heavenly Ball took place a couple days ago. I believe you don't know the particulars since you were not there, but you've heard of it, haven't you?"

"About the terrorist ruining the Heavenly Ball, right? Yes, I heard Karla and Komari defeated an Inverse Moon assassin."

"Yes, which gave Karla the support of the population. The Heavenly Ball was cut short, but she ended up as its victor. Everyone trusts she is the best choice for the next Goddess... and this was also my wish."

So was there nepotism afoot? It did seem like the title would be too much for Karin Reigetsu, though.

Suddenly, Nelia grew rather anxious. If she recalled correctly, Fuyao Meteorite had impersonated the Goddess to do as she pleased during the Heavenly Ball.

"There's something I want to ask." Nelia looked the Goddess straight in the eye. "Where were you while the terrorist wreaked havoc in the Eastern Capital? I heard you were missing. I find it unthinkable that you would let a terrorist take your place."

"It is true that Fuyao Meteorite attacked me. It happened at the party, right after the Heavenly Ball was announced. She's one quarrelsome foxgirl. But in any case, I pretended to be defeated and withdrew from the public eye."

Why?

"Then Fuyao impersonated me and made full use of the Goddess's authority. She tipped the scales in Karin Reigetsu's favor. This all was within my expectations."

"What are you saying? You mean you let the terrorist do as she pleased?"

"She's telling the truth, Nelia. I was asked to keep an eye on Fuyao Meteorite during the party. She called the Goddess backstage and attacked her. I saw it with my own eyes."

So they both knew of the fox's identity the whole time? But why would they leave her be? Fuyao had only brought about chaos and destruction. She'd instilled fear in many, hurting and even killing some. The damage had only been kept to a minimum thanks to Komari and Karla's Core Implosion.

Wait. Then, did they...?

"Core Implosion reflects the strength of one's spirit. It won't show in someone without conviction. Just having her grandmother force her to do things wouldn't do. Karla needed to go through a real trial."

Nelia was speechless. The Goddess had let Fuyao go free just to ensure Karla would develop a sense of duty. But that was a huge gamble. If any little thing went wrong, the whole of the Heavenly Paradise would have been wrecked.

"You... really wanted Karla to be Goddess that bad?"

"Yes. Otherwise, the Heavenly Paradise would have fallen under Karin's rule. That's a certainty."

"Certainty? Did you see the future or something?"

"Not through prediction like you might think. I saw it happen in real time."

Then the Goddess grabbed the paper charm covering her face and pulled it off. The

autumn wind carried it away from her fingers. Nelia could not believe her eyes. Even the Empress seemed surprised.

The face under the charm... looked just like Karla Amatsu's.

"Wha? Karla...? How...?"

"I came here from two years in the future. I am Karla Amatsu."

Nelia was dumbstruck. She wanted to believe it was Karla's sister or something, but her face was just too similar... albeit more mature. Even her voice was identical, now that she thought about it. Her mannerisms were also the same. So she really was...

"Waving Moment is my Core Implosion. As you might know, I have the power to turn back time. That is what I did. I rewound the time of the entire world, save for me, by about twelve years to go back to what would be ten years in the past now."

"For what purpose...?"

"For the good of all nations."

Twenty-seven-year-old Goddess Karla Amatsu told her story, nostalgically yet falteringly.

"In my timeline, Karin Reigetsu became the Goddess. I couldn't win the Heavenly Ball. Despite Komari's help, I stubbornly refused to become Goddess. But this turned out to be the worst decision I could make. Karin was not fit to be a ruler. Starting with Fuyao Meteorite, the terrorists took over the government, destroyed the Dark Core, and brought about the demise of the Heavenly Paradise in the blink of an eye. Having taken over the nation, the terrorists declared war on the rest of the world. It was chaos. Pure, wild slaughter. Divine Instruments were used. Dark Cores were attacked. Bodies piled up everywhere, and the land became a red sea of blood. People dear to my heart lost their lives one after the other. It wasn't until then that I realized I couldn't be a pâtissier. I had to be the Goddess. What was I doing? This power in my hands... was it for nothing? Waving Moment awoke within me by the time the whole world was already in shambles. There was but one thing I could do: turn back time and go back to the beginning. To a time where Karla was still young."

Nelia listened in silence. It was then that she realized she could sense no mana in the Goddess's body.

"I talked about it with my grandmother. Warned her of the impending doom. She understood right away. She ceded the title of Goddess without a Heavenly Ball and told me to come up with a plan to avoid that fate. I took my own steps toward world peace, while she was educating the Karla of this timeline. She had been on the laissez-faire side in my timeline, but now she was strict. Kaya knew she had to groom this Karla into someone worthy of being Goddess. She had to inculcate in her the role of a warrior... but fate is unforgivable. Karla dreamed of being a pâtissier just like me. Perhaps it was inevitable—perhaps her will was too strong. And in turn, my grandmother grew even stricter, knowing what awaited our nation. For ten years, I did all sorts of things to set the stage for Karla's victory. I cut down the Reigetsus' power. I sent spies to Inverse Moon. I sent Karla as envoy to the Mulnite Empire so she would come in contact with Terakomari Gandesblood. I had wanted to make them friends since long before... but fate reared its ugly head again; I couldn't get the chance. It was when I came to this timeline that I learned about Komari becoming a shut-in... Oh, by the way, Karla still doesn't know that I—she—is the Goddess. I knew she would take it easy if she ever learned of her special power. She wouldn't have been able to obtain true Core Implosion that way. I asked our grandmother to keep it secret from her. In any case... I did all I could to make her the Goddess, and my efforts bore fruit in the end. She won the Heavenly Ball, and in the best way possible—making Karin admit defeat. Had I simply yielded my title to Karla, Karin would have been hugely displeased. I needed to do all this to avert our doom."

The Goddess started looking translucent. The mana that had left her body began to shine all around her.

"It's been so long. But at last, my work here is done. Not just making Karla into the Goddess, but with this timeline as a whole... Compared to the youth I lived, things are much more peaceful. Aruka didn't collapse after the Six Nations War this time around after all."

Nelia got chills. The Goddess smiled.

"Now the nations of the world simply have to unite and defeat the terrorists. That's all. It's in your hands. I have no time left."

"Is... that the cost of your Core Implosion?" the Empress asked.

"Yes. Waving Moment's power is unconventional. You must give up a bit of your soul to use its awesome power."

"Incredible for sure. Perhaps just as amazing as the Blood Curse."

"Karla has used Waving Moment five times already in this timeline. It all depends on the length of time rewound, but she might end up like me if she uses it too much. One's soul isn't eternal... Please, warn her to be careful. I left her a letter of my own, but still."

"I see." The Empress grimaced. "Just the burden of using it on her house and that vase must've been heavy. By the way, I'm curious about something. Are your power and this timeline's Karla Amatsu's really the same? Karla's rewinds time locally, doesn't it? If that's the case, then it would be impossible for two of her to exist at the same time..."

"Core Implosions grow. The particulars don't stay the same forever. You can see that with Komari's, can't you?"

"Hrmm..." She put a hand on her chin.

Nelia couldn't even begin to think about the particulars of Karla's power, though.

The Goddess was already semi-transparent. Her body was turning into mana, dissolving in the air. It looked like an illusion. Like she was ascending to the heavens.

Nelia stood up on reflex.

If what the Goddess said was true, then what about her life? She couldn't make her dream come true like this timeline's Karla had. She couldn't live through peaceful times. She'd been sucked into war, lost people she cared about, and then went back in time twelve years. She'd lived these past ten years preparing to avert the Heavenly Paradise's doom.

"Was..." Nelia spoke. "Was this the right choice for you?"

"Yes. I was able to change the world. I'm satisfied." She put on a faint smile. "And besides, although these ten years were hectic, I was able to see people I thought I would never see again. I was happy. That was enough for me, even."

"I... I suppose..."

"Please, take good care of your friends. Join hands against evil. And keep an eye on Komari. That vampire princess is one of those who left us back in that timeline."

Take care were her last words, but the wind blew over them.

The Goddess vanished in the air. The only thing left behind was her residual mana, which also vanished in time.

Nelia and the Empress remained quiet for a while, staring at the place where she had once sat.



It hurt. Everything hurt. It felt like her body was being torn apart.

And yet she still relished the joy of being spared. She was supposed to be dead now—it was a miracle that she had survived that blow.

“Heh. Heh-heh. She held back. Bitch.”

In a back alley in the Eastern Capital hid the foxgirl Fuyao Meteorite. She was wounded all over, showing no signs of healing under the effects of the Dark Core. Naturally. She was not from the Heavenly Paradise, but the Lapelico Kingdom.

Still, she didn’t want to go to the beast-folk kingdom. It was her loss. She’d underestimated her opponent’s power and met a miserable defeat. But this pain would make her next victory even better. It would serve as fuel for her to try harder. *Let’s just savor this pain for now...* She closed her eyes.

Terakomari Gandesblood. The daughter of Yulinne Gandesblood, the vampire who had destroyed Fuyao’s homeland. She’d bore no personal grudge against the former before this; blaming her for the sins of her mother was ridiculous. But things were different now. She had a reason to resent Komari after getting terribly beaten up like that. She needed a rematch; she would know no peace otherwise.

“Just you wait, Terakomari. I’ll bewitch you to death next time...”

“Oh, you’re here.” She heard a voice out of the blue.

She turned around. A man was standing in the dark.

She clicked her tongue on reflex. It was a Sapphire man—her boss in Inverse Moon. One of the Lunae: Tryphon. He sighed and approached her.

“My, you should have told me you were injured. What if something worse happened to you?”

Fuyao clicked her tongue again and looked away. She had ignored Tryphon’s orders and failed. It was awkward. Beyond awkward, in fact. Inverse Moon was known for being unforgiving against people who failed.

“Look at this. It will fester if you don’t treat this. Let’s go to our Heavenly Paradise branch.”

“Hah. Stop pretending. I know you’re here to kill me.”

Fuyao stood up, placing her hand on the hilt of her katana.

“No way.” Tryphon shook his head with a smile. “The organization would collapse if we cut off exceptional human resources like you. It’s just one failure. If there is one thing to admonish you for, it’s that I wish you had stayed in contact more frequently.”

“...”

“In any case, I guarantee your safety. I’ll defend you even if Her Highness herself wants to get rid of you. And she is kind, so there’s no need to worry.”

“Should Inverse Moon be so warmhearted?”

“I suppose Her Highness is exceedingly kind, but so am I. Kakumei Amatsu looks ruthless, but he’s pretty gentle, too. Not to speak of Lonne Cornelius, who actually borders on vulnerable.”

“So you’re all a bunch of sweethearts?”

What a cozy bunch of terrorists. Indeed, that was how the Wicked God Slayer had described the organization herself. In any case, the fact they weren’t planning on executing her was a good thing. Fuyao could keep on working with Inverse Moon as she plotted Terakomari’s death.

Tryphon took out a bottle of disinfectant and poured it on Fuyao’s wounds. It stung. A lot. Now that was cruel. That wasn’t how you used it. She resisted the urge to complain.

“You are from the Lapelico Kingdom, right? You could go home and get healed right away, but hey, we are Inverse Moon. Wouldn’t be nice of us to rely on the Dark Core.”

“Hah... Pain only makes you stronger. Back in Lapelico, I left the Dark Core Zone every time I got hurt to stop the healing. Not once have I let it take care of me.”

“Impossible. You must have scraped a knee or something when you were little.”

“Not a chance. I was signed up to the Dark Core only a few years back. It was after the Wicked God Slayer took me in that I gave my blood to the Lapelico Dark Spring, on her orders.”

"Hmm?"

"My homeland was in the middle of nowhere. None of us knew about the Dark Core. I guess the village was outside Lapelico's administration. Doesn't exist anymore, though."

"...How curious," Tryphon said with deep intrigue, but he changed the subject immediately. "By the way, Her Highness was praising your work."

"What is there to praise? I didn't achieve anything."

"True, but we did get to see a new side of Terakomari Gandesblood, which pleased her. And you destroyed a fair bit of the Eastern Capital. It will halt the city's activities for a while; I would say that counts as an achievement."

"What...? I don't think it does. Terakomari did most of it, anyways."

"Yes, but you gave her the opportunity to do so. Anyways, it's being chalked up to you, so don't dispute it, okay? And in recognition of your accomplishment, Her Highness is appointing you as the fourth Luna."

The bottle of disinfectant was empty now. Fuyao got to her feet in agony.

The Dark Core was a wicked thing. It made the people forget about their fear of death, made them progressively more foolish. They'd forgotten how to evolve through the power of fear and pain. Fuyao understood why the Wicked God Slayer hated it so.

"A Luna? Not interested."

"That doesn't matter. You are one already."

"I don't care. In the slightest."

Tryphon grinned.

He was probably thinking something stupid, like always. His foul train of thought always disgusted her, but she guessed it wasn't so bad to have the backup of Inverse Moon.

"Here." Tryphon handed her a *manju* bun.

She stared at him.

“What’s this?”

“Just sharing a snack.”

“...Hah.”

She snatched it from his hand and bit into it right away.

It was sweet and tasty. Tryphon really was too kind. No other Luna gave their underlings a friendly snack... did they?

“Karla Amatsu made it. I got it at the Fuuzen.”

“Not bad.”

“Indeed. I bought everything they had at the shop, just for Her Highness. It was a total of three hundred thousand yen.”

“Are you stupid or something?”

“I am most certainly not. This will cheer up Karla Amatsu more than anything. She fought for her own dream... and her nation. I think she plans on continuing running her sweets shop even as Goddess. Quite admirable. And it was Terakomari Gandesblood who made this bright future possible.”

Something changed within him.

His crimson eyes suddenly glowed with bloodlust.

“She’s in our way,” he said.

“I’ll kill her.”

Tryphon sighed.

“...You’re too straightforward for someone with the power to shapeshift. You should try coming up with something more underhanded.”

I think I was quite underhanded this time around, thank you very much...

Tryphon produced a photo from his pocket. He showed it to her with a wicked smile on his face.

“Gandesblood herself is too powerful. We have to start with the people around her. I think it best we start by going after her... What do you think, Fuyao?”

“...”

I see. Oh, I see.

Yes, this could work to trap Terakomari Gandesblood. They could defeat the strongest vampire this way.

Click. A switch flipped.

“Great plan! I can’t wait to see the despair on her face! Let’s get started right away! Oh, don’t worry. I, Fuyao Meteorite, will take care of everything!” She smiled.

So did Tryphon.

And so the terrorists began to scheme.

The vampire princess had saved the Heavenly Paradise, but she’d put a target on her back.

The Sapphire was holding a picture of a girl. Terakomari Gandesblood’s biggest weakness. Her blue-haired maid—Villhaze.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. It's Kotei Kobayashi.

Thank you so much for reading *Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire 4*.

I think we can say the main motifs of this story were dreams and time. We saw our protagonist get dragged into a dangerous scenario against her will, but in the end, she saved the day. You know, the usual. I hope you enjoyed seeing how Karla and Komari came to terms with their dreams during this time limit.

I feel like time has been going by too fast lately.

I wake up, and suddenly, it's night already. Even though I've done nothing all day. Maybe it's because I've been spending more time at home due to COVID? Whatever it might be, I've been feeling like the deadlines are coming faster, so I'll draw up a daily schedule so I don't miss one! If I end up in trouble, hopefully I can look back on this afterward and be fueled with energy to save my butt... Is this okay? Sorry, I couldn't think of anything else to write here.

We're already four volumes into *Vexations*.

The cast has been growing steadily. Komari's also been growing across everything she's gone through. And it's about time the antagonist side starts acting on a full scale. I hope you are all looking forward to reading the next volumes. (Also, the page count has been growing, too; I'm working on seeing how to make things more compact.)

Now, some special thanks.

Thank you to riichu for drawing such cute and cool characters every single time. Seriously. Thanks as well to Ryo Hiragi for bringing out all the charm of the series in

the design of the books. To my editor, Yoten Sugiura, I apologize for the delayed deliveries. And thank you so, so, so much to all of you, my readers. *Vexations* is only possible because of you.

See you again.

Kotei Kobayashi

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